

Section 4

Water, Land and Energy in the North

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Introduction

Water, land and energy lie at the core of the contemporary policy narratives and discourse of Northern Australia. This section of five chapters offers a rich set of ideas that together portray northern development in a different light. The chapters range from the critical reflections on and possible solutions to the northern development dilemma to governance of natural resource management. Connecting themes include the fluid and intertwined nature of northern people, places and policy; the emergence of the north as a place with a past and present able to speak for its future; and the north as a place of undervalued uniqueness and potential for innovation.

Brewer et al. begins the section by exploring local landscape values and development preferences in and around Darwin Harbour as juxtaposed to northern development rhetoric. Their work is grounded in a comparison between the current iteration of the land use plan for the Darwin region and empirical data collected from a sample of households from the Darwin region. The identified values do not conform to hard planning boundaries but are diffuse and diverse, mirroring the people of the region. They identify the need to revisit development ideologies in a more sophisticated, open and shared way. These ideas are further developed by Carter in the last chapter in this section. Brewer et al. also offers pragmatic means of incorporating local interpretations of development and values into governance architecture and development language and policy.

Dale et al. bring us to land tenure as central to northern policy discourse. Land tenure underpins a broad range of government policymaking and program delivery and function including land administration, taxation, administrative boundaries and land use management. Therefore, a functioning, transparent and efficient land tenure governance arrangement, both in structural and functional terms, is vital to planning for economic growth, social stability, reducing investment risk and land management and sustainability. Dale et al. synthesise the history of land tenure in Northern Australia as an anchor for highlighting the importance of resolving land tenure complexities, including the multitude of tenure arrangements layered across northern landscapes, to move the northern development agenda forward. They outline both the impediments and opportunities for reform and, in doing so, present a synthetic mud map for moving northern development forward. Many of the most significant gains in terms of improving investor certainty and development outcomes for northern enterprises and communities will come from engaging with tenure complexity in constructive and more informed ways that recognise the unique mix of land uses, resources, rights and interests in northern lands.

The theme of land continues in the third chapter, where Dale et al. discuss governance of community-based natural resource management. They deliver a clear and succinct history of northern natural resource management governance and explore differences between natural resource management policy and program delivery at the national-level and in Northern Australia. They highlight key differences including strength of Indigenous land management, climatic constraints and the need to focus on maintaining ecosystem function rather than rehabilitation as occurs in the south. They end by offering some insights into the progression of the model to date in the north and suggest some key continuous improvements needed for better landscape outcomes. Both chapters led by Dale provide well-considered and pragmatic land use policy recommendations for future northern development informed by significant experience across key domains of land use policy.

In the fourth chapter, we return to water and maintain the conversation with our Southeast Asian neighbours. Here, Steenbergen et al. explore the impact of national and regional legislation on small-scale fisheries, as a readily overlooked yet important marine resource use system, at Waruwi in the Northern Territory and at Ohoiren in Eastern Indonesia. Using the trepang fishery as a case study, they show how local actors become entangled in legislation, which, while aiming to create fair and sustainable access to

fisheries, creates a system of rights that can undermine the ability of local actors to engage in commercial activities. Local actors must navigate not only these legally complex environments but local prescriptions governing access and use. They conclude that, despite the vastly different country settings similar tensions can be observed at local, regional and national scales in the challenge of balancing economic demands and sustainable resource management needs. This chapter reinforces the importance of placing Commonwealth-level development visions in the context of lived realities and forces us to think more deeply on the consequences of sweeping policy.

We end with an evocative interpretation of the elephant in the room of developing frontiers debates: confusion generated by ambiguous and conflicting ideologies of laissez-faire economics that consumes frontier resources and of protectors of the wild and pristine that was here before the frontier was conceived, demarcated and conquered. In essence, Carter highlights the mixed metaphor of nature and nurture of development and calls for resolution of confusion around the language of economic utopianism that dominates current development policy debates. Inspired by watery northern landscapes, Carter responds to this confusion by proposing a shift in thinking, defining and doing development, from the current dry, static and techno-centric approach to a more fluid, wet and dynamic interpretation and practice of development devoid of hard boundaries and binary thinking. A development that builds connections among and celebrates the academic and poetic dimensions of language to enable us to both grapple with the myriad interpretations of development and plot a development course more amenable to frontier landscapes and communities. He shows the metaphorical value of water in a policy landscape that traditionally values water in economic and ecological production terms.

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