

6.0 RECOMMENDED PRIORITY MANAGEMENT ACTIONS

Section 4 identified a number of management issues, all of which need to be addressed in the interest of the long-term maintenance of the full biodiversity of the rainforests of Cape York Peninsula. There is little to be gained, however, in trying to deal with management issues on a broad front. It is necessary to deal with what is achievable with likely resources, and to consolidate a pattern of initial effort and meticulous maintenance to ensure that what has once been gained is never lost again. Enthusiasm for habitat management, in particular, will quickly wane if initial effort is followed by neglect, which sees the loss of what has been gained. On the other hand, visible success is necessary to maintain the long-term interest of staff in any project. These maxims are nowhere more self-evident than in efforts to control feral animals and plants where any reduction in populations of a species, before total eradication, will see it recover, and resources that could have been used to deal with urgent problems elsewhere, totally wasted.

The recommendations made in this section, therefore, concern only a few priority issues that are considered to be achievable in the foreseeable future (within five years, perhaps). There is little point in thinking beyond them until they have been completed and maintenance systems are in place. If there is an increase in resources it should be directed towards these identified projects rather than to commence new ones. The reasons for this are as outlined above, and relate to the need for enthusiasm and commitment in participating staff and this can only be fostered and maintained by tasks completed and done well.

No attempt has been made to set long term priorities, although in the most general terms the eradication of pigs and cattle would eliminate most of the threats to rainforest habitat. Priorities will change with time, as more knowledge becomes available, and other issues, not currently recognised, emerge. It will be found more satisfactory to review progress, and change after several years, or nearer the completion of first priority tasks, and to set further tasks on that basis.

A number of recommendations are set out below in order of priority. In formulating these recommendations no consideration of land tenure has been made. The Department of Environment is charged by legislation with environmental responsibilities for all lands, and has the ability to fund, co-ordinate, and direct activities for some environmental protection activities on them. More importantly, where the major management issues are concerned, any attempts to treat individual areas or tenures in isolation would be self-defeating. This is particularly true for problems of introduced animals and plants where the minimum unit that can ever be addressed is a habitat unit, unless one is prepared to accept a commitment to dealing with the problems as a permanent feature. It is not felt that it is the responsibility of this report to identify possible funding sources for each project.

6.1 Elimination of Pond Apple

On the principle of prevention being better than cure, this is by far the most important proposed management project for the protection of not only Cape York Peninsula's rainforests but many of its other habitats.

Pond apple (*Annona glabra*) occupies most of the Cooktown town area drainage lines and is spreading along the mangrove fringes of the Endeavour River. The significance of the threat this poses to coastal areas as far north as Cape Flattery, and even ultimately the Cape Melville area, should not be underestimated. Presently it is eradicable. Before long it will not be.

The occurrence of *A. glabra* in the Temple Bay and Iron Range area is far more threatening than the Cooktown occurrence, serious as that is, as it leaves the whole of Cape York from Massey Creek northwards open to invasion. There is, in particular, a vast area of varying habitats between that creek and the Pascoe River and inland to the ranges, that would ultimately be under threat. There is, indeed, no need for the plant to establish itself unseen for more than a number of years, in one relatively small part of this area, for control if its spread to become impossible. Mapping of infestations is an urgent priority².

6.2 Elimination of Lantana - Northern Cape York Peninsula

The species *Lantana camara* was observed in a small area of sclerophyll forest south of the tip of Cape York. Whilst not seen in rainforest it is a potential threat to it because of its ability to promote a regime of infrequent but severe fires along its boundary, with subsequent attrition of its margins.

An impression was gained that the plant occupies only a small area. If this can be verified by survey then elimination of the infestation would become a very high priority. The land involved is entirely Aboriginal Land of various tenures.

6.3 Fencing of Vine-Forest Site (Type 26) at the Head of the Howick River

This has been identified in Section 3.3.1 as the highest conservation priority in terms of a need for action to protect a unique system, of high biological values, which is under threat.

Whilst there is a very large number of areas, particularly small areas such as this, swamp areas, and isolated springs, which are being seriously degraded by feral animal activity, action to protect more than a small proportion of them, in the foreseeable future, is not likely to be possible. In the case of the Howick River forest we have an area of the highest scientific importance in a situation, which, access considerations being ignored, would be easy to fence. In view of this, the damage being inflicted on it, and the desirability of making a start on the removal of such pressures from critical areas, it is recommended that this forest be fenced against both pigs and cattle, and that the fence be permanently maintained. It is situated within the former Kalpowar Pastoral Holding, which is now unallocated State land and a proposed National Park.

6.4 Permanent Reduction of Pig and Cattle Populations - Cape Melville and Altanmoui Ranges

An effort should be made to reduce damage being inflicted by feral animals on some key habitats in this area. The rationale for this can be provided by discussion in Section 4.3. In terms of the number of unique rainforest habitats and species, this was identified as the most significant part of Cape York Peninsula. It also has some of the highest populations of feral animals and some of the most damaged habitats.

Ultimately, cattle can be eliminated from most of the area, but the achievement of that must depend on eradication programs over a much larger area. There appears to be no prospect of eradication of pigs. It is proposed, however, that action be initiated to identify areas where the most serious damage is occurring and by making use of dry season watering points, take action (trapping, shooting, poisoning) to keep populations in those areas at the lowest possible levels.

² Since the initial writing of this report, major infestations have been found in the Iron Range area.

6.5 Rubber Vine Eradication (Type 15) – Deciduous Vine Thicket – Lakefield National Park

Because of its soil and open nature of the community, this type, which was identified as unique, is very open to invasion by rubber vine, and that process has already started. The danger to this community is very great as rubber vine has the capacity to smother and destroy it. There are, however, encouraging prospects for the control of rubber vine by a recently released rust which is actively spreading throughout the infestation on the National Park. It is not known, however, what the eventual effect of the rust might be, and as that may take years to clarify, it would be dangerous to wait upon that knowledge before taking action against the vine.

6.6 *Senna siamea* Eradication – Lakefield National Park and Coen area

Ringbarking or poisoning this tree downstream from both Old Laura Homestead and in the Coen area, is recommended, to protect the integrity of gallery forests downstream. After the main infestations are destroyed, searching of the full length of the rivers will be required to identify and destroy individual trees. This process could be made easy by the use of a helicopter during the early dry season period when the tree is flowering. As the species has a hard long-lived seed, vigilance will be needed for a decade or more to identify and destroy seedlings.

6.7 Rehabilitation of Mt. Webb National Park

Whilst the rainforests of Mt. Webb, north of Cooktown, were not identified as being unique or threatened, or even particularly rich in species, they are impressive forests aesthetically, and are part of the limited occurrence of rainforest on basalt on Cape York Peninsula.

When it was proposed to gazette the park the boundaries were designed to include a strip of sclerophyll forest country surrounding the rainforest. Perhaps in the mistaken belief that the park boundary was the rainforest edge, much of this non-rainforest strip was later cleared and/or cultivated. The disturbed area has now been colonised by Sicklepod (*Senna obtusifolia*, an invasive exotic legume). There is no possibility now that the original forest and groundcover can be rehabilitated, and the only practical possibility of control of the weed lies in shading it out. It is recommended that this be done by the dense planting of local rainforest species in a strip of variable width along the margin of the standing forest.

Whilst the control of the weed within the park boundary would be largely of symbolic importance, the proposed project could not be, and is not justified on those grounds alone. More importantly it would provide a buffer for the intact rainforest that would help to promote its long-term survival. This forest is not occupying the entire site, which on soil indications, is available to it, and has probably shrunk in range in recent centuries. For its area it has a large edge that provides an ecotone that is different in many ways from the interior of the forest. The proposed buffer strip would provide maximum protection of the forest against further contraction in area, and is likely, in contrast, to facilitate its expansion into an area, which no longer has any natural values.