

# Bridging the gap between policy and management of natural resources

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## Summary

This chapter provides insights for regional natural resource management (NRM) practitioners seeking to influence property management by rural landholders. We aim to bridge the gap between policy and management by providing improved understanding of changes in the social structure of rural areas and the impact of these changes and other influences on landholder decisions. We draw upon a number of theoretical frameworks, including the adoption literature. We also draw upon a substantial body of empirical research exploring the social structure of rural areas and landholder implementation of sustainable farming and biodiversity practices, including recent studies undertaken in the Corangamite and Wimmera regions of Victoria. Our research was intended to help regional NRM practitioners engage rural landholders, develop an effective mix of policy approaches, and evaluate the accomplishment of intermediate NRM program objectives. Key findings include: (1) only part of the implementation of conservation activities by landholders can be directly attributed to investment by NRM programs; (2) investing in NRM programs that engage human and social capital is an effective way of influencing the property management of landholders; and (3) NRM practitioners need to be aware that they will be engaging a very different cohort of rural landholders than in the past, with significantly increased proportions of non-farmers and absentee property owners.

## Introduction

NRM in Australia is increasingly structured around a regional delivery model where planning and implementation is guided by national and state priorities. In such a geographically large country, there are compelling reasons for managing at a bio-regional level. The regional scale is considered the most appropriate to support NRM that is holistic (covers all landscape elements); systematic (considers the interactions between elements); and comprehensive (embraces the range of values attached to landscapes) (Bammer *et al.* 2005). The regional scale also has attractions for policy and program managers concerned about the efficient and effective management of public funds (Curtis and Lockwood 2000).

Given the scale of land and water degradation and the relatively small tax base from which to fund remediation, Australians have relied heavily on the voluntary work of around 120 000