

Landmark guidelines for Indigenous involvement in NRM

In March, to encourage Indigenous communities across Australia to get involved in regional natural resource management (NRM) planning and activities, the federal government launched *Guidelines for Indigenous Participation in Natural Resource Management*.

The publication is part of stage one of a two-year project under the Australian Government's \$3 billion Natural Heritage Trust.

Parliamentary Secretary to the Federal Minister for the Environment and Heritage,

Greg Hunt, said "The guidelines include a "check list" to encourage discussion with Indigenous people on NRM activities, along with case studies of best practice management in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania."

"We need Indigenous communities to be aware of their options and want all NRM bodies looking at the opportunities that increased Indigenous participation can deliver."

Mr Hunt said the next stage of the project would identify ways for Indigenous

communities and regional bodies to set up arrangements or agreements to ensure proper representation.

"The focus will be on raising awareness of those best practice examples from the new guidelines," he said.

"We want to encourage greater interaction between Indigenous communities and NRM groups, and to improve Indigenous involvement in delivering nationally important environmental outcomes such as pest control, improved water quality, and fire, coastal and marine management.

A new vision for regional management The Wet Tropics Aboriginal Plan

Aboriginal, political and community leaders from throughout northern Australia gathered in Innisfail in April this year to launch *Caring for Country and Culture: The Wet Tropics Aboriginal Cultural and Natural Resource Management Plan*. The initiative marks a new era in cooperative environmental management throughout Australia.

Three years in the making, the Aboriginal Plan, as it is also known, is the first plan of its kind to specifically address the many challenges of maintaining distinct and diverse cultures in a multi-tenured and rapidly changing landscape.

At the launch, Queensland Environment Minister, Desley Boyle MP, said the event was an historic achievement for the region's Traditional Owners and Indigenous peoples throughout the country.

"This document is a blueprint outlining a clear way forward for the region's Traditional Owners to work collaboratively to maintain their culture and Country. Traditional Owners have a unique insight into the land and the Aboriginal Plan recognises their pivotal role in ensuring ecologically sustainable development in northern Australia."

Developed through a novel partnership between the region's Traditional Owners, the Rainforest CRC and FNQ NRM Ltd, the document identifies the aspirations, and a range of management and resourcing options for the Aboriginal Plan region's 17 Traditional Owner Groups. This includes accessing a share of the \$1 billion

extension to the Federal Government's Natural Heritage Trust program.

FNQ NRM Ltd Indigenous Director, Troy Wyles-Whelan, said the plan identifies new opportunities for stakeholders throughout the region to join Traditional Owners in taking care of the unique environment of the Wet Tropics.

"Aboriginal people in this region want to have strong involvement in both managing and growing this region, as well as maintaining our culture and traditional knowledge. By working collectively we've developed a vision and sound strategy to achieve this through genuine partnerships."

Traditional Owner from the Ma:Mu group and Plan Team member, Dean Purcell, says establishing the necessary partnerships with both government and non-government organisations is critical to kick-starting the range of sustainable development opportunities identified.

"For Aboriginal people, managing the environment from a perspective that recognises the linkages and need for a healthy environment, society and culture is fundamental to success. The plan aims to produce much needed economic, social and cultural benefits as well as significant environmental outcomes, and these will benefit both Aboriginal people and the broader community."

Steve Larkin, Principal of Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Australia's leading Indigenous research organisation, said that the plan takes a 'big picture' approach to



Traditional site, Katherine Gorge, Northern Territory, will come under the Plan's 'big picture' approach to Natural Resource Management. Matthew Scherf

Natural Resource Management and focuses on the often overlooked social and cultural dimensions of ecosystem management. "For too long, Country has been seen through environmental eyes only."

The Hon Greg Hunt MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Federal Minister for the Environment and Heritage, said, "the Aboriginal Plan will ensure that Traditional Owners have a prominent role in bringing traditional knowledge to bear in land management decisions that are aimed at repairing environmental damage and restoring Country."

The initiative's alignment with other planning and management initiatives, including the Wet Tropics Regional Agreement, is fundamental to achieving its goals. The Regional Agreement outlines how the Commonwealth and state governments will work with Aboriginal people to manage the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. Many of the Agreement's guiding principles and protocols are acknowledged in the Aboriginal Plan.

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