

# People and the Economy

Socio-economic activity and water use in the Tropical Rivers region

## The economy, society and environment are linked

The economy, society and the environment are inter-linked. This means that changes in the economy can affect the natural environment. For example, the environment can be used as a 'dump' for pollution or as a source of essential resources such as water. Likewise, changes in the environment can affect the economy and society by loss of benefits from the environment's ecosystem services or loss of things we don't use but value, such as beauty.

One of the aims of TRaCK is to develop methods for assessing the implications of future developments in northern Australia. Those seeking to understand what different futures (or scenarios) might look like thus need information about socio-economic systems and their relationships with the environment. This type of information is currently unavailable for northern Australia as a whole.

## Who's doing what and where?

This project will provide socio-economic background and population projections for river catchments across northern Australia. This means descriptions of the economic, cultural, institutional and human-capital

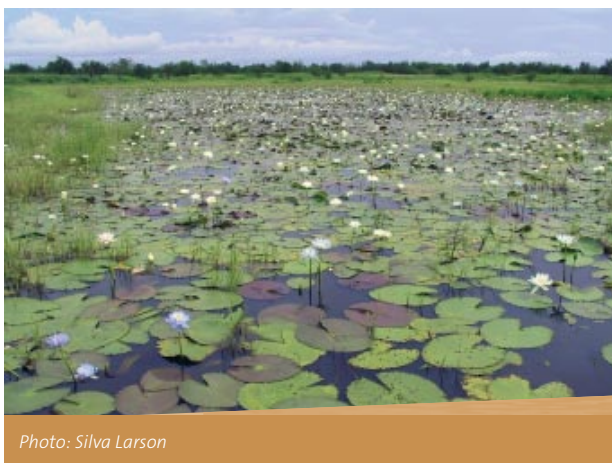


Photo: Silva Larson

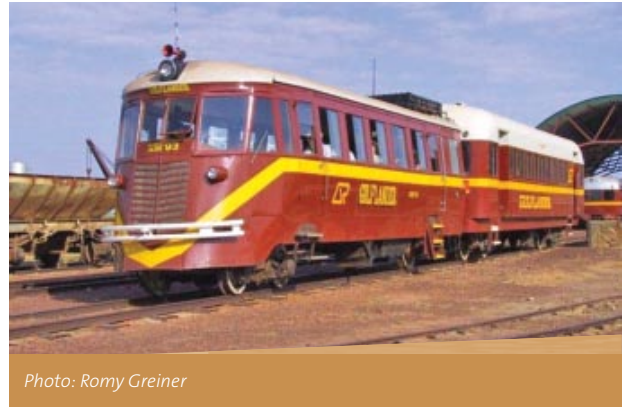


Photo: Romy Greiner

aspects of the people living in the North. Descriptions will include such features as internet use, labour force participation rates, incomes, and employment. This information can be used to group similar catchments and draw inferences from one catchment to another.

Researchers will also take a detailed look at tourism – since it is not just local residents, but also visitors who use (and potentially abuse) the region's resources. The population and tourism projections will allow researchers to identify which parts of the population such as the old/young; male/female; Indigenous/Non-Indigenous, are growing most quickly in which regions.

The project will also produce an economic model that can be used to describe how the region's socio-economic systems might change in the future. To do this the project team will work closely with the other TRaCK researchers looking at river futures (or scenarios). In this way they will be able to address questions like: 'How would the economy respond to an increase in agricultural activity or population growth' for example.

## A large region with sparse and unique communities

Despite the fact that the northern tropical region covers approximately 25% of Australia's mainland, in 2001 it was home to less than 1.5% of Australia's population.



Most of the region is therefore sparsely populated and relatively little is known about the structure and growth rate of its socio-economic systems.

We do have enough information to tell us that communities in Northern Australia are not just 'miniature' versions of larger cities. It is also clear that the structure of societies and economies differs quite markedly across this large region. For example, initial results indicate that population is growing relatively rapidly in some parts of the region, but is declining in others. Also evident is the fact that tourism is more important to some regions than to others. Darwin and Broome receive the largest 'share' of tourists, while visitors stay longer in some smaller centres like Kununurra and Halls Creek.

What this means is that one cannot simply assume that socio-economic systems in the TRaCK region will grow (and change) in ways that are similar to those in southern Australian such as Sydney, or NSW. And one cannot even assume that all communities in the TRaCK region will grow and change in a similar way. There is too much diversity to allow for such simplistic generalisations.

This research is, therefore, vitally important, since it helps fill a significant 'information gap' about socio-economic systems, their growth rates and their interactions with the environment in Northern Australia.

### Who is on the team?

The project is being lead by Dr Natalie Stoeckl from James Cook University in Townsville. Natalie and Owen Stanley from James Cook University are working with researchers from Charles Darwin University (Dean Carson, Andrew Taylor and Suzanne Campbell) and CSIRO Townsville (Silva Larson and Kostas Alexandridis).

### Where is the research happening?



Population projections and socio-economic profiles will be developed for catchments in the TRaCK region. Tourism profiles will focus on the Fitzroy WA, Daly NT, Darwin Harbour NT, Mitchell Qld, and Flinders Qld. The project started in March 2008 and will finish in 2010.



Photo: Romy Greiner

### How will this research help?

The project will be of most benefit to regional policy and decision makers such as natural resource managers, community groups, and local and state governments. It will enhance their knowledge about:

- the current status, and growth rate of the region's socio-economic systems and some of their 'interactions' with the environment and
- the likely impacts on the socio-economic systems and, by extension, environmental systems of alternative development paths.

The project will also help by identifying critical knowledge gaps about the region's socio-economic systems.

This information may also be useful to local residents, and/or others considering moving to, or investing in, the TRaCK region.

### Team contacts

For more information on this project contact:

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