



# Developing the Wet Tropics Aboriginal Cultural and Natural Resource Management Plan

Edited by  
Libby Larsen and Sandra Pannell



# Rainforest CRC

Cooperative Research Centre for Tropical Rainforest Ecology and Management



# DEVELOPING THE WET TROPICS ABORIGINAL CULTURAL AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

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Libby Larsen and Sandra Pannell

Rainforest CRC



**FNQ NRM LTD**



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This document contains language and expressions that some readers may find offensive.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the Rainforest CRC.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People should be warned that this document may contain images of deceased persons.

The original format and content of the workshop proceedings contained in this publication has largely been retained, however for publication purposes, minor typesetting and grammatical changes have been instigated.

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## ACRONYMS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACC	Aboriginal Coordinating Council
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
ANT	Aboriginal Negotiating Team (for Interim Negotiating Forum)
ARC	Aboriginal Rainforest Council
ARMP	Aboriginal Resource Management Program (within WTMA)
ATFI	Australian Tropical Forest Institute
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
BBIFMAC	Burdekin Bowen Integrated Floodplain Management Advisory Committee
BDT	Burdekin Dry Tropics
BDTG	Burdekin Dry Tropics Group
BRIG	Burdekin Rangelands Implementation Group
CAFNEC	Cairns and Far North Environment Centre
CAT	Centre for Appropriate Technology Inc.
CDEP	Community Development Employment Project
CRC	Cooperative Research Centre
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
CY HOAIG	Cape York Peninsula Heads of Agreement Implementation Group
CYHOA	Cape York Heads of Agreement
CYLC	Cape York Land Council
CYP	Cape York Peninsula
CYPDA	Cape York Peninsula Development Association
CYPLUS	Cape York Peninsula Land Use Study
CYRAP	Cape York Regional Assessment Panel
DEH	Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Heritage
DNR&M	Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines (now: Queensland Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water)
DOGIT	Deed of Grant in Trust
DPI	Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries
DTAC	Djabugay Tribal Aboriginal Corporation
EA	Environment Australia (now: DEH)
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
EPA	Queensland Environmental Protection Agency
FNQ NRM Ltd	Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management Ltd.
FNQ ROC	Far North Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils
GBRMPA	Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
GIS	Geographic Information System
GNT	Government Negotiating Team (for Interim Negotiation Forum)
HOA	Heads of Agreement
IAP	Indigenous Assessment Panel
ICPR	Intellectual and Cultural Property Rights
IEU	Indigenous Engagement Unit (EPA)

ILC	Indigenous Land Corporation
ILUA	Indigenous Land Use Agreement
IPLU	Indigenous Partnerships Liaison Unit
INF	Interim Negotiating Forum
IRG	Interim Reference Group
ITSG	Indigenous Technical Support Group
IWG	Indigenous Working Group
JCU	James Cook University
JWG	Joint Working Group
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NAP	National Action Plan (for Salinity)
NaREF	Townsville Thuringowa Natural Resource and Environment Forum
NHT	Natural Heritage Trust
NHT 1	Natural Heritage Trust Stage 1
NHT 2	Natural Heritage Trust Stage 2
NNTT	National Native Title Tribunal
NPA	Northern Peninsula Area
NQAA	North Queensland Afforestation Association
NQLC	North Queensland Land Council
NQRTA	North Queensland River Trusts' Association
NRM	Natural Resource Management
NR&M	Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines (now: Queensland Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water)
NRM Board	Natural Resource Management Board (Wet Tropics) Inc. (now FNQ NRM Ltd.)
QIWG	Queensland Indigenous Working Group
QMDC	Queensland Murray Darling Commission
QPWS	Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service
Rainforest CRC	Cooperative Research Centre for Tropical Rainforest Ecology and Management
RAP	Regional Assessment Panel
RFA	Regional Framework Agreement
RIS	Regional Investment Strategy
TAFE	'Technical And Further Education' – Publicly-funded post-secondary technical and vocational education and training organisation.
TO	Traditional Owner
TOAC	Traditional Owner Advisory Committee
TRG	Tenure Resolution Group
USL	Unallocated State Land
VSL	Vacant State Land
WAMP	Water Allocation Management Planning
WHA	World Heritage Area
WTAPPT	Wet Tropics Aboriginal Plan Project Team
WTWHA	Wet Tropics World Heritage Area
WTMA	Wet Tropics Management Authority

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## PREFACE

As the first dedicated regional Aboriginal NRM Plan, not only in Queensland but also within Australia, the Wet Tropics Aboriginal Cultural and Natural Resource Management Plan (Aboriginal Plan) signals a unique moment in the entangled and often embattled environmental history of this continent.

The Aboriginal Plan provides details of some of the natural and cultural resource management issues and priorities for Indigenous people of the Wet Tropics. It identifies a range of strategies to address the interests and aspirations of Traditional Owners in caring for their country and culture. More than this, the Aboriginal Plan acknowledges the long struggle for recognition and respect by Aboriginal people of far northern Queensland. It is also an affirmation of the achievements of Aboriginal people in retaining a pride in their culture and keeping their connections to country strong. The Plan sets out some of the practical steps to be taken and the material needs to be fulfilled to maintain healthy communities, country and culture for generations to come.

Rather than being seen solely as a blueprint for managing country and culture, the Aboriginal Plan can also be viewed as a call for change – both institutionally and socially. In this respect, one of the fundamental aims of the Plan is to instigate a new era in NRM. Hopefully, by raising awareness of Indigenous concerns and issues regarding NRM, the Plan will bring about improvements in Indigenous involvement in NRM and foster new relationships between Indigenous land holders, NRM agencies and regional communities.

While regional NRM plans are promoted as the key to the strategic delivery of Natural Heritage Trust funds in the current phase, this plan, like other plans, has its limits. It in no way replaces customary means for caring for country, which Traditional Owners may enact on a day-to-day basis. For example, those cultural responsibilities associated with speaking to and about country. Nor does the Plan adequately address the trauma, stress and frustration experienced by Indigenous landholders when country is used in inappropriate ways, at times resulting in misfortune, injury and death to others. Finally, the Plan is not a 'quick fix' for current environmental ailments and previous social injustices. In many ways, the limits of the Aboriginal Plan reflect the hurdles that still remain regarding cross-cultural understandings of country and culture. Recognition and respect are critical to overcoming these perceptual obstacles.

This discussion raises the question of the identity of the audience for this plan. The Wet Tropics is a region with considerable cultural and ethnic diversity. This diversity closely reflects the varied histories of regional industries, particularly primary industries, and the ebb and flow of movement and settlement trends. Indigenous Australians in the region include Traditional Owner groups, Torres Strait Islanders and those Aboriginal people living away from their homelands. In the latter instance, many of these people were forcibly removed from country and relocated to one of the missions or settlements in the region. This 'stolen generation' of Aboriginal people, together with their descendants, have made a home in the Wet Tropics. While coming from country outside the Wet Tropics region, these people have formed close bonds with Traditional Owners through marriage and co-residence, and have established a sense of belonging to the region and the community through birth, occupation and employment. It is hoped that the Aboriginal Plan will not only speak to the many Traditional Owner groups within the Wet Tropics, but will find interested readers across the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of the region, and in a range of environmental management agencies.

Throughout the Wet Tropics region there are many ways of speaking about the environment and natural resources, as there are ways of talking about country and culture. Increasingly, the language we hear, particularly from government environmental agencies, is that of the new managerialism and neo-liberal governance. These days it is common to hear and read about nature as an 'asset' or as 'capital infrastructure'; protecting the environment as an 'investment strategy'; ecological knowledge as 'capacity'; and our actions in the world in which we live as a form of 'management'. Nowadays, all manner of things are fed into the meat-grinder of management, including cultural and natural values, fauna and flora, even understandings and perceptions. In the language of management-speak, some terms can be readily interpreted, while others defy such attempts and point to new ways of thinking about the environment or novel relationships with it.

For many Aboriginal people, the challenge is to see the wholeness of country and culture when the language of environmental management speaks of bits and pieces. Among Aboriginal people in the Wet Tropics, some are more familiar with this way of speaking about country and culture, situated as they are within a range of government organisations and agencies. These individuals play an important role in their community as cross-cultural interpreters. The Plan recognises the multi-lingual nature of our environmental experiences and attempts to build bridges and linkages between the various ways Indigenous people now talk about country and culture.

Notably absent from the discourse of environmental management are references to affect and aesthetics, and the strong emotions and attachments embodied in the Aboriginal notion of 'country'. Throughout the preparation of the Aboriginal Plan, Traditional Owners spoke of the affective force of country in shaping their sense of 'we-ness'. All too often the sentiments and feelings that Aboriginal people express in relation to their claims to land are regarded as irrational or inappropriate in terms of the predominant, non-Indigenous NRM models. If language reflects, shapes and limits how we act within and understand our world, then we need a new language for talking about NRM. Reflecting this re-visioning of NRM, the Aboriginal Plan includes new words or building blocks for NRM – cultures and concerns, landscapes and values, sentiments and senses. The use of these words points to our need to develop different kinds of literacy and skills with respect to NRM.

This plan has its origins and momentum in the historical marginalisation and, at times, exclusion of Indigenous landholders from NRM programs and planning processes. In many respects, the absence of Indigenous people from local, regional and state plans reflects what amounts to the historical invisibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders on the national census prior to 1967. The counting and classification of populations is an integral element in the planning and mapping exercises undertaken by the State in the name of governance.

In the post World War II environment, planning represents one of the key strategies in the project of modernity embarked upon by Western democracies. Under the auspices of planning and management, Western ideas about development and modernisation have been imposed upon the non-Western world. For Indigenous peoples of Australia and elsewhere in the world, planning signifies one of the techniques used by governments to order, control and, too often, intervene in their lives in ways that often appear passive and even beneficial. Indeed, planning as a basic tool for achieving social change, and controlling people and space often goes unchallenged. Yet, as many Indigenous Australians know from their own experiences, this supposedly common-sense approach to NRM all too often produces inequity, unsustainability and intolerance. This intolerance is apparent in the way that Indigenous people's refusal to comply with State policies, their resistance to development efforts, and their sluggish participation in a range of planning processes is characterised as 'antimodern'. In this situation, Indigenous people are readily blamed for their apparent inability to embrace the ideas and benefits of development. In the twenty-first century, the old language of modernisation and development has been replaced by new talk about

capacity building, governance and institutional change for Indigenous people. Mindful of the limitations of this new language and the problems with planning and similar top-down approaches to environmental management, the Aboriginal Plan not only advocates new ways of thinking about NRM, but also new ways of *doing* NRM.

Planning projects can be seen as one of the ways in which nation-states produce the 'space of nation-ness' and, through a range of bureaucratic structures, simultaneously create the sites and apparatus for state surveillance, discipline and mobilisation. In the production of these places, planning projects all too often impose linear models of time and produce new bounded spaces in which socio-economic activities are understood. For example, under the regime of NHT 2, the emphasis is upon regionalism and the creation of new strategic regions for this purpose. This emphasis upon regionality has gained momentum in recent years and increasingly we see all manner of socio-economic services delivered at this scale. Aboriginal notions of country and people's attachment to traditional localities appear at odds with the imposition of these NRM administrative spaces. In this era of bureaucratic regionalism, it is easy to see how Indigenous peoples' focus upon the local could result in a range of exclusions. Aware of the challenges posed by regionalism, this plan attempts to span the distances between locally based Aboriginal landscapes and neighbourhoods and the larger-scale spatial and social formations of NHT 2.

Issues of scale and focus direct our attention to the complex environmental histories of the peoples and areas included in the Aboriginal Plan. These environmental stories paint a vivid picture of the varied nature of Indigenous engagement with the primary industries of the Settler population. This is not a simple tale of Indigenous resistance and European colonisation, or of widespread environmental degradation. Rather, these histories speak about the ways in which landscapes and identity are produced through the intersecting rituals and customary practices of Traditional Owners and Europeans alike. This said, it is important to recognise that the co-production of these cultural landscapes and social identities is inherently colonising, not only of people but also of environments. The effects of these colonising moments are histories of people and place which defy the all too easy imposition of simple dichotomies, such as 'traditional and modern', 'before and after', and empty stereotypes – 'pristine rainforests', 'noble savages' and 'ignoble settlers'. The Aboriginal Plan attempts to recognise some of the social and environmental consequences of these varied and often hidden histories. In doing so, the Plan represents a step forward in reconciling the disadvantages and injustices experienced by Indigenous groups and communities throughout the Wet Tropics.

While the Aboriginal Plan provides a wordy framework for addressing a multitude of Aboriginal NRM concerns and issues, it is real people who form the backbone of the Plan. The ongoing cooperation, collaboration and commitment of individuals and groups throughout the region forms the key to realising this vision of what a culturally and ecologically sustainable future should look like. In the course of developing the Aboriginal Plan, the designations and roles of many of these individuals and groups evolved and changed as structures and processes emerged to address the demands and requirements of the task at hand. In this sense, the Aboriginal Plan does not represent a template for 'best practice' Indigenous NRM or a 'one size fits all' blueprint for Indigenous engagement.

Indeed, although plans have yet to be finalised and accredited for many NRM regions, it is apparent that throughout Australia Aboriginal people have engaged with, and responded to, the planning process in a myriad of ways. For example, Traditional Owners in the Burdekin Dry Tropics NRM region, which adjoins the Wet Tropics in the south, have focused upon improving their involvement in NRM decision-making structures. Other Traditional Owners have worked towards establishing 'protocol agreements' for indigenous involvement in NRM with regional authorities (see Smyth *et al.* 2004).

The varied and circumscribed nature of indigenous responses to contemporary NRM planning processes reflects the historical conditions and experience of marginalisation throughout Aboriginal Australia. It also points to the rhetorical limits of both science and the state in addressing and effecting social, let alone environmental, change in the concentrated time-frames identified for the NHT program. In many ways, the circumspect approach adopted by Aboriginal people to current planning initiatives reveals the hurdles that still remain regarding cross-cultural understanding of the 'lie of the land' throughout settled Australia.

**Dr Sandra Pannell**

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