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Establishing priorities for wetland conservation and management, Kimberley region

By Tanya Vernes, Kimberley Wetlands Project Officer WWF-Australia

Background

The Kimberley wetlands are a blend of river systems and coastal wetlands comprising mound springs, swamps, claypans, lagoons and many other biologically and culturally rich water bodies. They are valued not only for their aesthetic splendor but also for providing habitat for animals and birds, harboring important plant species and holding unique significance to Aboriginal custodians of the region.

“Establishing priorities for wetland conservation and management in the Kimberley” is a project that was undertaken by WWF and funded by NHT, collated existing knowledge on the wetlands across the Kimberley region to develop a baseline of information on current threats, uses, cultural and biological values of wetlands in conjunction with land owners and managers. This information now provides a strong foundation for future planning and management of Kimberley wetlands.

Progress to date

There were three phases to the project:

Phase 1: Desktop study (August-December 2005)

Phase 2: Field Research (April-September 2006), and

Phase 3: Establishing the Framework (September-October 2006)

The project has now been completed with information collected from the desktop study (including GIS data), field research and community consultations drawn together to outline priorities for wetland management in the twelve Kimberley catchments. The report summarises management actions, further research and monitoring suggestions. More importantly, it provides a basis for asset identification and the establishment of resource condition targets under the Kimberley sub-regional NRM Plan.

Some of the major values and threats facing the Kimberley wetlands identified during the course of this project include:

Values

- Wetlands and water systems hold significance for Aboriginal culture, such as hunting, fishing, cultural stories or heritage sites;
- Wetlands of high biodiversity such as Ramsar sites or rainforest springs;
- Riparian vegetation that provide habitat for threatened species;
- Wetlands that provide a refuge for species in the dry season, such as permanent pools in rivers, floodplain wetlands or permanent lakes;
- Social values of wetlands such as fishing, birdwatching and tourism.

Threats

- cattle and feral stock pressures such as grazing, trampling and weed dispersal at sensitive wetlands;
- groundwater extraction e.g. for agriculture or from localised mining;
- changed river flows e.g. irrigation infrastructure or causeway/road construction;
- unmanaged or unsustainable tourism impacts on localised areas;
- changed fire regimes impacting on riverine vegetation or rainforest springs.

By combining both desktop and field based activities in this study it became clear that although there is information about the more easily accessible or well known wetlands in the Kimberley, a great store of information is also held by local people whose lives have involved intimate knowledge of local areas. As expected, the overlap of ecological and cultural values of wetlands was clearly evident making it difficult to separate ecological and cultural values from each other. Involving Aboriginal custodians in the project assisted to broaden the knowledge base of wetlands and allowed local people to become involved in wetland monitoring and developing management strategies.

Information about this project, including information sources, field survey methods and recommendations is produced in both a written final report to NHT and DVD format. A series of maps showing wetlands, planning boundaries (including Native Title and catchment areas) and data relating to areas of high biodiversity and threats are also available. This information will help to improve management and protection for wetlands in the Kimberly, and is available to the Kimberley NRM Group to assist with refinement of the NRM Plan, and also available to other interested cultural and natural resource managers.

Contact:

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Gumbaw wetlands © Phil Palmer