

Changes afoot in Coastal Zone Management policy in NSW: good first steps

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This Issue

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The popular understanding of global climate change suggests a rising sea level, combined with more frequent and severe weather events, is responsible for the current erosion as seen on some parts of the NSW coast.

This perception ignores the overwhelming natural variability in storm occurrence, wave energy and sand transport. When viewed on longer-term timescales, some parts of the coastline are currently accreting sand rather than eroding. This natural variability is anticipated to mask the impact of rising sea levels on some sandy shorelines until at least 2050.

The authors are part of the Coastal Processes and Responses Research Hub formed by the NSW Government to inform management decisions and actions taken by local communities and councils in the coastal zone. The Government would like to distinguish between current threats, such as exposure to coastal erosion, storm surges, or estuarine flooding, and potential longer term challenges if projections of global sea level rise and changes in storm frequency and intensity are realised.

In a recent discussion paper in the policy journal AGENDA, Roche et al. (2012) argue that a focus on future global climate change had allowed both sides of politics to defer solutions for present coastal management issues.

A period of relatively quiet storm activity through the 1980s and 1990s lulled us into a false sense of security. But with the return of more frequent La Niña conditions and increasing numbers of people on the coast, these issues are becoming more pressing.

The shape of the shoreline is the result of cycles in wave energy, ocean currents and the frequency of storm events. With an improved knowledge of the interplay of these processes with sand supply and transport, Government can refocus its agenda on planning for the medium term.

Given the amount of public infrastructure, private property and environmental heritage in coastal locations it is inevitable that large sections will have to be defended, or artificially managed. Solutions include sound environmental planning and a range of 'hard' and 'soft' engineering solutions -- artificial reefs, beach nourishment and terminal seawalls buried within the foredune.

Under Labor, the former state government adopted the precautionary or 'do nothing' approach of planned retreat in the face of anticipated rising sea levels. The new Liberal government has removed compulsory sea level rise planning benchmarks and plans to clear away red tape so that landowners can protect themselves with 'sensible measures'.

What constitutes a 'sensible measure' still remains unclear: the main objective seems to have been to remove any negative pressure on property prices, releasing political pressure in key electorates.

A nexus between medium-term planning and engineering approaches may buy some communities time in the face of an uncertain future. Some parts of the present coastline may well need to be abandoned if it becomes simply impractical and too expensive to protect, but that time is not yet here.

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Reference

Roche, K., Goodwin, I. and K. J. McAneney. 2012. Management of the coastal zone in Byron Bay: neglect of medium term considerations. AGENDA 20(1):21-39.

