

ENVIRONMENT

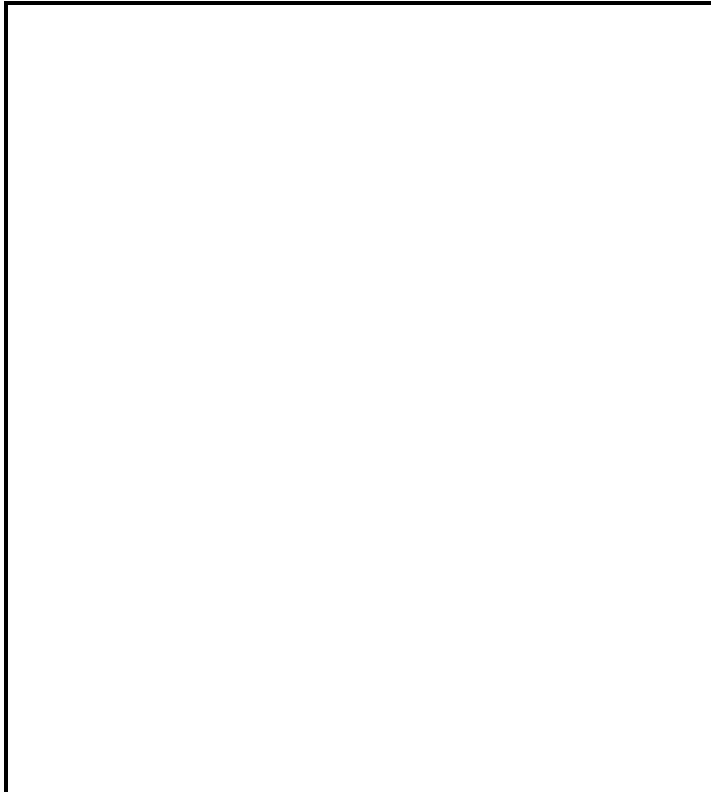
The Newsletter of the Environment Centre NT
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March 2000

Ord Stage Two-EIS released.

Last month a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was released for the Ord River Irrigation Area Stage 2. The developers, Wesfarmers and Marubeni, want to clear 32,000 hectares of land for agricultural production, and irrigate the area with water from Lake Argyle. The proposed project area spans the NT and WA borders north-east of Kunanurra in the Victoria-Bonaparte bioregion. About 29,000 hectares of the development would be for sugarcane production (initially) and 3,000 hectares would be sold to independent farmers to grow other crops. It is also proposed that 40,000 additional hectares would, as part of the project, be managed for conservation purposes. The project area has been under pastoral lease until now. The entire project area is subject to several Native Title claims by the Miriuwung and Gajerrong people.

Ord Stage 1 saw the damming of the Ord, the



creation of Lake Argyle and the establishment of 14,000 hectares of agricultural production (mainly to produce sugarcane). The cotton industry had big hopes for the region in the early 70's (sound familiar?), though left the region after a couple of bad seasons of intensive pesticide use in an attempt to subdue the Heliothis Moth. Traces of DDT, dieldren and other toxic chemicals remain in the region. Recently the cotton industry has made a return to the region establishing a crop of 1000 hectares, though

crop yields to date have been fairly poor.

One of the major criticisms of Ord Stage 1 has been the complete lack of analysis of the environmental impacts of the project. The EIS for Ord Stage 2 makes no attempt to remedy this past failing, excluding impacts from Stage 1 from its terms of reference, though at the same time claiming it will learn from the failings of Stage 1!

On the face of it, Stage 2 involves tripling the amount of land available for

agriculture in the region, by clearing, flattening and irrigating farms via a system of channels. However, at another level the project

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Insert: The latest on Jabiluka

Ord Stage Two (continued)

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represents a very deliberate effort to 'open up new country' for more intensive use, ie. the project is a very large real estate development. This has major implications for Native Title- the Mirauwung/Gajerrong Traditonal Owners have been involved in court cases over the past couple of years to determine their Native Title rights to areas in Keep River National Park and around Kunanurra.

Early analysis of the EIS for Stage Two does little to alleviate concerns that Ord Stage 2 will replicate the problems of Stage 1. ECNT has a team of volunteers working on a submission to the EIS process. So far the following areas have been identified as being of major concern:

1) Native vegetation clearance: experience in the Murray-Darling Basin (and elsewhere) has shown the true costs of clearing native vegetation. We know that habitat loss is the single greatest cause of biodiversity loss and extinction. Broadscale clearing of 32,000 hectares would have massive, irreversible environmental impacts.

2) Impacts on Groundwater: Irrigation water would seep through to the groundwater, polluting groundwater with agricultural chemicals and raising the water table. Ord Stage 1 has seen the groundwater table rise to two metres below ground level.

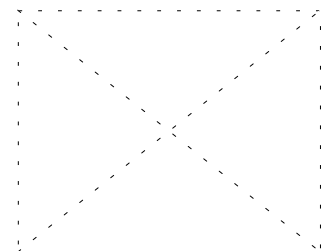
3) Water allocation- While water allocation is not addressed in the EIS (water allocation in Western

Australia is conducted by a separate process through the Water and Rivers Commission), the increased demand for irrigation water that would accompany Ord

values of the river and to consider the flows required for 'river users' ie aquatic and terrestrial plants, animals and organisms.

The EIS is a huge document that will take many hours (and days) to comprehensively assess. If you'd like to help ECNT make a submission, please give Kirsten or Mark a call on 8981 1984. The EIS documents can be viewed at ECNT or on the on the Lands, Planning and Environment website (www.lpe.nt.gov.au).

A meeting will be held at the Environment Centre at 5pm, Thursday 16th of March to discuss and coordinate an ECNT submission and assist individuals (and any other groups) with submission writing.

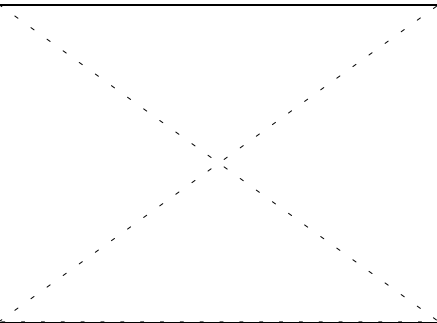


Conservation Alliance funds new project

ECNT and Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) in Alice Springs have jointly received a grant from the Conservation Alliance to fund a project focusing on reserves and conservation areas.

The project aims to provide the voluntary conservation movement in the Northern Territory with a tool to promote the extension of the Northern Territory reserve system and conservation estate by identifying those areas of pastoral holdings that are currently not utilised for cattle production as a result of changed management practices and matching these with biodiversity protection priorities identified by the Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission.

The work will complement existing efforts by the ECNT and ALEC to identify and promote bioregional priorities



for nature conservation.

The Alliance

The Conservation Alliance is a unique Australian funding body. Set up by members of the Outdoor Industry in 1997, the Alliance supports projects that may not otherwise obtain funding. Previously the Conservation Alliance has provided financial support for the "Kakadu Worth Fighting For" brochure, which was

produced by ECNT to coincide with the beginning of the Jabiluka Blockade in 1998. Currently the Conservation Alliance has fifteen members; Adventure One (manufacturers), Extreme Clothing (manufacturers), Inov8 (design and marketing), Main Peak (retailers WA), Paddy Pallin, Patagonia, Perception Kayaks, Recreation Equipment Inc (US), Snowgum (retailers), Swazi Apparel, Wilderness Photo, Wilderness Wear, Wild Horizons/Polaris, Wild Publications and W.L. Gore & Associates. Outdoor Australia Magazine is also a supporter of the Conservation Alliance.

You might like to consider these organisations next time you are buying yourself some outdoor gear. If you do you will know that a portion of your sale will support key Australia environmental initiatives.

For more about the Conservation Alliance check out: www.hydra.org.au/ca

Short Term Project Officer/s Needed

ECNT and ALEC have formed a steering group for the project and are seeking individuals who would be interested in undertaking the desk study. The project has a budget of \$3000 and we would welcome interest from individuals or from a team comprising northern and central researchers Please contact ECNT on 8981 1984 or ALEC for more information.

Landclearing in Queensland it still hasn't stopped

While deliberations continue in Canberra, about whether the Federal Government will fund a compensation package for Queensland farmers, land continues to be cleared at a rapid rate. This has contributed to Australia recently being ranked among the top land clearing nations, on a par with countries such as Brazil and Indonesia.

**Please write now to help stop the clearing. Send even a short message.
Flood them with discontent!**

John Howard Prime Minister
Address: MG 8, Parliament House,
Canberra ACT 2600
Telephone (02) 6277 7111
Fax (02) 6277 2058
Mr Howard appears not to have a public email address.

Senator the Hon. Robert Hill
Minister for Environment & Heritage
Address: Suite MG 68, Ministerial
Wing, Parliament House, Canberra
ACT 2600
Telephone: (02) 6277 7640
Fax: (02) 6273 6101
email: senator.hill@aph.gov.au

Sample fax / email
Feel free to cut and paste or
construct your own.

Dear Mr Howard/Hill,

Your Government has committed itself to greenhouse abatement and native species protection. These commitments can only be realised if native vegetation clearing substantially slows in Queensland.

You must reconsider your position and financially assist the Queensland Government to proclaim their Vegetation Protection Bill as soon as possible.

Widespread clearing will continue without control unless you do this. Your responsibility and credibility on these issues is now being judged. I, amongst many others, implore you to pass this test.

We are all waiting and watching.



The Future of Mining: some crystal ball-gazing.

ECNT was invited to attend an NT Minerals Council workshop on Environmental Management late last year. This report highlights some of what was said.

The Environment Centre was invited to the workshop as part of the Minerals Council's new policy of 'active engagement'. The day consisted of a program of talks from a range of operators on environmental management in the mining industry. We were interested to hear the following comments about the future of the Mining industry from the Northern Territory's Department of Mines, Tony McGill:

"There are interesting times ahead for the mining industry and its likely environmental impact. Commodity prices have been falling continuously in real terms for the past 200 years and no doubt will continue to do so into the future. Mining companies are responding by improving their efficiency and scaling up to take advantage of economies of scale. This in itself creates a new level of environmental risk. As the miners extract more of the orebody they simultaneously extract

more waste and more of the mineralised waste that typically surrounds the ore zone. Larger stockpiles means landform stability and reclamation will become more dominant issues. Increased volumes of sulfidic waste on the surface increases the

likelihood of acid drainage and the larger pits mean that huge voids will be left to fill with water, or acid, after mining. The recovery of minerals from ever lower grades of ore leads to increasing volumes of tailings waste and the use of larger equipment and automation in mills leads to a less employment intensive industry. The tyranny of distance is now countered by fly in/fly out and the benefits of mining may not be shared by the most affected stakeholders."

Not a very happy prognosis for the NT's biggest industry is it? Less employment, less profits, less local benefits and greater environmental risks. It makes you wonder where the mining industry would be without a raft of subsidies.

The paper presented by Mark Wakeham, one of ECNT's coordinators, made the following points (among others):

1) Mining is obviously an important part of the way that people live at the end of the twentieth century (not that this is necessarily sustainable). At the beginning of the

twenty-first century we should have the ability to sensitively extract mineral resources.

2) Some circumstances or conditions though should prevent mining developments from proceeding. We believe that these conditions have widespread community support.

These are as follows:

·Where mining is proposed on land against the wishes, or without the informed prior consent of the Aboriginal traditional owners

·Where a mineral lease is in, excised from, or surrounded by a National Park or Conservation Reserve

·Where the proponent has a poor environmental, industrial or human rights record elsewhere in Australia or internationally.

·Where the mineral in question is uranium

Most of these criteria are internal to the industry, and

"...Commodity prices have been falling continuously in real terms for the past 200 years and no doubt will continue to do so into the future..."

Tony McGill, NT Mines and Energy

thus the industry has control over its ability to ensure that, for instance, its environmental, social and human rights record is up to scratch. If mining companies (and industry bodies) are serious about improving their credentials, then the challenge

for them is to accept the legitimacy of external parameters for mining. Our perception is that when thinking about improving environmental performance, many operators are thinking that there is a need for a 'better engineered mine'. While this may be one area for improvement, it doesn't allow for the fact that there are some situations that can't be tweaked, some proposed mines that should not proceed.

3) The industry has suffered from a poor image in the past as a result of a history of sometimes shocking environmental damage. The damage done to the industry (not to mention the environment) by incidents like the abandonment of Rum Jungle Uranium Mine, with the Commonwealth being forced to contribute \$18 million in an effort to safeguard the public from radioactive hazards, is immeasurable. Contemporary examples of woeful management still exist. One only has to look at Ok Tedi [or more recently Esmeralda in Romania] for an example of a mine operated by an Australian company that has caused massive environmental and social problems.

4) A significant development in the industry is the rise and refinement of Public Relations (PR) techniques. Not only performance, but perception of performance has become critical, and PR practitioners attempt to capitalise both on improved practices and even incidents in an attempt to improve their credibility. In many circumstances PR becomes a prism through which the community views the industry, and also through which the industry views the community.

This doesn't have to be an unwelcome development.

Mining companies have refined the practice of locating and defining orebodies with exact precision over the years, what they have been less competent at is locating and defining where the community is on particular issues.

Interactive PR operations, that take on or address the concerns of the community (whether or not they are perceived to be industry concerns) may present another opportunity for improved relations between the industry and the community.

5) Too often however PR is deployed to cover up, confuse or dismiss concerns. Last year Nabalco denied that caustic leaching from a mine site had impacted upon the environment. The company eventually owned up to the incident, but only after fish kills had been reported by the public. There will be 'incidents' at mines, but if companies try to deny or cover up incidents, like Nabalco tried to initially, and like BHP/GEMCO did with their diesel spill at Groote Eylandt several years ago until their argument was untenable, then the reputation of the industry will be affected. Such practises seriously undermine company statements that they are committed to best practices in environmental management and accountability.

Too often however PR is deployed to cover up, confuse or dismiss concerns. Last year Nabalco denied that caustic leaching from a mine site had impacted upon the environment. The company eventually owned up to the incident, but only after fish kills had been reported by the public.

6) Similarly best-practice on-site management can be seriously undermined by industry association. Industry lobby groups often act at odds with the positions being advocated by individual companies. For instance Western Mining Company (WMC), which bills itself as a 'leader in environmental management' has been a central player in attempts by the industry to weaken state/territory national and international environment legislation and the Company Law Review Act, to demolish proposed greenhouse gas targets, to maintain diesel rebates to industry, to allow mining in National

Parks etc. WMC are not alone in their actions. When assessing the environmental credentials of a company it is important to look at what their representative groups are advocating. If the Australian Mineral

Council or a state affiliate is advocating for less regulation of mining or for their continued ability to pollute at existing levels, then member companies will be judged by the company they keep.

7) There is no reason why industry bodies can't act in their long-term interest, accepting both the inevitability and desirability of change and supporting progressive environmental policies. There is no reason why the industry cannot support freedom of information legislation or mandatory compliance with the Company Law Review Act or accept that decisions about mining, or not mining, on Aboriginal land should take place on Aboriginal terms, or that uranium mining or mining in National Parks should not occur. Obviously, it would be a different industry, but mining companies are so often telling us they are a different industry these days, that they committed to progressive change. There may be economic costs, but there would also be enormous social and environmental benefits which we believe would more than compensate.

Phelps-Panizza (formerly Howard River) prawn farm

ECNT welcomed news that the Phelps-Panizza Prawn Farm would no longer proceed at Howard River. We were however a bit astonished to hear Chief Minister Denis Burke's comments that "We do pride ourselves on being a pro development Government. We do pride ourselves on getting new projects in the Territory no matter what they are"- Nuclear waste dumps? Biological weapons manufacturers? The mind reels.

Well done to the Amateur Fishermen for taking on the Government on this. Despite this victory, ECNT is concerned that the Government may be considering Darwin Harbour sites for this large development. A 500 hectare aquaculture development is unlikely to be compatible with the values of Darwin Harbour. Any project which threatens the Harbour's mangroves and ecological integrity will be unacceptable. ECNT is also concerned that the NT Government may look at fast-tracking the process in order to appease the developers- Phelps-Panizza. The site selection process thus far has been inappropriate. The Government must propose a range of possible sites to the public and ensure a thorough and transparent process at all stages of the development of any aquaculture proposals. The battle may not be over yet on the prawn

farm front

End of an Era for the Register of the National Estate?

The Commonwealth is about to release a new national strategy for Australia's heritage. Conservationists are waiting with some trepidation for the new legislation. Kate Harris from the NSW Conservation Council reports.

The Register of the National Estate is a list of historic/cultural, natural and indigenous sites in Australia judged to be of high heritage significance. For twenty-five years the Register has provided Australia with a list of natural environment places which are important to current and future Australians.

The list reflects three decades of environmental awareness. The list is dynamic by nature as places keep being listed and upgraded as knowledge of places increases. Once a place is listed on the Register, public appreciation of the place is instantly validated. This is why it has often been dubbed the "People's Register". The Register of the National Estate plays a pivotal role within the heritage management arena. It has been said by some, that the

Australian Heritage Commission legislation does not have teeth and that "bluff" has been the major force of Register. In fact the National Estate list has been vital to environmental planning for natural heritage throughout Australia. The National Estate has alerted planners to the identity of significant places. The Register has provided Commonwealth leadership among the disparate planning laws and a reminder to renegade States and Territories of national perspective on Heritage issues. In some places the Register of the National Estate is the sole form of recognition of the significance of a place, and the only justification for protection.

Although no-one at this stage can say what form the new Commonwealth Heritage legislation will take, it appears that the Register of the National Estate will be slowly degraded. State and local places will be removed from the Register, to be placed on State or local lists, providing the regions can meet adequate accreditation. There will

be a new national list of heritage places protected by new legislation, but this list will contain only places subject to constitutional control of the Commonwealth.

Many people familiar with the existing system have greeted the speculated new model with mixed emotions. While increased protection is an improvement, the obvious probable demise of the Register of National Estate is not. A major point of concern is that during the transition from the old regime to the new regime, acknowledgment of many significant natural places may be lost. This could be aggravated by inadequate funding of the Register. Furthermore, once evolution of the Register ceases, the Register the list would become dated and no longer credible.

Northern Territory perspective

Mark Wakeham and Kirsten Blair

The Register of the National Estate has certainly taken a bruising recently in the NT: both the Hotel Darwin and the NT Supreme Court were on the Register, and yet listing did little to prevent their destruction. The Environment Centre has used the Register to good effect in the past, successfully nominating the Territory's important places of natural heritage. More recently the Environment Centre has invested considerable effort in co-nominating Darwin Harbour to the Register with the Larrakia Nation. Nominations have also been made for areas in the Gulf Fall region of the Northern Territory.

While the National Estate has always been more an awareness-raising measure than a protective one, when National Estate sites are destroyed without sanction, the effectiveness of the Register will increasingly be under question. What has become apparent, regardless of potential changes to the Register, is that the Commonwealth Register is weaker than State or Territory Heritage legislation (when it is enacted- it is more difficult to nominate a place to the Territory Register). Therefore while the Environment Centre is still working on having Darwin Harbour listed on the national Register, we'll be nominating Darwin Harbour (with Larrakia again) to the list of NT Heritage Places in coming months.

Bits and Pieces

Community Aid Abroad's Walk *against Want* VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

Have you got any spare time that you want to donate to a very worthy cause while having fun, meeting people, and gaining exceptional work experience in event management? Community Aid Abroad is currently organising their 34th annual *Walk against Want*. I am looking for volunteers to help recruit walkers, find sponsors for the walk, promote the walk to the media, and organise the logistics of the walk.

Any help appreciated!

Call: BELINDA PRATEN

Phone: 8941 6599

email: belindap@caa.darwin.org.au

Recycled Paper for sale at ECNT

The long awaited 100% recycled post consumer waste unbleached office paper has finally arrived! Available from ECNT for \$10 per ream, bulk deals are available. As far as we can determine, this is the only genuinely environmentally friendly office paper available in town. Come and grab some while stocks last.

Quiz Night

As advertised last month, the First Great Green Quiz Night will be held on Saturday 8th April at the Arafura Bowls Club. Start getting your team together now, table bookings of 6-10 people can be made at ECNT.

We also need volunteers to help with food, organising prizes and publicity for the event. Please give Di, Kirsten or Mark a call on 8981 1984 if you can help.

Solar Rebate Program

The Commonwealth Government has introduced the Photovoltaic (PV) Rebate Program to encourage the long-term use of photovoltaic technology to generate electricity from the use of renewable energy in Australia.

The rebate is based on the peak use PV output of a new PV component system. The minimum system size is 450 watt peak output. There is no maximum size although the rebate is capped at \$8,250 (or 1.5kW) for each installation.

Enquiries can be made to the Australian Greenhouse Office on 1300 138 122.

GenEthics update

by Jane Goodrich

Gene Ethics Network NT is still going strong, meeting every

fortnight at the Environment Centre. So far this year we have put in submissions to the draft Commonwealth Gene Technology Bill 2000. We've also responded to Monsanto's application to release round-up ready cotton in Australia. Steve Ebsworth, Nilva Egana and I all attended the public forum for the new Gene Technology Legislation. This was useful in firstly giving us an insight into the workings of the bill and of the Interim Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (IOGTR) and also to make them aware of our concerns over the bill.

Coming up on Wednesday the 15th of March is World Consumer Rights Day. We plan to have a Gene Ethics information stall in the mall and a stall at Casuarina the following Saturday (18th March). The aim of these stalls is to increase public awareness of genetic engineering as a consumer issue. It's important for people to be aware that we do have the power to reject this technology. We also hope to gain some new members as we are now starting to build up our membership base. The recommended rates for membership donation are \$5 (unwaged) and \$10 (waged). Membership entitles you to a discount at any Gene ethics gigs, quarterly newsletters and e-mail updates.

For more information, contact Steve Ebsworth on 8942 0912 (b/h) Jane Goodrich on 8942 3224 (a/h)

Dates to remember in March

- 5th - Clean Up Australia Day
- 8th - International Women's Day
- 14th - Australian Association of Environmental Educators meeting at ECNT 4.30pm all welcome
- 15th - Consumer Rights Day
- 16th - ORD EIS Meeting at ECNT 5pm
- 19th - Walk against Want
- 23rd - Two years since the start of Jabiluka Blockade
- 31st - ORD EIS responses due

The views expressed in *EnvironmentNT* are not necessarily those of the Environment Centre NT management committee
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