

Sustainable economies: Arnhem Land case study

Developing an Effective Conservation and Sustainable Use Economy in
Arnhem Land: Options for Payment for Environmental Services

Living on country

The Indigenous estate constitutes a huge portion of the terrestrial land mass in north Australia, much of it thinly populated. Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory is one of the least disturbed environments in Australia, if not the world. However, along with much of the tropical north, it faces increasing land and conservation management challenges with the spread of weeds, feral animals and the cane toad.

There is emerging evidence that, where Indigenous people are living on their country, they generate a range of ecological, economic, cultural and social benefits at local, regional and national levels. Benefits arise through activities such as weed control, the harvesting of wildlife for consumption, and the use of natural resources in commercial enterprises such as arts and crafts production.



Aquatic weeds (photo Jon Marshall)

These activities offer opportunities for the development of local economies across the tropical north based on conservation and sustainable use and management of natural resources.

Payment for service

There is a growing demand for the provision of environmental services, including bio-security and carbon trading, and Indigenous communities in northern Australia are well-placed to provide them through fee-for-service arrangements.

Focussing on two Indigenous Protected Areas in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, this project will examine how much it would cost for environmental services to be delivered by local people.



Photo: Ian Dixon

It will quantify the costs for purchasers such as governments, non-government organisations and private enterprises of contracting Indigenous communities to manage and deliver a range of conservation and land management activities.

The case-study will include an assessment of the environmental and cultural assets requiring management and what management opportunities are available. It will account for the priorities of local communities and people's existing skills and expertise. The analysis will consider potential institutional barriers to the local delivery of services.



Photo: Ian Dixon

Who is on the team?

The researchers are Dr Giovanni Concu and Dr Jennifer Koenig of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University, Canberra. They are under the supervision of Professor Jon Altman, the Director of CAEPR.

The researchers will be working closely with the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation and its Djelk Land and Sea Rangers, and the Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation particularly in assessing the benefits of the delivery of the services by local people.

Where is the research happening?



One area of focus for the project will be the riverine environment within the Mann-Liverpool catchment in central Arnhem Land, near Maningrida. This catchment is within the Djelk Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) which is due to be declared in September 2009.

The other area of focus is the coastal area in the region of the Dhimurru IPA in north east Arnhem Land. These regions are within the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Land Trust.

How will this research help?

At a time when there is considerable policy debate about on-country and off-country employment prospects, the research will provide a realistic assessment of both the prospects and time frames for developing local environmental management services in the two Arnhem Land catchments.

Working with local people, strategies will be developed for establishing and financing an effective conservation and sustainable use economy in the Maningrida regional catchments.

Improved information will also be available to decision-makers and funders in community, business and government about the potential of environmental services to support regional economies in northern Australia.

Team contacts

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