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Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
The Development of Northern Australia
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Joint Select Committee – the development of northern Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Parliament's Northern Committee inquiry into the development of northern Australia.

The Wet Tropics Management Authority is a Queensland statutory authority established to ensure that Australia's obligations under the World Heritage Convention in relation to the Wet Tropics is met. The Authority is jointly accountable to the Commonwealth and State environment ministers.

The Authority has diverse roles. As well as ensuring protection through administration of the statutory *Wet Tropics Management Plan 1988*, the Authority builds partnerships within the community, with Rainforest Aboriginal people, with the research community, with the tourism industry and with government departments and agencies to advance the conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the Wet Tropics.

We offer a brief list of issues that the Authority would like you to consider in developing your recommendations to Parliament.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Maclean
Executive Director

conserving...sharing...enriching

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World Heritage and valuing our national assets and cultural landscapes

Five of Australia's World Heritage properties lie north of the Tropic of Capricorn: Great Barrier Reef, Wet Tropics, Kakadu, Purnululu and Ningaloo. It is important that the globally recognised outstanding universal cultural and nature values of these sites, and the opportunities they provide, be appropriately considered in formulating recommendations. There is international interest in ensuring the highest standards of management for our World Heritage properties.

A number of Australia's 'National Landscapes' identified for tourism purposes, are also based in northern Australia, for example the Kimberley, Australia's timeless north, the Wet Tropics and the Great Barrier Reef. These form an important part of the national identity and Australia's international image as an attractive tourism destination.

It is important that development in northern Australia protects and sustains these natural areas and we should foster innovative infrastructure that complements rather than detracts or threatens their values.

Eco-tourism

Eco-tourism and travel is an important industry across the region, nowhere more so than the Wet Tropics where it underpins the regional economy. Our natural assets provide us with a point of difference and comparative advantage both domestically and internationally. It is important that we preserve spaces for exploration and discovery for travellers, for local recreation and for communities. Poorly targeted development that diminishes Australia's international reputation for good environmental management and high standards of presentation and tourism infrastructure should be discouraged.

The relatively intact environmental and cultural assets of northern Australia need to be protected and be seen to be protected if they are to be attractive for sustainable tourism. Growth will also depend on industry capacity development and development of new products that meet the interests and needs of target markets. The thinking behind the National Landscapes program exemplifies the direction to follow.

Indigenous participation

The committee should find ways to ensure Indigenous communities can fully participate in development and that any development proposed is respectful of Indigenous rights and sensitive to cultural needs. The committee process itself needs to ensure it provides for the particular needs of remote Indigenous communities to ensure their voice is heard. The standard Parliamentary submission and hearing model is not likely to work in this context.

The challenge for all levels of government, community services infrastructure providers, industries and non-government organisations is to find new ways of working with Indigenous communities to develop a better understanding of each other's culture and practices through constructive engagement, the development of partnerships, flexible arrangements and agreements to ensure Indigenous people are effectively engaged and consulted in the planning, design, delivery, operation and management of their resources. This includes consideration for how Indigenous communities may be able to utilise the value of their land to create employment and economic opportunities.

The Authority would be pleased to provide further advice on its experience in engaging Rainforest Aboriginal people in the governance of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area if the committee is interested.

Tropical expertise and knowledge

As one of the few developed tropical economies in the world, our tropical knowledge and expertise and research capabilities are uniquely positioned to deliver targeted products and services to other tropical economies across the world. A defining feature of the Wet Tropics is its location and its track record for research excellence in disciplines of particular relevance to the tropics.

Opportunity exists for university, research institutions, not-for-profit entities, industry and key economic and business agencies to collaborate to form stronger strategic alliances and to develop a clear framework for the building of a focused tropical knowledge economy in Northern Queensland.

The Wet Tropics Management Authority has responded to these opportunities and emerging challenges for science and technology by promoting the Wet Tropics as an internationally recognised *Learning Landscape* that provides for outstanding opportunities for collaborative research across disciplines. We have developed an action plan through our [research strategy](#) and invite collaboration with research providers to build knowledge.

Today, as a consequence of government backing of Wet Tropics rainforest research, a vibrant, world-class research culture has developed, producing a string of major advances in fields such as climate change science, infrastructure management, biodiversity monitoring and canopy research to restoration ecology.

Building on these opportunities and developing a sustainable niche sector of the Australian economy based on tropical knowledge and expertise requires us to capitalise on this previous research investment. The region needs to retain and foster the best trained people, infrastructure, research programs and resourcing to study, understand, and manage Australia's tropical ecosystems in the future, whilst building its strengths in applying world-class research to real world problems.

Water supply

At face value the availability of accessible water resources will likely be a significant issue for agricultural development in the north. With some of the most consistent and highest rainfall in Australia, the Wet Tropics has an abundance of fresh water. However, water planning and conservation is just as critical as in other drier regions in northern Australia.

Water demand is increasing due to increasing agricultural, urban and industrial development. The high conservation values of Wet Tropics waterways is an important consideration for water storage infrastructure, and many key environmental values and ecosystem services are dependent upon maintaining intact flow regimes, conflicting with the water demand. This scarcity when surrounded by abundance creates special challenges in conserving and managing water resources.

The Authority would need to carefully assess any proposals for any new dams that might adversely affect the outstanding environmental values of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, either through flooding, or interfering in environmental flows.

Biosecurity

The Authority is pleased that biosecurity issues are included in early policy discussion. It is important to stress that there are serious pest, weed and disease risks affecting the natural values of northern Australia that need attention, in addition to risks to agriculture. More people, more development, novel crops and more trade adds to biosecurity risks for the environment. The best way to deal with biosecurity threats is through a combination of preventative measures-early detection as well as rapid responses. In order to improve regional biosecurity it is necessary to

enhance the coordination and capacity of regional bodies and agencies across jurisdictions to recognise, act upon, and plan for animal and pest plants and wildlife diseases.

The recent experience in the Wet Tropics of pests and diseases such as yellow crazy ants, Asian honeybees and myrtle rust demonstrates that existing systems for surveillance, detection and response to environmental biosecurity risks are insufficient or inadequately resourced in northern Australia now. This situation merits careful consideration by the committee.

Governance challenges

Northern Australia has featured in a number of national conversations about the nation's future, either as the new frontier for new resource and agriculture developments or as a wilderness landscape. The committee should consider policies that empower northern Australia, regional institutions and communities to be engaged in deciding on their own future, to ensure focus, relevance and accountability.

This will require building stronger and better informed alliances, improved joined up government and additional financial investment responses across the north. The Wet Tropics Management Authority's success over 20 years in providing regional leadership, engaging communities and building productive partnerships is a positive example with relevance elsewhere.

Heritage Protection

Heritage places must be protected under an effective regulatory regime that is implemented in ways that maintain the continuing support of communities. The national regulatory framework afforded by the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the EPBC Act) is vital and generally effective, but should be supported by an appropriately complementary framework of state and local laws.

Proactive regional solutions administered through State law or planning systems might provide for effective, locally administered protection, greater certainty for developers and in turn, greater support for the positive values of heritage places.

For example, although not formally coordinated, the EPBC Act operating in concert with the *Wet Tropics Management Plan 1998* (QLD) and the specific recognition of Wet Tropics World Heritage Area values in the Regional Plans is possibly an example of a transferable approach. The strategic assessment process underway for the Great Barrier Reef may also provide clues to an approach to heritage conservation that could be applied more widely.