

ENVIRONMENT

The Newsletter of the Environment Centre NT (ECNT)
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July / August 2005

Dumping on the Territory

The Commonwealth Minister for Science Brendan Nelson has announced that one of three Commonwealth-owned areas in the NT will be the site of the controversial Commonwealth radioactive waste dump.

The proposed NT radioactive waste dump is intended to go on receiving long-lived, highly radioactive waste from the Howard government's new Lucas Heights reactor in Sydney for the next 40 years.

This waste, from reprocessed 'spent fuel rods', is likely to be shipped to the NT via Darwin Harbour. An unspecified amount of this most dangerous waste will be arriving periodically over the next 40 years. It will remain dangerous for tens of thousands of years.

The waste from a single reprocessed spent fuel rod is far more radioactive than ALL the waste the Commonwealth proposed to dump in South Australia, and spent fuel rods from the new reactor will be twice as radioactive as spent fuel from the current reactor, as the reactor operator, 'ANSTO', has acknowledged.

Based on ECNT research, there is a wide range of highly dangerous, long lived radioactive materials and other toxic substances that are likely to be included in shipments to the NT dump on an ongoing basis, were it established.

After years of waste dump debate, the Howard government has never fully disclosed the full range and radioactivity of the materials involved. As with all things nuclear, secrecy is the order of the day, along with linguistic tricks designed to conceal the full extent and risks of what is being proposed.

According to reports including the

The Lucas Heights reactors

Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the new nuclear reactor at Lucas Heights in Sydney, there are at least twelve categories of radioactive material that are almost certain to end up at a NT dump. These include:

- Approx. 50 cubic metres of highly radioactive waste produced from re-processing more than a thousand spent fuel rods (from Lucas Heights reactors) ;
- Approx. 150 drums per year of radioactive 'compactable low level solid waste' and solidified radioactive 'sludge' produced in the treatment of reactor wastewaters (Lucas Heights);
- Hundreds of tonnes of radioactive 'non-compactable contaminated

items', e.g. materials from the decommissioned old Lucas Heights reactor, pipes, machinery etc;

- A stockpile of over 5,000 drums of 'low level radioactive waste' (Lucas Heights);
- A stockpile of over 200 cubic metres of 'intermediate level solid waste' some with 'unknown radioactive inventory' (Lucas Heights);
- Over 800 drums of 'historical wastes' including radioactive thorium, beryllium and uranium (Lucas Heights);
- Over 2000 litres of radioactive contaminated charcoal (Lucas Heights);
- Hundreds of used air filters containing radioactive contamination (Lucas Heights);
- Around ten cubic metres of highly dangerous solidified 'long lived intermediate level waste' from molybdenum processing (Lucas Heights);

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**GREAT NEWS FOR
ECNT!!! See p.5**

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Key findings of the 2004 NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Transportation and Storage of Nuclear Waste

“Most of the waste in Australia is produced by the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) at Lucas Heights in Sydney and this is where most of the waste is currently stored. A much smaller amount is stored in dispersed locations, such as hospitals, universities and industry. ANSTO’s operations at Lucas Heights **are the largest generators of radioactive waste in Australia, producing almost 90 per cent of all radioactive waste.** It will be the main contributor of waste to new waste facilities.”

“The Committee is of the view that the storage and transport of radioactive material is so problematic with the general public that it requires sophisticated consultation processes. **These have been lacking to date.**...The Federal Government should as a matter of urgency recommence the site selection process for a waste facility in a genuinely consultative way, in line with more contemporary and democratic approaches being utilised overseas that are based on community acceptance criteria.”

“The rationale for [new national waste facilities] is to strengthen radioactive waste management in Australia by rationalising and centralising the ‘unsafe’ dispersed (non-ANSTO) storage locations across the country (estimated to be in excess of 100) and providing safe containment until the material decays to background levels. ... However, under the current proposals, both Lucas Heights and the operational non-ANSTO (‘unsafe’) sites **will continue to be waste facilities** as they accumulate waste on a two to five year cycle [before being shipped to the new waste facility]. This neither reduces nor rationalises the number of operating waste facilities. **Rather the proposals actually increase the number of operating [waste] facilities...**”

“It is hard to see how the proposal to move waste to remote areas away from the point of production will increase safety **as the transportation of the material actually increases the risk from accident or intervention.**”

“ANSTO has repeatedly assured the Committee that the storage of the material at Lucas Heights **is safe** (indeed ‘international best practice’) and the Federal Government’s own radiation protection regulator has advised that **there is capacity to store existing and future waste there** (a point confirmed by ANSTO)...There is no doubt that the transportation of radioactive waste increases the risk of accident or incident... By continuing the storage of waste at Lucas Heights on an interim basis, there is no need to transport most of the waste and any risks associated with that transport are avoided.”

“The Australian community benefits from the products produced by ANSTO’s reactor. But it is hard to see how this justifies imposing the facilities on **unwilling communities chosen virtually at random.** Furthermore, it is arguable that **alternative technologies** and strategies can produce these radioisotopes.”

“Professor Allen (a former Chief Research Scientist at ANSTO, Director of the Centre for Experimental Radiation Oncology, St George Hospital and Adjunct Professor, Medical Physics, University NSW) did not agree that alternative technologies could provide all the necessary isotopes for the foreseeable future. But he agreed Australia did not need the new reactor for medical reasons. Professor ALLEN: **‘Medically I do not believe the new reactor is essential...What the real reason for the new reactor is really is a matter for the Federal Government. I believe I know what the reason is and in that sense I probably concur with it, but I think it was inappropriate to claim that it was required to save lives with nuclear medi-**

cine’.”

“Nuclear reactors... require fuel to operate. This energy is provided by fuel rods. When this fuel has been irradiated to the point where it is no longer usable due to the depletion of fissile material and the build up of poison or radiation damage, it is removed from the reactor. At this stage the fuel rod becomes known as **spent fuel**... One of the most contentious issues put to the Committee was the management of spent fuel...There is no disagreement on the hazard presented by spent fuel when it has been removed from a reactor — it is the **most highly radioactive** of substances...Dr Loy, CEO of ARPANSA, observed that ‘it is a highly hazardous material ... it has to be handled with a very strict and careful method’.”

[NOTE 1: the reprocessed spent fuel rods from Lucas Heights are intended to come to the NT waste dump FOR THE NEXT 40 YEARS. This is long-lived, highly radioactive waste.]

[NOTE 2 – According to ANSTO (2005) **plutonium** will be sent to the NT dump if it goes ahead:

*“As stated in ANSTO’s supplementary submission to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Contract for the Replacement Research Reactor at Lucas Heights, the current arrangements ANSTO has with reprocessing companies (and any future possible arrangements foreshadowed with others for the processing of spent reactor fuel) specify that the very small quantities of **plutonium contained in the spent fuel are to be returned to Australia in a non-recoverable form, incorporated into the long-lived intermediate level waste.**”*

from: Martha Halliday
Community Liaison Officer, ANSTO, Mon, 1 Aug 2005

“Clearly these proposals for the new waste facilities fail the test of their own objectives. They do not appear to be cost-effective, a genuine rationalisation nor improve safety. They certainly do not reduce the number of operating waste facilities. It is also hard to see how moving waste from Lucas Heights, a storage facility which already, according to ANSTO, “meets international best practice”, and transporting it thousands of kilometres can represent a “cost-effective solution”. The Committee certainly supports attempts to improve the management of waste at the non-ANSTO sites and supports the audit of these sites and, given that these sites will continue to store waste, an urgent upgrade of those facilities if needed. The best short-term solution to the storage of waste, one that will achieve the objectives the government is claiming for these proposals, is to maintain waste facility at Lucas Heights.”



Minister Nelson's campaign of distortion

Federal Science Minister Dr Brendan Nelson has made numerous false claims in relation to his plan to dump the Commonwealth's nuclear waste on Territorians.

Dr Nelson told Alice Springs Radio 8HA that the waste to be dumped in the NT is low-level waste. **Wrong.** If built, the dump will also take long-lived intermediate-level waste, including reprocessed spent nuclear fuel rods from the Lucas Heights reactor.

Dr Nelson stated: "***If the people of Sydney can comfortably live with a nuclear reactor... why on earth can't people in the middle of nowhere have low-level and intermediate level waste***".

He also said, "***What we're proposing to do – although its not strictly necessary – is to put [nuclear waste] in relatively remote sites in the Territory which are geologically and environmentally suited...What we are trying to do is find – whilst its not absolutely essential - to find a remote location on Commonwealth land***". (Media conference transcript, 15/7/2005)

Dr Nelson said that: "... you've got a lot of uranium in the ground up there in the Territory, and that's actually more radioactive than the waste we're talking about." **Wrong.** The spent fuel reprocessing waste - and some other waste to be dumped in the NT - is far more radioactive and hazardous than unprocessed uranium.

Dr Nelson repeatedly claimed that every Australian will undergo a nuclear medicine procedure at some stage of their life. **Wrong.**

Dr Nelson said the waste 'facility' would be an above-ground store. **Wrong.** The government's own literature makes it clear that some wastes might be buried underground.

The waste "represents no threat to human health or life", Dr Nelson said. **Wrong.**

On July 26 Dr Nelson said that there had been a number of "misleading" comments in relation to the government's plan to dump nuclear waste dump in the NT. **Indeed!**

Daly debate in Parliament

On 18 August, Marion Scrymgour, the newly appointed NT Minister for Natural Resources, Environment and Heritage, delivered a Ministerial Statement on the future of the Daly River to Parliament. She began by highlighting the importance of protecting the significant ecological and cultural values of the river and its catchment and then proceeded to outline the key components of a future management framework:

"Government has given, in principle, support to most of the (Daly) Community Reference Group's (CRG) recommendations. We have adopted the CRG's tight limits on water use for immediate application; agreed to establish a new Daly River Management Advisory Committee; an Aboriginal Reference Group to participate in long-term management of the river and catchment; committed to the development of an adaptive management approach to the long-term protection of the river; approved development of enhancing monitoring systems for water availability and water use; approved a review of all natural resource management legislation with a view to providing a best practice framework that encourages planning and delivery of sustainable practice integrated across portfolios; and committed a total of \$3.5m to implement these actions".

ECNT welcomes these commitments, with reservations about how the 'adaptive management' approach, which is cited in order to justify proceeding with development in the face of scientific and ecological uncertainty, will be implemented. Despite the Minister's assurances that adaptive management 'does not mean trial and error', interpretations of the concept can vary widely, or are often expressed in very vague terms.

The NT Government has agreed to a further community consultation process and will release public discussion papers on the implementation of adaptive management principles and practice in the Daly. This will form part of the broader roll-out of the Government's 'Living Rivers' program, announced prior to the June election, to identify and protect the Territory's iconic rivers.

Meanwhile, the less said about the response to the Minister's statement by the CLP Member for Katherine, Fay Miller, the better. Despite a number of NT Government documents in the recent past clearly outlining the possible extent of land clearing in the Daly, Ms Miller could not resist making a dig at 'overzealous environmentalists'. She also demonstrated a total lack of understanding of the notion of environmental flows, the need to maintain minimum river levels, especially during the dry season, and the backlog of applications for over 20,000 megalitres of water from underground aquifers.

Independent MLA Gerry Wood's response was also disappointing, indicating that he did not support the current moratorium on land clearing in the Daly Region and that government approvals should be occurring on a 'case-by-case' basis (i.e. death by a thousand cuts).

It is also frustratingly obvious from the Minister's closing statement (below) that the Government itself anticipates further land clearing and water extraction in the Daly occurring in the future. ECNT will therefore be working to ensure that the precautionary approach is given top priority and that land clearing controls are tightened considerably and given much stronger legislative backing than at present.

"Importantly, we will continue to put the community first. Government will continue to apply a cautious approach to the development of the Daly. If nothing else, the history of past failed agricultural enterprises should be cause for caution and careful thought. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that some further development to the Daly will be possible once the research is undertaken and the monitoring systems are in place. This will only occur under the strict land clearing controls that this government has introduced and under an adaptive management regime that will be constantly reviewed. I am determined that there will not be a repeat of the mistakes made in the past".



Air Travel

When thinking about emissions from transport, we often forget to take air travel into account. However, emissions from air travel is one of the fastest growing contributors to climate change, and, it is predicted that in five years time aircrafts will carry 2.3 billion passengers annually (ECOS, Jan-March 2005). The impact really adds up!

Reducing air travel is a difficult issue. However, it is important to bear in mind the impact that air travel has on the environment, and whether, for example, it really is necessary to attend a meeting out of town, or whether using technology such as video conferencing will suffice.

Visit <http://chooseclimate.org/flying/> to calculate the emissions of your next flight.

Ways to reduce your greenhouse gas emissions at work

Most Cool Households have now implemented a lot of changes around their home to reduce their contribution to climate change. Below is a list of things you can do at your office to help further cut greenhouse gas emissions. Of course, some offices have air conditioning and lights controlled centrally, so you may need to talk to your building manager to implement some of these changes.

- Turn off lights when leaving your office/workstation for more than five minutes
- When going to lunch or leaving your computer for more than 5 minutes, switch the monitor off
- At the end of the day, turn your computer off at the wall. The power used by leaving your monitor on stand by over night and over the week-end can really add up
- If possible, adjust the air conditioner thermostat and try opening the windows in the Dry and working without air conditioning
- If your office has a split system air conditioner and the outside unit is not shaded, talk to your boss about having a shade device fitted. The shade may pay for itself with the improvement of the energy efficiency of the air conditioner
- Cycle or catch the bus to work, or see if you can organise car pooling with your work mates
- Work from home when you can to save emissions produced by travelling

Spread the word of COOLmob over the water cooler! Tell your colleagues about COOLmob and direct them to our website (www.coolmob.org) or call us (8981 2532) and we can send you out some brochures and booklets

Thea Bray - COOLmob Project Manager

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Illustrations by James Dunlevie (firehorse_1966@hotmail.com)

Waste dump continued from page 1

- Over 2000 cubic metres of radioactive contaminated soil currently stored at Woomera, and other Commonwealth Defence Department and CSIRO 'historic' radioactive waste.

It must be stressed that radioactive waste in many of these categories will be produced and transported to the NT on an ongoing basis if and when the new Lucas Heights reactor is activated, so the volume of radioactive material will go on increasing every year.

An analysis by Friends of the Earth shows that just to transport the existing stockpile of waste from Lucas Heights would involve over 130 truckloads of material. To transport all waste, current and ongoing, will require an initial 160 truck loads, another 200 truckloads for material from the decommissioned old reactor, and about 7 truckloads of new waste per year for the next 40 years.

Once again it must be reiterated that the safest and only responsible way to deal with the problem of Australia's radioactive waste, most of which is from the unnecessary Lucas Heights reactors in Sydney, is to store it in the safest possible way near the source of the waste, and to stop producing more and more of it.

PUBLIC MEETING

"Don't waste the Territory"

NO WASTE DUMP

**Wed 31 August, Crowne Plaza
Hotel, 7pm**



Independent review backs protection for Territory rivers

In July the Environment Centre NT (ECNT) released an independent review of water law and planning in the Northern Territory, which said that rivers in the Territory should be given special protection in recognition of their high conservation significance.

The review, commissioned by ECNT, was carried out by Ilona Millar, Principal Solicitor at the Environmental Defender's Office (EDO) NSW. It details the current system of water law and management in the Territory and makes more than thirty recommendations for improvement.

The review is extremely timely. The Martin Government announced during the June election campaign that it would undertake a complete overhaul of the outdated NT *Water Act* and introduce a 'Living Rivers' program to identify and protect the Territory's 'iconic' rivers, including the Daly. However, there is little detail yet on exactly what these commitments will involve.

There is a real need to learn from changes to water law and planning that have occurred in other jurisdictions around Australia and to see how these lessons may be best applied in the unique circum-

stances of the Northern Territory. Queensland, for example, is in the midst of passing new Wild Rivers legislation through its state parliament, which will protect 19 high conservation value rivers in Cape York and Far North Queensland.

Key recommendations of the EDO review include:

- The Water Act should give clear top priority to the use of water for the protection of the health of freshwater ecosystems.
- There should be a mandatory process of public consultation for the grant of new water extraction licences and approvals to use water, including an opportunity for an objector to appeal against the grant of a licence or an approval.
- The Minister or Controller of Water should be required to publish reasons relating to decisions for the grant or refusal of an application for an extraction licence or approval to use water.
- Offences under the *Water Act* should be subject to significantly higher penalties including suspension of licences.
- Rivers should be classified according to their conservation values and management plans developed for ones with significant natural values (which would include most NT rivers).

- The Water Act should provide limitations upon the ability of the Minister or Controller of Water to issue licences for extraction or to carry out works within the catchment of a high conservation value river.

These sorts of reforms would go a long way towards creating a best-practice framework for the management of the Territory's precious water resources. The full report by EDO NSW and an accompanying 14 page summary document can be downloaded from the Environment Centre's website <http://www.ecnt.org/html/media.html> or contact me for a copy.

Dr Gary Scott, Freshwater Campaigner.
Ph. 08 8941 7439 or
Email: ecntdaly@iinet.net.au

GREAT NEWS FOR ECNT!!

**Friday 19 August
2.17 pm**

Received an email from Minister Scrymgour's office: \$65,000 operational grant to ECNT "for this financial year". Hopefully, this can be seen as a strong indication of the value the Martin government places on the environment and the Environment Centre's independent advocacy work.

We have had a long and anxious wait for results of our application for this funding and we are now breathing more easily. It will go a long way towards making up for the shortfall left when the Federal Government cut our funding in April. The cut had been made retrospectively and left us without funding we had received for over twenty years.

Generous donations from our supporters and a small grant from the NT Environment Fund had allowed us to continue our work until now.

Our thanks go to Minister Marion Scrymgour for her support.



Frog killer

Monsanto's 'Roundup' herbicide killing frogs worldwide

ITTSBURGH - August 8 - As amphibians continue to mysteriously disappear worldwide, a University of Pittsburgh researcher may have found more pieces of the puzzle. Elaborating on his previous research, Pitt assistant professor of biological sciences Rick Relyea has discovered that Roundup, the most commonly used herbicide in the world, is deadly to tadpoles at lower concentrations than previously tested; that the presence of soil does not mitigate the chemical's effects; and that the product kills frogs in addition to tadpoles.

In two articles published in the August 1 issue of the journal *Ecological Applications*, Relyea and his doctoral students Nancy Schoeppner and Jason Hoverman found that even when applied at concentrations that are one-third of the maximum concentrations expected in nature, Roundup still killed up to 71 percent of tadpoles raised in outdoor tanks.

Relyea also examined whether adding soil to the tanks would absorb the Roundup and make it less deadly to tadpoles. The soil made no difference: After exposure to the maximum concentration expected in nature, nearly all of the tadpoles from three species died.

Although Roundup is not approved for use in water, scientists have found that the herbicide can wind up in small wetlands

where tadpoles live due to inadvertent spraying during the application of Roundup.

Studying how Roundup affected frogs after metamorphosis, Relyea found that the recommended application of Roundup Weed and Grass Killer, a formulation marketed to homeowners and gardeners, killed up to 86 percent of terrestrial frogs after only one day.

"The most striking result from the experiments was that a chemical designed to kill plants killed 98 percent of all tadpoles within three weeks and 79 percent of all frogs within one day," Relyea wrote.

Previous studies have determined that it is Roundup's surfactant (polyethoxylated tallowamine, or POEA, an "inert" ingredient added to make the herbicide penetrate plant leaves) and not the active herbicide (glyphosate) that is lethal to amphibians. This research was funded by the National Science Foundation, Pitt's McKinley Fund, and the Pennsylvania Academy of Science.

ROUNDUP Use in Australia
Roundup is the most common and widely used weed killer in Australia and the NT

Dead end technologies suffer further adversity

The worldwide problems of two fatally flawed technologies – nuclear power and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) – took a turn for the worse with reports underlining the outrageous costs and risks involved.

Both reports by: Paul Brown, environment correspondent, The Guardian UK, July 26 & August 12, 2005

£56bn bill for nuclear waste

The cost of cleaning up more than 50 years of nuclear waste from Britain's power stations and military projects has risen by £8bn to £56 billion pounds (over A\$100 billion!) and will rise further, Sir Anthony Cleaver, chairman of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, said yesterday.

If another 100 tonnes of plutonium plus thousands of tonnes of uranium stored at Sellafield, Cumbria, are also classified as waste, the bill will rise by a further £10bn. The stored materials are currently guarded by armed men day and night because of the terrorist threat.

The authority is to open a new low-level waste depository at Dounreay, and find a replacement for the existing dump at Drigg, in Cumbria, which is filling up and will end up inundated because of the rising sea level.

Although his role is, in theory, independent of government, Sir Anthony made clear that certain key decisions - for example, the future of the plutonium stockpile, and that of Thorp, the currently crippled nuclear reprocessing plant at Sellafield - would be taken by the Department of Trade and Industry.

The government is subsidising Thorp with £200 million a year in cash even though the plant was put out of action in May by a leak, and no permission has been given for a restart.

Weed find calls for GM ban

Britain cannot afford to take the risk of spreading genetically modified genes to wild plants and should ban GM crops that have wild relatives in the countryside, the former environment minister Michael Meacher said yesterday.

Mr Meacher, who was the minister responsible for introducing the farm-scale trials of GM crops in Britain to test their effect on the environment, said he was shocked yesterday at research results revealed for the first time in the *Guardian*.

The results showed that a related weed had picked up herbicide resistance as a result of cross-fertilisation with GM oil-seed rape, something that scientists had said would not happen in the countryside.

The discovery raises fears that herbicide-resistant superweeds could develop in the British countryside if GM crops were grown commercially.

"I remember being reassured on this issue when I was minister. Now we discover that charlock, a distant relative of GM oil-seed rape, has acquired resistance to herbicide," he said.

He said he had been to Canada to see the plight of farmers who had encountered superweeds. They had been forced to spray them with heavy duty chemicals. It was impossible to see how organic and conventional farmers could be safeguarded from cross-contamination, or how GM crops would not gradually contaminate everything else.

"The safe option is to say simply that the risk of these GM crops is too great and we will not grow them," he said.



Marine risks good reason against dump

On Friday July 15th the Federal Government broke their election promise on nuclear dumps when they announced plans for a national nuclear waste facility in the Northern Territory (NT). On Thursday August 4th, just 20 days later, the Federal Government overturned the NT's ban on uranium mines and opened up the Territory to uranium mining proposals.

Of particular concern is the risk posed to Darwin Harbour. The Federal Government plans to use Darwin Harbour as a hub for the movement of nuclear material in and out of the NT.

The naturally and culturally rich Darwin Harbour is the centrepiece of the Top End's lifestyle. The Harbour is home to 36 species of mangroves, unusually rich and diverse sponge gardens, 48 species of water birds, dugongs and the elusive Irrawaddy dolphin. This is certainly worth looking after.

If new uranium mines were to be permitted, more uranium would be transported in and out of Darwin Harbour and through the world's oceans on route to other countries. Spent fuel rods from the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor in Sydney are also likely to be transported to Darwin Harbour for dumping for the next 40 years.

The fact is that like in all other industries, accidents and spills happen in the nuclear industry. The NT's existing uranium mine, Ranger, has had at least 120 spills to date.

Shipping accidents occur, mining accidents occur, nuclear reactor accidents occur, transport accidents occur. Technical breakdowns and human error occur.

While there are many real, valid and longstanding community concerns about uranium mining and waste dumps, the threats are not restricted to the geographical location of the mine or dump. One of the most hazardous operations of the nuclear processing chain is **transfer** of nuclear materials from one location to another.

NUCLEAR IS NEVER SAFE!





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PUBLICMEETING

“Don’t waste the Territory”

NO WASTE DUMP

Wed 31 August, Crowne Plaza Hotel

7pm

NATIONAL THREATENED SPECIES DAY

Wednesday, September 7th

Earthdance 2005

Volunteers Needed

Saturday 17th September @ Charles Darwin National Park, Gates open 8pm. Entry \$15 donation

Great live bands, Dj’s, visual artists and performers. Join over 3 million people in more than 120 countries around the world as we dance for peace on earth. World Prayer for Peace at 8.30am on Sunday.

Earthdance is a non profit event which donates to environmental charities. Last year Darwin Earthdance donated \$1500 to ECNT. We need volunteers to help run the door and an info stand from 8pm to 6am.

Please call Elly on 8981 1984 or email ecntadmin@octa4.net.au if you can help with this great event. www.earthdance.org



earthdance

Global Dance Party for Peace