

THE CONVERSATION

13 August 2013, 10.57am AEST

We need a smarter debate on developing northern Australia

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Local people want sensible development that is sensitive to the things that make the north unique and valuable. Tom Rayner

Northern futures, northern voices: *It seems everyone has ideas about how Australia's north could be better, but most of those ideas come from the south. In this six-part weekly series, developed by the Northern Research Futures Collaborative Research Network and The Conversation, northern researchers lay out their own plans for a feasible, sustainable future.*

The Coalition's 2030 Vision for Developing Northern Australia invokes romantic notions of Australia's pioneering past, describing the north as no longer the "last frontier" but the "next frontier".

Calls for a northern food bowl to double Australia's food production appear to resonate with both major parties. And both seem sympathetic to new irrigation schemes fed from dams and groundwater pumping.

Labor is already investing in a A\$10M North Queensland Irrigated Agriculture Strategy in the Flinders and Gilbert River catchments of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The Queensland Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry wants to support investment and overcome technical barriers to production.

AACo (Australia's largest agriculture company) has a licence in the Flinders River but claims

that it won't be planting on its properties until further water is released. Cotton Australia sees room for industry expansion on the Flinders, assuming improved transport infrastructure and eventually a cotton gin. Integrated Food Energy Development has options over land to grow 50,000 hectares of sugar cane in the existing Gilbert River Farming District.

The Queensland Government announced in July 2012 a release of 80,000 and 15,000 megalitres of water reserved for new irrigation developments in the Flinders and Gilbert Catchments respectively. In May 2013 the Minister for Natural Resources and Mines announced the successful tenderers, and indicated that no further water releases will be undertaken until a CSIRO assessment is completed this December.

Irrigation promises a lot, but is yet to deliver in the north

These developments could be seen as a resurfacing of the “northern myth” — a term coined by agricultural economist Bruce Davidson in his seminal (and much ignored) 1965 book “The Northern Myth: a study of the physical and economic limits to agricultural and pastoral development in tropical Australia.”



Tom Rayner

Davidson was writing about the Ord Irrigation Scheme, the biggest irrigation project in northern Australia. His scepticism was well founded.

Fifty years on, after more than a billion taxpayer dollars and enormous volumes of subsidised water, more than 60 crops have been tried, but large-scale profitable sustainable irrigation industries have failed to persist in the Ord. Sandalwood may in time prove to be a winner, but you can't eat it. Neither WA nor the Commonwealth appears to want a rigorous, independent benefit-cost analysis of the scheme.

The Northern Australia Land and Water Task Force delivered its final report in 2009. It was the latest of many studies since 1912 to document the formidable climatic, physical and economic constraints in northern Australia to conventional irrigated agriculture, concerns echoed more recently in *The Conversation* here and here.

The CSIRO Northern Australian Irrigation Futures project concluded that a patchwork mosaic of smaller-scale irrigation based on groundwater, in areas with better soils and transport options, possibly integrated with the pastoral industry for fattening cattle and other livestock, would be a brighter prospect than large dams.

Australia has been running down its irrigation research effort, and will need a substantial re-investment in irrigation science, tailored to tropical conditions, if we are to avoid more expensive mistakes at the expense of taxpayers and the environment.

The environmental, social and cultural impacts of a network of dams and irrigation schemes across one of the world's largest regions of free-flowing rivers would be significant. Managing

these impacts would be difficult in a region where Indigenous interests are deep and enduring. Recent research by JCU and CDU colleagues suggests that existing models of irrigated agriculture are likely to deliver net disbenefits for Indigenous communities.

Studies in the Mitchell River catchment revealed “a profound and asymmetric disconnect” between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous economies - meaning that increasing the incomes of Indigenous people raises the incomes of non-Indigenous people, but not vice-versa. Hopes for “trickle down” benefits from agricultural development to Indigenous communities are likely to be misplaced.

Northern development is about much more than dams

However the Coalition’s 2030 Vision for Developing Northern Australia cannot be dismissed as just a yearning for big irrigation schemes. Looking past the media grabs and the political talking points, there are other worthy elements to this proposal.

Firstly, the idea of a White Paper on northern development should be welcomed, especially if the process provides genuine opportunities for dialogue and input from the people of the north, as suggested previously in this series by Allan Dale.

It’s also sensible to explore opportunities in defence, tourism, infrastructure, energy, education and services, and to invest in a sustained way in the relationships with our neighbours that will be critical if Australia is to prosper in the Asian Century.

Obviously as researchers based in the north, we think the Coalition’s plan for a Cooperative Research Centre has merit in principle. But flagging such an initiative at this stage appears to pre-empt the normally rigorous and highly competitive CRC selection process.



Tom Rayner

Such a CRC would need to focus on building science and planning capacity in the north — especially the collaborations and capabilities necessary to look in an integrated way at these big development questions.

For example, the natural and cultural values of the north are central to its enduring attraction for tourists, but those values would potentially be threatened by ill-conceived or poorly implemented development. Yes, we need much better infrastructure, but we also need to ensure that we retain significant areas with traditional “outback” qualities.

Measures that change river flows (such as dams or bores) will affect freshwater and marine fishing, both recreational and commercial. Movements of skilled labour to particular industry sectors can undermine other sectors, and so on.

There seems to be a nagging fear in southern Australia that if we don’t do more with the north, someone else will. Here in the Top End, we see ourselves as southerners in Asia — looking

north to opportunity — as well as northerners in Australia, looking south for examples of what not to do in over-allocating water resources and expanding irrigation on unsuitable lands.

We should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Northern Australia is a very special part of the world, with amazing heritage and values. Yes, there is enormous scope for development, but irrigated agriculture is likely to be at best a modest contributor. Bruce Davidson has yet to be rebutted convincingly.

If development is grounded in careful and respectful consultation and engagement with the people of the north, informed by good science done in the north, focused on natural competitive advantage, and subject to rigorous benefit-cost analysis, then we may yet transcend the northern myth.

Part one: Northern Australia should have a say in its own future.