



project in progress summary

knowledge for managing Australian landscapes

Assessment of social and economic values of Australia's tropical rivers

Research project number CSE29 of the Social and Institutional Research Program of Land & Water Australia. Commencement date: March 2005; Anticipated completion: December 2005.

Background

The protection and development of water resources across tropical Australia is likely to result in conflicting responses as physical intervention to provide secure water supplies will trigger reactions from environmental and social sectors and downstream users. Environmental changes resulting from water development are also likely to have economic, social and cultural implications for regional communities and businesses.

Projections for human population growth and expansion of economic activities in the near term are relatively low across most of the region, supported in part by remoteness, a lack of supporting infrastructure, and the large proportion of land held by Aboriginal and pastoral title.

Industries including pastoralism, mining, aboriginal enterprises, fisheries, and irrigated agriculture are linked by access to water resources and the consequences of using that water. Competing values

also mean that in addition to consumptive uses, rivers are increasingly important for ecotourism and high-value fisheries. Water resource development will influence all of these industries and vice versa.

Because of the opportunities and threats to social, cultural, economic and environmental values local communities want more input into management decisions concerning these systems. Cultural differences and the remoteness of many communities from centres of policy, decision-making and economic activity makes a complex and challenging social geography. Community knowledge remains largely untapped, whilst traditional knowledge held by Indigenous communities is being lost. Conservation and natural resource management (NRM) programs are likely to have only limited success without the support of local communities.



The social consequences of development decisions, and implications for future generations with respect to environmental sustainability require a combined social, economic and environmental research approach in the same manner as anywhere else in Australia, but with the added consideration of the cultural links of Indigenous people who live closely with river environments.

Project objectives

The profiling and scoping study will:

- develop an integrated social and economic profile of the tropical rivers region, focussing on the collation and reporting of data relevant to rivers and river management;
- identify important social and economic values and issues relevant to rivers;
- explain significant processes and pressure points that will impact on future management of tropical rivers, including conflicting stakeholder aspirations;
- scope future research needs and priorities based on the identification of key social and economic management questions, and
- recommend questions and approaches for further R&D that will generate an understanding of the social and economic processes and pressure points that will impact on the health of rivers, floodplains, wetlands and estuaries in the study area. The recommended approach will need to be well targeted to inform NRM policy makers and managers at the national, state/territory and catchment levels.

Study areas

The two major drainage divisions in Australia's north draining into the Timor Sea and Gulf of Carpentaria.

Target audiences for project findings

- LWA Tropical Rivers Program
- Communities, regional NRM groups and policy makers in the study regions.

Progress to date

- Community consultation
- Preliminary Australian Bureau of Statistics data collection

Contact

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