

Protecting Rivers, Supporting Communities

A report series by The Wilderness Society for the House of Representatives Economics Committee's *Inquiry into issues affecting Indigenous economic development in Queensland and review of the Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill 2010*

Sustainable Development on Cape York Peninsula

Report 5 of 6 – Feb 2011



Summary

This report provides a basic analysis of sustainable development potential on Cape York Peninsula, with an emphasis on opportunities for Indigenous people. This includes baseline available demographic and labour force data; a snapshot of the private sector including small business; and the emerging (and potentially substantial) opportunities in the industries of tourism, land management and other environmental services. A brief summary of each section of this report is as follows:

Demographic and Labour Force Context of Cape York Peninsula: The labour force data for Cape York Peninsula (taking into account this is more indicative than precise), demonstrates that in 2006, the majority of working Indigenous people on Cape York Peninsula were employed in “Public Administration and Safety” (58%) and “Health Care and Social Assistance” (11%). The largest industry for non-Indigenous people was “Manufacturing” (19%), in which only 4% of Indigenous people worked. Mining employed very few Indigenous people (1%). In 2009, indicative figures across Cape York indicated total unemployment of some 914 persons, a rate of 12.6% (as a weighted average).

Private Sector Economic Activity and Development: There are a range of private sector small and medium enterprises operating in or near Cape York Peninsula’s Indigenous settlements, which show significant potential for expansion. One of the most promising areas for expansion, as outlined in the *Cape York Indigenous Employment Strategy 2005* commissioned by the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments, is tourism, with the capacity to deliver up to one thousand jobs. According to this report, tourism would out-scale all other forms of employment combined, providing huge potential for Indigenous economic opportunity on Cape York Peninsula.

Emerging Sustainable Industries: Cape York Peninsula maintains extraordinary ecological and cultural values, which provide a huge natural competitive advantage for the region. There are a number of seriously under-realised employment opportunities in areas such as tourism, land management and carbon initiatives (particularly savanna burning). There is an urgent need for Government support and capacity-building in these areas.

How this report relates to the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry

This report addresses the following components of the Terms of Reference:

- [The Committee should consider:] options for facilitating economic development for the benefit of Indigenous people and the protection of the environmental values of undisturbed river systems
- [The inquiry should pay particular attention to the following:] The nature and extent of current barriers to economic development and land use by people, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, including those involved in the mining, pastoral, tourism, cultural heritage and environmental management
- [The inquiry should pay particular attention to the following:] Options for overcoming or reducing those barriers and better facilitating sustainable economic development, especially where that development involves Indigenous people
- [The inquiry should pay particular attention to the following:] The potential for industries which promote preservation of the environment to provide economic development and employment for Indigenous people

Demographic and Labour Force Context of Cape York Peninsula

Labour Force and Employment Data

Collecting accurate demographic and labour force data in remote areas with high proportions of Indigenous residents is well known to be problematic and generally undercounted. The Australian National University’s Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy and Research (CAEPR) calculated Cape York Peninsula’s total Indigenous estimated residential population in 2006 as 7726 compared to the non-indigenous ERP as 5887. CAEPR’s work on population growth rates has estimated that Cape York Peninsula’s Indigenous population will rise to 9311 by 2016 and 11,924 by 2031 (Biddle and Taylor 2009).

The following tables are taken from the Australian Bureau of Statistic’s 2006 Census, Indigenous Community Profiles. While these are now nearly five years old, and will be replaced by new data from the 2011 Census, they provide an indicative picture of employment, labour force status and other useful statistics.

A note must be made here on data accuracy issues. 2006 Indigenous census responses to questions about labour force status are confounded by the fact that many were working participants in Community Development Employment Projects (usually part time work as an alternative to receiving unemployment benefits and paid at a similar rate). Thus some CDEP participants classified themselves as “employed” and others considered themselves to be “unemployed” when responding to the census. It is not clear if the estimates of the number of unemployed people provided in the 2009 table below include or exclude CDEP participants.

“Not in the Labour Force” includes working age people who are students, sole parents, people with health issues or disabilities, older people, partners of those in the labour force, and also “discouraged job seekers” – i.e. those who have given up seeking work, or who have difficulty accessing unemployment benefits. The percentage of working age people identifying as being in this category is generally much higher for Indigenous people than for non-indigenous people. The figures also mask the extent of underemployment.

Employment by Industry Cape York Peninsula 2006

	Indigenous		Non-Indigenous		Indigenous as % of total sector	Indigenous as % of total sector
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	89	4%	196	7%	30%	1.6%
Mining	19	1%	170	6%	10%	0.3%
Manufacturing	108	4%	563	19%	16%	2.0%
Electricity, gas, water & waste services	5	0%	27	1%	16%	0.1%
Construction	55	2%	241	8%	19%	1.0%
Wholesale trade	3	0%	30	1%	9%	0.1%
Retail trade	35	1%	235	8%	13%	0.6%
Accommodation & food services	26	1%	241	8%	10%	0.5%
Transport, postal & warehousing	11	0%	96	3%	10%	0.2%
Information media & telecommunications	4	0%	15	1%	21%	0.1%
Financial & insurance services	-	0%	12	0%	0%	0.0%
Rental, hiring & real estate services	-	0%	38	1%	0%	0.0%
Professional, scientific & technical services	16	1%	38	1%	30%	0.3%
Administrative & support services	43	2%	62	2%	41%	0.8%
Public administration & safety	1,475	58%	335	11%	81%	26.7%
Education & training	88	3%	259	9%	25%	1.6%
Health care & social assistance	280	11%	232	8%	55%	5.1%
Arts & recreation services	14	1%	25	1%	36%	0.3%
Other services	6	0%	76	3%	7%	0.1%
Inadequately described/Not stated	246	10%	80	3%	75%	4.5%
TOTAL	2,523	100%	2,971	100%		

Figures are for persons aged 15 years and over. Source: ABS 2006a.

Labour Force Status Cape York Peninsula 2006

	Non-Indigenous		Indigenous	
Employed, worked full-time	2,114	43%	678	13%
Employed, worked part-time	605	12%	1,094	21%
Employed, away from work	248	5%	173	3%
Unemployed, looking for full-time work	74	2%	54	1%
Unemployed, looking for part-time work	23	0%	60	1%
Not in the labour force	822	17%	1,499	28%
Not stated	72	1%	108	2%
Not applicable	966	20%	1,601	30%
TOTAL	4,924	100%	5,267	100%

Figures are for persons aged 15 years and over. Source: ABS 2006b. *As identified in data.

Estimates of Unemployment Cape York Peninsula (June Quarters)

	Unemployment		2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Northern Peninsula Area (R) - Umagico (SLA)	persons	no.	5	6	5	8	9
	rate	%	4	5.3	3.9	6	8.2
Aurukun (S) (SLA)	persons	no.	20	27	20	28	52
	rate	%	4.1	5.6	3.9	5.3	12.3
Weipa (T) (SLA)	persons	no.	51	75	62	91	193
	rate	%	3.5	5.1	4	5.7	9.3
Cook (S) (SLA)	persons	no.	91	124	96	137	336
	rate	%	4.7	6.5	4.7	6.5	17
Hope Vale (S) (SLA)	persons	no.	19	25	19	28	95
	rate	%	4.7	6.5	4.7	6.5	19
Kowanyama (S) (SLA)	persons	no.	53	56	40	37	69
	rate	%	10.2	10.3	7.3	6.8	12
Lockhart River (S) (SLA)	persons	no.	14	19	15	21	30
	rate	%	4.7	6.5	4.7	6.5	12
Mapoon (S) (SLA)	persons	no.	5	6	5	7	13
	rate	%	4.7	6.5	4.7	6.5	9
Napranum (S) (SLA)	persons	no.	18	24	18	26	31
	rate	%	4.7	6.5	4.7	6.5	9.2
Pormpuraaw (S) (SLA)	persons	no.	32	34	24	22	45
	rate	%	10.2	10.3	7.3	6.8	12.4
Northern Peninsula Area (R) - Injinoo (SLA)	persons	no.	7	10	8	12	19
	rate	%	4	5.3	3.9	6	8.3
Northern Peninsula Area (R) - New Mapoon (SLA)	persons	no.	6	8	6	10	13
	rate	%	4	5.3	3.9	6	8.4
Northern Peninsula Area (R) - Seisia (SLA)	persons	no.	2	3	3	4	9
	rate	%	4	5.3	3.9	6	8
Total number of unemployed	persons	no.	323	417	321	431	914
Weighted average rate of unemployment	rate	%	5.0%	6.5%	4.7%	6.2%	12.6%

Source: ABS 2009.

Interpretation of Data

For 2006, employment and labour force data indicate that Indigenous people of working age on Cape York had much lower levels of formal full time and part time employment than non-Indigenous people. Despite data accuracy issues described above, data from the 2009 ABS National Regional Profile for Cape York Statistical Local Areas appears to confirm that even with a big increase in recorded unemployment in 2009 over the previous year, the total number of unemployed Aboriginal people on the Cape was less than one thousand. Hope Vale had the highest rate of unemployment, at 19%.

Indigenous employment by occupations and industry on Cape York Peninsula is also very different from non-Indigenous people. In 2006, the majority of working Indigenous people on Cape York Peninsula were employed in “Public Administration and Safety” (58%) and “Health Care and Social Assistance” (11%). By comparison, only 11% of the non-Indigenous workforce was employed in “Public Administration and Safety”. The largest industry for non-Indigenous people was “Manufacturing” (19%), in which only 4% of the Indigenous workforce were employed.

The 2006 census indicates that the mining industry in Cape York Peninsula employed very few Indigenous people – only 19 compared to 170 non-indigenous mine workers. Mining is also relatively insignificant as a source of employment in Cape York Pensinula, employing only 3.4% of the total employed labour force Although the mining industry desires to significantly expand operations in the western Cape, it is unlikely that actual Indigenous employment will significantly increase should this occur.

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Private Sector Economic Activity and Development

The employment data demonstrate that the largest single sector of employment on Cape York Peninsula is the public sector, including health services, education, police, and administration. These are essential public services, funded and operated by government or non-government agencies, and will remain and grow into the future with both growing populations, and greater policy focus on “Closing the Gap”.

“Some of the most disadvantaged Indigenous communities on Cape York are located close to major mining areas, suggesting that the benefits to those communities of having a mine nearby is limited”

Compared to these areas of employment, larger scale private sector economic activity on Cape York Peninsula is currently relatively limited. The pastoral sector is small, and although mining is presently one of the few examples of private employers, mining is overall a small source of employment in the region. Indeed, in terms of jobs, wealth and addressing Indigenous economic disadvantage, it is questionable that mining has contributed much at all for local communities either in Cape York Peninsula or in other mine sites around the country.

Some of the most disadvantaged Indigenous communities on Cape York Peninsula are located close to mining areas, suggesting that the benefits to those communities of having a mine nearby is limited. A key example here is the community of Napranum, which is situated at the door step of the world’s largest bauxite mines (operated by the multi-national giant Rio Tinto). Unfortunately, fifty years of intense resource extraction appears to have delivered little to this community in socio-economic terms compared with other communities located far away from mining activities.

Given that such mines generate huge incomes for the companies that own them, the idea of a “trickle-down” effect from mining to individual Indigenous people on the Cape does not hold water. It is important to note that the mining operations on Cape York Peninsula are not Indigenous-owned or controlled.

Indigenous Small Business

Contrary to common perception , Cape York Peninsula’s Indigenous people do already own and/or operate a plethora of small businesses, such as cafés, butcher shops, bakeries, market gardens, motels, guest houses, boat charters, various eco-tours and cultural tours, retail arts and crafts, vehicle hire, supermarkets and other retail businesses, camp grounds, various training and consultation services, and other businesses that are found in small rural towns of similar population size. Such development is facilitated by various policy programs and legislation, as outlined in Reports 3 and 4 of this submission.

There is potential to increase and expand such small businesses, and various non-government and government assistance exists to support this (eg. Indigenous Business Australia, Indigenous Land Corporation and several Commonwealth and Queensland Government Departments). However, there are some significant difficulties in establishing new small businesses, for example (this is by no means exhaustive):

- Poor infrastructure such as road and telecommunications access;
- Lack of commercial premises to accommodate small businesses, high costs of constructing such premises, and little or no government funding support for such construction;
- Native title, cultural heritage and land-use planning and surveying processes impacting on approval of commercial lease applications; and
- Seasonal/climatic conditions limiting agri-business and tourism businesses.

Wild Rivers and Economic Development

The impacts of Wild River declarations on economic development have been wildly overstated. As demonstrated in Report 2 of this submission, a declaration operates by ensuring a setback of highly destructive development from sensitive waterways and wetlands and regulates the impacts of development in the major parts of the catchment. Land tenure does not change, and a full range of current activities like grazing, fishing, eco-tourism, land management and mining, can still continue in declared Wild River areas. In addition it provides a water allocation specifically for Indigenous economic and community use - the first such water allocation scheme of its kind in Australia.

There are several difficulties in establishing small businesses on Cape York Peninsula, but Wild Rivers is not one of them. There are currently no examples of an Indigenous-owned business that has been stopped or seriously stifled by a Wild River declaration.

Cape York Indigenous Employment Strategy

While the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing and Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs is currently working on a broad Indigenous economic development strategy, in 2005 several Commonwealth and Queensland Government Departments worked with Kleinhart-FGI Corporate Advisors and Business Mapping Solutions Pty Ltd to produce the report, *Cape York Indigenous Employment Strategy*. This study assessed current employment levels across a range of private industries and employment areas on Cape York Peninsula, and sought to anticipate the likely levels of employment into the future.

Although it did not take into account significant sectors such as the public service, small business and land management, it does represent a rare attempt at enumerating prospective employment on the Cape and identifying where the future may lie in terms of jobs and economic activity.

The table below summarises the findings for potential jobs growth according to industry:

Future Likely Jobs on Cape York Peninsula by Industry Type

Industry	Future Likely Jobs
Agriculture	overall minimal
Market Gardens	50
Native Foods/ Seed collection Supplementary income	minimal jobs
Native Foods & remedies cultivation & value adding	very early stages, but could facilitated and developed well
Arts and crafts	minimal jobs
Aquaculture	60
Building & Construction	90
Cattle	120
Commercial Fishing	minimal but significant for some communities
Forestry & Timber	250
Mining	200-300
Tourism	700-1000

Source: Kleinhart-FGI and Business Mapping Solutions 2005. It is important to note here that the table omits significant sectors such as the public service, small business and land management.

Tourism is clearly the major prospect outlined in the *Cape York Indigenous Employment Strategy* study, with the estimated capacity to deliver up to one thousand jobs. In fact, tourism would out-scale all other forms of employment combined, providing huge potential for Indigenous economic opportunity on Cape York Peninsula (this opportunity is discussed later in this report).

A major conclusion that can also be drawn from this study is the lack of large-scale “mainstream” market conditions, and the relatively small capacity for industries such as pastoralism and irrigated agriculture to deliver substantial job growth. This is a structural economic consideration. As Professor Jon Altman of the Australian National University notes:

“(The) perceived problem is an absence of significant market or private sector economies. This explains in part why these discrete communities exist and in part why Indigenous people choose to live at them for mainly non-market reasons—because of continuing links with country. But while orthodox economic theory might suggest that Indigenous residents of such communities should migrate elsewhere to engage with the market economy, it is highly contestable how effectively they would compete for employment, owing to historic legacy...”

“...Economic development in such contexts is not just about development for enhanced market engagement, high formal employment and high and growing income. Such options rarely exist in these contexts. Rather, development should be viewed as a process that might enhance Indigenous participation with local, regional and national economies. The nature of economic development will be a function of the precise nature of local and regional economies, rather than of the currently prosperous metropolitan economies of south-east Australia successfully engaging with globalisation.” (Altman 2003: pp.2-3)

Large-scale Irrigated Agriculture Not Suited for Cape York Peninsula

The *Northern Australian Land and Water Science Review 2009* is the most comprehensive and thorough reviews ever conducted into land and water development in northern Australia. Coordinated by CSIRO in collaboration with over 80 of Australia’s leading scientists, the Review looked at options for use of land and water in northern Australia and the likely consequences of those uses, for communities, businesses and the environment.

The most telling conclusion of the Review concerned irrigated agriculture in northern Australia, including Cape York Peninsula. It showed that there are major natural constraints to this industry including: highly nutrient poor, fragile, saline and acid sulphate soils dominating the landscape; high risk of flooding, cyclones and prolonged dry periods; and lack of appropriate dam sites, particularly considering extreme evaporation rates and monsoonal nature of the climate.

In addition, the Review argued that the environmental impacts of this type of development poses a high risk, including displacing natural ecosystems of intrinsic as well as cultural and economic value (for example the Review stressed that water flowing through river systems and into the ocean is not “wasted”, but performs a critical role for marine ecosystems, including supporting fishing industries). (CSIRO 2009)

Emerging Sustainable Industries

Land Management and Environmental Services

Conservation and land management is economic development on Cape York Peninsula, contrary to outdated claims that conservation equates to no development and no economic future. This is due to the hard evidence of growing numbers of Indigenous jobs in this sector, combined with the remarkably positive social indicators associated with such programs (see Altman and Larsen 2006; Altman et al 2007; Gilligan 2006).

As Altman et al (2007) argue, the Indigenous estate in Australia contains some of the highest conservation value lands in the country. The careful management of these vast environmental and cultural assets is of benefit to all Australians, and can also provide job opportunities in the following key areas:

- Protected area management (including jointly managed National Parks, nature refuges and Indigenous Protected Areas);
- Weed and feral animal control;
- Water quality management;
- Quarantine and border protection;
- Fisheries management;
- Carbon economy opportunities, particularly concerning savanna fire management (discussed further below); and
- Scientific research and Indigenous ecological knowledge.

The value of this sector is beginning to be realised in some jurisdictions in Australia. For example, Altman et al (2007) note that:

“The Northern Territory Indigenous Economic Development Strategy 2005 identifies natural and cultural resource management as a key sector for economic development. This is representative of the growing recognition, supported by evidence, that Indigenous people living on country and participating in land and sea management activities generate significant environmental, economic and social outcomes at the local, regional and national levels.” (p.37)

A prime example of this type of employment opportunity being realised on Cape York Peninsula is the Indigenous Wild River Ranger program. In the 2006 Queensland state election, the Beattie Government responded to advocacy by The Wilderness Society to create a program of Indigenous Wild River Rangers to compliment Wild River declarations, with the aim of eventually employing 100 Indigenous people.

To date the program has been a huge success, with 35 rangers now employed across Far North Queensland, building nodes of skilled natural resource management workers across the region. The program is based on a community development model – whereby community organisations are funded and resourced to run their own ranger programs, rather than via a direct, Government-controlled program. Not only are the rangers performing a vital environmental service for all Australians, but the program is performing an important social role by providing full-time employment and a beacon of pride for local communities.

Another example of a key program delivering Indigenous jobs and economic development on Cape York Peninsula include the Commonwealth Government’s “Caring for our Country” program, which supports local ranger programs and Indigenous Protected Areas. With a World Heritage listing for Cape York Peninsula currently being discussed and considered (see Report 4 of this submission), these sorts of programs are likely to be seriously boosted in the coming years.

It must be noted that there are no publicly available figures totalling the current jobs in this important sector, let alone any coordinated approach to measure future potential growth, and ways in which the Commonwealth and Queensland Government could provide long-term support. This is clearly an area for urgent research and policy attention.

The Carbon Economy

Carbon is stored in vegetation and soils – meaning that the way we manage our landscapes affects the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and therefore the overall effect of climate change. Fire management, rainfall, the impact of pest species, grazing, large-scale development, and the introduction of human settlements, for instance, all have a significant impact on the fluxes of carbon being held in natural landscapes.

For this reason there is growing interest and scientific research into how natural landscapes could be managed so remote communities can benefit economically from a carbon economy. In other words, managing the carbon released from a natural landscape could provide a significant source of employment and income for Indigenous people.

In a vast region such as Cape York Peninsula, depending on the price on carbon and the accounting system, the variation of the baseline of carbon could be in the order of billions of dollars worth, signifying a significant business opportunity. It is also a potentially cost-effective mitigation strategy for Australia, with the implementation cost lower than many industrial sectors (see Nous Group 2009).

Potential land management activities that could reduce carbon and greenhouse emission output on Cape York Peninsula include weed and feral animal management, de-stocking of cattle in some areas, revegetation of the landscape where available, and management of fire in savanna ecosystems. While these mitigation measures are only just being understood and measured in terms of impact on greenhouse gas emissions, fire management appears to be the most progressed and promising opportunity.

For instance, a program is already underway in the Northern Territory (West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement Project), where the Darwin Liquefied Natural Gas is providing around \$1 million every year for the next 17 years to Traditional Owners of the region to implement a fire burning strategy (see Tropical Savannas CRC 2011). Cape York Peninsula has similar savanna landscapes so is likely to have the same opportunities emerge in the near future.

However, without a clear final date and conditions around baseline and management of greenhouse gas fluxes, it is not entirely clear exactly how this new set of land management drivers will impact on Cape York Peninsula. It must be remember that there are risks regarding the accounting of land management activities, which the Commonwealth Government is well aware of, and has written to the United Nations Framework Committee on Climate Change (UNFCCC) requesting the ability to “smooth” the impact of “natural disturbances” and other fluxes by averaging out the changes over five or more years.

Above all, Australia needs to set a price on carbon for this fledging economic opportunity to be fully understood and realised.

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Tourism

The potential for tourism growth on Cape York Peninsula is simply massive. While there is already a niche market of eco-cultural tours on Cape York Peninsula operated from Cairns, far larger opportunities could be built around either specific protected areas and places of high cultural or natural values (eg rainforests, rivers, rock art), or a large scale approach to protection and promotion region-wide - a World Heritage listing.

As a way of highlighting the economic potential of a World Heritage listing for Cape York Peninsula, it is worth briefly examining how World Heritage areas in Queensland have performed in creating jobs, wealth, investment and tourism activity.

In 2008, Queensland’s World Heritage areas (excluding the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park) were estimated to contribute at the state level:

- \$4.15 billion in annual direct and indirect state output or business turnover;
- \$1.85 billion in annual direct and indirect state value added;
- \$1.2 billion in direct and indirect state household income; and
- 24, 225 direct and indirect jobs state wide (Gillespie Economics 2008).

Indeed, the Wet Tropics World Heritage area alone contributed \$2 billion locally, \$3 billion at the state level and just under \$5 billion nationally in output in 2008 from the impacts of visitors, with a further 50% output from value added activities at each level. In terms of direct income, the area generated \$1.3 billion nationally from visitors, supporting 13,351 jobs locally (25,385 jobs nationally) (Gillespie Economics 2008).

“With the global recognition and marketing of a Cape York World Heritage area, Wild River declarations, a world-class walking trail on Cape York, and a rich Indigenous cultural experience, the potential of tourism is highly significant”

In the case of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, the figures are even more dramatic. Access Economics were commissioned by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority to assess the economic value of activity undertaken within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Marine Park (GBRMP) for the 2006-07 financial year. Their report examines the GBRMP’s contribution to the Great Barrier Reef Catchment Area (GBRCA). They concluded:

“The total direct and indirect contribution of the GBRMP to the GBRCA is estimated to be just under \$3.6 billion in 2006-07. The figure is larger for Queensland at just around \$4.0 billion. Australia-wide, the contribution is just over \$5.4 billion. These figures correspond with estimated employment contributions, direct and indirect, of 39,700 full time equivalents (FTE) of the GBRMP to the GBRCA. The employment figures for Queensland and Australia are 43,700 and 53,800 respectively. Tourism is by far the largest contributor to economic activity, accounting for 94% of the direct and indirect contribution.” (Access Economics 2008)

Extrapolating these figures to estimate the exact economic potential for a future Cape York Peninsula World Heritage area may be difficult, but one can assume the economic output and numbers of jobs would be substantial, particularly if carefully thought through to maximise indigenous employment opportunities. Indeed the future employment figures for tourism estimated in the Cape York Indigenous Employment Strategy already represent about 1000 jobs, and this is not factoring-in the marketing power of a World Heritage listing (as outlined in Report 4 of this submission, a potential World Heritage nomination for Cape York Peninsula is currently progressing).

One of the most promising of tourism ventures, which would go perfectly “hand-in-hand” with a World Heritage listing, is the push to create a vast “Dreaming Trail” on Cape York Peninsula, as part of Queensland’s “Great Walks” network. Initially floated by the Cape York Institute and Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation and supported by the Bligh Government at the 2009 State election, the Wilderness Society understands a feasibility study for the project has now been completed and the next stages of consultation and concept development are underway. Premier Bligh has stated that the project could eventually deliver 1,100 jobs and contribute millions of dollars to the local economy (Bligh 2009). This would make it Far North Queensland’s Kokoda Trail.

With the global recognition and marketing of a Cape York World Heritage area, Wild River declarations, a world-class walking trail on Cape York, and a rich Indigenous cultural experience, the potential of tourism is highly significant.

The Natural Competitive Advantage of Cape York Peninsula

Cape York Peninsula is an extraordinary region. Its myriad landscapes, rivers and coastlines, incorporating rainforest, savannah, woodlands, white sand country, wetlands and plains are home to one third of all Australian mammal species and half of our entire bird species, with high species endemism: 264 plant species and 40 different animal species occur only on Cape York Peninsula.

On a damaged planet it is remarkable that the inter-connecting ecosystems of this vast Peninsula remain largely healthy and intact across the whole landscape. Cape York Peninsula is a place where Indigenous peoples’ connection to their Country and cultural heritage is active and strong.

Capitalising on these values, including promoting, protecting and managing the region, represents a significant emerging opportunity for Indigenous employment in the region.

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Front page image: Fruit Bat Falls on Cape York Peninsula, by Kerry Trapnell.

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