

# Wet Tropics Management Plan Amendments

*The Wet Tropics Management Authority (WTMA) came into existence in 1988, and after much consultation, produced its Management Plan in 1998. This plan was intended to set the management agenda for the next 25 years, including a zoning scheme for different parts of the World Heritage Area.*

*But the Plan is not set in concrete, and it is possible to rezone areas and reclassify roads. The very first rezoning process is happening at the moment, and refers to the Misty Mountain Trails project.*

## **Misty Mountain Trails**

The Misty Mountain Trails form part of the Queensland Heritage Trails Network. It is a project proposed by the Shire Councils of Cardwell, Johnstone, Eacham and Herberton, and Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS), and involves about 120 kilometers of walking tracks based on old logging tracks and powerline maintenance tracks.

These tracks are in remote country and walkers will have to be aware of the risks, and be self-sufficient. It is an ideal opportunity for a guided expedition operator, and so long as 'best practice' bushwalking techniques are used, the environmental impacts will be manageable.

## **Cochable Creek**

But there is another component of the Misty Mountain Trails project in the mountains behind Tully that involves opening up the lower end of the 'H' Road and the Cochable Creek Road to public vehicles, and including 'day facilities' at the new trackhead at the Cochable Creek Causeway campsite.

This would mean that 9 kilometers of road that is currently only used by Powerlink to service high voltage powerlines would be open to anyone applying for a WTMA permit, including 2-WDs and guided tour buses. And, of course, once someone leaves the gate unlocked, well then everyone can go for a drive.

**The problem with vehicles using the road is that vehicles have a much greater environmental impact than bushwalkers.**

## **Phytophthora**

*Phytophthora cinnamomi* is a species of fungus that attacks tree roots and causes die-back in forests in widely different parts of Australia and around the world. "There is no available treatment for areas infested with Phytophthora. ... The only measures available for reducing Phytophthora damage are quarantine measures which aim to prevent transportation of this pathogen into new areas." (Powerlink EIS, 2002).

It is present in the Cochable Creek area and is spread by its spores being blown onto roads and then splashed along the road by vehicles driving through puddles.

The Federal Government has recognised Phytophthora as a 'key threatening process' and has developed a Threat Abatement Plan. It says, "Although [Phytophthora] is considered to be restricted to the wet coastal forests, many of these areas are designated as conservation reserves or state forests and are managed for recreation and conservation purposes. Visitor access and, therefore, the risk of spread is also considered a problem that will need to be addressed."

**Exactly – the risk of spreading Phytophthora along the Cochable Creek Road by public vehicles needs to be addressed.** The current Environmental Impact Management Plan addresses Phytophthora problems with respect to walkers and track maintenance workers, but not public vehicles. How can the public be expected to wash down their vehicles with high pressure sprays and disinfectant at all the checkpoints?

The management tools available to deal with Phytophthora are limited to mapping, monitoring and identifying pathways for spread, and "prevention of dispersal into unaffected areas".

**How can QPWS claim the spread of Phytophthora is being prevented whilst at the same time opening up the road to the public?**

## **Amphibian Chytrid fungus**

The fungus *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* is known to kill many amphibians including Wet Tropics' stream-dwelling frogs, and its

management is described in the Threatened Frogs Recovery Plan 2000 as "presenting an immediate and potentially devastating threat to frog populations throughout the world, in north-eastern Queensland and other parts of Australia."

It recommends disinfecting vehicle tyres when moving between different catchments and broadly similar management practices as for preventing Phytophthora spread, i.e. quarantining infected areas from vehicles. **How can opening the road to public vehicles do anything but help spread this fungus?**

## **Cassowary-Human**

The Recovery Plan for the Southern Cassowary, by QPWS April 2002, states: "The following activities are likely to affect cassowary populations:

(3) Road construction and road upgrading resulting in habitat fragmentation, ... and exposure to vehicles or increase in vehicle speed

(5) Recreation area development resulting in ... exposure to hand feeding and subsequent conflict with visitors.

This proposal is a textbook case of what not to do, as far as cassowaries are concerned.

**Opening Cochable Creek campsite to day visitors will only exacerbate cassowary-human interactions.**

## **Other impacts of roads**

- Loss of wilderness experience due to intrusion of vehicles.
- Dust, noise and smell acts as a barrier for many small creatures, causing fragmentation of habitat.
- Vehicles are strongly implicated in the spread of noxious weeds.
- Road kills
- Illegal off-road driving
- Illegal hunting
- Illegal native plant removal

## **The solution**

WTMA should not allow the road to be reclassified for public vehicle use – leave it as a walking track and occasional maintenance vehicle track. The proposed car park and day visitor area could then be located near the existing locked gate.

π **Dave Kimble**