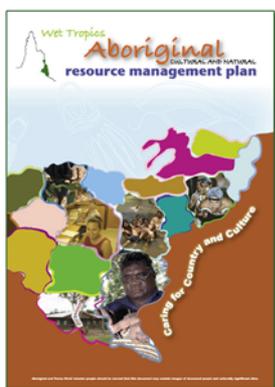


CARING FOR COUNTRY AND CULTURE

The Wet Tropics Aboriginal Cultural and Natural Resource Management Plan



An innovative and novel approach to natural resource management (NRM) is sweeping across Australia. As an extension of the Federal Government's *Natural Heritage Trust* (NHT) program, over 60 new NRM regions, regional bodies and plans are being established to direct the management of rivers, coastlines, biodiversity and vegetation.

The *Natural Heritage Trust* was set up by the Australian Government in 1997, with proceeds from the part-sale of Telstra, to help restore and conserve Australia's environment and natural resources. The Natural Heritage Trust received a \$300 million boost in the 2004 Federal Budget, extending the funding until 2007-2008, making it a \$3 billion investment in Australia's environmental future.

In this nation-wide experiment in environmental management and social change, NRM has moved from a project-based approach to strategic investments at a regional scale. With this change comes an increased emphasis upon community-based and integrated responses to regional issues and pressures concerning natural and cultural values.

In the newly-created Wet Tropics NRM region (see map), many of these natural values are protected by the World Heritage listing of the area's unique rainforests and the Great Barrier Reef. The Wet Tropics NRM region also includes the traditional country of 17 Aboriginal language groups.

In the first phase of the NHT program, 1997-2001, only a handful of Indigenous communities received funding support for local NRM projects. Outside of Cape York Peninsula, Aboriginal people in Queensland received less than 1% of the funding allocated for this round.

At a workshop held in Cairns in early 2002, Traditional Owners in Far North Queensland identified a number of factors contributing to the low level of Aboriginal involvement in NRM activities to date. These included:

- Inadequate consultation
- Poor Indigenous representation in planning processes
- Seriously defective regional structures

Unhappy with the proposed level of engagement in the development of a new NRM plan, the Traditional Owners of the Wet Tropics made a collective decision to develop their own Cultural and Natural Resource Management Plan.

Three years in the making, *Caring For Country and Culture: The Wet Tropics Aboriginal Cultural and Natural Resource Management Plan* outlines the aspirations and strategies of the Wet Tropics Traditional Owners in looking after country and keeping culture strong for future generations. A unique collaborative effort involving Traditional Owners government agencies and regional research institutions, *The Aboriginal Plan* also identifies the major threats affecting the sustainability of Australia's unique Aboriginal rainforest cultures.



Caring For Country and Culture calls for innovative partnerships and community investment opportunities in the natural and cultural future of Far North Queensland. In rolling out a new plan for doing 'green business' in the tropics, Traditional Owners of the Wet Tropics NRM region are leading the way in the regional integration of national issues, the activities of local agencies and grass-roots concerns.

Caring For Country and Culture is the first plan of its kind in Australia to specifically address the challenge of maintaining cultural distinctiveness and diversity in a multi-tenured and rapidly changing landscape. Unlike most other plans, *Caring for Country and Culture* takes a 'big picture' approach to NRM and focuses upon the social and community dimensions of ecosystem management. Core social assets and a range of strategies are highlighted in *The Aboriginal Plan* to improve the integration of the three Cs - **C**ountry, **C**ulture and **C**ommunity, within regional resource use and planning initiatives.

Creating new knowledge networks and linking in with current programs are fundamental to achieving the goals of *The Aboriginal Plan*, which also identifies a number of key regional processes, including the *Wet Tropics Regional Agreement*. *The Regional Agreement* provides a blueprint for how the Commonwealth and Queensland governments will work together with Aboriginal people in the management of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area.

Many of the Agreement's guiding principles and protocols are acknowledged in *The Aboriginal Plan*. Both the *Regional Agreement* and *The Aboriginal Plan* highlight the need to formally recognize the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area for its distinctive, Indigenous cultural values.

The Aboriginal Plan extends many of the management aspirations and procedures outlined in *The Agreement* beyond the boundaries of the World Heritage Area, to include traditional lands and waters covered by other tenures in this region.

Traditional Owners have chosen to highlight the close links between *The Aboriginal Plan* and the *Regional Agreement* by celebrating these two historic achievements on the same day, Friday 29 April 2005.

The launch of *Caring for Country and Culture* represents an historic achievement by Traditional Owners to bring national awareness to their pivotal role in sustainable development in northern Australia. In launching *The Aboriginal Plan*, Traditional Owners will be joined by the Queensland Minister for the Environment, The Hon Desley Boyle MP, The Hon Greg Hunt MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Federal Minister for Environment and Heritage, and Mr Steve Larkin, Principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

The launch of *Caring for Country and Culture* is an invitation to the wider community to join with Traditional Owners in pursuing new opportunities to ensure the environmental and social well-being of the Wet Tropics region.

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