The Wet Tropics to Fitzroy Regions

Habitat Protection and Biodiversity Conservation

Natural ecosystems, ecosystem processes, wildlife and their habitat are already suffering very great impacts under urban and rural development pressure. The natural environment now faces threats from many angles, and it is imperative that these stresses are reduced to build ecosystem resilience in the face of major threats such as climate change. Future population growth and residential expansion must proceed in a way which does compromise the health of ecosystem function and wildlife communities. Attempts to stabilize the decline of certain plant and animal species and to rehabilitate natural areas must be increased and supported; not undermined by further poor planning and escalating development pressure.

Water management and environmental flows

The dominant regional ecosystems in the Far North are the Wet Tropics bio-region and the Great Barrier Reef. Both have recognised world, national and state heritage values of significance. The region is further characterized by short, fast flowing streams and rivers which carry significant flows into the Reef lagoon at various times throughout the year. Given the extensive reach of intensive agriculture throughout the region's coastal floodplains, and the high levels of sediment volume carried within its riparian systems, the preservation of (at a minimum) current levels of environmental flow are critical for the health of the Reef and the on-going health of the Wet Tropics rainforests. Maintaining, and enhancing, these flows will be critical in the face of regional climate change impacts.

There is some evidence that the Great Barrier Reef relies on monsoonal flows from fresh water estuaries, which cools the sea water and reef ecosystems. This phenomenon will be particular valuable in the event of global warming and rising sea water temperatures, and may slow the rate of coral bleaching. Any planning for water infrastructure should take this into account, so as to minimize impact on environmental flows.

Protecting and rehabilitating our Waterways

By protecting our waterways, we can significantly preserve ecosystem function and services, and create thriving hubs of biodiversity which criss-cross the entire region. Riparian zones are hot spots for biodiversity and habitat, and should be recognised as such, and protected by any planning instruments. Protecting the riparian zone from development provides a number of significant benefits to the region, through reducing erosion and run off, improved water quality, providing habitat, supporting fisheries and reducing impacts upon estuarine and marine environments. CAFNEC believes that all waterways should be spared from development right up to their banks, and that significant buffer on either side of the flood mark be reserved for conservation.

Cape and Gulf Rivers

Current Water Resource Planning in the Gulf region, as reflected in the draft Water Resource Plans, threatens to deliver a water allocation regime that is not based on any demonstrated need for water resources, but rather on untested aspirations and a guesstimate of the capacity of the river systems to absorb loss.

The health of the Gulf's rivers is the lifeblood for many existing communities and multi million dollar industries including fishing and tourism. These industries, and others that utilise an intact landscape, should be supported and not put at risk through overallocation of the regions most vital resource.

Cape York is a globally significant region, its remoteness lack of infrastructure and iconic status have conspired to retain much of its natural integrity. CAFNEC believes an increase in consumptive water use must be measured against the values of the regions outstanding natural and cultural assets.

Recommendations for the Terms Of Reference:

CAFNEC makes the following recommendations for incorporation into the Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce interim report:

- The indentification of over allocation, and/or use of water also be identified and actions recomended to reduce allocations to a sustainable basis, as defined by sections s25x) and s79 f) of the NWI.
- A requirement that potential risks and costs to marine and coastal systems, and thier associated industries are incorporated into these identifications.
- A requirement that impacts of future alterations to climate and the potential changes to water availability be reviewed.
- Review the economic impacts of the current conservation estate, including the Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics World Heritage Areas, and other conservation legislation on industries in the region.
- Identify policy and market barriers to the expansion of employment generating schemes in the areas of environmental and land management including fire management, carbon sequestration, community based landcare, weed and feral animal control across all land tenures.
- Review the potential impact of increased consumptive water use on existing, emerging and potential economic activities reliant on, and consistent with preserving the intact land and seascapes of Northern Australia.

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