
PART ONE:

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

by Libby Larsen and Sandra Pannell

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The Traditional Owners of the Wet Tropics Natural Resource Management region have adopted a unique approach to ensure that their interests and aspirations are considered in the new, Australia-wide Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) funded regional arrangements for integrated natural resource management (NRM). Dissatisfied with the engagement process associated with the development of the Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan¹, Traditional Owners made a collective decision in 2002 to develop their own Wet Tropics Cultural and Natural Resource Management Plan (Aboriginal Plan). In doing so, they envisioned that the Aboriginal Plan would inform the content and direction of the Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan and, in itself, constitute a groundbreaking vision for caring for country and culture in a holistic sense.

The Aboriginal Plan took over three years to develop, commencing with the first Traditional Owner regional workshop held in March 2002 to discuss Indigenous involvement in NHT 2. Indigenous groups were largely excluded from the planning process in the first phase of the NHT program (1997-2001), and consequently only a handful of Aboriginal communities Australia-wide received funding support for NRM projects. Determined to rectify this state of Indigenous marginalisation in what is arguably a multi-billion dollar, nation-wide experiment in environmental management and social change, Traditional Owners, government and non-government organisations in the Wet Tropics region attended numerous workshops, meetings and presentations to develop an Aboriginal Plan.

It has not been an easy task to develop this plan, and ensure acknowledgement of Indigenous perspectives and values in the broader Wet Tropics NRM planning process. Although there has been support from a number of individuals working within government departments (both State and Commonwealth) and FNQ NRM Ltd, the reality is that the framework for NHT 2 and the guidelines for the development of NRM plans do not adequately embrace and support Indigenous aspirations for caring for country. Thus, one of the major challenges encountered in developing the Aboriginal Plan was to broaden the focus and objectives of NHT at a regional, State and Commonwealth level. The promotion of a more holistic and integrated view of NRM is crucial if Indigenous aspirations are to be recognised in regional planning processes. Critical to this reformulation of current NRM models is the adoption of a whole-of-government approach to the articulation of NHT and the delivery of sustainable NRM outcomes. In this respect, in the process of developing the Aboriginal Plan, strategic partnership arrangements were developed between Traditional Owners, the Board of FNQ NRM Ltd, the Regional Group Collective, Commonwealth and State Government NRM teams and the Joint Steering Committee.

As the first plan of its kind to specifically address the many challenges of maintaining distinct and diverse cultures in a multi-tenured and rapidly changing landscape, it is important that the process of developing the Aboriginal Plan is documented to ensure that other NRM regions and Indigenous groups can benefit from the lessons learned within the Wet Tropics NRM region. This is not to say that what has occurred in the Wet Tropics should be used as a 'one-size-fits all' model for Indigenous engagement in other NRM regions. Rather, some of the issues and ways in which the Wet Tropics Aboriginal Plan Project Team (WTAPPT) attempted to shape the NHT framework and planning process to better reflect Indigenous people's values and priorities for natural and cultural resource management may be used as an inspiration and guide for other Indigenous groups in Australia. In addition to documenting the process leading to the launch of the Aboriginal Plan at Innisfail on 29 April 2005, this document also contains the proceedings of Aboriginal Plan development workshops

¹ **Editorial Comment:** The document *Sustaining the Wet Tropics. A Regional Plan for Natural Resource Management 2004-2008* is widely referred to as the *Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan*, or in short, the *NRM Plan*.

convened between March 2002 and December 2004. The content of these proceedings have been retained not just for the 'historical record', but also to illustrate the complexity and multi-processual nature of the Plan's development. While a recent review of the NHT program identified the Aboriginal Plan as a "case study of exemplary consultation with Indigenous communities", suggesting to the general public a process of clear and mutual understanding, the reality of the Plan's evolution is quite different. As evident in the proceedings in part two of this report, issues of cross-cultural interpretation, translation, and comprehension were encountered on a daily basis. It is incorrect to see these issues simply as one of the effects of imposing western ideas about planning and management upon Aboriginal peoples and landscapes. The NHT process brings together a number of different cultural systems, including Indigenous, Anglo-Australian, scientific and bureaucratic orders of meaning and value. In this culturally diverse context, misunderstanding and mis-recognition on the part of those involved were, at times, the unintended outcomes. As demonstrated in the proceedings, the Aboriginal Plan owes its 'success' to those people willing to recognise and reconcile differences in ideas, identities and ideals in this social experiment in multi-cultural, multi-sectoral planning.

PLANNING AND POLICY CONTEXT

The Extension of Natural Heritage Trust – New Regional Arrangements for NRM

The State and Commonwealth Governments' support for community-based NRM has moved from a project-based approach to strategic investment at a regional scale. To oversee this investment, nearly sixty Regional NRM Bodies have been established across Australia (FNQ NRM Ltd and Rainforest CRC 2004). These bodies are responsible for the implementation of the extension to the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) at a regional scale. The NHT program will provide \$2.7 billion through to 2007-2008 (Worth 2005), with funds to be delivered primarily through investments at a regional level. These investments are based upon an accredited NRM plan and a regional investment strategy developed by the regional NRM body.

The integrated delivery of the NHT program is intended to streamline planning and the implementation of NRM based on regional needs. Program implementation is through integrated regional plans, developed by local communities and supported by government and the best available science.

The overarching objectives of the second phase, also known as 'the extension' of the NHT program, or as 'NHT 2', are:

- **Biodiversity Conservation:** the conservation of Australia's biodiversity through the protection and restoration of terrestrial, freshwater, estuarine and marine ecosystems and habitat for native plants and animals;
- **Sustainable Use of Natural Resources:** the sustainable use and management of Australia's land, water and marine resources to maintain and improve the productivity and profitability of resource based industries; and
- **Community Capacity-building and Institutional Change:** support for individuals, landholders, industry and communities with skills, knowledge, information and institutional frameworks to promote biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource use and management.

The ten key areas of activity for NHT 2 are:

1. Protecting and restoring the habitat of threatened species, ecological communities and migratory birds;
2. Reversing the long-term decline in the extent and quality of Australia's native vegetation;
3. Protecting and restoring significant freshwater, marine and estuarine ecosystems;
4. Preventing or controlling the introduction and spread of feral animals, aquatic pests, weeds and other biological threats to biodiversity;
5. Establishing and effectively managing a comprehensive, adequate and representative system of protected areas;
6. Improving the condition of natural resources that underpins the sustainability and productivity of resource-based industries;
7. Securing access to natural resources for productive purposes;
8. Encouraging the development of sustainable and profitable management systems for application by landholders and other natural resource managers and users;
9. Providing landholders, community groups and other natural resource managers with understanding and skills to contribute to biodiversity conservation and sustainable natural resource management; and

10. Establishing institutional and organisational frameworks that promote conservation and ecologically sustainable use and management of natural resources.

Indigenous Involvement in NHT 2 at a Regional Level

In 2004, as part of its *Enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Regional Natural Resource Management* project, the Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Heritage (DEH) developed a series of documents and booklets aimed at assisting Indigenous communities and individuals to achieve active and equitable participation in the NHT program². A year earlier, the Queensland Government had drafted Indigenous engagement guidelines³ to assist Regional Coordination Groups and Regional NRM Bodies. In many respects, the development of these 'engagement guidelines' was driven by the initiative taken by Traditional Owners in the Wet Tropics to interpret and respond to NHT in their own terms. Notwithstanding the belated development of national and state 'Indigenous engagement protocols', the situation of Indigenous marginalisation in the NHT process doesn't appear to have significantly improved in the second tranche of funding for the program. As one commentator concludes, "[o]verall, the NHT... program has demonstrated little actual involvement with, or consultation of, Indigenous Australians" (Worth 2005).

² These documents included *Working with Indigenous Knowledge in Natural Resource Management: Guidelines for Regional Bodies* (2004), *Guidelines for Indigenous Participation in Natural Resource Management* (2004), *Working with Indigenous Knowledge in Natural Resource Management: Recommendations for Commonwealth Agencies* (2004), plus six 'best practice' case studies for Indigenous engagement in natural resource management case (Smyth, Szabo and George 2004).

³ *Guidelines for Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in: The Establishment of Natural Resource Management Bodies and the Development of the Regional Natural Resource Management Plan and Investment Strategy* (2003).

THE PLANNING REGION – THE WET TROPICS NRM REGION

The Wet Tropics NRM Region of North Queensland extends from just north of Townsville to just south of Cooktown and west to Mount Garnet, incorporating six river catchments draining eastward into the Coral Sea. Encompassing approximately 1,849,725 hectares – almost one percent of the area of Queensland – the region boasts some of the most spectacular and significant landscapes in the country, including the rainforests of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (WTWHA) (900,000 hectares) and the adjoining Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, the world's largest marine protected area (Weston and Goosem 2004).

This tropical biodiverse region contains the traditional country of seventeen Traditional Owner groups, *Bandjin, Bar-Barrum, Djabugay, Djiru, Girramay, Gulnay, Gunggandji, Jirrbal, Koko Muluridji, Kuku Yalanji, Ma:Mu, Ngadjon-Jii, Nywaigi, Warrgamay, Warungnu, Yidindji, and Yirrganydji*. However, because the Wet Tropics NRM Region has been defined by catchments and other 'natural' values, its boundary cuts across the traditional lands of a number of Aboriginal groups, resulting in the need for them to engage in at least two NRM planning processes (Smyth 2004). A large portion of the new NRM region is included within the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, which in turn is made up of numerous national parks, timber reserves and other tenures. Outside the protected area boundaries, the remaining land has largely been cleared of its native rainforests for sugar and banana cultivation, dairy farming, a range of other agriculture pursuits, plus urban development. Tourism associated with the rainforests, wild rivers and the Great Barrier Reef is the largest industry in North Queensland (FNQ NRM Ltd and Rainforest CRC 2004; Smyth 2004).

Although Aboriginal people suffered many of the consequences of colonisation that occurred elsewhere in Australia – displacement, dispersal, massacres, introduced diseases, poisoning, discrimination and exploitation – many Aboriginal groups continue to live on or close to their traditional country. In the past, they maintained this connection to country through their employment on farms and cattle properties or by living on missions and reserves established on their land (Smyth 2004). As a result, many Aboriginal people have retained knowledge of their language, culture and country. Despite this continuing connection to country, so far very little land has been returned to Aboriginal owners across the region, either through land grants or through the recognition of Native Title rights and interests. While large areas of the region are held as freehold tenure, some commentators have suggested that Native Title rights and interests continue to exist in nearly eighty percent of the WTWHA (Smyth 2004).

Right:

Figure 1: The map 'Caring for Country and Culture' depicts the boundaries of the Wet Tropics NRM Region and identifies its Traditional Owner Groups (Map courtesy of the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Cairns, 2004).

CARING FOR COUNTRY AND CULTURE

The Traditional Owners of the Wet Tropics NRM region include:

Banjin, Bar-Barrum, Djabugay, Djiru, Girramay, Gulnay, Gunggandji, Jirrbal, Koko Muluridji, Kuku Yalanji, Ma:Mu, Ngadjon-Jii, Nywaigi, Warrgamay, Warungnu, Yidinji, Yirrganydji.

NOTE - There are also clan groups within many of the Traditional Owner groups. There can be variations in the spelling used for each Traditional Owner group.

These spellings are consistent with the

Wet Tropics World Heritage Area Regional Agreement.



Indigenous held lands
(includes DOGIT, Aboriginal Land Act Freehold, Land Leases and Reserves (Land Act 1994) and other land held by Indigenous corporations)

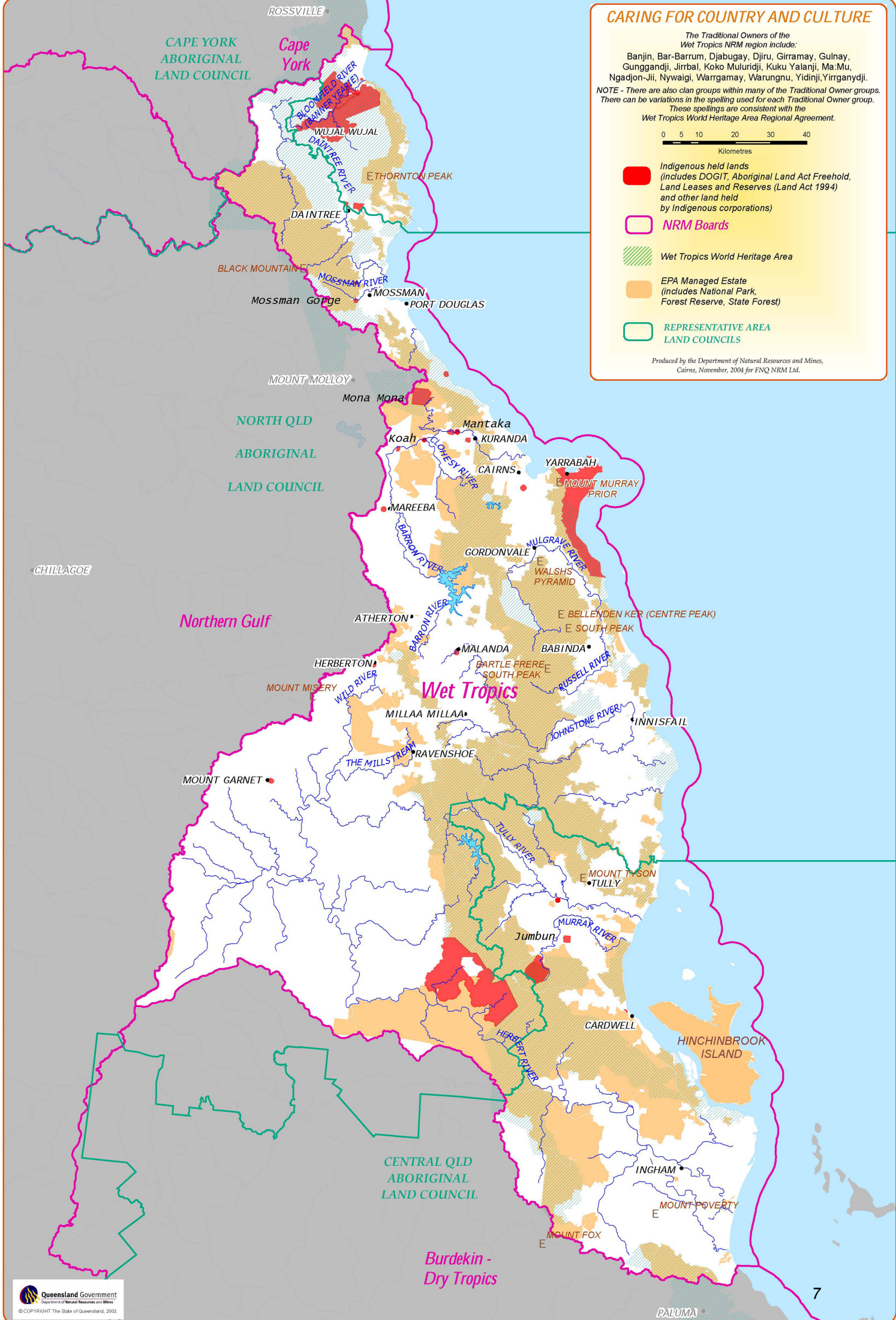
NRM Boards

Wet Tropics World Heritage Area

EPA Managed Estate
(includes National Park, Forest Reserve, State Forest)

REPRESENTATIVE AREA LAND COUNCILS

Produced by the Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Cairns, November, 2004 for FNQ NRM Ltd.



DEVELOPMENT OF THE ABORIGINAL PLAN AND THE WET TROPICS REGIONAL NRM PLAN

Figure 2 outlines some of the key stages in the development of the Aboriginal Plan.

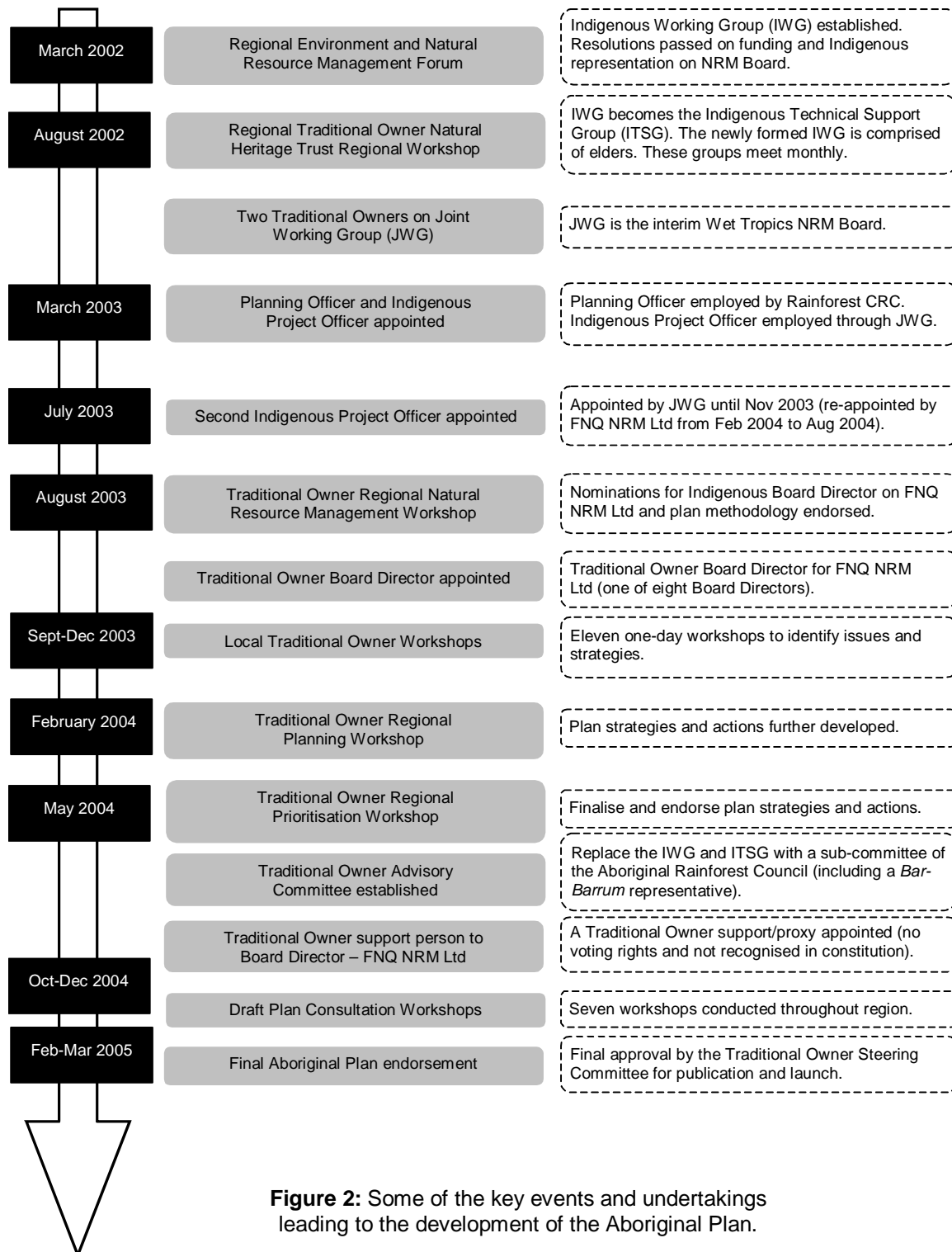


Figure 2: Some of the key events and undertakings leading to the development of the Aboriginal Plan.

As indicated in this figure, the development of the Aboriginal Plan was a multi-processual and multi-sectoral achievement. For some dimensions of this accomplishment, it is possible to provide clear dates and times for temporally-confined events, while other activities evolved from rather diffuse spatial and temporal origins and ran in a number of directions for extended periods. While history and hindsight tends to pull these happenings and processes together in a single coherent framework suggestive of a pre-determined structure and schedule, the reality over the course of the three years taken to develop the Plan was quite different. As the first plan of its kind, Traditional Owners and others involved generated their own, at times unique, reading of and responses to the NHT program and its planning guidelines. For the most part, this involved rejecting the imposition of inappropriate aspects of the NHT conceptual apparatus and governance structures, and replacing them with culturally sustainable alternatives. At other times, however, Traditional Owners worked with NHT categories and within the existing NHT framework to produce innovative interpretations suitable for local conditions, experiences and expectations.

ORIGINS OF THE ABORIGINAL PLAN

First Regional Traditional Owner Workshop

A two-day regional Traditional Owner workshop was held in Cairns in March 2002 to discuss issues relating to the new Wet Tropics-based funding arrangements for NHT. The workshop was organised by the Regional Bushcare Facilitator and the regional Indigenous Land Management Facilitator, and was supported by the NQLC, Giringun Aboriginal Corporation, QPWS, the Bushcare Program, Indigenous Land Corporation, Cape York Development Corporation and the Rainforest CRC (WTAPPT 2005). The aims of the workshop were to:

- Explain NHT funding and the purpose of the various programs;
- Discuss the issues that limited Aboriginal involvement in the first phase of NHT;
- Highlight the changing backdrop for NRM processes within the region; and
- Discuss a way forward to increase Indigenous involvement at all levels during the planning and delivery of NHT 2.

Second Regional Traditional Owner Workshop

A second regional workshop for Traditional Owners was held in Cairns in August 2002 to consider several options for engaging Traditional Owners in the NRM planning process. At this workshop a decision was made to embark on the development of a separate plan (the Aboriginal Plan), which would address the full spectrum of Aboriginal NRM issues. It was agreed that this plan would then be integrated into the Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan. At this meeting, participants also passed a resolution to establish two Indigenous positions on the Joint Working Group (i.e. the Interim Wet Tropics NRM Board).

Wet Tropics Aboriginal Plan Project Team

Indigenous Working Group and Indigenous Technical Support Group

At the first regional workshop, participants established the Indigenous Working Group (IWG). The IWG comprised Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals with experience and expertise in the field of natural resource management and environmental governance. Members of the IWG occupied key positions in government environmental agencies (e.g. EPA, WTMA) and regional research institutions (JCU, Rainforest CRC). One of the aims of the IWG was to enhance Indigenous engagement in the current NRM planning process (Hill and Nursey-Bray 2002). At the second regional workshop a new IWG comprised of elders from a number of Traditional Owner groups was established to oversee the planning process. At this meeting, members of the original IWG formed the Indigenous Technical Support Group (ITSG). Among its many roles and responsibilities, members of the ITSG facilitated workshops, attended NRM meetings and provided support to the IWG (Smyth 2004).

Both the IWG and ITSG each played an important role in providing guidance to Aboriginal participants at regional workshops and meetings. In addition, both groups provided strategic direction and advice to the Indigenous Project Officers and Planning Officer involved in the development of the Aboriginal Plan. Monthly meetings between the ITSG, Planning Officer and Indigenous Project Officers were conducted during the first half of the Aboriginal Plan's development (that is, until the formation of the Traditional Owner Advisory Committee in mid 2004).

Planning Officer and Indigenous Project Officers

In March 2003, Traditional Owners, in conjunction with FNQ NRM Ltd and Rainforest CRC, advertised and appointed a Planning Officer (Libby Larsen) to develop the separate Aboriginal Plan. Employed by and based at the Rainforest CRC in Cairns, Libby Larsen worked with planning researchers, Professor Geoff McDonald and Nigel Weston, to integrate the key issues identified in the Aboriginal Plan into the 'mainstream' Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan. At the same time, the NRM Board (Wet Tropics) Inc. (NRM Board) appointed Indigenous Project Officer, Lyle Johnston. In July 2003, the NRM Board appointed an additional Indigenous Project Officer, Jean Fenton, initially for a three-month period until September 2003, and then for a further six-month period in 2004. While the Rainforest CRC and FNQ NRM Ltd funded the planning officer and two Indigenous project officer positions respectively, the initiative for the establishment of these positions came directly from the Traditional Owners.

Traditional Owner Advisory Committee

In September 2003, negotiations to develop a new Traditional Owner Advisory Committee (to replace the IWG and ITSG) began. As the Aboriginal Plan neared completion, members of the Aboriginal Plan Project Team saw the need to establish a new steering group that would play a critical role in the long-term implementation and monitoring of the Plan.

Around this time, and for some years previously, negotiations between Traditional Owners (through the Aboriginal Negotiating Team) and a number of government agencies (DNR&M, DEH, WTMA and EPA) were underway to develop a Regional Agreement, which would facilitate Indigenous input to the management of the WTWHA. The signing of the Regional Agreement by the interested parties would also bring into existence a new regional Aboriginal organisation, the Aboriginal Rainforest Council (ARC). As the peak Traditional Owner organisation for the region dealing with land management and cultural heritage, the ARC was well placed to play a key role in the future implementation and monitoring of the Aboriginal Plan.

In mid 2004, after several meetings and presentations to the newly formed ARC, a Traditional Owner Advisory Committee, comprising a sub-committee of the Aboriginal Rainforest Council, with a *Bar-Barrum* representative, was established (WTAPPT 2005).

THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

One of the key considerations driving the development of the Aboriginal Plan was that it would be undertaken in accordance with the priorities and desires of the Traditional Owners. The decision-making model for the Plan development process is highlighted below.

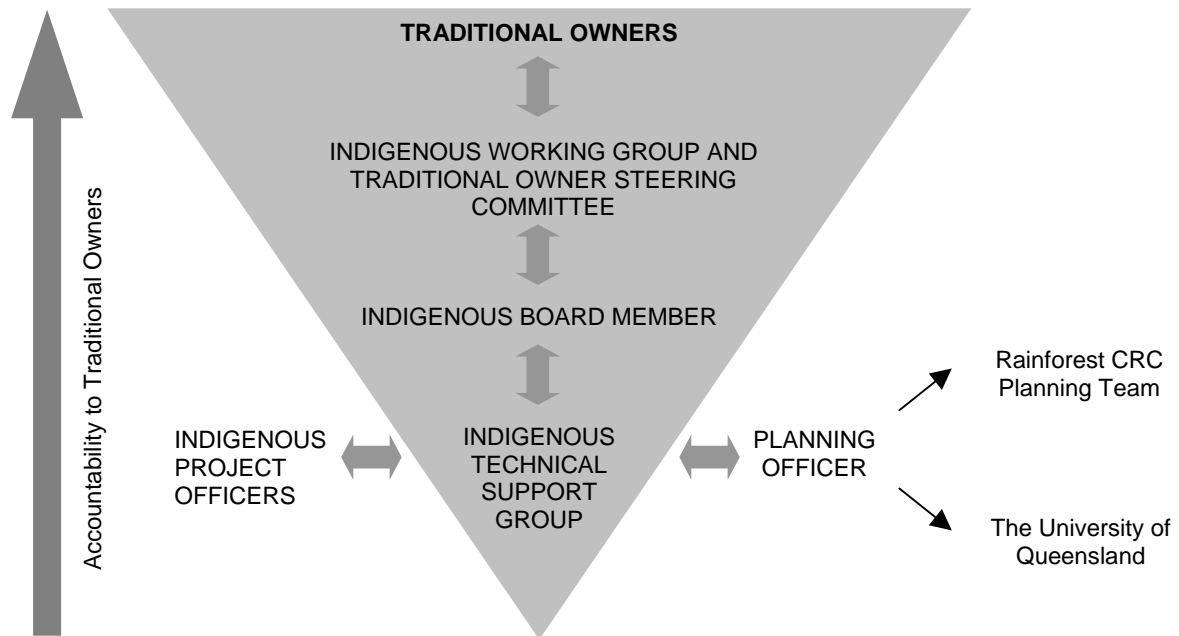


Figure 3: Decision-making model for the development of the Aboriginal Plan.

Plan Development Workshops

At the third regional two-day workshop held in Cairns in August 2003, Traditional Owners endorsed a methodology for researching and developing the Aboriginal Plan. The framework endorsed at the meeting included draft timelines, a detailed engagement process, guiding principles and protocols and suggestions for the Plan's format and structure.

At the August 2003 workshop, participants also identified and endorsed a selection process for the five Traditional Owners nominated for the position of Indigenous Director on the newly established Board of FNQ NRM Ltd. Through this Traditional Owner-driven selection process, *Warrgamay* man, Troy Wyles-Whelan, was appointed to this position.

As part of the engagement and Plan research process, eleven one-day workshops were undertaken with individual Traditional Owner groups between September 2003 and December 2003. These meetings, typically held *on country*, were organised and facilitated by the Indigenous Project Officers and the Planning Officer. Details of these local-level workshops are presented in Table 1. This table also provides summary information about the staging of regional workshops and meetings.

Table 1: Details of Regional Meetings and Traditional Owner workshops convened from March 2002 to December 2004.

Workshop	Venue	Date	Purpose
Wet Tropics Regional Environment and Natural Resource Management Forum	Sisters of Mercy Conference Centre, Cairns	14-15 March 2002	– Discuss the extension of NHT (NHT 2) and new regional NRM arrangements.
Regional Natural Heritage Trust Workshop	Sisters of Mercy Conference Centre, Cairns	13 August 2002	– Discuss NHT 2 and new regional NRM arrangements.
Traditional Owner Regional Environmental and Natural Resource Management Workshop	Sisters of Mercy Conference Centre, Cairns	13-14 August 2003	– Nomination of Traditional Owner Board Directors for FNQ NRM Ltd. – Determine appropriate methodology for developing Aboriginal Plan (timeframes, consultation process, etc.).
One-day Local Workshops for Aboriginal Plan Development	Malanda Showground, Malanda	10 September 2003	– Determine issues in cultural and natural resource management at a local scale. – Identify strategies and actions to address issues. – Identify capacity-building issues.
	Kuranda Medical Centre, Kuranda	17 September 2003	
	Wet Tropics NRM Catchment Centre, Innisfail	18 September 2003	
	Wet Tropics NRM Catchment Centre, Innisfail	22 September 2003	
	Kowrowa Hall, Kowrowa	23 September 2003	
	Ingham Community Hall, Ingham	14 October 2003	
	Chowai Centre, Innisfail	16 October 2003	
	Jumbun Community Hall, Murray Upper	15 November 2003	
	CWA Hall, Atherton	28 November 2003	
	School of Distance Education, Cairns	29 November 2003	
	CWA Hall, Gordonvale	13 December 2003	
Regional Traditional Owner Planning Workshop	Sisters of Mercy Conference Centre, Cairns	12 February 2004	– Further develop strategies and actions developed at local level. – Endorsement of key themes for Aboriginal Plan.
Prioritisation Traditional Owner Regional Workshop	Cairns Student Lodge, Cairns	May 2004	– Finalise and endorse strategies and actions according to funding years. – Score each strategy against agreed criteria (healthy culture, healthy country and economic).

Workshop	Venue	Date	Purpose
Draft Aboriginal Plan Workshops	International Club, Atherton	7 October 2004	– Finalise and approve draft Aboriginal Plan.
	Chowai Centre, Innisfail	12 October 2004	
	Girringun Training Centre, Cardwell	15 October 2004	
	Community Hall, Wujal Wujal	19 October 2004	
	Mossman Gorge Training Centre, Mossman Gorge	21 October 2004	
	Sisters of Mercy Conference Centre, Cairns	29 October 2004	
	Community Hall, Yarrabah	10 December 2004	

The Planning Officer, together with the two Indigenous Project Officers, interviewed workshop participants and recorded their aspirations and concerns regarding their customary obligations to care for country and culture. A summary of the key information recorded at these Traditional Owner workshops is presented in Figure 4.

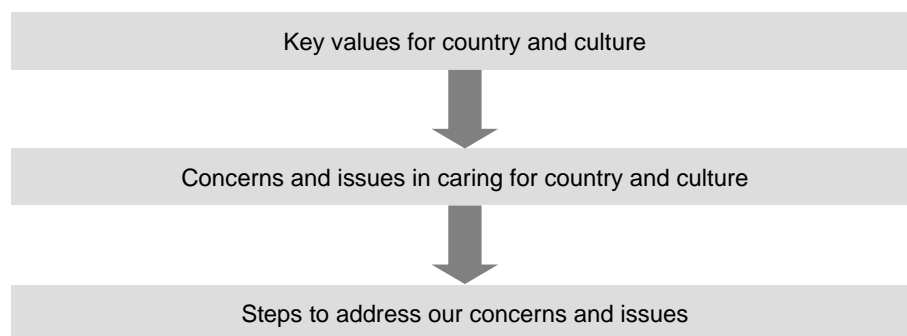


Figure 4: An indication of the kind of information recorded at Traditional Owner workshops.

Following the Traditional Owner workshops, a fourth regional forum was held in February 2004 in Cairns. The purpose of this meeting was to further develop the draft strategies and actions identified in the local-level workshops. At the regional forum, Aboriginal delegates endorsed a set of key themes, strategies and actions for inclusion in the Aboriginal Plan (WTAPPT 2005).

In May 2004, a fifth regional two-day Traditional Owner forum was again held in Cairns. The primary purpose of this meeting was threefold:

- To finalise previously endorsed strategies and actions;
- To sequence the strategies and actions according to funding years; and
- To score each of the strategies against the agreed-upon criteria of (1) healthy culture; (2) healthy country; and (3) economic development. Each of the three criteria was accorded a 'benefit rating' from 1 (high) to 3 (low). The strategies were then ranked as 'high priority', 'moderate priority' or 'low priority' strategies.

The prioritisation outcomes of the fifth regional forum were subsequently integrated into the Draft Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan for community consultation and the Draft Aboriginal Plan for consultation with Traditional Owners. The information generated at this forum also formed the basis of the Aboriginal component of the Regional Investment Strategy for the Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan.

In September 2004, Traditional Owners of the region were sent the Draft Aboriginal Plan and a draft Summary of the Aboriginal Plan containing a timetable of Traditional Owner workshops to be held during October and November 2004. Drafts of the Aboriginal Plan were also sent to key regional Indigenous organisations, including the ARC, Native Title Representative Bodies, Giringun Aboriginal Corporation, ATSIC Regional Councils, Indigenous Partnerships Liaison Unit (IPLU), WTMA's Aboriginal Resource Management Program (ARMP) and the EPA's Indigenous Engagement Unit (IEU). Informal feedback and written submissions were requested from all groups, who were also encouraged to attend the October-November 2004 workshops.

In addition to the series of workshops held late in 2004, several meetings were convened with key Indigenous bodies. Further, a workshop was staged in late November 2004 to discuss the Draft Aboriginal Plan. Held at the Rainforest CRC, this workshop involved members of the Traditional Owner Advisory Committee, the Indigenous Board Director for FNQ NRM Ltd (and the proxy Indigenous Board Director), the Indigenous Land Management Facilitator, an Indigenous Project Officer, the Planning Officer and other members of the Aboriginal Plan Project Team. In late January 2005, the Traditional Owner Advisory Committee approved printing and publication of the final Aboriginal Plan (WTAPPT 2005).

On 29 April 2005 at Innisfail, Traditional Owners of the Wet Tropics joined with government representatives and the wider community to celebrate the launch of *Caring for Country and Culture: The Wet Tropics Aboriginal Cultural and Natural Resource Management Plan*. The launch of the Aboriginal Plan was staged in conjunction with the signing of the *Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area Regional Agreement*. Representing one of the largest gatherings of Traditional Owners in recent times, the two events were attended by the Queensland Ministers for the Environment (The Hon. Desley Boyle MP), and for Natural Resources and Mines (The Hon. Stephen Robertson MP) and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Federal Minister for the Environment and Heritage (The Hon. Greg Hunt MP). In addition to the attending government officials, Mr Steve Larkin, Principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, participated as an invited guest speaker for the official launch of the Aboriginal Plan.

CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING THE WET TROPICS REGIONAL NRM PLAN AND THE ABORIGINAL PLAN

Meeting NRM / NHT Goals and Indigenous Aspirations for Caring for Country

For Traditional Owners of the Wet Tropics, nature and culture are linked and regarded as inseparable. However, the framework and agenda for the extension of the NHT program (NHT 2) is still firmly entrenched within a standard scientific NRM model and thus does not recognise the holistic environmental perspective advocated by Indigenous people. Acknowledging and reconciling these fundamentally-different points of view is essential for the successful integration of Indigenous interests and aspirations within future NRM processes and paradigms. The holistic nature of Indigenous peoples' relationship to country is something that many non-Indigenous Australians find difficult to conceptualise and understand. According to the Traditional Owners consulted in the process of developing the Aboriginal Plan, cultural, spiritual, economic and social relationships are intertwined and interdependent in terms of their continued well-being and existence. If one part of this interconnected network of values, practices and beliefs is damaged or destroyed, all other dimensions are placed at risk.

For example, when speaking about their aspirations for environmental protection and conservation, Traditional Owners interspersed their conversations with stories about language maintenance, being on country with young people and elders, and looking after places of significance. For Traditional Owners, there are clear links between biodiversity protection, language maintenance and other activities, which are largely signposted as 'cultural projects' in the nature-based NHT / NRM framework. Realistically speaking, some of the key aspirations identified by Traditional Owners for looking after country will probably not be funded through the NHT program. The considerable challenges faced by Traditional Owners in their attempts to 'mainstream' a different cultural paradigm become more apparent when the various elements and key objectives of the NHT program are considered in more detail. For example it is difficult to reconcile the 'Matters for Targets' and 'Investment Strategy' guidelines that regional bodies must address in the preparation of their NRM plans with an Indigenous point of view. The issue is not just about a clash of cultures – bureaucratic culture and Indigenous cultures – but is also about a different way of imagining an *Umwelt* or life-world and the position of sentient beings in this world.

This issue came up time and time again throughout the Plan process and caused great frustration on the part of the Traditional Owners, as well for those responsible for preparing the actual Plan. In the course of researching and developing the Aboriginal Plan it became apparent that the much-heralded 'integrated' approach to NRM advocated by the NHT program has its limits. In this scenario, *integration* appears to Traditional Owners as a form of assimilation rather than as a true recognition and celebration of the connectedness of living things.

Developing Targets for Indigenous Issues

The Commonwealth Government has identified a number of 'Matters for Targets' that regional bodies are required to address in their NRM Plans (Table 2). These so-called 'targets' are clearly based on a biophysical NRM model, which appears at odds when contrasted with the 'Matters for Targets' identified by Traditional Owners. Table 2 succinctly illustrates this contrast in its comparison of the draft matters for targets by Traditional Owners in the planning process and those set by the Commonwealth Government for regional bodies to address. Reconciling the content of the two columns constitutes one of the major challenges that faced those involved in the preparation of the Aboriginal Plan.

Table 2: A comparison of government and Indigenous 'Matters for Targets'.

Commonwealth Guidelines Matters for which Regional Targets must be set	Draft 'Matters for Targets' Developed by Traditional Owners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Land salinity - Soil condition - Native vegetation communities' integrity - Inland aquatic ecosystems integrity (rivers and other wetlands) - Estuarine, coastal and marine habitats integrity - Nutrients in aquatic environments - Turbidity / suspended particulate matter in aquatic environments - Surface water salinity in freshwater aquatic environments - Significant native species and ecological communities - Ecologically significant invasive species 	<p>Indigenous Cultural Knowledge and Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aboriginal Languages - Access and Use of Country - Knowledge of Country - Transmission of Cultural Knowledge - Intellectual and Cultural Property Rights <p>Sustainable Use of Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hunting and Gathering - Commercial Use of Resources - Cultural Tourism <p>Cultural Landscapes, Places and Materials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Places of Significance - Aboriginal Material Culture <p>Biodiversity Conservation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Plants and Animals of Cultural Significance - Weeds and Feral Animals <p>Wetlands and Waterways</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Water Quality and Quantity - Cultural Significance <p>Sea Country</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Marine Resource Use - Cultural Significance of Sea Country - Managing Sea Country

Lack of Awareness and Recognition

At both Commonwealth and State levels of government, there is a considerable lack of awareness of Indigenous issues, not just environmental, but also social-economic matters. When coupled with a lack of experience in working with Indigenous people and communities, this situation represents a serious 'capacity-building' challenge. As this suggests, and contrary to the usual Indigenous focus of capacity-building initiatives, the problem also lies within the walls of non-Indigenous organisations and at the feet of white Australia. Technically, this meant that a great deal of energy was spent ensuring Indigenous issues were at the forefront of the activities of FNQ NRM Ltd and were seriously addressed in the preparation of the 'mainstream' Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan. In combating the apparent lack of non-Indigenous capacity, members of the Wet Tropics Aboriginal Plan Project Team also encountered some of the preconceptions and prejudices that form part of the racialised landscape of North Queensland. While highlighting the need for cross-cultural awareness programs as part of the delivery of NHT at a regional level, this experience demonstrated the historical and social distance that still needs to be covered for a truly integrated approach to NRM.

Increased Community Appreciation

Notwithstanding the challenges and obstacles identified in the previous section, it is also apparent that many of the individuals and organisations involved in developing the Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan have developed a greater appreciation of the scope of Aboriginal interests in environmental management. This awareness has largely come about through attending Traditional Owner workshops and discussing ideas and issues in a face-to-face manner, receiving briefings from project officers involved in preparing the Aboriginal Plan, and participating in negotiations with members of the IWG and ITSG regarding funding and other resources needed for the Plan's development.

Indigenous people involved in the development of the Aboriginal Plan acknowledged that individuals associated with the wider NRM planning process had "come a long way" in their understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal issues and interests in cultural and natural resource management. However, the same people pointed out that this had at times been a painful and stressful process, sometimes involving heated exchanges. The implication here is that this experience of cross-cultural capacity-building can have a hidden, personal cost which should be acknowledged in what in reality is seen by many Aboriginal people as an Australia-wide attempt at reconciliation.

Culturally-Appropriate Planning Scales

One of the great challenges in developing the Aboriginal Plan involved coming to terms with the issue of what constitutes a culturally-appropriate planning scale for each Traditional Owner group. The Wet Tropics NRM planning region contains the traditional lands and waters of seventeen different Aboriginal tribal groups. For some of these groups, their country is divided by the boundaries of the planning region and, as such, they are involved in more than one NRM region and planning process. Discussions with Traditional Owners caught up in this bewildering bureaucratic situation, and with NRM personnel from other regions, indicates that while NRM regions may be contiguous, the planning processes are often quite different. For Aboriginal people this difference is particularly apparent in the way that each region engages with Traditional Owners. As the recent NNTT review of the NHT program observes, Indigenous engagement in the fifty-six NRM regions established Australia-wide varies considerably (Worth 2005:4).

The focus on regionalism and the delivery of the NHT program at this scale is in many ways at odds with Traditional Owners' notion of country and their responsibilities for it. Although there are many similar issues for each group in the region, there are also many differences in how these issues are prioritised by each group. Some Traditional Owners were of the opinion that the Aboriginal Plan should contain details about specific projects and priorities at the local level. However, the reality is that this proposition was far beyond the capacity of the planning process and, as such, future research is required to achieve these aspirations. Acknowledging the need to rethink the spatial focus of the current NHT program, 'country-based planning' has been identified as one of the funding priorities in the Wet Tropics Regional Investment Strategy. This new way of thinking about the delivery of the planning process will identify priorities at a local and, thus, more culturally-appropriate scale. The resulting plans, based on traditional spatial parameters, can then be used by Aboriginal landowners in future negotiations with non-Indigenous stakeholders regarding issues on their country.

Involvement, Real Engagement, and Then Getting Things Happening on the Ground

Indigenous engagement in the second tranche of NHT funding, or NHT 2, still seems to focus on and revolve around the idea of consultation. There is very little indication to suggest that *consultation* in this context actually involves the preparation of regional NRM plans to better

reflect Indigenous cultural perspectives or aspirations. The reality is that the national benchmark for serious Indigenous engagement in the new NRM arrangements is low and will depend on the commitment of NRM regional bodies, the capacity of Indigenous groups, and regional Indigenous organisations to ensure equitable participation in the process.

Although historically Indigenous peoples of the Wet Tropics have been largely left out of the plethora of planning processes undertaken to date, there has certainly been a dramatic improvement on the part of government and the private sector to consult with Indigenous peoples regarding land and sea management issues. At times, Indigenous concerns do not always conform to, nor can be addressed by, these consultative processes. Invariably, this disjuncture between bureaucratic objectives and Aboriginal aspirations leads to a notable lack of real outcomes for Indigenous peoples, and a healthy skepticism on their part about the benefits of being involved in these consultations in the first place. The experience of frustration and dissatisfaction with official structures and approaches was certainly identified by a number of Traditional Owners as a stumbling block to their ongoing and committed involvement in the planning process during the initial development of the Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan and Aboriginal Plan. The delivery of real outcomes and identifiable benefits is one of the many challenges facing everyone in the post-Aboriginal Plan period.

The Capacity of Indigenous Communities

The resources and time needed to effectively engage with Traditional Owners is often not taken into consideration in regional planning processes. As is the case in the rest of Aboriginal Australia, Wet Tropics Traditional Owners spend an inordinate amount of their time and energy attending meetings with various agencies and organisations to discuss issues affecting their lives and their traditional lands. All too often there is an expectation in the non-Indigenous community that the involvement of Traditional Owners in these externally-generated 'consultative' processes is based upon goodwill. Little consideration is given to meeting transport costs or providing payment for Indigenous advice and input. In this scenario, it is all too easy to account for the lack of Indigenous involvement in terms of Aboriginal apathy, rather than understanding the marginality or absence of Indigenous people as one of the effects of profound economic and social disadvantage. Mindful of this pressing issue, the Indigenous Technical Support Group played an important role in lobbying the parties and players involved in the NHT roll-out to secure sufficient resources to ensure effective Indigenous engagement. In this respect, gaining the support of the Rainforest CRC and FNQ NRM Ltd was a critical achievement and step forward in the planning process.

Real Indigenous Involvement in Decision-Making Structures at the Regional, State and National Levels

While the development of the Aboriginal Plan and the mainstream Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan have achieved substantial on-ground Indigenous engagement, it is apparent that Indigenous people are not involved in the higher-level administrative and governance structures of the NHT program. Yet it is at this level that strategic decisions affecting the viability of regional plans are made.

On the surface of things, it would appear that the stated NHT objectives of institutional change and capacity-building do not apply to the NHT framework itself. Linked to the realisation of these two objectives is the question of whether non-Indigenous notions of 'representation' necessarily constitute appropriate means for expressing Indigenous concerns and aspirations in NHT structures and frameworks. For example, although the Commonwealth Indigenous NRM Guidelines recommend that the newly-established regional NRM boards have a minimum of two Indigenous representatives, in reality, at least within the Wet Tropics, there is only one Indigenous Director out of the eight directors which comprise the Board. While Traditional Owners have voiced their dissatisfaction with this governance

arrangement on numerous occasions, the issue of increased Indigenous involvement on the Board for the Wet Tropics NRM Region remains unresolved.

The lessons from the Wet Tropics demonstrate that 'good' engagement occurs at several levels and is an ongoing process, rather than a singular event driven by an externally-generated agenda or timeframe. Like the concept of 'capacity-building', *engagement* is a term that is readily misunderstood and may mean different things to different people. For the Traditional Owners of the Wet Tropics, engagement is based on equity and mutual respect. It involves exchanging information, sharing responsibilities and equitably distributing all benefits. It cuts across all stages of the planning process, from high-level negotiations through to active involvement in on-ground projects. Developing a shared understanding of what 'engagement' should look like is a useful starting point, and will certainly avoid miscommunication later on.

Culturally-Appropriate Processes for Indigenous Involvement

Experience suggests that a 'one-size-fits-all' model of Indigenous engagement will not address or achieve the needs and aspirations of Traditional Owners regarding their involvement in the NRM process. In many ways, what occurred in the Wet Tropics came about because of the dissatisfaction experienced by Indigenous people with the way in which their interests were being considered in the development of the new regional arrangements.

Within the Wet Tropics, the way in which Traditional Owners wanted to be engaged in the roll-out of NHT 2 and the structures established to guide this process were determined by Traditional Owners. The pressure to work within government timeframes and meet pre-arranged deadlines while preparing the Aboriginal Plan was a considerable challenge for the Plan project team. However, from the very start of the planning process a methodology and a timeframe for the integration of the Indigenous targets and information into the mainstream Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan were identified and endorsed by Traditional Owners. The initial and ongoing involvement of Traditional Owners in all facets of the planning process has resulted in unanimous support for the Aboriginal Plan by the seventeen Traditional Owner groups in the Wet Tropics NRM region. In this region, ownership and control of the planning process both characterised and defined the nature of Indigenous engagement.

Indigenous Engagement is Everyone's Responsibility

The emergence of a strong Queensland-wide network of Indigenous Project Officers, employed by regional NRM bodies, and the appointment of an Indigenous State Network Coordinator, represent positive steps towards enhanced Indigenous participation in NRM. Developing a separate Aboriginal Plan illustrates the kind of demands and expectations placed upon these Indigenous Project Officers. In the Wet Tropics, only one Indigenous Project Officer has been appointed. This person is responsible for working with each and all of the seventeen Indigenous groups in the Wet Tropics NRM region. Economic and social disadvantage, coupled with a history of exclusion from planning processes, has meant that Aboriginal groups require considerable resources and support in order to effectively participate in the new regional NRM arrangements. All too often there is an expectation that the Indigenous Project Officer will deal with all things 'Indigenous', regardless of whether they directly relate to NRM / NHT issues. Some of the many activities and responsibilities of the Wet Tropics NRM Indigenous Project Officer are summarised below:

- Supporting Traditional Owner groups and Indigenous groups throughout the region;
- Supporting FNQ NRM Ltd staff members to increase their awareness of Aboriginal issues and to liaise with Aboriginal people;
- Communication of information to Aboriginal people;

- Coordination of transport to enable people to attend meetings;
- Supporting Aboriginal groups to develop project ideas and write funding applications;
- Facilitating the development partnerships between Aboriginal groups and NRM stakeholders;
- Liaising and networking with Aboriginal organisations;
- Supporting Aboriginal people to plan for and manage all aspects of projects;
- Provide advice for FNQ NRM Ltd policy relating to Traditional Owners issues; and
- Coordination of Indigenous Advisory groups for FNQ NRM Ltd.

Rather than 'black-boxing' Indigenous engagement, the lessons learned from the Wet Tropics experience highlights the need for all staff employed by regional NRM bodies to work with Indigenous groups within their catchment areas.

Challenges for the Future

So far, feedback from Traditional Owners and others involved in the planning process of the Aboriginal Plan suggests that the approach taken has been successful in providing a vehicle for developing and communicating Indigenous peoples' aspirations for resource management in the Wet Tropics. While key elements of the Aboriginal Plan have already been integrated into the 'mainstream' Wet Tropics Regional NRM Plan, the challenge of implementing the integrated Plan lies ahead. For the purposes of enhancing Indigenous engagement in NRM elsewhere in Australia, it will be important to monitor the effectiveness of how this and other Plan-related challenges are met in the future.