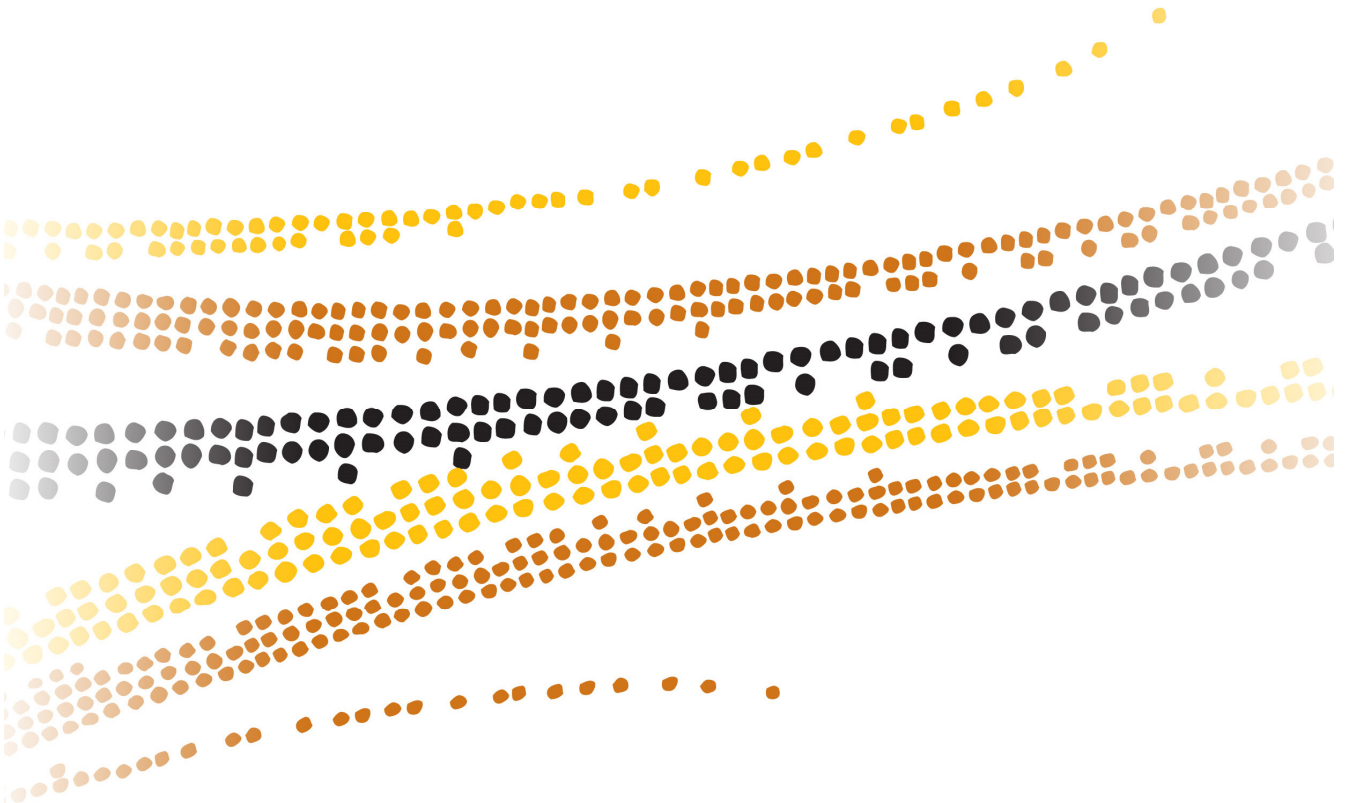
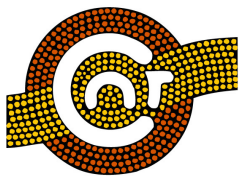


**C**entre for  
**A**ppropriate  
**T**echnology

**Submission to the Joint Select Committee  
on Northern Australia**

**4 March 2014**





# Centre for Appropriate Technology

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## HEAD OFFICE:

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The Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) is the national Indigenous science and technology organisation. CAT's vision is Happy and Safe communities of Indigenous peoples and its purpose is to secure sustainable livelihoods through appropriate technology. CAT is currently funded from a variety of sources including the Australian and State and Territory governments and private sources.

[www.icat.org.au](http://www.icat.org.au)

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# **Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) welcomes the opportunity to provide this brief submission to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia. We hope to be able to discuss and expand upon it during the Committee's planned visit to Alice Springs. This submission is based on CAT's extensive experience and focuses on policy areas to help identify the critical economic and social infrastructure needed to support the long term growth in our region, and ways to support planning and investment in that infrastructure. As a credible, experienced and resourceful NGO CAT is uniquely placed to assist government deliver on commitments in Northern Australia and ensure that Indigenous people are engaged and participating in this exciting venture.

## **WHO WE ARE**

Putting in place appropriate solutions for the complex issues facing remote and Indigenous communities has long been one of the most challenging areas of policy and program implementation for Australian governments. The Centre for Appropriate Technology is a national Indigenous science and technology organisation with over thirty years' experience in successful, cost-effective and innovative program delivery in communities across the most remote parts of northern Australia. We have an Indigenous Board, skilled staff across our extensive footprint and best practice administrative and governance procedures and protocols.

CAT's aim is to enable Indigenous people to harness economic opportunity and the self-reliance that can be leveraged through sustainable and appropriate technology transfer and skills development.

## **WHAT WE DO**

We have offices in Cairns, Darwin, Broome and Alice Springs, helping to deliver on our core capabilities of:

- energy and water solutions
- housing, infrastructure and telecommunications services
- remote and regional area project management
- community engagement and planning
- Indigenous capacity building, training and employment

Our track record in delivering practical and appropriate solutions in genuine consultation with communities is unparalleled. For example, our Bushlight program has delivered reliable, 24 hour power through renewable energy systems to 130 communities since 2002.

With core funding support from government, CAT can continue to deliver sustainable, cost-effective programs and services to remote communities. This will generate both positive outcomes for the communities themselves, contribute to wider regional economic activity across the area of interest to the JSCNA, as well as generating 'good news stories' that will build local interest and momentum behind this initiative.

#### ➤ **Energy and water solutions**

Renewable energy is a critical piece of the infrastructure picture in Northern Australia. The Bushlight project, developed by CAT, has changed the lives of thousands of people across 130 remote communities by ensuring the provision of 24 hour reliable power. Although there are some greenhouse benefits to renewable energy powered by solar, the technology should instead be evaluated through the lens of payoffs that include:

- improved health and nutrition and better storage of medicines through refrigeration
- freeing up time and space for community members to leave the community to work or meet social obligations without the necessity to keep a generator operative, or be concerned that the power will go off in your absence
- breaking the cycle of dependency on high cost diesel and consequent energy poverty frees funds for households and allows communities to engage in wider economic activities, such as arts centres and tourism ventures
- In some instances, installation of a Bushlight-style system relieves governments of an ongoing obligation to provide subsidised diesel

CAT has been active in the field of small community water supply risk management since 1994, leading research, resource development and capacity building programs for community residents and service providers. Risk management is critical where the cost of compliance is either prohibitive or technically infeasible.

➤ **Housing, infrastructure and telecommunications services**

CAT's expertise and experience ranges across projects from construction of individual dwellings to refurbishment of some 100 dwellings – structural, electrical and plumbing – across 18 homelands in Utopia using predominantly local Indigenous labour.

We manage the community phones program as it was not cost-effective for Telstra and are part of a longitudinal research project to increase home internet use in remote communities.

➤ **Remote area project management**

CAT and its affiliate, CAT Projects, has successfully managed projects including the swimming pool build in Mutitjulu, the \$18 million Alice Springs Aquatic and Leisure Centre, remote airstrip construction, major solar farms and construction of new waste facilities.

➤ **Community engagement and planning**

CAT has both history and capacity across our northern footprint of genuine engagement with Indigenous communities to ensure that programs are in tune with their aspirations for their homelands and communities, whilst providing whole-of-life benefits to all stakeholders. The payoff is immense, ensuring that infrastructure is appropriate and fit-for-purpose, and that government programs are tightly focused and sustainable in the longer term. We have a deserved high reputation for delivery of innovative solutions to complex problems that meet clients' needs.

➤ **Indigenous capacity building, training and employment**

The sparse and dispersed population of much of northern Australia, with its high turnover of professional and trade-qualified people, coupled with the relative permanence of a fast-growing and still significantly disadvantaged Indigenous population underscores the ongoing need for capacity building, training opportunities and realistic employment strategies. Through its partnerships and project implementation strategies CAT provides both accredited and non-accredited training in areas including construction, remote essential service operations and automotive.

Our expertise in, and approach to, employment and training of Indigenous people is one of creating a pathway to economic participation and sustainable livelihoods. Similarly, our approach to infrastructure development in remote communities and elsewhere integrates community consultation to ensure that the infrastructure meets both government and community objectives and facilitates participation in the wider economy. In recent times

these aspects have been demonstrated in the extensive housing and infrastructure upgrading work carried out at the Utopia Homelands in the eastern NT. A similar project is also underway in Northeast Arnhem Land.

## **DISCUSSION**

Many previous attempts at 'developing the North' have adopted, almost unconsciously, a quasi-colonial mindset that sees development as something planned, controlled and owned outside the region. This has led to what the *Fixing the hole in Australia's Heartland*<sup>i</sup> report calls 'a deep sense of disconnect and discontent' in the region. Thinking has thankfully moved on and there is now a realisation that development needs a large quotient of 'of the north, for the north, by the north' to close the gap between intention and action.

The development of Northern Australia is a long-running and demanding task that requires comprehensive policy settings that are both consistent enough to allow communities, industry and the non-government sector to plan, whilst being appropriately responsive to changing circumstances and learnings. In that respect CAT can be both a catalyst of, and an agency for, change. The recent rationalisation and stream lining of policy and service provision to Indigenous people is an important step in establishing a more coherent policy framework, but vigilance is required to ensure that granularity, essential detail and local relevance are not lost in the process. The imposition of yet another interventionist model, however well intentioned, will be counter-productive.

It should not be contemplated that a deep development agenda will proceed without conflict between groups with different interests and value sets. Such conflicts over tenure, access to human and financial capital, priorities and precedence, locations that gain and those that miss out, will be exacerbated by the lack of an intrinsic commonality across three jurisdictions and vast distances. Shortcutting or going around local and/or Indigenous governance structures and institutions may appear attractive in the short term, but can leave a legacy of entrenched mistrust. CAT can play a constructive role in this space, not as an apologist for any entrenched or parochial interest, but as an honest broker facilitating dialogue and constructive pathways.

CAT's own survival over 30 years and its current adaptation to the constrained economic environment and changed policy settings that now prevail - with the need for measuring effectiveness and efficiency against predominantly economic criteria - serves us well to

assist Aboriginal communities and organisations on a similar journey. We have the credibility that comes from a long involvement with northern and central Australia and we are widely seen as an honest broker between governments and Indigenous clients.

Removal of red (or any other colored) tape is a necessary but not sufficient condition to allow strategic growth and development to occur in Northern Australia. The role of governments in the development of the north is to establish and maintain a base level of economic activity that then allows markets to operate effectively. Without this support, many parts of Northern Australia, lacking the resilience that comes from a diversified economic base and a stable and well trained workforce, will not have a foundation from which to grow in times of stimulus and large proportions of the population will be left behind.

### **WHY HAS CAT MADE THIS SUBMISSION?**

CAT maintains that the areas of Indigenous policy and the development of the north are inextricably intertwined. Northern development needs a healthy, socially-engaged and stable workforce. Tailored support for economic opportunities for people living on-country and in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is an important part of that.

On its part, governments will need a tailored and nuanced engagement with the non-profit sector which understands the dynamics of successful engagement with Indigenous communities to fully deliver on the potential of Northern Australia. CAT has the capabilities, the desire and the experience to provide governments with just this capacity and provide a bridge to an entire constituency traditionally at the periphery of political power. Given CAT's presence and networks in all the regions of Northern Australia, we are uniquely positioned to coordinate Indigenous engagement strategies with remote and regional infrastructure and social development.

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, B W, Porter D J, and Marsh, I. *Fixing the hole in Australia's Heartland: How Government needs to work in remote Australia*, remoteFOCUS – Desert Knowledge Australia, September 2012. This report underpins many of the above observations and is suggested as a key resource for the JSC.