

Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the “effectiveness of the Australian Government’s Northern Australia Agenda”

Submission by:

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Summary:

- This submission addresses core Indigenous economic development issues, challenges, and most of all opportunities, focused specifically on sustainable development of the far northern Australian land sector – complementing a more broadly focused submission from the North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance Ltd (NAILSMA)
- A first core issue is to acknowledge the non-viability and long-term sustainability of much of the current predominant northern land use sector, the extensive (free range) beef cattle industry
- Hence there is an evident need, with demonstrable benefits to government and society at large, to encourage and support:
 - development of complementary diversified land sector opportunities, especially those based on ecosystem services (including cultural- and ecologically-based tourism, carbon and other novel markets)
 - enhancing the scope of current investment into remote Indigenous environmental employment programs (e.g. WoC, IPA, CDP) to plan for and build effectively governed, autonomous, culturally and economically sustainable local enterprises—including targeted investment in building the governance and operational capacity of Indigenous Ranger Groups to provide contracted services in a range of environmental, cultural, infrastructural, and emergency management activities
- However, as acknowledged in part in the Northern Development White Paper, significant supportive policy and implementation challenges include:
 - (1) inconsistent policy settings in the three northern jurisdictions supportive of diversification opportunities on pastoral leases;
 - (2) inconsistent policy settings in the three northern jurisdictions addressing carbon rights and offset policies;
 - (3) addressing complexities, time constraints and uncertainties associated with Native Title in multi-tenured arrangements;
 - (4) progressing development of ecosystem services metrics and markets, and engaging the far northern pastoral industry in ecosystem service market opportunities;
 - (5) lack of vision, understanding, and support for relevant R&D (notably including the CRC for Developing Northern Australia) towards advancing a diversified, sustainable, cultural supportive land sector in northern Australia

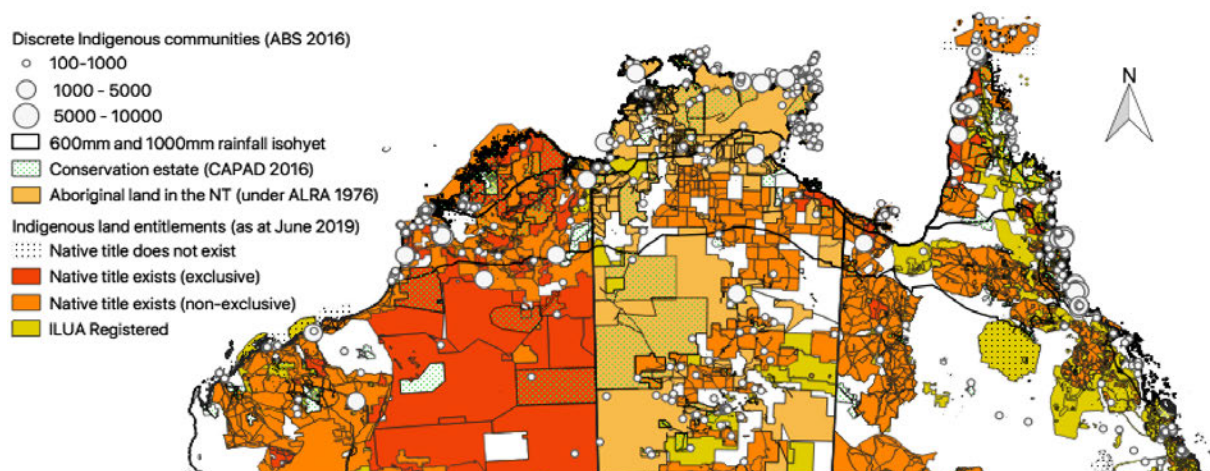
1. Context

1.1 This submission addresses core Indigenous economic development issues, challenges, and most of all opportunities, focused specifically on sustainable development of the far northern Australian land sector—where the ‘far north’ is defined essentially as the 1.2 M km² region north of a line stretching from between Broome to Townsville (the region above 600mm rainfall isohyet – Map 1). Although not addressed here, the matters raised apply equally to the sea management sector. In canvassing these specific matters, we note that this submission complements a more broadly focused submission from the North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance Ltd (NAILSMA)¹.

1.2 The Commonwealth Government’s 2015 Northern Development White Paper² fails to usefully acknowledge and address the very significant contributions that Indigenous people, and their very considerable interests in land (currently comprising ~60% of the far northern region³ – Map 1), can, under supportive policy settings, make to regional prosperity^{4,5}—rather, the white Paper perpetuates “the myth of Indigenous interests as barriers to sustainable northern development”¹.

Map 1: Indigenous communities and Indigenous interests in land in northern Australia, as at mid-2019, updated from Archer et al. (2019)⁶

The general focal area of this submission is above the 600 mm rainfall isohyet (refer legend), corresponding to the lower limit of current savanna burning greenhouse gas emissions methods.



2. Non-viability and -sustainability of the current land sector

2.1 With specific respect to the land sector, the White Paper also perpetuates the myth of the viability of the current predominant land use sector, the extensive beef cattle pastoral industry. Substantial evidence, including from the industry’s own reports, paint an entirely different picture—as much as 75% of north Australian typical beef cattle enterprises are economically non-viable⁷⁻¹¹, and the long-term environmental costs associated with land and water degradation, loss of biodiversity, greenhouse gas emissions, etc., are simply astronomic¹⁰⁻¹¹. For non-Indigenous enterprises the northern pastoral industry is better considered as a real estate industry, with phenomenally increasing land values, averaging

around 6% annually over the past 20 years for a median-priced northern pastoral property¹². Conversely, such enterprise marginality of much of the Indigenous pastoral estate presents significant economic and cultural management challenges given that *country*, once reacquired, is not real estate that can be traded⁶.

2.2 The pastoral industry is particularly vulnerable to climate change—as the effects of recurrent droughts and recent floods graphically demonstrate. How will the industry adapt to markedly increased regional temperatures, and associated impacts on seasonal water availability, under projected climate change scenarios in the decades, let alone centuries ahead¹³? Notably the White Paper is silent on climate change issues.

2.3 A first core issue is therefore to acknowledge that the land use sector in northern Australia must undergo transformative change to survive, let alone grow—through support for developing diversified enterprise opportunities which are economically, environmentally and culturally sustainable and inclusive^{4, 10-11,14}.

3. The need for a diversified land sector

3.1 Far from being a landscape endowed with homogenous high pastoral potential¹⁰⁻¹¹, north Australia instead supports very significant cultural^{6,15}, biodiversity conservation¹⁶, and global carbon stock values¹⁷, which contribute significantly to the socio-economic well-being of local and regional communities. The economic value of the regional nature-based tourism industry, based particularly on maintaining intact freshwater systems and associated recreational fishing opportunities, dwarfs that of the pastoral industry^{2,18}.

3.2 The recent rapid development and take-up, particularly by Indigenous land sector organisations, of commercial 'savanna burning' carbon conservation and greenhouse gas emissions abatement projects, illustrates the enormous potential for developing innovative, culturally supportive enterprises. Savanna burning markets alone are likely to expand very significantly in the next 2-3 years – in some fire-prone areas yielding more than 5-10 times more carbon credits than under current greenhouse gas accounting methods – with the addition of proposed new carbon sequestration methods under Australia's national emissions regulatory framework¹⁹. Within the pastoral industry itself, already we are seeing a rapid expansion of innovative carbon market opportunities with significant attendant flow-on productivity benefits, including: reducing ruminant emissions through feed supplements; increasing efficiency of fertiliser use; enhancing carbon in agricultural soils; sequestering carbon through more effective stock management, revegetation and reforestation^{20,21}. These opportunities will enhance the economic and environmental performance of pastoral enterprises in the subset of sites where it is genuinely viable long-term land use.

3.3 The recent emergence of carbon markets highlights opportunities for developing further innovative ecosystem services markets and activities based on north Australia's natural and cultural assets. Substantial foundational work is being progressed, particularly in QLD associated with the Land Restoration Fund and Great Barrier Reef conservation initiatives, towards developing a variety of ecosystem services-based market instruments, for example: biodiversity, land condition, water quality, cultural and community well-being credits; public

incentives including grants, subsidies, tenders, stewardship payments, stamp duty relaxation, insurance schemes; offset arrangements; reduced commercial interest rates for sustainable enterprises^{11,22,23}. Globally, ecosystem services markets are worth USD36-42billion per annum²⁴.

3.4 Despite these opportunities, to date there has been little formal R&D support for developing, and examining how, ecosystem services markets can contribute to a diversified, sustainable land sector in northern Australia—and especially for culturally-supportive Indigenous economic development. For example, the CRC for Developing Northern Australia (CRC-NA) has shown no interest in the ‘agricultural’ diversification issues raised here²⁵—and yet, Savanna Burning is listed as an agricultural activity under the Kyoto Protocol! Clearly, the remit of the CRC-NA needs to be re-examined and expanded, including a broader diversity of ‘agricultural’ interests on its Board—hint: how many of the current Board and Executive have been / are directly associated with the pastoral industry?

4. Investing in Indigenous land sector enterprise capacity

4.1 The benefits associated with engaging Indigenous people living in remote communities to manage the northern landscape for government and society at large are enormous: on-*country* employment; reduced domestic violence and dependence on welfare payments; improved health outcomes and childhood learning—meeting ‘Closing the gap’ targets, coupled with reduced costs of weed and pest management, and protection of biodiversity and water resources for the wider Australian public benefit. Despite the Australian Government’s ‘Closing the gap’ strategy, implemented since 2008 with significant financial investment, employment, educational, and health outcomes have been minimal for Indigenous people including in our focal region. To realize those outcomes, there is great scope to expand existing land management and support new land sector programs in the region.

4.2 Although Indigenous people comprise only 3.3% of the entire Australian population, they comprise almost 16% of northern residents, and in remoter parts comprising the vast majority of northern Australia, more than 90%⁴. In locations where Indigenous residents seek to retain ongoing cultural connections with their ancestral lands, mainstream employment opportunities typically are scarce to non-existent, including in skilled land and sea management activities. In 2016 an estimated 600 Indigenous rangers were employed as land and sea conservation managers across the far north, primarily supported through Commonwealth (Working on Country, Indigenous Protected Areas) and QLD Govt (Land & Sea Rangers) funding programs—by contrast, about 390 Indigenous people were employed in the far northern pastoral industry^{8,10}.

4.3 To date, public funding of Indigenous ranger programs has served a number of important employment, cultural site and environmental management, and socio-economic policy objectives. Appropriately expanded and linked to regional development strategies, it could focus also on providing foundational investment to build the capacity of Indigenous Ranger groups (IRGs) to contract their services and develop sustainable, autonomous regional enterprises. Various IRGs already contract services for a range of activities outside their mandated public funding commitments, e.g. mine-site management, road maintenance,

quarantine surveillance, and fire management around outstations. Based on long experience, perhaps most critical of all is investment support for:

- planning assistance for IRGs and local communities to address both community aspirations as well as enterprise development opportunities^{4,15}
- developing effective governance arrangements which address both Indigenous cultural and standard business regulatory requirements^{26,27}.


4.4 An illustrative example of the critical role that well-supported and -trained IRGs could play is afforded by their capacity to provide contracted emergency management (EM) services in remote community settings. Given the absence of well-resourced EM services such as are available to all major population centres, IRGs are well positioned to provide ongoing preparedness activities (e.g. fire risk reduction in areas surrounding communities), and frontline responses in the aftermath of major events (e.g. post-flooding and -cyclone cleanup operations)²⁸. Despite a national policy approach agreed to in 2007, there has been little concerted action to address this subsequently²⁹.

4.5 Lack of appropriate supportive policy settings compromises mutual benefits for government, Indigenous and the wider Australian population. For example, mandatory offset policies to mitigate or remediate environmental damage from mining, agricultural or other infrastructure development activities can generate multiple benefits such as protecting biodiversity, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and creating enterprise and employment opportunities for Indigenous people in remote northern Australia.

4.6 Applying an integrated approach to develop the North for managing land and water resources, and enhancing well-being including utilizing and building capabilities of Indigenous people in remote locations, can deliver very significant cost-savings to the government with multiple socio-economic and environmental benefits, as demonstrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Estimated cost savings and benefits for the Australian Government for engaging the Indigenous population in the 'developing the North' agenda³⁰.

Current government welfare expenditure sectors and sub-sectors as per Indigenous Expenditure Report (by SCRGSP 2017 ³¹)	Scenario 1: each sub-sector benefiting fully from Indigenous people working on country (\$bn/yr)	Scenario 2: each sub-sector benefiting 50% from Indigenous people working on country (\$bn/yr)
1. Safe and supportive communities: Community support & welfare	\$3.5	\$1.76
2. Economic participation: Social security	\$5.54	\$2.77
3. Healthy lives: Public and Community health & support	\$2.82	\$1.41
4. Early childhood development, education and training: early childhood and school education (excludes tertiary education)	\$4.44	\$2.22
4. Weed management	\$2.45	\$2.45
5. Pest management	\$0.27	\$0.27
6. Land reclamation (as opposed to cost of land degradation)	\$1.01	\$1.01
7. Costs of infrastructure for land management	-\$2.0	-\$2.0
Total	\$18.03bn/yr	\$9.88 bn/yr

Above cost-savings when invested in <i>country</i> -related programs can deliver long-term benefits	
	
<p><u>Under the current situation:</u> the Australian Government may spend >\$334bn over the 10 years with minimal well-being outcomes due to proven ineffective policies as evident from 'Closing the Gap' outcomes since 2008.</p>	<p><u>With appropriate policy settings and investment, we can achieve:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sustainable, regional, and rural economies - enhanced employment, health and educational outcomes for Indigenous people - well managed land and water resources - reduced greenhouse gas emissions and better biodiversity outcomes

5. Overcoming policy barriers to diversification

5.1 Despite the clear need for developing diversified land sector enterprise opportunities in northern Australia, especially for addressing the raft of pressing socio-cultural and economic issues confronting Indigenous residents, significant policy barriers remain. The Northern Development White Paper² makes a start at identifying various of those barriers and proposing some procedural solutions (see Table 2), but, in the four years since its publication, there is realistically no tangible progress to report⁵.

5.2 As described in Table 2 and elsewhere in this submission, those impediments include:

- (1) inconsistent policy settings in the three northern jurisdictions to facilitate diversification opportunities on pastoral leases;
- (2) inconsistent policy settings in the three northern jurisdictions addressing carbon rights and offset policies;
- (3) addressing complexities, time constraints and uncertainties associated with Native Title in multi-tenured arrangements;
- (4) progressing development of ecosystem services metrics and markets, and engaging the far northern pastoral industry in ecosystem service market opportunities, and
- (5) lack of vision, understanding, and support for relevant R&D (notably including the CRC-NA) towards advancing a diversified, sustainable, cultural supportive land sector in northern Australia.

5.3 The Northern Development White Paper promises that various of these key issues would be effectively addressed through the Northern Australia Strategic Partnership. While some of these matters are evidently challenging (e.g. effective Native Title recognition), clearly this process has failed to deliver anything useful to date.

5.4 As noted in Table 2, perhaps the most useful suggestion that the White Paper makes with respect to advancing the diversification agenda concerns the commitment to support practical pilot (or demonstration) economic diversification activities to assist overcoming perceived and real barriers. Our view is that this is an entirely sensible suggestion and should be strongly pursued, including through a refocused and revitalized CRC-NA.

Table 2: Key policy challenges to developing a diversified northern Australia land sector

Table modified from Russell-Smith and Sangha (2019: Table 2)¹⁴

Issue	Comments
Inconsistent policy settings in the three northern jurisdictions supportive of diversification opportunities on pastoral leases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The White Paper² notes that “<i>while some jurisdictions have more flexible arrangements than others, pastoral leaseholders often face a number of challenges</i>”, including: land use restrictions for other than grazing; often requiring approvals from various government bodies; reduced investment security • The White Paper proposes that such key regional policy issues (and others, see below) could be effectively addressed through the Northern Australia Strategic Partnership, including biannual meetings of the Ministerial Forum on Northern Development involving Federal and State Ministers and agencies, and two advisory groups, an Indigenous Reference Group, and a more broadly based North Australia Advisory Council • In supporting the above initiative, Dale (2019)³² notes (1) the importance of engaging also with regional planning and local government initiatives, but (2) “<i>the lack of cohesive vision in the white paper concerning the role of Indigenous people...and the lack of clear pathways and strategies for supporting the development aspirations of Traditional Owners</i>”.
Addressing the complexities, time constraints and uncertainties that can be associated with Native Title, multi-tenured arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The White Paper notes “<i>Importantly, pastoral leases and native title rights co-exist over Australia’s north. Broadening and securing these leases through negotiation will create opportunities for partnership that benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people</i>” • Given that Native Title is too often seen as a barrier to, rather than an opportunity for, economic development benefiting all title holders, the White Paper outlines various initiatives and processes for expediting negotiation processes. From a practical land management perspective arguably the most innovative is the commitment to support pilot (or demonstration) activities—for case example, supporting economic diversification activities on pastoral lands in multi-tenured settings. • The above facilitating roles identified for the Ministerial Forum on Northern Development, and engagement of other regional and local governance bodies, also apply here
Inconsistent policy settings between the three northern jurisdictions, and the Commonwealth, concerning carbon rights legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carbon rights serve as a prime example of the dysfunctional regulatory framework that currently applies to affect the development of ecosystem services opportunities across the North—refer Dore <i>et al.</i> (2014)²⁸ for the different regulatory frameworks applying both to (a) Native Title holders, pastoral lessees, and freehold landowners, and (b) savanna burning emissions abatement and sequestration projects, in (c) respective northern jurisdictions • The role of the Commonwealth is also pivotal given provisions of the Carbon Farming Initiative Act (2011), and subsequent amendments, particularly with respect to treatment of sequestration projects involving Native Title—refer Dore <i>et al.</i> (2014)³³ for initial details • Facilitating roles identified for the Ministerial Forum on Northern Development, and engagement of other regional and local governance bodies, could also apply here

Progressing development of ecosystem services metrics and markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As acknowledged in Russell-Smith and Sangha (2018: 327)¹⁰, although <i>“significant technical and policy challenges”</i> remain, there is already <i>“a substantial diversity of foundational work...now being progressed”</i>
Engaging the far northern pastoral industry in ecosystem service market opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Substantial work is required to address firstly the above actual and perceived policy barriers The commitment to support practical pilot (or demonstration) economic diversification activities in the Northern Development White Paper (pp. 17-18)² would also assist to overcome such barriers

We welcome any opportunity to discuss the issues raised here and offer our support for progressing the ideas of innovative land-based opportunities to develop economically and environmentally sustainable northern Australia.

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