

Daintree newsletter No 1

You may have noticed the battle to save the Daintree Coast may be on again with a push for a bridge over the Daintree River, upgraded coast road to Cooktown and grid electricity. These issues have arisen periodically over the past two decades, but never all at once.

To what extent these are pipe dreams is difficult to say. The worst case scenario, should they all occur, would have direct and indirect impacts that would change the face of the Daintree Coast forever.

Our view is that government investment should prioritise conservation and presentation, not development.

We are starting by setting up an information network of people we hope will share our concern.

Let us know what you think of the following.

Given these threats seem to arise periodically, we think it is time for

- A strategy to combat development pressures that threaten conservation values
- a Daintree Conservation Management Plan, to ensure the exceptional scientific, conservation and cultural values (Attachment 1) are conserved, enhanced and well presented.

The Plan would need to be unambiguously framed by those exceptional values. Those values also underwrite its foundational role in the tourism economy, underlining the need for better business planning too.

There are a variety of drivers for a bridge, road upgrade and grid power:

- Cook Shire and Wujalwujal Council are pressing for the sealing and upgrading of the Bloomfield Track
- The current member for Leichhardt, Warren Entsch MP was pushing for all three at recent meeting of select invitees
- A number of residents from North of the Daintree – mostly the same people who have fought all previous conservation agendas are agitating for greater infrastructure and development
- A new “invite-only” lobby group called the Northern Douglas Ratepayers, unhappy with the Douglas Shire Council, is seeking to raise a raft of issues North of the Daintree, these three included
- A shire wide pro-development lobby that has tried to gain control of Council for the last 25 years

A Conservation Management Plan would need to encompass all issues and assess all options, some objectives might be:

- to conserve and present the Daintree lowlands’s environment and Indigenous culture

- to meet local social needs in ways that do not compromise the environmental values
- to meet the transport and energy needs of existing residents and visitors in a way that does not detract from the environment and presentation or drive additional development
- to support Traditional Owners, local residents and landowners to be good stewards
- to have a thriving, sustainable tourism industry that
 - significantly improves the revenue share of the tourism \$ that accrues to locals
 - values, interprets and promotes the biological and cultural values
- to ensure conservation approaches sustain ongoing ecological and evolutionary processes within the World Heritage Area

There are international standards to guide such a process, that recognise community and economic imperatives, that seek consensus.

It won't be cheap. It will take time. But if there is no Plan a lot of public money and investment may get wasted, the arguments will continue, the angst will go on, the area will look crappy, the environment will likely come off worst.

Issues

Grid Power

The Australian Renewable Energy Agency ARENA has commissioned a report called Powering Daintree (not on ARENA website but can be supplied if requested).

With the support of a few of us locals, Austrop, (a small research facility with a long history in local, renewable, Remote Area Power Systems), is doing a detailed analysis of the ARENA "Powering Daintree" report. That should be complete in a week or two. There are 5 options presented,

- 1) Single microgrid
- 2) 3 Separate microgrids
- 3) Numerous small microgrids connected by gas pipelines
- 4) Extend microgrids from existing generation assets
- 5) Remote AREA Power Supply (RAPS)

Early assessment of the preferred option (Option 1) is:

- It will require huge subsidy from government:
 - \$65 M capital expenditure
 - 273 residential properties are "expected" to link to the grid/grids
 - 42 businesses (ditto)
- The report does not mention the cost of property connection at a cost of \$50,000 to \$100,000 per property (est. \$1000 per meter connection line costs, excluding

mandatory inspections and upgrading wiring to current Code. Few places are wired to Code. This will be a major disincentive).

- Many already have stand-alone systems that serve their needs and won't want to connect even if it were free
- It is designed to promote development
- It is not renewable – proposed generation will be a gas fired power station North of the Daintree with an unspecified, solar component.
- We think a variation of Option 5 – assisting all current residents and business to bring their RAP system up to scratch would be more widely supported, a fraction of the cost and would not promote development (and would enhance their “image”).
- Only a select group of 5 residents, called “friendly” in the report, were consulted for the Report, giving an incredibly distorted view of real demand

██████████ has been doing a fine-grain analysis of the reality and distribution of solar installations and solar-capable buildings in the Daintree Lowlands. This information is absolutely essential for countering the arguments of the ARENA report

The road

Cook and Wujal Wujal Shires have commissioned Bill Cummings to do an economic assessment of road upgrading. That is expected to be released soon.

We are concerned this report:

- will not deal with the environmental and financial consequences,
- Will increase through traffic and transports from Cairns to Cooktown and beyond (150 km shorter than inland highway)
- will add pressure to the Daintree Ferry, already at capacity for three or four weeks
- Drive demand for a bridge
- Force the widening, flattening and straightening of Australia's most scenic Road, defined by its narrow winding path with overhead rainforest canopy
- Create demand for more development
- Cost Council and State, (that means you, as rate and tax payers) a lot of money

The Bridge

There is no new study for a bridge – its advocates are citing a 2004 study (Ref?). We think that study is outdated but should, of course, be taken into account in a more comprehensive Management Plan.

The demand for a bridge follows the ferry being out of the water for five days and 3 weeks of queues at peak season.

We agree transport for locals and visitors should be reviewed prior to the next ferry tender and as party of a broader study which would consider and evaluate all options.

Attachment 1

Values

A 2013 paper in the prestigious journal *Science* (<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/342/6160/803.summary#aff-1>) listed the Wet Tropics as the planet's sixth-most-irreplaceable protected area in terms of species conservation, and its eighth-most-irreplaceable when considering only threatened species. The study looked at the biological uniqueness and irreplaceability of different ecosystems across the planet. A major piece of work, it examined over 173,000 different protected areas and ranked the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area as the 6th most critical and irreplaceable.

Of World Heritage Areas, it was the 2nd most critical and irreplaceable.

<https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2013-016.pdf>)

Within the broader wet tropics region, the Daintree River to Cape Tribulation coast has a special status - it is the last surviving, essentially intact, tropical lowland rainforest in Australia. Significant stands of threatened lowland communities are now confined to this area. It has one of the highest diversity of plant families anywhere in the world and THE highest concentration of primitive families.

Its rarity, fame and superlative beauty make it one of the foundations of the region's tourism economy.

It is the only place in the world where two World Heritage Areas meet

Other issues and threats to the Wet Tropics WHA are discussed in this 2015 article in *The Conversation* (<https://theconversation.com/ecocheck-australias-wet-tropics-are-worth-billions-if-we-can-keep-out-the-invading-ants-56815>).

Attachment 2

Strategy

Ideas for a strategy will be considered by DSSG on May 7 but in the meantime all views, ideas, criticisms and everything but insults are welcome

Daintree Conservation Strategic plan – elements for discussion

- Co-ordinate with Rainforest Trust (and Rainforest Rescue)
- Approach the Northern Douglas Ratepayers (to understand their agenda)
- Banner/Brand/identity
- Formation of Daintree Coast Community Conservation group (or reactivating Cape Tribulation Community Council – still in existence but sleeping)

- *Response to Powering Daintree*
- *Response to Cook/Wujal economic report due in a few weeks*
- *Promoting ongoing buyback and park expansion*
- *Letter writing*
- *Alert local, state and national environment groups*
- *Article for The Conversation: Prof Steve Turton (adjunct CQU), Dr Steve Goosem (retired chief scientist, WTMA), Hugh Spencer and Mike Berwick will write*
- *Follow up releases in national media*
- *Public rally, Port Douglas, march down street, guest speakers, stinger park a Saturday morning/afternoon?*
- *Presentation to Daintree Planning Group (DSC, WTMA, NPWS, Jabilbinna) advocating a Daintree Conservation Management Plan (as proposed above)*
- *Briefing to Council – Conservation Management Plan*
- *Letter to Frydenberg/ARENA re power report*
- *Briefing state member for Cook and Minister Enoch*
- *Address TPDD*
- *Address to music festivals – Black Mountain, Home Rule, Woodford...*