

# The People of the Tropics – now and into the future

Research was conducted into the changing nature of people living in and visiting tropical river catchments from Broome to the tip of Cape York (the TRaCK region or “region”). Demographic changes were examined in terms of how mobile people were, how long they had lived in a place, their age, gender and Indigeneity. Analysis was also done to explore whether trends observed in the past ten or fifteen years are likely to be carried forward in the next ten or fifteen years, and how this might influence the population makeup well into the 21st century. From a tourism perspective numbers and types of visitors were profiled along with the nature of the trips common to the region.

*The research was a sub-component of the broader TRaCK 3.1 research program which had three main parts:*

- (A) Developing an understanding of tourism and population trends and projections of the catchments
- (B) Developing a socio-economic snapshot of catchments within the tropical rivers region; and
- (C) Creating an economic model of the region.

*This fact sheet focuses on part (A)*

## What did we investigate?

A range of data sources were analysed to compare and contrast the demographic composition of populations within, across, and external to the tropical river catchments. This included a separate analysis of the resident populations and tourist populations. The findings were used to assess the likely future composition of resident populations and how these might change over time. A demographic profile was produced for each catchment (or groups of catchments where the population numbers were too small).

For tourism, trends in the number of visitors and their origins (international and domestic) were assessed.

*Figure 1: Populations of Urban Centres and Localities As Recorded at the 2006 Census (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 Census)*

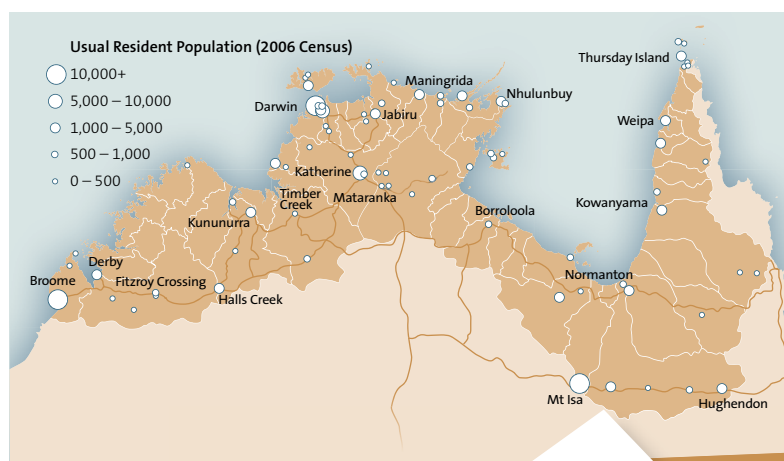
## People in the tropics

The TRaCK region is home to just two percent of Australia’s resident population (about 310,000 people). These people aren’t evenly spread among townships in the region, rather there are large concentrations in several centres; notably the greater Darwin area, Broome and Mt Isa (Figure 1).

There are a number of features of the population that distinguish it from the rest of Australia. Firstly there is a higher proportion of Indigenous people residing in the region – around a third of the total (approximately 110,000 people). This represents 16 percent of Australia’s Indigenous population and around half of Australia’s Torres Strait Islander population of 30,000.

Secondly it is a young population with a relatively high number of men. The median age is 33 years compared to 37 years for the rest of Australia while there are 106 men for every 100 women. The Indigenous resident population also has a higher proportion of young people than the non-Indigenous population (Figure 2).

Population growth in the region has followed two distinct paths – a rapid increase of Indigenous populations since the early 1980s and high rates of population turnover among non-Indigenous populations. Most non-Indigenous population growth has occurred amongst the ‘older’ people. As the current group of 45 year-olds gets older they will either retire in the region, creating a large dependency burden, or move away, diminishing the economic and social capital.



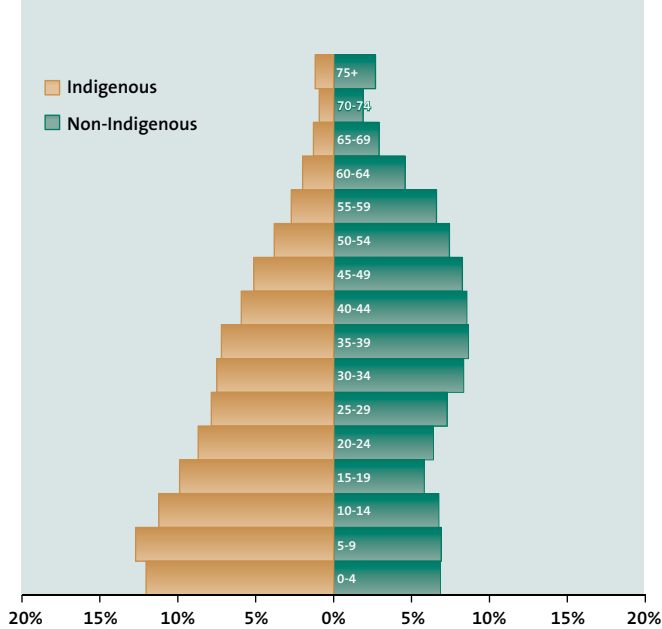


Figure 2: Age-sex pyramid by Indigenous status, 2006 (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 Census)

## Tourism

More than 20 percent of international visitors to Australia visit the region while about six percent of travellers (international and domestic) in Australia visit the region each year. This equates to about 4.5 million visits each year. Most of those visitors come during winter (about 75%), and during the peak tourism season, the effective population of the TRaCK region doubles to almost 300,000 people. This has implications for businesses during the off season and for infrastructure provision (like roads) and accommodation establishments in meeting peak season demands.

Tourism performance can be described at best as flat. During 2000 to 2007 the domestic tourism market share was static at around 4.5 percent. The TRaCK region's share of international visitors was also static between 2002 and 2007 at around 22 percent but this market has grown over the same period so that the number of visitors to the region may have increased. Consequently, the growth in the tourism market in the 2000s has been almost exclusively from the international visitor market, and the focus of this market on Cairns and Port Douglas may mean that other places in the region have had only a limited numbers of visitors.

## The future

By the middle of the current century, the human populations of the TRaCK region are likely to have grown in total (both residents and visitors) but they will have become even more concentrated in larger centres. There

will be a higher percentage of Indigenous people and the population will continue to age. The current large group of young Indigenous people will move through the working age groups over the next ten or fifteen years, while the current large group of mid-career non-Indigenous people will retire. Many of both groups will move away, continuing the established pattern of high mobility and residential moves to more urbanised parts. Isolated pockets of tourism development may occur, but the bulk of the infrastructure will remain in the established areas, and the current trend is toward decreased dispersal of tourists.

One effect of these future trends will be a growth in those who are 'service needy' in the more remote parts with demands on welfare, health and education services likely to increase. In the growth areas (essentially the major cities) there will be continuing pressure on housing, infrastructure and services. A key challenge for governments at all levels will be to generate innovative ways to sustain remote communities who are not well connected (by transport or economically) with the main centres.

## How has this research helped?

The application of this research is to inform assessments about and the planning for future human, economic and environmental scenarios for the region in conjunction with other research streams being conducted under the TRaCK banner to support river and estuary management in northern Australia (see [www.track.gov.au](http://www.track.gov.au)).

## Who was involved

Charles Darwin University – Dean Carson, Andrew Taylor, and Suzanne Campbell

CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems – Silva Larson and Kostas Alexandridis, based in Townsville

James Cook University – Dr Natalie Stoeckl (leader of overall project) and Owen Stanley

## Contacts and more information

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Other project publications and profiles for individual catchments can be viewed on the TRaCK website: [www.track.gov.au/research-projects/301](http://www.track.gov.au/research-projects/301) by following the links.



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