



Is 'hope' helpful or a hinderance? Implications for coastal governance

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ABSTRACT

Projected population growth and climate change paint an increasingly bleak picture for many coastal communities and their already threatened ecosystems. Yet, coastal managers and residents provide expressions of hope. In this short communication we reflect on the findings of a four-year research project examining coastal governance in rapidly growing Australian coastal communities. Practitioners shared their perspectives on current coastal governance approaches and were hopeful that sought-after goals would be achieved. However, hopefulness contrasts with self-reported barriers to change and limited evidence of transformative action. Thus, we ask whether hopefulness is misplaced, and a barrier to change, or whether hope remains a necessary precursor to transformative action. We find it is both: hope can provide a vision for a resilient future and a beacon towards the challenge of creating novel, exciting, and equitable futures. Yet, hope is insufficient unless accompanied by actions for resilient social and ecological communities. Hope without action is baseless and exacerbates vulnerability by limiting proactive responses, squandering valuable time, and further weakening systems. The findings have relevance in responding to global environmental challenges by distinguishing between 'hope that helps' versus 'hope that hinders' in the governance of complex systems.

1. Introduction

Coastal areas are a locus of human development (Glavovic 2013), supporting vital natural, social, cultural and economic values. As such, their sustainable management is paramount to socio-ecological well-being (Neumann et al., 2017). Yet, after almost 50 years of integrated coastal management efforts, the sustainable management of coastal areas continues to challenge policy makers and practitioners necessitating the need for large-scale reforms in governance (Kelly et al. 2018, 2019).

Governance refers to collective decisions regarding the use and management of systems and can provide a the foundation for achieving sustainability. As the focus on adaptation and transformation in coastal areas grows (Siders et al., 2021), it is timely to explore the extent to which those driving on-ground action seek good practice governance outcomes and associated perceptions of efficacy. If governance targets are misplaced, action will unlikely achieve goals. Similarly, misplaced optimism can mitigate anxiety and induce complacency (CPA 2022) or

generate 'false hope' (Martínez-López et al., 2019) rather than enable adaptation (Mortreux et al., 2023; McAfee et al., 2019).

Drawing on a four-year national research project examining coastal governance in Australia, we examine how coastal governance is framed by practitioners addressing multiple forms of vulnerability in the coastal zone. In Australia, there is no nationally agreed framework for integrated coastal zone management. Consequently, State jurisdictions independently set objectives and responsibility for action is commonly further devolved to local government authorities (see Supplementary Materials for further details). Coastal managers and community service providers are largely responsible for preserving coastal assets (social and ecological) and providing support services to vulnerable coastal community members, respectively. We refer to coastal managers and community service providers herein as vulnerability practitioners.

We commence this Commentary with reflections on why hope is gaining prominence as an enabler of change, explore the presence of hope in narratives of coastal governance and vulnerability expressed by vulnerability practitioners and ask whether hopefulness is misplaced,

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and a barrier to change, or whether hopefulness remains a necessary precursor to transformative action. Implications beyond the Australian coast are discussed.

2. Hopefulness amidst uncertainty

While the broad-scale effects of climate change are relatively known (e.g., more intense extreme events), the specific direct and indirect impacts at the local scale are less well-understood. The Anthropocene has been expressed as an era of uncertainty, unknowability and unpredictability (Hollis 2023; Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2021). Aradau (2014) refers to this as the era of ‘un’ness’ (adding unexpected and unmanageable). As Kleist and Jansen (2016) state, for the ‘articulation of any hopes for different futures to be possible, there must be a degree of uncertainty, an awareness of it and a willingness to act in it’ (Kleist and Jansen 2016, p. 379). It is not unsurprising therefore that there is a resurgence in the scholarship of hope. In addition, increasing hopelessness caused by global declines in social and ecological wellbeing are driving an agenda to explore the enabling attributes of hope (e.g., Mortreux et al., 2023; Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2021; Barnett 2017). For example, examinations of where hope lies, how it can promote action (e.g., Ojala, 2023; Maartensson and Loi, 2022) and its adoption as a political tool to maintain the status quo (e.g., Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2021) are indicative of the turn towards hope in an era of un’ness (Aradau 2014).

Essentially, hope can drive action or promote inaction (evaluation of the efficacy and sustainability of actions/inactions aside). Hopefulness can help an individual achieve their goals and, while it doesn’t guarantee action, it combines with a sense of self-efficacy to provide the motivation to act (McAfee et al., 2019; Mortreux et al., 2023). But hopefulness is not all positive; it can reduce the sense of urgency for action and if unchecked, lead to self-deception as facts are rejected in preference of personal beliefs (McAfee et al., 2019).

In support of this theory, Kleist and Jansen (2016) argue that ‘waiting patiently’ is a theme promoted in resilience discourse with respect to hazard management and community development in Australia, and elsewhere (e.g., Welsh 2014; Weichselgartner and Kelman 2015). In contrast to the emphasis on immediate agency and changing the system, prevalent in narratives of transformation, Kleist and Jansen (2016) suggest resilience is linked to ‘enduring and perhaps even embracing situations of uncertainty’ (p. 383), where individual responsibility, adaptability and preparedness is emphasised (Johnson, 2013; Welsh 2014). The extent to which the notion of ‘patient waiting’ and an overall passive approach to responding to uncertainty is evoked by practitioners working to respond to social and ecological vulnerabilities in Australian coastal communities is yet to be empirically explored – but is an important question in disentangling hope that helps (i.e., promotes action) versus hope that hinders (i.e., justifies inaction).

3. Hope is common in narratives of vulnerability and coastal governance

Drawing on interviews with 78 coastal managers and community service providers in Australia’s most rapidly growing coastal communities (Fig. 1; and refer to Supplementary Materials) we found strong positive narratives of hope when reflecting on coastal governance, vulnerability, and the needs of coastal communities.¹ There was hope, for example, that: (i) civil society will demand change to preserve the coast when required; (ii) the institutional instruments in place will effectively achieve governance goals; and (iii) valued coastal attributes will remain in 100 years’ time (Table S1 Supplementary materials). Very

few respondents referenced hope in a negative or pessimistic frame, indicating hope in achieving the scale of change required to respond to social vulnerabilities.

Where hope was placed differed between coastal managers and community service providers. Coastal managers were hopeful that existing practices and processes would achieve sought-after outcomes. Community service providers were hopeful for change in the systems and processes that affect vulnerability (Table S1).

3.1. What are the goals of coastal governance?

Best practice coastal governance, as defined by the respondents, included: (i) goals for the *process* of governance; (ii) goals for the *outcomes* of governance; and (iii) normative assumptions concerning the fundamental *values* underpinning governance (Fig. 2; Table S2 Supplementary materials). Best practice coastal governance was expected to be collaborative, coordinated, transparent, cross-scale, planned, and underpinned by effective leadership. Achievement of these goals was expected to deliver sustainable, resilient, and empowered communities, experiencing improved levels of wellbeing and reduced exposure to climate risk (Fig. 1).

The process, values and outcomes of best practice coastal governance as voiced by respondents align to ‘good practice’ coastal governance as expressed in the scholarly literature (Olsen 2002). Integrated coastal zone management has been the cornerstone of efforts to sustain coastal areas under complexity and uncertainty (Olsen 2003). With focus traditionally placed on society, economy, environment (Turner and Bower 1999; McKenna et al., 2008), further consideration is now given to collaboration, equity, and fairness (e.g., Walsh 2019; Nurhidayah and McGillorm 2019). The ideas that practitioners bring to coastal governance construct the problem that requires action, influence the way actors perceive their interests, and inform solutions (Barnett 2020; Elrick-Barr and Smith 2022a). Thus, alignment between practitioner perspectives and broadly defined good practice governance demonstrate an intent to achieve collaborative, resilient, and sustainable coastal futures.

3.2. Hope for impact

Most coastal managers believed that the goals of coastal governance would be achieved (see Table S1) even if some described progress as “nudging towards change” (Western Australia, Coastal Sector 03). Positivity in achieving goals was based on having a plan in place (i.e., adaptation and hazard management plans) and having raised community awareness, which, in turn, was anticipated to drive good decision-making. For example, when considering whether the important values of the coast will remain in 100 years’ time one coastal manager explained “With a robust, considered plan, you’ve given it your best shot” (Western Australia, Coastal Sector 01). The adoption of good practice approaches to respond to coastal vulnerability likely support hopefulness; for example, institutional and policy changes to improve land-use planning and support the implementation of climate change risk assessments have been adopted (Harvey and Clarke 2019). Furthermore, cross-jurisdiction and cross-scale collaboration provides the knowledge and capacity to respond, while forward planning and collaborative management inform on-ground coastal protection works, including the installation of protective structures, re-vegetation, storm water management, access path re-alignment, and sand re-nourishment (Fig. S1, Supplementary materials). Collectively these responses represent a planned approach to vulnerability management that incorporates risk-based planning and adaptive management principles.

Yet despite improvements, challenges remain. Politics, resourcing, and community support are key barriers to achieving coastal governance goals (Elrick-Barr et al. in review). For example, Australian State governments independently set coastal governance objectives and the lack of federal government leadership is a recognised barrier to proactive

¹ More than half of the respondents (59%) used the term ‘hope’ at least once when reflecting on coastal governance, vulnerability and needs in their coastal community; and in 94% of cases hope was framed positively.

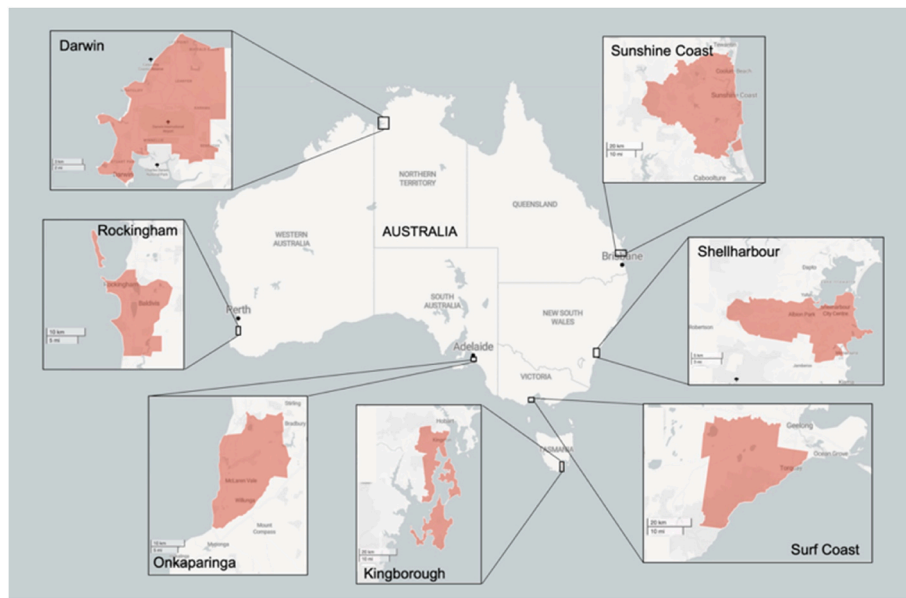


Fig. 1. Local government areas containing Australia's most rapidly growing coastal communities, 2011–2016.

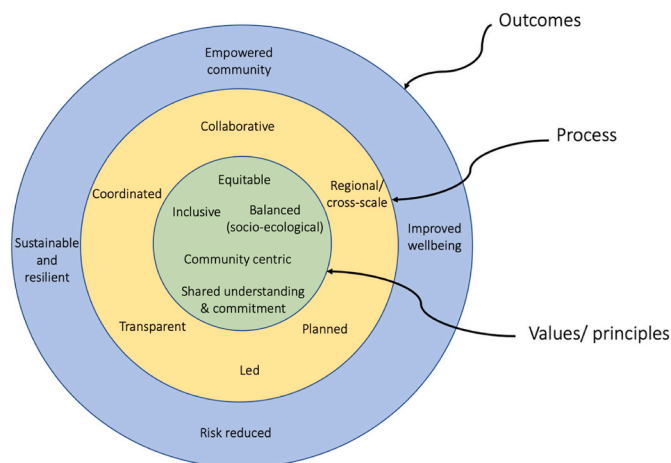


Fig. 2. Goals of coastal governance as defined by Australian vulnerability practitioners.

action (Harvey and Smith 2023; Harvey and Clarke 2019; Cicin-Sain and Belfiore 2005). As a coastal manager explained: “The barriers [to coastal governance] are probably the lack of federal government championing this shared approach, and the State government. I used to think it was a lack of coastal legislation, but I don’t know if that is going to make a difference at the end of the day” (Western Australia, Coastal Sector 04). Furthermore, limited community buy-in and support for change (Boxshall 2022) leads to political and legal uncertainty (O’Donnell 2019b) and proves a disincentive to proactive action (Gibbs 2020), as one respondent noted:

Pressure from landowners is always there. And depending on which way the Council is, or who’s influenced by who ... it’s too fickle and it can change ... you have an election and then the next thing they resolve to change the coastal management plan based on a different set of criteria (New South Wales, Coastal Sector 04).

Even in instances of best practice, sectoral isolation (Elrick-Barr and Smith 2021), incorporation (and weakening) of coastal management within other portfolios (e.g., land use planning and natural resource management) (Clarke and Harvey 2022; Warnken and Mosadeghi 2018), a dominant anthropocentric framing (Elrick-Barr and Smith

2022a), and differences in institutional arrangements across jurisdictions (Thom, 2023; Harvey and Stocker 2015) all combine to reduce impact (Harvey and Smith 2023). These challenges are not unique to Australia, with lack of coordination (Martínez-López et al., 2019) and sectoral integration (Cabana et al., 2023), limited knowledge exchange (Martínez-López et al., 2019), and weak or non-existent ICZM policy (Caviedes et al., 2020; Cabana et al., 2023) hampering integrated coastal zone management globally.

Amidst these challenges, the hopeful framing expressed by Australian coastal managers in relation to the ability to achieve best practice coastal governance is perhaps inadvertent cruel optimism (Berland, 2011) – suggesting the possibility of a sustainable and resilient future, which is likely impossible to attain in the absence of significant change. While such optimism can drive efforts towards sustainable coastal futures, in this study, hopeful framings were rarely accompanied by plans for significant change. In addition, we found that barriers to change, particularly to transformation, were significant and included limited financial and human capacity and a culture of ‘failure avoidance’ in government (see Elrick-Barr et al. *in review*). Rather, hope was placed in existing mechanisms to achieve sought after outcomes. Hage (2003) argues that the idea of the possibility of achievement (or upward mobility) is central to capitalism and sustained regardless of whether it is likely or not. The optimistic frame may therefore be a function of institutional paradigms that seek to ensure community confidence in the governance systems intended to protect and support them. Yet as Eriksen et al. (2015) explain, expecting the systems that generate problems to also be the solution is misplaced at best, and unethical at worst.

3.3. Hope for change

Community service providers were slightly less optimistic than coastal managers, noting that community services “are not up to scratch” (South Australia, Community Sector 03); and that despite a growing emphasis on the importance of community (and their values) in directing coastal management, communities are not adequately engaged. For example, community service providers explained that “they [government authorities] say it is about the community but do not engage with the community” (Western Australia, Community Sector 03); and “community engagement might be a goal in some regions but is it rarely achieved” (New South Wales, Community Sector 04). For others, there was hope that the sought-after and existing goals of coastal

governance aligned, but confidence was lacking, as demonstrated through responses that simply stated “God, I hope so” (Western Australia, Community Sector 01).

Community sector practitioners sought change but thought that change would be driven by others: civil society, extreme events, or other significant events that shift thinking and practice (i.e., gamechangers, following Westley et al., 2016). This hopefulness and allocation of responsibility to others could reflect the limited engagement of the community service sector within coastal governance in Australia. While it does not negate or disvalue their actions to reduce social vulnerability, it has implications for achieving coordinated and holistic approaches to coastal vulnerability management.

Placing hope in others to act is a form of misplaced optimism that transfers responsibility to others and in doing so reduces the sense of personal urgency for action (McAfee et al., 2019). Risk management in Australia is governed by framings of resilience, self-perseverance, and individual responsibility (Allen 2013; Elrick-Barr and Smith 2022b). Hage (2009) suggests that through this framing, Australians have come to value passivity in response to uncomfortableness. Australians, Hage argues, consider braving challenging conditions, or ambivalence towards uncomfortableness, as heroic (Hage 2009, p 8).

Evidence suggests that when individual and community capacity are present, community service providers are well-placed to drive innovation, delivering collaborative approaches that achieve sustainability whilst building community (Elrick-Barr et al., *in review*). Yet in the absence of a perceived need to engage in coastal governance, the likelihood of transitioning from patient waiting to proactive action is limited.

4. Misplaced optimism or required hope?

We commenced this study by asking whether hope placed in the ability of current systems of coastal governance in Australia to achieve sought after goals (resilient, sustainable and healthy coastal communities) was misplaced, or a requirement to achieve transformational change. We conclude by suggesting it is both. Hope provides a vision for the future, a target that seeks an alternative. Given the uncertainties and the challenges the future holds, hope is a beacon towards new, exciting, and equitable futures. Yet hope is not enough. Unless hopefulness is accompanied by a drive for change (active), rather than awaiting change (passive), it becomes cruel optimism (Berland, 2011).

We find passivity across Australian coastal governance, which is not a function of the will or drive of the practitioners seeking to enact change. Rather it is a function of embeddedness within socio-institutional systems that constrain transformational change (see Elrick-Barr et al. *in review*; Coaffee and Healey 2003). Thus, a key question becomes: can hope be leveraged to achieve transformational change? A pessimistic framing is argued to both impede action and normalise a neoliberal approach to coastal governance that is non-conducive to transformational change (Griswold 2021). In contrast then, can the optimistic frame promote actions that challenge the status quo?

Drawing from research on the impact of a negative framing on the ability to adapt in the Pacific, Barnett (2017) argues that a focus on despair or loss can ‘undermine efforts to sustainably manage environments and disempower local adaptation ...’ (Barnett 2017, p. 8). Similarly, Griswold (2021) suggests the dominant framing of catastrophic climate impacts in the Pacific sustains a neoliberal approach to development; and asks if adaptation strategies that promote an alternate more hopeful framing can challenge its dominance.

In Australia, the framing of hope is accompanied by a market-based approach to adaptation (O'Donnell 2019a) and Federal and State government investment in managing the physical manifestation of climate hazards (e.g., erosion and inundation) and protecting private property. A position that impinges the ability to implement more transformative approaches to coastal management (O'Donnell 2019b). Similarly, in the

United States, Shi and Moser (2021) contend that the narrow framing of adaptation as disaster management has resulted in a focus on infrastructure investment rather than addressing the drivers of vulnerability. A situation also reported in the United Kingdom (Brown et al., 2017) and small island developing states (e.g., David et al., 2021). This is important because, as discussed by Chaffin and colleagues (2016 p. 409), ‘transformative governance is about framing and agenda setting’.

In turn, a focus on hope may drive the search for alternate adaptation solutions and wider engagement promoting a strive for more than business as usual. Yet, to be effective hopeful frames must be couched within a clear understanding of the elements vital to their success. Transformational change can be achieved through structural (policy) change and individual action (e.g., private action, social-signalling action, and system-changing action); altering the values and norms that constrain innovative coastal governance (Naito et al., 2022; Horcea-Milcu 2022; Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021; Abson et al., 2017). Trends in ‘blue economy’ (Evans et al., 2023), ‘nature positive’ (Birkeland 2022) and integrated coastal and marine management (Van Assche et al., 2020) may provide leverage points to achieve such structural change - yet caution is advised – these trending themes can also be encapsulated within the dominant anthropocentric framing of economic growth that promotes business as usual with a green tinge (Hausknott and Hammond 2020).

In short, change will take time and effort (Naito et al., 2022; Gorrard et al., 2016; Geels, 2011). Thus, rather than ‘hoping’ for a point a time (somewhere in the future) when civil society will call for change, a point at which it may be impossible to reverse the losses experienced, the time to start is now (Siders 2022). It is time to accept the need for difficult discussions, the likelihood of disputes and have the strength to challenge the status quo. As only through the presence of change agents (Naito et al., 2022; Keys et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2013) will hopeful futures come to fruition.

This commentary draws on findings from one case location: Australia. Further research to explore the presence of hope and implications for transformation in coastal governance is a valuable area for further research. We hope this commentary broadens discussion and critical reflection on the assumptions within discourses of coastal resilience and transformation – to move beyond patient waiting to immediate, meaningful action.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Carmen E. Elrick-Barr: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Tim F. Smith:** Data curation, Funding acquisition, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. **Dana C. Thomsen:** Visualization, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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