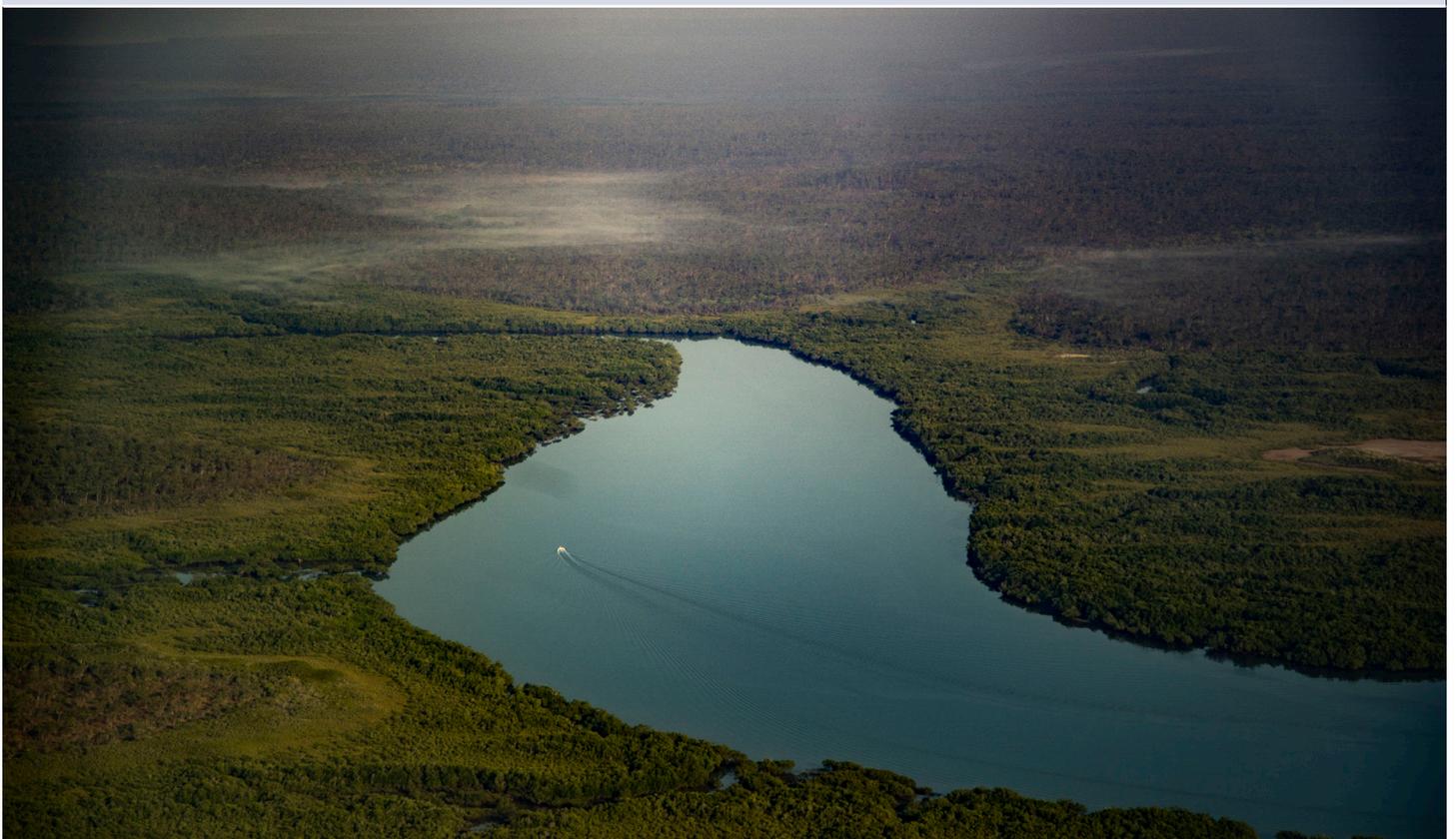


Discussion starter

Key messages

- Increasing focus on the development of northern Australia is seeing the region experience major investment and development in a landscape that boasts significant environmental and cultural values.
- Robust development planning and decision-making processes are needed to meet the needs of investors and the community, and to reduce the risks to both the region's unique values and future economic opportunities.
- Achieving high-quality investment and development in the north requires planning and decision-making that can account for the complexity and diversity of values of the region, can facilitate acceptable trade-offs and is based on the best available knowledge.
- Integrated environmental assessment (IEA) is an approach for combining knowledge from diverse disciplines and knowledge systems to inform and improve development decisions.
- The aim of this project is to support decision-makers in the design and delivery of IEA processes that would bring significant benefit for both investors and communities, and improve the quality and implementation of policy, regulatory, planning and project decisions in northern Australia.
- We are seeking to work with stakeholders across northern Australia to support them to adapt and tailor an existing IEA framework to fit in with existing planning and decision-making approaches.



A Top End river. Photo: Patch Clapp.

The challenge

Northern Australia (Figure 1) boasts environmental and cultural values of global, national, and local significance. Increasing focus on developing the region has led to northern Australia experiencing significant opportunities for investment and development, including for agriculture, aquaculture, energy, mining, housing and tourism. Current approaches to development planning and decision-making are proving insufficient for achieving sustainable development.

For investors, clear, viable development opportunities for progressing towards investment are not readily accessible. Both development and community interests have raised concerns about impediments to new investment and the achievement of sustainable development in northern Australia. Equally, a recent audit and review of the operation of the Commonwealth's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act¹ argues that current regulatory arrangements are not adequately protecting environmental values, particularly in the face of climate change. Both development and community interests have raised specific concerns about impediments to new investment and the achievement of sustainable development in northern Australia.

Recent research work undertaken by the Cooperative Research Centre for Developing Northern Australia (CRCNA) suggests that these problems arise, in part, from the difficulty in considering the multiple and diverse environmental, social, economic and cultural values of the land- and seascapes of northern Australia in an integrated way. The CRCNA's work^{2,3,4} argues that current policy,

planning and assessment approaches and decision-making processes are inadequate for meeting this challenge, leaving both investors and decision-makers who are seeking to protect important environmental and cultural values, and de-risk new areas for development, facing considerable uncertainty when assessing development opportunities. Identified problems include:

- lack of clearly articulated priorities for development and conservation across the north
- limited integrated, collaborative planning at the catchment or regional scale between governments, the private sector and the community
- fragmented and conflicting policy and process settings in project assessment and approval
- a limited focus on raising the capacity of development interests to develop and progress investment-ready proposals that can achieve regulatory obligations.

Conflict arising from these problems leaves industries, financiers and communities uncertain and risk-averse about investment, and importantly, it also places the environmental and cultural values of the landscape at risk. These issues are exacerbated by the changing climate of the north. High-quality investment and development requires proactive planning and robust decision-making processes that can consider and account for the significant environmental, social, cultural and economic values of the region in an integrated way, using the best available information.

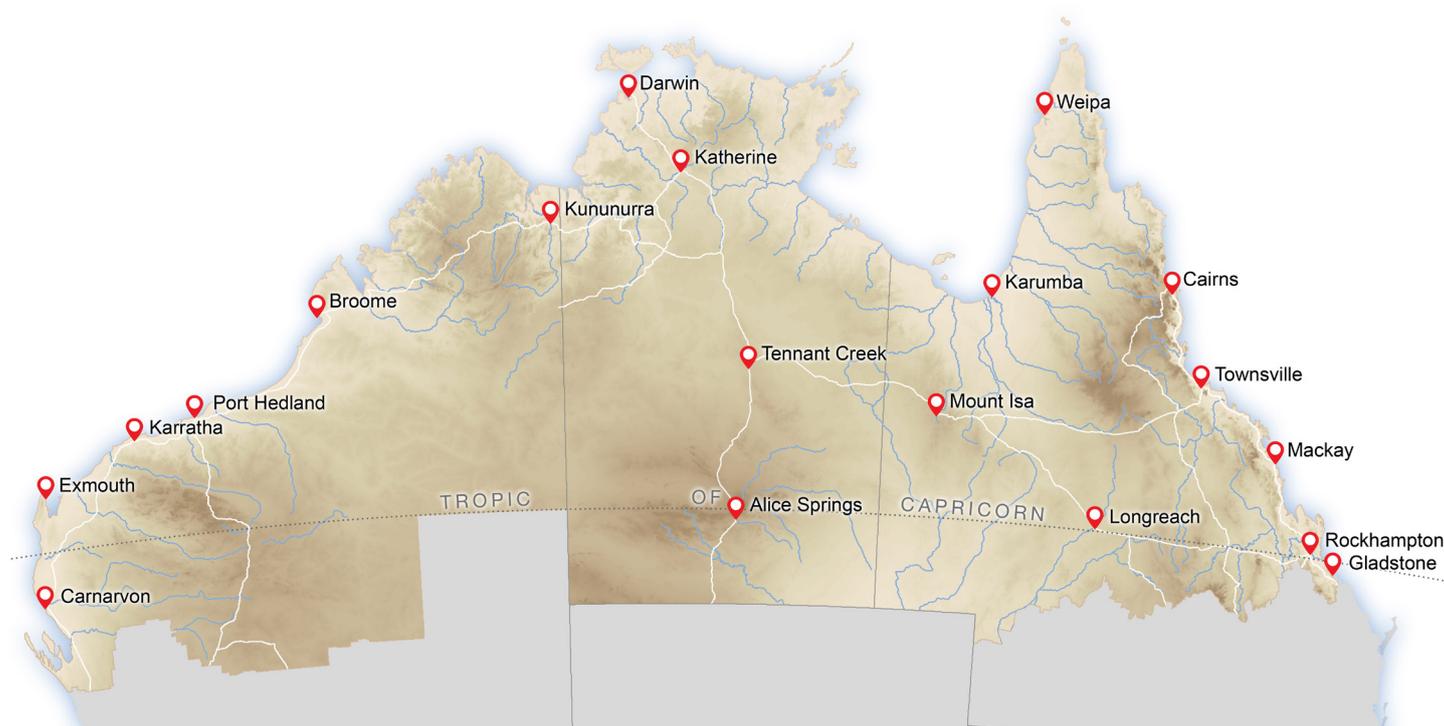


Figure 1. The geographic scope of this research is the area defined as northern Australia by the Office of Northern Australia. The outputs of the project will be applicable in this region, but the framework and recommendations about the approach will be applicable nationally. Map data courtesy Australian Bureau of Statistics.

What is integrated environmental assessment, and how could it help?

Integrated environmental assessment (IEA) is an interdisciplinary and policy-orientated process for supporting shared decision-making through combining, analysing and interpreting information from diverse disciplines and knowledge systems. IEA offers a structured and participatory process to evaluate and synthesise knowledge in various forms, including expert knowledge, scientific data and cultural perspectives. It uses a coordinated analysis framework to deliver insights into complex issues that can assist decision-makers. The process can help facilitate trade-offs and also allows for early identification of knowledge gaps and other barriers in advance of decision-making.

The ability of improved IEA to explore complex issues and to integrate information from multiple knowledge systems

makes it particularly useful for informing development decisions in large, contested areas containing high biodiversity and cultural values, such as northern Australia. The IEA process could provide valuable insights into strategic assessments and environmental impact assessments, as well as regional, local and project-level planning in northern Australia (Figure 2). The IEA process could be used, for example, to identify areas where economic, cultural and environmental values overlap, compete or complement, or to explore scenarios of possible environmental, development and climate futures, and facilitate the negotiation of appropriate trade-offs. If well designed, it could prove an invaluable process for both de-risking investment in the north and protecting the region's significant cultural and environmental assets.

The project

This project brings together all six Hubs of the Australian Government's National Environmental Science Program and seeks to contribute to improved decision-making about development and the environment in northern Australia. It aims to do this by working with the north's stakeholders to adapt and tailor an existing IEA framework to fit within existing planning and decision-making processes. Building on the work of the CRCNA, the project has a specific focus on informing and

supporting high-quality planning and development decision-making that considers environmental, social, economic and cultural factors, and integrates across the relevant land- and seascapes. In supporting stakeholders, and particularly the Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland governments, the project will also identify practical case studies that demonstrate applications of IEA, and illustrate the benefits and challenges of implementing the IEA approach.

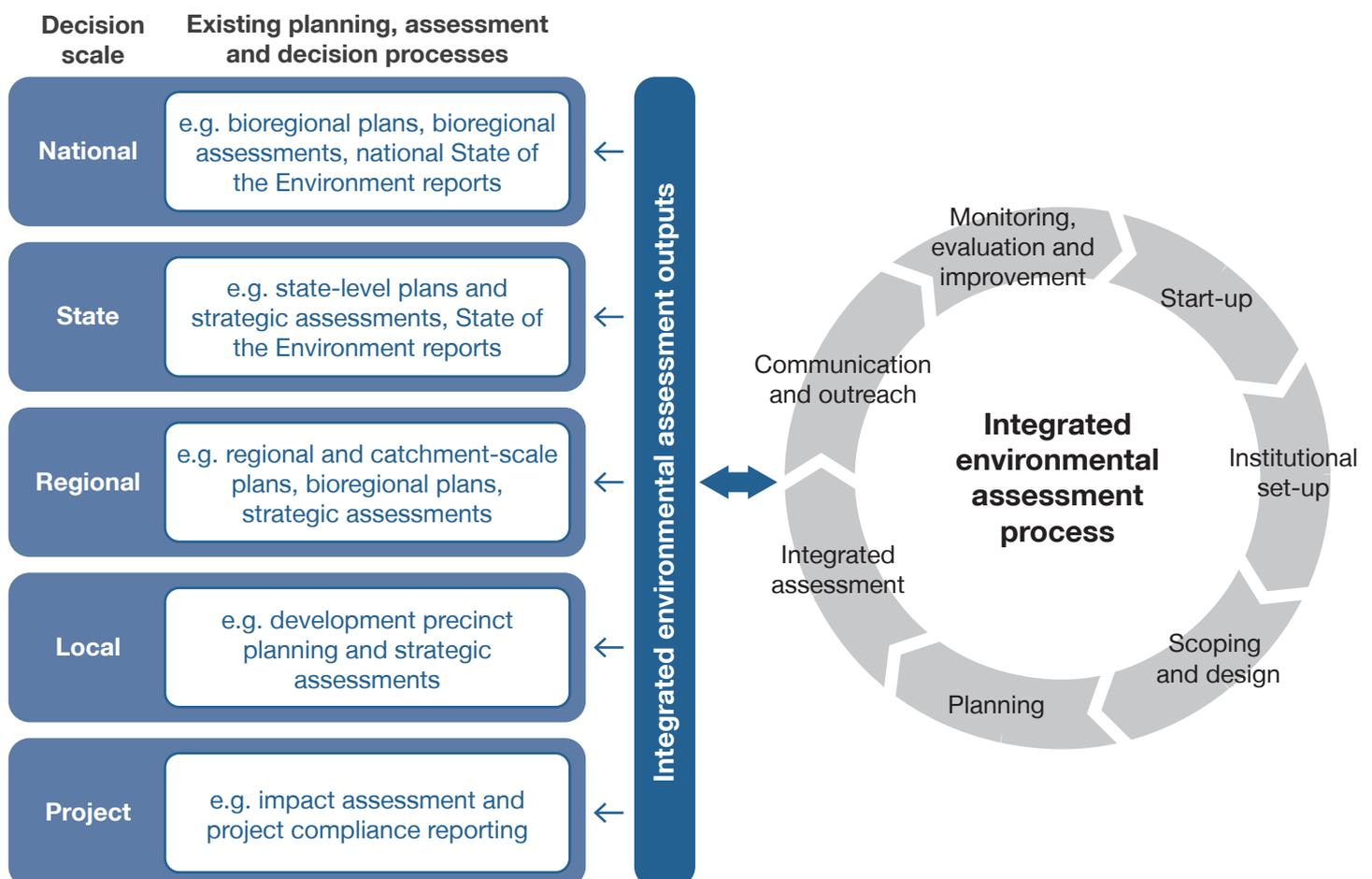


Figure 2. Relationship between IEA and existing planning, assessment and decision processes, at different scales.



Canoeing in the Kimberley. Photo: Jaana Dielenberg.

Our approach to collaborative effort

The National Environmental Science Program delivers collaborative, practical and applied research to inform environmental decision-making and on-ground action. We are seeking to work closely with the north's key stakeholders to help shape the potential enhancement of planning and decision-making systems at the jurisdictional, regional, local and project scales. We are particularly interested in identifying and partnering with key stakeholders who are seeking to secure better economic, social, cultural and environmental outcomes for northern Australia as the region develops. This document aims to simply start that discussion with those key stakeholders.

Further information

Visit nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/projects/integrated-environmental-assessment-to-inform-environmental-decisions or contact Mat Hardy mat.hardy@unimelb.edu.au or Allan Dale allan.dale@jcu.edu.au

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