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### Cape York for World Heritage listing: is it ready?

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## Cape York for World Heritage listing: is it ready?

### Abstract

World Heritage sites in Australia have often been born out of battles between conservationists and development-oriented state governments. Little regard has been paid to land owners: until now.

### Disciplines

Medicine and Health Sciences | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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# THE CONVERSATION

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## Cape York for World Heritage listing: is it ready?

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There are opportunities for compromise between development and conservation in Cape York, but they're en route to being missed. [hindsite/Flickr](#)

World Heritage sites in Australia have often been born out of battles between conservationists and development-oriented state governments. Little regard has been paid to land owners: until now.

February marks an annual deadline for new site nominations. In 2013, the Federal Government aims to submit a Cape York site nomination to UNESCO. Working towards this deadline raises problematic issues. Interestingly, Federal Environment Minister Tony Burke has publicly stated that a nomination can only proceed with the consent of Traditional Owners. This is unusual because it potentially gives Traditional Owners the final word on nomination.

Cape York is surrounded by two other World Heritage sites, the Great Barrier Reef and the Queensland Wet Tropics. Cape York residents are therefore no strangers to World Heritage issues. Far-north Queensland has well-documented natural "outstanding universal values" under World Heritage criteria.

Historically, peak interest groups were not opposed to joining together to further a World Heritage agenda for Cape York, as demonstrated by the aspirational 1996 Cape York Heads of Agreement. However, 30 years of inaction on economic issues, poor infrastructure, and failed policies now form a background for oppositional politics in Cape York. The organisations that confront conservation, pastoral, or Aboriginal issues in Cape York must deal with legacy and ongoing tensions that converge on the subject of World Heritage. These include the contentious Wild Rivers Act 2005 and "consultation fatigue".

Since the Queensland Liberal National Party government committed to repealing Wild Rivers, a major obstacle preventing inter-organisational cooperation on ascertaining heritage values and explaining World Heritage to communities has been removed.

What then is the problem?



Seisia, Cape York. hindsite/Flickr

## The tyranny of distance and the legacy of bureaucracy

Cape York in many ways exemplifies the new frontier of transforming remote places into conservation estates, and many pastoralists and Aboriginal groups are disgruntled with the way the conservation agenda for Cape York has defined the recent political trajectory of the region. For them, Wild Rivers was an indicator of policy and governance that failed the test of inclusion for community engagement and consultation in Cape York.

“Consultation fatigue” is common throughout Cape York communities, Aboriginal or otherwise, largely due to the many bureaucratic and academic studies that have been conducted with little material results. Breaking through consultation fatigue to achieve the requisite “informed consent” should raise serious concerns about a February 2013 nomination deadline.

At last year’s World Heritage Symposium in Cairns, some speakers warned that the considerable resources invested in the nomination process meant failure to proceed with a nomination would be an unacceptable outcome. In my recent research, one interviewee argued that “people are being consulted about things that aren’t really their concern or agenda”.



Lockhart River Cairns Peace by Peace

These issues, combined with pre-existing consultation fatigue, begins to lend the issue of consent an unsettlingly coercive colouring. Under such circumstances, government acquisition and return of pastoral land to Aboriginal people in exchange for supporting conservation objectives may appear to be a form of bribery – a bribery of customary Aboriginal land no less.

Much of the conservation agenda, including Wild Rivers and World Heritage, is aimed at preventing increased mining (despite some Aboriginal support for mines). World Heritage is seen as an opportunity to develop an alternative conservation economy. This would include carbon farming, increased tourism and a number of other initiatives. It broadly aligns with Jon Altman's "hybrid economy" modelling of market, state and customary components.

The conservation economy fails to address what many see as more pressing economic concerns such as infrastructure (which will in turn facilitate tourism) and land tenure restrictions in an area geographically distant from the traditional market economy. These two issues and more could be included in a broad-scale economic plan for the region, but to date no plan has ever been drafted.

The federal or state government should consider this a fundamental step in explaining World Heritage opportunities when consulting with communities.

## Confronting the issues

Across-the-board support for increased tourism is just one of many issues that could be used to build bilateral support and inter-organisational trust in the region. Problematically, where there is opportunity for agreement, past infractions and ideological conflict prevent cooperation.

Ideological conflict can stem from the culture of the organisation, or from particular people in positions of authority. The remote and parochial nature of the region means that people have often had a long time to develop particular grievances – perceived or otherwise – against other organisation members.



Abattoir Swamp, Cape York Charlie Brewer

To facilitate an inclusive World Heritage listing, should it go ahead, organisational figures may be required to confront their prejudices for the sake of representing the region's heritage values.

Recent developments, such as the withdrawal of the Queensland government from the World Heritage consultation process they have been facilitating for the last two years (citing procedural duplication with the Federal Government), will only seed more distrust and confusion for World Heritage within communities.

February 2013 may be a good opportunity to find closure on a 30 year issue. However, this deadline places unnecessary strain on community engagement and marginalises those that do not wish to participate. Responsibly resolving inter-organisational disputes without a looming deadline will be central to an empowered community that protects what is important to it. Only then should World Heritage follow.