Following a decade of drought in NSW, environmental scientists have observed and reported on the effects of prolonged drying, and its ecological, biological and geological impacts. Similarly, those in the field of mental health have documented the impacts of such prolonged adversity on the mental health and wellbeing of communities, and specifically rural communities. Whilst it is generally accepted that the health of the environment is inextricably linked to human health there are few programs that work across these domains. In order to further explore the relationship between the environment and mental health and wellbeing, a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) was used to assess the possible health, and in particular mental health benefits of engaging in natural resource management (NRM) activities. The HIA was conducted as an innovative and interdisciplinary partnership between Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority (CMA), the Rural Adversity Mental Health Program (RAMHP), the Southern NSW Local Health District (SLHD) and the University of NSW Health Equity, Training Research and Evaluation (CHETRE).

The HIA indicted that there were strong links between NRM and health, and that well designed NRM services can have positive outcomes for landowners, specifically in terms of their sense of empowerment, mental health and wellbeing, in addition to positive environmental impacts. However the HIA also revealed that the success of the outcome was dependent on the way in which the NRM plan was developed and communicated. As a result of these findings a number of recommendations were made including the development of a pilot program “Supporting Healthier People through NRM”.

The aim of the pilot was to develop techniques and tools for the environmental scientists to assist them to support the wellbeing of the community through the delivery of NRM services. To achieve this, the following objectives were developed.

- To strengthen the capacity of CMA staff to work with landowners and their families who may be in distress and utilise appropriate mental health and wellbeing referral pathways.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot, with the view of replicating this work across the state.
- To promote the results of the evaluation to a wider audience and explore possible research projects.

Evaluations of the pilot found that all objectives were achieved however there was a slight decrease in staff’s reported confidence to use new mental health skills and knowledge. Results suggest that in order for there to be a transfer from knowledge to behaviour, staff need to be supported at an organisational, team and individual level.

Given the ongoing and increasing emphasis on environmental issues such as the potential impacts of climate change, it is suggested that future NRM plans acknowledge the link between environmental conditions and mental health. Greater understanding and communication regarding the link between the mental health of communities and the environment in which we live can only have mutual benefit, which in turn benefits us all. It is therefore recommended that future research focuses on the development of evidence based social and wellbeing measures that are appropriate for NRM planning.