



Djungan Elder Paul Neal opening the Forum and acknowledging country.

Welcoming remarks

Paul Neal brought the forum into focus with a considered view on the relationship between people and country, and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews.

“We have to change how we think. We have to learn how to fit the economy into Country, not fit Country into the economy.” This view is in stark contrast to the current political rhetoric around a “nature repair market” and “putting nature on the balance sheet”, both of which place economic viability at the centre of the question. Instead, Paul is saying that Country must be in the centre, and the economy must conform to its needs.

He noted that Indigenous people are sitting on the front lines of the contest between economic demands for constant growth and the necessity of respecting Country as the source of all values. “And we’re not changing our values.” Within this tension however, is a spirit of welcome: “For us, it’s all inclusive, all non-exclusive.”

Mayor Angela Toppin welcomed all the attendees and then opened the presentations with comments on the importance of community participation across the Shire. She complimented the Mitchell River Group on their longevity and history of public-good projects across the catchment.

Mareeba Shire Council is an active supporter of community groups such as the Mitchell River Group. Mayor Toppin also noted that the Shire invests in extensive land management activities, including programs to reduce and contain weeds and ferals across a very large and often remote landscape.

Cape York update

Trevor Meldrum offered remarks from a number of different perspectives as he wears many different hats. Fundamentally, Trevor is a Cape York man with family ties through to Yalanji Elder Eric Rosendale, who was also in attendance. Trevor gave an update on Cape York Weeds and Feral Animals, Inc, an Indigenous not-for-profit delivering training and land management services across the Cape. Based in Cooktown, CYWaFA is one of the longest-serving such organisations in the north.

The key message is that “no one wants to fund real work.” That is, there is plenty of money for communications campaigns, meetings, and brochures, but there’s bugger-all to pay for people to actually go do something about the overwhelming pressures of weeds and feral animals.

As a “Biosecurity Mate” for the Cape, Trevor is currently organising for some of the Biosecurity Queensland bureaucrats to get out of Brisbane and come out on country where they can get a feel for the actual needs.

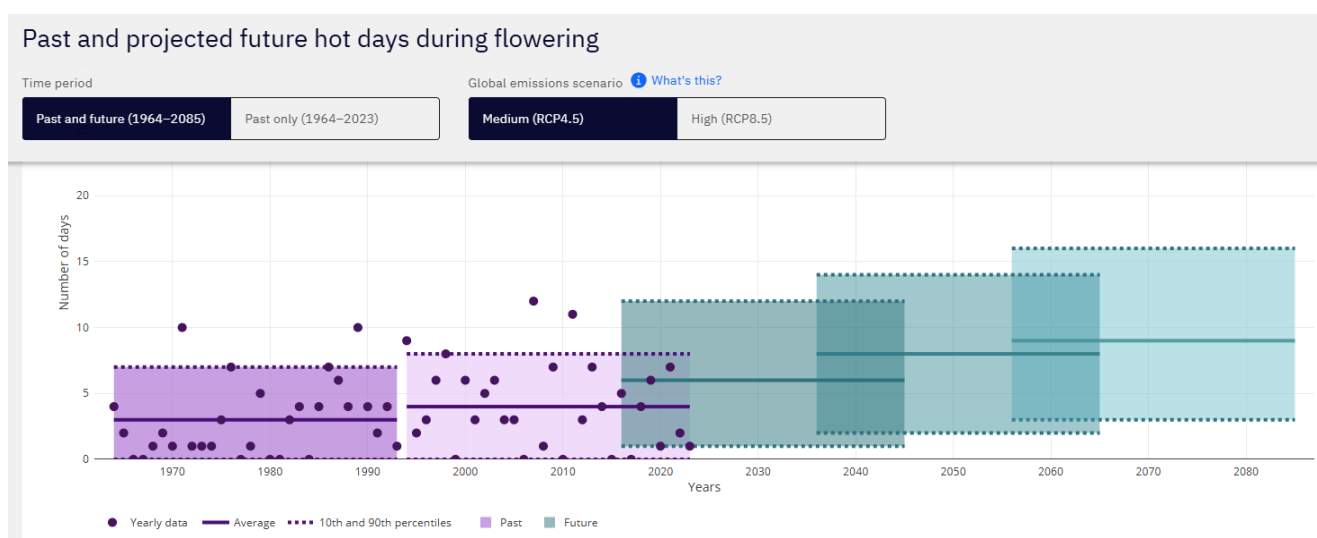
Trevor also serves as the Chair of the Queensland Conservation Council, a role that gives him an opportunity to hear from conservation groups right around the state.

“We know we can succeed when there’s sufficient resources for the work. We showed what could be done in the fight against Pond Apple and we’ve cleared hymenachne out of major wetlands. But now there’s lumpy skin disease, foot and mouth, and worst of all: avian flu. We need resources back on country and we need the Departments to get out of their siloes.”

Drought resilience for the Gulf

Kasmin Brotherton was the Drought Resilience Coordinator for Gulf Savannah NRM. She gave an overview of what the Drought Hub network seeks to achieve across Australia, namely, to get primary producers to structure their businesses around the idea that drought is a normal and unavoidable part of the natural cycles in the Australian climate. This will help producers realise that drought not a natural disaster, it's climate variability and business as usual. “You are either preparing for drought, in a drought, or recovering from drought. Drought is always there.” [[Presentation](#)]

Of particular interest is a new tool called **My Climate View** (<https://myclimateview.com.au/>) which aims to assist primary producers better understand the risks and opportunities facing them over the next 50 years.



Developments at Nguddaboolgan



Angela Threlfall is the Coordinator for NNTAC (Nguddaboolgan Native Title Aboriginal Corporation) who are the traditional owners of the Djungan peoples country between the Mitchell and the Walsh, encompassing the pastoral property Kondoparinga and the sacred site of Ngarrabullgan (formerly Mount Mulligan). NNTAC represents the interests of approx 4,000 members and is actively developing new cultural and economic opportunities on country.

Angela has joined NNTAC as Coordinator after 21 years of service in the military. She's been instrumental in delivering on the Ranger funding that NNTAC have secured. The Ranger program will commence in October.

Recent developments include over 16km of new fencing being installed, replacement of roadsigns in collaboration with Mareeba Shire Council, removal of asbestos from derelict and burned out structures, and installation of fit-for-purpose accommodation for the Ranger team.



Illegal Activity



Angela noted that amongst the challenges that the group faces is a long history of “outlaw” behaviour by fossickers, hunters, and off-road drivers. “We have a strict no trespassing policy in place now and our Rangers are going to be diligent with surveillance. This country is sacred to us and it’s our traditional home. We’re going to make that clear to people.”

[\[Presentation\]](#)

The Great Australian Cane Toad Bust



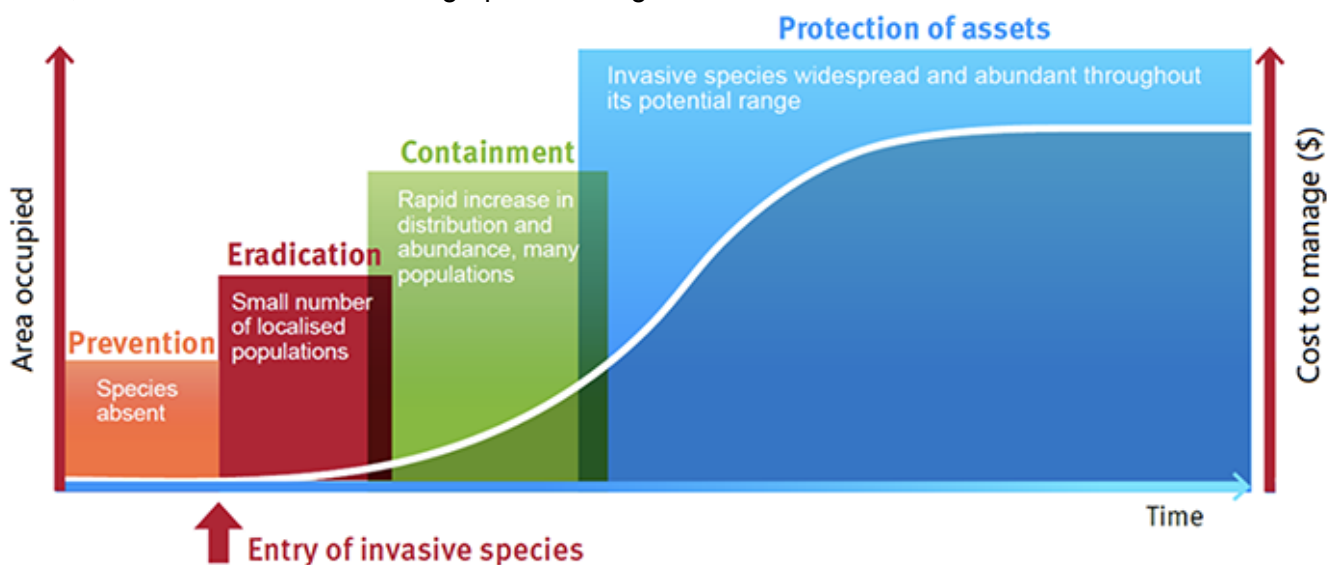
Legendary environmentalist **Wal Mayr** and **Kelsi Taylor**, Invasive Species Officer for Watergum, gave a lightning pitch for the upcoming **Great Cane Toad Bust**: <https://watergum.org/greatcanetoadbust/>

In addition to the Bust, Watergum is also leading the way with cane toad prevention through their innovative tadpole traps. These traps are 100% environmentally safe and each trap can reduce toad populations by thousands! **Tadpole Trapping**: <https://watergum.org/tadpoletrapping/>

Invasive species research

Biosecurity Queensland’s **Michael Graham** is the Biosecurity Officer for the Wet Tropics / Invasive Plants and Animals. Michael gave a presentation on the extensive range of activities that he and his research colleagues are involved with at BQ.

As with most such programs, BQ is focussed on “pushing things toward the left of the invasive species curve”, which is a reference to this graph of management actions:



[Presentation]

Management strategies at Springmount

Kevin Davies is the Manager at the massive Springmount Waste Facility at Arriga, just to the west of Mareeba. Springmount is a joint venture between Remondis Australia and FGF Developments. Remondis is a privately owned German company, and FGF is a privately owned civil works company based in Cairns.

The facility is estimated to have another 40 years of lifespan in the State 1 development.

Springmount is the only certified, triple-lined facility north of Townsville. As a result, the Springmount facility is the focus for a wide range of controlled waste such as contaminated soils, asbestos, and biosecurity matters.

Recently, there was a lot of media coverage about haulage and disposal of PFAS contaminated soils at Springmount. Kevin emphasised that all activities are heavily regulated and Springmount complies with strict environmental requirements. The levels of PFAS contamination in the soil are far less than typically encountered in household plastics.



The Springmount facility also generates significant quantities of methane, which is a potent greenhouse gas. This gas is collected through underground piping from 32 wells and brought to the flare. Here, 99% of the methane is burned off at a temperature of over 700C. In the future it might be possible to utilise this gas for power generation. At present, however, the economics do not justify sensible utilisation of this valuable resource, so the methane is just wasted. Economic policy is not a law of nature: it is a social choice.

[\[Presentation\]](#)

Gulf Savannah NRM and Sustainable Ag

Zoe Williams, CEO of Gulf Savannah NRM (GSNRM) gave a brief update on the main projects that the group is contracted to deliver. **Sarah Reynolds**, who has just started as Sustainable Ag Coordinator, made her introductions and invited attendees to contact her for more information and conversations.

Gulf Savannah NRM is the regional NRM body that looks after much of the Mitchell River catchment area. There is a small portion of the catchment on the Alice River that is co-managed with Cape York NRM (CYNRM). **Pip Schoor**, CEO of CYNRM, was also in attendance at the Forum.

Both regional bodies are the conduits for the majority of investment from the Commonwealth's National Landcare Program. They also manage funds sourced from the Queensland Natural resources investment program (NRIP).

More info: [Gulf Savannah NRM](#) / [Cape York NRM](#)

Agrihoods & self-reliant horticultural villages

Planning underway for Australia's first 'agrihood' to merge homes, farming in Far North Queensland

Fiona Broom

ABC Rural Sustainable and Alternative Farming

Thu 21 Mar



Kuranda man's mission to grow off-grid edible forest using syntropy, permaculture techniques

By Chris Catline ABC Far North Sustainable Living

Wed 24 Aug 2022



Holly Gurling is an Independent Community Facilitator currently in Sweden pursuing a Masters degree in *Strategic Leadership Towards Sustainability*. She gave an inspiring presentation on the potential to cooperatively work toward more self-reliant food systems, starting right here.

Holly has been working with a wide range of innovators and practitioners, learning what works, what doesn't work, and how to nurture the networks of relationships that will support this pathway toward regional self-reliance.

Agrihoods is a term that includes agriculture, neighbourhoods, mutual aid, resilience, sustainability, vulnerability, regeneration, and an invitation to re-imagine the very idea of "villages." A key insight is that in the face of global climate change, local communities and regions are the most cost-effective scales at which to develop and deploy innovations.

[\[Presentation\]](#) [\[YouTube\]](#)

Ghost nets and Banana bags: bringing the solution to the problem



Ghost nets and other plastics are a serious waste disposal problem for Australia.

Connor Clarke is CEO of Plastics Pirate, is a one-man force of nature working to transform the way we look at the plastic problem. “Look, just about every strategy in the world starts with the idea that we have to collect waste plastics into a big waste stream and then feed it through some immense, hundred-million dollar high-tech processor. There are so many problems with that model, and our technology solves them all.”

Plastics Pirate is the exclusive Australian distributor of a small-scale plastics pyrolysis unit pioneered by South African innovators, ScarabTech. The “beetles” as the units are affectionately known, weigh about 2 tonne, easily transported by trailer. “We can go to where the waste is: that’s a completely different solution approach and it means we can start cleaning up the problems that people have thought were impossible.”



Pyrolysis unit inside purpose-built trailer for easy transport.

Connor is currently working on a pilot project with the Australian Government that is interested in more efficient ways to deal with “ghost nets” and other plastic debris arriving on the Australian coast. Often, this plastic waste is brought to remote Indigenous communities where there are very limited options aside from landfill disposal. “Pyrolysis is recognised as one of the most effective ways to transform plastic waste into a useful feedstock,” Connor notes.

The beetles are able to handle about 1 tonne of plastics per day, producing about 900L of distillate that can be directly substituted for diesel. In the case of banana bags, it means that a farmer can process their own bags (or be part of a cooperative), transforming an expensive waste product into valuable fuel to run their on-farm plant.

Banana bags loaded into a melter to compress into pyrolysis feedstock for the “beetle.”

More information: <https://plasticspirate.org/>



Smashing the bush for a renewable future?



Steven Nowakowski is an award-winning photographer and multi-talented data visualisation expert passionate about conserving Queensland's remaining wild country. He became aware of inappropriate wind farm developments when the Mount Emerald and Kaban projects went forward. Armed with a drone and a vibrant information network, he took a deep dive into the world of renewable energy projects.

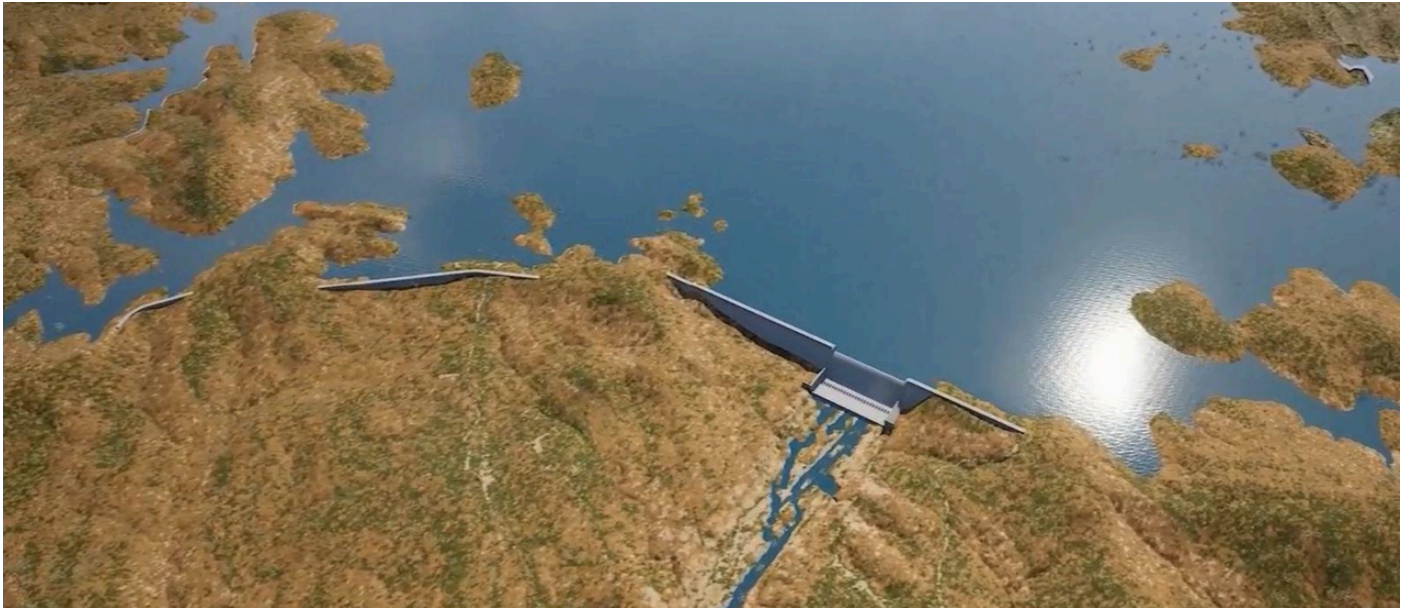
As he presented to the Forum, it is clear that the Queensland government has given carte-blanc approval to renewable energy speculators who are ranging up and down the high voltage transmission lines looking for any opportunity. All along the Dividing Range and right up to the boundaries of our National Parks, projects are being proposed that will fragment and disrupt tracts of high-elevation bush. With the support of the big conservation groups and big finance, a dizzying number of completely inappropriate wind farm developments are being fast-tracked for approval. Few in the public have an idea of just how many projects are currently in the pipeline or the scale of damage that they are doing. While these developments are being encouraged as a strategy for lowering greenhouse gas emissions, the brutal facts are:

- 1 - These developments are doing irreparable harm to habitat on a vast scale; and
- 2 - Since the government has not committed to lowering the total amount of energy available to the economy, all of the additional "green power" provided by these projects is simply being absorbed into an onward increase in total emissions and cumulative harm to the environment.

Steven urgently asked the group to demand a more coherent and conservative energy policy for Queensland, or risk losing an unforgivable proportion of Queensland's remaining native habitat.

[\[Presentation\]](#) [\[Visualisation\]](#)

Lakeland Irrigation Scheme: RDATN update



Tony Potter has been the lead Consultant for RDATN (Regional Development Australia, Tropical North) for over half a decade now and was generous enough with his time to once again provide an update on the LIAS (Lakeland Irrigation Area Scheme).

At this stage the RDATN have finished their work on the project by delivering the [Detailed Business Case](#). This massive report has been reviewed by the State with no immediate indication of support for further progress, although this can obviously change as political priorities change.

In order to proceed, the project will need a proponent, a detailed Environmental Impact Study, a favourable review of the Mitchell River Water Plan, land use agreements from all relevant Native Title groups, and a detailed cost-sharing agreement with water buyers.

Tony gave a detailed explanation of how the engineers have taken dam failure risk into account.

[\[Presentation\]](#)

Lakeland Irrigation Scheme: CAFNEC update

Lucy Graham, in the role of Director for CAFNEC (Cairns and Far North Environment Centre) has been keeping a very close watch on the LIAS project. There are clearly a number of troubling environmental, cultural, technical, and even economic issues with the proposed development.

The situation is not improved by the fact that the development is being put forward as a public benefit even though there is no sincere effort to address legitimate community concerns with honest and forthright data.

A key example of this is the oft-repeated claim that the dam will have less than a 0.2% impact on the Mitchell River. This sounds like a very small reduction in flow, but that's because the Mitchell is a massive river system. The Palmer however, where the dam will be located, is a much smaller system. Despite its modest size, the Palmer is a vital resource for over 300km until it joins the Mitchell. So the more relevant question would be: what is the proposed dam's impact on the Palmer?

As shown here, from the RDATN’s own presentation, flows at the dam would be reduced by *87%*.

Location	Pre-development Mean Annual Flow (ML/yr)	Irrigation offtake (ML/yr)	Irrigation offtake Percentage (%) of Mean Annual Flow	Direct Evaporation (ML/yr)	Direct Evaporation Percentage (%) of Mean Annual Flow	Environmental Flows at dam outlet (ML/yr)	Environmental Flow Percentage (%) of Mean Annual Flow
Palmer River Dam	222,810	94,453	42.4%	27,943	12.5%	28,964	13.0%

This is typical of the “partial truths” being communicated to the community by the project’s proponents.

There may well be sufficient merit to the project for it to gain community support. But making good decisions in the public interest requires open and honest communication. This has not been a feature of the process so far.

Lucy pointed out that even the Queensland government has raised serious questions about the project. Here’s a selection of comments by the State, as published in response to the Detailed Business Case:

Concerns Raised By State Department

- **Water Entitlements:** There is insufficient unallocated water in the Mitchell Water Plan to meet the project’s needs. The water plan expires in 2027, and while a review could increase available water, there’s no guarantee this will happen or meet the project’s full requirements.
- **Geological Conditions:** Geological conditions at the dam site are not fully understood, having only been investigated by a relatively small number of boreholes, but issues are possible due to the known location of the Palmer River Fault and rock conditions that showed high water losses under testing.
- **Transfer Tunnel:** Only two boreholes have been drilled along the 12 km tunnel route. This limited data raises risks for cost and timeline overruns, despite allowances in the projected costs.
- **Economic Viability:** The project’s high construction costs and low economic benefits pose significant challenges. The benefit-cost ratio is estimated between 0.13 and 0.37, meaning only a small fraction of the capital cost will be recovered. The project does not meet cost recovery expectations and would require substantial grants and subsidies

www.cafnec.org.au



If the objective is to provide good jobs and sustainable livelihoods for the people of the Lakeland area, the LIAS proposal needs to be evaluated on a set of far more clarifying metrics. Then a proper public conversation should be facilitated to allow for the public good to be honestly measured with respect to the private interests and real-world risks that the project would involve.

[\[Presentation\]](#)

NOTE: Following the Forum, Tony put together a more pointed presentation addressing some of the concerns raised by CAFNEC. We thank Tony for his diligence and follow-through while noting that CAFNEC may have more to say on the matter as well. [\[RDATN response presentation\]](#)



Thanks to....

Djungan people, Mbarburum people, and all traditional owners

Gulf Savannah NRM - CAFNEC - Mareeba Shire Council

Queensland Water & Land Carers (QWaLC)

EQ Resources

And all our presenters for their time and attention to this amazing catchment we call home!

