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Establishing priorities for wetland conservation and management, Kimberley region

By Tanya Vernes, Kimberley Wetlands Project Officer WWF-Australia

Background

Rivers and wetlands are vital to the water cycle and are essential habitats for a multitude of plant and animal species – from migratory shorebirds to frogs, tortoises and microscopic organisms. The Kimberley is renowned for its major river systems and coastal wetlands, which have high Aboriginal cultural significance, contain many endemic freshwater species amid its dynamic biodiversity, host up to 850,000 migratory shorebirds, and support local industries such as the Barramundi fishery. All of these values are dependent upon the health and integrity of the wetlands.

However, wetlands in the Kimberley are poorly recorded, especially in terms of biodiversity and cultural values, and are subject to increasing pressure from human activities. This puts them at risk as protection needs are not fully understood or adequately implemented.

In order to address this omission, WWF developed a proposal and secured NHT funding for the project “*Establishing priorities for wetland conservation and management in the Kimberley*”. Running from April 2005 to October 2006, this project will collate knowledge of the values, threats and management priorities of wetlands across the Kimberley, establishing a baseline of essential information to improve management planning and protection of conservation values. Information will be sourced from project reports, GIS map layers and research, as well as the unique and valuable knowledge held by local people.

Progress to date

There are three phases to this project:

- Phase 1: Desktop study (August - December 2005, completed)
- Phase 2: Field Research (April - September 2006)
- Phase 3: Establishing the Framework (September - October 2006)

The WA Department of Conservation and Land Management were consulted to undertake the first phase of collating existing data. This involved researching and obtaining relevant sets of data (such as GIS maps, reports, research) to determine what wetland values, biophysical information and risks/threats are recorded for the Kimberley.

The data will now be analysed to identify data needs/gaps, priority values and threats for field based surveys to be carried out by WWF and WA Department of Environment staff. The on country visits with Traditional Owners, Indigenous Rangers and/or land holders/managers will aim to enhance understanding of wetland values and threats, and practical measures to address them.

The final phase draws together information from desktop, field research and community consultation to establish priorities for wetland management in the Kimberley, including management actions,

research and monitoring. This will also provide a basis for asset identification and the establishment of resource condition targets under the Kimberley sub-regional NRM Plan. The resulting report and maps will be provided for community and agency use to help improve management and protection for wetlands in the Kimberley.

Partnerships

One of the key strengths of this project has been the cooperation and involvement of diverse stakeholders with a wide range of views and expertise to offer advice via a project Advisory Group. Members include the National Centre for Tropical Wetland Research (NCTWR), Kimberley Regional Fire Management Project, WA Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), WA Department of Environment (DOE), WA Department of Indigenous Affairs (DIA), Kimberley Land Council Land & Sea Unit. WWF has also worked collaboratively with the CALM state data inventory project “*Wetlands - collation of data into GIS*” and NCTWR “*Australia’s tropical rivers - an integrated data assessment and analysis*” to add value and avoid duplication.

This Kimberley Wetland Project will consolidated much of the existing knowledge of Kimberley Wetlands, fill some important gaps, and identify areas where further wetland research is required. This will form an improved knowledge based for future Kimberley wetland conservation prioritization

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Inland arid-zone wetland, Tanami desert, Western Australia
Photo: © Tanya Vernes