

Daintree Coast – A 30 year Management Strategy

Land Use and Infrastructure

Introduction

During the 1970's and 1980's, prior to World Heritage Listing in 1988, there was significant subdividing of Daintree Coast lowland rainforest. This subdivision has been an ecological and a planning disaster.

Clearing rainforest for residential development has resulted in rainforest fragmentation, displacement of wildlife and susceptibility to invasive weeds all of which threaten the biodiversity values which makes the Daintree Rainforest so unique.

Delivering services and infrastructure, controlling weeds and pests and regulating activity has all been made difficult by the subdivision (and subsequent development) in what has proven to be a technologically difficult environment.

In 1990 there was around 1100 properties available for settlement. Today there are around 600.

A huge effort on the part of many individuals, government departments and conservation organizations has made good progress toward mitigating some of the adverse effects of the subdivision.

Several acquisition programs have been responsible for purchasing properties for conservation, thereby reducing the overall ecological threats to the Daintree Coast. While the acquisition task continues at a slower pace - the conundrum of servicing a population of scattered residences within a global environmental treasure remains.

Overarching land use strategies

The ecological importance of the Daintree Coast demands the respect of the various levels of Government to commit to a long term strategy to further rationalize the settlement levels into the future. Two main strategies apply:

1. No net increase in permanent settlement levels from current levels; and
2. Targeted conservation land acquisitions.

Discussion

Some of this important work has already been implemented through the Douglas Shire Council Town Planning Scheme. Conservation Precincts were established as areas deemed too sensitive to be settled, and unsettled properties in those areas have been stripped of their development rights. The owners of many of the unsettled properties within those zones were compensated for their loss of development rights or, in some cases, properties were purchased outright for conservation purposes.

There are 51 unsettled properties remaining in private ownership within the Town Planning Conservation Precincts. 20 of these have been compensated for their loss of development rights and will not be developed.

An offer to be duly compensated for relinquishing ownership would ensure their conservation status in perpetuity. Based on current land values, we would estimate that this process would cost in the order of about \$2.5 million to fully implement.

This long term strategy is part of a broader conservation and presentation strategy where the targets include purchasing larger, often partially cleared properties with a view to rehabilitating them. This would enhance the visitor experience and provide opportunities for enterprises to offset their carbon footprint, such as the Douglas Shire Council which is committed to negating their carbon footprint through their *Healthy Reef Project*.

Overarching infrastructure and service provision strategies

Given the ecological values at stake, all levels of Government must adopt the position that any form of subsidised power should have a conservation dividend that delivers a net gain to the environment.

Three main strategies apply:

1. Various levels of government should not fund infrastructure into areas that are within conservation precincts (as set out in the Douglas Shire Planning Scheme Local Plan Map Sheets - LPM-001 and LMP-002);
2. Infrastructure provision should be focused on areas where the majority of settlement has already occurred so that it is more appropriate and economically viable; and
3. Infrastructure provision should have a conservation dividend that delivers a net gain to the environment.

Discussion

Services within the recognized settlement hubs should be provided in an appropriate ecological method and to a level that is financially realistic and that meets the needs of a modest rural lifestyle.

As outlined in our policy document "Daintree Coast Power Supply Policy Position", we strongly support the concept of upgrading individual RAP Systems with the creation of up to two micro grids limited to servicing the needs of the Commercial establishments centred in Cow Bay and at Cape Tribulation.

Subsidised power in any form, should not encourage or subsidise new or intensify existing development. We would encourage that private landowners, who agree to conserve significant portions of their land under a binding covenant, be financially assisted to upgrade their ageing stand-alone power systems.

This strategy is not intended to undermine the current community infrastructure such as education facilities, health services, telephone and television but more to provide certainty to service providers about future demand potential and installation costs so that they can make more informed decisions.

Outcomes

- No net increase in permanent settlement levels from current levels
- Increase in visitor satisfaction through more ecologically appropriate land use and more land under conservation protection.
- Great for tourism which remains by far the region's biggest employer and largest income stream.
- Lower Carbon footprint
- Consolidating settlement areas to current heavily settled areas to make provision of services and management easier and more cost effective.

- Prevents the increase in road and ferry congestion that could lead to pressures to upgrade placing a huge financial burden on rate payers across the whole shire.

Mechanisms to achieve 30 year strategy.

- Through land acquisitions that are voluntary not coercive and that property owners should expect reasonable recompense for their property or for setting aside parts of their property in secure conservation protection.
- Delineating conservation and settlement hubs clearly. Much of this has already been achieved through the Douglas Shire Council Town Plan.
- Establishing a fund to allow for the buying of targeted conservation lands opportunistically.
- Offering deals to landowners already within the Conservation Precincts e.g. offering homeowners already living on roads within the conservation precinct a portion of the eventual sale price up front, with permission to remain living in their homes, in return for an agreement that the property be sold for conservation purposes when no longer required by that owner. Alternatively, offering compensation for putting a significant portion of their land into a binding conservation covenant.
- Buying larger cleared or partially cleared properties for rehabilitation and carbon offsets.
- Services within the recognized settlement hubs are being provided in an appropriate ecological method and to a level that is financially realistic and that meets the needs of a modest rural lifestyle.

Note

DSSG will propose that the *Daintree Coast - 30 Year Management Strategy – Land Use and Infrastructure* becomes the foundation for the Daintree Futures Plan currently being developed by Daintree Joint Management Group. We acknowledge that while this is a fundamental element of a Futures Plan, there are many other aspects which are currently under development, including biodiversity, presentation and community development.

Acknowledgement

This policy position was researched and presented by members of Daintree Coast Environment Network (DCEN) in consultation with residents of Daintree Coast and members of DSSG during 2019.