

2025 Mitchell River Forum Proceedings



The Mitchell River Watershed Management Group is one of Australia's oldest and most enduring community-led organisations focussed on the sustainable use and care of natural resources in a watershed. Formed in 1990 by elders from the community of Kowanyama, at the mouth of the mighty Mitchell, the group has been charged with being the "cockatoos at the top of the catchment," ensuring that the five main rivers that make up this catchment are healthy, productive, and respected.

The Mitchell River Forum has become an annual event that attracts land managers, agencies, researchers, and community members to openly share their views, knowledge, concerns, threats, and opportunities.

This year's Forum was held at the lovely Geraghty Park Community Hall, Julatten, on 11 October. The forum opened with an acknowledgement of country requested by Chair Fiona Barron and provided by Trevor Meldrum.

First session

Zoe Williams	Gulf Savannah NRM
Ross Cardillo / Amy Braes	Pest Management Advisory Committee
Andrew Denniss	Mt Lewis Frogs
Emma Atkins	Biosecurity Queensland
Oceane Dupont	Wetherby Wetlands Restoration
Barbara Weuringer	Sawfish in the Mitchell and Walsh



Gulf Savannah NRM: Regional Update



CEO Zoe Williams provided a comprehensive update of projects in the region. The GSNRM footprint encompasses the Mareeba-Dimbulah Irrigation Area, stretching west to the extensive grazing country to Georgetown and the Gilbert River, and north to the gulf savanna formed by the Mitchell River.

GSNRM is currently developing projects that have been funded by the \$117M NRM Expansion program. Projects are specifically funded to achieve on ground results for weed control and protection of ecosystems dependent on the Great Artesian Basin.

There are projects being funded (finally!) as part of the TC Jasper recovery program, and again there is an emphasis on weed and feral pest management.

GSNRM have a number of projects running with Regional Delivery Partners, including Climate Smart Ag 1&2, Northern Quolls, Priority Places program, and an Indigenous Participation project being coordinated by Natarsha Bell. Scott Morrison is the Regional Feral Pig Coordinator, facilitating access to traps and baits, and leading the coordination of regional control efforts.

Finally, there was a brief update on developments with GSNRM corporate governance. Further, Zoe noted that the organisation has made an ongoing commitment to a robust regional presence by purchasing staff housing at Georgetown and renewing the long-term lease arrangement at the historical offices.

PRESENTATION: <https://www.mitchell-river.com.au/sites/default/files/2025-11/25-mrfoum-gsnrm.pdf>

Mareeba Shire Pest Management Advisory Committee



Councillor Ross Cardillo provided a comprehensive review of the work of the Mareeba Shire PMAC (Pest Management Advisory Committee). The purpose of the PMAC is to provide Council with strategic guidance on regional pest management, which includes reviewing the Mareeba Shire Community Biosecurity Plan, prioritising invasive species, sharing knowledge, and identifying funding opportunities.

The PMAC is convened by the Shire and is intended to assist with the coordination of management efforts across the Shire. Membership on the Committee includes Gulf Savannah NRM, as well as the Mitchell River Watershed Management Group, and the Julatten & Molly Association of Ratepayers and Residents.

The key project officer is Graham Winert, the senior Lands Protection Officer for the Shire. Graham provided additional information to the meeting about control of Amazon Frogbit, Gamba grass and pigs, in particular.

MORE INFO: <https://msc.qld.gov.au/?s=PMAC>

Mountain-top Nursery Frog project report



Dr Andrew Denniss is a field ecologist leading a project for Terrain NRM to protect and restore breeding sites for a cryptic frog species in the Mt Lewis National Park. His report acknowledged the contribution of many collaborators, especially Dr Edwaard Evans, Nathaniel (Archie) Levers, Evan Rohde, Mark Copine, and Dr Conrad Hoskins.

The Mountain-top Nursery-frog is a small species with a highly restricted habitat. This ongoing research project considers to measured and modelled impacts of climate change, along with a range of other threats, including the impact of feral pig diggings. The project will run through til April 2026, after which the infrastructure will be handed over to Parks. Andrew described some of the formidable logistical challenges the team has confronted, including the complete wash-out of Mt Lewis Road in TC Jasper, forcing them to build the research station with airlifted materials.

Pigs are responsible for severe ecosystem damage at the local scale, and the project seeks to quantify these impacts through the use of pig “exclosures” paired with control sites where no protections have been implemented.

The project has surfaced a further potential issue for research. Andrew noted that the pig damage appears to be associated with the acceleration of runoff drainage. The undisturbed forest floor provides a soft, spongy layer that functions to hold water and allow it to slowly percolate into the soil, recharging the complex hydrological network that, as a whole, delivers the majority of permanent flows to the Mitchell River. As such this slow forest floor percolation mechanism is essential to the riparian health of North Australia’s largest river system.

Unfortunately, as pigs dig, they remove the protective, absorbent layer of leaf litter and compact the soil. The forest floor is less able to absorb and buffer contributions of rainfall and moisture from cloud harvesting. This results in the formation of puddles and drainages that rapidly disperse off the mountain, bypassing the more complex hydrological recharge. Although this effect is only a working theory, it seems worthy of further investigation and could be a driver for more extensive management of feral pigs.

PRESENTATION:

https://www.mitchell-river.com.au/sites/default/files/2025-11/25-mrfoum-denniss-c_monticola.pdf

Biosecurity Queensland



Emma Atkins, Regional Director Biosecurity (North) provided a quick definition of the biosecurity system in Queensland, outlined the Government's election commitments to strengthen the system, and then gave an overview of the restructure and renewed commitment that she has been leading in her Division. The four key missions she has identified are related to stakeholder engagement, regional profile, investment in staff, and lifting the level of preparedness for disaster management at the district level.

Emma went on to discuss the context of the Mitchell catchment and covered the main biosecurity challenges that are on her radar. In particular, these include invasive ants, Avian Influenza, feral pigs, invasive weeds (including aquatic weeds such as Amazon Frogbit), wild dogs, and pest fish.

She then provided a summary of the consultation she's undertaken and what she and her team have heard so far. For the most part, it was a familiar list of concerns, including the lack of funding for biosecurity activities, the difficulty of enforcing the General Biosecurity Obligation, and the challenges faced by regional Councils struggling with staff retention and limited rates base. Emma has a full schedule of activities set out for her Division and is keen to hear from stakeholders.

Emma Atkins Regional Director Biosecurity (North) 0472 652 095 Emma.Atkins@dpi.qld.gov.au Location - Cairns	Jennifer McKee Regional Biosecurity Senior Executive Officer 0461 565 865 Jennifer.McKee@dpi.qld.gov.au Location - South Johnstone	Louise De Lai Regional Biosecurity Senior Support Officer 0491 334 355 Louise.delai@dpi.qld.gov.au Location - Cairns
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Wetland Restoration at Wetherby Station



Oceane Dupont, a project officer with Gulf Savannah NRM, delivered an inspiring report on the efforts to restore a wetland at the historic Wetherby Station in Julatten.

Like many such wetlands, the Wetherby Station ecosystem has been degraded by decades of inappropriate cattle operations, intensified by the introduction of Olive Hymenachne. This South American native grass was championed by the cattle industry as a “ponded pasture” solution to the problem of carrying large herds across the late dry season when paddocks are exhausted. By colonising the wetlands, graziers gained a few more months of low-cost feed. For some northern pastoralists, ponded pasture is profitable. However, Olive Hymenachne is also exceptionally invasive, and there are no practical methods to eliminate the spread from private grazing lands into public recreational and conservation lands. For example, the wetland at Wetherby is less than 3km from a cherished conservation reserve. The conservation reserve is completely overwhelmed with hymenachne, and the volunteer efforts to control it are futile at best.

To the credit of the current owners of Wetherby Station, the decision was made to fence off the project wetland and begin the slow process of restoration. This work commenced with mass treatment of the hymenachne with an approved herbicide. The exclusion fence is designed to be pig-proof to eliminate another key vector of ecological damage.

The project has been undertaken with respectful inclusion of Indigenous people traditionally associated with that country, and with the involvement of some of the area's highly-qualified volunteer ecologists.

The project will be an important learning experience

PRESENTATION:

<https://www.mitchell-river.com.au/sites/default/files/2025-11/25-mrfoum-dupont-wetherby.pdf>

Sawfish in the Mitchell



Dr Barbara Weuringer, Director & Principal Scientist, Sharks And Rays Australia (SARA), delivered a powerful presentation on the importance of sawfish on the Western Cape. They are a totemic animal of deep significance to Indigenous people, and they are internationally listed as critically endangered. We are uniquely privileged to be the custodians of some of the most important habitats for these creatures in the world.

One of the key findings from her research is that sawfish appear to range widely into the catchment, travelling far upstream for food and for nesting. There is a clear need for further research into sawfish behaviour and for ongoing monitoring of populations, but it is already very clear that the animals make use of ecosystem services that originate in areas that have been proposed for broadscale agricultural development.

There is a critical need for caution and public discussion before private interests are allowed to potentially damage the habitats critical for ongoing survival of these ancient animals.

PRESENTATION:

<https://www.mitchell-river.com.au/sites/default/files/2025-11/25-mrfoum-wueringer-sawfish.pdf>

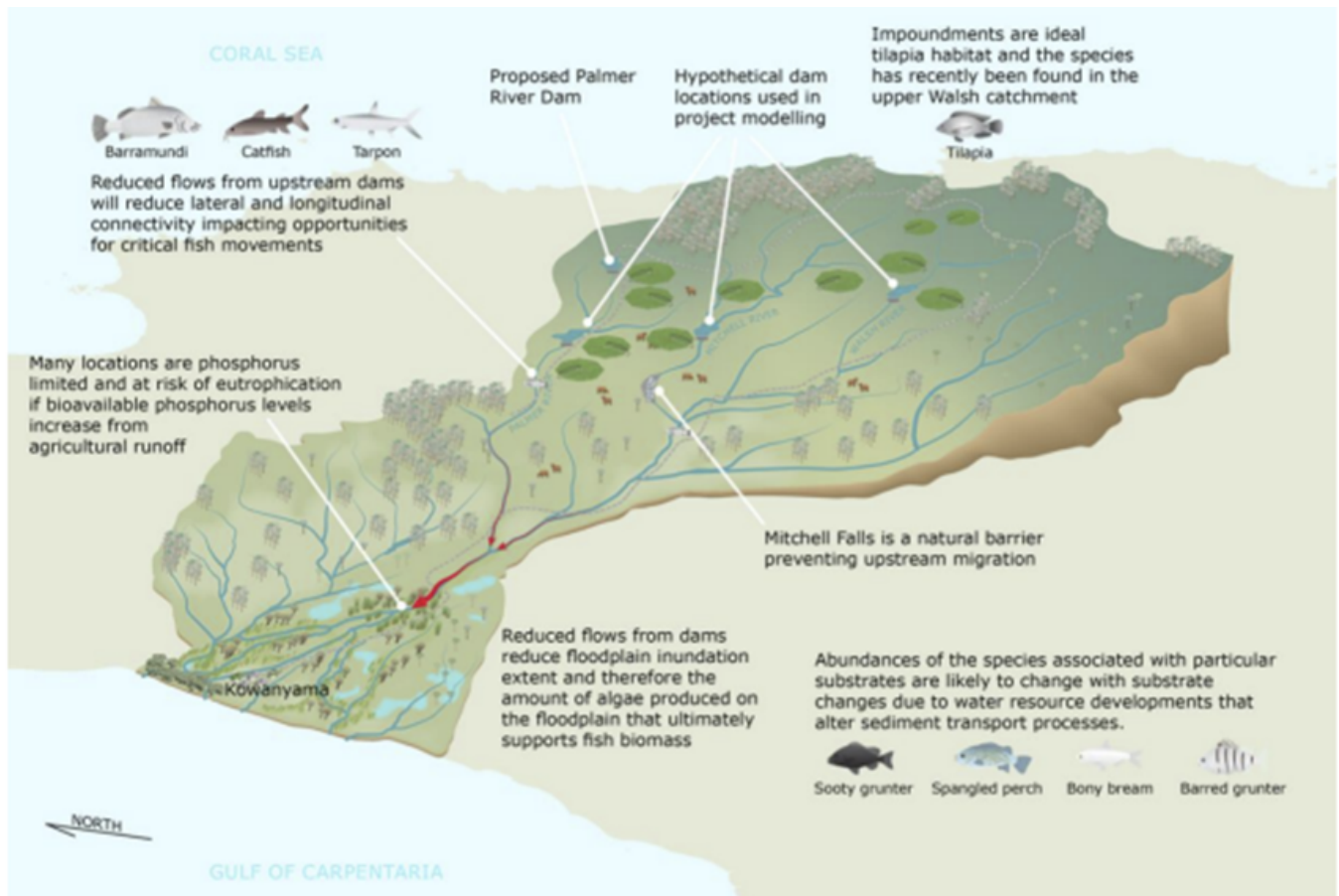


(L-R) Councillors Amy Braes and Ross Cardillo receive the Abattoir Swamp Progress Report from Lindsay and Keith Fisher, on behalf of the Friends of Abattoir Swamp, with Mitchell River Chair Fiona Barron.

Final session

Lucy Graham	CAFNEC Mitchell River Catchment	Project updates
Lindsay Fisher	Abattoir Swamp report	Briefing
Michael Anthony + Leanne Kruse	North QLD Naturalists / Woody Weed demo	Research
Pip Schoor	Cape York NRM updates	Project updates
Trevor Meldrum, Anne-Marie Keating, Bryony Barrett, ...	<i>Call around the room for key people to be recognised and give a short intro to their work</i>	
Fiona / John / Trevor / Karen	Panel discussion / round-up/ highlights / what's next?	<i>Thanks to Bendigo Bank, et al</i>

Water Planning in the Catchment



Lucy Graham is the Cape York Campaigner for CAFNEC (Cairns and Far North Environment Centre) and she presented a thought-provoking assessment of the Mitchell River Water Plan. The Plan is currently undergoing a review. All Water Plans in Queensland must be reviewed periodically, and a review of the Mitchell River Water Plan has coincided with the current Government's commitment to review all water plans across the State with a view of making more water available for economic development.

Public comment on the Mitchell River Plan has now closed, but no findings have yet been made available. Lucy gave a careful and factual account of the factors that are considered by the Department, and how they must take account of legislation related to protection of environmental and cultural interests.

The Mitchell has long been targeted for broadscale agricultural development. Along with the Gilbert, these expansive savannah plains appear to offer significant potential for large corporate ag developers to establish operations aimed at export commodities such as cotton, sugar, and pulses.

Lucy noted that dams do not improve water security nor do they add to regional climate resilience. Instead, they serve to support large-scale industries and activities that are even more dependent on favourable conditions, brittle logistics, and highly volatile overseas markets.

Large water projects directly impact the ecosystems of a wide range of dependent flora and fauna, leading to unpredictable and often detrimental changes to land condition. These large projects also have a history of feeding agricultural activities that further contribute to catchment degradation through the impacts of chemical runoff, habitat fragmentation, and reduction in biological diversity.

PRESENTATION: <https://www.mitchell-river.com.au/sites/default/files/2025-11/25-mrfoum-cafnec.pdf>

Swampie Report



Lindsay Fisher is a key contributor to a group of volunteers who call themselves the Friends of Abattoir Swamp, or “Swampies” for short. Abattoir Swamp is a much-loved environmental park located on the Mount Molloy - Mossman Road. It has enjoyed a glorious past as a jewel on the international birdwatching circuit. The wetland narrowly missed being filled in during the cane boom of the early 80s, and (through intense local activism) was eventually donated to Mareeba Shire Council in 1991 to be used for public benefit. Leveraging funds from the establishment of the Wet Tropics in 1988, a well-designed birdhide and raised walkway were constructed by Mareeba Shire Council.

By the early 2000s the wetland was choked by the invasive Olive Hymenachne, introduced for the benefit of north Australian pastoralists keen to convert their wetlands into “productive” paddocks. In 2021 the Shire called for expressions of interest to manage the park and the Mitchell River Watershed Management Group was successful in securing a 5-year lease to caretake and develop the park.

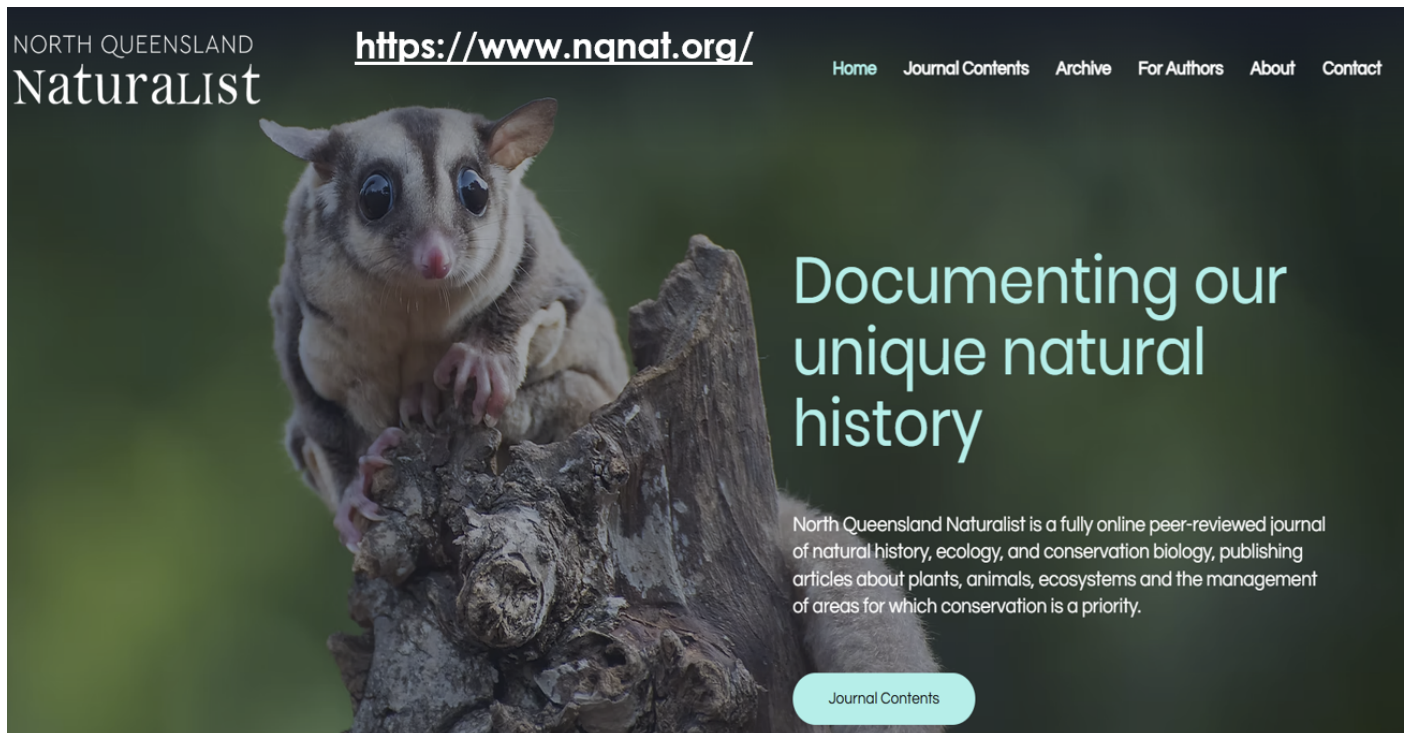
Mitchell River formulated terms of reference and called for volunteers to take on the management role. Thus, the Friends (Swampies!) were formed. The inaugural (and current) convenor is local birdwatching legend Carol Iles. Together with Lindsay, Carol has kept the Swampies on task. Lindsay described the various achievements of the Friends over the past 4 years, including cleaning and maintenance of the birdhide, gardening the parking lot and amenity area, and securing funding for a series of interpretive signs.

A 4-year Progress Report had been prepared and was officially presented to Councillors Ross Cardillo and Amy Braes with Mitchell River Chair Fiona Barron congratulating the Friends on their staunch perseverance in the face of significant challenges.

ABATTOIR SWAMP PROGRESS REPORT:

<https://www.mitchell-river.com.au/sites/default/files/2025-11/2025-as-report.pdf>

North Queensland Natural History Group



Michael Anthony, deeply experienced field ecologist and guide, gave a fascinating account of the North Queensland Natural History Group and the peer-reviewed journal that the group operates.

This group consists of people with a passion for the natural riches of north Queensland, ranging from interested members of the community to scientists and naturalists. Discussions within the Natural History group demonstrate the need for a journal to document the natural values of the area as well as to harness the large amount of observations, research and investigations taking place into the flora and fauna, natural history, conservation and land management of the region. The group also provides a forum to make it easier for interested parties to stay informed of work being done in the region by both amateurs and professionals.

The group is actively involved with three main projects: Greater Gliders, Magnificent Broodfrog, and Gouldian Finches.

PRESENTATION: <https://www.mitchell-river.com.au/sites/default/files/2025-11/25-mrfoum-nqnhg.pdf>

Breakthrough treatment technique for woody weeds

Long-term regional facilitator and innovator Leanne Kruss gave an exciting plug for a new treatment system used for management of woody weeds such as prickly acacia and Parkinsonia. The system was developed by Prof Victor Galea at the University of Queensland. According to Leanne, it is a proper game-changer!

MORE INFORMATION:

<https://www.adama.com/australia/en/professional-consumer-products/herbicide/injecta-400r>

Report from Cape York NRM



Pip Schroor is the CEO of Cape York NRM, the regional NRM body serving the Cape and extending into the Mitchell catchment area at the Alice River and across to the Desailly Range. Cape York NRM is a not-for-profit organisation and registered charity dedicated to the sustainable management of natural resources in Cape York Peninsula.

Pip gave an very informative overview of the projects and initiatives that her organisation is advancing across the Cape, including the area of joint management in the Mitchell River catchment area. These activities extend to threatened species, fire and pest management, erosion control, sustainable agriculture, water quality, and drought resilience.

All of the programs depend on close engagement with land managers, traditional owners, agencies, and science collaborators. Funding is sourced from both Federal and State programs and is administered by Cape York NRM through various strategies to maximise on-ground benefit for country and community.

Along with the core programs aimed at problems such as feral pigs and high-biomass invasive grasses, Pip described some of the stand-out projects such as the Golden-shouldered Parrot recovery program and the West Coast Turtle Threat Abatement Alliance (WCTTAA). Both of these programs target opportunities in the Mitchell catchment that would otherwise be very difficult to fund.

Cape York NRM is also delivering programs that are specifically aimed at drought resilience and climate-smart sustainable agriculture. These initiatives offer general assistance for primary producers on the Cape, and they also target the specific needs of food security in remote communities.

Pip concluded with an update on the Regional NRM Plan. This is a community-owned process that provides a regional framework for the protection and sustainable use of natural resources including land, water, soil, plants and animals.

PRESENTATION: <https://www.mitchell-river.com.au/sites/default/files/2025-11/25-mrfoum-capeyorknrm.pdf>

Other voices

To wrap up the Forum we invited leading figures from around the room to give brief updates or comment to the attendees.

Ann-Marie Keating

A leading Koko-Muluridji elder, Anne-Maree expressed her satisfaction with the Forum and described her traditional connections to this country, stretching from Mount Carbine right back to Mareeba. She also confirmed the way that the Mitchell and the Barron are sometimes connected across the Great Dividing Range in the flat country near Bibbohra. This is the meaning of Mareeba as a “meeting of the waters.”

Roscoe Bensted

One of the region’s most enduring commentators on the pastoral industry, and a seasoned veteran of local politics, Roscoe noted that the Queensland Cattle Growers is in favour of water development in the Mitchell. This is important for pastoralists to be able to develop small-scale hay operations that will improve their drought resilience and lower the carbon costs of hauling hay up from down south.

Margot Warnett

Margot is an inspiring new contributor to Barron Catchment Care, one of the region’s most respected and high-profile landcare groups. Margot and her husband Kevin stood in for BCC Chair Bryony Barnett who was a reluctant apology for the Forum. Margot briefed the group on BCC’s activities and their interest in collaboration on issues that our two groups share.

Trevor Meldrum

Trevor is the manager of Cape York Weeds & Feral Animals, an Indigenous-owned and operated non-profit aimed at delivering contract services, training, and advocacy on all matters relating to weeds and ferals. Trevor is also a regional Director for the Queensland Water and Land Carers, and serves as Chair of the Queensland Conservation Council. He is also a Drought Ambassador, and in this role he offered support and endorsement for the presentation provided by Emma Watkins.



Conclusions and thanks

Fiona Barron, Chair of the Mitchell River Watershed Management Group, wrapped up the 2025 Forum with a note of thanks to the attendees and presenters. She gave a special shout out to the Mareeba-Dimbulah Community Bank who, through the good efforts of our Treasurer Karen Pedersen, provided funding for the Forum's catering. She also thanked Tim and Gayle from Barramundi Gardens who donated the delicious spring rolls. The Julatten Mens Shed were heroic on the deep fryer and BBQ, serving up a mouth-watering lunch enjoyed by all.



Mitchell River
WATERSHED MANAGEMENT GROUP

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