



National Environmental
Research Program

TROPICAL ECOSYSTEMS *hub*

NERP Tropical Ecosystems Hub Conference 2013

**Tuesday 7 May 1330-1500
Forum Synopsis**

**How do we recognise progress in securing the
conservation of the Wet Tropics?**

Convener: Andrew Maclean
Executive Director, Wet Tropics Management Authority



Australian Government

**Department of Sustainability, Environment,
Water, Population and Communities**

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The inscription of Australia's Wet Tropics rainforests 25 years ago as a World Heritage Area was a great achievement for conservation. Listing saw an immediate end to logging activity, limited the prospect of any future mining, prevented any significant vegetation clearing and led to the establishment of a robust, statutory management plan. In turn, listing as a World Heritage Area created a strong impetus for the growth of rainforest tourism, building understanding and support for conservation among residents and visitors alike.

We would be complacent if we were to conclude that our responsibility for protecting and conserving the outstanding universal value of the Wet Tropics was achieved simply through listing and formal reservation. Many threats to rainforest conservation operate without regard to our boundaries and rules.

Pests, such as tramp ants and feral deer; weeds, such as Miconia and Koster's Curse; and diseases, such as Myrtle Rust and Chytrid Fungus have become established in the Wet Tropics despite World Heritage listing and our management efforts.

Climate change has accelerated over the last 25 years and we might be already seeing its manifestations in the Wet Tropics in increased cyclone intensity, more frequent hot spells and changing rainfall patterns.

Population growth in the region continues to drive land use change in the wider region and create pressure for establishing new, or improving existing, transport, water supply, energy and telecommunications infrastructure within the World Heritage Area.

The four papers presented in this session all contribute in various ways to our understanding of the conservation status of the Wet Tropics.

- Professor Steve Williams' research adds to and draws upon a very extensive rainforest fauna dataset established over many years. This data combined with sophisticated modelling techniques is helping us better understand processes, trends and management priorities relevant to rainforest conservation.
- Dr Darren Crayn is investigating the distribution of plant and fungal taxonomic richness, endemism, and genetic diversity across the Wet Tropics bioregion at the level of genus, species, and population. This information will provide a solid foundation for conservation prioritisation efforts in the region.
- Dr Conrad Hoskins's work focuses on the region's frog populations, several of which have been severely affected by chytrid fungus. Conrad's work is providing some cause for optimism that populations may persist in unexpected locations or may even have adapted to survive with chytrid fungus infections.
- Dr David Westcott's research focuses on population monitoring of the iconic southern cassowary, and flying foxes. Cassowaries and flying foxes are prominent features of Wet Tropics biodiversity, often evoking strong reactions in the human community. Aside from the information it provides on the species themselves, David's research highlights the challenge of monitoring trends in wildlife populations in ways that can allow confident conclusions about management strategy and results.

Representatives of the research user community will join the researchers in a Q and A panel session following the presentations.

Some focus questions for the discussion session:

- Having secured 900,000 ha of forest for conservation 25 years ago, all we ever seem to discuss is how things are getting worse. Is there any empirical evidence of positive trends in Wet Tropics forest conservation?
- Is the scientific/technical understanding of forest condition the same as the community/political



understanding? If not, can we reconcile and align these?

- Is modelling monitoring? Is it acceptable to estimate and predict forest condition, or should we measure directly?
- Despite work done all over Australia and the world for many years, we do not seem to have managed to identify informative, reliable, trusted and cost-effective indicators of trends in biodiversity. Is our search for indicators as likely to succeed as the quest for the Holy Grail?
- How influential has Wet Tropics research been in influencing policy, planning and management practice? What role do scientists themselves have in ensuring their work has influence?
- While we apparently like biodiversity and we trade on the biodiversity of the region, we like it to be in its place not our place. Snakes, flying-foxes, feral pigs, lorikeets, crocodiles, wallabies are all animals that are attracted to the habitats we make but are not welcome. Can we learn to live with these animals and what are the risks of not doing so?