

## CAPE YORK PENINSULA – COUNTRY PLANNING AND WORLD HERITAGE

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### ABSTRACT

Cape York Peninsula is a place of unique heritage. For many years, the community and the Government have focused on protecting Cape York Peninsula's world-class natural and cultural heritage.

The Queensland Government is rolling out a country planning program across Cape York Peninsula. The aim of this program is to support interested Traditional Owner groups to identify key cultural and natural heritage sites on their country that they want to see protected and managed. The country planning process also provides the opportunity for Traditional Owners to gather together all of their existing cultural and natural information and to store it in a safe location of their choice for future generations. Another potential benefit of this process is for interested members of the community to attain training and employment during the planning process and to identify employment opportunities for community members in their country plans. It is also envisaged that through this planning process, Traditional Owners will be in a better position to decide if they want certain areas of their country to be included in a potential National and/or World Heritage nomination.

Both the Australian and Queensland governments require Traditional Owner consent and community support before lodging any areas of Cape York Peninsula for a potential World Heritage nomination.

The aim of this program is to take a participatory approach to the development of a World Heritage nomination. It is hoped that this program will be able to deliver successful country planning outcomes for Cape York Peninsula Traditional Owners, regardless of whether a National or World Heritage nomination is progressed. Two pilot projects have been initiated on Cape York in Pormpuraaw and the Northern Peninsula Area.

### BACKGROUND

The special values of Cape York Peninsula have long been recognised and celebrated. In 1972, following an academic symposium in Cairns, Walker published *Bridge to Barrier: the natural and cultural history of Torres Strait* which recognised that Cape York Peninsula had cultural and natural values of international significance. At the World Wilderness Conference in 1980, Peter Stanton noted that "*The Cape York Peninsula must be one of the most complex regions still left on earth.*"

Support for investigating World Heritage as a management option was expressed by conservationists, pastoralists and Aboriginal people in 1996 through the signing of the historic Cape York Heads of Agreement. The agreement included clauses regarding the development of 'a management regime for ecologically, economically,

socially and culturally sustainable land use on the Cape York Peninsula' and assessment for a potential World Heritage nomination.

The State Government also signed on to the agreement in 2000 and commenced work to determine whether the natural and cultural heritage of the Cape were of potentially 'outstanding universal value', one of the tests for a World Heritage nomination.

In 2007, the Queensland Cape York Peninsula Heritage Act was passed, establishing a process for identifying and declaring areas of international conservation significance on Cape York that could be considered for World Heritage nomination. Subsequently two advisory committees were appointed to help identify these significant areas and the best ways to engage with the community—the Cape York Peninsula Regional Advisory Committee and the Cape York Peninsula Region Scientific and Cultural Advisory Committee.

In 2009, the Queensland Government made a commitment to work towards preparing a World Heritage nomination for suitable areas of Cape York Peninsula if there is Traditional Owner consent and community support. Therefore the Queensland Government intends to work closely with Traditional Owners, the community and the Australian Government in preparing any nomination for World Heritage listing.

## **WORLD HERITAGE**

World Heritage areas are places that have cultural and natural heritage of such importance that they are recognised worldwide as being significant. Only areas that have 'outstanding universal value' can be nominated for World Heritage listing.

The nomination is submitted to UNESCO's World Heritage Centre and then assessed by independent technical advisory bodies.

The World Heritage Committee meets once a year to decide which nominated properties will be inscribed on the World Heritage List. The committee can defer the nomination or ask for more information.

The evaluation of nominations is rigorous and competitive. Only some fifty percent of nominated properties make it on to the World Heritage List. Therefore managing community expectations is important from the onset.

Once an area is included on the World Heritage List, the nominating country is obliged to manage, protect and promote its heritage values for the benefit of current and future generations.

When an area is nominated for World Heritage listing, suitable management strategies that will protect heritage values for current and future generations must be identified as part of the nomination. These become part of the management arrangements for the World Heritage property if the nomination is successful.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

Cape York Peninsula is a special heritage place. Up to 650 kilometres-long and 400 kilometres-wide, it contains vast, relatively undisturbed landscapes rich with Aboriginal traditions and customs.

Cape York Peninsula is different from other areas in northern Australia due to its extraordinary biological diversity, the integrity of its interconnecting ecosystems and its evolutionary links with Papua New Guinea. Many of its plants and animals are found nowhere else in the world, while some such as the spotted cuscus and palm cockatoo are shared with New Guinea but nowhere else in Australia.

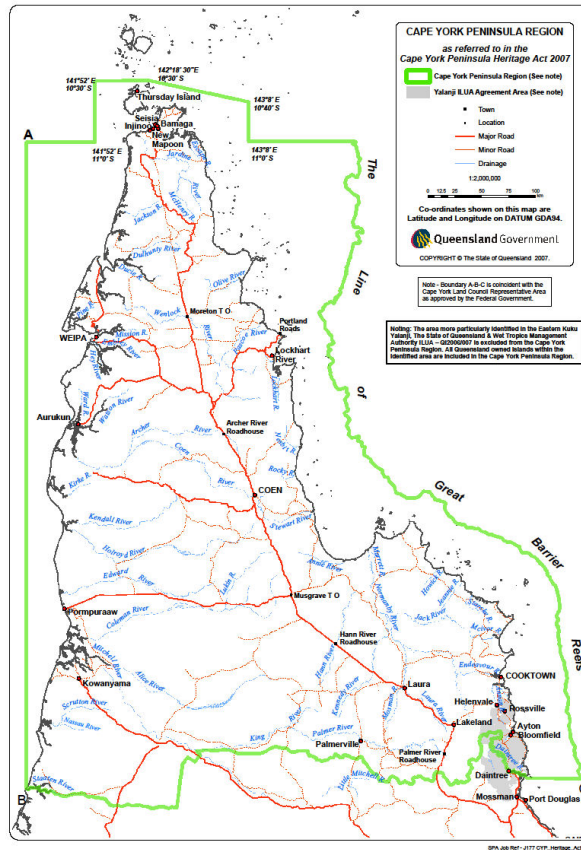


Figure 1. Cape York Peninsula Area boundary as defined by the *Cape York Peninsula Heritage Act 2007*

Studies undertaken to date (eg Mackey et al, 2001Valentine, 2006,) indicate that many areas on Cape York Peninsula contain cultural and natural heritage of national and international significance. Boundaries of a potential National or World Heritage nomination have not yet been determined. Boundaries will be determined through a rigorous process of community participation and scientific assessment.

### INDIGENOUS ENGAGEMENT

Both the Australian and Queensland Governments require Traditional Owner consent and community support before lodging a World Heritage nomination for suitable areas of Cape York Peninsula. At this stage, no decision has been made about which areas will be nominated. Only areas that are supported by Traditional Owners and have outstanding heritage values will be nominated.

A participatory approach with Traditional Owners in relation to a potential World Heritage nomination is currently being trialled on Cape York Peninsula. The approach recognises that consideration of a potential World Heritage nomination should take place in the context of land use aspirations and the existing planning and

legislative arrangements. Funding and other assistance is being made available to Traditional Owner groups to engage in this process through the preparation of a plan for their country or other preferred methodology (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Communication material describing country based planning approach

Country Based Plans recognise Indigenous cultural domains ('country') as an appropriate basis for Indigenous engagement. 'Country', whether on the sea, on the coast or inland is the fundamental scale at which Australian environments have been managed for tens of thousands of years. It follows therefore, that a country-based scale of planning, is an effective tool for enabling Indigenous voices to be heard in setting directions for future management (Smyth, 2007).

At the end of the process of developing a plan for country, it is envisaged that Traditional Owner groups will:

- Have an established planning document, which will serve as a guide for implementing their aspirations;
- Understand the implications of World Heritage listing in order to make an informed decision;
- Submit to the Queensland Government a document that provides proof of whom with and how the informed decision about World Heritage was made amongst their group.

If the decision about World Heritage is to proceed with the nomination then Traditional Owners are asked to also submit their planning document that:

- records cultural and natural values and threats
- identifies aspirations for country
- explores different management options.

If a nomination is successful, the planning document may form part of the management arrangements of a future World Heritage area. The plan would have a life beyond the World Heritage nomination, and would be relevant even if a nomination does not proceed. Such a plan could be used to seek alternative funding from government and other programs.

Preferably, where it is possible, planning work will be undertaken in collaboration with existing projects, programs and organisations (eg Great Barrier Reef Traditional Use Marine Resource Agreements, Indigenous Protected Area planning, NRM Boards).

## **DISCUSSION**

Adopting a participatory approach where Traditional Owners drive the World Heritage nomination process themselves is breaking new ground for Traditional Owners and government.

Three Indigenous Engagement Coordinators are facilitating participation of Traditional Owner groups on Cape York Peninsula. For ease of planning, 13 sub-regions (based on clan group affiliations) are grouped into 3 broad engagement areas:

1. Western Cape includes: Kowanyama, Pormurraw, Aurukun, Napranum and Mapoon sub-regions.
2. North East Cape includes: Kaurareg, Northern Peninsula, Lockhart-Wuthathi and Coen sub-regions.
3. South-East Cape includes: Lakefield-Kalpawar, Laura, Hopevale-Cooktown and Yalangji sub-regions

Initial consultations with Traditional Owner groups are exploratory in nature, aiming to determine:

- local capacity
- time commitments
- governance structures and
- existing natural and cultural planning project and gaps

In recognition of the different governance arrangements across the Cape, the composition of working groups will be informed by Traditional Owners. For example, in some sub-regions several tribal / clan groups may form one working group and make decisions collectively about large areas of country, while still retaining the strong cultural principles of 'speaking for country'. In other sub-regions working groups may be based on one tribal group.

To date two pilot projects have commenced: in Pormpuraaw and the Northern Peninsula Area. Both regions have adopted a similar model of engagement, drawing on the skills of a trusted consultant to assist with the consultation, country planning and financial management. However, the process is flexible and open to innovative approaches that suit the capacity of each Traditional Owner working group. Particular focus is on building capacity within each community to undertake the country based planning work themselves.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is anticipated that this engagement approach will:

- Improve the way that Government engages with Traditional Owners in relation to decision making about country and culture;
- Give something back to the community through providing resources to develop a plan for country;
- Facilitate participation of Traditional Owners in the World Heritage nomination process from the outset.

## **TAKE HOME MESSAGES**

Engaging with the multiple Traditional Owner groups on Cape York Peninsula through planning for country will take around 2 or 3 years. During this time further desktop research and extensive consultation with the broader community will continue. At the end of the planning process, Traditional Owner groups will be in a better position to make an informed decision in relation to whether they want to go ahead with a World Heritage nomination or not. If yes, Traditional Owners will work with the Australian and Queensland government to contribute information about heritage values and management arrangements which will support a nomination. Without the consent of Traditional Owners and community support a World Heritage nomination can not go ahead.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks to Pormpuraaw Land and Sea Management Office, Apudthama Land Trust for agreeing to take part in the 'pilot' projects.

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