

25 October 2013, 2.27pm AEST

The battle for Cape York: whose vision will win out?

AUTHOR



Allan Dale

Leader of Tropical Regional Development, The Cairns Institute at James Cook University

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Allan Dale works for The Cairns Institute in James Cook University. He receives funding from the Northern Futures Collaborative Research Network. He is also the Chair of Regional Development Australia Far North Queensland and Torres Strait (RDA FNQ&TS).

More Jobs

Where experts find jobs



Remote beauty: Twin Falls in Cape York. [www.shutterstock.com/John Carnemolla](http://www.shutterstock.com/John_Carnemolla)

From its stunning wetlands in the west, across a dry central spine, to the coastal heathlands and rainforests in the east, Cape York Peninsula is deservedly world-famous for its rugged beauty.

For many Australians, memories or dreams of making a “once in a lifetime” trip north to the tip of Cape York evoke deep passions. These passionate responses can range from those seeking greater protection of this biologically-rich region, to those who see only the potential for unlimited development.

Unfortunately, too often those deeply divided approaches have meant that the Peninsula’s 15,000 people have been overlooked in outsiders’ visions for the region.

With the Queensland Government set to release its new draft Cape York Regional Plan within the next few weeks, now is a good time to rethink the foundations needed to deliver real progress for the people of the Peninsula, as well as to the benefit of the nation.

Too many grand plans, not enough action

The Cape is unquestionably an Indigenous domain, with sub-regions such as the Aurukun local government area covering some 13 Wik-related language groups and 26 clan groupings.

Dotted around the Peninsula’s massive coastline are some 12 indigenous communities, plagued by the poverty faced by many post-colonial societies.

The battle for Cape York: whose vision will win out?

Parts of the wider Peninsula landscape are heavily industrialised, such as the Weipa mining precinct. Elsewhere, extensive pastoral leases and conservation areas cover significant territory.

In the late 1980s, the Queensland Government's grand vision for the region included major tourism, agricultural and mining developments and even an international spaceport.

The 'open for development' approach drew speculators from across the globe and the Cape saw a decade of crazy ideas, unfathomable land price hikes and declining returns on capital in the pastoral industry.

By the early 1990s, the federal Labor government and a new state Labor government led by Wayne Goss were heading in the opposite direction over proposals for major wilderness declarations. This created huge levels of uncertainty about how regional development could occur into the future.

But in the mid 1990s, the Cape York Land Use Planning process slowly began to build real local consensus about the future. That led to the **Cape York Heads of Agreement**, a sound agreement between pastoralists, traditional owners and conservationists about progressive and balanced land use and tenure reform.

A decade on and by the mid 2000s there was a hardening of the line taken by some of the nation's conservation organisations. That saw the return of government-led central control of the region, with the then state government pushing through legislation for a series of divisive Wild Rivers declarations.

Amid this three decade tug-of-war between external governments, developers, environmentalists and others, the principles of strong regional ownership and the need to deliver social, economic and environmental outcomes have often been lost.

The result? Indigenous communities left to live with entrenched poverty; the weakening of a once iconic pastoral industry; and an area of outstanding conservation value largely beset by the ravages of poaching, pigs, weeds and wildfire.

While local efforts to tackle those problems are underway, they remain under-resourced.

The next steps for Cape York

In mid-September this year, Queensland's Deputy Premier Jeff Seeney met with Cape York mayors, industry and community leaders to discuss the new draft regional plan. Public consultation on it will start soon, with the draft plan due for release by **early November**.

At last month's meeting, Mr Seeney said **there's no question Cape York will be opened up for development**, with plans for greatly increased agriculture, mining and tourism. But he also added that local communities and **areas of high-value conservation** would be protected, suggesting a hope for a more balanced outcome for the future.

This new plan presents opportunities for a new start. But if it is to succeed where others have failed in the past, it needs solid foundations.

First and foremost among those foundations is strong regional ownership of the process, built on having the right local players around the table. There are positive signs on this front.

The battle for Cape York: whose vision will win out?

There also needs to be a genuine consensus, built between not only the federal and state governments but also with communities within the region. That kind of consensus is the only way that the region can move beyond the historical tug-of-war of competing external agendas.

Striking a balance on land use and tenure reform is essential. That means ensuring the protection of people's rights and those critically important heritage, cultural and tourism values for the future. But it also means recognising that there is significant scope for well-managed, strategic mining and agricultural development with the highest environmental standards, delivering real economic opportunities for Cape York's communities.

With greater land use and tenure certainty, investment capital for business and infrastructure can then be better organised. Both state and federal governments working with developers and regional communities can then get world-class environment standards in place for development.

Among the big challenges ahead will be the process of securing enough water and energy to feed increased development, while still looking after the environment.

Not just another southern power grab

Most important of all, the new plan needs to be about building long-term partnerships for genuine and ongoing regional development – and not just become another southern bid for short-term control over land use.

People in the Peninsula are understandably wary about being brought around the table by external powers to discuss hastily-developed plans, having often in the past been left with planning documents that are never implemented or, worse, seeing implementation occur without any regional agreement. By my count, this has happened to the Cape York community at least seven times in the past 20 years.

It's not enough to bring people together to agree on a plan, no matter how good it may be. What will matter most is keeping people around the table, to monitor progress and to check that governments, investors and community groups alike deliver on the plan promises.

The people of Cape York Peninsula have heard enough of other people's grand plans for their future.

The new regional planning process shows some promise, but after more than a generation of lost opportunities, the key thing for all governments to remember is that it's time to get moving, and to turn plans for this unique part of Australia into action.

Sign in to Favourite 15 Comments

TAGS

Indigenous, Northern Australia, Queensland, Regional development