A Case-Based Discussion on the Disjuncture between Local Values and Federal, State and Territory Development Policy in Northern Australia

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Introduction

Northern Australians have seen repeated waves of politically fashionable development-focused policy prescriptions devised in Perth, Adelaide, Darwin, Canberra or Brisbane by the Commonwealth and the states over the preceding century. While some policies have had positive outcomes for the region, many have failed to deliver expected outcomes and have arguably in some cases had negative effects on human communities and their land and sea environments across the north (Adamson, 2013; Bell et al., 2014). A historical and growing literature points to a number of factors that contribute to the failure of northern development, including climatic, soil and remoteness constraints on primary and secondary industries including agriculture and mining (Ash, 2014; Davidson, 1965; Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce, 2009); top-down engagement with Indigenous communities that occludes other ways of knowing and doing (Stephens et al., 2015); and pro-environmental
agendas driven by southern lobbyists that, knowingly or ignorantly, disregard northern land- and sea-management rights and practises and livelihoods embedded in the north (Dale, 2014).

Democracies, in theory, function by the will of the people; political parties are elected, decisions are made and laws are passed based on majority rule. Within our Australian democracy, the federal government is answerable to the largest number of constituents. While different tiers of government are responsible for different elements of governing, public policy devised and enacted at the federal level, such as welfare reform, will generally affect a more socioculturally diverse body of constituents than local-level public policy. Equally, federal policy focused on a particular geography or demography will face the challenge of reconciling national agendas with individual-, local- and region-level idiosyncrasies and aspirations. This potential mismatch of scale between national- and local-level aspirations (Cash et al., 2006; Termeer et al., 2010), coupled with sociopolitical changes, including reduced nation-state autonomy, increased multiculturalism and the rise of the market as the preferred mode of policy delivery (Lockwood et al., 2009), makes formulation and implementation of public policy challenging.

While the national government consults the community on public policy using a broad range of tools (including letters to local members, submission platforms, opinion polling, meetings and white papers), we argue that effective modes of acquiring and integrating public views are lacking. There remains, in our view, a marginalised silent majority that lacks the means, or desire, to engage in public policy processes. Additionally, neoliberalism, the dominant paradigm in Australian politics, tends to view alternate values as disruptive to markets (Springer, 2010) and, consequently, precludes their influence, rather than drawing on the sociocultural diversity embedded within society (Stephens et al., 2015). Here, neoliberalism refers to the political belief that economic liberalism and privatisation and reduced government taxation, spending and regulation are good for society. It assumes that the market is capable of recognising individual and social values and preferences. A concern with this mode of policy delivery, in our view, particularly in places like Northern Australia, is that forcing conformity to maintain market function occludes diversity, leading to erosion of social resilience and reduced long-term prosperity (Grieves, 2015). This chapter urges the greater incorporation of the embedded diversity of sociocultural values of Northern Australia (Altman, 2009; Grieves, 2015) into planning processes and development
policy as a means of achieving desirable development. In doing so, we are not discounting the role of markets in achieving positive social outcomes but are suggesting that the full engagement of multiple belief systems have a role in realising desirable development:

Good governance does not simply default to the power of global capital. Good governance enables the input of, and negotiation with, small populations and remote, and at times divided, Indigenous communities. Good governance recognises the value of diversity and the value of the north’s proud non-conformity. (Bell, 2013)

We argue that a mismatch between federal- and state/territory-level policy and local values and development preferences contribute to chronic past failure of federal visions of northern development (Carson et al., 2010). Overcoming this mismatch through embracing local values, aspirations and knowledge, rather than marginalising or normalising them (Stephens et al., 2015), will lead to an improvement in the development trajectory of the north. However, this will require an understanding of northern conceptions of development (Dale, 2013), rather than ones that hold market-driven development as the preeminent goal. Our development vision (synthesised from Stephens et al., 2015) is one of a governmentality that enables marginalised views to gain legitimacy and voice, rather than simply endorsing the current neoliberal paradigm. It is one of genuine self-determination and improved wellbeing of both mainstream and Indigenous communities of Northern Australia (Altman & Markham, 2014; Morrison, 2013), secure environmental assets and a flourishing and diverse economy that dampens boom–bust demographic and economic cycles (Carson, 2011). It is one of greater internal autonomy, drawing on the knowledges and networks of those residing in the north and their links to Southeast Asian neighbours.

The recent *White paper on developing Northern Australia* (Australian Government, 2015) is an example of larger-scale federal public policy initiative that highlights federal ambitions in Northern Australia. Leading up to the white paper, the federal government released the Liberal Party’s 2030 vision for developing Northern Australia (Liberal Party of Australia, 2013) and the *Green paper on developing Northern Australia* (Australian Government, 2014). Discussion around land use; growth in mining, agriculture, industry and residential; and a streamlining of native title processes ‘to drive growth in jobs and investment for the benefit of all Australians’ (Australian Government, 2014, p. vi) are dominant
across the pages of both documents. Both documents were designed to instigate debate on northern development, but, more significantly, they are statements of intent on utilising the north by reducing regulation and increasing privatisation for economic development. Publicising the federal vision prior to broad consultation in Northern Australia meant discussions on northern development would begin from the position presented by the government, potentially reducing opportunity for dissent and increasing apathy arising from inadequate engagement (Peel & Lloyd, 2007). The resulting white paper (Australian Government, 2015) was distinctly focused on economic growth and development, including simpler arrangements to support development; developing the north’s water resources; our business, trade and investment gateway; infrastructure to support growth; a northern workforce for growth; and good governance for Northern Australia. The most significant tangible development resulting from the white paper was the announcement of A$5 billion in concessional loans to encourage private sector investment in economic infrastructure development.

Essentially, the geographically distant, short-term economic view of the utility of Northern Australia is limited to growth of human and financial capital, a source of immediate revenue for national prosperity. However, enduring development, including ongoing liveability of places, additionally requires genuine consideration of other forms of capital including natural, social and cultural (Beeton, 2006; Woolcock, 1998, 2001) to strengthen and maintain sustainable development of communities.

Darwin, as a capital city, significant seaport and gateway to Southeast Asia, has experienced rapid economic growth over recent years, representing a focal point of development through free market means. Darwin can, therefore, be seen as antagonistic to alternate values and ideas of development and not representative of broader Northern Australia including rural and remote communities. We posit, however, that comparing manifestations of the current paradigm with local values in a place where free market policies dominate enables some inference that if there is a mismatch between the current development policies and local values in Darwin then there is likely to be mismatch in other northern regions. Contemporary examples include conflict between Woodside Petroleum and local residents in Broome, Western Australia, and the AQUIS mega-resort proposed for Cairns, Queensland.
This broader federal agenda is reflected in the previous NT Government’s Draft Regional Land Use Plan for the Darwin region (NT Planning Commission, 2014). The purpose of the Regional Land Use Plan is to ‘define and respond to the essential characteristics and needs that will shape land use and development in the Darwin Region in the long term’ (NT Planning Commission, 2014). Land use planning is controlled by a legislative hierarchy. Development for the entire NT is controlled through the NT Planning Scheme (NT Government, 2007) and is subordinate to the territory-wide planning legislation, the NT Planning Act (2008). Per Section 2A, the objects of the Act are ‘to plan for, and provide a framework of controls for, the orderly use and development of land’ and these objects are to be achieved by:

a. strategic planning of land use and development and for the sustainable use of resources;
b. strategic planning of transport corridors and other public infrastructure;
c. effective controls and guidelines for the appropriate use of land, having regard to its capabilities and limitations;
d. control of development to provide protection of the natural environment, including by sustainable use of land and water resources;
e. minimising adverse impacts of development on existing amenity and, wherever possible, ensuring that amenity is enhanced as a result of development;
f. ensuring, as far as possible, that planning reflects the wishes and needs of the community through appropriate public consultation and input in both the formulation and implementation of planning schemes; and
g. fair and open decision-making and appeals processes.

Unlike the Queensland equivalent, the objects of the NT Planning Act do not specifically mention the identification and protection of landscape amenity or the enhancement of community social wellbeing and, more importantly, the protection of Indigenous Australian culture and tradition. Rather, the focus is on the creation of a system of land use and development control for the purposes of economic development as opposed to balanced perspective of sustainable development (after Campbell, 1996). NT land use plans cannot incorporate aspects of planning not outlined within the Act, which limits the inclusion of local values and preferences. The land use plan can, however, be used to guide interpretation of the provisions outlined in the Planning Scheme. The draft plan places strong emphasis
on efficient allocation of infrastructure—industrial, residential, roads and rail required for continued economic growth (see Figure 12.1)—reflecting the tenor of the federal white paper. Similar to the federal agenda in Northern Australia, the regional planning process, as required by the Act, is focused on built and financial capital as vehicles for economic growth, providing limited consideration for other forms of capital. As with the federal development agenda, the land use planning process is top down, limiting opportunity for consideration of alternative values and development preferences at more local scales. It has been suggested that Darwin in particular experiences periodic economic stagnation due to, among other factors, prioritisation of the short-term interests of external investors in land use planning and construction (Carson et al., 2010). Carson et al. (2010) suggested that addressing this periodic stagnation requires a change in the political approach to development at the Territory level that prioritises local interests that generates internal development, including more consultative planning with long-term residents and City of Darwin Council.

Since the publication of the draft plan, the NT Planning Commission has conducted public consultation including information displays, briefings and submissions (Munday, 2014). Stakeholder values were elicited as part of the consultation process and included but were not limited to rural lifestyle, heritage/culture, Indigenous culture, tropical lifestyle, recreation, old Darwin culture and values and environment. Inadequate recognition for cultural and heritage values, natural environments and
the conservation estate has been identified as a problem, suggesting the final plan might include some changes that reflect this new knowledge on local values and priorities; however, it cannot be expected to extend beyond its purpose as defined by the Planning Act. Importantly, the consultation highlights discrepancies between citizen priorities and the market values driving federal and territory agendas. This discrepancy is succinctly summarised in a statement in the community consultation report: ‘It was clear during consultation that development can be an emotive topic, particularly when it threatens people’s values, lifestyle and amenity’ (Munday, 2014, p. 35).

We have highlighted the chronic failing of federal and state/territory capital visions of development in Northern Australia, as others have done, and suggested that part of the cause is the continued application of a singular ideology that prioritises short-term economic gain to the occlusion of non-market values and local preferences held by long-term residents that do not conform. To overcome these limitations, there is a need to ensure the marginalised, who add to the current landscape knowledge, diversity and resilience, do not remain marginalised or become normalised, but play a role in shaping northern development (Altman & Hinkson, 2007; Morrison, 2013). Specifically, we ask to what extent do local values, presented as spatial data on non-market values, reflect state and federal policy priorities, presented as key policy documents and a regional land use plan.

Methods

To explore predicted disjuncture between local values and federal and state policy prescriptions, we elicited, using a survey instrument, spatially explicit landscape values and development preferences for Darwin Harbour and foreshore. We followed the method of Brown and others (Brown, 2005, 2006, 2012; Raymond & Brown, 2006; Brown & Raymond, 2007) to elicit the landscape values and development preferences. The 12 landscape values are a typology of both material/instrumental (e.g. economic and biodiversity) and non-use/symbolic values (e.g. cultural, intrinsic and aesthetic). Thus, they allow an exploration of what people value in landscapes, beyond the market values that are the focus of regional planning and federal priorities. Landscape values in the typology are ‘aesthetic’, ‘biodiversity’, ‘economic’, ‘future’, ‘heritage’, ‘intrinsic’, ‘economic’, ‘future’, ‘heritage’, ‘intrinsic’,
‘knowledge’, ‘life sustaining’, ‘recreation’, ‘spiritual’, ‘therapeutic’ and ‘wilderness’. Development preferences presented here include ‘no development’, ‘residential development’, ‘tourism development’ and ‘industrial development’. Landscape values mapping enables the local community to be involved in the planning from the outset, rather than predefining the agenda as has occurred in the white paper process and the Darwin Regional Land Use Plan process. The landscape values loosely represent forms of non-market capital (e.g. cultural, social and natural) overlooked in the white paper process, and not made explicit in the regional plan. The spatial nature of the exercise enabled comparison with the Draft Darwin Regional Land Use Plan.

To elicit landscape values and development preferences, we administered a questionnaire to 2,000 households in the Darwin Harbour catchment. Probability (random) sampling was used to sample that part of the population that does not normally participate in the planning process (Brown, 2005)—the silent majority. A small prize incentive and a reminder postcard were used to increase response rate. It was also made clear to respondents that the information derived from the survey would be made available to the government to consider in future planning. Determining landscape values and development preferences involved respondents placing stickers on a map (scale 1:125,000). Six stickers were available for each of the landscape values and development preferences allowing respondents to identify multiple locations as having particular values and preferences. The landscape value sticker dots were worth different points (50, 20, 10, 10, 5 and 5) to indicate the relative importance of different locations on the provided map (Brown, 2005). The map, derived from a satellite image, included Darwin Harbour and foreshore to 500 metres inland from the estimated coastline (coastline source data). Data were aggregated across respondents. Here, we briefly present the spatially explicit landscape value and development preference data to inform a discussion comparing the results of the survey with the white paper process and Darwin Regional Land Use Plan process.

Results

The results presented here are preliminary and not necessarily fully representative of the population, including only 130 households, of the approximately 60,000 residential addresses within the study area, that
responded to the survey and completed the mapping exercise. The response rate from the initial 2,000 surveys administered was low. No Larrakia people, the traditional land owners, responded to the survey.

A total of 3,157 of a possible 9,360 (34 per cent) landscape value sticker dots were placed on the provided maps. The spatial extent was relatively well covered by the summed values of the 130 respondents (see Figure 12.2); however, there was significant clustering around the built landscapes including Darwin City (1) and the Cullen Bay Marina (2) and relatively natural landscapes including Charles Darwin Nation Park (3), East Point (4), Nightcliff foreshore (5) and Casuarina Coastal Reserve to Lee Point (6).

Disaggregating the landscape values revealed differences in both the average total scores assigned to the different values and in their spatial distribution. Recreation and aesthetic values were, on average, assigned the highest total value by respondents (see Figure 12.3). These values are associated with open spaces and natural areas, which received only cursory recognition in the draft land use plan (NT Planning Commission, 2014, p. 27). Economic value, arguably the only value here that has been revealed to the market, was the eighth-highest scoring value. These differences, we assume, reflect a relative difference in perceived importance of the different values. However, economic value is, arguably, not well represented spatially and so comparing scores and spatial distribution between values should be done with caution. Individually, the landscape values differ in their degree of spatial clustering (see Figure 12.4), with some values having clear hot spots and others as a spatial mosaic across the harbour and foreshore. Notably, the only values that are clearly evident in the more urban areas of
Darwin are historic value and economic value. This finding highlights the perceived importance of natural landscapes, across a range of values, to the survey respondents. Generally, the differences in spatial distribution highlight both the relative uniqueness of each of these perceived values and the complexity of incorporating such values into regional land use planning if not mapped explicitly.

Figure 12.3: Mean percentage of landscape value assigned by respondents of a possible 100 based on sum of all points for each value.
Source: Authors’ research.

Direct overlay of development preferences with the draft land use plan shows some clear differences between the two data sources (see Figure 12.5). For example, survey results show a strong preference for industrial development (see Figure 12.5A) to be focused around the east arm of the harbour; this is in contrast to the draft development plan, which proposes greater spatial spread of ‘industry’ and ‘strategic industry’ (purple shading). When aggregated, respondents had a clear preference for ‘no development’ (see Figure 12.5B) along much of the harbour foreshore, including the embayment to the north of East Point where there has been a proposal to engineer an island for residential housing, and towards the top of Shoal bay (top right of map) in close proximity to the Glyde Point Port proposal. It is possible that the high density of preference for no development is in response to the proposed Glyde Point Port, yet this is speculative because the spatial extent of the mapping exercise did not encompass the proposed port site. While there are clear
differences in both method and results between the two data sources, it is not possible to conclude that either data source adequately represents the views of local residents. Further sampling and analysis is required to conduct a more robust comparison. Beyond further sampling, further analysis correlating proposed land use zones with the point data on landscape values and development preferences would give a quantitative measure on compatibility of the two data sources.

Figure 12.4: Spatial distribution of a sample (6/12) of individual landscape values derived from 130 surveys of the catchment community represented as heat (density) maps.

Note: Black line shows coastline of Darwin Harbour.
Source: Authors’ research.
Figure 12.5: Spatial distribution of development preferences displayed as 2 km radius heat map including preferences for ‘industrial development’ (A), ‘no development’ (B), ‘residential development’ (C) and ‘tourism development’ (D) overlaying Draft Darwin Regional Land Use Plan.

Note: White areas of density map reflect higher density sticker placement by survey respondents. See Figure 12.1 for draft land use plan legend.

Source: Authors’ research and NT Planning Commission (2014).
Discussion

Federal policy that aims to make northern landscapes economically productive, to the exclusion of other understandings of utility, has a long history of conflict and failure. A swathe of biophysical factors including a harsh and variable climate, poor soils, variable water availability and pests and disease have prevented the success of the Anglo-centric development model. Further, excluding some communities’ input of value placed on the landscape will potentially alienate them from long-term shared purpose. Here, we suggest the need for identifying an alternate development paradigm for Northern Australia; a less rigid paradigm that respects and, in doing so, reflects tropical social and cultural values that work with the biophysical realities and that are resilient to exogenous vagaries. To be clear, this paradigm of adaptive and resilient development is not about abandoning economy and markets as an important component of northern futures, but about ensuring the northern economy is compatible with the diversity of existing northern values that have emerged (and flourished) through enduring northern experience. As a contribution towards challenging the legitimacy of the dominant northern development paradigm, we have highlighted the depth and diversity of localised non-market values that are embedded in a region where market values are dominant in the policy and planning landscape. To illustrate our case, we have shown the landscape values and development preferences held by people residing in the Darwin Harbour catchment as a counterpoint to the white paper process and Draft Darwin Regional Land Use Plan. The breadth of landscape values that respondents identified with, and the higher relative weighting assigned to non-use/symbolic values reflects the feedback on the Draft Regional Land Use Plan (Munday, 2014) of a range of non-market values that are largely overlooked in the planning process, because they are not explicitly recognised in the Act.

Mapping of landscape values and development preferences occurred after the release of the Draft Darwin Regional Land Use Plan, so no opportunity to incorporate this new information into the plan occurred. It is hoped that, within the limits of the Planning Act, the derived data will be presented to the NT Planning Commission for consideration in future planning processes. However, despite the predicted importance of landscape values in land use planning (e.g. Brown, 2012; Klain & Chan, 2012; Zube, 1987), landscape values and development preference mapping exercises have, historically, failed to tangibly influence land use
planning elsewhere (Brown, 2012). According to Brown (2012), the main reason for this is that planning processes tend to include superficial, obligatory and tokenistic public participation. In Brown’s view, for public participation, using mapping exercises to have a meaningful impact on planning outcomes, planning agencies must meaningfully engage the public in the process irrespective of the mapping component. We would add to Brown’s (2012) observations that to make spatially explicit values and development preferences meaningful in regional planning there needs to be a mechanism for translating spatially explicit values into an understanding of how this affects public and private spaces (Ives et al., 2015). Trade-offs are required between values in space and more abstract but equally valid issues such as how much space should be dedicated to, for example, aesthetic and spiritual values (which are spatially fluid compared to discrete landscape objects such as biodiversity, which can be measured using repeatable methods). To their credit, the NT Planning Commission has conducted extensive public consultation regarding controversial rezoning and urban infill proposals. The low response rate to the survey on landscape values and development preferences is telling of the difficulties associated with engaging the public in planning processes. Identifying why residents do not actively engage would aid more targeted future engagement. The data on landscape values of Darwin Harbour and foreshore will be further dissected to begin exploring these and other issues around improved regional land and sea decision-making in Northern Australia.

Assuming that future federal and state development policy that explicitly recognises, respects and negotiates with local values will deliver long-term development gains both in the north and Australia at large through generating greater internal development, how can we achieve better uptake of local values in current governance arrangements? We discuss four potential strategies below.

First, we believe there is need for transparent discussion on the varied interpretations of ‘development’—what ‘development’ means to different people and through different political ideologies and who is likely to gain and lose from the different interpretations. Until development is explicitly defined, it is not possible to have productive conversations around policy expectations. Reframing the agenda as ‘Developing (in) Northern Australia’ might reposition the agenda as being development defined by Northern Australia rather than implicit economic development through external agency as currently occurs. A northern definition of development
will require a shift in governance power towards greater northern autonomy so that the northern collective can articulate development that suits the north and see it realised. This will be made possible as large-scale institutions with vested power work in unison across the north (e.g. via new and emerging cross-jurisdictional governance mechanisms).

Second, there is a need to reveal the importance of landscape values to quality of life and understand the trade-offs between maintaining current landscapes and proceeding with major projects. Not all values are commensurable and, therefore, untradeable. Therefore, a sensible way forward would be to recognise a greater breadth of values within policy. Similarly, there is a need to better account for the beneficial and detrimental aspects of major projects associated with clientelism (Carson et al., 2010) in Darwin and across the north. To illustrate, the Darwin Harbour region has been declared, within the NT Water Act (1992), as having a suite of beneficial uses and recreational, cultural and aesthetic values. Yet the NT Government has been actively supporting the approval and development of large industrial sites on the foreshores of Darwin Harbour. When, in 2003, the first liquefied natural gas (LNG) project was initiated, effort was invested in public forums to inform the community on the expected benefits from the project and how the project would affect the aesthetics of the harbour. Much of what was shown was that the LNG plant would be hidden from view behind a small hill and the fringing mangroves. However, on completion, the facility is clearly visible from many locations around the harbour. When the second LNG project was initiated, public information sessions focused on economic benefits and assurance of significant environmental regulation. Although the investors conducted useful studies and produced extensive reports, none of the data has been made publicly available. Neither was an effort to show the visual impacts of the final development and the second LNG development is readily seen from many locations around the harbour. With the construction phase complete and on-site employment reduced, future financial benefits to the community will be limited (David Williams, personal communication, 3 June 2015). The short-term economic gains from these major projects must be weighed against adverse effects on the environment, including landscape values and the local community including traditional owners.

Third, spatially explicit tools that aid the nuanced incorporation of local values and preferences need to be employed in planning and development decision-making (Archer et al., 2009). Components of these tools can be agent based—agents respond autonomously to changes in their
environment, driven by rules that can be qualitative, quantitative or both. Agents can reflect different communities and viewpoints within communities within a defined landscape. Using a participatory action research approach, iteratively, would enable calibration of the tool and increase community buy-in through participant observation of the potential consequences of development-related choices. This process would enable community-driven development of alternative development scenarios based on local ideology and values, which could inform a more nuanced land use planning process.

Fourth, the purpose of the NT Planning Act is primarily about the process of planning and provides no substantive matter to guide the creation of a regional plan. Explicit inclusion of matters related to enhancing the liveability of the NT and Darwin in particular, for its residents, is critical. The Northern Territory Planning Act (1999) does not require plans to consider matters such as landscape values, climate change, urban congestion, human health, diversification of housing and the economy and infrastructure efficiency. Nor does the Act provide for the creation of regional plans (unlike Queensland and Western Australia) and, as such, both the substance and procedure associated with this regional planning process is neither transparent nor accountable. Regional plans should be more than strategic investment documents for government to achieve economic efficiency of municipal and transport infrastructure. Regional plans should be about deciding how to enhance the liveability of a region through strategic investment in public and private infrastructure. Finally, there is a lack of coordination between major projects and land use planning in the NT. Darwin and the entirety of the NT should not be regarded as remote frontiers or even new frontiers that should be grateful for any development. Rather, Darwin and the balance of lands and waters within the NT are home or a place treasured by its residents and, as such, these values should be protected and enhanced through planning activities that explicitly acknowledge the presence and validity of these values.

Conclusions

Despite century-old rhetoric on the economic potential of Northern Australia, outcomes, as measured against expectations, have been limited. We have argued, as others have done, that the narrow laissez-faire ideology which occludes and suppresses alternative practises, ideologies and values scattered throughout Northern Australia partly explain this failure.
Explicitly, we have shown disparity between local values and federal, state and territory priorities using land use planning as our exemplar and conclude that reduced clientelism and stronger engagement with local diversity, values and place-based knowledge will enable development to be better suited to the context. Our recommendations for incorporating local views and values are not meant as an exhaustive list of instructions but as a sample of pragmatic means of moving the development conversation in a more north-centric direction.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education via the Northern Futures Collaborative Research Network. We thank three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful reading of the manuscript and suggestions.

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This text is taken from *Leading from the North: Rethinking Northern Australia Development*, edited by Ruth Wallace, Sharon Harwood, Rolf Gerritsen, Bruce Prideaux, Tom Brewer, Linda Rosenman and Allan Dale, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/LN.2021.12