

**IMPLEMENTING THE VISION IN A WORLD HERITAGE AREA:
CONSERVATION AND TOURISM IN THE DAINTREE**

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KEY WORDS - Wet Tropics World Heritage Area : Daintree : Eco-tourism :

ABSTRACT

The Daintree region of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area faces serious problems of environmental degradation and changes resulting from a burgeoning tourism industry. In 1993 the Commonwealth Government funded the "Daintree Planning Package" study, which led to a \$23 m joint State / Commonwealth funding commitment. This provided additional impetus to a coordinated planning process that had been developing, primarily through the activities of Douglas Shire Council and the Wet Tropics Management Agency.

The funding package is intended mostly to achieve environmental protection of freehold lands and development of tourism infrastructure. It complements the planning strategies and development control mechanisms in the recently approved Douglas Shire Planning Scheme.

The Daintree Planning Package recognises that the Council is one of several agencies which have powers and responsibilities relevant to managing land use and conserving environment in this area. The paper adopts the position that planning strategies should be developed having regard to the powers and resources of the agencies that will administer their implementation. The paper will examine the role of each of three key agencies, the Douglas Shire Council, Wet Tropics Management Agency, and Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage. These agencies have set up the Daintree Planning Co-ordination Group (DPCG) that meets regularly to decide strategies on issues affecting the planning and management of the area, including expenditure of the Package funding, and how to effect limits to growth.

DISCLAIMER : Whilst Brannock Humphreys Planning and Environment Consultants have provided town planning advice to Douglas Shire Council since 1990, including in the preparation of its recently adopted Planning Scheme, and the Daintree Planning Package report, this paper is very much the personal observations of the author, and does not necessarily represent the views of the Council, any Councillor, or Council employee.

INTRODUCTION

Planning has been described as a process of choosing strategically, whether the decision is in relation to the form of a plan, or a policy, or an operational decision (Friend and Hickling, 1987, p.5). The decision-maker is continually faced with uncertainties : uncertainties about the environment on which the decision is made, uncertainties about the values of the stakeholders affected, and uncertainties with respect to related decision fields, that the decision-maker does not control. (ibid, Figure 3, opposite p11). However, while the decision-maker would like to reduce these uncertainties, by carrying out studies or research, carrying out consultation, or seeking to co-ordinate with other decision-makers, the opportunities to do so are limited by time and resources, and there is a pressure to decide, to enable progress to be made. As over time, the planning authorities make decisions, whether in plans, policies, or operational decisions, and as decisions are taken in related decision fields, the shape of the problem changes, putting forward a new set of challenges for the next round of related decisions (ibid, Figure 5, opposite p.15).

The decision-making process in the Daintree Region of Far North Queensland (FNQ) over the last decade is described comfortably by this model, and this paper explores the planning process that has taken place in the Daintree, from that perspective, and seeks to draw conclusions about visions and implementation, in terms of the Strategic Choice model of planning.

Relevantly in this case, planning should also be conceived as a political activity connected with the management of land use, subject to the same influences, system relationships and intrigues as other political activities that expend public resources and exercise controls, to promote a particular outcome. Land use planning strategies should be developed having regard to the powers and resources of the agencies that will administer the implementation of the strategies, and the interests of community groups and other stakeholders who will be affected.

I first wrote that last statement, in relation to planning the Daintree, in August 1995, and the abstract for the paper, that appears in the Congress proceedings, was written later that year. Since then, the Queensland State Government has changed, and the Federal Government has changed. The context of planning decision-making with respect to the Daintree has changed in less than a year, highlighting the fluidity and complexity of the planning process, and possibly providing general lessons for "implementing visions".

THE VISION

As soon as one mentions "vision" in a planning context, the legitimate first response is "Whose vision?" For the purposes of this paper I will focus on a vision that may be discerned from various planning documents that have been drawn up related to the Daintree, but part of the problem is that this is not, completely, a vision shared by all.

Underpinning the issues and the adopted "vision" for the Daintree is its ecological significance.

Twenty years ago, J.P. Stanton wrote of the area north of the Daintree:

"there is no other region in the State which contains in an area the same size, as much inspiring scenery or as great a diversity and abundance of life forms."

(Stanton, 1974,p.6)

Most of the area between the Daintree and Bloomfield Rivers is contained within the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (WTWHA), an indication of its ecological significance. In

the report submitted by the Australian Government in its application for listing of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, it was stated:

"The Wet Tropics region of north-east Queensland is one of the most significant regional ecosystems of the world. It is of outstanding scientific importance and natural beauty ..." (RCSQ, 1986, p.79)

A recent analysis of the biological qualities of the area showed it to possess more plant taxa with primitive characteristics than any other tropical forest in the world; approximately 120 rare or threatened plants are assessed to occur in the area. Another recent, detailed survey found a total population of 59 Cassowaries, a keystone species, in the area, and there are other rare fauna present too.

Many of the ecological values found in the WTWHA are also present in adjoining freehold areas; especially, extensive freehold areas comprise lowland tropical forests not well represented in the WTWHA, including rare or threatened plants, and valuable habitat. Conservation of these important ecosystems is the central element of the vision for the area. So too is facilitating the public's exploration and appreciation of the area's values.

The "Presentation" management goal for the WTWHA is:

"To present the natural heritage values of the Wet Tropics WHA to local, national and international communities." (WTMA, 1992, p.10)

This goal is also applicable to other, privately-owned areas of the Daintree with significant biological values, and is reflected in Douglas Shire Council's relevant planning documents.

At present, more than a quarter of a million people cross the Daintree River to visit the region each year, and this tourism industry is economically important to Far North Queensland.

The other major planning factor affecting a legitimate vision for the area, is the existence of approximately 1000 freehold allotments, about 90 percent of which are less than 5 hectares, and about 400 occupied with dwellings. There is therefore a growing population, with the potential to grow further, and there is a serious lack of normal residential services.

In 1994, Douglas Shire Council advertised a new planning scheme; a vision for the area, at that point, may be discerned from the Aim and Objectives of the Daintree-Bloomfield Development Control Plan, as follows:

"4.2.1 Aim

The central aim of the DCP is to provide for an extent, nature and configuration of visitation and development which is consistent with retention of the Area's attraction as a low-key, undeveloped, nature-based recreational environment.

It is also sought to conserve the natural environment, limit population growth and provide suitable facilities for the resident population.

4.2.2 Objectives

General Access Objective

- *To avoid the need for upgrading of the Daintree River ferry crossing.*

Tourism Objectives

- *To conserve the Area as an undeveloped, low-key tourist and recreation experience, based on the exploration and appreciation of the natural environment.*
- *To provide only for those uses and facilities which are necessary to support visitors' exploration and appreciation of the natural environment.*
- *To encourage tourism which is sensitive to the natural environment and consistent with the relatively isolated, nature based recreation experience, which is an intrinsic part of the Area's tourist appeal; and where necessary to limit tourism development to promote those qualities.*

Residential Objectives

- *To minimise housing development and population growth in the DCP Area.*
- *To provide for limited shopping and community facilities as necessary to meet only the local needs of the Area's residents.*

Environment and Landscape

- *To conserve the natural forested landscape character and scenic quality of the Area.*
- *To minimise the physical, ecological and other environmental impacts of development, recognising the outstanding international heritage significance of the area.*
- *To avoid or reverse change in the predominant character of the Area from a low-key, undeveloped natural environment to a productive rural environment, or an environment that shows the character of human settlement.*
- *To ensure that any development is sympathetic and sub-ordinate to the natural landscape character of the Area in terms of scale, density, architectural style and landscape treatment."*

(Brannock Humphreys, 1994, p4.2-4.3)

CONFLICTS AND HURDLES

Day-tripping

The numbers visiting the Daintree have escalated over recent years, and can be expected to increase further, as visitation into Cairns International Airport grows. Greater numbers means crowding on roads and at visitor nodes, conflicting with the objective of retaining an "undeveloped, low key" experience for tourists; it also potentially leads to environmental damage at visitor sites. It is difficult in the circumstances of the Daintree, to control visitor numbers.

Tourist Accommodation Development

There has continued to be pressure to approve more tourist accommodation in the Daintree. There is already overnight accommodation for approximately 1100, in resort/units, hostel and camping facilities; approximately the same again, or more, is the subject of other approvals which have yet to be acted on. Further development of tourist accommodation may change the area towards a more developed, sophisticated character, and away from an undeveloped, nature-dominant character; there may also be conservation impacts, attempting to deal with sewage effluent disposal in an isolated, tropical environment, for example, and permanent population increase associated with staff and development of support infrastructure.

Settlement

Occupation of the 1000 or so allotments subdivided by George Quaid in the 1980's has continued, stimulated no doubt by the sealing of the road most of the way to Cape Tribulation. These allotments were subdivided without sealed roads, reticulated power, reticulated water or sewerage. Residents are now pressing for reticulated power to be provided. Settlement tends to bring clearing of valuable vegetation, dogs that cause problems for native fauna including cassowaries, and stronger demands for services and economic development; it also increases traffic volumes in the low-standard road system, that will be difficult to upgrade.

The Ferry

Increased settlement, day-tripping and accommodation will together load significantly the ferry across the Daintree River, presently the only southern access to the area; they will also raise traffic volumes on the Cape Tribulation Road, leading to capacity problems and a reduced tourism experience.

SELECTED TOOLS

Over the last ten years, a number of initiatives have been undertaken to "reduce uncertainties" with respect to planning for the Daintree. A new planning scheme has been prepared, involving research and public consultation. The Wet Tropics Management Agency has researched biological and other values, and again, consulted extensively with the community and other stakeholders. The Daintree Planning Package report was prepared to develop a strategy to pursue "the vision", based on further research and consultation, and using a range of means supplementary to proposed town planning controls.

Town Planning Controls

The proposed planning scheme, as advertised, put a ceiling on the amount of tourism accommodation to be provided in the area, sufficient to accommodate 20 percent of the medium 2005 tourist accommodation projection for Douglas Shire. Further subdivision to allow more residential settlement was proposed to be prohibited. Site approvals were proposed to be introduced for new dwelling houses, designed to provide a vehicle to minimise clearing and visual intrusion. There are no town plan or ordinance controls to prevent clearing vegetation, at present.

Reticulated Power

Providing reticulated power remains a divisive issue. Problems include the method of reticulation in a sensitive environment, and the cost. The Daintree Planning Package proposed a compact with the community; reticulated power in exchange for agreeing to a range of strict environmental controls.

Environmental Management

Apart from controls over growth, the Daintree Planning Package canvassed a range of possibilities to protect environmental values in freehold areas (Brannock Humphreys,1994,p73). These included:

- government buying back environmentally valuable land;
- purchase of environmentally valuable land by conservation groups;
- co-operative management arrangements under the Native Conservation Act;
- regulatory intervention under the Native Conservation Act;
- rate incentives to prevent land clearing;
- actions to achieve rehabilitation (e.g. weed control, planting, feral pig control);
- town planning or other local government regulation; and
- transferable development rights.

The Daintree Planning Package recommended *"A strong ethos of environmental protection needs to be maintained and/or promoted in the community.... The preferred approach emphasises education and information rather than controls or sanctions, although the latter may need to be available to ensure sufficient protection"*. (ibid,p.74)

There have been many calls for town plan or other local government vegetation protection regulations over the years, but because of strong local community feelings, the approach recommended in the Daintree Planning Package, that is, education rather than regulation, has so far been adopted.

The other Daintree Planning Package initiative adopted was "buy-back", the public purchase of freehold land of high environmental value.

Day Tripper Facilities

The Daintree Planning Package recommended establishment of additional visitor facilities, to provide better interpretation for visitors, and manage potential visitor impacts.

The Ferry

The Daintree Planning Package recommended that the ferry over the Daintree River be retained (at its present size) as the only southern access point; this was not only to maintain an important element of the visitor experience, but also to control numbers entering the area, and to serve as a potential mechanism for education and visitor administration (licensing and prioritisation) (ibid.,pp77-82)

Other Measures

Other important recommended measures included:

- control over signage (a code touching uniformity, positioning and numbers);
- tree planting along the Cape Tribulation Road, to develop a "green tunnel" effect for visitors to the region; and
- putting the emphasis on commercial tours rather than private visiting, to allow greater numbers, better interpretation and better control of impacts.

IMPLEMENTATION

The selected tools, or strategies outlined above rely very much on particular implementation mechanisms for their success. The following are significant.

Town Plan Administration

The existing Douglas Shire Planning Scheme generally supports the vision of the draft (as advertised) planning scheme, however the new scheme is much more specific in its objectives and implementation mechanisms.

Some mandatory provisions of the draft planning scheme should be effective in promoting achievement of the Plan's objectives, including winding back of development rights in the Resort Business Zone (accommodation) and the Rural Residential Zone (subdivision). DCP-3 (Daintree - Bloomfield) provisions that are also mandatory, set up a system that should effectively limit new accommodation approvals. In addition, the Strategic Plan and DCP-3 contain many strong expressions of strategy, consistent with the vision, which while not mandatory in effect, make it difficult under Queensland planning legislation, to achieve approval for inconsistent development.

Provisions of the draft DCP that require site approval for new dwellings have been the subject of much debate, with calls for their removal (including from the State Government). No controls over vegetation clearing are proposed in the new planning scheme.

Daintree Planning Package

In 1993, the then Prime Minister visited the Daintree Section of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, and recognising serious problems of environmental degradation and a burgeoning tourism industry, provided political impetus to a planning process that had been developing in recent years, primarily through the activities of Douglas Shire Council and the Wet Tropics Management Agency.

The Commonwealth Government funded the "Daintree Planning Package" study, which led to a \$11.5 million funding commitment by the Commonwealth in the 1994 budget, matched in its 1994 State Budget by the Queensland Government. Of the \$23 million, \$17 million was allocated to environment conservation measures, and the other \$6 million to the development of tourism infrastructure. \$15 million of the environment conservation budget has now been spent, most on "buying back" properties of environmental significance. 62 allotments totalling 1205 hectares have been purchased. Other measures undertaken so far to promote environmental management include:

- a. vegetation audit carried out that is used to inform landowners of the significance of their properties; following on from this, a "landholders information kit" was prepared to advise landholders on management and environment protection measures, particularly related to residential development of small allotments (such as suitable methods of access and house site planning, water and power supply, waste disposal, house design, and revegetation), and a Community Information Liaison Committee was established to serve as a conduit for providing information to landowners, resourced to provide advice from a biologist and/or and engineer;
- b. environmental management agreements with landowners, supervised by the Wet Tropics Management Agency, (none implemented yet);
- c. appointment of an environmental officer, to control feral pigs and administer dog licensing (now abandoned); and
- d. encouragement of private nurseries, to provide endemic species for rehabilitation of road verges and cleared areas on private property.

\$5 million of the tourism infrastructure budget remains, to acquire land and build facilities for visitors to the region.

Daintree Planning and Co-ordination Group (DPCG)

In order to achieve a more co-ordinated approach to planning and operational decision making in the Daintree, a group was formed of the three main institutional players, Douglas Shire Council, Wet Tropics Management Authority, and the Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage, now Department of Environment; there are also several community representatives.

The Wet Tropics Management Authority, a joint federal/state initiative with enabling legislation from both parliaments, has responsibilities within the WTWHA, and limited powers outside. The Douglas Shire Council controls use of privately owned land, and also is responsible for the usual range of municipal functions, including the license for the ferry. The Queensland Department of Environment retains responsibilities for state-owned public lands, almost all of which are in the WTWHA, including development of visitor infrastructure in these areas, and tour operator licenses and levies. Whilst the Wet Tropics Management Authority was ultimately responsible for administering the Daintree Planning Package funding, it has done so with reference to the DPCG, which meets regularly, to discuss and recommend programs and priorities. The group has adopted a flexible approach in its work, using member agencies and private firms to implement actions, where appropriate. The group had been formed before the Daintree Planning Package, and will presumably continue, after the funding has finished.

The Power Debate

An intriguing dimension of the Daintree planning process, has been whether reticulated power should be provided to the southern three-quarters of the small allotments, subdivided in the early 1980's. The residents bought into the area without this service, although apparently some were assured that power would be provided. The previous State Government promoted the use of Remote Area Power Supply (RAPS). Estimates of the costs of reticulation vary; one estimate is that to install standard overhead reticulation would cost \$5.2 million, while an underground system would cost \$12.7 million. (Brannock Humphreys, op.cit., p.92). A significant grouping of residents has focused on the power issue as its central grievance.

The new State Government proposed to provide power, led by its North Queensland-based Minister for Minerals and Energy, Mr Gilmore. On the other hand, the Minister for Conservation, Mr Littleproud, has stated that vegetation clearing controls must be instituted, north of the Daintree River. When the proposal for power went to State Parliament, it was defeated as Mrs Cunningham the Independent, voted with the opposition. It is understood that she presently backs something like the Daintree Planning Package "compact", that power reticulation will only be allowed when vegetation clearing controls have been instituted.

Other Mechanisms

The Daintree Planning Package recommendation that the existing ferry be retained as the southern access point, to serve as a valve, remains a proposal that has no specific authority in any statutory document, although it was reasonably well investigated and justified in the study report. Methods of collecting revenue at the ferry from visitors were investigated and reported in the DPP report, but are yet to be instituted; revenue so raised was intended to fund visitor infrastructure in the Daintree. Likewise, methods of encouraging commercial tours at the expense of independent travellers were investigated, but are yet to be implemented (ibid, pp 87-91).

CONTINUING PROBLEMS

The implications of further development in the Daintree remains a matter for concern. The Daintree Planning Package report budgeted for about 360 existing allotments to be somehow removed from the pool available for housing, through "buy-back" or other means (ibid, p 72). The funding ultimately agreed was less than the report sought, and the decisions made about acquisition since have focused on large allotments of high environmental value, rather than the smaller residential allotments. Accordingly, there is a potential for about 50 percent more resident-generated traffic movements on the road system, than planned for in the DPP. This ultimately leads to reduced potential for visitation, if the existing ferry is used as the "valve". In response to pressure from the resident community, rhetoric in the draft town plan referring to limiting population numbers has been removed. Underlying reasons may include the possible loss of rate revenue if many allotments were "bought-back" or owners were offered incentives to

refrain from settlement, and the impact that reduced allotment numbers has on the costs per allotment of reticulated power. If electricity is reticulated, then, as with the sealing of the road to Cape Tribulation, the rate of settlement can be expected to increase.

The purpose of using the ferry as a constriction is primarily to reduce congestion on the Daintree road system, in the interests of the environmental experience. There are other experiential benefits of restricting development as well. If the ferry is not maintained as a restriction, traffic modelling shows that congestion will mount, and the low-key tourist experience sought in the area will progressively be compromised.

Lack of environmental controls is likely to result in scenic and ecological degradation. While progress has been made, there remain many problems, including uncontrolled clearing episodes, dog problems, and damage from feral pigs.

One complicating factor is the expressed needs of the Wujal Wujal aboriginal community at the north of the Daintree, who would like improved access through the Daintree region, to the south. Unfortunately, improved access between Cape Tribulation and the Bloomfield River (the site of the famous road blockade) will open up the area to additional through traffic, that will exacerbate congestion problems.

THE CHALLENGE

In the last 10 years, there have been many changes in the Daintree; notably, the road to Cape Tribulation has been improved and sealed, there has been further settlement of existing allotments, tourist accommodation has been built, and visitor numbers have increased substantially. In a paper presented at the Canberra conference four years ago, I questioned whether "... *in places that are highly valued for their natural qualities, it is inevitable that the low-key recreational experience must disappear, as visitor pressure increases.*" (Humphreys, 1992, p1).

In the four years since then, many of the planing initiatives and actions taken have improved the situation: sealing the road has removed choking dust that compromised the

appreciation of the natural environment, even though it has no doubt stimulated development, and has had a civilising influence on the character of the area; there has been substantial planting of endemic plants along the road verge and in cleared areas; the draft town plan is tough on population growth and tourist accommodation development, directing the latter south of the Daintree River; there has been no new subdivision and possibly, a net decrease in the amount of approved accommodation; some of the existing accommodation has changed emphasis towards "eco-tourism", although the interpretation offered in most establishments (and generally) still needs improvement; the Daintree Planning Package has made a big difference, in providing information to residents to encourage better conservation practices, in buying back environmentally significant land, and in building some new visitor infrastructure.

There remains however, the same concern that was expressed four years ago, that the low-key visitor experience will disappear. Even with the generous Daintree Planning Package, there has been little impact on the potential for population growth, and it seems likely in due course that there may be a significant permanent population in the area, that will give it a more civilised, developed character, out of keeping with the nature-dominated atmosphere it has had, and which would be more appropriate to retain. The pressure for more tourist accommodation to be approved remains, notwithstanding that many existing permits are yet to be acted upon. There is potential to improve the visitor experience, as numbers increase, by building more, new infrastructure in appropriate locations, that will relieve existing pressure points and provide new opportunities to explore the environment; the Daintree Planning Package funding has been continued by both governments, and most of what is left is earmarked for tourism infrastructure development. This will not be enough to make a sufficient, long-term impact.

If there is growth on all three fronts, resident population, tourist accommodation and day-tripper visitation, then it is likely that the ferry will seem inadequate for access, and there will be demands for significant road infrastructure upgrading. These will be extremely expensive consequences, aside from the impact these developments would have on the character of the area.

Achievement of the vision is likely to be relative. It depends on the attitude of state and federal governments. Will WTMA be retained and adequately funded? Will further funding be allocated to development of infrastructure to support the tourism industry? Will the conservative approach of the new town plan continue to receive State Government support? The progress that has been made to date has depended critically on the vision, drive, and political and organisational ability of one man, the Douglas Shire

Council mayor, Mike Berwick; will he fall under a bus, retire or lose his local electoral support (already eroded)? There is still not the community consensus about the vision that would be desirable, to inspire confidence in its "implementation", with a significant proportion of residents north of the River unsympathetic to many of the objectives of the planning for the area. Will their qualified acceptance of some of these diminish, as the flow of the Daintree Planning Package funding dries up, and the poor level of economic opportunities in the area becomes more obvious?

These factors are all largely beyond the influence of planners. The planning has been generally well directed. The Daintree Planning Coordination Group has worked effectively to co-ordinate interests and resources. The implementation of the vision will depend mostly now on consistent political support in the local community and in each sphere of Government. So far there has been no significant back-sliding; just the whiff of it.

CONCLUSION

Planners often work in circumstances where the parameters are continually changing, and are for the most part completely beyond their control; that is the case in the Daintree.

Visions conceived and accepted at one point, may lose their relevance and support as circumstances change. There will always be uncontrollable elements and uncertainties, in some situations more than others, but planners must accept this as an essential feature of the professional landscape. Faludi (1987, p126) has referred to the "robustness" of plans, that quality that allows the plan to retain its relevance as circumstances alter. In developing strategy, the planner has to strike a balance between developing a practical, inspiring vision, and building in robustness that allows for unfavourable outcomes. We will not always succeed in implementing the vision, and it may need to be adjusted.

In the Daintree, there has certainly been a complex, positive vision developed, supported by research, and which has been "implemented" to some degree. It is well integrated into planning documents about to take effect. However there can be no certainty or complacency that the Vision will be sustained.

Some of the implementation mechanisms adopted are, in Friend and Hickling's terms (1987, pp7-8), "complexity-simplifying" and "uncertainty-reducing"; they include the use of the ferry as a congestion valve and strategy yardstick, and the ceiling an overnight visitor capacity. These mechanisms while simple and effective, and appealing for that reason, may be less robust than the "complexity-elaborating" and "uncertainty-accommodating" objectives of the Vision. The educational rather than regulatory approach to environmental management is expensive, and may be difficult for a small local authority to maintain, if funding is reduced.

The role of the political process will be critical in determining this outcome: the interplay between different spheres of government, local politics, the future of the Wet Tropics Management Authority and the complexion of state and federal politics will all be significant. Woven through this, the level and coherence of support for the Vision that is developed in the local community will be a factor that will also vitally determine the outcome.

Implementing the vision in the Daintree may be viewed as the accumulation of related planning decisions over time, decisions about plans, decisions about policy and operational decisions. Depending on the decisions that are made over the next ten years and onward, the vision may shine as an icon of planning and community endeavour; or it may fade as an idealistic anecdote, one more victim of the inexorable drive towards overdevelopment, and another testimony to our inability to achieve excellent environmental outcomes. Enough progress towards the vision has been made to have warranted the effort in its formulation to date, and to be assured that the vision was neither impractical nor unsupportable. However the likelihood that the vision will be achieved remains very much in the balance. The planning process continues.

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