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○ ISSUE 1 | ○ 2009

TRaCK

Indigenous Forum

NEWSLETTER UPDATE ABOUT THE
TROPICAL RIVERS AND COASTAL
KNOWLEDGE (TRaCK) INDIGENOUS
ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMME

Acknowledgements to all our dear elders that still exist in the hearts and minds, the ones who have left us to sleep in death and the ones still alive with us. With their knowledge, wisdom and thoughtfulness, we can carry on in the struggle for country and the fight towards homeland movement and work in union towards self determination and reconciliation.

BACKGROUND OF THE FORUM

The Tropical Rivers and Coastal Knowledge (TRaCK) Indigenous Forum was held in Mount Carbine North Queensland over three days, 14th – 16th November 2008 to engage with Traditional Owners of the Mitchell River Catchment. Marceil Lawrence developed a structured forum that was packed with information for Traditional Owners within the Mitchell River Catchment, as well as participants from the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA), North Queensland Miners Association, and visitors from Balkanu and the Daly River water group, with the aim of building partnerships and delivering awareness to new and existing projects within the Mitchell River Catchment. In the past there has been poor engagement between researchers and Traditional Owner groups. This forum was set up to deliver a better engagement process to enable all parties to understand and work alongside each other. By establishing workable partnerships, and enhancing the researchers' understanding of Indigenous people, past and present and their connection to

land and water, this forum opened a door of acceptance, so future decision making and projects become profitable and beneficial to all. The forum was held in Western Ku Ku Yalanji country, at the Mount Carbine Caravan Park, Camp Paterson accommodated and catered for the delegates and many extras that came and supported the weekend event. Unfortunately, Kowanyama Community could not attend but sent their apologies. Kowanyama sits at the end of the catchment and relies heavily upon the river for their existence. This community was the first to form a watershed management group when they hosted a forum in 1990. This became the foundation of the Mitchell River Watershed Management Group (MRWMG) and the vision was to enhance the river health together as a community. Through collaboration, Kowanyama spearheaded a strong, viable and productive organisation. We are grateful for the work they started with the MRWMG by raising concerns and dealing with issues of land and water management in North Queensland.



THE MITCHELL RIVER CATCHMENT

The Mitchell River flows hundreds of miles across Cape York Peninsula, from its headwaters in World Heritage listed rainforest, to its mouth in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The biologically diverse catchment is 72,000 square kilometres, taking in tropical rainforest, wet and dry forest, eucalypt woodlands and savannah regions. The rivers within the catchment include the Mitchell, Alice, Lynd, Tate, Palmer and Walsh.

Photos courtesy of Michael Douglas and the Mitchell River Watershed Management Group

PHOTOS FROM THE

DAY 1



"Remember our ancestors knew this land and its rivers before we. All our stories and special feelings are there so we must care for our river country" - Michael Yam, Olkola/Kunjen Traditional Owner, Chairperson of the Mitchell River Watershed Management Group (MRWVG)

DAY 2



Photos courtesy of Michael Douglas

TRaCK INDIGENOUS FORUM

DAY 3



Photos courtesy of Michael Douglas

MEET THE TEAM



Michael Douglas, Theme Leader of Aquatic Ecosystems and Water Resources in TRaCK, is based in Darwin NT. Michael has worked with the TRaCK program to develop research in close collaboration with the Australian Government, the QLD, NT and WA Governments, Indigenous organisations and regional natural resource management and catchment management groups. Michael Douglas spoke about how his researchers bring knowledge to the table and conversely highlighting how important traditional knowledge is and its contribution to western science. TRaCK brings researchers together to manage tropical rivers, with the aim to make good decisions about how to look after rivers.



Marceil Lawrence coordinated the TRaCK Indigenous Forum. Marceil recently graduated from Deakin University in natural-cultural resource management. She jumped on board with the Mitchell River Watershed Management Group 2 years ago and found herself sitting on the seat of the Executive Committee as Vice Chairperson. Marceil coordinated the forum that brought many together and highlighted the need for traditional owners in the catchment to formalise themselves with natural resource management groups. Marceil emphasised that these connections would help Traditional Owners to create support networks and obtain funding towards caring for country.



Deborah Eastop, former Coordinator of the Mitchell River Watershed Group. Deb worked with the Mitchell River Watershed Management Group for 5 years, until she recently resigned. Deborah has helped the Mitchell River Catchment and its communities towards greater environmental practices through her tireless community work. Deborah has established and influenced many volunteer projects in the catchment, and has encouraged greater dialogue amongst stakeholders. Deborah was largely responsible for encouraging Indigenous engagement with research programs, such as TRaCK.



Brynn Mathews worked for 11 years with Environmental Protection Authority. Based in Cairns, his work took him through Cape York working with community councils, assisting them in licence activities. Brynn now works as a Project Officer for Mitchell River Watershed Management Group.

And us mob, the people of the land.



Photos courtesy of Michael Douglas and *Charles Darwin University

FORUM PARTICIPANTS

The Mitchell River catchment includes a variety of working groups including Pastoralists, Schools, Researchers and Research Organisations, Tourism, Fishing, Mining, Conservation, as well as Local, State and Australian Government agencies. The Tropical Rivers and Coastal Knowledge (TRaCK) Indigenous Forum focused on understanding the catchment issues from the perspective of Indigenous peoples. TRaCK researchers rely upon liaison work with Indigenous people. Cultural awareness is important. Michael and the TRaCK team encourage Traditional Owner groups in the catchment to get involved with the catchment programs as well as supporting Indigenous groups that are already functioning well in the catchment.

Hugh Wallace Smith from NAILSMA is very much involved with Indigenous and environmental issues in the top end. He is the Coordinator for the new Indigenous Community Water Network. Hugh has recently been working for the Kimberly Land Council coordinating the Fitzroy River Catchment Management Project. Barrister/Lawyer Ruth Link (nee Cummins) facilitated the forum. Ruth is a descendant of the Western Ku Ku Yalanji. She is based in Brisbane and teaches at Griffith University and University Queensland. Ruth's husband, Brad, is also a Lawyer and he kindly offered to take notes at the forum.



Other delegates included the Traditional Owners from the Mitchell River catchment and visitors from the Daly River Catchment Group from the Northern Territory. All came together to listen, discuss and gather information vital to the survival of the rivers that flow in the catchment. Welcome to country was proudly given by the Western Ku Ku Yalanji clan group with a performance from the Myee Woonba Aboriginal dance group lead by Bertie Riley. Pastor Eddie Turpin, a Ku Ku Taipan elder, blessed the forum with prayer. The first address was given by Graham Brady from Western Yalanji. Entitled "From There to Here", Graham spoke about Indigenous lifestyle before and after colonization, assimilation and segregation and how Indigenous people fit into the popular culture period which exists today. He centred on how the environment suffered and survived due to the drastic change brought upon by the movement of Indigenous people, but if we as a people work for progress, then change will be a change for the better. Graham emphasised the importance of unity that existed among the clans and that the river was the common thread that links us all together.

Photos courtesy of Michael Douglas

PROGRAM OF THE

DAY 1

All gathered for the opening ceremony, and a welcome to country was acknowledged and recognitions to Dr Tommy George and neighbouring people of the Mitchell river catchment was given. This day was opened with prayer by Pastor Eddie Turpin and followed by Myee Woonba Aboriginal Dance group - Traditional Owners from Western Yalanji. Adapting to change was the talk given by Graham Brady Traditional Owner of Westren Yalanji. He highlighted how we must recognise that we as a people cannot just say we are here without recognition of the past since European contact. Because we are custodians of a higher power and it is he who gave us responsibility to care for this land, the land and the people became one in unity. The disposition of Aboriginal people from homeland to reserves was hard for the country and the country suffered. Graham reminded the Traditional Custodians that it is today that bama can see how the land suffered, especially with the rivers, waterways, and waterholes throughout the whole Mitchell River Catchment. The children's workshop was supervised by Jasmine Brady and Sharon Lawrence. The focus was how the young are affected by the usage of the rivers, and to give their input to ways of dealing with managing and the future of our creeks, rivers and the catchment.



DAY 2

Everyone gathered in the hall and Marceil opened the morning with a brief outline to introduce what the day was going to bring. She reminded everyone to think about outcomes to be drafted, with the aim of constructing an agreement. She introduced people associated with Tropical Rivers and Coastal Knowledge (TRaCK) research and their involvement with projects in the Mitchell River and told of the keen interest they have with working alongside Traditional Owners.

One project that the Traditional Owners were especially interested was on flows and fish. Ian Halliday and his team from the QLD Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries will be investigating how flows of freshwater into estuaries affect the productivity of estuarine fisheries. He informed how the team will be approaching commercial recreational and community fishers from the Mitchell River estuary to take specimens from their catch so they can age the fish and look at how numbers vary from year to year in relation to the size of river flows into the estuary. This work will enable researchers to predict how changes in river flows affect the productivity of fish that live in the estuaries at the end of tropical river systems.

If you want more information on this project please call Ian Halliday on 07 3817 9530.



EXAMPLE BARRAMUNDI BONE

Fish Details

Caught: June 2008, Five Ways, Mitchell River

Total Length: 1151mm

Age: 9 (born 1999)

Photo and information courtesy of Ian Halliday

TRaCK INDIGENOUS FORUM

DAY 3

The morning session had everyone come together to reflect on the information that was delivered over the first two days. The children spoke about their workshop and delivered a hand paint wall hanging to the Daly River group as a token of respect and acknowledgement for their support and encouragement.



The forum ended well, as the three days were jammed packed with information that the people needed to know. Families came together, they talked about what they were feeling and the needs for the land, rivers and the next generations coming. Expectations were given by both parties and understandings of two cultures working together and achieving the same goals became closer to a realization than just a dream. There will be follow ups to keep the people informed, interested and encourage us all to get involved. This is a time for change, a time to reflect, create, get involved and unite as a family, work colleagues and friends. If you are interested in more information or wanting to contribute time or ideas, please feel free to contact Marciel Lawrence at the Mitchell River Watershed Management Group on 07 4053 3471.

The **final recommendations** from the Indigenous Forum included:

- That we adopt the “Mitchell River Traditional Custodian Advisory Group” (MRTCAG) which was carried unanimously
- That the MRTCAG make a submission to the Queensland Government responding to the Mitchell Draft Resource Operation Plan 2008
- That we the MRTCAG endorse Ruth Link and Brad Maher to undertake research and write draft documents; including:
 - Governance documents
 - Relevant Considerations
 - Application Processes for Researchers (and train Marciel Lawrence and the new Water Facilitator to learn these skills and do this also)
 - That TRaCK pay Ruth and Brad Maher a nominal fee for the research and drafting of the aforementioned document

The work set up from the Indigenous Forum will be followed up by Marciel Lawrence, and the MRTCAG will continue beyond the scope of TRaCK.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

- Visit communities
- Visit to individual key people from each mob
- Another funded meeting to seek endorsement of the draft agreement document
- Draft then to be sent to TRaCK (if agreement reached)

Photo courtesy of Michael Douglas

OUTCOMES OF THE FORUM

A draft water plan was submitted to the Queensland Government, as the Government had asked all Traditional Custodians, stakeholders and businesses in the Mitchell River Catchment to write submissions to the **Mitchell Draft Resource Operations Plan 2008**. The draft report was prepared by the Mitchell River Traditional Custodian Advisory Group, with the assistance of Brisbane based solicitor Mr Bradley Maher and Barrister Ms Ruth Link. If you want a copy of the report please contact Marceil Lawrence on 07 4053 3471.

Another outcome from the Indigenous Forum, is that **Sharon Brady was accepted into Deakin University** to study Business - Commence, to major in Economics and Business Marketing. Sharon has a keen interest in the fundamentals of finance, and how it has an impact on society. Sharon is also interested in working alongside JCU Townsville economist lecturer Natalie Stoeckl and her new project with TRaCK. By studying and furthering her knowledge in this field Sharon has the opportunity to work with Natalie and has been invited to be involved with her research.



Photo courtesy of Michael Douglas

CONTACT INFORMATION

For additional copies of this newsletter as well as the minutes from the TRaCK Indigenous Forum, please contact Marceil Lawrence on 07 4053 3471.

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