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# Keeping the Outstanding Exceptional: The Future of World Heritage in Australia

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# World Heritage in the Life of Communities: An Analysis from the Wet Tropics of Queensland

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The Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area is a region of spectacular scenery and rugged topography with fast-flowing rivers, deep gorges and numerous waterfalls. Mountain summits provide expansive vistas of the oldest surviving rainforest in the world.

The exceptional coastal scenery combines tropical rainforest, white sandy beaches and fringing reefs just offshore; a unique feature on a global scale (WTMA, 2010). The World Heritage Area covers nearly 900,000 hectares from Townsville to Cooktown in northern Queensland. It is predicted that some 270,000 people will live within the Wet Tropics region by 2016.

Prior to World Heritage listing in 1988, the rainforests of the Wet Tropics region were extensively harvested for timber. This unsustainable logging was opposed by the environment movement and others creating a lot of conflict in the region. Despite the challenging start, more than 20 years later, the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area is totally entrenched in the communities of this region. Community support for its listing has grown from 50% in 1996 to over 80% in 2007 (Carmody and Prideaux, 2008). Similarly there is strong support for its protection, with almost all of the respondents (92%) of a study supporting the general level of protection afforded by the listing (Bentrupperbäumer et al., 2004). Residents view the World Heritage Area as an integral part of their landscape and lifestyle and feel a strong sense of collective ownership and responsibility (Bentrupperbäumer and Reser, 2006; Carmody and Prideaux, 2008). Its outstanding natural environment is also widely recognised and supported in the Australian community and elsewhere and is translated into actual visitation levels and economic contribution (Gillespie Economics and BDA Economics and Environment, 2008).

## **Addressing a function in the life of the community in the World Heritage Convention**

The World Heritage Convention (the Convention) obliges State Parties to the Convention to identify, protect, conserve, rehabilitate, present and transmit to future generations, the natural and cultural heritage of the World Heritage properties within its territory (Article 4). The Convention also obliges State Parties to, '*adopt general policies which [aim] to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into*



The beauty and diversity of the Wet Tropics afford a wealth of experiences for both tourists and residents. Photo: Courtesy Queensland Tourism Industry Council

comprehensive planning programs' (Article 5 (a)) (UNESCO, 2011).

However, the operational guidelines to implement the Convention do not provide specific guidance on what is meant by the '*function of a World Heritage Area in the life of the community*' (UNESCO, 2011). There are a number of paragraphs that refer in general terms to aspects of it including reference to participation of a wide variety of stakeholders, and local and Indigenous people (paragraph 12,123); potential partnerships (paragraph 40); human activities, including those of traditional societies and local communities (paragraph 90); and development of educational materials, activities and programmes (paragraph 219). However, in practice implementation and monitoring related to providing a 'function in the life of the community' is left largely to the discretion of each property.

### A framework for analysis of the 'function of World Heritage Areas in the life of the communities'

This paper presents an overall framework for analysis of the 'function of World Heritage Areas (WHAs) in the life of the communities', Figure 1. The overall 'function' is the combination of those dimensions and their linkages depicted in the figure. Insights from a systematic analysis of how the dimensions of this framework manifest themselves within the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area, follows.

Community in this chapter is used in its broader sense; not only the people that live in and around the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area (the Area),

but also people and communities living throughout Australia and the world who value and have an interest in the protection and management of the Area.

### The function in the life of communities of the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area: Summary results of implementing the framework

Following is a summary of the function of the Area in the life of the community adopting the analytical framework presented in figure 1.

#### Involvement, participation and collaboration

##### Communities and stakeholders

With more than 2500 individual blocks of land neighbouring its 3000 kilometre boundary, the active involvement of neighbours and landholders is crucial to the management of the Area. Wider representation for community engagement comes through a number of committees attached to management agencies and natural resource management organisations. Locally-based community groups are also active participants in the Area's conservation and land care.

A clear example of the positive results of this engagement was the establishment of cassowary feeding stations after Cyclone Yasi damaged large parts of the Area in February 2011. Community support was quickly enlisted through social networks in the region. At the peak of the crisis 105 feeding stations were established and supplied with an average 3000 kg of fruit each week, largely prepared by community volunteers. Supermarkets supported this community effort by donating fruit (QNPWS staff, personal communication).

##### Indigenous peoples

*'Over the last 20 years I have seen the World Heritage listing raising the wider community's appreciation of our country to that which it deserves. The listing seemed to formalise what we, as Traditional Owners, already felt toward the land and we are now working hard to have our land formally recognised for its cultural values'* (WTMA, 2009, p. 53).

The Area is culturally rich, comprising the traditional lands of 18 Rainforest Aboriginal groups. Since the World Heritage listing, regional Rainforest Aboriginal representative arrangements have evolved through Indigenous organisations and committees attached to management agencies and natural resource management organisations into an independent regional alliance. During this evolution a *Wet Tropics Regional Agreement* (WTMA, 2005) represented a considerable effort in fostering collaboration for Indigenous peoples'

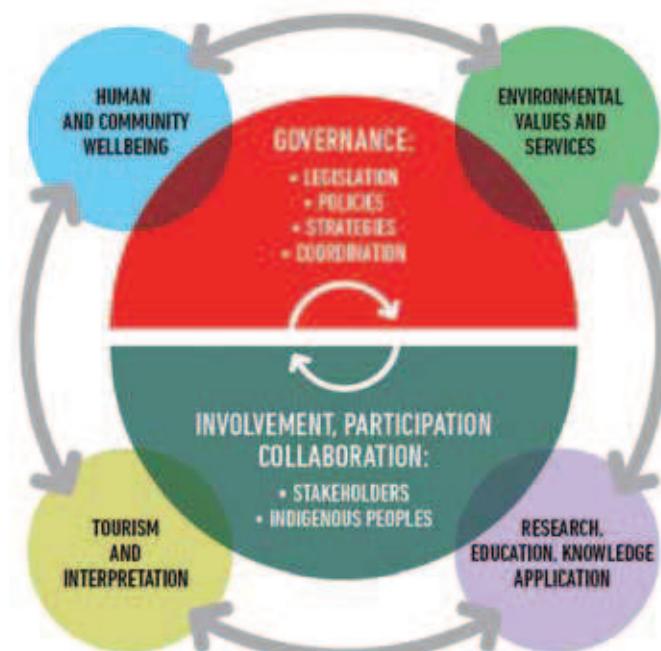


Figure 1: The Function of the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area in the Life of the Community

effective participation and self-determination in the Wet Tropics region. This agreement provided an overall framework for the involvement of Rainforest Aboriginal People in the management of the Area amongst WTMA, the State and Commonwealth governments and the 18 Rainforest Aboriginal groups.

There is also widespread support for other forms of engagement with Indigenous peoples through negotiated Indigenous Land Use Agreements and the creation of Indigenous Protected Areas. The Eastern Kuku Yalanji Indigenous Land Use agreement – a cooperative approach to land ownership, use, management and community development is one such example.

## Governance

Concerted efforts towards collaborative management are a feature of the Area. As a multi-tenured protected area that includes private landholders and different government-held tenures, its governance necessitates complex and vibrant community partnerships that build on and provide social capital for the Wet Tropics region.

For example, the *Wet Tropics Conservation Strategy* developed by the Authority (WTMA, 2004) in collaboration with numerous partners, promotes actions to achieve the conservation, rehabilitation and transmission to future generations of the Area and the broader Wet Tropics bioregion. A broad range of landscape management priorities identified in the Strategy are reflected in the Terrain NRM Regional Plan and the Far North Queensland Regional Plan 2009-2031. These agencies and organisations also work closely with community groups, with the value of the Area being an important driver of their collaboration. Such inclusion directly reflects Article 5 of the World Heritage Convention.

## Human and community well-being and environmental values and services

There are many quality of life benefits derived by the community from the Area. Figure 2 describes environmental values and services and their links to human and community well-being. However, the nature and strength of the links between environmental values and services from the Area and human and community well-being are incompletely understood. Clean air, good water quality, water supply from the forest in the dry season, the aesthetic beauty of the surrounding green mountains to cities and towns throughout the region are all part of these services. Opportunities for walking, camping and other recreation activities also provide an important connection between the Area and the community. Each of those contributes to human and

community well-being benefits related to health, greater social cooperation, spiritual customary practices and income generation.

For example, the annual ‘Cassowary Awards’ - to recognise individuals and groups who have made outstanding contributions towards the conservation and presentation of the Area - allows for the expression of a variety of ways people interact with the Wet Tropics environment. This initiative contributes to a sense of place, community pride and social cohesion, all part of wellbeing.

Many environmental services generated by the Area also benefit communities. For example, cloud stripping in the high altitude rainforests of the Area contributes greatly to annual precipitation and feeds stream flow and water supply. Coffee plantations in the region derive pollination benefits from the Area’s birdlife (Stork et al., 2008).



Figure 2: The Link between Environmental Values and Services and Human and Community Wellbeing in the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area

## **Research, education and knowledge application**

### **Research**

The Wet Tropics region has benefited from a succession of Commonwealth investments in support of regionally-based integrated research programs. The interdisciplinary nature of research has been greatly influenced by the existence of the Area and active management agencies needing information for management. The value of the Area as a living laboratory has been outstanding demonstrated by the research funding and output of publications, and transfer of knowledge to management in the region and elsewhere. Publications summarizing years of research have provided a great exposure of learning from this region in a contribution to rainforest management worldwide (Stork et al., 2008). Consistent with a regional community goal of being recognised as a source of expertise in tropical knowledge, the region is often visited by leaders from developing countries to learn and consider application of practice from the Area in their own countries.

### **Education**

Schools and academic institutions benefit greatly from being in the Area. Educational materials have been developed to assist in the delivery of Wet Tropics themed teaching in schools with many school taking field trips. Academic institutions such as the James Cook University have a strong focus on teaching tropical ecology, natural resources management, sustainable development, ecotourism and conservation sciences. Staff from agencies and organisations in the region play a significant role in transferring knowledge about the Area and its management to these many different learning contexts.

### **Tourism and Interpretation**

The outstanding beauty of the Wet Tropics makes it one of the premier tourism attractions in Australia. The tourism industry plays an important role in connecting communities and economies. It is a key regional partner in delivering better understanding of World Heritage through interpretation and presentation. Aiding in such delivery is the region's first online training program for tour guides, raising the bar for World Heritage tourism in North Queensland. The Wet Tropics is one of Australia's National Landscapes, providing the opportunity to reach a global audience and strengthening regional collaborations within the tourism industry.

## **Conclusions**

Analysis such as the one above, can lead to understanding needs for improvement in management, collaboration, communication, research, education, and industry practices at any given World Heritage Area. This understanding contributes towards ensuring that the overall function of a World Heritage Area in the life of the community can accommodate new social, cultural and economic trends and policy requirements.

From the analysis of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area many opportunities exist for further enhancing the function of the Area in the life of the community. Amongst those it is worth noting:

- supporting collaborative governance for conservation and management through strong leadership and dialogue across levels;
- supporting Indigenous people's aspirations and contributions to the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area through strengthening of Rainforest Aboriginal peoples' representative bodies, bolstering their capacity to participate in management and the development of co-management arrangements;
- and promoting understanding of the links between environmental services and values and human and community well-being with clear communication about such links to the wider community.

World Heritage Area property managers would benefit from more guidance with respect the obligations of the Convention goal of properties providing a 'function in the life of the community'. From this analysis of the Area, some aspects requiring particular consideration are:

- the need to establish a consistent analytical framework such as presented in this paper;
- the need for on-going long-term monitoring with respect to how the 'function in the life of the community' manifests itself in each property;
- the greater appreciation and understanding of the broader social, economic and cultural context as part of such a 'function' and therefore its crucial role in sustaining the Outstanding Universal Value of any property in the long-term.
- the need to address the issue of 'function in the life of the community' in the assessment, nomination and management of a World Heritage Area, which in turn will recognise the opportunity that exists within the World Heritage Convention itself to integrate biodiversity and cultural considerations within the broader social, economic and cultural context of each property.

## Links

This paper is mostly a summary of the ‘State of the Wet Tropics Report 2011-2012’. Please refer to the acknowledgement in the full report for all the support and contribution provided in its preparation: [www.wettropics.gov.au/site/user.../wtma\\_annrep\\_2011-2012\\_a4qld.pdf](http://www.wettropics.gov.au/site/user.../wtma_annrep_2011-2012_a4qld.pdf)

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## Biography

Dr. Lea M. Scherl is an environmental and social psychologist who has been addressing the nexus of conservation, natural resource management and social development for over 20 years. She has worked extensively with government, NGOs and indigenous and local community organizations both in Australia and in many countries overseas in the Asia, Africa, Latin America and Pacific regions. She has contributed for many years to IUCN technical commissions including as a member of global steering committees. She is an Adjunct Associate Professor at the School of Earth and Environmental Sciences at James Cook University and a member of the Wet Tropics Management Authority Scientific Advisory Committee.