

## Wet Tropics Management Authority Board Communique No 113 26–27 November 2020

In the first face-to-face directors meeting since the COVID -19 pandemic restrictions began, the Board of Directors of the Wet Tropics Management Authority (the Authority) met on 26 and 27 November in Cairns. The appointment of two new directors on 1 October 2020—Dr Sally Driml and Ms Chrissy Grant—meant that the Authority would focus on inducting new directors and updating continuing directors, on activities carried out under the Wet Tropics Strategic Plan 2020–2030. The Strategic Plan underpins all of the Authority’s work. The Board had met previously via teleconference on 5 November to begin inducting Dr Driml and Ms Grant into the Authority’s administrative processes and their responsibilities as directors.

Dr Sally Driml has a strong background and experience in eco-tourism and protected area economics in the Area and is currently a senior lecturer and researcher at the University of Queensland. Dr Driml has more than 30 years of varied experience researching and working across issues such as climate change, protected area management and policy and tourism in the Wet Tropics region. She has strong industry links and takes a proactive and collaborative approach.

Ms Chrissy Grant is an Eastern Kuku Yalanji woman who has national and international experience working in issues of World Heritage, Indigenous Peoples, natural and cultural management and biological diversity. She is also currently the Chairperson and Foundation Member of the UNESCO’s International Indigenous Forum on World Heritage.

Drawing on the Strategic Plan as a framework for the agenda, directors were given a summary on each of the five strategies and then brought up-to-date on the initiatives being actioned under each strategy. On the first day, the board learned about the climate focussed initiatives being progressed as part of Accept Act Adapt: Climate Adaptation Plan for the Wet Tropics 2020–2030. Directors were very pleased that the \$2.6M Queensland Government Reef Assist funding, to be auspiced by the Authority, will be directed to programs led by several Traditional Owner organisations and other key Authority partners. These projects draw directly from the recently launched Green and Blue Economic Stimulus Package which was developed collaboratively by a consortium of organisations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on the Wet Tropics region. With more than 20 private and public sector partners aligned to build the resilience of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (the Area), the Board are excited that this collaborative action is generating interest. The Authority will continue to seek investors and partners for a suite of climate resilience projects.

Board directors received an update on the progress of the Authority’s Yellow Crazy Ant Eradication Program and congratulated the Authority on its ability to continue meeting milestones and staying on target with the 10-year eradication plan during the pandemic. This has been achieved through the implementation of specific COVID-safe measures and practices for field work. In his report Professor Iain Gordon—Chair of the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC)—also commended the scientific research underpinning the Authority’s eradication of yellow crazy ants and the innovation employed by field staff.

The COVID-19 pandemic has continued to markedly impact the Authority’s capacity to maintain its in-person engagement across the spectrum of partners—from Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to industry partners and communities affected by yellow crazy ants. Directors were impressed with the resourceful and innovative approaches staff have implemented to enable continued and effective engagement with the Authority’s communities of interest. They noted that the Authority’s agile style of engagement will continue to be appropriate well into the future.

Directors were pleased to learn that the communications and media team have continued to share informative content through social media and attract a larger audience across a wider demographic. In September and November two very successful Science and Smashed Avocado events showcasing Rainforest Aboriginal cultural

burning practices and climate science marked the first community in-person events held by the Authority since March. Both events were successfully live-streamed through Facebook and commentary and questions from Facebook audience members were addressed by presenters ‘on air’ during the event.

The Authority is now planning the 18<sup>th</sup> Cassowary Awards—cancelled in 2020 due to COVID-19—and investigating innovative ways to run the event. The board and staff exchanged event ideas and directors supported the idea of the awards being presented through a hybrid of in-person and live-streamed approaches. Directors want to make sure that the awards do prevail in 2021 and ensure the recognition of those community members who have maintained their commitment and activities in World Heritage management, despite COVID-19 restrictions. The board is considering an appropriate date and venue for 2021.

The draft Wet Tropics Sustainable Tourism Plan is a project which has been a flagship for the adoption of innovative online and participatory tools, workshops, consultation and collaboration during COVID-19. The draft plan generated much conversation from directors who provided targeted and considered feedback. Directors congratulated the Authority on its engagement with the tourism industry and other collaborators to develop the draft plan, particularly during a period of upheaval and distress for the tourism industry. Board directors were updated on the implementation of the Wet Tropics Management Plan which came into effect on 11 September 2020. The Authority has been progressing the development of supporting guidelines and other policy documents to enable a more detailed understanding and application of the plan. Directors again congratulated the team for their thorough consultation process.

The Board received a presentation from the Department of Environment and Science (DES) Director of Cultural Capability and Connections in the Department of Environment and Science, regarding the department’s progress in implementing the Gurra Gurra Framework 2020-2026. The framework seeks to guide DES in reframing its relationships with First Nations peoples and is underpinned by a key principle which places Country and people at the heart of DES business. Directors noted strong synergies between the Authority’s work and the Gurra Gurra framework in implementing a rights-based approach.

A DES Senior Environmental Officer also briefed directors on a proposal to develop a Queensland world heritage strategy that will provide a policy framework for existing properties and future nominations in line with the Gurra Gurra Framework 2020–2026. Directors were supportive and pleased to note its development and its alignment with Dhawura Ngilan: A vision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage in Australia and the best practice standards in Indigenous cultural heritage management and legislation<sup>1</sup>.

A presentation on the way in which the Authority is embedding a rights-based approach also generated strong support amongst directors, in particular for the proactive approach used to meet both native title obligations and those under the recently introduced *Human Rights Act 2019* (Queensland).

The Board heard reports from the recent meetings of SAC and the Community Consultative Committee (CCC)—each with newly appointed members— and thanked outgoing Director, Ms Anne Clarke for continuing in the role of Chair of the CCC pending appointment of new directors. Directors welcomed Dr Sally Driml as the new Chair of the CCC.

On the second day, directors had the opportunity to acknowledge the achievements of one of its longest serving staff members. Mr Max Chappell has led the Planning and Conservation team since 1993, and his leadership included laying the foundations for the Wet Tropics management planning framework. The Board paid tribute to Max and his significant contribution to the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area and wish him well in his retirement. Max was also awarded with a ‘Chairs Award’ in recognition of his service and commitment to the Wet Tropics.

The Board also recognised the significant achievements of the Authority’s staff during a very challenging year and thanked them for continuing to deliver so many positive outcomes.

Board meeting 114 will be held on 24–25 February 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> As approved by the Heritage Chairs and Officials of Australia and New Zealand at its meeting on 16 September 2020  
<https://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/publications/dhawura-ngilan-vision-atsi-heritage>