

Board Communique No 112 20–21 May 2020

Tinged with a little sadness, the Wet Tropics Management Authority Board Directors met on 20 and 21 May for meeting 112—the last meeting for three of its valued directors. Dr Leah Talbot, Mr John Courtenay and Ms Anne Clarke all joined the Authority’s board in 2015 and have each been key contributors to the strategic directioning, action planning and forward-thinking which has come to characterise this board. The board met by videoconference over the two days and welcomed observers and presenters from the Queensland Government and Authority staff.

On the first day, and throughout the meeting, directors heard about how Authority programs and staff are being impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. The Authority was quick to mobilise in late March and transitioned to working-from-home arrangements efficiently and effectively—with 70% of staff continuing to work from home. The Authority’s response to COVID-19 demonstrates its ability to adapt and maintain momentum through innovative problem solving. Directors were excited to learn about the results being achieved through innovative use of videoconferencing and online engagement tools for collaboration with partners across the Authority. The board also heard about how the Yellow Crazy Ant Eradication Program continues to meet milestones by adapting fieldwork to incorporate strict social distancing.

Climate action and climate resilience of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area are at the core of the board’s strategic goals for the Authority. Directors discussed the substantial body of work being undertaken to research and develop a clear and appropriately targeted climate resilience investment prospectus. The prospectus will be action oriented, will clearly define community, environmental and corporate benefits and will address key themes such as at-risk ecosystems and Aboriginal traditional ecological knowledge. Acknowledging there will be a need for a response to the economic impacts of COVID-19 on the region, directors also discussed the potential for building broad regional partnerships to progress investment opportunities to sustain and build the resilience of natural terrestrial and marine assets whilst focusing on job creation and innovation in business and industries.

Ensuring the meaningful and appropriate involvement of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in the Authority’s business and in the management of the Area also lies at the heart of the board’s passion and vision. Directors welcomed Ms Cheryl Leavy— Executive Director of Partnerships, Queensland Department of Environment and Science (DES)—for a briefing on the new Gurra Gurra Framework 2020-2026. Launched on 4 May 2020, the Gurra Gurra Framework seeks to reframe the way DES does business by holding *country* and people at the centre of operations and decision-making. Ten initiatives will guide progress toward the Gurra Gurra vision—*to walk forward together, from two paths to one, in a partnership founded on respect, trust and First Nations peoples’ vision for Country and people*. Directors considered the framework to be highly relevant to the way the Authority conducts its activities and welcomed future work on its implementation in the Wet Tropics.

COVID-19 restrictions are affecting the Authority’s capacity to engage with partners such as Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples. Principal Project Officer, Mr Buddy Ahmat, advised directors that delivery of the refresh of the Wet Tropics Regional Agreement has been delayed as the Traditional Owner Leadership Group (TOLG) reviews its consultation and engagement approach. However, despite the ongoing challenges, the TOLG have continued to deliver a significant number of outcomes through regular meetings and the ongoing, responsive support of Authority staff. The board is very supportive and appreciative of the work of the TOLG and keen to see this advanced to the State and Australian governments at the soonest possible time.

The board also received a presentation on the QPWS&P Values Based Management Framework, to better understand park planning challenges and outcomes. Directors appreciated the way in which multi-faceted

considerations were applied to park planning, particularly as it relates to service levels to meet visitor expectations.

The staff of the Authority are finding very positive ways of communicating the great work being done in the Wet Tropics, despite current restrictions. In enhancing and revising the Authority's approach to communications, a detailed discussion was held about how the Authority is increasing its online engagement and improving outward communications and promotion. The board were encouraged by the results of the substantial efforts being given to targeted social media and ensuring the online and broader community stay connected to the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area.

Senior Project Officer, Gretchen Martins enlightened directors on the multi-layered approach the Authority will adopt to effectively engage with youth. The Authority's Community Consultative Committee has driven the need to better engage with youth and the clear themes included in the recently released Strategic Plan 2020-2030 are in direct response to this. The board noted that the Youth Engagement Program is well researched and are excited to see it progressing so positively, even bringing one director to tears (of joy)!

Another key board priority is for the preparation of a tourism destination plan to map out appropriate visitor experiences into the future. The board were provided with an update on the substantial progress made toward the development of the Wet Tropics Sustainable Tourism Destination Plan. Since the board met in March 2020, Chris Jahnsen and Emma Hedditch have made significant inroads using innovative online engagement techniques to gather significant input across most key stakeholder groups, and to better understand the needs and expectations for developing a framework for appropriate tourism experiences and places in the World Heritage Area. Due to COVID-19, completion of the plan has been extended until October 2020 to ensure appropriate engagement with all sectors, and particularly with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.

As it was the final meeting of three esteemed directors, the board took the opportunity for them to share their views of their time on the board and provide advice on ways forward for the new board. The chair noted that this board had come together following a period without a functioning board, and together with the executive director and a committed staff, had reset the agenda, established priorities and made many achievements. The chair highlighted just a few of these achievements including:

- adopting a rights-based approach with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples and holding three on-country Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' forums that brought together Traditional Custodians from across the Wet Tropics to participate in the review of the Management Plan and the refresh of the Wet Tropics Regional Agreement
- making climate change a board priority, followed by a number of key initiatives including the launch of Accept, Act, Adapt—Climate Adaptation Plan for the Wet Tropics 2020–2030
- reviewing the statutory Wet Tropics Management Plan through the most extensive community engagement program to date, and developed a new strategic plan, setting out the Authority's vision for the next 10 years
- reinvigorating the Cassowary Awards, our night of nights for recognising those who contribute to the World Heritage Area;
- re-establishing the Community Consultative and Scientific Advisory Committees, ensuring they were better linked to the board by appointing directors as committee chairpersons
- advocating for and securing ongoing funding for the Yellow Crazy Ant Eradication Program, a landmark program that is making a real difference to the World Heritage Area.

The expertise, commitment and perspectives of Dr Leah Talbot, Anne Clarke and John Courtenay will be sorely missed, and the board and staff extended their sincerest appreciation for their contributions.

The next board meeting is scheduled for 19–20 August 2020.