

The NT Labor government's green tape cutting makes it easier for absentee vultures to feast on a threatened environment.

We have been objectors to inappropriate landclearing in the NT for close to 30 years. We live on a 20 acre bush block and highly appreciate the biodiversity on our land through regeneration, careful management and advocacy that educates others in our community to protect Country.

We have been increasingly frustrated and angered by the decisions of the Pastoral Lands Board that allow pastoral leaseholders to clear bushland in bioregions that have, until recently, had environmentally significant habitats for vulnerable native species.

We submitted objections to landclearing on Claravale Station because of the cumulative impacts of clearing such land and the effects this will have on native plant and animal communities in the Douglas/Daly bioregion. Claravale Station has leasehold and freehold land and has had extensive clearing accepted for both. The landholders at Claravale want to plant more improved pasture - without irrigation. The landholders at Ucharonidge want to plant cotton and sorghum – without irrigation.

Our considered and long-term experience as Top End rural land managers is that water in huge quantities will be needed for non-indigenous trees, crops and pastures during the drier times.

We are obviously deeply concerned about the climate change implications for our already stressed Top End. We've witnessed and recorded the increased temperatures over the years and the increased drought years. Creating an NT Ministry for Climate Change should spur climate and environmental scientists within the NT Public Service to remind the NT Government and the NTEPA to significantly limit landclearing of our biodiverse tropical savanna bushlands. Cooling the planet demands more protection - and responsibility - for the rapidly declining natural environment that has kept us cool. Our green planet is becoming red and severely heat-stressed. No amount of 'man-made' shade structures and highly expensive airconditioning will save us as a reckless, unthinking species when millions of eons of evolutionary natural processes are ignored and displaced.

And - we can't even find the appropriate words to express how misguided the simplified landclearing planning process is. Just tick the boxes and wait for the word 'go'! Government rural planners and environmental scientists are thin on the ground in the NT and the simplified planning process requires very little ground-trueing. We can hardly trust private investors wooed here to make a quick profit from the land to give a thorough and honest picture of what is or was until recently found on that land, can we? Google images suffer from a flat earth syndrome.

We are losing our faith in the Territory government's ability to look after Country. This urban-based government has many plans but nothing substantial to show that it cares for our unique, beautiful, dynamic and life-enhancing natural environment. When the health of our environment suffers, so do we. Our environment gives us job security by helping us to protect what we value - naturally.

When we objected to the planning application by Ucha Pty Ltd to clear thousands of hectares of bushland in the Beetaloo Basin on Ucharonidge Station to plant cotton and sorghum, we noted that the landholders were cotton farmers in the north-west of NSW and that we were aware of the water politics and chemicals involved with large-scale cotton production in that area. Some of the representations used as evidence by the learned proponent on why more landclearing is needed, really don't apply to the land, soil, weather and water resources on Ucharonidge Station. Cotton farming and associated nutritional crops to aid cotton production in north-west NSW applies. The application to clear was almost a cut-and-paste exercise of what not to do - because the method to be employed has depleted river systems and groundwater resources elsewhere.

The Ucharonidge landclearing proposal has now been referred to the NT Environmental Protection Authority under the Environment Protection Act NT. The proposal fails to recognise that removal of nutritious and soil enhancing native grasses such as Mitchell Grass to plant introduced (likely) GM crops will further destroy any chance of regeneration of threatened natural vegetation or habitat for native birds and other animals.

There are several large-scale landclearing developments planned for this region that will have a huge cumulative ecological impact. Along with Ucha's cotton plans, there are non-pastoral plans to exploit onshore shale gas and Sun Cable's massive solar farm plans. The foreseeable cumulative impacts of these proposals in such a significant bioregion alone make it essential for the Ucharonidge Station proposal to be subject to an environmental impact statement by the NTEPA. .

The cotton industry is new in the Territory, and we are deeply concerned about its environmental impacts and the landholder's lack of evidence-based information of public interest. Ucha has not followed the NTEPA's stakeholder engagement and consultation guide and has simply ticked the right boxes on environmental issues narrowly guided by an extremely simplified and cynical landclearing process relying on desktop research of likely threatened native species. We need to trust that the NTEPA will regulate and rigorously assess environmental impacts to better inform the public of what is known and what has yet to be found out and monitored appropriately for future environmental health and well-being.

Threatened species which may be in the area include the Gouldian Finch, Plains Death Adder, Night Parrot and the Bilby. Greater Bilbies foraged and bred in Mitchell grasslands until white settlers brought in foxes, rabbits, cats and cattle to destroy them and their habitats. It's not surprising that no significant native wildlife has been found (or sought after) at Ucharonidge Station. Significant habitat for significant wildlife is nourished by biodiverse native species.

On our rural property, we've had one glimpse recently of a blue-tongue lizard and a frill-necked lizard. These are the first sightings we've had on our property of these significant and iconic native species since the coming of the Cane-toad (that we almost religiously catch and freeze when we find them). We may not see a blue-tongue or frilly-neck again BUT what a thrill to have seen them once again!

Significantly important native animals seen at the Mitchell Grass Downs of the NT include the long-haired rat *rattus villosissimus*, the strip-faced dunnart, the long-tailed plannigale, and the iconic flock bronzewing. Baseline studies are currently underway as part of the Fracking Inquiry to understand the biodiversity baselines and projected impacts of proposed development in the region. An NTEPA assessment as part of an environmental impact statement will complement and strengthen evidence-based studies highlighting the cumulative impacts of large-scale landclearing, burning, chaining and associated monocultural practices that destroy or severely degrade natural biodiversity.

Rain patterns are changing – fast - as is temperature. While more intense weather patterns are expected in tropical NT, so are more intense fires caused by neglected introduced grasses, crops and pasture expected. Scientists are saying that our tipping point of an increased 4 degree temperature has already been reached. If our business-as-usual development continues, we as a species – won't continue. This will likely now be in the lifetime of our children and grandchildren.

Not only is there no further mention in the referral of the toxic chemicals that the landholder may be using to grow his water-hungry introduced crops but there is also no further mention of what methods will be used to keep 'pests' away. Shooting and poisoning are common ways to stop native birds and animals from returning to past feeding and foraging places.

Assessment and more research should be carried out – to balance the proponent's claims that soil would be enhanced and native animals and their habitats will be protected and enhanced. We need more facts on the cotton and sorghum crops proposed to be planted. We need to know there are water licences for the many bores on the property. We need to know the groundwater yields needed for growing water-hungry introduced crops. We need to know what chemicals will be used and their impact on the land, air and water.

We need the proposal to be assessed as an environmental impact statement.

Respectfully,

Diana and Greg

Diana Rickard and Greg Chapman

PO Box 127 Berry Springs NT 0838