



National Environmental
Research Program

NORTHERN AUSTRALIA HUB

Getting it right in the Daly

VANESSA ADAMS DESCRIBES A NEW PLANNING FRAMEWORK WHICH STRIKES THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION IN THE DALY RIVER CATCHMENT.

Conserving the things a community values and meeting its potential for development can be a hard act to juggle, especially if there is strong interest in agricultural development, outstanding natural and cultural values, and differing perspectives in the catchment. For the past three years, researchers funded under the Australian Government's National Environmental Research Program, have been working to achieve exactly that in the Daly River catchment by developing a framework that combines environmental, social and economic values to inform sound policy.

Future potential

The Daly catchment supports an abundance of wildlife, is home to some of the best recreational fishing in northern Australia, and is highly regarded for its Indigenous values. Research fellow Vanessa Adams, who has been working in the catchment since 2008, says the potential for further development is also understandable.

"Its water resources, suitable soil and proximity to Darwin are all favourable factors for future development and people do have an interest in increasing land production for agricultural uses. So it's important to have a plan that can tell us where the best places are to undertake those types of intensive activities, but also the best places to conserve natural and cultural values," Vanessa said.

Straight to the source

Public opinion formed an essential part of the framework. Vanessa says respecting the different values people have for the region was a top priority.

"We wanted to know what aspects of life in the catchment were most important to people, what they like to do there and what areas were of most value," she said.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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www.nerpnorthern.edu.au/publications/citation/nerp626

PHOTO DAVID WITZKE



PHOTO MICHAEL DOUGLAS.

Over 200 residents participated in a survey, equating to about 10 per cent of the households in the catchment. Results showed that the environment is the most important value for people. They choose to live in the catchment because it is a special place. Commercial values on the other hand, were ranked the least important, even though they were still important to people because they have to have a livelihood.

The survey also found people were concerned about pollution, water extraction and the sustainability of future development when it came to commercial land uses. Transparency was also a top priority. Residents felt that any decisions made should be transparent and based on the best available knowledge to ensure that the future land uses within the catchment support livelihoods and protect the environment.

The magic number

Residents were asked how much environmental change they would accept in the future, such as vegetation clearing across the catchment. The results showed that most would be satisfied if 10 per cent of the catchment was cleared, but would accept up to 20 per cent across the catchment.

“This was a really interesting finding, because it aligns with existing clearing guidelines that the Northern Territory Government developed in 2010, to cap clearing at 20 per cent,” Vanessa said.

“Our research also indicates that around 20 per cent of the catchment area has soils that are suitable for developments like farming. So, in fact, these existing guidelines could support development and conservation goals at the same time.”

Vanessa says, however, development is not just about clearing land to access suitable soils; it is also about making sure there’s enough water to support the proposal.

“Surveys in northern Australia consistently find that people think the most important use of water is to keep rivers, plants and animals in good shape for future generations. Similarly, the people in our Daly survey also wanted to see the river supporting plants and animals, and providing a place for fishing.”

Moving forward

The framework, which considered both freshwater and terrestrial environments, can be used across the north and in other parts of Australia. It allows planners to draw together all the available information (environmental, social and economic) to test different strategies and to assess the trade-offs.

Vanessa says getting development right means bringing together scientific evidence and public values to inform good land and water resource policies.

“We believe that planning is a really important part of decision making. The framework we developed can be used by decision makers to evaluate opportunities as they arise, to ensure that decisions are transparent and deliver the best outcomes for residents in the catchment.”

LAND MANAGERS WERE AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE SURVEY. PHOTO MICHAEL LAWRENCE-TAYLOR

