

Board Communique No 108

Session 1: 30-31 May 2019

Session 2: 15 June 2019

The board of the Wet Tropics Management Authority held meeting No 108 in Cairns over two sessions. Chair, Ms Leslie Shirreffs PSM was joined by directors Mr John Courtenay, Ms Anne Clarke and Mr Phil Rist. Professor Iain Gordon attended (session 1 by phone) and Dr Leah Talbot was only able to attend session 2 due to other commitments. Senior officers from the Commonwealth Department of Environment and Energy and the Queensland Department of Environment and Science also attended session 1.

Session 1 of the board meeting was held on 30–31 May 2019 and included important discussions on the board’s climate [statement and 10-point plan](#). The statement and 10-point plan call for urgent action to improve the resilience and protection of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, following new evidence of escalating climate impacts. The statement highlights the serious threat of climate change to mountain adapted species, such as the lemuroid ringtail possum, at threat from extreme temperatures. The board noted that while current trends indicate temperature increases are locked in for 20 years, significant investment is required to respond to local challenges for reducing other threats. Investment will also help ensure that areas are as resilient as possible pending a reduction in global emissions. The board remains optimistic that collaboration and investment on a range of activities and actions can ensure the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area—the worlds’ oldest living rainforest—is robust heading into the future, and urged the Authority to continue to pursue collaborative funding opportunities.

A delegation from the [Cairns and Far North Environment Centre](#) (CAFNEC) attended the meeting to discuss their submission on the Wet Tropics Management Plan, prepared on the behalf of the regional conservation sector. President, Mr Denis Walls, director, Ms Ros Walden and Associate Professor Peter Valentine (a long-time member) were keen to engage with the board regarding the sector’s support and concerns with some of the proposed Plan amendments. In particular, they sought further clarity on changes to zoning and the extent of opportunities for visitor infrastructure. CAFNEC congratulated the board on the release of the climate change 10-point plan and requested that specific climate refugia areas be identified in the Plan. The board committed to reviewing the submission and expressed appreciation for their presentation.

The board also discussed a rezoning application from the Cassowary Coast Regional Council to accommodate essential community infrastructure inside the Tully Gorge National Park section of the World Heritage Area. The proposed reservoir provides essential community service infrastructure to address ongoing health issues arising from suspended sediments potentially carrying encysted giardia into the local resident’s drinking water supply. The Authority undertook formal public notification for the council’s application, as well as a number of on-site assessments with staff from Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) and expert ecologists. In their considerations the board noted that the site has been previously degraded due to historical logging and recent cyclones. As a result, the total area of vegetation to be cleared is minimal. Additionally, the Gulngay Traditional Owners have provided consent for the proposal and the Cassowary Coast Regional Council agreed to provide offset compensation to QPWS for impacts on the Tully Gorge National Park. After considerable discussion the board agreed that, subject to confirmation that the community has had proper opportunity to provide feedback on the proposal, it will approve the preparation of an amended zoning map to give to the Wet Tropics Ministerial Council for their due consideration.

Session 2 of the board meeting was held on 15 June, a few hours prior to the 2019 Cassowary Awards. The Awards honour outstanding individuals and organisations who apply their passion and skills to protect and showcase the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. This year, exceptional contributions in nine categories are to be recognised, including a new category for Climate Change Leadership. Some 250 community members, regional leaders and dignitaries, including the Queensland Minister for Environment and the Great Barrier Reef, Minister for Science and Minister for the Arts, The Hon. Leeanne Enoch MP, confirmed attendance to this gala event to be held at Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park. The board acknowledged the considerable effort of staff in organising this event and the support of the event's sponsors.

The board reflected on the outcomes and resolutions of the Aboriginal Regional Forum held 31 May–2 June 2019, which was attended by the Chair, Leslie Shirreffs, Executive Director Scott Buchanan and Indigenous directors Dr Leah Talbot and Phil Rist. The Traditional Owner Leadership Group (TOLG) led discussions on the implementation of the refresh of the Wet Tropics Regional Agreement, the Wet Tropics Plan Review and the research protocols. The forum participants passed several resolutions tasking the Authority to support the TOLG in delivering their work program over the next 12 months and beyond. The board acknowledged TOLG members for their leadership and significant work leading up to the forum, and the considerable efforts of staff in supporting this process to date.

The board was thrilled to learn that the Authority has been successful in acquiring \$224,000 through the [Australian Heritage Grants Program](#) to prepare a Wet Tropics Tourism Destination Plan. This project will create a framework that provides strategic guidance and policy context for identifying appropriate tourism activities in, and adjacent to, the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. The plan will build tourism confidence by identifying new experiences for people to better appreciate and understand the unique natural and cultural values of the Area, while preserving those values and providing economic benefits to local communities. There is already strong interest for involvement from other government agencies, regional tourism organisations, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, the conservation sector and key stakeholders.

The board also welcomed the Queensland Government's \$9 million dollar commitment to the Authority's successful Yellow Crazy Ant Eradication Program. This funding matches the Commonwealth contribution, ensuring that the significant threat posed by yellow crazy ants is appropriately addressed. This commitment, along with the ongoing passionate and active participation of local residents, community groups and industry, and the success of the Authority's dedicated and expert team, will allow the program to continue eradication of the ants from the region.

On a final note, it was with great sadness that directors learned of the recent passing of the Authority's inaugural Executive Director, Mr Peter Hitchcock. He was a renowned environmentalist who oversaw UNESCO World Heritage nominations across the globe and established some of Australia's first rainforest national parks. Peter was a great inspiration for New South Wales, the Wet Tropics and Cape York's land management issues throughout his career. He played a lead role in successfully making additions to the Tasmanian World Heritage Area in 2013, which included his much loved tall eucalypt forests. His international work through the IUCN and own endeavours in Indonesia, West Papua, Papua New Guinea and many other critical parts of Asia has been extremely important locally and globally. Peter was always prepared to step up and provide his especially astute advice and to take on issues, ranging from local campaigns to large and complex international issues and he mentored a wide network of specialists. Peter will be missed. The board paid tribute to a great Australian.

The next board meeting is set for 26 July 2019. This will be a special meeting to discuss legislative amendments to the Wet Tropics Management Plan.