

The highest form of generalship? A review of weed strategies

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Summary ‘Perception is strong and sight weak. In strategy it is important to see distant things as if they were close and to take a distanced view of close things.’ Miyamoto Musashi (1584–1645).

Over the past few decades we have seen the increasing invocation of strategy as a tool for piloting organisations and businesses through the tempests of change. Everyone has a strategy – from huge corporations like Microsoft right down to my local Neighbourhood Watch Group. More recently, strategy has increasingly been invoked in managing weeds. Australia has a National Weed Strategy, and each of the States has a strategy too.

Strategy is the art or science of the planning and conduct of a war. For one ancient Chinese warlord, it was ‘The highest form of generalship’, and, at its most exquisite, even a substitute for war. It is true that the management of Australia’s weed invasions is a form of war, and right to use strategy to marshal our scarce resources to greatest effect in the conduct of hostilities. However, in war, there are good and bad strategies, and no amount of good tactics can overcome unsound strategy. In the same way, weed management practice that is narrowly focused will only be a temporary solution. Bad strategy, or its absence, will find us out eventually.

The purpose of my talk is to review the weed strategies devised by the States and at the Federal level in Australia. I will appraise them against a set of indicators drawn from the world of strategic planning. These indicators fall into three broad headings:

1. **Planning** For example, does the strategy take account of its operating environment, does it allocate responsibilities clearly, does it prioritise efforts, does it deal with both chronic problems and emergencies, does it have a risk management plan, and does it link into broader strategies such as Natural Resource Management?
2. **Resources and implements** For example, does the strategy draw upon and sustain its knowledge base, does it employ tools such as policy, and does it consider and plan for the people and resources that will be required?
3. **Review and reappraisal** Does the strategy indicate suitable performance indicators and mechanisms for gap analysis, and does it have a system for feeding new knowledge and experience back into planning?

Having compared and contrasted the strategies, I will conclude by proposing future directions for weed management strategy in Australia.