A planned cultural economy for **CAPE YORK**

A new report acknowledges Cape York Peninsula as a globally significant cultural landscape requiring innovative and sensitive solutions to its impending development challenges. The cooperative work of scientists, conservationists, Traditional Owners, economists, and government and business interests, the report could be a blueprint for the future planning of Australia's northern regions. Justin McCaul reports.



On Cape York Peninsula you gain a strong sense of being in a landscape quite unlike anything else in Australia. Its striking physical landmarks bear a strong spiritual significance for the Indigenous people of the region – a cultural distinctiveness that a defining report has identified as a central element in developing an appropriate regional economy for the Peninsula.

On 10 March this year in Cairns, Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) President Professor Ian Lowe AO, launched the *Culturally and Environmentally Appropriate Economies for Cape York Peninsula Report* – a mutually beneficial vision for this special region founded on the environment, culture and jobs. It is the outcome of the landmark Appropriate Economies Roundtable held in November 2003, hosted by the ACF and the Cooperative Research Centre for Tropical Rainforest Ecology and Management (Rainforest CRC), supported by Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation.

Professor Lowe said the document was significant in demonstrating that by linking nature conservation to Indigenous peoples' role on country, sustainable economic development for the region can be achieved.

'Development on Cape York needs be consistent with the cultural values and environmental requirements of the region,' he said. 'ACF has long recognised that Cape York Peninsula is outstanding on a global scale for its natural and cultural heritage values, and we want to see that status maintained.'

Planning the future for a unique landscape

The Peninsula holds a unique diversity of ecosystems worthy of World Heritage listing, but it is the integrity of these ecosystems and habitats that stands out. Much of the area remains intact, due largely to the lower levels of modern development in comparison to southern Australia. At 140 000 km², or about half the size of Victoria, Cape York is the largest least disturbed landscape along eastern Australia.

Yet threats are emerging. Cattle grazing has caused a reduction in the number and diversity of flora and fauna species – such as grain-eating birds reliant on native grasses – and pressure from mining companies to establish operations on traditional land has caused division and instability amongst Indigenous communities.

Agriculture is being considered too, but it isn't well suited to Cape York. The region's soils mostly come from a heavily weathered geological landscape, leached of nutrients during the annual monsoon rains, and there are only limited viable sites were soils are of morefertile, basaltic origin. It's also why the pastoralism tried in the region has been marginal. Left: Kuku Yalanji Traditional Owner **Eileen Walker** displays Marra seeds, part of the diet of Eastern Kuku Yalanji people whose country stretches from Mossman Gorge through to the **Bloomfield River in** Far North Queensland. **Right: The beautiful** Cape Tribulation of Far North **Oueensland**

Talika Greenwool prepares wukay a traditional food of the Kuku Yalanji people of Far North Queensland



Valuing culture

In a welcoming address to the original Roundtable participants, Mr Richard Aken Chairman of Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation, an Indigenous development and advisory organisation, stated simply that 'Cape York is Aboriginal land'. Indigenous leaders like Mr Aken want to see recognition of 'spiritually sustainable development' – development that respects the traditional culture of Indigenous people and allows important customary responsibilities under 'caring for country' to continue. He, like others, believes many of the social problems that affect Indigenous Australians can be overcome if land security is addressed. Land has the critical dual significance of both economic and spiritual importance to Indigenous people.

The Queensland Government recognises the tourism potential in these unique cultural characteristics of Cape York Peninsula. Indigenous tourism enterprises and operators stand to tap into the fast growing ecotourism markets, and some communities have already established successfully growing tourism enterprises.

New activities and opportunities

For ACF and Indigenous organisations, the Appropriate Economies initiative represents an opportunity to develop a framework for a sustainable economy on Cape York. Activities identified as being environmentally and culturally appropriate for the region include naturebased and cultural tourism and other cultural industries, traditional medicine, land and sea management, protected areas management, feral animal and weed management, eco-commodities including carbon credits, seed collection, bush foods, small scale novel crops, nurseries and market gardens, education and training, and communications and information technology.

A proposal to establish an Eco Trust Fund for Cape York was widely supported by conservationists and Indigenous groups. The Canadian Eco Trust concept is built on the vision of a conservation economy – economic development that meets human needs while regenerating natural systems. Through investors, the fund would provide low interest loans to individuals and businesses that deliver conservation outcomes with economic development. In addition to funding, a new approach to the way in which development initiatives are planned and designed is also possible.

The Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation also inspired a lot of interest with their Business Hubs model, which encourages partnerships with the corporate sector.

Mutual exchanges of knowledge

For Indigenous leaders and communities, the Appropriate Economies work may represent an opportunity to avoid the mistakes and heartache of the past. In decades gone by, whether it was national parks or cattle stations, almost all decisions on land management and economic development on Cape York were made without the consent, let alone participation, of Indigenous people.

Working closely with Indigenous groups in a two-way approach – involving communities in decision making and providing assistance when needed – is an important principle for success. More importantly, Indigenous groups now insist on a two-way approach as fundamental to any meaningful collaboration.

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Agreement amongst diversity

The diversity amongst stakeholders on Cape York represents perhaps the biggest challenge. Conservation and protected areas management, tourism, Indigenous entities, pastoralism and mining all vie for recognition, funding and political support on Cape York. An earlier Cape York Heads of Agreement signed in 1996 between ACF, the Cattlemen's Union, The Wilderness Society, Cape York Land Council and the Peninsula Regional Council undoubtedly contributed to the diversity of groups that participated in the Roundtable – another chance for these stakeholders to come together, communicate, and create a necessary and shared dialogue to discuss appropriate development on Cape York.

Despite the diversity of interests, there are some common points of agreement. One of those is increasing the commitment of state and federal governments to provide funds to Cape York. In 1997, the Federal Government's National Heritage Trust (NHT) program made funds available for conservation and natural resource management in areas such as Cape York. Now, in its second phase (2002–2008), the NHT process has unfortunately left stakeholders frustrated. Long funding delays between NHT 1 and NHT 2 have forced many projects to fold, while people on Cape York feel there is too little to show on the ground since the expenditure started in 1997. A second common agreement is the need for communities – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – to drive planning and decision-making. The NHT process has proved too bureaucratic and overly complex for remote communities, and building the capacity of local people to facilitate, plan and implement development on Cape York is considered a better option. This is now being addressed through the establishment of the Cape York Interim Advisory Group (CYIAG) that consists of community people. It will oversee expenditure of NHT 2 funds for natural resource management on Cape York Peninsula up to 2008.

For the authors and convenors of the *Culturally and Environmentally Appropriate Economies Report*, the document will hopefully become a blueprint for development that links economy, culture and conservation on Cape York as well as other remote regions. Like Cape York, north-west Western Australia is characterised by low population density, and unique natural and cultural features, but faces increased pressures from sometimes ill-conceived development proposals. Later in October this year ACF, along with partners Environs Kimberley and Kimberley Land Council in Broome, will host another Appropriate Economies Roundtable to discuss and plan sustainable economic options for the Kimberley.

• Justin McCaul is Community Outreach Officer with the Australian Conservation Foundation's (ACF) Northern Australia Program based in Cairns.

More information:

Appropriate Economies Report for Cape York: www.rainforest-crc.jcu.edu.au (click on 'publications'). Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation: www.balkanu.com.au/ ACF's Northern Australia Program: www.acfonline.org.au (click on Northern Australia)

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We are getting into business here...

It's midday and as some of the staff of Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Walks take their lunch break, Roy Gibson is greeting a small group of international tourists and welcoming them on to the country of his ancestors.

For the next hour Roy will lead the group through the cool rainforest of Yalanji country on the edge of Daintree National Park, explaining how the trees, streams, fruits and leaves of the rainforest have been used by Aboriginal people in the area for thousands of years.

Guided walks are a feature of the growing small business Roy and the Indigenous community of Mossman Gorge, about 80 km north of Cairns, are building based on country and culture. In addition to the walks, tourists can buy artwork produced by local Indigenous residents, as well as books, jewellery and artefacts.

Born and bred in Mossman, Roy is

proud of where he comes from. He knew the best thing for the longterm future of his community and culture would be tourism. With some start-up funding from the state government, the community built a shed to make artefacts and handicrafts, which they sold from the side of the road. Later, with the help of a Traditional Elder they cleared some tracks to take people for quided walks into their rainforest.

Then one day a bus pulled in with a group of tourists. The bus operator spoke with Roy and some others to ask if he could bring tourists here on a regular basis. After more discussion an agreement was reached. At that point Roy and others realised 'Hey, we're getting into business here'. That was 1987. Today their business has won a Queensland Tourism award for Best Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Operation and has had two



Kuku Yalanji Traditional Owner Roy Gibson shows ACF's Northern Australia Program Coordinator, Rosemary Hill, around his country. Steven Norwakowski

books published about them.

Mr Colin Brook is Tourism Advisor with Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Walks. With a background in small business, Mr Brook sees a lot of potential with the Yalanji enterprise. 'The tourism business in north Queensland is very competitive, but I feel we have a product that offers visitors an authentic Indigenous cultural experience.' And with 600 000 visitors to Mossman Gorge per year, Kuku Yalanji has a ready-made market right on their doorstep.

While much of the present funds for Kuku Yalanji are through Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP) and other grants, income through the business is increasing. The goal is to eventually be fully self-sufficient. 'We definitely want to expand the business, but in a way that is in keeping with the values of the community' explains Mr Brook.

Back outside and at the end of the walk, Roy entertains his international visitors with jokes and easy conversation over tea and damper. Roy's cousin Sean joins the group to demonstrate the versatility of the didgeridoo by mimicking a kangaroo, kookaburra, crocodile and even a steam train! After saying goodbye to his still smiling guests, Roy reiterates the thoughts of Mr Brook.

'We want to grow to a size that we can handle. If we overdo it, we might not be able to handle it (the business). Being based in a community we don't want too much disturbance to happen,' says Roy.