

# ENVIRONMENT

The Newsletter of the Environment Centre NT  
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December 2001/January 2002

## A big year for the Environment Centre

### Environment Centre NT Convenor s Report 2001

Another hectic year has flown by, with the Environment Centre expanding its operations considerably and achieving some major campaign wins in 2001.

#### Some of the campaign highlights include:

##### DARWIN HARBOUR

As part of the Darwin Harbour Alliance, ECNT ran an enormously successful public campaign which led to the scrapping of government plans to construct a dam across the Elizabeth River. Thousands of people demonstrated their opposition to the dam with over 8000 people signing a petition that was tabled in Parliament. If you would like to learn more about the history of this struggle, there is a chronology of the campaign on our website at [www.ecnt.org](http://www.ecnt.org)

ECNT has also been monitoring the potential gas developments around the Harbour and in the Glyde Point area. This work is being done with a broad range of groups, including the Litchfield Shire, Top End Native Plants Society, the Environmental Defenders Office and the Field Naturalists Club.

Our on-going work on Darwin Harbour also delivered a number of election promises in relation to the Harbour from the newly elected NT Labor Government. These included a commitment to re-zone the mangroves with con-

servation status, develop a plan of management for the Harbour and investigate Marine Park status. ECNT will continue to campaign for the declaration of a National Park for the mangroves of Darwin Harbour

tralia s mistakes of landclearing and over-allocating water resources.

##### MINING ISSUES

**Jabiluka-** ECNT continues to work with the Mirrar Traditional Owners to prevent the development of Jabiluka uranium mine. In March 2001 Rio Tinto (new owner of ERA, the company which has the lease to mine the Jabiluka deposit) announced that there will be no development of the Jabiluka mine for at least 10 years, because of traditional owner and community opposition. This is a major victory for the campaign and vindicates the efforts of thousands who have been involved in the campaign over the past 5 years. Obviously however there is still much work to be done to ensure that plans to develop the mine are abandoned and that the Jabiluka mineral lease is fully rehabilitated and incorporated into Kakadu National Park.

*Elizabeth River- Saved!*

##### LANDCLEARING

ECNT and Environs Kimberley appointed Jann Crase as the Northern Woodland and Wetlands campaigner in April this year. Jann hit the ground running and has enormously increased our capacity to work on landclearing issues. In May ECNT released a new report *Clearing moves North* written by John Brock, which has been adopted by several NTU courses as a core text.

ECNT has been concentrating on preventing broadscale clearing for agriculture in the Daly, Ord and Tiwi Islands and on the introduction of landclearing legislation in the NT. While it is early days yet for this campaign we ve had a number of positive results with restrictions being placed on development approvals as a direct result of our input. ECNT will continue to promote the need to maintain our natural abundance rather than repeating southern Aus-

### Inside your Dec-Jan edition :

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### **West Arnhem Land uranium exploration-**

ECNT has focused on uranium exploration in West Arnhem Land over the past year. We are about to release a report on this issue (which will be available on our website) and have collaborated with the Alliance Against Uranium to prepare a poster outlining for traditional owners the process by which exploration licences are issued. This is important as under the Land Rights Act agreement to exploration is deemed to be consent to mine should an economic ore-body be discovered.

ECNT has also monitored other mining operations throughout the NT and recently embarked on a campaign for the introduction of compulsory rehabilitation bonds for all NT mines.

### **CLIMATE CHANGE**

**Cool Communities-** Gary Scott began working as the Cool Communities Facilitator in March and has been busy assisting communities to take part in greenhouse gas reducing activities. Cool Communities is a joint project between ECNT and the Australian Greenhouse Office aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions at the household level. Gary has also greatly increased our knowledge base on greenhouse issues.

ECNT remains an active member of the Climate Action Network of Australia (CANA). Over the past year we held an information night with Anna Reynolds (of CANA) in Darwin, contributed to national forums and several joint media and lobbying events organised by CANA and continued to comment on the Australian Government's continuing reluctance to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

### **OTHER CAMPAIGNS**

**NT Election-** ECNT engaged in the NT election by seeking and assessing the various parties' environmental policies. This process saw the Labor Party make a raft of environment policy commitments prior to the election which, if implemented, will lead to major con-

servations gains in the NT. ECNT will obviously be following up these commitments with the newly elected government.

### **Weeds-**

Our 1995 publication *Weeds of Natural Ecosystems: A field guide to environmental weeds of the NT* finally sold out this year. The book has been an invaluable tool for NTU students, Aboriginal communities, Landcare groups, government agencies and other land managers. ECNT has secured funding from a variety of sources for a reprint. We are extending the current publication to include Queensland and northern WA. We expect that the second edition will be available early next year.

ECNT has also worked on a range of other issues over the year, including waste minimisation, feral animal control, fisheries issues, terrestrial and marine protected areas, pesticide and herbicide use and aquaculture.

### **Organisationally some of our achievements have been as follows:**

-ECNT has grown significantly and consolidated over the past year. With the growth in staff numbers, several changes were needed in the office and we were fortunate to have the services of Charlotte McCabe for 9 months this year. Charlotte spent much of her time organising management of the office, which is now functioning very well. She also organised and ran stalls at Mindil markets during the main part of the tourist season. Even though Charlotte has finished, we have the benefits of her time here. She remains an active member of the Management Committee as Treasurer. Thanks Charlotte!

-ECNT's finances remain in relatively good shape and we have continued to improve our finance systems over the course of the year.

-ECNT has formally joined the Darwin Alternative Trading Group which runs a stall at Rapid Creek markets every Sunday. Fair trade tea and coffee as well as ECNT information are available. Everyone is welcome to drop in and say hello!

-ECNT continues to support the local Gene Ethics group, a group concerned about the impacts of genetic engineering.

-We had a very successful fundraiser on World Environment Day (5 June) in the form of a Spaghetti Western night at the Deckchair Cinema. We also had a number of information evenings throughout the year and hosted the Wild Spaces environmental film festival.

-ECNT has spent much time upgrading our website over the past year. Our website is now full of interesting and up to date information and has proven a real benefit particularly with the annual influx of requests for information from students. We still have face to face contact, but much time can be saved by referring people to our site! Over 50 people visit our website every week now.

-ECNT continues to respond to hundreds of information requests over the course of the year and publish a regular newsletter *Environment*.

### **Future Activities**

Some of the things we are planning for 2002 include:

-organising a forum on wetlands and the RAMSAR convention.

-reprinting and launching *Weeds of Natural Ecosystems*.

-increasing our fundraising base

-increasing our capacity to work on marine issues

-continuing to be a strong voice for the environment of the NT and beyond.

**Finally we would like to thank all our members, supporters, volunteers and Management Committee members for their crucial contribution to our efforts this year.**

Di Koser ECNT Convenor, November 2001  
*A huge thanks to Di for her continued enthusiastic input, energy and commitment to the work of ECNT.*

# LANDCLEARING

*Near the beginning of this year the Environment Centre launched the Landclearing moves North report providing the most accurate documentation of the rate of landclearing in the Territory as well as details of the impacts of landclearing and a forecast of clearing to come. As the year ends we revisit the need for landclearing legislation .*

Landclearing is the biggest threat to Australia's biodiversity and is responsible for much of Australia's land and water degradation. Australia's landclearing rate of 687 000 hectares per annum in 1999-2000 places us as 5<sup>th</sup> worst in the world behind Brazil, Indonesia, Sudan and Zambia.

Landclearing rates in the NT have increased over the last 5-7 years particularly in the Litchfield Shire and there are also many plans for massive agricultural and land use schemes for example, agricultural expansion in the Daly Basin. In the absence of any overarching regulation of landclearing it is virtually impossible to determine the current rate at which land in the NT is being cleared despite claims that we've only cleared 1% of the Territory. At this stage there is simply no way of knowing.

There are many direct, indirect and cumulative impacts from landclearing including loss of habitat and fragmentation, increased run off and degraded water quality. Intact ecosystems (synonymous with intact native vegetation) have ecological, economic, social and cultural values which are reduced through clearing. For example, deep-rooted vegetation assists in maintaining water table levels and preventing salinity.

There is an urgent need to avoid mistakes of past practice as evidenced by various environmental catastrophes in southern Australia requiring massive (expensive) rehabilitation programs. Although the total proportion of land clearing (that we know of) in the NT may appear relatively small there are no mechanisms to protect important habitat, such as riparian areas and rainforest pockets, from clearing. Therefore even with our current clearing rate significant damage is still being done, particularly as important habitat such as riparian areas provide a dry season refuge for many species.

The quality of habitat is also an issue with weeds, fire, feral animals all impacting on woodland areas across the Top End. A bald statement that only X% of the Territory has been cleared provides no indication about the health or quality of the remaining vegetation, how well it is being managed, what species it is able to sustain and whether ecological integrity is maintained. The impact of clearing relates not only to how much is cleared but also to the type of habitat that is cleared.

We need to ensure long-term maintenance of the Territory's existing native bushland vital to the survival of its native animals and natural ecosystems. The Northern Territory Government has indicated support for greater controls on landclearing. We are waiting for confirmation of this position and for details on plans to bring in better controls. It is likely that clearing guidelines, providing practical guidance for landholders wanting to clear their land in an environmentally responsible way, will be released in the near future. Actual control of landclearing, however, could only be achieved through landclearing legislation which must be developed with the community.

For further information contact Jann Crase, Northern Woodlands and Wetlands Campaigner northern-woodlands@octa4.net.au

## Clearing out for cotton

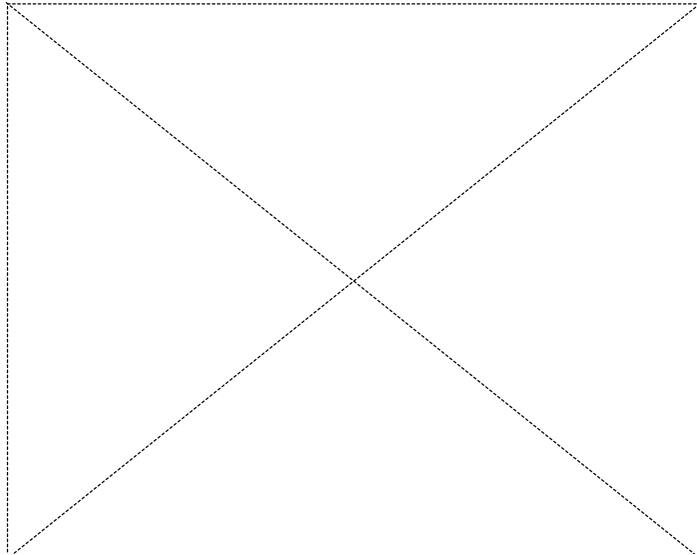
An article in the Weekend Australian (24-25 November) has sparked debate about the expansion of cotton into northern Australia. Cotton is but one of a number of irrigated crops which require the clearing of expansive tracks of land and the consumption of vast amounts of water. Genetically modified Bt gene cotton has been trialled at the Katherine Research Station since the mid 1990s. The Cotton Co-operative Research Centre plans to expand its research and development focus into 21 catchments across northern Australia with a view to establishing commercial production of Bt gene cotton.

The question is not whether cotton can be grown sustainably but whether we want irrigated agriculture sucking up water and consuming tens of thousands of hectares of native vegetation. The choice is ours.

Jann Crase, Northern Woodlands and Wetlands Campaigner

# Growing Plans for Taminmin High School

Last week, Kirsten, Di and Gary went on an excursion to the Taminmin High School to look at, their Woodside Conservation Reserve with Agriculture teacher,



*Gary admiring a Sand Palm at Taminmin's reserve*

Ron Mitchell. The reserve is 150 hectares and is being used among other things as a source of seeds for the Litchfield Community garden near the Humpty Doo Primary School.

Students from Taminmin and Humpty Doo help to gather seed, identify plants, and document plant usages. They also help to make and maintain the tracks through the reserve. After the recent rains, the area looked magnificent, with a wide variety of plants displaying lush green foliage, flowers and fruits. We sampled some fruits from the Milky Plum, which tasted something like soursop.

Future plans include interpretive signs with the Indigenous names and plant uses.

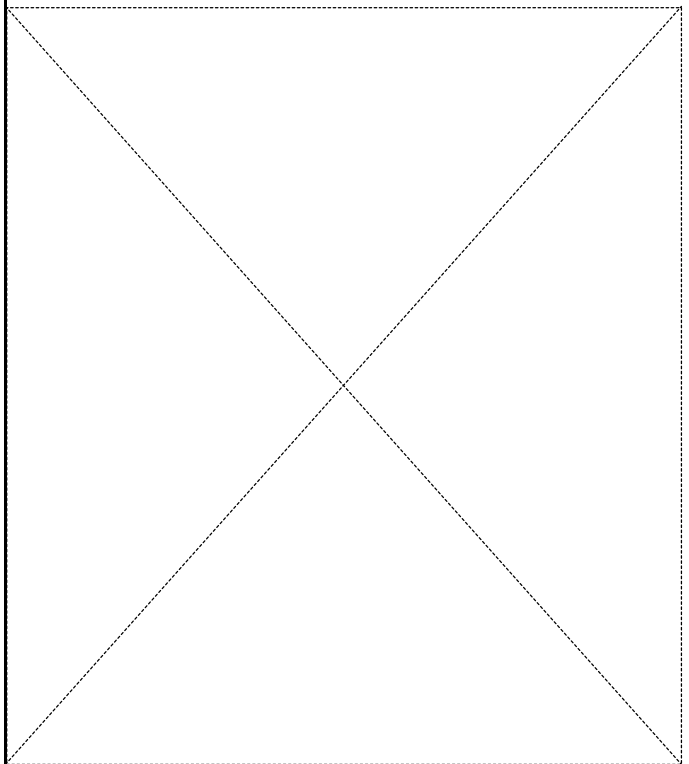
## Comment sought on Woodside Gas proposal

The environmental impact statement for Woodside's uranium gas development proposal will be available for commenting at the Council meeting until mid February next year. We will be writing a submission on this statement in the near future and encourage members to do the same. You could help with preparing our response please contact Kirsten in the office area where she has reopened in January.

# Uranium Exploration in West Arnhem Land

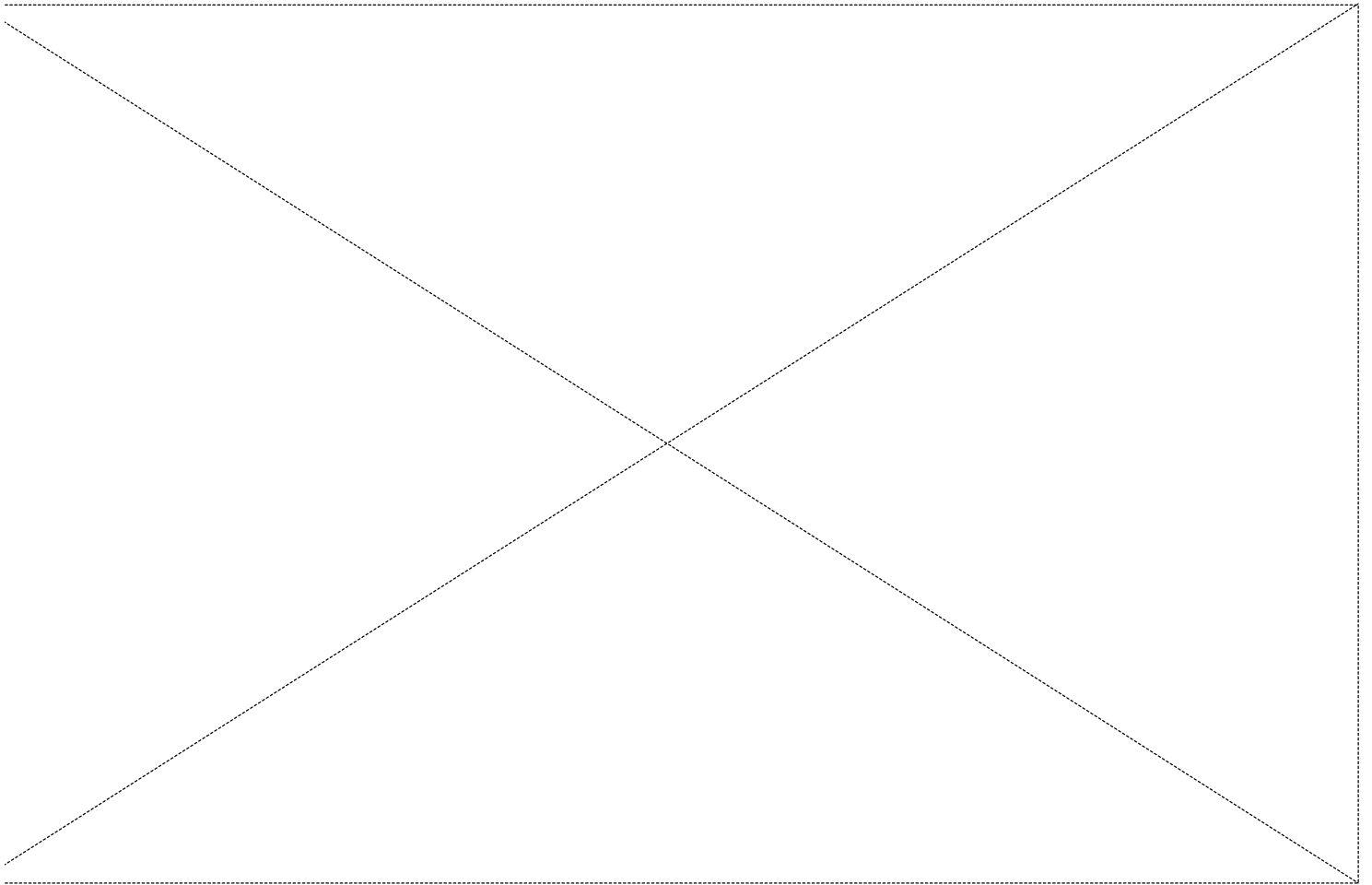
Earlier in the year the Australian Conservation Foundation and the ECNT commissioned a report on the exploration activities of uranium companies in West Arnhem Land. Below is the executive summary from the report. The full report can be downloaded from the ECNT website. There are also a limited number of printed copies available.

**Uranium exploration activity in West Arnhem Land increased substantially from 1996.** Aboriginal traditional land owners have been more inclined to negotiate exploration agreements over the last five years. Saying yes to exploration is seen by many as one way to get miners off their backs. Currently, there are 20 granted licence areas in the West Arnhem region, most of which have been subject to uranium exploration activity at some point over the last five years. The area under current veto, where the traditional owners have told the mining companies to go away, continues to shrink.



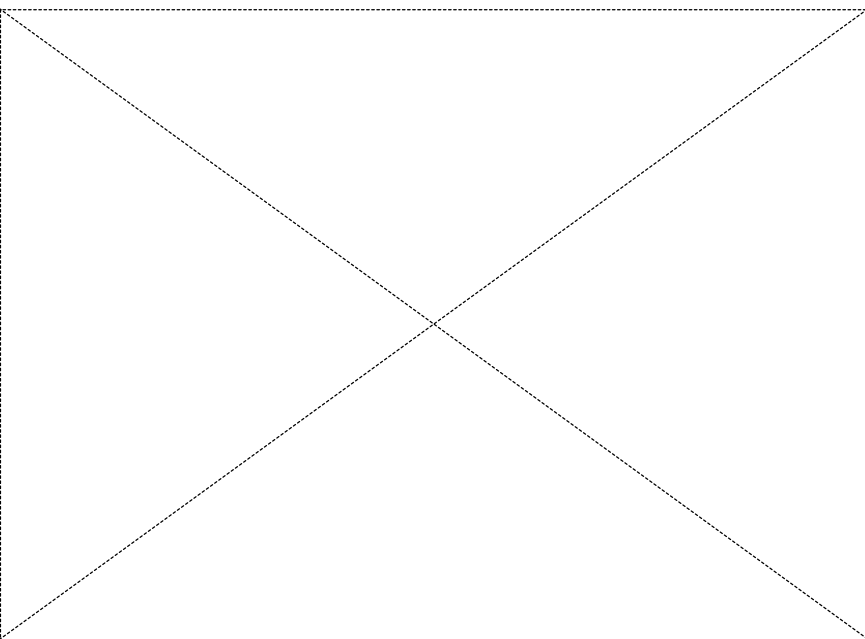
Cameco drilling rig at King River, September 2001

The two main companies involved in 2001 are Cameco, which is based in Canada and Afmeco, a subsidiary of French company Cogema. Afmeco's exploration activity is increasingly centering on the Tin Camp Creek area and is conducted from a base camp at Myra Falls. This area includes the prospective Caramal deposit, although at current uranium prices this is exceedingly unlikely to prove commercially viable. Cameco is also planning to explore in the Tin Camp Creek area. Other areas of ongoing interest for Cameco are the King River area north of Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) and Deaf Adder, which is further south near the upper reaches of the Mann River. In 2001 all of these programmes have been scaled down from previous years due to a squeeze on exploration budgets.



A brief visit to Cameco's King River exploration site in early September 2001 revealed that drilling operations in this area demonstrated a low level of directly observable environmental impact. However, throughout West Arnhem Land more indirect impacts of exploration campaigns such as changed fire regimes, the spread of weeds and feral animals, erosion and reduced traditional owner access to country have been identified as issues of ongoing concern. Furthermore, if a prospective uranium deposit were to be discovered and mined, the impacts would undoubtedly be large and long-lasting, as demonstrated by the nearby uranium mine at Ranger and the former Nabarlek mine in West Arnhem Land itself.

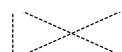
Under current provisions in the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976* traditional owners have the right to veto exploration proposals for five-year periods. If traditional owners consent to exploration, however, they are deemed to have consented to subsequent mining activity. Companies are also not required to formally declare their intention to explore for uranium (or to specify any other mineral they might be looking for). **For traditional owners then, saying yes to exploration leaves the door wide open for a future uranium mine on their land whether they want one or not.**



This is an entirely unsatisfactory situation and should be remedied immediately by the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments. Uranium is a hazardous substance. It is unquestionably different to other minerals due to its dangerous radioactive properties and should not be accorded the same status as other minerals when dealing with exploration activities upon Aboriginal land. The Land Rights Act should also be amended so that consent to exploration does not automatically entail consent to mining. This would mean a return to the situation prior to changes made to the Act in 1987. Current legislative requirements are unfairly weighted in favour of mining corporations. This imbalance must be corrected.

- Gary Scott and Mark Wakeham

Laying out the uranium core samples into trays



# Land for Wildlife in the Litchfield Shire

**The Honourable Kon Vatskalis, Minister for Lands, Planning and Environment and Local Government officially launched the Litchfield Shire, Natural Heritage Trust Bush-care Project, *Land for Wildlife* on 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2001.**

**A very popular scheme elsewhere in Australia, this is a first for the NT. *Land for Wildlife* is a free, voluntary and legally non-binding scheme which recognises the significant contribution to the conservation of flora and fauna being made by private landholders.**

The Litchfield Shire, a growing area with a relatively large proportion of land with reserve status, has the opportunity to retain and maintain effective wildlife corridors. However, reserves alone cannot sustain viable populations of most fauna and flora species.

The diverse land uses and rapid development in the area will counteract the effectiveness of these reserves if we do not plan carefully and work together to retain the wildlife habitats that exist here today. Unsustainable horticultural practices, including inappropriate clearing and chemical use, as well as where and how sand mining and subdivisions occur are is-

ues that we must be ever mindful of if we are to prevent future land degradation, vegetation fragmentation and species decline.

A joint effort is required, with the responsibility of land management falling on government departments, local government

you. Every buffer, whether it is 50m or 500m wide; and even every little fragment of native vegetation will assist in providing wildlife corridors and in preventing species decline.

**Residents of the Shire have already shown there is a need for such a scheme, with over 70 property applications already in the system and more coming in every day. For further information contact:**

-Sally Jacka

Sally is the Litchfield Shire *Land for Wildlife* Coordinator. Contact her on:

Tel: (08) 8983 1912

Litchfield Shire Council

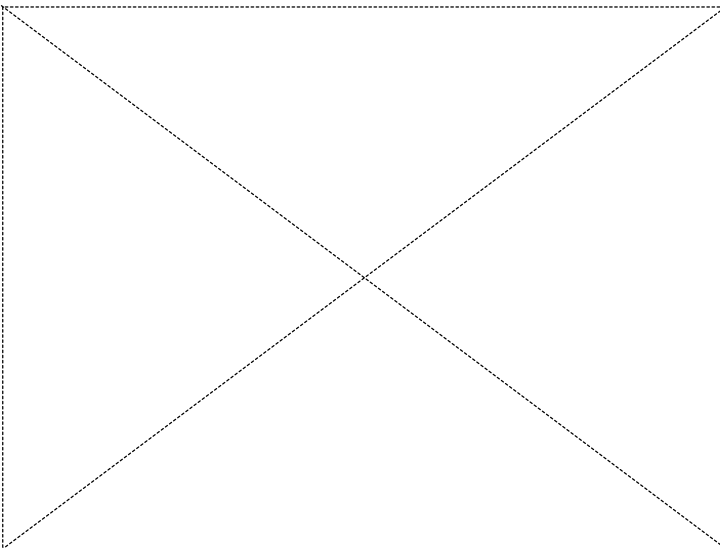
Fax: (08) 8983 1165

PO Box 446

HUMPTY DOO NT 0836

email:

sally.jacka@lsc.nt.gov.au



*Sally Jacka with Minister Vatskalis presenting the first Land for Wildlife notice to acting Litchfield Shire President Ethel Bourke*

and individual landholders. However, regardless of the government's policies and legislation, it is the private landholders who own most of the land, and therefore, ultimately their responsibility to look after it in such a manner that prevents environmental and habitat damage.

In recognition of the efforts made by landholders who practice sustainable land management and provide habitat for wildlife, the Litchfield Shire *Land for Wildlife* scheme provides assistance and encouragement.

It doesn't matter if you have a bush block, a horticulture block or own horses. Whether you have 2ha or 200ha, if you are demonstrating a commitment to providing at least some habitat for wildlife, the *Land for Wildlife* scheme will credit and benefit

## Thank you

**To all members and friends of ECNT for your support this year.**

**There are many wonderful people who have donated time, expertise, cooking skills, money, information or some other form of assistance. You all know who you are your support is the lifeblood of the Centre and is much appreciated.**

**All the best for a safe and happy festive season.**

**See you next year!**



# Bits and Pieces

## Unity Needed on Kyoto

Britain's Environment Minister has urged Australia to ratify the proposed Kyoto treaty, saying the best way to convince the United States to join the battle against global warming is for every other country to ratify the accord. Michael Meecher says if countries decided to hold off ratification of the Kyoto treaty until the US joins in, the treaty might unravel. Instead, he believes the treaty will come into force next year, and he says Britain expects Australia too to ratify, particularly since it has fairly mild greenhouse reduction targets. And, he says, in the same way as the United States has needed the rest of the world in its campaign against terrorism, the world needs the United States to slow global warming.

The Climate Action Network Australia (CANA) will be producing an easy-to-understand guide to the Kyoto Protocol next year, which will be available to all ECNT members.

## AGM

The ECNT Annual General Meeting held on Monday 26 November went very well. We now have an expanded committee of 13 members, including three new people, who have a variety of interests and expertise. We are anticipating a great year in 2002!

## End of Year Fun

On Friday 7 December at sunset (around 6.30pm) the members of the committee will move to the Rapid Creek foreshore near the Beachfront Hotel for end of year drinks, conversation, and possibly Asian Gateway take-away. We invite you all to join us BYO drinks etc.

## Freedom of Information

A range of community groups interested in open government has cooperated to bring a FOI expert, Rick Snell to Darwin for two information sessions for the public. Rick Snell is a senior lecturer at the University of Tasmania Law School and he edits the FOI review, a journal focussing on open government and FOI legislation. He can explain why some FOI Acts have succeeded, while others have failed and what you can do to make our Act the best in the Australia.

- **Thursday 6 December Darwin City Council (upstairs) 12.30pm**

- **Friday 7 December Northern Territory University room 23.01 midday**

Supported by: Darwin Community Legal Service, the Environment Centre, NT Law Society, NTCOS, the Environmental Defenders Office, Gerry Wood, Independent member for Litchfield, Greenpeace, ACF, Australian Services Union, and Darwin City Council  
**Info: Patrick O'Leary 8981 5433**

## Coming Up: World Wetlands Day

World Wetlands Day Events in Darwin February 8-9, 2002.

The Environment Centre NT and the National Centre for Tropical Wetlands Research are collaborating to make WWD 2002 a memorable one. A half day seminar entitled People in Tropical Wetlands will be held at the Northern Territory University on Friday the 8<sup>th</sup>, covering topics including Working with Tropical Wetlands, Ecotourism in Tropical Wetlands and Cultural Heritage Management of Tropical Wetlands. In the morning

of Saturday the 9<sup>th</sup> there will be a field trip to three local wetlands sites: early morning at Fogg Dam, the Adelaide River Floodplain at Windows on the Wetlands and Knuckey's Lagoon.

The two events will provide an opportunity to update different organisations and agencies on wetlands research programs and activities in the Top end and elsewhere in Australia; and provide an interface between scientists, local communities and others involved in the use, conservation, protection and management of wetlands.

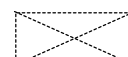
More information as well as registration forms are available on our website: [www.ecnt.org](http://www.ecnt.org) under

What's New, or contact Kirsten at ECNT or MariaGrazia Bellio: [mariab@eriss.erin.gov.au](mailto:mariab@eriss.erin.gov.au), ph (08) 89 799 704

## Mud Crab Fishery to be Assessed

The Northern Territory Mud Crab fishery is to undergo environmental assessment by Environment Australia in the near future. This allows a period for public comment which must be taken into account in the final assessment. Two downloadable PDF documents produced by the Northern Territory Government are available from the ECNT website which gives more detail about the fishery. This is the first time any fishery in the Northern Territory has undergone any form of formal environmental assessment.

For more information about the assessment process contact Kerry Truelove at Environment Australia on 0262741111 or [kerry.truelove@ea.gov.au](mailto:kerry.truelove@ea.gov.au)



# Dates for December, January, February

Thursday 6 & Friday 7 December FOI sessions (see page 7 for details)

Friday 7th Dec —ECNT end of year event at Rapid Creek foreshore, near Beachfront hotel at sunset.

Sunday 9th Dec —Human Rights Day rally 10am from Rapid Creek Markets to Nightcliff

Monday 10th Dec —International Human Rights Day. Launch of “Refugees: Living on the margins”.  
Dinner at Café Kashmir, 2 Pavonia Place, Nightcliff. Bookings 8948 0688

Wednesday 12th Dec —“Let food be your medicine” talk 1-2pm at Community room, Palm Court, 8  
Cavenagh St. Organised by the Multicultural Council NT, vegan lunch available \$5.

**ECNT office closed from Dec 21st January 21st** (messages will be checked from time to time)

Friday Feb 8th & Saturday Feb 9th —World Wetlands Week Darwin events. “People in Tropical  
Wetlands” seminar and Local Wetlands Field Trip. Check out our website  
under ‘What’s New’ for more details, or ring the ECNT office.

The views expressed in *EnvironmeNT* are not necessarily those of the Environment Centre NT management committee  
Please recycle this newsletter: leave it in a waiting room or other appropriate place for someone else to read

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