

Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' Regional Forum Summary Report



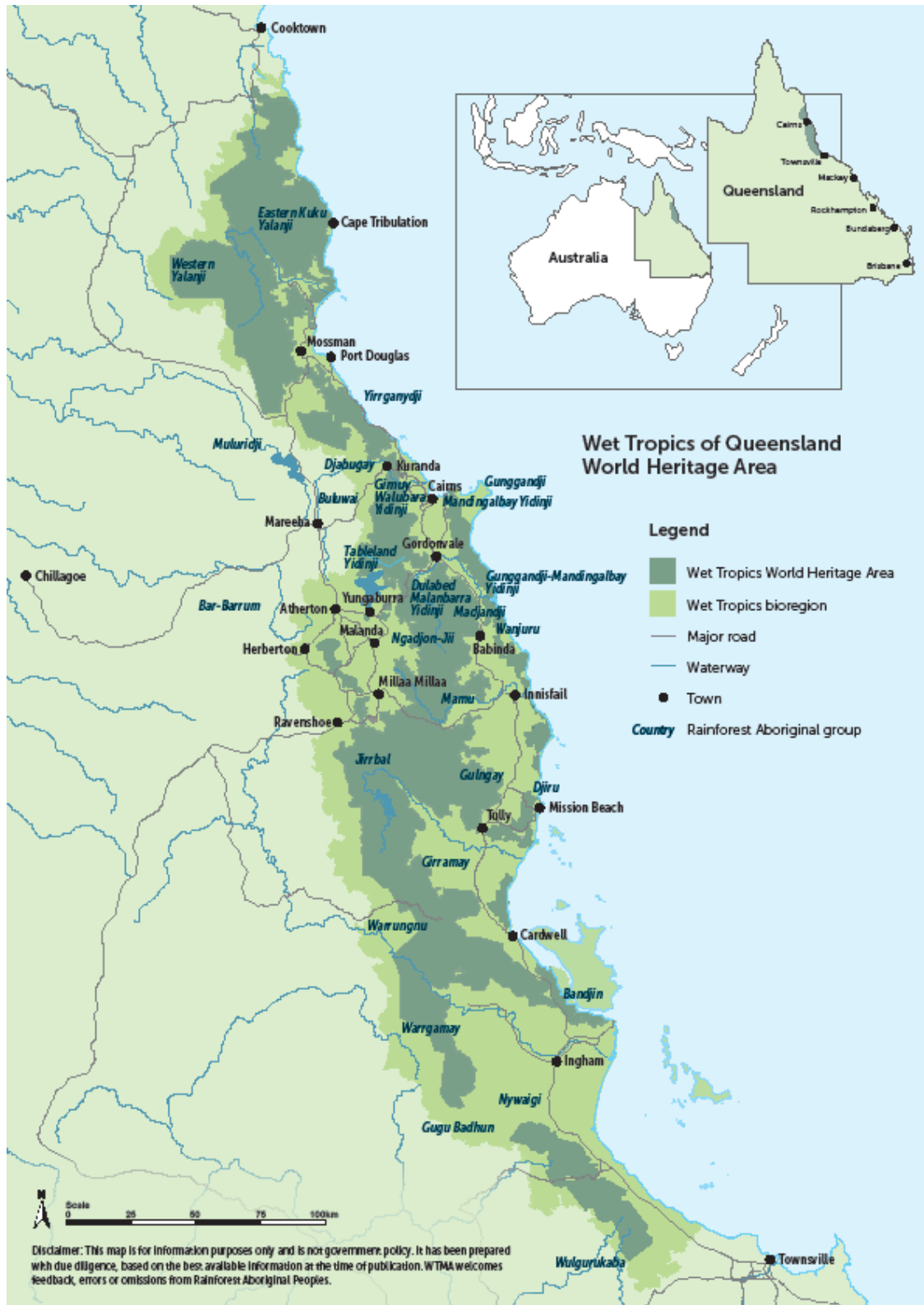
10–12 June 2025
Eastern Kuku Yalanji & Djabugay Nation Country

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Acknowledging Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples of the Wet Tropics

The Wet Tropics Management Authority and Terrain NRM acknowledge the spirit of Country of the Wet Tropics and recognise Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples as carrying custodial responsibility. We pay our respects to their ancestors and traditions.



Executive Summary

The 2025 Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' Regional Forum, held on Eastern Kuku Yalanji & Djabugay Nation Country, brought together 60 Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples and 30 representatives from partner organisations and government agencies. Organised by the Wet Tropics Management Authority (WTMA) and Terrain NRM, with support from Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships (QPWS&P), the Forum provided a platform to reflect on progress, address challenges, and plan for the future of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. This year's Forum marked the 20th anniversary of the Wet Tropics of Queensland Regional Agreement, a landmark commitment to involve Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in managing the Wet Tropics.

The Forum celebrated significant achievements, including increased representation of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in decision-making roles, recognition of Native Title, and the growth of Indigenous Ranger groups. However, challenges remain, such as the need for a well-resourced strategic alliance, improved joint management agreements, consistent application of the Gurra Gurra Framework (2020–2026), and more time for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to respond to permit applications.

Key discussions focused on caring for Country and people, future tourism and economic development, strengthening partnerships, empowering future leaders, and managing invasive species. Participants explored opportunities to integrate traditional knowledge into land management, expand eco-cultural tourism, and build capacity through initiatives like the Queensland Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger Program and WTMA's digital media training. The Forum also highlighted successful biosecurity efforts, including the eradication of yellow crazy ants, and ongoing restoration projects to build climate resilience.

The Forum emphasised the importance of partnerships, cultural heritage preservation, and empowering Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in decision-making processes. Constructive feedback from participants included suggestions to host future forums in diverse locations to benefit local communities, ensure in-person presentations for better engagement, and revise the agenda development process to better reflect Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' priorities.

Future forums will play a critical role in continuing the dialogue, strengthening partnerships, and driving meaningful action to address shared challenges. They provide an essential platform for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to advocate for their aspirations, share knowledge, and collaborate with government and partner organisations. By ensuring forums remain inclusive, accessible, and responsive to the needs of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, they will help shape the future of the Wet Tropics region and ensure the legacy of cultural and environmental stewardship is carried forward for generations to come.

The 2025 Forum demonstrated the strength of collaboration and the importance of co-design in achieving shared goals for the Wet Tropics region. The outcomes and feedback will

guide the planning of the 2026 Forum, ensuring it remains impactful and continues to build on the progress made.



WTMA Staff and participants registering for the day

Overview

The 2025 Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' Regional Forum (the Forum) was held from 10–12 June on Eastern Kuku Yalanji & Djabugay Nation Country at the Oaks Port Douglas Resort. The Forum brought together 60 Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples from groups across the Wet Tropics and 30 representatives from partner organisations and government agencies. The Forum is organised by the Wet Tropics Management Authority (WTMA) and Terrain NRM with support from Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships (QPWS&P).



Sonya Takau, Master of Ceremonies and Jirrbal Traditional Owner. Phil Rist, Nywaigi Traditional Owner

Purpose and significance

The Forum provided a platform for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to share their voices, reflect on progress, and plan for the future. It marked the 20th anniversary of the [Wet Tropics of Queensland Regional Agreement](#) (Regional Agreement), a landmark commitment to involve Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in the management of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area.

Key quotes from the Forum highlighted its purpose:

“The Forum is an opportunity to advocate for your aspirations within the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area.”

“We are standing on the shoulders of people who fought the fights and left their legacy.”

Achievements and challenges

Over the past 20 years, significant progress has been made under the Regional Agreement, including:

- Increased representation of Rainforest Aboriginal People in decision-making and advisory roles.
- Increased recognition of Native Title over Country.
- Growth in Indigenous Ranger groups across the region.

However, challenges remain, such as:

- Establishing a well-resourced strategic alliance to represent Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples at a bioregional scale.
- Negotiating effective joint management agreements over Country.
- Ensuring consistent application of the Gurra Gurra Framework (2020–2026).
- Allowing Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples more time to respond to permit applications.

Organisation of the Forum and preparation of this report

WTMA and Terrain NRM coordinated the Forum. This included managing participation, gathering input on topics and speakers, developing the agenda, and arranging logistics such as the venue, accommodation, catering, and travel for attendees. This important work was made possible with the support of the Australian and Queensland governments.

Sonya Takau, a proud Jirrbal Rainforest Aboriginal woman was engaged by WTMA to facilitate the Forum. Cath Moran (Cath Moran Ecological) was contracted to take notes during the first two days of the Forum, and these notes, along with additional contributions from WTMA staff, form the basis of this report. All images in this report are Wet Tropics Images unless otherwise specified.

To respect privacy, quotes from participants are included to highlight key points but are not attributed to individuals, as consent for attribution was not obtained.

Discussions and presentations from closed sessions are not included in this report. Instead, a separate document summarising these sessions has been provided to the Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples Think Tank (RAPTT) for further use and discussion.

Day 1

The Forum began with Chrissy Grant, Chair of the WTMA Board acknowledging the Traditional Owners and honouring the work of Elders who have cared for Country, both within and beyond the boundaries of the Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics World Heritage Areas.

Gavin Singleton, Indigenous Advisory Committee member and Yirrganydji Traditional Owner also acknowledged the Traditional Owners and the signatories of the Regional Agreement, highlighting the Forum as a valuable opportunity for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to reconnect and address shared challenges.

To foster a sense of community, Sonya Takau, the Forum facilitator, invited all Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to stand, introduce themselves, and share the Country they identify with. This exercise showcased the diversity of attendees, representing many clans and tribes, including:

- Djabugay, Djiru, Eastern Kuku Yalanji, Girramay, Gugu Badhun, Gunggandji, Jirrbal, Mamu, Mandingalbay Yidinji, Ngadjon Jii, Nywaigi, Warrgamay, Western Yalanji, Yirrganydji, and Yidinji.

This opening session set a respectful and inclusive tone, celebrating the rich cultural heritage and unity of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.



Chrissy Grant, Chair of the WTMA Board & Gavin Singleton, Indigenous Advisory Committee Member and Yirrganydji Traditional Custodian

Address from the Chairs



Barry Hunter, Chair of Terrain NRM Board

Barry Hunter, Chair of Terrain NRM Board,

highlighted the critical role of the 20-year-old Regional Agreement, particularly in addressing the lack of recognition of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in the original listing of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area 36 years ago.

Key progress over the past two decades and more recent actions including:

- Increased representation of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in regional organisations, including on the Boards of WTMA and Terrain NRM.
- A growing number of Indigenous Rangers, creating opportunities for fee-for-service arrangements for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.
- Terrain NRM's commitment to building capacity for resource management through partnerships with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.
- The addition of two new Indigenous staff members at Terrain NRM, Mark Wargent and Nakita Kirby, who are leading the Indigenous partnerships strategy and strengthening engagement between Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples and Terrain NRM's teams and projects.
- The enduring relevance of the report *Which way: Our cultural survival*, a key milestone for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.

Despite these achievements, Barry acknowledged significant challenges, such as the need to renew the Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) over Djabugay Country, which has expired despite its historical importance as the site of Queensland's first native title determination.



Chrissy Grant, Chair of the WTMA Board

Chrissy Grant, Chair of the Wet Tropics Management

Authority Board, acknowledged the deep cultural and spiritual significance of the Wet Tropics to Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples and recognised her fellow Rainforest Aboriginal Board Directors, Ailsa Lively and Willie Enoch-Tranby.

Chrissy celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Regional Agreement, emphasising its enduring relevance. She highlighted how the Forum's theme aligned with the 2025 NAIDOC theme: The Next Generation – Strength, Vision and Legacy, underscoring the importance of honouring the past while taking action to prepare for the future.

Chrissy shared recent examples of partnerships between WTMA and Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, including:

- The Rainforest People Country and Culture interactive map, which highlights the connections of nine Rainforest Aboriginal groups to Country and promotes respectful engagement. Chrissy also acknowledged the Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples who passed during the project and thanked their families for allowing their contributions to remain on the map.
- Collaboration with Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships (QPWS&P) to design new signage showcasing the cultural significance of the Wet Tropics.
- Chrissy also provided updates on related initiatives:
 - Continued work with the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to include cultural values on the World Heritage register for the Wet Tropics without requiring a full re-nomination process.
 - The addition of two new Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples members to WTMA's Community Consultative Committee (CCC), which acts as a bridge between the community and WTMA.
 - WTMA's Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) seeking a female Rainforest Aboriginal person to join the existing male Rainforest Aboriginal member.
 - The Indigenous Advisory Committee (IAC) seeking an additional female Rainforest Aboriginal member to collaborate with existing members to ensure Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples voices are heard in the development and delivery of WTMA and Terrain NRM programs.

Chrissy concluded by encouraging participants to carry forward the lessons learned and remain inspired to protect the place they call home.

Partner updates



Stewart Christie, CEO Terrain NRM

Stewart Christie, CEO of Terrain NRM, acknowledged the significant leadership of Barry Hunter, the first Indigenous Chair of any of the 54 NRM regional groups across Australia, and Aunty Chrissy Grant, the first Indigenous Chair of a World Heritage Authority in Australia. He highlighted their national and international influence and the opportunities they have to advocate for the interests of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.

Stewart outlined Terrain NRM's efforts to rebuild its capacity for effective and coordinated engagement with Rainforest Aboriginal organisations. He recognised the contributions of Michael Morta in his previous role at Terrain NRM and welcomed Mark Wargent and Nakita Kirby, who are now managing the Indigenous Partnerships Strategy and supporting engagement between Terrain NRM and Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples. He also announced that Terrain NRM would soon welcome another Rainforest Aboriginal person to their team, as part of their commitment to increasing employment opportunities for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.

Stewart highlighted that 80% of Terrain NRM's projects involve Indigenous engagement, with 20% being Indigenous led. Key projects include:

- Forest Resilience Projects: Focused on species such as spectacled flying-foxes, mountaintop nursery frogs on Mt Lewis, and northern bettongs.
- Landscape Repair Project: A five-year initiative focused on streambank repair along the Johnstone River in Innisfail.
- Green Connections: Large-scale restoration projects across the region, in collaboration with the Wet Tropics Restoration Alliance.
- Cassowary Credits Scheme: A program offering specific benefits and opportunities for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.



James Newman, Executive Director QPWS&P

James Newman, Executive Director Northern Parks and Forests, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships (QPWS&P), provided an update on the work being done across the Northern Region, which spans from Gladstone to Cape York, the Northern Territory border, and the Simpson Desert.

James reflected on the Regional Agreement and how it has influenced QPWS&P's approach to working with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples. He highlighted the importance of personal relationships and partnerships in realising Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples aspirations on Country. He acknowledged the contributions of Elders, past and present, who have made this progress possible.

Key updates included:

- Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs): Several MOUs are being revised or discussed with groups such as Mandingalbay Yidinji, Tablelands Yidinji, Choorechillum, and Mamu. James also noted that the Barron Gorge National Park Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) had expired.
- Blended Team Model: QPWS&P is developing a collaborative model with Jabalbina to share staff and procedures while maintaining independence.
- Natural Disaster Management: Examples of collaborative work with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples include:
 - Hosting a women's fire management workshop.
 - Reintroducing cultural fire pathways, including fire implementation and planned burns.
 - Providing planned burning training for Choorechillum Rangers to enable them to work on Country as accredited fire practitioners.
 - Undertaking capital works and asset management projects, such as work at Josephine Falls with Choorechillum and at Goldsborough Valley with Dulabed Malanbarra Yidinji.

- Recognition: QPWS&P received a United Nations award for co-designing initiatives with Traditional Owners.



Scott Buchanan, Executive Director WTMA

Scott Buchanan, Executive Director, Wet Tropics Management Authority, acknowledged that the last Forum was held in 2023. He explained that significant sorry business in 2024 meant it was not the right time to hold a gathering, making 2024 the first year since 2017 without a Forum.

Scott emphasised the importance of the Forum as a powerful platform for collaboration, enabling partners to come together, demonstrate their commitment to Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, and achieve meaningful outcomes.

Scott provided updates on WTMA's recent work, including:

- Reef Assist program: A partnership with Choorechillum PBC to deliver training to Noongunburra Ngadjon-Jii Rangers.
- Wet Tropics Restoration Alliance: Bringing together multiple organisations to enhance caring for Country and restoration efforts, particularly to build resilience against climate change.
- Eastern Kuku Yalanji Return to Country Program: Assisting native title holders to return to freehold land.
- Yellow Crazy Ant eradication: Successfully eradicating yellow crazy ants from 728.2 hectares, more than double the area of any other eradication effort globally. However, a new infestation has been identified in Dulabed Malanbarra Country.

- New Board appointments: Welcoming Natassia Wheeler and Michael Nelson to the WTMA Board.
- Wet Tropics World Heritage Guides: Set to launch later in 2025, this program will train tour guides to share the story of the Wet Tropics and highlight the cultural significance of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in the region. Scott encouraged Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples interested in tourism to participate in the training.

Session 1: Caring for Country (research)

Andrew Dennis, Terrain NRM, described Terrain's efforts to integrate traditional knowledge into the management of the Wet Tropics.

Andrew highlighted current partnerships with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples under the Australian Government's Species Resilience and Saving Native Species programs, including:

- Monitoring and surveillance of spectacled flying-foxes (Endangered): Collaborating with 13 Rainforest Aboriginal groups and James Cook University (JCU) to conduct camp counts and develop data-sharing agreements. Training for Indigenous Rangers includes species identification, field methods, mapping, and data management.
- Reducing flying-fox deaths caused by paralysis ticks: A four-year project with multiple partners, including Tableland Yidinji, Ngadjon, Mamu, and Jirrbal, to eradicate wild tobacco plants.
- Protecting the mountaintop nursery frog: Working with Western Yalanji and JCU to fence areas and reduce damage caused by pigs.
- Fire management for northern bettong habitat: Collaborating with Buluwai, Yidinji, and Western Yalanji to manage fire, pigs, cats and invasive plants.

Emmeline Norris, James Cook University, a PhD candidate at JCU, presented her research on improving the accuracy of flying-fox population counts using thermal imaging technology. She explained how drones equipped with thermal imaging tools have doubled the accuracy of population estimates compared to traditional methods.

Emmeline shared plans to develop a learning algorithm to automate the detection and counting of flying-foxes, which will save time and improve efficiency.

Ed Morgan and Tek Raj Bhatt (Griffith University) and Tina Williams (Jagun Alliance), are currently running a project funded by the National Environmental Science Program (NESP) to build capacity for climate adaptation and resilient landscapes. The project aims to deliver decision-support tools and identify climate risk hotspots in the Wet Tropics.

Tina Williams, a Bundjalung descendent from the Jagun Alliance, shared her positive experience working with the project and encouraged Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to engage with the researchers.

Terry Carmichael, WTMA, discussed the vulnerability of highland rainforests (above 800m) in the Wet Tropics due to climate change. He highlighted the Australian Government's Priority Places project, which aims to reduce extinction risks and improve the health of these ecological communities.

Terry emphasised the importance of partnering with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples for on-ground activities to protect these threatened ecosystems.

Questions and discussion: Caring for Country (research)

All speakers formed a panel, where they addressed questions and comments from the audience.

Questions and comments from the floor	Responses
Regarding the process towards data sovereignty, after 30 years of native title, there is advancement towards economic independence for PBCs and TO groups. How are we creating agreements so that data and information and capacity can be transferred to the TO groups to support their aspirations and independence?	<p>Andrew Dennis (Terrain) There is usually a requirement for scientific data to be publicly available. Under Terrain's data sharing agreements, ownership of data is usually joint with the TOs involved in collecting the data. However, where cultural information is involved, Terrain's practice is to leave cultural data with the custodians.</p> <p>Ed Morgan (Griffith University) NESP provided researchers with training on Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property. In the project, they worked with Jagun to write an Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property agreement. Depending on what is in the agreement, some data can be shared with some people, but not necessarily publicly. The researchers also need to satisfy the government. TO knowledge is acknowledged as belonging to them. In the research space, co-authorship is a form of recognising ownership of knowledge.</p> <p>Tina Williams (Jagun Alliance) acknowledged the importance of ensuring that any information from TO groups is their property; it's their story. In Jagun's work, we need to make sure we're protecting it and go back to the owners to check whether they give permission to share stories. Jagun has an agreement with Griffith University about sharing their information in the project.</p>

Regarding Application for Research Engagement (ARE) and Permit to Take/interfere with Cultural or Natural Resources (PTUKI). Scientific and educational permits used to be considered inconsequential and TOs only had the opportunity to comment. QPWS&P, what agreement do you have in place now to allow TOs to be part of the decision process? Suggest to QPWS&P that TOs need more time with permitting. For example, with future act notices, only have 28 days and the time starts ticking when TOs receive notice. Suggested that the clock should start ticking after everything is signed off.	Andrew Dennis (Terrain) In Terrain, they start with ethics committee (e.g. JCU), then go through Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples consultation form (ARE), then PTUKI. When work with mob, also have data sharing agreement with the TO group. Aspire to co-develop projects from the start with Rainforest Aboriginal People, rather than bring them in later. Welcome Rainforest Aboriginal People bringing ideas in so can start working with RAP from the get-go. Asked Rainforest Aboriginal People to let Terrain know if they are missing something.
Regarding the Griffith University landscape resilience project. Where do you see the opportunities in the Wet Tropics and what is realistic in 1.5 years?	Ed Morgan (Griffith University) The work in NSW has helped to refine the methods and, so the team has a head start for working in the Wet Tropics. They expect that engagement will take most of the time; know that it's important not to rush it.

Day 2

Session 1: Caring for Country and people

The Queensland Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger Program has grown significantly since its inception, as outlined by **Dave Wildermuth, Manager at the Queensland Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation**. Starting with 20 rangers in Far North Queensland in 2005, the program expanded to 100 rangers across 24 communities by 2018, and by 2025, it includes 200 rangers in 46 communities.

In 2024, the Queensland Government committed to funding an additional 150 rangers, including 30 new positions, under the More Rangers, Better Neighbours election commitment. The program focuses on caring for Country and culture, increasing First Nations involvement in land and sea management, and creating economic opportunities. Rangers protect cultural sites and knowledge by documenting and safeguarding sites, repatriating artefacts, and preserving cultural knowledge through engagement with Elders and youth. The program also supports cultural tourism and lead efforts to monitor and manage threatened species in collaboration with Traditional Owners and scientists.

Queensland Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger program 2023–2024 Achievement Summary

The Queensland Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger Program supports the protection of Queensland's biodiversity and cultural heritage, drawing on First Nations knowledge in land and sea management.



The program emphasises training and leadership development, with most rangers completing a Certificate II or III in Conservation and Ecosystem Management, and over 100 rangers participating in the Indigenous Leadership Program. Junior Ranger programs engage youth through learning activities and On Country camps, while the Queensland Indigenous Women's Ranger Network, established in 2018, connects over 240 female rangers. The Looking After Country Grants Program provides up to \$75,000 for cultural and environmental projects, helping smaller groups build capacity.

Nicholas Roberts, Department of Transport and Main Roads (TMR), Cultural Heritage Officer, discussed TMR's focus on state-controlled roads and their Duty of Care provisions for cultural and historical heritage.

Nicholas highlighted TMR's efforts to improve engagement with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, including:

- Obtaining Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) for projects.
- Developing agreements and protocols that align with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' Country-based plans.
- Indigenous programs such as the drivers licensing program, local fares scheme, and transport infrastructure development initiatives.

Rowan Shee, Jabalbina, outlined Jabalbina's work on large-scale rainforest restoration on Julaywarra Bubu. He described Traditional Owners' aspirations for Country, including returning to live on Country, making a living on Country, and managing Country again.

Rowan highlighted opportunities in the green economy, such as integrated agriculture, renewable energy, and eco-cultural tourism, while acknowledging challenges like local planning restrictions.

Kylie Clubb, Gambir Yidinji Fire Practitioner, shared her experiences with the Australian Women in Fire Exchange (OzWTrex), which provided international training for 48 First Nations women in prescribed fire management. She emphasised the importance of women's involvement in cultural burning and reflected on her journey as a Bama woman stepping into the fire management space.

Questions and discussion: Caring for Country and people

All speakers formed a panel, where they addressed questions and comments from the audience.

Questions and comments from the floor	Responses
Regarding ranger funding will some of the new ranger funding go to existing groups or is it only for new groups?	Dave Wildermuth: the department is still in discussion about this.
It was expressed that there is interest in integrating some of Kylie's work on women's burning into Choorechillum and their new Ranger program, noting that the majority of their Rangers are women.	
It was also highlighted that cultural burning is highly relevant to the protection of cultural sites, particularly those located in road corridors.	

Session 2: Future tourism and economic development

John Fejo (Byna), Goondoi Aboriginal Corporation, Larrakia man and Ranger Coordinator, discussed the Indigenous Australian Datathon, which empowers Indigenous people to solve real-world challenges by blending culture with innovation. He highlighted the use of technology in managing Country, such as drones for monitoring sacred sites and tracking animals.

Jacob Cassady, Mungalla Station, Nywaigi Traditional Owner, shared insights from 20 years of tourism at Mungalla Station, a 2,500-acre property returned to Nywaigi people in 2000. Jacob highlighted Mungalla's success in eco-tourism, education, and blue carbon projects, while acknowledging challenges such as infrastructure limitations and funding gaps.

Dewayne Mundraby, Mandingalbay Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation, Economic Development Manager, presented their eco-cultural tourism venture, which is based on a circular economy model. He shared lessons learned, including the importance of cultural integrity, community support, and navigating tenure and planning systems.

Carly Jia, Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation (DETSI), Program Manager for Indigenous Tourism at DETSI, introduced the Our Country Advisory Service (OCAS), which supports Indigenous tourism operators through a business growth framework. She highlighted opportunities for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in eco-tourism, particularly considering the 2032 Olympic Games and the Destination 2045 strategy.



Dewayne Mundraby, Mandingalbay Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation

Questions and discussion: Future tourism and economic development

All speakers formed a panel, where they addressed questions and comments from the audience.

Questions and comments from the floor	Responses
Regarding Indigenous tourism where do you see the future for Indigenous tourism industry?	<p>Jacob Cassidy: Educational tourism e.g. universities. Talking about 40,000 students coming to North Queensland each year on Australian tourism exchange. 2. Culturally immersive experiences. 3. Olympic Games</p> <p>Dewayne Mundraby: tourism is a way to address oppression, create future pathways for next generations.</p> <p>Carly Jia: observed that often just the feasibility stage is resourced for an Indigenous project. Feasibility is only stage 1 of 6 stages; can't assume organisations have the resources to fund the rest of the stages.</p>
Many young kids graduate from our local school with a good education, but they lack opportunities to move forward. Our community often feels left out. Despite signing the Regional Agreement years ago, we have not seen significant benefits in our area. There is a strong desire within the community to become self-sufficient.	



Allison Halliday, Malanbarra Yidinji Traditional Owner

Session 3: Strengthening partnerships

Mark Lamont and Joelene Gertz from the **Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation (DETSI)** provided an overview of the Agreement Making Framework, which aims to strengthen partnerships with First Nations peoples by embedding their knowledge and leadership into departmental systems, policies, and programs. Guided by the DETSI Strategic Plan 2024–2028, Protected Areas Strategy 2020–2030, and Gurra Gurra Framework 2020–2026, the framework emphasises co-design, cultural responsiveness, and recognising First Nations peoples as custodians of Country.

The framework seeks to:

- Recognise First Nations Peoples' connection to Country and custodial responsibilities.
- Provide a structured, culturally responsive approach to guide relationships.
- Inform consistent, equitable, and mutually beneficial agreements.
- Improve departmental culture by simplifying processes and offering guidance.

It also supports staff by acknowledging First Nations peoples as custodians, addressing legislative obligations, identifying appropriate agreement types, and streamlining agreements through a triage process.

Key achievements include the Agreement Making Framework Report, Implementation Plan, and other foundational documents. Next steps involve implementing the framework through research, engagement, testing, and development, ensuring it is practical, beneficial, and celebrated by all stakeholders.

Victoria Clark and Jedda Priman from the **Native Title Team within Permissions Management and Ecotourism at QPWS&P** provided an update on the Application for Research Endorsement (ARE) process, introduced in late 2020 as part of the implementation of the Scientific and Educational Permitting Protocol under the Regional Agreement. The process aims to support culturally informed decision-making for non-commercial research activities within QPWS&P-managed areas of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (the Area) by encouraging researchers to engage directly with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.

Since its implementation, the ARE process has been used inconsistently:

- Between late 2020 and July 2023, 46 research permits were granted across the QPWS&P estate within the Area.
- Of these, 31 applications included an ARE form.

However, many researchers have not successfully engaged with Traditional Owners, and several challenges have been identified, including:

- low awareness of the process among Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples,
- limited contact points within Rainforest Aboriginal organisations,

- low researcher engagement,
- and a process that is unclear and difficult to navigate.

Additionally, the current ARE form does not adequately address the concerns of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, limiting its effectiveness in informing culturally appropriate permit decisions. To address these issues, QPWS&P plans to:

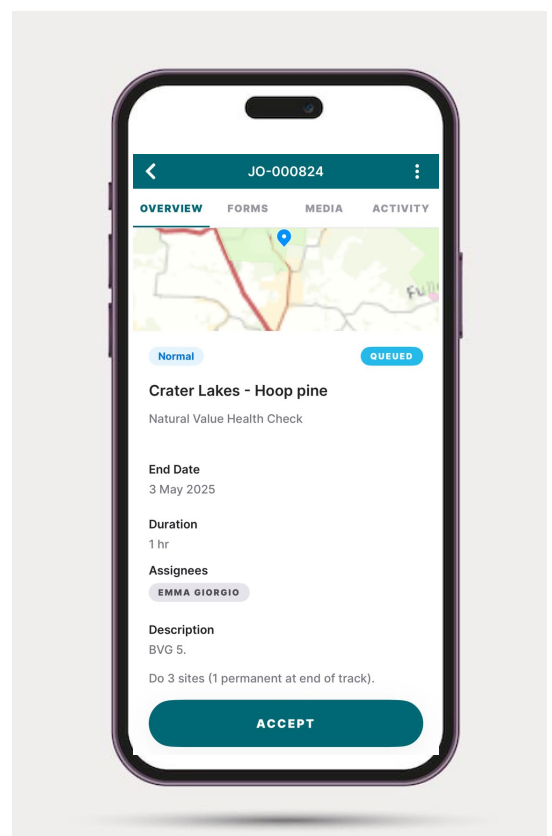
- refresh the process through engagement with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples,
- provide education to improve understanding of research permitting in the Area,
- identify information needs for both Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples and researchers, and
- explore options to better support Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples involvement in research-related decision-making.

Sylvie Garner, Director of Projects, Planning and Information, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships (QPWS&P), introduced the Monitr software, a tool designed to support land and park management. The software can be used offline and remotely on mobile devices to conduct "health checks" by collecting data on the condition of an area. The software generates reports and stores data centrally, with access permissions that can be customised to meet the needs of different stakeholders.

QPWS&P is willing to share their learnings from developing the software, as well as the data collected, with partners. Sylvie acknowledged the importance of data-sharing agreements to ensure that Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples retain ownership of their data and can decide what to share with QPWS&P.

Key capabilities of the Monitr software include:

- Providing access to data on nature, visitor experiences, Indigenous cultural heritage, threatened species, and other values.
- Measuring the effectiveness of gazetted management plans in protecting key park values.
- Allowing users to document emerging issues in the field, which trigger alerts for office-based staff to adapt management strategies.
- Assigning tasks to other organisations through the software.





Discussion panel

Zachimo Kulka, Jabalbinsa Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation, Audrey Reilly and Ian Holloway, WTMA, presented their work supporting Eastern Kuku Yalanji (EKY) in planning their return to Country project. The project enables development in conservation areas where it aligns with Bama law/lore but would typically be restricted under Western law.

The project uses a culturally responsive engagement framework, which includes:

- Right partner: Collaborating with WTMA to ensure alignment with shared goals.
- Right way engagement: Establishing an Elders' Advisory Group to provide cultural guidance and advice.
- Inclusion of EKY values and priorities: Ensuring that the cultural vision of EKY is reflected from the outset.
- Participatory planning: Collaborating across planning, policy, and cultural governance structures.

Ian, discussed the complexities of the project, including challenges such as Tropical Cyclone Jasper, Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) hurdles, cultural consent, legislative requirements, and the high costs of housing. He noted that EKY Country spans a large area, approximately the size of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).

Ian outlined the strategic assessment process used to identify opportunities for safe, well-located housing on Country that is resilient to flooding. He explained that modelling suggests flooding similar to that caused by Tropical Cyclone Jasper could occur approximately once every 10 years. Ian also highlighted the community's vulnerabilities, including housing locations and preparedness issues such as medicine supply chains.

Finally, Ian provided an overview of the landslide susceptibility index developed as part of the project, which aims to identify areas at risk and improve community resilience.

Questions and discussion: Strengthening partnerships

All speakers formed a panel, where they addressed questions and comments from the audience.

Comments from the floor

Regarding the Agreement Making framework *engage with TOs from the beginning, not later on in the process – i.e. when you are testing it.*

Statement regarding PTUKI, ILUAs and frontloading permits, *ARE was a big win from the Regional Agreement because it gave mob more than the right to comment. ARE goes together with PTUKI – why not mention that?*

At the end of the day, all Country is significant. Usually, the land that was given back to us as freehold isn't much use – don't have infrastructure, can't develop etc.

A lot of ILUAs have expired and been superseded by MOUs that aren't legally binding. Had hoped that the EKY ILUAs would set a precedent for the Wet Tropics. But because of buyback approach didn't get that.

About frontloading of permits. In 2006, QPWS established working groups for each of the mobs in the Wet Tropics – no excuse that researchers don't know who the right mob.

QPWS&P have talked about this (Agreement Making framework) for years, but still, we see nothing. We have told you what we want and how to do this, but you keep coming back and asking us the same questions. Why don't you just go ahead and do it?

Statement regarding equity for Gimuy

Will we have a talk fest every year? A lot of the decisions come from people who are a long way off – when you're not near to the problem it's hard to understand the problem. Hearing the same things for 30-40 years. Same old talk. Bama are driven by western control over how we achieve our aspirations for Country. In Gimuy, we have no equity. Our interest is what's best for Gimuy but people around us are greedy – their interest is for themselves. Our children have nowhere to stay.

We want a refresh of a few things:

- *Forestry Act on Country – currently stops Traditional Owners making a living off Country. As Traditional Owners, our only option is to say no to research.*
- *In relation to Monitr app, we are interested in sharing the information from QPWS&P with Traditional Owners right now.*

Session 4: Empowering future leaders

Phoebe Kinley and Aaron Smith, WTMA informed participants about their digital media training available to Rainforest Aboriginal groups. This one-day training session aims to empower groups to use their traditional oral storytelling skills to reach wider audiences through digital platforms. They emphasised that professional filming equipment is not necessary, as effective storytelling can be achieved with basic tools such as smartphones.

Aaron highlighted the media training already delivered to groups including Gunggandji-Mandingalbay Yidinji, Dulabed, Choorechillum, and Jabalbina, which covered:

- Techniques for taking quality photos and shooting great videos using either professional cameras or smartphones.
- Practical tips on the use and storage of tools.
- Conducting photo shoots for the group.
- Building confidence and communication skills through media training.
- Learning how to be an interviewer and a good interviewee by being authentic, prepared, and clear about key messages and branding.

The team shared examples of videos created by Traditional Owners and encouraged interested groups to contact the communications team at media@wtma.qld.gov.au to organise their training.

This initiative supports Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in sharing their stories and cultural heritage with broader audiences, while enhancing their media and communication skills.

Wet Tropics NRM Plan discussions

Barry Hunter and Mark Wargent from **Terrain NRM** provided an update on Terrain’s evolving Indigenous procurement policy, efforts to build capacity among Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, current project plans, and highlighted partnership opportunities with Rainforest Aboriginal groups, such as the Cassowary Credits initiative.

Barry informed the Forum that the Wet Tropics NRM Plan is scheduled for review this year. Mark will be coordinating discussions with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to identify their priorities and determine which aspects of the plan need updating. Barry also reflected on the Bama Plan (2004–2005), which was the first regional framework to articulate Indigenous priorities, and explained how the Wet Tropics Plan for People & Country (2017) integrated these priorities. He suggested that the plan could serve as a foundation for future Country based planning.

To support the review, Barry and Mark asked Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to break into groups and discuss two key questions:

1. What are the important values on your Country? (e.g., special places or things under threat).
2. What steps would you like to take to manage your Country?

Participants recorded their responses on butcher’s paper, and representatives from each group shared their discussions during the report-back session. Below is a summary of the key points raised:

Group 1	Group 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Cultural sites (heritage and protection)2. Activities on Country. Being on Country, taking kids out3. Biodiversity. Protecting significant plants and animals, where Ranger work fits4. People and place – current and future, not only past.5. Unity through words6. Succession and planning – promoting cultural frameworks as strong way to empower pride. Instil pride in saying “I’m Aboriginal”. Keep family connections and partnerships7. Cultural narrative. Decolonising the landscape. Reintroducing names and stories8. Water. Economic, cultural and lifeblood aspects. No Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples are being recognised or deriving benefit other than culturally.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Language, songlines, trading routes and lore = strategic vision2. Invest in knowledge. Lost a lot of knowledge through colonisation3. Invest in Elders as knowledge holders4. Land management (on one side) and governance (on the other). All the different agencies are trying to work out how we’re going to do things on Country – this relates to governance. Have to keep that separate from management on Country

Others are exploiting it for economic potential	
Group 3 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Oldest rainforest in the world 2. Sacred sites 3. Waterways 4. Endemic species 5. Biodiversity 6. Cultural protocols 7. Community engagement 8. Meaningful partnerships 9. Access to benefits e.g. training but departments get recognition for the work we do 10. Cultural heritage protection 11. Infrastructure, for example, Gimuy-Walubarra Yidinji doesn't have an office, PBC is in the old hospital building which is falling down. 12. Capacity building – governance etc 13. More rangers, more security: Gunggandji have 4, Gimuy-Walubarra Yidinji may have no rangers next year. Not enough human resources at all levels e.g. executive officers as well as operational staff 14. Land and sea Country planning 	Group 4 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gimuy people are living in a city 2. Set up a Gimuy cultural centre 3. Language kit for use by descendants of Gimuy-Walubarra Yidinji clan 4. Develop a rate base e.g. funds from marina
Group 5 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Healthy waterways 2. Flora and fauna 3. Healthy soil 4. Human resources to do what we want to do 5. Returning to Country to live 6. Improving access to Country 7. Economic development and long-term self-sustainability 8. Language reclamation – our names back on waterways 9. Cultural heritage 10. Country based planning 	Group 6 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Needs to be adaptable to changes e.g. in climate 2. Fee for service 3. Putting Country back together across different tenures 4. Auditing ourselves – each Wet Tropics corporation/activity / etc to identify needs for governance, planning, tenure, what is your Country – saltwater, freshwater, World Heritage. Assets – equipment and people etc
Group 7 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Water quality from 5 main rivers that start in Jirrbal Country and connect us all 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Access to language for transmission of knowledge 3. Record cultural knowledge. 4. Language revival and place names 5. Dingo, cassowary, possum, brood frog, sugar glider, striped possum. 6. Story places, cultural sites 7. Getting rangers set up and working on Country 8. Revegetation projects 9. Catchment organisations across Country 10. ILUAs not MOUs 11. Walk the Country, walk the grandkids on Country 	
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Day 3

Invasive species

Jules Seabright, WTMA, presented WTMA's work on eradicating yellow crazy ants, achieving the largest eradication globally (728.2 hectares). Jules emphasised the importance of partnerships with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in biosecurity efforts.



Sharon Janssen, Biosecurity Queensland, discussed the efforts to detect and eradicate electric ants, highlighting the importance of regular yard checks and community cooperation to prevent the spread of these invasive pests.

What are we doing about them?

Deliver 'Toolbox Talk' training to local industry's and workers to provide identification and reporting information, and best practise advice to prevent risk of spread.

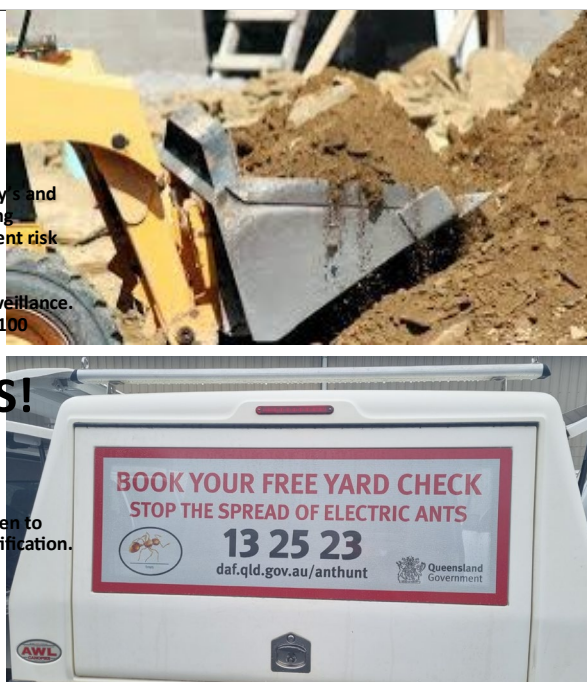
200 sentinel sites have regular scheduled surveillance. Proactive monthly surveillance of more than 100 sentinel sites

FREE YARD CHECKS!

Self checking is not thorough or reliable

Field officers are trained to lure, detect and collect samples, all are taken to Our Diagnostics Laboratory for accurate identification.

Help keep your community electric ant free. Book your free yard check today



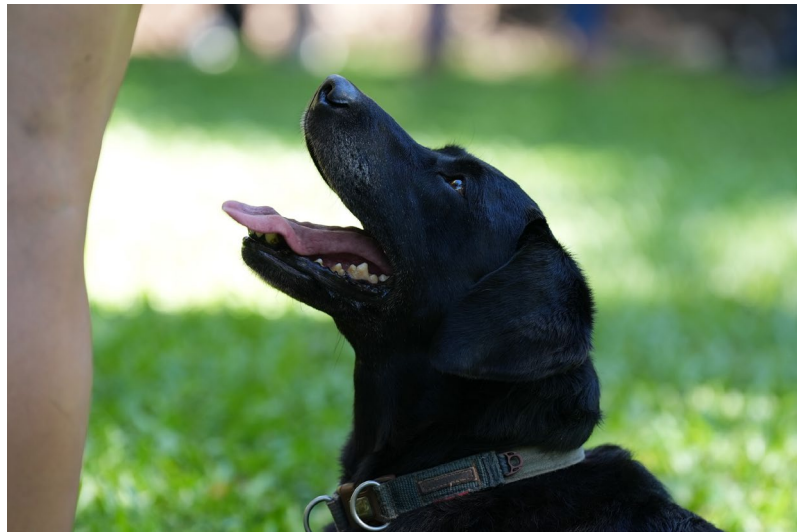
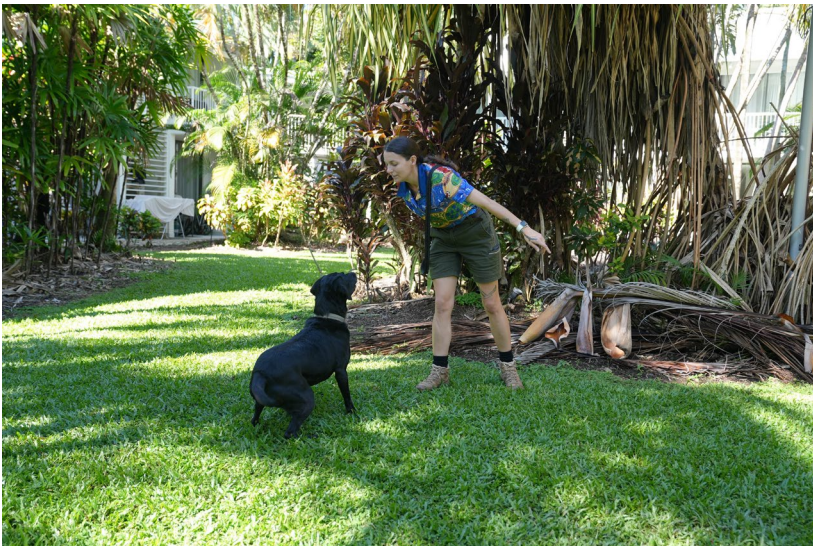
Questions and comments: Invasive species

All speakers formed a panel, where they addressed questions and comments from the audience.

Questions and comments from the floor	Responses
<i>Do you have data about what happens before and after the ant infestations?</i>	Jules and Sharon: Explained that there are monitoring programs to collect data and track how species composition changes in the environment before and after invasive ants arrive. Jules explains that WTMA has a partnership with JCU to monitor specifically how the composition of ant species changes before and after infestations.
<i>Can we access the data?</i>	Jules: Data sits with JCU, and they should be approached about sharing.
<i>Are there any interest and information about how to make cultural practices part of biological surveys? How can we engage more Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples with these programs? We need people going to different departments and educating people about environmental practice and culture. Too much disturbance is happening and will continue to happen on Country; we used to burn around Cairns but now is all buildings. There is too much change to the environment there is always going to be a new invasive species, a new problem. Maybe RAP going to schools and other places to educate people with you. We need more people on the ground connecting to Country.</i>	Jules: WTMA field protocols have been tailored to meet cultural needs, and that consultation has taken place with RAP. No animals of cultural significance such as scorpions are collected during monitoring activities. Jules agreed that it would be good to have more people working together and that the engagement team from WTMA should be approached to organise that. Jules also agreed that disturbance and changes to the environment are a big problem and that yes, invasive species are a constant problem. Jules said this is why biosecurity is so important, and we really need to work together to find solutions.
<i>How do you deal with groups/activist that do not want their properties checked?</i>	Sharon: It is only possible to detect the ants by accessing the properties, as they are very good at hiding. If people do not agree to the yard checks, there is not much to do. She explained that some people advocate for use of steam to kill the ants and explained that this method does not work. Interestingly the person that started advocating for the use of steam, runs a steam business. Sharon explained that is important to question this type of initiatives that have not been proven to work.

Yellow crazy ant detection dog demonstration

Jules Seabright and Kayleen Crawford from WTMA's Yellow Crazy Ant Eradication Program, demonstrated the use of odour-detection dogs in finding yellow crazy ants. Kayleen explained how the dogs are trained to work in various environments, including forests and industrial areas, and provided a live demonstration of their detection capabilities.



Conclusion and evaluation of the Forum

The 2025 Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' Regional Forum provided a valuable platform for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and discussions on key priorities for the management and protection of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. Over the course of three days, participants engaged in meaningful dialogue, shared insights, and contributed to shaping the future of the region. The Forum highlighted the importance of partnerships, cultural heritage preservation, and the active involvement of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in decision-making processes.

All discussions and resolutions from closed sessions are not included in this report, this information has been provided to the Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples Think Tank (RAPTT) for further review as they plan for a summit in 2026 to reflect on the Wet Tropics of Queensland Regional Agreement.

On the final day, participants were invited to provide open and constructive feedback on the Forum, which will help inform the planning of 2026's Forum. Key feedback included:

1. **Location of the Forum:** Participants suggested holding future forums in different locations where Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples live, ensuring that the economic benefits flow directly to those communities. Accessibility, comfort, and safety, particularly for Elders, were highlighted as critical considerations.
2. **In-person representations:** Participants expressed a preference for having presenters physically present at the Forum, as virtual presentations via Teams were less engaging and diminished the value of the information shared.
3. **Agenda development:** Forum participants suggested WTMA revise the process for developing the Forum agenda to ensure it better reflects the priorities of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples. WTMA reiterated its commitment to a collaborative approach and encouraged ongoing input.

WTMA plans to distribute a survey to participants to gather further feedback and suggestions for the 2026 Forum. This will ensure continuous improvement and alignment with the needs and aspirations of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.

The Forum demonstrated the strength of partnerships and the importance of co-design in achieving shared goals for the Wet Tropics region. The feedback received will guide future forums, ensuring they remain inclusive, accessible, and impactful for all participants.