



# Chair's Report

## November 2008

### FIFTH EDITION: NRM IN REMOTE NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

Queensland's regional NRM bodies are working with many community organisations, industry groups, Indigenous groups and government agencies to manage our natural resources in remote and northern Australia.

The northern and remote areas of Australia have particularly high conservation, environmental and cultural values. Partnerships continue to build bridges across regional and state borders in order to strengthen coordinated efforts to manage the natural resources of this precious country.

Some prevalent issues facing northern and remote Queensland and neighbouring areas include Indigenous cultural, social and environmental knowledge sharing; pest control; and protection of threatened species, such as sawfish and turtles.

The following stories show a sample of the extensive, collaborative efforts of regional NRM bodies and partners, which continue to strengthen our programs and on-ground outcomes for all to enjoy across Queensland.

MIKE BERWICK, CHAIR,  
QUEENSLAND  
REGIONAL NRM  
GROUPS COLLECTIVE



### Carpentaria Ghost Nets Program

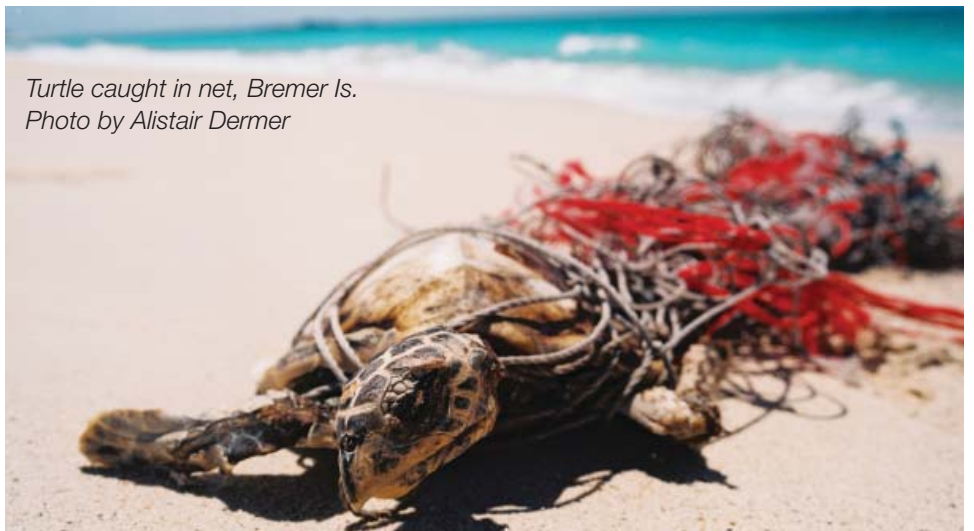
Indigenous Sea Ranger organisations and other community members are working together to clean up ghost nets from the coast of northern Australia including the inner isles of the Torres Straits, western Cape York, southern Gulf of Carpentaria & eastern Arnhem Land. This multi-award winning project is an alliance of 19 indigenous organisations, other non-government entities and the Australian, Qld and NT Governments. They call themselves the Carpentaria Ghost Net Program.

Ghost nets are fishing nets that have been lost accidentally, deliberately discarded, or simply abandoned at sea. They travel the oceans of the world with the currents and tides continually fishing as they float through the water. They catch threatened species, undersized and protected fish and dramatically reduce the total fish population. This threatens both our fishing industries

and the marine environment. Normally, fishing nets are pulled into a boat and the catch is removed from the nets, with legal sized fish collected and anything else returned to the sea. No one frees captured marine creatures from ghost nets, the wildlife are left to drown or starve to death.

In its four years of operation the program has contributed greatly to stopping the nets re-entering the ocean by physically removing more than 5,000 ghost nets from the coastline. Each net has been catalogued recording information such as country of manufacture. This information will assist in international negotiations to stop fishing nets becoming discarded in the first place as 96% of the nets originate outside Australian waters. Simultaneously the project is helping to train and build skills of Indigenous rangers so they can continue working on ghost nets and other natural resource management work beyond the life of this project.

*Turtle caught in net, Bremer Is.  
Photo by Alistair Dermer*



## Inland Northwest Queensland Archeological Excavations

An archeological party led by Dr Lynley Wallis, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Archeology, Flinders University has located and excavated one of Australia's deepest rock shelter sites in the foothills of the Gregory Ranges in inland northwest Queensland (Southern Gulf region).

This site, Gledswood Shelter 1, contains a rich record of Aboriginal cooperation including thousands of stone artifacts, many pieces of ochre and extensive charcoal from hearths throughout its extent of nearly three meters. Initial radiocarbon date from halfway down the excavations show it as at least 15,000 years old. This suggests the base of the site (for which the dates are currently being analysed) could be the oldest evidence of human occupation in the region.

The excavation was conducted as part of a field school for the Coursework Masters Program in Archeology at Flinders University, in collaboration with Indigenous members of the Woolgar Valley Aboriginal Corporation. In addition to carrying out exactions at Gledswood Shelter 1, students were taught skills in site surveying, archaeological photography, rock art recording, community liaison, and applications of geophysical and geological techniques in archeology. Students also recorded an extensive open site on a tributary of the Woolgar River, featuring hundreds of axe grinding grooves.



*Helen Smith showing her granddaughter Jade axe grinding grooves*



*Yarrabah school excursion to Cairns Marine*

## A Brighter Future for Sawfish

A broad social paradigm shift has emerged from the groundswell of community concern for our environment. The view has manifested in government policy; and to the operational standards of industry and the personal decisions of individuals. The community is now the ultimate auditor of environmental performance and an essential partner for conservation endeavours.

In recognition, Stirling Peverell from the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries has engaged community, industry and academic partnerships in pursuit of protection of the endangered sawfish. Once abundant throughout the continental tropics, sawfish now face an uncertain future. Northern Australia could be the last bastion of hope for this extraordinary animal.

Strategic partnerships are critical to extending knowledge and awareness to a broad audience. Mr Peverell has formed solid ties with the community through regional NRM groups in the Cape York Peninsula, Northern Gulf

and Southern Gulf; the Mapoon Aboriginal Council; researchers from James Cook University; public aquarium supplier Cairns Marine; wildlife documentary film makers Digital Dimensions; and the Gulf of Carpentaria Commercial Fisherman's Association.

The team undertakes research and monitoring activities and has a major emphasis on raising awareness of the threats to sawfish survival. The extension program has a broad catchment, including schools and communities in northern Australia; television audiences throughout Europe; and to the 60 million visitors that annually view sawfish in public aquaria throughout the world.

Mr Peverell has written a children's book entitled "Adventures of Sonya the Freshwater Sawfish", which traces the tumultuous first year of a life. Proceeds go to Project Sawfish, a non-profit organisation established by Cairns Marine to support projects that raise community awareness of endangered aquatic animals in northern Australia. Through community and industry partnerships, Mr Peverell and his team are securing a brighter future for sawfish.

## Cape York Weeds and Feral Animals Program

The Cape York Weeds and Feral Animal Program (CYWAFAP) commenced in 1999, with the overall goal of involving all stakeholders in ongoing, coordinated and effective pest management for long-term and sustainable ecological and economic growth in the region. The program is funded independently through grants and contract work and operates throughout Cape York Peninsula.

Since its humble beginning, the program has grown to become one of the leading natural resources management bodies within the Cape, undertaking a range of NRM activities

related to weed and feral animal control. The work carried out by the program is wide ranging and varied, utilising the specialised knowledge and skill of the experienced and well respected CYWAFAP team. Some of the greatest pests targeted in the program include feral pigs, Pond Apple and Rubber Vine.

CYWAFAP undertakes pest management planning, creating plans at a regional scale, for local governments and for individual properties. Also, extensive training in weed and feral animal control is delivered through the program, with its team containing qualified trainers and assessors who can deliver both formal and informal training.

## Satellite Tracking Turtles from Mer Island

For the past two years, the Torres Strait Regional Authority's (TSRA) Land and Sea Management Unit (LSMU) has been working with eight Torres Strait Island communities on the Torres Strait Dugong and Turtle Project.

The Project was designed to empower and strengthen Indigenous involvement in Dugong and Turtle Management in the Torres Strait through a community-based approach that involves each of the eight island communities determining their own management of these important species.

The Project aims to:

- Develop sustainable Dugong and Turtle Management Plans,
- Assist island communities in monitoring the catch and health of dugong and turtle habitats, and
- Deliver training in order to promote community awareness of dugong and turtle sustainability.

Training and education is a key part of the project. The LSMU employs a Dugong and Turtle Project Co-ordinator and a Dugong and Turtle Project Liason Officer who work with community Project Officers employed on the Islands of Badu, Boigu, Mabuiag, Iama, Horn, Erub, Mer and at St Pauls community on Moa Island.

LSMU staff provide the community Project Officers with training opportunities and information to assist the Officers in raising community awareness about turtle and dugong life cycles and sustainability.

In December 2007, as part of the Project, James Cook University delivered a week long turtle nesting training program during which a group of Project Officers attached satellite transmitters to two nesting green turtles captured at Dowar, near Mer Island.

The purpose of the satellite trackers was to determine where the Dowar green turtles go when they finish nesting. Research has shown that turtles have set nesting locations in one region, but have set feeding areas in another, meaning that female green turtles may travel distances up to 2,500km when moving between locations.



*Eric Vanderduys, Ron Archer (expert photographer) and the kids*

## Boundaries and Biodiversity – Indigenous discoveries

The Northern Gulf Indigenous Savannah Group (NGISG) coordinates work with the various indigenous language groups on behalf of the Northern Gulf Resource Management Group (NGRMG). Ricky Archer, Indigenous Mapping Coordinator, has recently spent time with elders of the various groups to determine the geographic language boundaries between them. (These are not used to determine Native Title issues.)

The government has also developed its own boundaries that it uses in Indigenous Land Use Agreements and for other legal purposes. The map shows government vs reality and how the differences can effect large tracts of land traditionally under a particular indigenous group.

Biodiversity is being studied intently in the NGRMG region. With the help of Eric Vanderduys from the CSIRO young indigenous kids are discovering the variety and importance of the biodiversity around them. From bush tucker to the little critters the attitude of the kids to their homeland is changing. After a couple of days in the bush with Eric one young kid was hanging around the camp fire when a little critter fell into the fire. He leapt up, grabbed it out of the fire and threw it in a bucket of water to try and save it. Two days earlier he would have let it cook and eaten it.

This involvement of young indigenous people through mapping, recording cultural history, and understanding the diverse nature of their region and the importance of protecting it, is helping ensure that indigenous culture will continue through future generations.



*A Torres Strait turtle sets off on a well watched journey*

## Recording Traditional Knowledge for Management of Country

Aboriginal Elders from Cape York designed the Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways project to record and apply Traditional Owner knowledge for Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to manage our natural resources for present and future generations.

This million dollar state-wide project was funded by the Strategic Reserve and involved seven Traditional Owner groups and five regional NRM areas across Queensland. The regions involved were Desert Channels Queensland (1 group), South West NRM (2 groups), Mackay Whitsunday NRM (1 group), Terrain NRM (1 group), and Cape York Peninsula Development Association (2 groups). Giringun Aboriginal Corporation and Balkanu Aboriginal Corporation were the organising bodies for Far North Queensland and Cape York regions respectively.

The project covered more than half the state and provides a mechanism for combining traditional knowledge with contemporary land management, through video recording and multi-media databases. It enabled Elders to pass on their knowledge and skills,

in a format that will be preserved for future generations.

Recording of knowledge covered a range of aspects such as restoration and protection of fish traps; fire management; management of cultural sites; fencing to allow access for native animals, where appropriate; management of water courses; maintenance of natural watering holes; importance of restoration of mound springs; and biodiversity.

Desert Channels Queensland managed and administered the project and provided technical support to three Traditional Owner groups in

western Queensland. One of these groups was the Budjiti people, who have their traditional lands centred along the Paroo River and extend into New South Wales. In this project Elders passed on their knowledge of how the area was managed before the impacts of reduced water pressure due to large numbers of bores being drilled in the region. This information assisted the management since some of the springs had returned as a result of the GABSI Capping and Piping initiative. This is just one of the many initiatives involved in this cross regional project.

*James Newman recording traditional knowledge*



To find out more about natural resource management projects, visit the 14 Regional Bodies directly or via the Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective website: [www.rgc.org.au](http://www.rgc.org.au)

Digital Chair's report movies are available at [www.landcare.placestories.com](http://www.landcare.placestories.com)

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