

Northern Australia Water and Land Taskforce

A Submission from The Wilderness Society

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Gunlom Falls, Northern Territory, Glenn Walker

“Northern Australia has natural values of great significance. In particular, it has the largest and most intact tropical savanna left on Earth, and the majority of Australia’s remaining natural rivers and wetlands. It also has nationally important areas of rainforest, mangroves, tropical heathlands and other habitats. It has many species found nowhere else on Earth.” Woinarski et al, The Nature of Northern Australia, 2007

“Any crop can be grown in any region at a cost. It is technically possible to produce pineapples in Antarctica” Dr B.R Davidson, The Northern Myth, 1965.



This submission has been produced by Lyndon Schneiders, Larissa Cordner, Glenn Walker, Anthony Esposito and Kerryn O’Conor.

The Wilderness Society (TWS) is a not for profit, non government conservation organisation whose purpose is to ‘protect, promote and restore wilderness and natural processes for the ongoing evolution of life on earth’. TWS has offices throughout the country and works on a variety of conservation issues and campaigns.

1. Introduction

The Wilderness Society is pleased to provide this initial submission to the Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce. We note that the objective of this Taskforce is to 'examine the potential for further land and water development in northern Australia with particular emphasis on the identification of the capacity of the north to play a role in future agricultural development.'

This objective, and the associated terms of reference of the taskforce, poses a range of significant questions that need to be answered if the desire for genuinely sustainable development and the ongoing protection of the natural and cultural conservation values is to be reached. This brief submission aims to a) identify lessons from past attempts at Northern Development so as to inform the work of the taskforce; b) describe the environmental assets of Northern Australia that must be taken into consideration; and c) identify a series of recommendations in respect to the terms of reference created to guide this taskforce.

The Wilderness Society supports economic development and employment creation in Northern Australia that provides for a prosperous, environmentally sustainable and equitable future. We believe this can be achieved by encouraging development and employment opportunities that maintain the region's key ecological processes, protect the region's extraordinary environmental and cultural values, which work in harmony with the unique climatic conditions and environmental constraints prevalent across Northern Australia, and which help to address existing land management issues such as fire management and weed and feral animal problems.

SECTION A - The Northern Myth revisited

Despite the recent flurry of political and media attention, the desire to develop the land and water resources of Northern Australia is hardly a new phenomenon. In fact, a desire to develop the North has been a recurring theme throughout colonial Australian history. .

The most sustained period of political interest and financial investment in northern development occurred during the period between the 1940's and 1970's. This era commenced with the post war formation of the Northern Australia Development Committee and saw a range of projects initiated including the Ord River Development Scheme and a variety of other agricultural development initiatives.

This era reached its conclusion during the 1970's as the Commonwealth Government withdrew financial support and subsidies for a number of large development schemes across Northern Australia.

During the mid to late 1960's, a sustained intellectual and economic critique of the post war Northern Development schemes, particularly irrigation based projects, was headed by Dr. B.R. Davidson. Davidson authored such influential books as the *Northern Myth* (1965) and *Australia: Wet or Dry?* (1969) and engaged in a spirited public debate with the then Premier of Western Australia, Sir Charles Court, in respect to the merits of the Ord River Development Scheme.

Davidson identified a range of factors that made large scale agricultural development across Northern Australia, particularly irrigated agriculture, economically irresponsible. These factors included constraints imposed by poor soils; the remoteness of developments from potential markets; the prohibitive cost of required infrastructure; the inappropriate scale of proposed developments; and the need for substantial public subsidies.

Many of Davidson's premises in respect to the significant barriers to agricultural development remain to this day. For example, recent investigations into the development potential of agriculture in Queensland's Gulf Country illustrate this point¹. These studies, compiled by the Queensland Government to inform the state-based water resource planning process for the region, found that the following concerns mounted a considerable barrier to agricultural expansion: lack of suitable soils near available water supplies; high risk salinity; distance to markets; poor roads and access to

¹ <http://www.nrw.qld.gov.au/wrp/gulf.html>

farm services; a lack of risk capital for development; severe climate; extreme evaporation rates; and highly variable flows.

For these reasons, we recommend that the taskforce urgently review and analyse the issues identified by Davidson and others in respect to the barriers to agricultural development in Northern Australia.

SECTION B – Environmental values and constraints in Northern Australia

Davidson and others mainly concerned themselves with an analysis of the economic limitations of agricultural development in Northern Australia, however during the past 30 years a substantial body of research has also highlighted the immense conservation significance of Northern Australia at both the global and continental scales.

This body of research has been consolidated into a major new study titled *The Nature of Northern Australia* (2007). This landmark report was authored by four eminent scientists, Dr. John Woinarski, Professor Brendan Mackey, Emeritus Professor Henry Nix and Dr. Barry Trill.

The report is a comprehensive account of the natural values of Northern Australia and explains and documents the ecological processes that sustain these values (water, fire and long distance biological movement) whilst examining opportunities for development that maintain these values and ecological processes into the future.

The authors find that the extreme variability in monsoonal rainfall shapes the ecology, distribution and abundance of most plants and animals throughout Northern Australia and that for several months of the year a major water deficit exists that is created by the difference in the monthly rate of evaporation and the monthly rate of rainfall. The authors also find that Northern Australia is an important centre for biodiversity at the continental scale. For example, 'more native fish species may be found in one waterhole in Kakadu than are known in the entire Murray Darling system.'

The report found that despite the apparent health of the northern environment, there are many signs of breakdown in the ecology of Northern Australia including substantial declines in the range and abundance of a large number of plants, mammals and grass-seed eating bird species. This decline in the health of the northern environment is related to the loss of traditional Indigenous land management practices caused by the dispossession of traditional owners and the introduction of a range of new strains to the landscape associated with changed fire management, over grazing and the introduction of a range of introduced plant and animal species.

The authors propose a model for economic development in Northern Australia that maintains and protects the natural values of the region through a regional conservation and land management planning process that constrains environmentally destructive activities; that promotes economic development that is compatible with a healthy and functioning environment; which fosters collaboration between Government agencies, industry and landowners; and which supports the development of a 'conservation economy' throughout the region.

It is our belief that this approach, when coupled with a rigorous economic assessment as outlined in Section A, should underpin any assessment of the economic development potential of the north.

SECTION C: Terms of Reference

For the reasons identified in Sections A and B, The Wilderness Society recommends that the Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce incorporate the following recommendations in the production of its interim report.

ToR 1: Identify, consistent with the provisions of the NWI, the sustainable capacity of the systems/basins to support increased consumptive water use

Any sound evaluation of the capacity of northern river systems and basins to support increased consumptive use should also consider;

- The implementation of related sections of the National Water Initiative including s25 x) which recommends that Governments identify and acknowledge surface and groundwater of high conservation value and to manage these systems to protect and enhance these values and s79 f) which recommends that Governments identify any special requirements needed for the environmental values and water management arrangements necessary to sustain high conservation value rivers, reaches and groundwater areas;
- A review of the findings and recommendations of the 'Nature of Northern Australia' science report in respect to the values, conservation significance, measures of ecological sustainability and ongoing options for the protection of the rivers and associated catchments of Northern Australia;
- A requirement to review the predicted impact of climate change on the availability and seasonality of water across Northern Australia and impacts on the health of river and catchment ecology, including the impacts of reduced rainfall across the eastern section of Northern Australia as identified by the Bureau of Meteorology;
- A review to identify the benefits of existing river conservation initiatives within northern Australia including the Queensland Government's Wild Rivers initiative and the Northern Territory Government 'Living Rivers' program;
- A review to identify and prioritise employment generating activities consistent with the ongoing protection of the conservation values and ecological health of northern rivers and catchments.

ToR 2: Identify, consistent with sustainable resource use principles and practices, agricultural and other economic development and diversification opportunities.

- A critical first step in the identification of potential economic development opportunities should be to identify the factors that led to the success or failure of past economic development initiatives, including those factors identified by Davidson and others;
- A further step in this process should be to identify the environmental and cultural impacts and costs of past developments including the full extent of public subsidies involved;
- Identify impacts upon existing industries, such as commercial and recreational fishing and tourism, of proposals to expand agricultural development throughout the region;
- Identify, through relevant economic analyses, opportunities for economic development and employment generation based upon ongoing management and protection of the natural environment and to address existing land management problems such as fire management and weed and feral animal control and management;
- Identify opportunities and strategies to support existing land management and 'Caring for Country' initiatives throughout Northern Australia.

ToR 3: Identify incentive, market, regulatory and planning instruments that could be used to facilitate, control or influence such development

- Identify opportunities presented to Northern communities through the development of a market based carbon trading and emissions abatement scheme;
- Identify policy and market barriers to the expansion of employment generating schemes in the areas of environmental and land management including fire management, the protection of sites of outstanding natural and cultural conservation significance, and weed and feral animal control across all land tenures.

ToR 4: Recommend governance arrangements for the effective management of land and surface and groundwater resources that cross jurisdictional boundaries.

- Investigate opportunities to promote cross jurisdictional initiatives to promote and support land and water management and conservation based employment generating activities;
- Identify and support governance arrangements for Aboriginal landholders and traditional owners in support of sustainable management of natural and cultural resources and related employment creation strategies.

END.