The Daly River Management Advisory Committee (DRMAC)

The Daly River Management Advisory Committee (DRMAC) was established in 2006 to advise the Northern Territory Government through the Minister for Land Resource Management on ways of achieving the highest standards of management of lands and other resources (including water) used for both production and conservation in the Daly River region.

DRMAC is an independent community committee with a mandate to bring a diversity of skills, perspectives and opinions to bear on land use, conservation and sustainable use of resources.

DRMAC has the following Terms of Reference.

The Committee is to advise the Minister for Natural Resources, Environment and Heritage and the Government on the following.

- Visions for healthy communities in the Daly River Catchment and its sub-catchments, based on sustainable development.
- Land and resource use options and conservation strategies for delivering on those visions.
- Resource use or conservation management issues of particular concern to local and regional communities.
- The costs and benefits of different land use and management options.
- Design and maintenance of systems for monitoring all important values.
- Specific development and/or conservation plans for the region.
- Best practice in land and resource use and conservation management.
- Options for legislated change to support improved management of natural resources at the regional scale, including approaches to community engagement.
- Development proposals for use of natural resources in the region.

The Committee will have the following membership.

- An independent Chair with extensive experience in management of consultation processes and knowledge of natural resource management issues (1).
- Non-Indigenous landowners representing pastoral, agricultural and horticultural interests in the area (3).
- Indigenous landowners representing and supported by the Aboriginal Reference Group (ARG) which represents Traditional Owners of the language groups in the Daly River region (3).
- Commercial tourism and recreational (fishing) representatives associated with the area (2).
- Conservation interest representative (1).
- Government water manager (1).
- Government conservation and recreation manager (1).
- Government regional development planner (1) and land use planner (1).
- Government primary industries manager (1).
The importance of the Daly River Catchment.

The Daly River Catchment is an iconic area of national and international renown. It has particular significance and value in the Northern Territory for its many qualities and values. Not the least of these is the constantly flowing Daly River providing environmental, commercial, cultural and amenity value to locals and visitors alike.

The Daly has a long history of Aboriginal traditional ownership and management of country. It represents an important link with the past, and opportunities for future cultural and livelihood benefit.

With the provision of fertile soils, reliable monsoonal rains and access to water for irrigation the Daly is a significant area for current and future agricultural and pastoral production.

The outstanding natural and climatic features resulted in areas of outstanding conservation value. These also contribute to ecosystem services of considerable importance and value for communities and the Territory.

These natural values coupled with supportive infrastructure and commercial enterprises create outstanding opportunities for people to enjoy these natural amenities. From the Daly River and its fish through the floodplains and their wildlife to the gorges in the headquarters there are extensive opportunities for tourism and recreation.

What DRMAC has achieved to date.

DRMAC was established at a time of considerable community disquiet over plans and proposals for the Daly. The tree clearing moratorium was in place for part of the catchment. The Community Reference Group had made useful recommendations concerning monitoring and adaptive management approaches but with divided views on future development and conservation.

DRMAC has taken a constructive approach to developing productive community relationships among the diversity of people and sectors with an interest in the Daly River Catchment. These strong relationships have provided the basis for constructive and agreed advice to the Minister and the Government on priority natural resource issues. All advice provided has been on the basis of consensus. While there is always a diversity of views and opinions in discussions, committee members have been able to come to agreement on the advice provided to the Minister.

Of particular value has been the ongoing relationship with the Aboriginal Reference Group. This relationship has proven to be mutually beneficial and essential to the effective development of DRMAC advice and outputs. The model employed consists of a separate Aboriginal Reference Group where open and frank discussions can be held amongst aboriginal people, with advice and outcomes emanating from such discussions being bought into to the overall DRMAC agenda by the 3 ARG representatives. This model has been recognised
nationally as one of the most successful in the country with regard to engagement with aboriginal people.

In particular, DRMAC has achieved the following.

- Advice was given to the Minister as to how tree clearing could be conducted sustainably in the Daly River Catchment, if the Government chose to lift the moratorium. This included innovative approaches such as the Cascade Assessment Process, implementation of Adaptive Management Plans and the use of specific Guidelines in the approval process for vegetation clearing.
- Comment is provided on all applications for land clearing in the Daly River Catchment, with particular reference to use of the Guidelines and the impact within the broader landscape.
- Experience with this process and adaptive management implementation influenced aspects of the revisions to the proposed Native Vegetation Act and Pastoral Land Act. In addition the concept of landscape health as a basis for assessing landscapes condition was strongly supported by DRMAC.
- Water allocation plans have been developed for the Tindall Limestone Aquifer (Katherine) which has been implemented, and the Oolloo Aquifer which is being considered for public comment. The Tindall Plan and its implementation are being monitored within the adaptive management framework.
- A report, "River Health in the Daly Catchment", has been produced providing a report card on the Daly River and its sub catchments. This will provide the basis for ongoing assessment and maintenance of the health of the catchment.
- To ensure that water quality is maintained at the highest level, a "River Health Monitoring Strategy and Plan for the Daly River" is in the final stages of development. It will provide the basis for ongoing community involvement in assessment and maintenance of high standards of water quality.
- Advice to the Minister has been provided on emergent issues likely to impact on the well-being of the natural resources of the Daly River Catchment. In particular the impact of current and prospective mining in the catchment has been an issue for consideration. The potential impacts of the cessation of live cattle exports on natural resource condition and possible degradation was assessed and advice provided. Advice was provided in relation to fishing regulations and their application on the Daly.
- The conduct of research by NT Government Departments, Charles Darwin University, CSIRO, Tropical Rivers and Coastal Knowledge (TRaCK) Program and the National Environmental Research Program-North Australian Hub has been sponsored and supported. This has resulted in significant benefit to understanding of natural resource processes and impacts and the involvement of local people in the conduct of research. In particular, understanding of river flows and their impact on local fish and aquatic animal populations has improved considerably. Further research is needed on the interaction between water extraction and ecosystem response.
What needs to be done in the Daly River Catchment.

The activities of DRMAC have provided the framework and building blocks for future sustainable natural resource management and use in the Daly River Catchment. Sound guidelines and an adaptive management framework are in place for use and protection of land and water resources. The opportunity exists to determine how the natural resources can be sustainably used for increased economic, cultural and livelihood benefit to people in the Daly.

DRMAC members see an opportunity to consider, assess and develop economic and regional development plans and options. The matching of different land use practices with the appropriate resources requires considerable investigation. Providing appropriate access to necessary resources for development needs to be researched. This can be achieved by using the plans and processes for land and water use now in place and continuing the constructive processes of community engagement that have been developed. Diversified economic development will provide a basis for resilience and sustainability.

Of particular importance is support for the very real indigenous economic and cultural development opportunities now available. This includes access to water resources through the strategic indigenous reserve and the potential for involvement in the carbon economy through fire abatement and management.

The opportunities for social, community and infrastructure development which are linked to these economic developments need to be carefully considered. It will be crucial that communities are involved in this process of consideration and planning.

For some time DRMAC has expressed the need for the development of a regional conservation plan in conjunction with the development of economic and social opportunities. Development and conservation planning need to be conducted in concert and the community acknowledges this.

The opportunities now being presented through such programs as the Carbon Farming Initiative are in strong agreement with sustainable resource management practices and policies in the Daly River Catchment. The maintenance of landscapes in good health can be achieved through the application of sound fire abatement programs which fit well with aboriginal ranger programs and cultural and community enrichment.

With the building blocks now available for sustainable natural resource management in the Daly, the opportunities for achievement of a number of Government policy initiatives are now enhanced. DRMAC can support the achievement of regional development and indigenous advancement goals. DRMAC contributes significantly to the ongoing sustainable management of water resources, weed management and soil conservation, community development and support, and development and promotion of existing and new industry such as tourism, fishing, recreation, agriculture, aquaculture and carbon farming.
DRMAC members believe that it is timely for a strategy for development and conservation for the Daly River Catchment to be developed. The strategy should achieve integrated outcomes in the areas of economic development, community development, indigenous economic and cultural development and conservation and protection of natural resources. The work already done, and currently being done such as the regional conservation plan, will all contribute to the development of such a strategy. Implementation is often one of the most challenging aspects and DRMAC with its broad community base will help considerably to ensure that this is achieved.

Goals for DRMAC for the period 2012-2015.

DRMAC will exploit the opportunities for further economic, social and cultural development and conservation protection by working towards the following goals.

DRMAC will, by 2015:
- Produce a "Daly River Catchment Conservation and Development Regional Strategy".
- Monitor the implementation of the Tindall (Katherine) and Ooloo Water Allocation Plans, the Water Quality Monitoring and Reporting Program and Tree Clearing Guidelines and provide advice for their improvement.
- Support the development of a Fire Abatement Program and other initiatives which provide economic, cultural and social benefit to land owners in the Daly River Catchment.
- Sponsor and support the conduct of research in the Daly River Catchment, particularly on significant issues such as economic development, infrastructure enhancement and environmental and cultural flows
- Advocate for and review research and investigations which would benefit natural resource use and management for the benefit of Daly River and Territory communities.
- Report on the impacts of land clearing and water use on landscape health and advise on any responsive action needed within the adaptive management framework.
- Develop such plans and reports as are required by legislation and regulation and as requested by the Minister.

Operation of DRMAC.

Over the period that DRMAC has been operating, considerable procedural and financial efficiencies have been achieved.

DRMAC should continue to meet four times per year, with as many of these meetings as possible within the Catchment. This enables constructive and ongoing engagement with local communities and an increase in the respect with which DRMAC and its members are held. Members are able to observe first-hand
the detail of issues and to discuss them personally with people involved. This significantly enhances the Committee's effectiveness and ability to provide relevant and timely advice to the Minister and the Government.

DRMAC will enhance the extent and effectiveness of its community engagement to ensure the relevance of the planning and review work being undertaken and the advice being provided to the Minister and Government.

DRMAC will provide reports on all its meetings. The Committee will provide written and in person advice to the Minister as issues arise and as the Minister requests.

Although no additional financial or administrative support resources should be required for the future operations of DRMAC itself, those resources should be clearly identified to ensure that other priorities do not impact on the ability of DRMAC to achieve its primary goal of ensuring the highest standards of management of land, water and other resources used for both production and conservation in the Daly River region.

DRMAC will continue to require the support of Government Departments to undertake its investigative and planning work. The five departments involved have contributed comprehensive and constructive reports and information to date. They have also nominated and supported representatives as members of DRMAC who have made significant contributions to the achievements to date. There may be particular investigations and research proposed which require additional resources, which will be sought from appropriate providers.

John Childs
Chair, Daly River Management Advisory Committee

28 November 2012