

PREFACE

WHY DID WE WRITE THIS BOOK?

It is because we see something of value here, that is in the process of being devalued. It is because we are aware of the increasing momentum to transform these lands, largely by those unaware of or impervious to its intrinsic value. It is because we consider that the fate, health and societies of people in Northern Australia are bound inextricably with their natural landscapes. It is because it is time to consider systematically and realistically the future of this land, and mechanisms to guide it to that future. It is because of the failures of the past.

We take inspiration and instruction from our history. Notwithstanding a general anarchic pattern of development, there have been some extraordinarily detailed and systematic attempts to understand the North and to plan its future. The most grand of these was the North Australia Development Committee which, from 1946 to 1948, was charged with investigation of the lands and their potential for pastoral, agricultural, mining, forestry, marine, fuel and power, and processing and manufacturing industries. Thirty years later, its chairman, Nugget Coombs, reflected on its limitations and biases:

Apart from its emphasis on research and experiment, the committee's work reflected the optimism of the time and the prevailing views, shared firmly by the

committee itself, that growth was a good thing, that it could be achieved primarily by seeking to impose on the North a pattern of productive activity and a way of life essentially European in its origin and substantially European in its relevance. There is little evidence in the work of the committee, I am sorry to say, of a genuine understanding of, or an intuitive sympathy with, the climatic and territorial environments of the North. We were southerners, and Europeans, and never really got over the sense of being in a somewhat alien and hostile environment ... There was an almost complete disregard for the character and potential of the natural flora and fauna of the North ... There was nothing organic in the growth we planned for; it was fundamentally to be based on extractive and exploitative techniques ... It is this lack, not merely in the work of the committee, but in the thinking about developments by me and my colleagues and the generation to which we belonged, which in retrospect is so disappointing. (Coombs 1977)

Thirty years further down the track, it is timely that we mark this message, accept the shortcomings of such narrowly developmental perspectives, and work towards a future for Northern Australia that recognises and nurtures its societies and land, and the links between them. It is in this spirit that this book is offered.

