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Driving Improvements to Aquatic Ecosystems Using an Annual Report Card



Report Card²⁰¹⁰
for the waterways and catchments of South East Queensland



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About fifteen years ago, warnings by university researchers that waterways in South East Queensland, Australia were deteriorating at an alarming rate were the stimulus for a program of change. A partnership was formed between governments, community groups, universities and other research organizations to halt, and where possible, reverse this decline. This “Healthy Waterways Partnership” adopted the concept of ecosystem health for waterways, identified the major causes for declines within aquatic ecosystems and water quality, and began work on changing practices and behaviours. Change was to be brought about through a combination of community education, adoption of best practices by industry and agriculture, the creation of a government framework of policies and legislation, and by providing major funding for targeted remedial actions. After an initial series of monitoring and design investigations, a long-term monitoring program was created to quantify annual changes in the ecosystem health of waterways and to quantify the effectiveness of large scale management interventions designed to improve waterway health. This monitoring program became the Ecosystem Health Monitoring Program (EHMP) for South East Queensland waterways. After more than a decade it is now seen as one of the most comprehensive freshwater, estuarine and marine monitoring programs in Australia, delivering a regional assessment for 19 major freshwater catchments, 18 river estuaries and 9 zones in Moreton Bay. The program’s major deliverable is an annual Report Card presented to the Queensland Minister for the Environment in a high profile media event each October. The Report Card is based upon rigorous science but its effectiveness is as a communication tool providing an easily understood message for driving change. In this seminar I will provide an overview of the water quality and biological monitoring used to construct the annual Report Card, discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses of the program and highlight advantages that flow from researchers having access to its datasets. I will also discuss the latest Report Card in the context of devastating floods that affected South East Queensland in early 2011.