



Cairns and Far North Environment Centre Inc.

PO Box 323N, Cairns, Qld. 4870
T: (07) 403 21746 F: (07) 405 33779
E: coord@caf nec.org.au www.caf nec.org.au

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Policy Position

Far North Queensland 2025 Regional Plan

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1. Sarah Rizvi, Cairns and Far North Environment Centre
2. Michael Bryan, Cairns and Far North Environment Centre
3. John Rainbird, Cairns and Far North Environment Centre_
4. Steve Ryan, Cairns and Far North Environment Centre_
5. Andrew Simmonds, Cairns and Far North Environment Centre
6. Marin Haldane, Cairns and Far North Environment Centre
7. Ellie Bock, Cairns and Far North Environment Centre
8. Lenore Evans, CBUG: Cairns Bicycle Users Group
9. Jill Thosborne
10. Adam Millar, Environmental Defenders Office
11. John Beasley, Envirocare Kuranda
12. Svargo Freitag, Empower
13. Sid Walker, Friends of the Earth Kuranda
14. Di Horsburgh, The Wilderness Society
15. Roisin Allen, Douglas Shire Sustainability Group
16. Elisa Ryzar, Low Isles Preservation Society
17. Gabi Bohnet, Yabasta, Atherton
18. Bill Sokolich
19. Graham Harrington
20. Ian Northcott
21. Bill Bray

Contents:

Introduction

Challenging the status quo

Key assumptions

Strategic directions:

1. Defining sustainability
2. Designing a low energy future
3. The natural environment
4. Natural resources
5. People
6. Monitoring and evaluation – measuring our progress
7. Mapping

Desired Regional Outcomes:

Sustainability

- a. Performance Indicators
- b. Clear and binding Targets
- c. Monitoring and Evaluation
- d. Implementation and Enforcement

Natural Environment

- a. Wildlife corridors and reserves
- b. Buffers zones around World Heritage
- e. Local Area Planning
- f. Comprehensive mapping
- g. Conservation and Biodiversity checks on development applications
- h. Managing the Coast
- i. Environmental Offsets

Regional landscapes

- a. Conservation areas
- b. Scenic Amenity areas
- c. Agricultural areas
- d. Outdoor recreation
- e. Cultural landscapes

Natural Resources

- a. Land
- b. Sustainable agricultural practices
- c. Diversified landscapes
- d. Soil Conservation
- e. Mining and extractive industries
- f. Water Resources

Rural Futures

- a. Sustainable and Diversified Agriculture
- b. Agro forestry
- c. Ecosystem Services
- d. Protecting good quality agricultural land from residential development.
- e. Local food economies
- f. Permaculture
- g. Riparian management within Rural Production land

Urban Development

- a. Urban structure
- b. Urban form
- c. Character and design
- d. Housing mix
- e. Rural residential
- f. Regional activity centres
- g. Local growth management strategies
- h. Integrated land use and transport policy

Economic Development

- a. Policy position
- b. Key points

Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

- a. Traditional Owner Engagement
- b. Community Engagement
- c. Cultural Heritage

Water Management

- a. Total water cycle management
- b. Water demand management
- c. Tanks, Rainwater, Grey Water and wastewater recycling
- d. Dams
- e. Groundwater
- f. Water Supply Planning
- g. The Water Resource Planning process
- h. Wild Rivers
- i. Environmental values and water quality

Infrastructure

Integrated Transport

- a. Strategic Transport planning
- b. Sustainable Travel and Improved accessibility
- c. Effective transport investment

Regulatory Provisions

Appendix: Traditional Owner Engagement Strategy for FNQ 2025 Planning Project

Introduction

This paper outlines the Cairns and Far North Environment Centre (CAFNEC) policy position on the FNQ 2025 Plan. In the following pages, we will describe the outcomes and models we would like to result from the policy development process. Our comments have been grouped under the Desired Regional Outcomes of the SEQ Regional Plan, and the provisions are outlined which we feel are required to deliver these outcomes. Our position will be further developed through research and ongoing consultation with our members and other stakeholders, over the coming months.

CAFNEC supports the development of the FNQ 2025 Regional Plan. We recognise that this planning exercise represents a positive opportunity for the better land use planning and environmental management in Far North Queensland. Although previous state exercises in regional planning, such as the SEQ Regional Plan and the FNQ 2010 Regional Plan have not lived up to the expectations of community and environmental groups, in neither process nor outcomes, we are optimistic that this planning exercise can deliver some great benefits to the community and planners alike, and provide local governments and state agencies with a valuable tool with which to navigate towards a sustainable future for Far North Queensland.

CAFNEC also recognizes the importance of such a planning instrument in ensuring consistency of decision making throughout the local government jurisdictions of the region, and throughout the terms of different council administrations. The Plan can provide an additional level of accountability and security by reinforcing the directives of individual planning schemes, in matters of regional environmental significance. It is because of this recognized potential to improve the decision making process on development assessment in our region, that CAFNEC are determined to have a constructive role in the process. We seek to facilitate consultation with environmental groups so we can work together with the planners towards the right outcomes which benefit our common natural and built environments, both for the present and future generations.

CAFNEC have consulted our members and conducted a questionnaire to ascertain their views on and concerns with the FNQ 2025 Plan. This policy position includes many of their comments and insights. Collectively, our membership base represents a huge breadth and depth of environmental and planning knowledge, which spans generations and includes scores of first hand accounts and a detailed local knowledge of our region. We hope that through CAFNEC, this knowledge and expertise which exists within the community can be captured by the planning process, resulting in a better policy for us all.

CAFNEC support the concept of a regional plan for Far North Queensland that complements and guides relevant council planning schemes, but has the authority to prevail over them if necessary. We feel that it is particularly important to have a planning instrument that, backed by appropriate regulatory provisions, provides firm direction towards a sustainable region. The concept of regional planning is far more ecologically sound than local government planning which is limited to imposed political boundaries that rarely reflect true natural integrated systems or bioregional areas. We commend the move towards institutional arrangements which better reflect these natural divisions.

Within the wider context of Queensland's radical reform agenda away from prescription and towards "performance based planning" as enshrined by IPA (1997), there is serious lack of certainty and accountability in the Queensland planning system, which we fear has led to marked increase in ad hoc, badly planned development and a consequent decline and deterioration of environmental values and ecosystem function within our region. We hope that through providing an added layer of regulation, the FNQ 2025 Plan can begin to remedy this situation.

CAFNEC also supports the review and amendment process. We stress the need for the establishment of mechanisms to measure progress against sustainability criteria. We also believe that all amendments to the Plan must result in a net environmental gain. The process for any amendments needs to be open and consultative.

CAFNEC would also like to commend the creation of a Regional Office with permanent staff to administer the FNQ 2025 plan. If given the appropriate responsibilities and powers to implement and enforce the Plan, as well as the role of coordinating regional planning initiatives, this Regional Office has the potential to be of great benefit to the environment of Far North Queensland. If the full benefits of regional planning are to be achieved, a regional planning office is required. All impact assessable developments should be referred to this office for assessment against agreed goals and criteria. This process is essential to halt the corrosive effects of ad hoc developer driven planning, and willingness of some local councils to bend their own rules to allow inappropriate development to proceed. Ideally such an office would provide assistance and guidance to developers in achieving goals of environmental sustainability. Such systems do exist in other states and countries, notably Tasmania.

Appropriate institutional arrangements are required if the Plan is to be effectively implemented. The Regional Office will play an invaluable role in coordinating government departments, agencies and local councils. The Regional Office needs to be appropriately resourced if it is to fulfill its vital functions. Adequate resourcing to local governments for the implementation of the Plan is also critical its success.

Given the importance of the FNQ 2025 Plan, CAFNEC would like to raise the following concerns.

- The current timeframes are inadequate for constructive and proper consultation and to allow appropriate consideration by the community;
- Resources have not been adequately provided to support the community in its consultations, discussion, deliberations and decisions.
- There has been a lack of compulsion for, or ability of, various government agencies to information-share and otherwise work together toward the goal of environmentally sustainable development.

CAFNEC implores the State Government to extend the timeframes for developing this Plan, with the intention of conducting meaningful and genuine community engagement. The FNQ 2025 Plan is too important to be compromised by unrealistic timeframes and inadequate resourcing.

Challenging the status quo

CAFNEC perceives the following problems with the current planning system in Far North Queensland.

FNQ 2010 and IPA based planning schemes are only advisory documents for willing local authorities. Changes to land use are too environmentally, economically and socially important for regional plans to be limited in this way. Some prescriptive limits to council discretion, enforceable more directly than by judicial choice between competing opinions, are vital for effective land use planning. The Plan should clearly state whether sections are law or for advice only.

There should be a readily available and inexpensive process for appealing planning decisions and questioning subsequent adherence to approved plans, such that citizens and community groups can be empowered to provide oversight of development within the region.

The major obstacle to environmentally sustainable development and pleasing settlement design in this region is a culture in which development jobs and profits must never be put at risk. In this culture, landowner initiative leads state infrastructure timing, and discretion to approve applications is built into planning process.

Local governments often lack the powers, financial resources and support to be able to prevent inappropriate development within their jurisdictions. They are under huge, and inappropriate, pressure from developers whom are better financially resourced to litigate through the Planning and Environment Court.

There is also too much discretion allowed to individual councils to...

- Determine whether or not they will implement and enforce proper measures that will responsibly ensure that ecologically sustainable development is promoted and achieved.
- Determine whether there are "sufficient planning grounds" in existence to justify approving a development, despite conflict existing between the development applications and established planning schemes.

This results in development outcomes that are largely determined by local politics rather than to the principles of environmentally sustainable development.

We hope that the FNQ 2025 Regional Plan will address some of these current institutional problems.

Key assumptions

CAFNEC understand that FNQ 2025 Regional Plan is an exercise in growth management, however we feel it is important to examine the key assumptions behind the existing approach to managing growth through land use planning.

CAFNEC feels that other planning exercises in Queensland of this nature have looked first and foremost at projected population increases and economic expansion. Only after these have been accommodated within the regional landscape, has conservation been considered for remaining land. If environmental sustainability is to be properly regarded this process needs to be reversed. First environmental flows, constraints and ecosystem services need to be considered, and once these have been properly conserved, population and industrial expansion can be accommodated. In this way environmentally sustainable will be achieved.

CAFNEC strongly feels that addressing environmental constraints and ecosystem services first and foremost will not in any way damage the regions capacity for population expansion and economic prosperity; it will however ensure that these can occur in a way that does not lead to further environmental degradation and decline.

Strategic directions

1. Defining sustainability

Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) has become a notoriously difficult thing to define, implement and realise. Rarely has any word ever been used so extravagantly by so many different interests without defining what it actually means. A clear definition of the term is required. Not only does the Plan need to clearly outline what is meant by sustainability, it needs to provide binding measures to evaluate, monitor and implement it.

In the National Strategy for ESD in 1992, The Commonwealth of Australia defined Ecologically Sustainable Development as the following...

- *Development that improves the total quality of life, both now and in the future in a way that maintains the ecological processes on which life depends.*

Many have claimed that ESD is in fact an oxymoron; however this depends on how the word *development* is defined. One definition of development is advancement or positive change, and by this definition ESD *is* possible, however it requires all development to advance or embody a positive change towards ecological sustainability. CAFNEC feels that if the FNQ 2025 Regional Plan claims to do this, it must then clearly lay out steps as to how this positive change will be accomplished.

The following sub headings relate to the critical aspects of advancing towards sustainability.

2. Designing a low energy future

The threats of climate change and global warming are now well understood. We are already experiencing these impacts; however we are still accelerating the causes of them in our modes of production and cultural behavior. It is also well known that Cairns is particularly at risk from the negative impacts of global warming, including sea level rise and increased storm surges, and the region is vulnerable because of the likely increase in severe tropical cyclones. The World Heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics are also at risk. Therefore, global warming is something we as a region need to take very seriously, in both aspects of mitigating the impacts, and decreasing our regional carbon contribution.

2.1 Compact, efficient urban form and better public transport.

The FNQ 2025 Regional Plan could make progress towards lowering carbon emissions, is to facilitate a move away from car dependency. This will involve advancing towards more compact and efficient urban form, arranged around mixed-use activity nodes and well serviced by public transport.

2.2 Improve the energy efficiency of new buildings

Better building design is also crucial to improving our regional energy efficiency. This will involve retrofitting existing buildings in both residential, business, industrial and government sectors, and requiring new buildings to conform to far more stringent energy efficiency standards. We recommend that a State Planning Policy be drafted to enforce better energy efficiency performance across *all* new building in Queensland; however it may be necessary to develop one in conjunction with this Plan which exclusively addresses energy efficiency within Far North Queensland's tropical environment.

2.3 Potential of renewable energy sources.

CAFNEC understands that areas identified as having mineral and extractive industry potential will by law be protected from new development under the Plan. We strongly implore that the same should be done for sites with renewable energy generation potential, such as geo-thermal, wind and solar farms. This renewable energy may very well be of extreme strategic importance in the future context of a declining use of fossil fuels for energy.

2.4 Carbon sinks

It is important that existing vegetation cover be retained and increased, to act as a carbon sink for our region. There is strong scientific evidence that vegetation in tropical areas across the globe is much more effective as a carbon sink than vegetation in temperate zones. This means that for Australia to meaningfully contribute to global efforts to reduce green house gases, the forests and vegetation within our region are of prime national importance.

3. The Natural Environment

For regional ecological sustainability to occur, ecological function and health must be elevated in importance under this Plan and all related policy, legislation and management practice. This means the following areas will have to be extensively mapped and protected under the Plan.

3.1 Biodiversity

Biodiversity needs to be comprehensively mapped under the Plan, and these maps should be one of the first data sets to inform the Plan. Furthermore, biodiversity “hot-spots” should be awarded an added level of protection under the Plan, through models such as local area planning.

3.2 Conservation and habitat

To conserve valuable habitat and connectivity for native plant and animal species, extensive mapping for wildlife corridors must be undertaken, in consultation with groups such as Evirolink, TREAT, and the Catchment River Management Authorities. Not only should existing corridors be protected, but potential corridors should be put under reserve under the Plan, and development should be prevented from occurring in these areas. Riparian and riverine habitat should be given particularly high status under the Plan

3.3 Water quality

Water quality underlies the health of our rivers and waterways, and has implications for the region’s freshwater and marine ecosystems, including the Great Barrier Reef and fisheries. When water quality deteriorates, the enjoyment and health of recreational users, many of whom are children, are put at risk. Therefore maintaining water quality should be a core objective of the Plan. CAFNEC recommends that this is done by developing water quality improvement plans (WQIPs) for every local government area, as already undertaken by the Douglas Shire Council. These WQIPs need to also be accompanied by an implementation schedule.

4. Natural Resources

4.1 Water as resource for humans

Our human settlements and economic activities all depend on water resources. However any water extracted and utilized for human activities should be done so efficiently and in recognition of environmental flows. CAFNEC strongly believes that major new dams should be avoided at all costs and that all efforts towards water efficiency are developed.

4.2 Soil – retaining good quality agricultural land

Like water, soil is another natural asset upon which our human activities depend. CAFNEC supports planning which protects good quality agricultural soil from ad hoc piecemeal residential development and encroaching suburban sprawl. Soil conservation is something which should be encouraged and supported under the Plan.

4.3 Agricultural practices- recognizing ecosystem services

Productive agricultural land covers large areas of Far North Queensland. We recommend that these areas are not managed exclusively for the productive capacity, but their role and capacity in achieving conservation outcomes within a rural landscape is facilitated and supported also.

5. People

5.1 Community Engagement

Land use planning is a field in which every person within the community has an interest and a stake in. Therefore, stakeholder engagement must not be confined to state agency staff and those with a direct commercial interest in the Plan. The whole of community should have an opportunity and an avenue to engage with the planning process, which is not merely confined to the right to make a submission during the period when the draft is available for public comment. CAFNEC recommends a series of public forums so concerned members of the public have an opportunity to learn about and advise planners on various aspects of the Plan.

Also, there should be some mechanism to capture public opinion, community values and local knowledge into the Plan. This could also be achieved through surveys and forums.

5.2 Public awareness and education

Some efforts should be made to raise public awareness about the Plan and its implications and potential for the region. In CAFNEC's experience, even the most concerned and astute members of the public have very minimal understanding of the Planning system in Queensland, and this is not through lack of interest, but lack of education. Therefore it is important that an effort is made on behalf of the State government to inform the general public about this planning initiative and its objectives through educational channels such as websites, forums and direct correspondence and consultation with community and resident's groups.

5.3 Incentives

There are many behavioral and attitudinal constraints to advancing the cause of sustainability, and these can be addressed by a range of strategic incentives, subsidies and programs which target aspects of sustainability in our region.

6. Monitoring and evaluation – measuring our progress

Institutional arrangements must be made to ensure that there is a clear monitoring, reporting, and evaluating feedback mechanisms for achieving progress towards sustainability objectives. State of the Environment and State of the Region have started this process, however it needs to be expanded upon so it is not merely a reporting requirement, but informs timely and decisive action. This point will be expanded upon in relation to Performance Indicators under the heading of Sustainability under Desired Regional Outcomes.

7. Mapping

Comprehensive mapping of environmental values must be incorporated into FNQ 2025 as base data. These maps must include the following...

- Biodiversity
- Migration paths of animals (including flight paths and seasonal altitudinal movement of species)
- Connectivity of conservation reserves
- Habitat corridors- present and potential
- Re-vegetation programs- present and potential
- Impacts of sea level rise and areas subject to inundation.
- Potential sites for renewable energy generation
- Waterways and riparian habitat

By generating these maps and super imposing them onto of each other, an urban settlement pattern which is ecologically sustainable will begin to appear.

Much of these mapping has already been undertaken by different agencies, such as the Wet Tropics Management Authority and the EPA, so this process can substantially be achieved by the collation of existing data sets.

Desired Regional Outcomes

Sustainability

Sustainability/ Performance Indicators

CAFNEC feels that the most promising policy model for achieving sustainability is to develop a comprehensive set of performance indicators. Currently we have a “performance based” system with no clear or binding performance indicators. Clearly this is a major flaw in Queensland’s planning system.

We feel the Regional Plan could address this by selecting six key areas for monitoring progress towards sustainability criteria, which may be expanded upon when the system is fully operational.

These six areas are...

1. Water Quality
2. Air Quality
3. Regional energy consumption
4. Biodiversity
5. Vegetation cover
6. Social Well-being

Under these six general areas, a number of components can be identified that may be used as the basis for indicators. These include, but are not exclusive to...

Water Quality:

- Sediment loads
- Riparian ecosystem health
- Aquatic fish stocks
- Health problems associated with swimming in the rivers.
- Water quality tests

Air Quality:

- Traffic surveys
- Air traffic surveys
- Air quality tests in different locations
- Air borne particulates analysis
- Health surveys of air related illness (e.g. Incidence of Asthma in children)

Regional Energy Consumption

- Electricity consumption
- Petroleum consumption
- Traffic levels
- Carbon contribution
- Energy efficiency of households

Biodiversity

- Flora Surveys
- Fauna Surveys
- Monitoring of keystone and threatened species (e.g. cassowaries and rainforest frogs)
- Monitoring of Indicator species (e.g. epiphytes)
- Ecosystem health

Vegetation cover

- GIS mapping

Social well being

- Social disadvantage index
- Housing access and affordability index

In all of the above examples, this data is already in existence, and being continually collected by different sources. Therefore, collecting this data need not involve new research on behalf of the Department of Local Government, Planning, Sports and Recreation, but merely coordinating a unit to collate existing data sets.

The framework for the monitoring system currently being developed through the State of the Region reporting system is *Pressure-State-Response*. This systems works in a cyclical, feed back fashion, by firstly identifying and analyzing the Pressures on natural systems, or the *Drivers*, such as Climate Change, land clearing, population growth etc, then monitoring the State, or Condition such as fragmentation, species extinction and declining water quality, and then triggering a Response, such as investment, legislation, policy and further research. When the condition of the environment reaches a Threshold of Concern, it must then trigger a Response. This is how Indicators can be a valuable tool in preventing environmental decay and advancing toward sustainability.

Source: Butler, J (2007) MTSRF Status and Trends PowerPoint presentation.

Some of these Performance Indicators are already in operation, such as under the State of the Environment and State of the Region reporting system (the latter being used as part of the SEQ Plan). However CAFNEC would like to stress that if the indicator system is to be a useful tool for advancing towards ecological sustainability, than it needs to be more than just a reporting system-it needs to have mechanisms to effect and direct positive change in development patterns and decision making, and be backed by regulatory provisions. Therefore the existing systems need to be revised. The focus needs to be on acting when there's a problem clearly identified, not fulfilling reporting requirements!

Clear and binding Targets

Indicators are only a useful policy mechanism is they lead to informed and decisive actions to mitigate and reverse environmental degradation. One way of doing this, as discussed in the previous section, is that when an indicator measurement reaches a Threshold of Concern, a suitable course of action is triggered to reverse this trend. However, this approach is not always feasible. One main reason for this is that in most key areas of environmental health, Thresholds of Concern have already been passed long ago. The system of triggers needs to be accompanied by a system of *targets* for repairing environmentally degradation, and reversing environmentally destructive patterns and trends.

We must stress again that these targets need to be measurable, achievable and binding. All of the above examples can be met in a number of different ways; however every local government must find ways to meet them. Once again, local authorities need to be properly resourced to do so.

Monitoring and Evaluation

CAFNEC is aware that several agencies are undertaking research towards developing workable sustainability indicators through the MTSRF (Marine and Tropical Science Research Facility) funding. These agencies include CSIRO, JCU, University of Queensland and Terrain (FNQ NRM) Ltd. CAFNEC feels that any one of these is well positioned to coordinate the collation of data, undertake monitoring and evaluation and to identify the need for additional research where existing data is inadequate. The Department of Primary Industries, Natural Resources and Water, Communities and the Environmental Protection Agency may also be in a position to contribute base data. Indigenous communities have also expressed an interest in being involved in monitoring and evaluation of these indicators, especially those relating to the health of country. We recommend that the Department of LGPSR should fund the appointment of several extra staff within one of these agencies to coordinate such an effort. This way, the research, initiatives and expertise which is currently being undertaken can be captured and fully utilized in the FNQ 2025 Plan. Currently much of this research is occurring in silos and does not have the opportunity to influence positive on the ground reform and action. FNQ 2025 Regional Plan could change this through a fairly simple institutional arrangement which enables environmental reporting to actually trigger action.

Implementation and Enforcement

Although monitoring and evaluation of data can be outsourced by contracting another agency to coordinate it, implementation and enforcement of triggers and targets needs to be done by the Department of LGPSR and local authorities. The Regional Office has the potential to perform a key role in this respect. Local Authorities also have a vital function; however the Department must facilitate this with proper resourcing. Furthermore, should local authorities fail to meet their prescribed targets, they should incur penalties through funding cuts.

Recommendations

1. A system of performance indicators is developed and incorporated into the Plan, based on existing data sets.
2. An existing agency is contracted to coordinate the collation of this data into indicators.
3. Indicators inform and trigger decisive action.
4. Targets for improving our regional environmental performance are sets.
5. The regional office of the DLGPSR is responsible for enforcement of triggers and targets under the Performance Indicators system.

Natural Environment

A sustainable society

A key aspect of a sustainable society would be the ability of urban patterns and human industry and agriculture to co-exist in balance with natural assets and features of the landscape. Systems of interlinked wilderness areas and other large nature reserves, surrounded by multiple use buffer zones managed with due regard for ecological values, offer the best hope for protecting sensitive species and intact ecosystems.

Whilst we love and enjoy our national parks, mostly these sites were selected because of their aesthetic or recreational features, or because they had little value for extractive resource industries. As a result, granite outcrops and wetlands are highly represented within protected areas, whilst many other ecosystem types are not represented at all. Because biological considerations were absent from most design decisions, park boundaries do not conform to ecologically relevant boundaries and many reserves are too small to maintain populations of wide ranging animals or to maintain genetic diversity.

A sustainable society would involve a matrix of natural vegetation and wild life habitat, interlaced with small to mid size settlements with local economies surrounded by a buffer of agricultural land.

The FNQ 2025 Plan provides an opportunity to address some of inadequacies of past planning practice with respect to the protection of biodiversity and natural systems. As part of this, the Regional Plan should identify biodiversity hot spots which are outside conservation reserves and national parks and these are should be protected from development. FNQ 2025 should re-instate the "prohibited" status with respect to any development occurring in these areas.

Key to this process is the identification and protection of

- Ecosystem types and boundaries
- Wildlife Corridors
- Riparian habitats
- Potential corridors for revegetation
- Areas important for migratory, endemic and locally threatened species
- Areas forming part of the range and distribution of other native species

Wildlife corridors and reserves

The importance of wildlife corridors in addressing fragmentation and loss of habitat is being increasingly appreciated. There has been some marvelous work done, mostly through the energy and commitment of local community groups and volunteers in strategic re-vegetation projects. An integrated network of conservation reserves and wildlife corridors must be developed and mapped, and development around these areas strictly controlled.

We feel that it is of utmost importance that the network of wildlife corridors which has been developed is given status as a protected area under the Regional Plan. Consultation with all these groups during the drafting of the Plan is essential to ensure that the efforts of hundreds of volunteers are not undermined by ad hoc, badly planned development.

These groups include...

- Kuranda Envirocare
- (Contact: John Beasley)
- Green Corridors project
- (Contact: Kim Forde)
- TREAT; Trees for the Evelyn and Atherton Tablelands.
(Contact: Doug Burchill)
- Envirolink
- Barron River Integrated Catchment Management Authority
- (Contact: Jax Bergesen)
- Johnstone River Integrated Catchment Management Authority
- Conservation Volunteers Australia
(Contact: Mark Dwyer)

There are a few critical corridors which are either under threat currently or severely constrained. These include...

- The Envirolink corridor west of Kuranda. This corridor is of particular importance (it is mapped as a corridor in the Mareeba Shire Planning Scheme, but deserves an added level of protection under the Regional Plan).
- The Fairyland link (Myola) which is parallel to the Envirolink corridor but smaller and closer to Kuranda. This one is heavily impacted by development and not satisfactorily mapped in the Mareeba Shire Planning Scheme.
- The Wet Tropics World Heritage listed area is severely constrained near Kuranda, where it exists only as a thin neck connecting larger areas north and south.

Buffers zones around World Heritage Areas

Buffer zones around World Heritage and areas with recognized outstanding natural values or biodiversity should be identified and awarded a higher level of protection under the FNQ 2025 Plan. Development in these buffer zones should be subject to a greater level of regulation to manage ecological impacts. Any development must be low impact, such as a mixed-use low density zone. It may be appropriate to establish a system of caveats, covenants, overlays and easements which prevent ecologically damaging activities. These should include a prohibition on noxious exotic plantings, poisons and cats and dogs.

Local Area Planning

Certain biodiversity "hot spots" deserve an added level of planning and environmental management. CAFNEC supports the "local area planning" model for human settlements and centres which exist within these areas.

With Far North Queensland, these areas should include...

1. Mission Beach
2. Daintree
3. Southern Atherton Tablelands
4. Myola

In regards to Myola, CAFNEC strongly believes that this area should be protected from intensive residential development. This fragile and special place should not become a dormitory suburb for Cairns commuters. Future planning in Myola should receive the same attention as Mission Beach in terms of local area planning to prevent inappropriate development.

Comprehensive mapping

The FNQ 2025 Plan should require the spatial identification and ranking of areas in terms of ecological and biodiversity significance. Sophisticated GIS mapping and collation of existing data should be undertaken to create a comprehensive set of maps of natural values, which can then be used to direct future development. This approach can be useful in managing the cumulative impacts of development and controlling the fragmentation of remaining habitat areas.

Biodiversity and conservation values should be required to be mapped as part of any initial proposal for rezoning with onus on developer to show how these values are to be protected.

The Planning Information Forecasting Unit (PIFU) in Brisbane does not currently include all the relevant ecological information in its forecasting/GIS exercises, and should not be solely relied upon as a source of mapping of ecological values of this region.

Conservation and Biodiversity checks on development applications

All impact assessable developments, reconfiguration of lots and change of use must be subject to Conservation and biodiversity checks. All development proposals must be required to prove they do not threaten ecological values.

Compliance to these conservation checks should be ensured by the regional planning office, which would be responsible for assessing major development against biodiversity and conservation protection criteria.

Managing the Coast

Coastal areas need to be managed for their environmental attributes and ecosystem services. The coastal areas of Far North Queensland have been subject to much damaging and inappropriate development which has led to coastal habitats being severely, and in many cases terminally fragmented, particularly in Cairns northern beaches. These development patterns must discontinue as they are detrimental to the preservation of the ecosystem services provided by healthy coastal zones and directly degrade the economic powerhouse of the region, the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, due to their negative impacts on the water quality utilized by the reef. It is the quality of water available to the reef that has been identified by AIMS and GBRMPA research as being fundamental to the reef's biodiversity and health, thus influencing its ability to absorb extreme climate and weather events.

Due consideration must be taken into account when assessing development applications within the coastal zone in order to mitigate the harmful impacts of climate change. Coastal ecosystems are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of sea level rise, increased incidence of tropical cyclones, storm surge and coastal flooding, all results of changing climatic conditions. Not only does a changing climate endanger coastal habitat and ecosystems, but it puts homes and communities at risk. Although vulnerable to these impacts, ecosystems such as coastal mangroves, wetlands and intact dune systems provide the best defence against such events and also prevent environmental impacts from being exacerbated. Therefore, densely developed foreshores should be discontinued, especially within 200 metres of the high tide mark.

It is therefore imperative that in planning to allocate suitable agricultural land and assessing coastal developments, that the value of the services that these ecosystems provide must be accounted for. Being of vital importance in the trapping and recycling of sediment and nutrient run-off, existing wetlands, floodplains and mangrove systems must be identified and efforts to restore their viability must be undertaken through planned re-habilitation and restored connectivity. This is of paramount importance to the quality of water that the GBR experiences.

Creeks and drains should be re-vegetated where they have been cleared in order to re-establish the riparian vegetation zone as an ecosystem service provider. In fact waterways should be identified as the prime means by which to implement the connectivity of bio-regions throughout the Wet Tropics and this must be provided for within the FNQ 2025 Regional Plan. This connectivity is of significant importance in the preservation of the regions biodiversity and genetic variability. A coastal buffer zone within the planning area should be allocated as an ecosystem service provider not available to development.

Dune protection and re-habilitation plans should be developed. Beach front clearing must not be permitted and regulatory provisions for the complete mitigation of impacts from development adjacent to the buffer zone must be imposed. Such impacts include degradation of visual amenity and environmental impacts affecting water quality and habitat fragmentation. Steep hill slopes adjacent to the coastal buffer zone must not be developed for safety reasons and due to the impact of increased turbid run-off resulting from the destruction of natural sediment trapping.

On the basis of the criteria outlined above, no development should be permitted on existing intact flood plains (especially in the context of climate change) and a moratorium should be placed on any existing applications to develop land that impacts any existing natural areas that include wetland, mangrove, riparian or coastal dune vegetation communities.

CAFNEC would like to stress our complete opposition to any canal estates. We understand that this is already enshrined in law; however, some canal estates have regrettably still been able to proceed. CAFNEC is concerned over a potential “loophole” in water access for developments re: using locks like in Dickson Inlet. This needs to be addressed to ensure no further development of this nature is permitted. We would like to see this matter addressed in the Regional Plan, to give local authorities and communities an extra level of certainty on this point.

Management of Urban Biodiversity

Remnant vegetation in urban development (within the footprint) should be protected from further piecemeal erosion from development, particularly in coastal areas and on the hill slopes. Remnant native vegetation within urban area could rightfully be classed as “endangered”, and should be protected under statutory arrangements. This is not only a matter of conservation, but of aesthetics and amenity for city dwellers.

Furthermore, areas of high value conservation, including buffers and corridors should be excluded from the urban footprint. The Regional planning office in Cairns should support Local government in implementing management of high value conservation lands.

Environmental Offsets

In principle, CAFNEC supports the idea of environmental offsets. However in practice, these programs are often subject to exploitation and green washing by developers. In most cases where environmental offsets have been negotiated, audits of environmental values after the

developments construction have revealed that the environmental values of the site have incurred a net loss.

Therefore an environmental offsets program needs to be based firmly on the principle of NO NET LOSS to the environment. If a development proponent is unable to clearly identify how this will be achieved, then their proposal should be rejected on those grounds.

Recommendations

1. An integrated network of existing and potential wildlife corridors be mapped and protected by law under the Plan.
2. Revegetation groups in the region are thoroughly consulted as to areas to be protected.
3. Mixed use buffer zones, which are subject to higher levels of regulation, should be established around World Heritage areas and other areas of high conservation value.
4. Comprehensive mapping of ecological values be undertaken and form the basis of the Plan.
5. Local area planning is developed for certain “biodiversity hot-spots”.
6. Conservation and biodiversity checks on all applications for impact assessable development.
7. Moratorium on further high density coastal development.
8. Environmental offsets program firmly based on the principle of NO NET LOSS to the environment.

3. Regional landscape

The five key values (listed below) of regional landscapes can be complementary and do not need to be separated into different zones, but should always be managed carefully and sensitively so one value does not compromise another.

Conservation areas

High impact recreational activities, such as ATV's and dirt bikes, should be prohibited in conservation areas, and diverted to sites that are designated for these activities. It is important that conservation areas are not used to fulfill local authorities' requirement to provide residents with open space for outdoor recreation. Recreation and conservation can be catered for in the same area, but impacts on conservation values must be carefully managed and activities should be limited to low impact recreation such as bush walking and bird watching.

Agriculture areas

Agricultural landscapes are part of the region's distinctive cultural and visual character, and should not be affected by encroaching suburbia or inappropriate development. We advocate diversified agricultural landscapes, and encourage the incorporation of conservation values on productive land (e.g. the Land for Wildlife program).

Scenic amenity areas

All scenic landscapes of regional significance should be identified and mapped under FNQ 2025, and developments that threaten these scenic values should not be permitted. This would require a mapping exercise to identify all scenic areas of regional significance and the legislation drafted to protect these from inappropriate development across all local government jurisdictions.

CAFNEC opposes any further hill slope development, on both scenic and conservation grounds. Stricter controls to protect the scenic rim of Cairns are clearly required to avoid further unsafe, piecemeal development creeping further up the hill slopes.

Incremental damage to scenic values of the coast should also be prevented. CAFNEC strongly feels that many large development proposals such as False Cape, Trinity Inlet, and Palm Cove should have never been permitted. Rock walls at Machans Beach, Holloways Beach and now Clifton Beach are also highly visible, as is creeping development on the headlands around and within Cairns. The scenery of Cairns and Far North Queensland is outstanding, and provides the basis of our prosperous tourism economy. It needs to be recognized for its high value and managed accordingly.

Outdoor recreation

Sufficient outdoor recreation areas should be provided for the projected population increases. We would like to see these areas strategically located to connect with densely populated areas by bike tracks, or be within easy walking distance. They should not only be accessible by private car. Once again, natural area open space for conservation and developed open space for recreation need to be strongly distinguished.

Cultural landscapes

*See section on *Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: Cultural Heritage*.

Recommendations

1. Open space conservation and Open space recreation are given different status under the Plan.
2. Scenic values of regional significance are mapped under the Plan and given additional status.
3. Further residential development on wooded hill slopes is discontinued.

Natural Resources

Land

*See section on Rural Futures

Soil Conservation

*See section on Rural Futures

Mining and extractive industries

The cumulative impacts of mining and extractive industries must be mitigated at all times and pollution and emission from these activities contained so as not to pollute surrounding country, especially water courses. Aboriginal communities should be consulted about any application to develop mining and extractive industries within their country.

Water Resources

*See section on Water Management

Rural Futures

Sustainable and Diversified Agriculture

CAFNEC supports the practice of sustainable and diversified agriculture. Conventional broad scale agriculture is a very inefficient form of food production when fossil fuel and agrochemical inputs, land area used and actually biomass produced are analysed and quantified. It is also a form of agriculture which, typically in tropical regions, are eventually either unprofitable or experience an ecological crash. Land degradation associated with these practices drives a decline in farm profitability and the need for further intensification and agrochemical inputs. This dilemma can be addressed by innovative approaches to diversification that are compatible with mechanized agriculture (such as agro forestry), or into smaller scale farming units, such as those currently managed by hobby farmers. The latter is perhaps compatible with the growing population of the Cairns area (adapted from Leakey: 2005).

Agro forestry

By integrating trees within an array of mixed cropping systems, the following benefits can be reaped. These trees produce marketable products (fruit and nuts, medicines, resins and fibres etc) while the relevant services of trees are those that increase the crop yields (nitrogen fixation, increased soil organic matter, nutrient cycling, soil conservation). By integrating trees into rural production areas, then stretches of agricultural land can become a net carbon sink rather than a carbon emitter, as is currently the case. Whatever regional planning policy is available to support agricultural diversification and agro forestry should be advanced within the Plan.

Source: Leakey, Roger (2005) Agricultural Sustainability in FNQ, School of Tropical Biology, James Cook University.

Ecosystem Services

There is now growing recognition of the role of ecosystem services. These services must be protected and enhanced on rural production land. By promoting diversification and agro forestry and protecting the riparian zone within the rural landscape (both within private and leasehold land) these services can be improved and protected from further deterioration.

Protecting good quality agricultural land from residential development.

CAFNEC supports the planning mechanisms which are in place which protect good quality agricultural land from being developed into residential areas. These should be reinforced by the FNQ 2025 Regional Plan. Retaining space for food production is also vital for the future viability and sustainability of our communities.

Local food economies

Population centres should retain the productive capacity within their surrounds to produce enough food for their communities. This local productive capacity may be crucial to the future viability of our communities, as fuel costs of importing food in from other regions becomes prohibitively expensive. Also, by promoting local food networks, we can significantly reduce our regional carbon footprint and support healthy economic diversification. This gives added importance to retaining good quality agricultural land and productive capacity within the regional landscape.

Permaculture

Small scale Permaculture systems are positive ways to reduce our ecological footprint and produce a small food yield for the local community. They also integrate ecosystem services and conservation values into food systems. Therefore any Permaculture system on rural residential land should be considered “low impact” and giving precedence over other high impact uses.

Riparian management within Rural Production land

Riparian zones are extremely valuable for their ecosystem services and habitat values. They should no longer be cultivated, but rehabilitated. This area should be recognized for its high habitat value and contribution to water quality and fish stocks. Sediment loads from agricultural activities are one of the main contributing factors to deterioration of the Great Barrier Reef. Therefore protecting the riparian zone within agricultural areas is of utmost importance.

A definite protective buffer is required along all waterways, at least 10 m back from the high banks of creeks and 20m plus along rivers.

The riparian zone is currently inadequately protected. In addition the DPI definition of waterways is so bureaucratic and full of exceptions that many creeks with significant riparian vegetation are not even recognized as waterways. DNR consistently declares minor streams “not a water course” which removes them and their vegetation from any protection. In light of these discrepancies it is crucial that the Regional Plan award all riparian zones with their rightful status and level of protection.

Furthermore, zoning of riparian areas should be consistent throughout the water course of the integrated system, i.e. creek, swale, dune etc. Any disruption to this system through different zoning will lead to deterioration of the whole.

CAFNEC advocates an environmental offsets policy, in which farms can subdivide off one small lot of their property into rural residential, if they return the riparian zone of their property back to the government to be protected as conservation reserve. This offset would genuine result in “no net loss”.

Recommendations

- Promote sustainable and diversified agricultural practices.
- Support the creation of agro forestry
- Retain enough productive land around urban centres to retain their ability to feed their own populations.
- Give small scale permaculture systems the status of “low impact” in rural residential areas (See section of Rural Residential under Urban Development).
- Protect a buffer of riparian vegetation within agricultural areas.
- Where possible, use an environmental offsets program to reclaim the riparian zone back into conservation reserve.

6. Urban development

Urban structure

Within the SEQ Regional Plan, the guiding principle for managing urban structure is to “accommodate the majority of regional growth in existing urban centres or within identified urban growth areas”. CAFNEC supports the latter half of this principle. We would like to stress that future high to medium density residential development should be strategically located within walking and cycling distance from essential services, or be connected by a well serviced public transport route. A major failing of past and present planning practice is that it has allowed permanent car dependency to be built into urban form.

CAFNEC is categorically against to the practice of planning remote suburbs in which residents commute to Cairns by private car, using fossil fuels and creating barriers to the movement of wildlife. We also oppose opening up rural or rural residential land up for urban development, particularly in areas which are not serviced with schools and other community facilities and rely on large commutes to employment centres (i.e. a regional activity centre). We have watched with horror as more and more of these estates emerge. In the context of peak oil, these out of town suburbs run the risk of becoming disadvantaged ghettos of the future with residents unable to afford travel to key essential services.

Therefore it is imperative that housing solutions are sought within existing town centres throughout the region, with access to civic infrastructure and services. The model of urban development and expansion which we will now describe can accommodate population projections in a pleasant and amenable way which is conducive with community life.

We support the concept of inter urban breaks and feel that the urban footprint approach has the potential to determine more compact and efficient urban structure. However the urban footprint needs to first and foremost consider environmental constraints.

Urban form

CAFNEC would like to see a high proportion of new residents to Far North Queensland accommodated within infill urban land. Cairns is a fairly low density city, with ample capacity to accommodate new residents within its existing borders. Should opportunities be considered to develop Greenfield sites, these should be well planned around environmental constraints, and connected to existing urban centres via public transport. Every centre should have an internal economy and unconnected “sleeping settlements” or “dormitory suburbs” should be avoided at all costs.

CAFNEC advocates the New Urbanism model of urban development. This model mimics the form and structure of a traditional pre-automobile era town or suburb, where there are many uses within short proximity of each other and homes, shops and services are within easy walking distance of each other. Design emphasis is put on creating precincts on a cyclist and pedestrian scale. This model has been developed successfully in many parts of the world, and has been found to be highly desirable and commercially viable to new residents. There *is* a high demand for alternative housing to what the current market of Far North Queensland provides. It is the result of a combination of unimaginative housing developments and bad planning that the current housing stock is dominated by inefficient three bed-room detached concrete dwellings on large allotments in cul-de-sacs. Market demand and the models for better urban development exist- the culture of planning and development in Far North Queensland just needs to catch up.

The key words when it comes to planning for urban growth are *compact* and *efficient*. Therefore urban forms should be consolidated and function in as energy efficient way as possible.

Dense urban re-development and regeneration projects in Cairns should focus on sustainable building materials (green roofs, authentic tropical design, low energy consumption, compulsory solar, collecting rain water etc) and meet stringent efficiency standards. Good urban design includes user friendly public spaces and community gardens, and residential areas with restricted traffic access so “children can play in the street”. Neighborhoods should be mixed use to promote a sense of vitality and community, and have activity nodes which are serviced by public transport nodes.

Neighborhood amenity is achieved through village style community living and very importantly a connection to nature. Therefore conservation areas within the urban footprint and adequate, well planned, open space and recreation areas are critical to good urban design. These features are essential to good psychological health of city dwellers. This is further incentive to ensure there is a system in place where remnant vegetation and urban conservation areas are protected under the Plan, and integrated into urban land uses. These conservation reserves are under extreme pressure from fragmentation and threat of further development.

Of particular importance is the Cairns Central Swamp, which CAFNEC is currently re-vegetating with the help of hundreds of volunteers. This area is currently zoned Unallocated State land, but we would like to see it receive a higher level of conservation and status under this Plan and the Cairns City Council Planning Scheme.

CAFNEC strongly disagrees with the recommendation in the FNQ 2010 Plan to accommodate for Cairns suburban sprawl in Myola, Koah or Clohesy River. These are not appropriate sites for urban expansion as they rely solely on private car transport to the main employment area of Cairns. Myola has outstanding ecological values, Clohesy River is an intact ecosystem and Koah is an agricultural, food producing area which is an unacceptably long distance from an activity centre. We strongly implore planners of the FNQ 2025 Regional Plan to desist in the assumption that future residential expansion of the Cairns population can be accommodated in these areas. All these areas should be left outside of the urban footprint.

Character and design

Many of the design principles upon which New Urbanism is based will enhance and create urban character by developing a strong sense of place and local identity within each activity centre. Existing neighborhood character should be preserved and beautiful, old buildings in Cairns deserve full heritage listing. Cairns has lost many of its old historic buildings in a recent frenzy of inner city development, and recently Atherton lost historic silos due to lack of heritage control on developers- we sincerely hope that planning mechanisms to prevent the further erosion of the region’s heritage are being developed.

Natural habitat within urban areas, remnant vegetation and large trees should also be heritage listed under this Plan. These features are also essential for retaining urban character and amenity.

Walking and cycling tracks and network should be developed, utilizing park lands where possible but always designed with functionality and access in mind should be developed within all urban areas.

Building design and energy efficiency needs to be addressed if the region is to decrease its carbon contribution. We feel that the best way to achieve this is for the Regional Office to make a strong recommendation to the Minister to create a State Planning Policy to significantly tighten up the standards for energy efficiency in new building through out the state of Queensland.

Adjunct to this policy, there needs to be a State Planning Policy developed specifically for this region, which is released in conjunction with the Regional Plan, which embodies an overarching tropical design policy developed to address climate appropriateness. This policy also needs to be binding through law and amend current building regulations.

Housing mix

CAFNEC advocates a shift towards mixed use residential areas, as opposed to homogenous dormitory, commuter suburbs which is the current dominant paradigm for new residential development. This would involve suburbs which integrate commercial and community space and services amidst compact dwellings, arranged around an activity hub which is serviced but cycling/walking tracks and public transport. Although this urban arrangement is light years away from what is currently being developed in Far North Queensland, it is possible, feasible and commercially viable- it just requires a shift in planning and development culture to facilitate it into reality.

Housing industry lobby groups and developers often claim that the way to address housing affordability is to release more land on the urban fringe. However we feel that this is a deeply flawed claim, which is motivated more by a profit agenda than by water tight logic. These marginal blocks are ever greater distances from employment centre's and employment, meaning that the cost of travel is transferred onto residents, who are often in the lower economic strata already. In the context of rising fuel prices and peak oil, these costs will skyrocket, leading to a widening gap between advantaged, gentrified inner city suburbs and disadvantaged outer suburban residents, by pure virtue of their geography. We feel that the New Urbanism model is a far more viable and equitable way to cater for urban growth and housing affordability, as it offers design solutions which do not automatically further marginalise the disadvantaged.

Rural residential development

Rural residential development is a difficult issue to address with many contradictions. From a conservation perspective this land use designation can have equally as many positives as it does negatives.

The conservation benefits of Rural Residential include the following...

- Lower population density
- Less demand for services
- Preservation of privately owned bush land and rural landscape
- Land ownership is broken up so it is difficult to have large blanket subdivision progressing rapidly.
- This land is usually good quality wildlife habitat and generally contains significant amounts of remnant vegetation as per the Vegetation Management Act.

Other considerations for Rural Residential land designation in the agricultural landscape include...

- Potential Rural Residential land is usually grazing or forested land.
- It is not usually prime agricultural land.
- The land is usually marginal for cropping due to lesser quality soils and undulations.
- There is capacity for a marginal yield or cash crop through market gardens and small orchards.
- In many cases its also has a marginal economic return and is termed a “lifestyle block” or a hobby farm.
- It can be a buffer zone between higher density land use and centres.
- Residents who aspire towards a “low impact” lifestyle can meet many of their own food needs within a small acreage, thereby offsetting their greater ecological footprint and fossil fuel consumption.

However, planning for Rural Residential must consider the following negative impacts upon conservation values and rural landscapes...

- When too large an area is subdivided without a township nearby and it becomes a horse suburb or a rural depressed area.
- If prime agricultural is sub divided into Rural Residential blocks, there is little chance of true economic productivity being generated.
- Broad scale Rural Residential often causes roads and lots to be developed on steep land for people chasing views.
- Exotic plants and domestic dogs and cats move in, causing a deterioration of conservation values in the area through weed invasion and predation.
- Local councils often set aside no park or communal land in these areas.

Other considerations...

- Grazing land can be zoned back into conservation.
- Some key blocks can be purchased and placed into protected areas.

Clearly the Rural Residential zoning is very controversial and there is no clear answer as to how it should be managed. CAFNEC feels that this land use can be managed in a sustainable manner if done in a way which is sensitive and gives the existing and potential conservation values of this land its primacy.

Firstly, large blanket subdivisions of rural into rural residential land should not be permitted. This is because it takes up large areas of agricultural productive land and turns them into marginalized commuter suburbs on over sized blocks. If they are not close to a town centre then they enforce car dependence onto residents, and if they are close to a town centre, they represent an inappropriate sequencing of growth which damages the social and cultural cohesion of existing communities and puts too much pressure on existing services.

Secondly, a large buffer should be drawn around any National Park, conservation reserve or area identified as having high conservation value, and any rural residential lots which are released or re-sold in this buffer must be subject to certain conditions which ensure the natural values of adjacent conservation land are not compromised. This would include a ban on noxious exotic plantings, cats and dogs as domestic pets and use of poisons.

Thirdly low impact dwellings should be given priority over high impact ones on rural residential. We do not want to see our rural landscape over run by “Mc Mansions”. Some planning mechanism to

discriminate towards dwellings which harness renewable energy, rain water and are appropriately designed for the climate should be explored. Such a policy is in operation in Wales to manage new dwellings in their rural areas.

Lastly, incentives and regulations must be in place to ensure that the natural values of the block are preserved and enhanced by residents. In particular, riparian habitat which runs through rural residential blocks must be regulated to ensure that it is maintained appropriately.

In conclusion, Rural Residential land is usually derived from undulating grazing and/or forested land. Marginal rural land is mainly held as an investment and/or lifestyle; however, the owners are seeking maximum returns in the future. Nearly all forested land has had all commercial timber removed and grazing land is usually in a nutrient depleted condition- therefore it is often economically spent. The usual progression to Rural Residential is better than that to straight residential because of the conservation and open space benefits.

However, large blanket rural residential are extremely damaging to both conservation and productive values of land and is subsidized by huge fossil fuel inputs. It is imperative that the Rural Residential zoning in the region is managed carefully to ensure that the landscape does not become prey to this type of badly planned development. We strongly hope that government resist strong market pressure to release more land for this type of development, as we feel that the long term environmental and social impacts are only negative.

Regional activity centres

CAFNEC supports the further consolidation of regional activity centres as locations for future employment concentrations and retail and commercial uses. We feel that the development of further out of town retail parks or large “strip shopping” (eg. Mulgrave Rd) should be discontinued. In Great Britain, retail parks on the urban fringe have been prohibited, and the benefits to the urban form and vitality of existing regional centres has been very significant.

Recommendations

1. Support compact and efficient urban form.
2. Promote “New Urbanism” model of urban growth.
3. Assign the Cairns Central Swamp with a higher level of protection than its current USL status under the Cairns Planning Scheme.
4. Exclude Myola, Clohesy River and Koah from the Cairns urban footprint.
5. Introduce state-wide efficiency standards for new building (recommend to the Minister that a State Planning Policy is developed to address energy efficiency in new buildings).
6. Develop a state planning policy adjunct to the Regional Plan which deals specifically with building design standards in Wet, Tropical climates.
7. Retain large trees in urban areas as heritage features.
8. Prohibit broad scale blanket rural residential developments
9. Rural residential within conservation buffer zones is subject to a higher level of regulation.
10. A mechanism to discriminate towards low impact dwellings within the rural landscape is developed.
11. Introduce regulations to ensure that natural values within rural residential blocks are maintained, with particular emphasis on riparian habitat.
12. Discontinue development of large out of town “retail parks”.
13. Sequence population growth in regional activity centres gradually so small communities and local services can adapt.

Integrated land use and transport planning

**See Integrated Transport section*

Local Growth Management Strategies

CAFNEC is concerned with the sequencing or rate of local growth in some regional activity centres in Far North Queensland. The two most critical areas of concern are Mission Beach and Yungaburra. Both of these centres have development applications either approved or pending which threaten to double the populations of these communities. This rate of growth is not sustainable and has many serious adverse impacts on the community, social cohesion, character and culture of small towns, and puts inappropriate stress on services such as schools, health centres and civic infrastructure. Sequencing of population growth needs to be conducted in a timelier and appropriate manner.

Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Traditional Owner Engagement

Rainforest Traditional Owner groups must be supported to record, manage and apply cultural heritage information as part of the planning and management of their respective traditional Country within Far North Queensland. The FNQ 2025 Regional Plan must include mechanisms to provide this support. Appropriate cultural protocols must be followed.

Community Engagement

Currently, communities have had little say about major residential or resort developments in their neighborhoods. Major developments within or adjacent to Aboriginal communities must have prior approval from them before being able to proceed.

Cultural Heritage

Within the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area there are at least 18 Rainforest Aboriginal Tribal groups that have been identified with ongoing strong relationships and traditional connections to land. To Rainforest Aboriginal people, the natural features and the resources for the Wet Tropics are inseparable and interwoven into their value systems and central to their spirituality, culture, social organisation and customary economy, including food, medicines, tools, customs, stories and traditions. Rainforest Aboriginal People have customary obligations to look after this country. The Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area Regional Agreement, The Wet Tropics Aboriginal Cultural and Natural Resource Management Plan and the Regional NRM Plan all acknowledge the need and express the commitment to record, store and apply Aboriginal cultural heritage values in the management of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. This commitment must also be enshrined within the FNQ 2025 Regional Plan. CAFNEC also feels that the Regional NRM Plan contains a good guide on Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and developing collaborative relationships for protecting sites of cultural significance.

The new Cultural Heritage Mapping Project will empower Traditional Owners to record and manage cultural information, and ultimately provide a useful tool to educate the next generation and the wider community about the need to monitor and protect the cultural heritage of the Wet Tropics region. CAFNEC feels there is a great opportunity for this cultural mapping project could be incorporated into the FNQ 2025 Regional Plan to better inform planning and development within cultural landscapes. It would provide a Regional Framework for collaboration between Traditional owner groups and management agencies in protecting and applying cultural heritage values to WTWHA management.

If this mapping exercise was incorporated into the FNQ 2025 Regional Plan, then development applications which affect an identified site of cultural significance would automatically trigger compulsory consultation with the relevant Traditional Owner group, and their approval would be sought. This would prevent the current common practice of significant sites being threatened or compromised by inappropriate development without any consultation to the relevant Traditional Owner group.

Areas identified as having very important cultural values should be divested into protected area estates, under the control of Traditional Owner groups.

We also recommend that place names should have Indigenous translation to recognize TO/cultural significance.

Source: Aboriginal Rainforest Council website 2007

http://www.arc-inc.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=42&Itemid=70

Please refer to Appendix 1 on CAFNEC's Traditional Owner Engagement Strategy.

Recommendations

Traditional Owner groups and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups are engaged on development applications which effect their communities and country.
Cultural heritage mapping exercise is incorporated into the Plan, and ensure better consultation with Traditional Owner groups and planning of cultural landscapes.
Areas with very significant cultural values and significance are divested into protected area estates.

Water management

Total water cycle management

A multifaceted, integrated water management strategy will be essential to meet water demands from a growing population at the lowest economic and environmental cost. FNQ is a unique region containing urban, rural and remote communities along with a rainfall pattern unlike many other industrialised urban landscapes, requiring home-grown solutions that do not further degrade the regions environmental assets.

Water demand management

This is an area where major savings can be made at minimum cost. Efficiency must be rewarded and inefficiency discouraged. Water demand and efficiency targets should be set and pursued, whether through price mechanisms, incentives or prescriptive regulation.

Motherhood statements utilised in previous regional plans must be replaced by targets enforces through the Plan.

Tanks, Rainwater, Grey Water and wastewater recycling

Rainwater tanks can form an important role in demand reduction but remain controversial as a compulsory mechanism. Urban rainwater harvesting methods, including tanks, must be investigated and pursued in new developments within the region.

Household or neighbourhood grey water recycling systems can increase water efficiency and should be included in new developments, dwellings and renovations where possible. Incentives or mandatory measures could be used as appropriate.

Wastewater recycling should be including in wastewater infrastructure planning. This is a longer term mechanisms that can result in significant efficiency gains.

Dams

CAFNEC opposes new major dams in the region. Dams have an unacceptable impact on river health, reef health, loss of terrestrial habitat and ecosystem function and can be avoided with less costly efficiency measures.

Groundwater

Groundwater supplies, and the effects of water removal, need to be fully understood before plans for the use of this water can be made.

Water Supply Planning

There is a physical limit to the amount of water that can be supplied via our regional rivers, dams and aquifers without further degradation of regional natural assets. There is also a growing level of uncertainty around how this limit will change in the future.

Active implementation of demand management, water efficiency and recycling strategies are central to ensuring demand can be met sustainably and reliably into the future.

The Water Resource Planning process

The current draft Water Resource Plans for the Gulf and Mitchell rivers represents an inefficient and outdated resource allocation system. The current model, where water allocations occur without first establishing the demand or an environmental management regime associated with the allocation, should not be utilised within the region. Demand should be demonstrated and tested against environmental targets before an allocation is approved, with a cap on allocations based on the maintenance of local and regional ecosystem function.

Wild Rivers

The protection offered by Wild Rivers legislation should be supported and utilised as a minimum benchmark for protecting our major intact river systems and reinforced through operation of the plan. Planning for new water developments on intact river systems must not jeopardize future Wild River status.

Environmental values and water quality

Water quality improvement plans (such as the Douglas Shire) – and implementation schedules should be part of every planning scheme and a statutory requirement of the Regional Plan. Funding should be resourced and the implementation enforced and monitored by the DLGPSR.

Minor streams and their riparian vegetation are vital in maintaining ecosystem function across the landscape and are currently given no status under DNR regulations. The importance of these geographical features should be reflected in local planning regulations and their protection given far greater weight.

Recommendations

1. CAFNEC opposes new dams in the region.
2. Demand Management, including efficiency targets, rainwater & grey water harvesting, must form a central part of any water management regime. Incentives, disincentives, and mandatory measures should all be utilised.
3. Water allocations to rural users through the Water Resource Planning process must allocate water on the basis of demonstrated demand and environmental management outcomes in line with those set by this Regional Plan
4. Water quality improvement plans (such as the Douglas Shire) – and implementation schedules should be part of every planning scheme and a statutory requirement of the Regional Plan. Funding should be resourced and the implementation enforced and monitored by the DLGPSR.
5. The importance of minor streams and their riparian vegetation should be reflected in local planning regulations and their protection given far greater weight.
6. Planning for new water developments on intact river systems must not jeopardize future Wild River status.
7. The regional office of the DLGPSR is responsible for enforcement of triggers and targets under the Performance Indicators system for water efficiency targets and impact of rural water allocations.

Economic Development

The economy of FNQ is intricately tied to the well being of the region's natural environment. Nature based tourism is the single biggest contributor to the regional economy. Fisheries are also a sizable contributor, and also rely on healthy marine environments to ensure optimal output. As such ensuring the health of the regions environment will continue to pay rich dividends for the community and regional economy. However, the region is experiencing rapid growth due to a combination of immigration into the region together with state and local government policies which promote regional growth and development. The key issue here is this growth is not guided by principles of ecological sustainability, and is causing major impacts through settlement, infrastructure and changes in land use on many of the regions most sensitive and vulnerable species and ecological communities. This growth is often driven by interests that lie outside the region, and that do not necessarily have the well being of the region as a primary consideration. For the regional economy of FNQ to remain robust and viable is it essential that the focus shift from the current blind growth paradigm to one seeking the economic opportunities associate with progressing sustainability. Peak oil and climate change both have very major implications for our regional economy, and unless the economy responds now to face these challenges in a proactive manner, it is likely the regional will suffer a major economic downturn in the coming decades.

The regional economy does of course not operate in isolation, and is greatly influenced by factors beyond the region. Currently markets fail to deliver sustainability as an outcome due to a combination of organizational, regulatory and information failures as well as false or missing price signals. Some of these issues can be addressed at a local level. We should seek to develop creative policy frameworks that move us into the twenty first century and that help us navigate the major changes that lie ahead over the coming decades.

The regional economy of FNQ should aim to be an inclusive and innovative economy for the benefit of all. This should include improving the skills of locals, closing the gaps between Indigenous communities and the broader community in relation to health, education, employment and housing and protecting and enhancing the environment.

Policy positions:

- The regional economy must diversify to reduce the vulnerability of being so heavily dependant on tourism. Tourism is very vulnerable to changes in fuel prices, extreme weather events, wars and disease outbreaks – all of which are likely to be significant issues over the coming decades.
- The region must actively seek out and support opportunities for local employment and economic activity associated with research, design, construction and implementation of measures and technologies in the following areas:
 1. Water efficiency and reuse
 2. Improved waste management, reuse and recycling
 3. Renewable energy
 4. Environmental management and restoration
 5. Sustainable building design and construction
 6. Services and technologies associated with minimizing the impacts of climate change on the community
 7. Local diversified agriculture
 8. Any other activity that support local resilience and promotes a more sustainable approach to development and resource management.

Key points:

- The region must actively consider ways to reduce its vulnerability to peak oil and climate change through developing a local resilient economy that is as self reliant as possible in terms of energy, fuel and produce.
- The economy should aim to be as inclusive as possible by supporting the education and training of the local community and ensuring economic benefits are ploughed back as much as possible into the local economy and community.
- A particular effort must be made to address the disparity between the well being of local Indigenous communities and the broader regional community in relation to health, education, employment and housing.
- Mechanisms should be investigated to channel a portion of profits derived from capitalizing from the regions natural and cultural assets back into the supporting and progressing the health of those assets.
- All companies should be take a triple bottom line approach to conducting business
- The local economy should develop a systems approach to ensure greater understanding of the interconnectedness within the economy and between the economy and the broader community and environment. Such an approach should aim to develop polices and actions that simultaneously address as many needs as possible with as few resources as possible and with minimal social and environmental impacts as possible.

Infrastructure

The provision of infrastructure, in particular transport infrastructure, is a key determinant of the future shape, functionality and sustainability of cities and surrounding regions. It is therefore critical that any major infrastructure planning undertaken by the state occur within the context of the regional plan, rather than above or separate to it. Unless this is the case, the regional plan will lose a significant amount of integrity and may fail to achieve the desired outcomes where they conflict with other infrastructure plans. If the State is to expect the community to have faith in its planning processes, the State must itself respect and adhere to these processes. The decision by the State to progress the Nullinga Dam for example, makes a mockery of the FNQ2050 Water Strategy process as well as provisions under the Barron River Resource Operations Plan, and undermines community faith in these processes. Major infrastructure projects such as the Kuranda Range Road Freeway proposal must be included in the regional planning process as this proposal will have a significantly influence on the future of the region.

If growth is going to be directed by good planning and into strategically selected areas than infrastructure provision must come ahead of demand, otherwise planners are caught in a cycle of trend planning where they do not influence the future of urban form, but the development industry does.

The potential of renewable energy should be mapped and these sites should be protected from any other development, as is the case with Extractive Industries. Similarly, as potential for extractive industries are now protected under their own State Planning Policy, so should the potential for wind, solar and geo thermal energy generation plants.

Key issues on Infrastructure planning and provision are:

- All major infrastructure planning for the region must occur within the context of the FNQ2025 regional Plan, and not above or separately to it.
- The Kuranda Range Freeway proposal should be included as an option for consideration within the Plan.
- Before any further investment occurs in major infrastructure in this region, the need for such infrastructure must be fully considered using a least cost planning approach, and must take into consideration issues for climate change and peak oil.
- Future Transport infrastructure should facilitate a shift to greater use of public transport and more efficient transport options such as rail.
- Future infrastructure should facilitate consolidated urban development rather than facilitating further unsustainable and damaging urban sprawl.
- Infrastructure should as far as possible avoid environmentally and culturally sensitive areas, and be designed to maximize connectivity across the landscape.
- Future infrastructure should aim to assist the region reduce its emissions of Greenhouse Gases by improving efficiency and promoting local renewable power generation over an expansion of the use of power from distant coal fired power stations.

- Water infrastructure must focus more on demand management issues and the recycling and reuse of water over infrastructure such as dam and weirs, which are highly disruptive to catchment ecology and offshore ecosystems.

Recommendations

- Infrastructure should follow and serve the intention of the Plan, it should not follow development.
- Key infrastructure must be committed ahead of need.
- Major infrastructure investment is required to upgrade public transport facilities.

Integrated Transport

Strategic Transport planning

The city of Cairns and the region of Far North Queensland are in desperate need of better transport planning. Our public transport networks are dreadfully inefficient and consequently under utilized. In regional activity centres such as Kuranda and Mareeba, public transport is virtually non existent.

CAFNEC would like to stress the point that it is impossible to have a well planned and efficient city without an integrated and well patronized public transport system. Cairns fails dismally in this respect. In the wider context of peak oil, well planned public transport infrastructure and service will be vital. In the context of climate change it is crucial that we address car dependence being built into urban form. Strategic transport planning needs to **supply lead**. Currently the existing bus service elicits a mediocre response from Cairns residents (excluding school students only about 2% of movements are made on public transport from Cairns residents. There is currently no policy to increase this proportion. Low patronage numbers are no excuse for not upgrading- Auckland recently ignored their own market research which indicated that residents would not patronize public transport, and undertook a major upgrade of their own facilities, which now enjoy high usage.

Even the best public transport in the world will not bring about a reduction in car use unless it is accompanied by **direct disincentives** for car travel.

The only truly sustainable urban transport modes are walking and cycling, and a transport policy that took environmental considerations seriously would promote public transport as a second best alternative to these modes. Therefore better provision for walkers and cyclists needs to be integrated into urban form.

Sustainable Travel and Improved accessibility

“Even in cities with high car ownership, up half of the population do not have cars. The modern mother has been freed from the stove and tied to the wheel” (Mees, 2000) Accessibility to public transport, especially into outer suburban neighborhoods is a critical access and equity issue for the young, the elderly, the disabled and the disadvantaged. This problem can only be resolved by greater provision of affordable and accessible public transport which connects all neighborhoods and centres within the region.

Effective transport investment

The ability to address the sub standard state of the region's public transport system by diverting some infrastructure investment to a major upgrade of existing facilities must be a major function of this Plan. Such an upgrade is absolutely necessary in light of projected population increases to the region. Unless the rate of public transport use is substantially increased over the life of this Plan it will have failed to deal with a substantial issue. Developing more and more roads to keep up with demand and relieve congestion is NOT effective transport investment.

Upgrading existing rail infrastructure must be reconsidered in light of current population increases to the region, as must developing a new light rail system. Cairns is a relatively linear city and could be well service by a single rail corridor. The possibility of connecting beach suburbs to Cairns centre via a ferry service from jetties should also be explored.

Source: Paul Mees (200) A very public solution, University of Melbourne Press.

Recommendations

Divert a significant portion of infrastructure investment to upgrading public transport system.
Extend existing rail network
Feasibility study of a light rail system connecting the suburbs of Cairns from Palm Cove to Gordonvale.

Regulatory Provisions

CAFNEC advocates the following regulatory provisions:

1. The Regional Office of the Department of Local Government, Planning, Sports and Recreation should be a concurrence agency on all impact assessable development.
2. The prohibited status on development should be reintroduced, particularly in some uses within the conservation zone.
3. Buffers zones should be created around all conservation areas (National Parks, World Heritage and biodiversity hotspots) and these should also have prohibited uses within them.
4. Mapping of existing and potential wildlife habitat be protected under Conservation Reserves and protected from development.
5. Covenants on property within conservation areas are negotiated between developers and local governments to prevent things like domestic cats and dogs, poisons and noxious exotic plantings in these sensitive areas.
6. The Coastal Management Plan (EPA) is integrated into FNQ 2025 and its directives be given the weight of law.
7. The land uses and their schedules are based on maps which provide definitive areas where certain classes of development can and can not occur. These maps must be based on comprehensive mapping of all ecological values within the region.

8. Subdivision may not occur in the conservation zone.
9. Prohibitions are not conditional
10. Broad scale blanket rural residential subdivisions are prohibited.
11. A State Planning Policy is drafted to amend building regulation and improve standards for energy efficiency in new buildings.
12. A State Planning Policy is drafted specifically to address Tropical Design and Climate Appropriateness of new building in the region.
13. A State Planning Policy is drafted to identify potential sites with renewable energy generational capacity, and these sites are protected from other development.

Traditional Owner Engagement Strategy for FNQ 2025 Planning Project Cairns and Far North Environment Centre (CAFNEC) 2007

Best practice engagement and involvement of Traditional Owners within the context of CAFNEC's FNQ 2025 Planning Project will be based on:

- the assumption that Traditional Owners of country within the Far North Queensland region will themselves identify who are their most appropriate representatives for CAFNEC to liaise with in terms of the FNQ 2025 planning project.
- liaison with key regional Aboriginal representative forums, including but not necessarily limited to the Aboriginal Rainforest Council, Giringun Aboriginal Corporation, Wujul Wujul Council and Yarrabah Council.
- CAFNEC may liaise with native title representative bodies within the region if so directed by respective Traditional Owners and/or native title claimants (Cape York Land Council, North Queensland Land Council and Central Queensland Land Council).
- where a determination of native title has been made, and where lands and/or waters held by the native title holders is considered by CAFNEC to have exceptional environmental conservation values, CAFNEC will undertake to liaise with the relevant Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC), Land Trust or land holding corporation.

In terms of the FNQ 2025 Planning process, CAFNEC supports positive Traditional Owner driven initiatives enhance sustainable resource use and viable local economies of benefit to the environment and biodiversity conservation outcomes. CAFNEC strongly believes that consultation with Traditional Owners and regional Aboriginal communities be initiated in the earliest stages of the planning process and not after everyone else has had a say.

In meeting these objectives, CAFNEC believes the FNQ 2025 Plan should:

- explicitly seek to build viable and equitable partnerships between Traditional Owners, local Indigenous organisations, government and non-government interests;
- include a statement on the region's Aboriginal history, heritage and interests - particularly given the existing Wet Tropics Regional Agreement signed between government and Traditional Owners from the 18 Rainforest Aboriginal groups whose respective country lies within the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (WTWHA);
- include recognition that there are Aboriginal interests in most, if not all, of the region's resources, i.e. there are spiritual, totemic and economic relationships with many plants and animals (biodiversity) and that Aboriginal people have rights, obligations and responsibilities for these;
- include recognition of Aboriginal interests in water management, e.g. lakes, rivers, coastal areas, significant places, recreational and subsistence fishing and environmental flows;
- recognise the need for protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage places; and
- recognise Aboriginal peoples traditional ecological knowledge and land management practices.