

Both environmental organisations and the indigenous Australians who call Cape York home are fighting to preserve it. But with a disagreement simmering on how to protect the region's rivers, can a new foundation led by young Aboriginal leaders from the area help find the middle ground?

# A NEW VOICE FOR THE CAPE

The huge area of land in Australia's north-east rivals the Amazon as one of the last truly wild places on Earth. Cape York Peninsula is filled with rainforests, wetlands, pristine rivers, savannah grasslands and immense biodiversity. Understandably, it is high on the lists of environmental groups who want to see the area preserved for future generations to enjoy. It is also home to 10 000 Aboriginal people, living in 16 communities spread throughout the Cape.

The peninsula's sensitive ecology is predominantly threatened on two fronts: widespread feral infestations of weeds,

and feral pigs that, among other things, prey on the eggs of endangered turtles to such an extent that there hasn't been a proper hatching for 30 years on the Cape's west coast. There are also emerging pressure from resource exploration and other private development initiatives.

For the past decade the interests of the environmental and indigenous organisations largely coincided – the Aboriginal people were passionate about protecting and caring for their country; green groups were equally passionate about environmental protection, land rights and social justice.

But in early 2007, the relationship between the local people and one of their main allies broke down. Aboriginal groups had got wind of a plan by the Wilderness Society to register the entire Cape York region as a World Heritage Area, starting with lobbying the Queensland Government to declare more than a dozen rivers on Cape York 'Wild Rivers'.<sup>1</sup> While this denomination gives the healthy free-flowing rivers protected status, it also puts limits on newly won rights to use the waterways for traditional activities such as hunting, and on future economic development.



Members of the Indigenous Environment Foundation represent the organisation at a rally in Queensland. Indigenous Environment Foundation, Shaun Edwards

<sup>1</sup> Wild Rivers status can be allocated to pristine rivers that meet criteria set out in the Queensland Government's *Wild Rivers Act 2005* and the subsequent *Wild Rivers Code 2007*. <http://www.nrw.qld.gov.au/wildrivers/>





**Billabongs form off rivers across Cape York and are traditional hunting and gathering locations, as well as habitat for native species.** Indigenous Environment Foundation, Shaun Edwards

Apart from a belief that this 19th century way of looking after country by locking it up is not the answer – similar mismanagement in the past has apparently led to today's feral species invasions – the local people also felt they had been cut out of the debate while their attention was focused on fighting poverty and trying to bring about social reform.

So they fought back, accusing the Wilderness Society of supporting a new form of dispossession and treating them in a neo-colonialist manner.

Out of this was born the Indigenous Environment Foundation (IEF), a philanthropically funded advocacy group founded by young Aboriginal leaders with associates based in Sydney, Brisbane and Cape York.

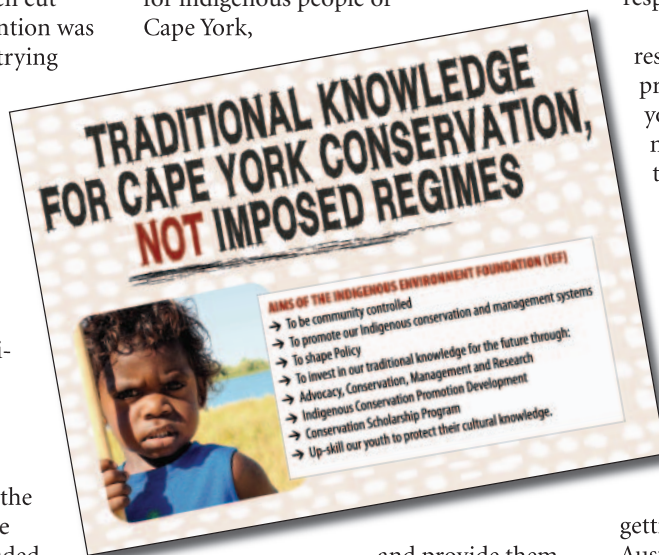
Shaun Edwards, a member of the Kokoberrin people and one of the group's founders, says he was goaded to action when he found out that the Staaten River, on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula where his people live, was one of the first to be declared a Wild River.

'No one is disputing the need to protect and conserve Cape York,' he says. 'We have been doing it – and doing it well – for 40 000 years.'

'But like anyone whose livelihood and future is threatened, we strongly resent that this decision has been forced upon

us without consultation. It will severely restrict what activities the local people can engage in, without providing any viable alternative forms of income.'

He says the IEF was formed to advocate for indigenous people of Cape York,



and provide them with a united voice. 'We would like government to recognise the value of our traditional knowledge when considering policy development in Cape York. This means working with a range of groups to develop sensible economic and sustainable opportunities.'

### **Broadening indigenous representation**

Supported by sister Cape York organisations, traditional owner groups and

community land and sea centres, the IEF is also lobbying the government for the resources they need to look after their homeland. This includes the thorny question of who will pay to eradicate millions of feral pigs and weeds that are infesting the Cape, as a result of it being 'locked up' with minimal pest management, preservation and conservation work.

'The IEF is a community-controlled organisation, promoting indigenous conservation and management decisions,' says Edwards. 'We want to help shape policy so we don't end up with Acts that aren't necessarily in the best interests of the people or their country.'

Through grassroots activism the IEF has opened debate among the informed – attending rallies in Sydney, Brisbane and Cairns and attracting media attention about their concerns.

'We also want to invest in traditional knowledge for the future through conservation, management and research, indigenous conservation promotion development, establishing conservation scholarship programs, and up-skilling youth to protect their cultural knowledge,' adds Edwards.

He says they would like to establish research programs into how best to look after the country, as well as building the capacity of, and properly equipping, Aboriginal rangers – and giving them the respect due as professionals in the field.

'We don't currently have the right resources to enact quality conservation programs. But by creating pathways for young people in terms of land management, we can also help them to support their families.'

### **Community development with conservation**

As with any large group, there is a huge diversity of opinion among the indigenous community on how to manage the Cape's resources, with some wanting its preservation and others wanting to exploit its natural wealth through cattle ranching, aquaculture, timber getting and mining – just as European-Australians have done elsewhere.

According to Michael Winer from the Aboriginal Policy Think Tank at the Cape York Institute, economic development is key to local people escaping the cycle of welfare dependency and rebuilding self-respect. And even though 60 per cent of the Cape's wealth is produced from bauxite mining, economic development doesn't have to involve destroying the environment.

'Rather than just funding an occasional part-time ranger, we would like to see



local people with the capacity to tender for jobs such as fencing, weed eradication, maintaining roads, managing the feral pig population or whatever other work needs to be done in the region.

‘In the midst of the unprecedented social reform that is occurring in Aboriginal communities all over Australia, it is fundamental to their culture’s survival that they are given reasonable prospects of economic sustainability, where they are living.

‘Through its work, the IEF is also empowering young people to understand what their elders fought for, in terms of land management and land rights, and to carry that torch in the future.’

Jim Walker, Aboriginal Liaison Officer for CSIRO, concurs, saying that more than just building capacity, organisations such as the IEF are helping young people to become future decision-makers.

‘It’s great to see a young group start to build a profile as an E-NGO, one that takes both the needs of the environment and the indigenous land holders into account.

‘When we look at the environment and caring for country, we do it with the next generation in mind,’ he says. ‘We have a custodial responsibility – that Indigenous Generation Xers and Yers are taking on the fight has to be good for indigenous people, the environment, conservation and the Australian people as a whole.’



**Indigenous Environment Foundation activities are staffed by volunteers, but the organisation is supported by local and increasingly national fundraising efforts.**

Indigenous Environment Foundation, Shaun Edwards



**Eliot Falls on Eliot Creek, Cape York, Queensland. Cape York’s pristine rivers are the centre of a protection and management quandary.** John Carnemolla, iStockphoto

‘While the Wilderness Society has its place – environmental protection is certainly in everyone’s interest – it is important that no one comes into the country and rides roughshod over indigenous communities. They should be working with the communities and empowering them to use their cultural knowledge and traditions to manage the environment they depend on for survival.

‘We do need to proceed with caution

### Finding the common vision

According to the Wilderness Society’s Lyndon Schneiders there is a diversity of views from both indigenous and non-indigenous groups about the Wild Rivers issue and the listing of Cape York as a World Heritage area.

‘It is hard to say how representative any one group’s views are of traditional owners across the Cape, but I believe we have more in common than not.

## And even though 60 per cent of the Cape’s wealth is produced from bauxite mining, economic development doesn’t have to involve destroying the environment.

in the management of this sensitive area,’ he says. ‘Perhaps the IEF will be able to provide linkages, be a catalyst to bring people together – no mean feat in an area as vast as Cape York and with such limited infrastructure – and become an agent of change into new ways of thinking.’

Shaun Edwards agrees: ‘Looking ahead we want to become partners with other green groups and move forward, and take on new issues such as environmental refugeism (many areas of Cape York are very low lying and its people are threatened by sea-level rises), climate change and helping Australia to become carbon neutral, perhaps by using the Cape’s huge tropical forests as a bio-offset.’

‘We need to reconcile the balance between conservation and development and the forums for negotiation now in place,’ he says.

‘Although the Wilderness Society is a strong advocate for the protection of rivers, we certainly don’t believe we are the enemy. We simply want to help protect an area that is important to all Australians using all appropriate conservation measures, whether scientific or traditional. We would like to work together with the people of the Cape to achieve a good outcome for all.’

● Rachel Sullivan

*To support the IEF’s work contact them at [youth\\_ief@hotmail.com](mailto:youth_ief@hotmail.com)*