

ENVIRONMENT

The Newsletter of the Environment Centre NT
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March 2002

CYANIDE SPILL IN THE TANAMI

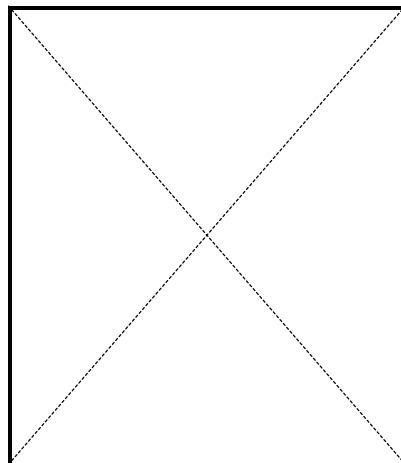
NT environment continues to suffer the effects of irresponsible mining

On February 11th ABC news reported on a traditional owner discovery of a 400 litre cyanide spill on the Tanami Highway. The spill is reported to have killed at least 500 birds and a dingo. Following the discovery police attended the site removing dead animals while Granites mine staff undertook a clean-up operation, which apparently involved the removal of contaminated earth to the mine site. It is unclear whether the clean-up operation prevented contaminated material seeping into the groundwater. The Work Health authority is currently investigating the incident. Details surrounding the incident are sketchy and will be until the findings of the investigation are made public. ECNT is following up the incident and will be urging the government to find and sanction those responsible.

Whilst the specifics of the incident remain unclear, ECNT generally believes the incident is just another example of the NT's mining industry's failure to perform to acceptable standards. In all likelihood the cyanide was being transported to the Granites gold mine, 150 km from the spill. Over 90% of the 100 gold mines in Australia use sodium cyanide to assist in extracting gold from crushed rock. However cyanide is extremely poisonous - one teaspoon of cyanide is enough to kill a person. There are alternatives to cyanide, however the mining industry has strongly resisted change, presumably because cyanide leaching is a relatively cheap extraction method.

While the industry has argued that it is possible to use cyanide safely, cyanide leaks and spills from gold mines throughout the world continue to prove otherwise. The Baia

Marie gold mine spill by Australian company Esmeralda in February 2000 killed almost all aquatic life in the upper reaches of the Tisza and Szamos rivers (see picture). Closer to home, fish in the Edith river were killed in 1999 as a result of cyanide contaminated water overflowing from the tailings dam at the Mt Todd mine. Cyanide poses unacceptable risks and hazards and is the subject of international campaigns to ban its use. The Turkish government recently banned cyanide use in gold mining. ECNT shares the belief of a range of Australian environment NGOs that cyanide should be banned in the NT. This incident is further evidence supporting this argu-



A fisherman pulls dead fish out of the Tisza River in Romania after the Baia Marie cyanide spill. Picture from MPI website.

ment. Two days after the spill was discovered, recognising the threat this incident posed to the mining industry, the manager of the Union Reef gold mine in Pine Creek announced the establishment of a voluntary code of practice for cyanide handling. Stan Padgett of Union Reef was quoted on ABC news as saying 'We're all very, very conscious in the industry that if there's a major, major spill and there's

problems then it could kill the industry' (ABC news, 13/02/01). ECNT believes that voluntary codes of practice are no replacement for adequate regulation. Numerous major environmental incidents at NT mines in recent years demonstrate that the industry is not operating in a responsible manner and cannot be trusted with regulating its own activity.

Speculation on the Tanami incident has it that the truck-driver transporting the cyanide pellets filled drums with water in order to provide ballast to stabilise the truck on a rough road. The contaminated water was then allegedly dumped beside the Tanami Highway. If these allegations prove to be true, ECNT shares Environment Minister Kon Vatskalis's view that 'using water as ballast in a container that contains cyanide without neutralising it, I think was a criminal act' (ABC news, 15/02/02). Whatever the case it is up to the Government to swiftly get to the bottom of the incident and take appropriate action to safeguard the environment from mining accidents.

For more information on the dangers of cyanide use see: The Mineral Policy Institute: <http://www.mpi.org.au>

- Mark Wakeham & Kirsten Blair

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New report shows climate change in the NT is already doing damage.

Earlier this month the Climate Action Network Australia (CANAA), of which ECNT is a member, released an important new report. The document *Warnings from the Bush* draws on 50 scientific studies and is peer reviewed by the CSIRO and other scientists. It shows that many of the Territory's natural icons are in trouble because warming temperatures and more extreme weather patterns are changing habitats.

The report's message is that climate change could undo gains that have been made in conserving bush and protecting habitat for endangered species. It finds that cutting greenhouse gas emissions is a priority for protecting animals and ecosystems. Efforts to contain development and create national parks will not be enough to protect our natural environment if we continue to change the climate too rapidly for animals and plants to adapt to.

The report shows that global warming is not just a future threat, but is already affecting Australia's nature. The key findings of the report are:

- Sea level rise as a result of global warming is thought to be the cause of freshwater environments converting to saltwater wetlands in Kakadu. This is leading to extensive dieback of paperbark and freshwater grasses, and is affecting the distribution of long necked turtles and many other species like waterlilies and magpie geese. Most of the Territory's wetlands are extremely vulnerable to sea level rises because of their low-lying nature.
- The trend to wetter and more widespread monsoon seasons and higher temperatures is leaving the landscape full of dry fuel for hot wild fires. This trend will continue as global warming intensifies. Intense wildfires that occur on an annual basis are an extreme threat for plant and animal species throughout the Top End. While many species need fire every 2-5 years, the regularity and heat of fires as a result of warming conditions is a

threat to their survival.

- Many of the NT's remaining native forests will be damaged. For example, 50% of Australia's Eucalypt species (gum trees) have a current temperature range of less than 3°C, and may not cope with changes to the climate beyond this.
- Some of the NT animals that have been identified as at risk of decline or extinction as a result of climate change are the Antilopine Wallaroo, Dusky Hopping-Mouse, Central Rock-rat, Black-footed Rock-wallaby, Greater Bilby, Mulgara, Golden Bandicoot, Ghost Bat, Birds - Red Goshawk, Gouldian Finch and Little Tern. However many more species could be at risk but are yet to be studied.
- The climate of many national parks established to provide homes for endangered animals and plants may become unsuitable for those species. A national park that is 3°C warmer in 2070 is equivalent to moving that national park 300-400 km north of where it is today. Many species will not cope with this new climate.

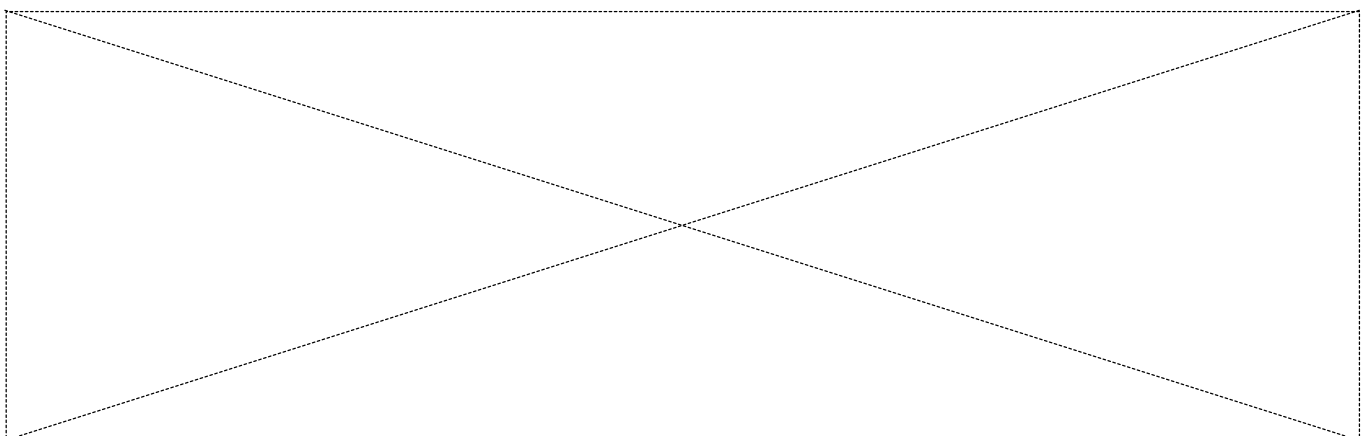
These findings are certainly shocking, but this report has only profiled those ecosystems and species that have been studied by individual scientists. The impacts are likely to be far broader, but we won't know what they are until more effort is put into researching the impact of climate change on ecosystems and wildlife.

STOP PRESS:

The full report can be viewed at www.climateaustralia.org or contact the ECNT office for a hard copy.

A similar report which looks at the international situation: *Habitats at risk: Global warming and species loss in globally significant terrestrial ecosystems* has also just been released by WWF and can be viewed at: http://www.worldwildlife.org/climate/species_loss.pdf

-Kirsten Blair and Mark Wakeham



Ranges of annual average warming °C for around 2030 and 2070 relative to 1990. Images courtesy of CSIRO (2001)



Conservation groups attack cotton plans for northern Australia

A report released late last year by the Cotton Industry Cooperative Research Centre identified 21 areas for expansion of cotton crops across northern Australia- in Cape York, the Gulf Country, the Top End and the Kimberley. ECNT joined with other environment groups to attack the industry's plans.

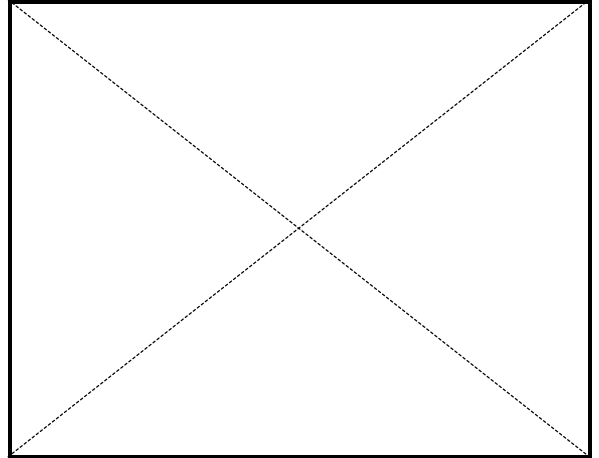
"What we need for northern Australia are development visions that keep the extraordinary abundance of nature and provide long term economic and social benefits for northern people. What the Cotton Industry and associated irrigated agriculture will deliver, if allowed, is a repeat of the mistakes of the south- short term cash gains for a few companies- and salinity, degraded rivers, depleted groundwater, damaged fisheries and toxic chemicals. It is crucial that state, territory and federal Governments act quickly to block these plans," said Ms. Maria Mann, Coordinator of Environs Kimberley.

Disturbing

Jann Crase, Landclearing Campaigner with the Environment Centre of Northern Territory said: "Most disturbing in the industry plans is the revelation that the irrigation industry wants to systematically target some of the few remaining wild rivers in Australia. Rivers such as the Fitzroy in the Kimberley, the Daly in the Northern Territory, and the Flinders in Queensland still have natural flows. Irrigated crops such as cotton on northern rivers will damage the ecology of these rivers, which support some of the biggest concentrations of wildlife in Australia."

Ms. Kerry O'Connor, Rivers Project Officer with the Queensland Conservation Council said: "Irrigated crops such as cotton require large volumes of water. Such irrigation on our northern rivers will reverse the normal Wet/Dry cycles, causing major environmental destruction but also putting at risk the huge northern fishing industries that depend on natural seasonal flows of clean water."

"Cotton is of particular concern due to the high level of pesticides the crop requires. Contrary to statements by the industry, genetically modified cotton varieties still require pesticide use. Southern beef producers living near cotton growers face a constant problem of chemical residues. The north can avoid this."



'Trial' cotton crops in the Ord. Photo: ECNT

Dr. Barry Traill, Landclearing Campaigner with The Wilderness Society said: "We will be talking and working with other community and industry groups across the north to ensure that these proposals don't proceed."

This year ECNT will be working with a broad range of other environment groups to develop alternatives to broadscale irrigated agriculture development in northern Australia.

Jann Crase has summarised the relevant sections of the Cotton CRC's report as they apply to the NT.

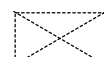
To get a copy of this summary contact Jann- northernwoodlands@octa4.net.au or download the summary from the ECNT website in the near future.

World Wetlands Week

This year, ECNT joined forces with the National Centre for Tropical Wetlands Research (NCTWR) to deliver two events celebrating World Wetlands Week (Feb 2-9). Attendees came from all over the Top End with Jabiru, Katherine and Darwin being particularly well represented. There were even some folk from Kununurra and Broome who made the journey over. The theme: 'People in Tropical Wetlands' was explored at a half-day seminar, primarily organised by the NCTWR and held at the Northern Territory University. The follow-up field trip the next morning was run by ECNT as a part of the Australian Wetlands Alliance regional wetlands workshops program.

There were thirteen speakers at the seminar including Traditional Owners, researchers, conservationists and educators. The seventy delegates were treated to a range of accounts of work being done to under-

(Continued on page 4)



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stand, work with and conserve wetlands in the Top End. Peter Christophersen from Kakadu talked about a new joint management project being implemented on his country, Michelle Handley from World Wide Fund for Nature talked about brokering conservation agreements for wetlands on private land and Jann Crase from ECNT outlined the gaping holes in current Government practice as far as woodland and wetland protection goes.

On the Saturday morning, about fifty people braved the early morning downpours to visit a few Top End wetland sites. First stop was Fogg Dam, where research scientist Greig Brown treated visitors to a very interesting description of his work with water snakes. He even brought some live specimens along to illustrate his talk, which proved extremely popular. Morning tea (and a heritage walk for those willing to brave the rain) was next, at Window on the Wetlands (WOW). The group was also treated to the final performance of the hilari-

ous and educational puppet show: 'A gander at our wetlands' which Pam Wickham and the WOW team put together for World Wetlands Week. The final stop for the day was at Knuckey Lagoons Reserve where Sally Jacka (Land for Wildlife), Marilyn Barnes (Local Government Association) and Gerry Wood (Independent Member for Nelson) shared stories of community efforts to protect and restore local wetlands. The group enjoyed lunch and another rainy walk before people headed home.

ECNT is grateful to the National Centre for Tropical Wetlands Research for the opportunity to work collaboratively on such a successful project and both groups are keen to work on joint projects in the future. ECNT also appreciates the support of the Australian Wetlands Alliance for organising the regional wetland workshops and thanks the Natural Heritage Trust and supportive members of ECNT for assisting with finance for the field trip.

- Kirsten Blair and Mark Wakeham

Population and the Environment

The following letter-to-the-editor has been signed by seventeen Australian green organisations including ECNT and has been sent to major newspapers around the country:

Dear Editor,

The current debate about asylum seekers has served to polarise Australian society. It has also renewed debate about what may constitute a long term sustainable human population for Australia. Concern for the environment has often been used as an argument to limit or even reduce immigration, and some within the environment movement have argued for lower population levels in order to decrease environmental impacts.

The following organisations recognise that existing land use patterns, and resource extraction, production and consumption (including greenhouse gas emissions) are the most significant drivers of environmental deterioration in Australia. The debate we need to have as a nation on what may constitute a sustainable population must start with a clear assessment of our current ecological footprint, an acknowledgement that we are over-consuming, and a serious plan for reduction in ecological impacts, regardless of final population levels.

Population growth, while a factor in environmental impact, should not be considered in isolation of these other issues. It is inappropriate to single out immigrants as a potential source of environmental degradation. As Australians, we need to get our own 'house in order' and not seek to blame others for our ecological problems.

Further to this, we understand that Australia, as a nation, is part of a globalised world, with corresponding responsibilities. The current management regimes for asylum seekers are no less than shameful, and impact directly on Australia's international reputation. We call on the federal government to immediately end its policy of mandatory detention of asylum seekers, and to move to community-based systems for hosting asylum seekers.

Yours sincerely,
Kirsten Blair and Mark Wakeham, Coordinators ECNT (as well as others)



Woodside EIS underestimates environmental impacts

As mentioned in last month's newsletter, the draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Woodside development of the Sunrise gas field was available for public comment earlier this month.

The following highlights some of the concerns raised by the Environment Centre:

- The EIS substantially overestimates the benefits of natural gas in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It suggests that natural gas, when used as a fuel, produces approximately half the greenhouse emissions of other fossil fuel alternatives when really current figures show that natural gas emits around two-thirds of the emissions of coal power generation.
- There is no discussion of the potential implications of global warming

induced sea level rise, or the potential for altered cyclonic activity over the next 30 years.

- The EIS fails to address the socio-economic impacts of the project on East Timor. For instance, there is no mention of how many Timorese traditional fishers may be affected through restricted access to the Project area.
- Claims are made that threatened whale and turtle species would not be affected by the project yet no data is provided to substantiate this.
- The possibility of accidents during construction and operation is not addressed sufficiently despite the fact that accidental spills and leakages of gas, fuel oils or other contaminants inevitably accompany such developments.
- As part of the EIS, Woodside

claims to have undertaken 'extensive and in-depth consultation' with all relevant government and non-government organisations, including ECNT. As far as ECNT is concerned, this claim is incorrect. The only interaction we've had with Woodside on this matter has been the exchange of otherwise publicly available information which can in no way be seen to represent 'extensive and in-depth consultation'. This misrepresentation raises questions about the sincerity of Woodside's claims to environmental and community commitment.

If you would like to read the ECNT submission in full, please contact the office.

Kirsten Blair and Mark Wakeham

BHP WASHES ITS HANDS OF DEAD RIVER.

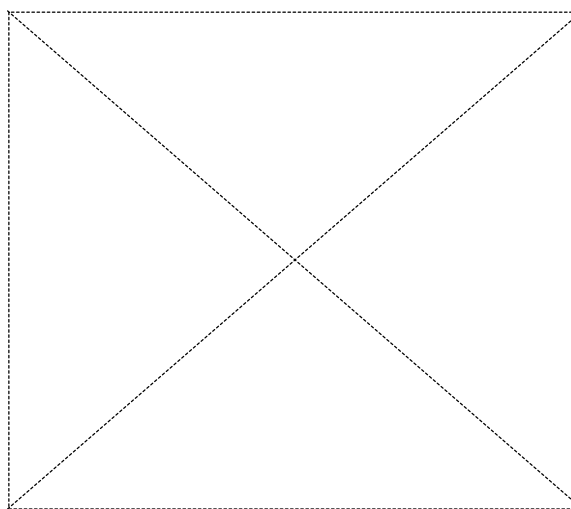
The following is an extract from a Minerals Policy Institute media release dated 8th February 2002:

BHP Billiton today washed its hands of responsibility for the damage its Ok Tedi mine is creating.

The company is putting its majority share of Ok Tedi into a trust based from Singapore. For the price of ten years of mine profits it is divorcing itself of responsibility to clean up the damage it has created, and in the process gains a full legal indemnity from the Papua New Guinea government.

"BHP started dumping 80,000 tonnes of waste a day into the Ok Tedi and Fly rivers in 1984. In Australia it would have to clean up this mess" said Mr Simon Divecha, Mineral Policy Institute.

"The company says it wanted to shut the mine but the people in PNG wanted to keep it open. This is not true, but it also does not remove BHP's obligation to these people and to fixing the mess it has made"



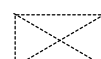
We know we've used this David Pope cartoon before but we thought it was still appropriate

BHP has an agreement signed by people 'representing or purporting to represent a Community or clan.' The agreement is legally binding on a whole village even if 'there is no express authority for that person to sign'

"BHP's waste is killing the river. It will leave people in PNG with their forest dead, their river gardens destroyed and a possible total collapse of the fishery"

"Even if the mine shuts tomorrow this damage will last for a hundred years" concluded Mr Divecha.

For more information see the MPI website: <http://www.mpi.org.au>



Crazy ants

A new threat to the Territory environment

**Interview with the Top End's resident ant expert,
CSIRO's Dr Alan Andersen**

ECNT: Crazy ants have recently been found on the Gove peninsula. Alan tell us about the damage that you've seen yellow crazy ants inflict.

Alan: I have seen the devastation wreaked by crazy ants on Christmas Island. In infested areas they occur in unbelievable numbers – teeming masses of ants everywhere you look. They have killed all land crabs in these areas, and presumably have had similar effects on most other creatures living there.

ECNT: What impact could the crazy ant have on Northern Australia?

Alan: Crazy ants could have the same effect here as they have elsewhere in the world – that is, the elimination of many, if not most, other creatures from the environments they infest. At this stage however, we don't know what impacts they are having. We don't know the extent of their distribution, what densities they occur in, and how rapidly they are invading new environments.

ECNT: How do crazy ants stack up against other environmental pests in terms of their potential threat to the environment?

Alan: Crazy ants can occur in such high densities that their impact is all-pervasive. They can potentially have a far greater ecological impact than other introduced pests such as cane toads.

ECNT: Who should people contact if they see crazy ants?

Alan: They can contact me on 8944 8431.

ECNT: What government programs are necessary to prevent the spread of the crazy ant?

Alan: A formal crazy ant management programme needs to be developed as a matter of urgency, covering a range of issues such as public education and awareness, dispersal mitigation, control operations, community participation, and research. The last thing we want is to do nothing until we reach crisis point.

FACT FILE : YELLOW CRAZY ANT

Scientific name: *Anoplolepis gracilipes*

Description: The yellow crazy ant, has been introduced across the tropics as a by-product of human commerce. It invades urban, agricultural and native ecosystems where it

can have a large, catastrophic impact. Impacts include decimation of endemic species, rapid degradation of native communities, and altered ecosystem processes.

Distinguishing features: The crazy ant is notable for its remarkably long legs and antennae (hence its alternative name, long-legged ant) and its frenetic behaviour when disturbed (hence the name, crazy ant). Workers have a long and slender body, approximately 4-5 mm long. It lacks a sting but subdues and kills prey by spraying formic acid.

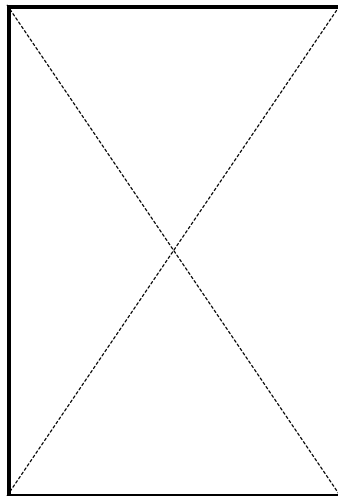
General impacts: The crazy ant is a major environmental and secondary agricultural pest, as well as a human nuisance, in the tropics and subtropics. In high numbers it can directly impact native 'keystone' species and species of special conservation value (including endemic reptiles, birds, and mammals). This can alter community structure and species composition, and affect ecosystem processes including litter decomposition. Deletion of native keystone species by the crazy ant can cause rapid state changes in native communities. Crazy ants are happy eating a range of plant species. This can lead to population outbreaks which cause dieback of larger shade-providing plants. Secondary invasions of giant African landsnails and shade-intolerant woody weeds can follow such invasions by crazy ants, further degrading native forests. In agricultural systems, impacts are primarily indirect, although some believe that this ant benefits crop plants by deterring plant pests. Crazy ants commonly nest at the base of plants, sometimes undermining crops such as sugarcane and coffee. In some instances, the crazy ant is a household and village pest. Formic acid sprayed by the ants can cause skin burns and irritate the eyes of fieldworkers.

Management information: Control and management of yellow crazy ants has primarily involved the broadcast of toxic chemical baits. Current programs use a fish meal attractant laced with an invertebrate intoxicant, e.g., Fipronil. Concentration of the intoxicant is low so that foragers will live long enough to return the bait to the colony and disperse the intoxicant among other workers, larvae, and queens. On Christmas Island, an initial island-wide survey was used to identify locations of infestations of crazy ants. These infestations are mapped at a finer scale and baits are then broadcast on parallel transects through each infestation. Aerial baiting using helicopters is being explored as an alternative, more efficient control methodology.

Source: Crazy Ant Database compiled by Dennis O Dowd. It can be accessed at <http://www.issg.org/database> (need to type 'crazy ant' into species field). There is an account of the Christmas Island situation at <http://www.monash.edu.au/pubs/monmag/issue8-2001/antsoct2001.html>

Thanks to Dr Alan Andersen for his assistance with this article.

- Mark Wakeham and Kirsten Blair



Bits and Pieces

Earth Summit

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (the Johannesburg Earth Summit) will take place in August 2002. The meeting is to be the formal assessment of progress on sustainable development since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (which is why it is often referred to as Rio +10). The Summit is the most significant international environmental meeting on this year's calendar.

Australian environment groups have been involved in regional preparatory meetings during the lead up and will be represented in Johannesburg. Environmental and social justice groups hold grave concerns with the direction preparatory talks are heading. Business and governments are pushing for non-binding agreements (where have we heard this before?) and little commitment is being shown to make the real changes that are needed for global environmental equity. Information: www.rio-plus-10.org

Are computers harming our Future?

Did you know that throwing our obsolete computer in the tip is creating a huge problem for the environment? There is a composite of over 1000 highly toxic chemicals, lead being the biggest problem, in computers. Once these poisons get into landfill and the waste stream, they can cause very serious health problems.

By 2005 it's predicted that for every new computer, another will become obsolete. That's a scary prospect given that Australia alone purchased over 2 million computers in the year 2000. Computers are a toxic cocktail and internationally there is a push to handle them better at the end of their life.

Many argue that the responsibility for the afterlife of computers should lie with their manufacturers. Fortunately, some large companies such as IBM, Hewlett Packard, Compaq are now taking responsibility and designing computers for the environment and disassembly.

Compaq have partnered with MRI who have been recycling for 20 years specialising in electronic and electrical goods, to establish an as-

set recovery service of old computers.

In Darwin NT Metal Recyclers are now recycling computers (and mobile phones). The computers are sent to Brisbane or Adelaide for disassembly. NT Metal Recyclers are at Lot 2149 McKinnon Road, Berrimah (the 11-mile), phone 8932 4122. In the interests of our environment, please don't throw your obsolete computer in the dump - take it to NT Metal Recyclers for responsible disposal.

(Information taken by Anne Whar-ton from Radio National's Earthbeat program 10/3/01 - you can look this up on the Radio National website abc.net.au/rn -Thanks Anne!).

'Dubya' proves no climate commitment

The US President recently announced an extraordinarily poor excuse for a greenhouse plan. It includes a goal of reducing national greenhouse gas intensity from 183 to 151 tons per million dollars of GDP over the 2002 to 2012 timeframe. Because of projected GDP increases, a GHG intensity decline of this size actually implies an **increase of emissions to 36 percent above Kyoto targets**. The plan is based primarily on voluntary measures, includes significant new subsidies for the fossil fuel sector and means that the US will not return to the Kyoto process.

LATE BREAKING NEWS: Environment Minister David Kemp has just announced that Australia and the US will be collaborating on this so-called alternative plan to curb greenhouse gas emissions globally. This is extremely bad news for the Kyoto process and another example of the Australian Government embarrassing this country internationally. More details in next month's newsletter.

Woomera 2002

The Festival of Freedom will be held over Easter 2002: March 27 April 2 in Woomera, SA. The Festival will make connections between dispossession, enclosures, dislocations and profits on aboriginal land in an area where innocent people are detained, uranium is mined and international spying takes

Cool Communities Update

Parap Residents Association and Ludmilla Creek Landcare Group are calling on cool people living in Parap, Fannie Bay, Ludmilla and The Narrows to help them put together a Community Action Plan for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from local households. The Plan needs to be completed by 30 April. If you would like to assist with this task, or if you would be prepared to fill out a survey form which asks questions about your household's electricity and car use, please get in touch with me here at the ECNT.

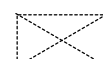
Contact: Gary Scott, Cool Communities Facilitator, ph. 8981-2532 or email: ecntgary@octa4.net.au

'Think Global, Act Local' A National Awards Program Call for Nominations

Nominations are now open for the 2002 United Nations Association of Australia World Environment Day Awards. Awards will be presented in the categories of City of Melbourne Triple Bottom Line Award, URS Business Enterprise Award, Alcoa Community/Individual Award, Local Government Award, Global 500 Education/School Award and Media Awards for Environmental Reporting (print, radio and television). The winners will be announced at an Awards Presentation Dinner to be held on May 22 2002. **The closing date for nominations is April 30.** Individuals or organisations wishing to enter the Awards should visit the UNAA website: www.unaavictoria.com.au or contact the United Nations Association of Australia (Vic) on ph (03) 9482 3655, fax (03) 9482 5118 or by email: UNAA.VIC@bigpond.com

Thanks!

A huge thanks is due to all the people who have come in and volunteered at ECNT already this year. It has been a wonderful start to what will no doubt prove a very busy one. Thank you all!



Dates for March:

Thursday 7th - NTU O Week, stalls on campus, at the basketball courts, 10am - 2pm. Look out for the ECNT stall.

Saturday 9th - International Women's Day march, 11am Parap Village Fountain. Bring musical instruments.

April 3rd-7th - Women and Earth Conference, Blue Mountains NSW. For more info: www.womenandearth.org.au

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