

SOTER: Feb 6, 2014: ANDEV Member Submission re Northern Development, Australia.

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Andev Member Submission: Re Urgent Need for Northern Development in General Terms and Terms Specific to Location and Areas of Interest

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As a somewhat far-flung and relatively recent member of ANDEV, I currently reside in the US (and have done so since 1982) although I return to my home base in Australia quite regularly and plan to more of that now that I'm an independent writer and consultant on matters relating to language, literacy, and cultural arts. I'm responding to this call for positive submissions to the Select Committee regarding what I perceive to be an urgent need for Northern Australian Development from a rather personal perspective but hope it's still useful.

In his ANDEVE Blog Post (Feb 1, 2013), Imants Kin asked the same question he claims that Australians at large also often ask: "Where the hell are the courageous visionaries with big ideas" ? I don't think they're necessarily non-existent but they likely are not present in the traditional halls of power. He also wrote in the same ANDEV Blog that "encouraging people to live and work in the north must be a priority" and that "freeing land for housing is one necessary component of this," including "offering incentives to encourage businesses and individuals to relocate to and remain in Northern Australia." [pp.3-4, Talking To You (ANDEV Blog, Feb 1, 2013)]. I offer in this response, a couple of examples of what I think are "big ideas" and hope that they may help us reconceptualize what we think "development" means.

My initial response to the challenge called for begins with a basic notion: that to transform the north, we must also transform our consciousness, as Imant called or in his Blog Post, Feb 1, 2013. As I noted above, the visionaries are likely not to be found in the traditional halls of power. Those halls are filled as a matter of course, with those who think with "old (known and acceptable) consciousness" appears to me to have focused on "development" in terms of economic development as a first goal and with that, the development of infrastructure that would primarily support industry and business – for the obvious reason that without work, the area could not attract "workers." I believe we have to redefine current and future occupants of the north – to not think of "workers," but rather, as members of thriving communities that will be able to sustain themselves even long after the industries (whether mining or other) have either transformed or gone.

Of course, economic development is t important, but economic development and infrastructure closely linked to that development will not sustain thriving communities over the long term. There needs to be durable, and sustainable additional attractions. The south, whether west, east or central, and primarily along coastlines, has a relatively moderate climate that obviously makes living there more pleasurable. The south also has closer access to major population centers and all that that entails for "life" purposes such as varied sources of entertainment, amusement, and illumination as well as variety of merchandise, shopping centers that draw enough people to sustain smaller, individual outlets. Proximity to products including those for housing and leisure makes these more affordable – transportation costs remain one of the most prohibitive costs for major individual development (e.g., building materials, gardening material, interior decorating and so on. Local industries in the north are minimal – much still has

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to be ordered from “the south” wherever one is in the north. All of these are opportunities for “development.”

These are ongoing challenges but more to the point in my vision is this question: *what would draw significantly larger numbers of people to live in the north beyond the draw-card of “making good money” and subsequently relocating to “the south”?* How many children born in the north remain in the north? Most of those born in the north, leave the north if they have aspirations and skills to attend a university in the south, or pursue careers often not available in the north, after which, unless they find compelling reasons to return, typically do not except for occasional visits if that. Thus, local northern Australian population always has to be replenished with new “adults” who continue to repeat the cycle. A thriving region retains and at least regains its young, more so than the attrition all too common in the north.

Obviously, Northern Australia needs to develop industry, a diverse economy, and corresponding infrastructure, to support people who choose to live and work in the northwest to kick-start sustained and further development and diversification of occupation. Yet, there is a need for a critical mass of committed, passionate live-in-the-north people to sustain that vision. The current situation even in the more developed and currently stable mining towns of Mt Tom Price, Karratha and Newman is not a given, may in fact, be time-bound as is often the case with regions that depend on depletable resources for their existence.

I grew up in Wittenoom Gorge in its heyday. My parents arrived there from Europe in 1950 and indeed, were the longest continuous residents of Wittenoom. My family has been a core family in Wittenoom after many others came and went. However, in order to experience education beyond primary school, I and my siblings had to go to boarding school (for which I’ve been eternally grateful!). To continue to flourish without going in to mining or some other related industry, I had to continue the exodus beyond Wittenoom – from Wittenoom, to Geraldton, to Perth, to Sydney, to the US, each location punctuated by a deepening and broadening of my education from primary school, to secondary school, to an undergraduate degree at UWA, to a Masters Degree in English Language and Literature at U.Sydney, to a Ph.D. at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, USA. This could not be pursued in the north. This is pursuable, however, in the south. Granted, one can now attend government high schools in Port Hedland and Karratha and other towns in the region, and one can acquire degrees online but one cannot, yet, acquire the all-round education that is part of a live-in, study at a tertiary institution without leaving the northwest of Australia. One can do that to some extent in Darwin but that is one city that is also a significant distance from what in reality is at least 1/3 of a whole continent. I wonder, had the opportunities existed to continue a high quality and varied education in the north, would I have stayed or at least returned? Many of us who left the north for reasons similar to mine, have a deep and permanent love for the region but realize that opportunities of the kind described (as well as others beyond those) are not available and feel that moving on is really the only choice for pursuing aspirations outside industry of whatever kind.

Grand claims and visions always supercede what is currently in existence, what one can currently imagine. As Imant writes in his blog post (Feb1), what is needed to bring about sustainable transformation is a change in “consciousness”. Therefore, in order to bring about the

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development of northern Australia from one ocean to the other (from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific) we need a vision that incorporates not only the language of growing economies, but also language that addresses what else it is that makes people want to live in a region; that enables people as human beings, to grow, to thrive, to become deeply engaged with life and not primarily focus on particular kinds of work. It also needs a vision that services that go beyond the minimal - sophisticated, multi-faceted development that encourages and allows people in a region to produce not only material needs but those which satisfy intellectual and emotional needs and interests.

The vision I have would not just include services specific to the treatment of tropical illnesses but medical centers that enable people to remain in their or at least regional medical facilities rather than have to fly to Perth as we always had to do with ailments and illnesses that went beyond simple treatment that were more often than not, dealt with by mothers and nurses stationed in the town I grew up in. Dental services, for instance become even more costly if one has to fly to a major city to undergo routine procedures that would ensure dental health for life. The north should also be able to sustain increasingly prevalent alternative practices such as therapeutic massage, alternative holistic practitioners, the visual, literary and performing arts and crafts – all recognized as valuable for overall well-being. People thrive when not only their bodies and pockets are supported, but also when their spirits and minds are supported. Think-tanks would do well to discuss what can be done to attract and retain expertise of these kinds as well as how to “grow” them in the region rather than mostly having to import them from elsewhere.

In tandem with this line of thinking, and because I am intrigued by what has attracted long-term residence in the north are questions that I think the Committee and others should consider as they consider “development.” These questions include:

- What are common characteristics of those who have remained in the north? Among these I would include, hardy, durable, sense of humor; adaptability, resourcefulness, an enjoyment of the dramatic landscape and environment as a whole, inventiveness; independence. Which advertisements to solicit potential inhabitants have emphasized and do emphasize these inspirational qualities?
- How can we utilize these characteristics to attract more of the same kind of “northern dweller?” How were they able to endure heat, dust, flies, relative isolation (the latter is dealt with to some extent with the internet but not entirely).

I’ve been intrigued by qualities such as these which I noticed in adults who remained in Wittenoom for at least 20 years after the mine closures there. I am grateful for my years as a child to young adult in Wittenoom despite the incredible isolation at the time (or perhaps because of it). There is a big story to be told about that saga and I am writing it. However, in response to Imant’s call for our urging the development of Northern Australia, I strongly urge that any articulation of that vision go beyond the language of growing economy there. True, without that there would be no expansion of the north. I also deplore the lack, in addressing the need for development, of a vision of the “whole” human being. I have recollections indelibly marked on my consciousness of drunkenness, of adults who had “nothing” to do beyond work and heading off to the pub and although there is social and related leisure-diversification in current communities such as those mentioned earlier in this response, a systemic, sustained development

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of these kinds of other avenues for personal growth and development are still largely lacking. The North could also develop writing centers, arts communities (of the kind common in SW Arizona and New Mexico as well as southern California – climatically and environmentally comparable).

A second strand of my vision entails education. Since I'm not in industry, mining or commerce but have been involved in the arts and language education at one level or other for many years, I will focus my vision on this domain to provide at least an example of how this vision can materialize. One aspect of educational development that could be fostered in the north and that isn't very common in the south is to focus on areas of education that entail utilizing the landscapes across the north. Outward bound programs for all southern students is an under-resourced concept. Study Abroad could bring students from the Pacific and Asian rim countries to the north to study flora, fauna, landscapes, appropriate architectural designs, utilization of natural resources for habitation that matches the environment – to name a few possibilities that are unique to the north. We shouldn't just replicated education offered in the south – we have an opportunity to offer something unique to all Australian students as well as students from neighboring countries. Indeed, such programs that would attract students from the US would be eagerly sought if ways could be found to assist students with funding these experiences. To know what it is to live in various parts of the north could entail the need for host families that would make such experiences more authentic.

Members of Australian Aboriginal communities could be invited to share their long and deep understanding of how to live in these regions; how to come to really know the land; how to communicate with the land, its mythology, and its energies. Their wisdom and expertise has been largely ignored in these ways – we know them best through the commercialization of their art, music and legends but have not truly embraced their knowledge of how to *live* in these northern regions.

How people live in this region, how they can and do have full lives in this region is what should be explored. How does the body cope with heat? What is sweat about? Why does one not go for a stroll without water. What signs of water does none look for? How do we cohabit with this? Architectural design and materials for building should be unique to the region, reflecting the climate and the land itself. There are opportunities here for appropriate outback living designs that could be pursued from high school through university addressing critical questions such as: why are verandahs and breezeways seem to be crucial in design here? Why are certain building materials more viable here? What about insulation to counteract high heat in sustainable ways? And so on and so on. Designs could be competitively developed. Students could be asked to do these in their science classrooms. What about using the soil for building? Adobe-like designs in the southwestern US have flourished there in similarly harsh and dry climates. What kinds of gardens flourish naturally in these climates? These are some ways in which education and the arts could offer something unique and potentially desirable to attract more permanent residents as well as provide potential employment for those not interested in working in the core industries but would love to live in the north.

Other questions that arise also involve lifestyles: What does one do with one's spare time? How does one socialize? Can venues be created that encourage a range of community

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involvement on a regular and sustained basis? How can these relate to the north in ways that don't just replicate suburban life styles in the outback? This is not what would make life there appealing in the long term.

I see tremendous potential in northern Australia as long as we don't replicate the main population centers in the south, and so long as we don't rely primarily on relatively time and supply-constrained mineral resources and tourism (two major industries the north has largely relied upon to date). Major opportunities for unique contributions to Australian culture as whole lie mostly, though not entirely, dormant in the north even today.

I've simply touched upon some avenues for a bigger, long-term vision of developing the region in a way that "grows" the population in the north rather than having to rely on continuous replacement because of natural attrition – how to inculcate a vision among youth that the north is "home" rather than just a place they grew up in long ago. Perhaps this is way over the top, but visions always go beyond the "appropriate," and I hope this is at least a little beyond that.

Respectfully,

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As of July/August 2014, I am planning on an extended stay in WA for a year or two and hope to become more involved with ANDEV.