



Using Rainforest Research

Indigenous Cultural Values of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area

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The 1988 listing of the Wet Tropics of North Queensland as a World Heritage Area recognised the outstanding natural values of the region. While the nomination briefly mentioned Aboriginal rainforest culture, neither Indigenous or non-Indigenous cultural values were considered in the listing process. Management of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (WTWHA) centred almost entirely on the nominated natural values, sometimes to the detriment of the cultural values of the people who live in and adjacent to the protected area.

Ten years later a 1998 review entitled *Which Way Our Cultural Survival* was held to investigate Aboriginal involvement in Wet Tropics management. A key recommendation was the re-nomination of the WTWHA for its cultural values. The Review also argued for better protection of Aboriginal cultural values, increased Indigenous involvement in the management of the area, and provision of economic benefits to Aboriginal people.

World Heritage Cultural Criteria

In order to be placed on the World Heritage List, a place must fulfill one or more of the following World Heritage criteria. To be listed for its

cultural values, a place or region should be a highly significant example of:

1. Human creative genius.
2. Important developments in architecture, technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design.
3. An exceptional cultural tradition or civilisation, living or disappeared.
4. A type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape illustrating a significant stage in human history.
5. A traditional human settlement or land-use which is representative of a culture.
6. Associated with events, living traditions, ideas, beliefs, artis-

tic and literary works of outstanding universal significance, but this must be in combination with another criterion, cultural or natural.

In 1995, the World Heritage definitions of cultural properties were expanded to include cultural landscapes under 3 main categories:

- Intentionally created (eg gardens)
- Organically evolved (eg farming landscapes)
- Associative cultural landscapes (eg natural landscapes with significant religious associations)



Ngadjon-Jii people (Elder Emma Johnstone with May Morta and Warren Canendo) utilising rainforest resources to erect a traditional dwelling or *mija* at Malanda, Atherton Tableland.

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As a result of this new definition, Uluru Kata-Tjuta National Park, previously listed as a World Heritage property only for its natural values, was re-listed as an associative landscape with 'powerful religious, artistic and cultural associations of the natural element'. It is probable that the Wet Tropics WHA could also be re-listed in a similar way.

The (Re)nomination Process

A nomination can only be made by the Australian Government which would need to show how the WTWHA is cultural landscape according to one or more of the required World Heritage criteria. It would also need to show that there are adequate protection and management mechanisms in place to conserve the nominated cultural values. At present, the re-nomination of the Wet Tropics WHA is not being considered by the Australian Government.

Indigenous Cultural Values of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area

Our land has many places that are sacred and significant. There are many story places that link us with our past, our ancestor's time and the dreaming. We have to look after the land so it can look after us.

For Rainforest Aboriginal people or *Bama*, the Wet Tropics is their homeland and the traditional country of their ancestors — not a natural wilderness. According to their laws and customs, this landscape was created, named, and 'humanised' by the Storytime (or Dreamtime) ancestral spirits. These Storytime beings are an essential part of the life of the country - they look after places and people.

The traditional connection of Rainforest Aboriginal people with their country fits the World Heritage definition of an 'associative cultural landscape', or a series of such landscapes associated with different rainforest groups. Although this association is common throughout Aboriginal Australia, the rainforest cultures are unique in many ways. The Wet Tropics could fit cultural criteria three, five and possibly six.

The Cultural Heritage Project

The Rainforest CRC, in conjunction with the North Queensland Land Council, has developed and funded a two-phase project aimed at identifying the Indigenous cultural values of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. The first stage of the project represents an initial step towards a re-nomination document. It compiled existing written information about the cultural significance of the Wet

Tropics and was undertaken by Dr Nicky Horsfall, with assistance from Hilton Noble, Rainforest Aboriginal groups, archaeologists and anthropologists who have done research in the region. The second phase involves preparation of a document which focuses upon contemporary expressions of Indigenous cultural values in the WTWHA. Together, these two reports will form a *Statement of the Indigenous Cultural Values of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area* which will constitute the foundation document supporting the proposed re-nomination. It will also act as a guide in developing collaborative management of the WHA and adjacent areas.

Management implications

A better understanding of the cultural heritage values of the Wet Tropics should result in better management of these values. Proper management of cultural values does not necessarily conflict with management of the natural values, but management of the latter without consideration of the former can, and has, resulted in the destruction or degradation of the cultural values.

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