

THE STATE OF THE WET TROPICS  
WORLD HERITAGE AREA  
2018-2019

A snapshot of  
opportunities  
and threats



# At a glance

Of over 173,000 protected areas, the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area was rated as the second most 'irreplaceable' natural World Heritage Area on earth and the sixth most irreplaceable protected area by a team of international scientists.

Although it represents only 0.12% of the total area of the Australian landmass, the Area is home to an exceptionally high proportion of the nation's biodiversity including:

36%

of Australia's mammals

29%

of Australia's frog species

41%

of Australia's freshwater fish species

23%

of Australia's reptile species



60%

of Australia's butterfly species

30%

of Australia's orchids

65%

of Australia's fern species

50%

of Australia's bird species



COOKTOWN

CAIRNS

TOWNSVILLE

## Rainforest Aboriginal Culture

Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples are the custodians of the Wet Tropics region and have been so for many thousands of years. Prior to European colonisation, the Wet Tropics was one of the most populated areas of Australia, and the only area where Aboriginal people lived permanently in the rainforest.

Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples developed extensive ecological knowledge contained within their distinctive cultures and this knowledge allowed for effective land management techniques across millennia.

Their cultural, spiritual beliefs and ecological knowledge are intertwined with the natural features of their country. Those values, and their importance to the management of the World Heritage Area, persist today.

The Area's indigenous values were included in the National Heritage listing in 2012.

photo: Wet Tropics Images/Brad Newton



# The State of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area 2018-2019



The Wet Tropics bioregion contains a rich variety of Australian animals and plants, many of which are endemic, rare or threatened. The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area retains the largest area of rainforest in Australia and supports the highest level of biodiversity of any region in Australia. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature voted the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area (the Area) as the 2nd most irreplaceable natural world heritage area on earth.

In 2017 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), carried out its regular Conservation Outlook Assessments for all the world's 241 natural World Heritage sites. The 2017 Outlook Report declared that the Area, while protected by a strong legislative framework and a dedicated independent management authority, is under direct threat from "invasive plants, animals and diseases, and the high risk posed by the predicted impacts of climate change".

The Wet Tropics Management Authority's own monitoring of the Area, mirrors the IUCN's conclusions; this annual report on the state of the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area confirms that the outlook for the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area is a cause for great concern.

Effective action must be taken now to build ecological resilience in the Wet Tropics landscapes to the threats posed by climate change, invasive weeds and pests and habitat fragmentation.

These actions include:

- undertaking on-ground works to improve forest health and manage environmental stress
- protection and management of high priority refugia
- maximizing ecosystem resilience by reducing non-climate stressors such as invasive species
- targeted programs of ecological monitoring and research
- increasing community awareness and mobilising behavioural change
- increasing Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' role in the management of the Area
- improving and communicating our knowledge of the natural and cultural values of the Wet Tropics, and
- improved regional planning and coordination.

Concurrent with these regional actions must be a national and international effort to address the causes of climate change.

This 2018-2019 State of the Wet Tropics Report is a snapshot of the condition and trend of the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area (the Area). More detailed information, including source references, can be found in the 2018-2019 State of the Wet Tropics reference documents at

<https://www.wettropics.gov.au/annual-reports>

<https://www.worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org/explore-sites/wdpaid/17757>





# Assessment of threats

**Data indicates that the status and conservation outlook has not improved since the 2017 IUCN Outlook Report. There are a number of significant threats that the Area continues to face, including:**

- Climate change is escalating as the most significant threat to the Wet Tropics long-term outlook, including changes to the distribution and density endemic and specialised cool-adapted rainforest species.
- Changes to endemic and specialised cool-adapted rainforest species distribution and density having already been recorded—and some somber predictions of modelled effects are already being realised.
- Invasive species continue to cause impact. Threats such as, feral pigs, yellow crazy ants, a number of invasive weed pests, and pathogens such as myrtle rust, will require collaborative effort and resources to manage impacts.
- More extreme and unplanned bushfires will occur in the future. Although not directly attributable to climate change, our rapidly warming climate, driven by human activities, is exacerbating every risk factor for more frequent and intense bushfires.
- Significant decline in research and monitoring of the property. Despite previous historical investment in research in the Area, research funding has significantly declined over recent years. Under the current National Environmental Science Program (2015–2021) Commonwealth research funding investment into Wet Tropics rainforests was not a priority.
- Increased demand for infrastructure like roads, dams and energy supply caused by a growing urban population and tourist visitor numbers, distributing visitation across a wider area.

## **An innovative approach to plant conservation.**

the Authority has collaborated with the Australian Tropical Herbarium to secure the future of Australia's climate-threatened tropical mountaintop plants. The Australian Tropical Herbarium, with support from a number of Botanical Gardens and in partnership with Traditional Custodians, is building an ex-situ conservation reserve to 'backup' at-risk wild populations and support research and education. Novel research will be undertaken on seed-banking strategies, genetic diversity and plant tolerance of extreme climates to increase our understanding of the effect of changing climate on these important species.

## **A multi-faceted program to eradicate yellow crazy ants from areas within and adjacent to the World Heritage Area.**

This program, which has engaged community and industry support, has been successful in significantly reducing population numbers of this invasive pest. The Authority has achieved demonstrable success, with three infestations eradicated, a halt to the spread of ants in the World Heritage Area and radically reduced numbers in other known infested areas. Many areas have now moved into post validation of eradication and treatment areas continue to contract. The search for any additional infestations continues with the invaluable help of Indigenous Rangers, the sugar industry, local landholders and the broader community.

## **World's best practice in management planning**

Key to effective management of development within the Areas is the Wet Tropics Management Plan, which guides what can occur and where. The Plan also provides the basis for assessing proposals and looking for better solutions that maintain the World Heritage values. The Skyrail Rainforest Cableway, a tourism attraction in the heart of the World Heritage Area, sought a development permit to replace an existing lookout at their Barron Falls station. Skyrail were seeking to improve safety and enhance the viewing experience. As part of the permit assessment, the Authority and Skyrail were able to agree on design improvements whilst retaining significant trees to minimise overall impacts and improve overall aesthetics. The innovative cantilevered structure is now fully operational and providing a unique view of the Barron Falls and the Barron Gorge for visitors. Assessment of the application included consultation with the Djabugay people.



# Conservation outlook - status and trends of values



The IUCN World Heritage Outlook provides a Conservation Outlook Assessment for all the world's 241 natural World Heritage sites. These assessments indicate whether a natural World Heritage site is likely to conserve its Outstanding Universal Value over time.

In both 2014 and 2017, three Australian World Heritage properties, the Great Barrier Reef, Kakadu and the Wet Tropics were assessed as of 'Significant Concern'

If a properties' conservation outlook is of significant concern, its values are considered to be threatened by a number of current or potential threats, with significant additional conservation measures being required to preserve these values over the medium to long term. Worldwide, 29% of natural sites were considered to warrant a conservation outlook of 'significant concern'.

World Heritage Criteria	Status	Conservation outlook
Superlative natural beauty	Good	Stable
Living examples of ancient and primitive rainforest species	High concern	Deteriorating
Unique rainforest ecosystems	High concern	Deteriorating
Exceptional biodiversity	High concern	Deteriorating

## Benefits of World Heritage

### The regional community values the Wet Tropics lifestyle

The Wet Tropics Area abuts the regional cities of Townsville and Cairns. The region contributes at least \$5.2 billion annually to the regional economy, with significant potential for increased whole of community benefit.

In a region that boasts two World Heritage Areas, the natural and cultural environment provides very substantial spiritual, health, well-being and economic benefits to the local population and is of considerable significance to the wider global community in terms of wilderness values, outdoor recreation, scientific research value and the environmental services provided by the rainforest.



# Protection and management

- The Wet Tropics Management Authority are leaders in World Heritage governance and planning — governed by an effective and independent board of directors with expertise in natural and cultural heritage, tourism, community engagement, financial management and legislative obligations.
- In 2018-19, a Wet Tropics Strategic Plan 2020-30 was developed. This document sets a new approach to World Heritage management, which embraces the spirit of cooperation and community empowerment to manage the World Heritage Area into the future.
- The challenge is to plan for future changes without endangering World Heritage values. Ensuring heritage values, our economy and the wider community are protected from negative effects will need considered planning and regulation as well as the support, and partnership, of the Wet Tropics community.
- The long established stewardship of the Area by Rainforest Aboriginal People is one of the Area's greatest assets. A key responsibility and management tool of the Authority is to ensure a decisive voice for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in management decisions and activities within the Area.
- Strong community engagement activities by the Authority ensure that the local population is informed and active in protection of the Area.

“ The Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage site is protected by a strong and updated legislative framework, a dedicated independent Management Authority which enjoys broad community support, and a comprehensive suite of management strategies

- the International Union for the Conservation of Nature 2017 ”

## GETTING BETTER AT

- Permitting and assessment guidelines
- Integrating the World Heritage Plans into regional and national planning systems
- Protecting the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area from adverse impacts of development through contemporary planning systems

## EFFECTIVE AT

- Engaging with the local community
- Partnerships with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples
- Interpretation and education programs
- Supporting sustainable tourism initiatives and planning for future expansion

## SEEKING TO IMPROVE

- State and Commonwealth funding investment
- Investment into long-term research and monitoring programs

### Wet Tropics Management Authority

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**WET TROPICS**  
MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY

