

Traditional Owners speak out on Northern Territory water plan

Indigenous people have a right to participate fully in government water planning which affects their country and livelihoods. This was the message of Traditional Owners affected by the Tindal Limestone Aquifer (Mataranka) Water Allocation Plan in a submission to the Northern Territory Government.



Credit: Jon Armstrong/Tourism Australia

The submission was prepared on behalf of participating Traditional Owners by the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Alliance Ltd (NAILSMA), Northern Land Council (NLC) and Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (AAPA).

The Mataranka region includes Elsey National Park, which contains the headwaters of the Roper River and two thermal pools, popular with tourists. The thermal pools flow at a constant 32 degrees Celsius and the warm waters are crystal clear. The Roper River is also a popular bushwalking, birdwatching, canoeing, swimming and fishing attraction.

‘As First Australians, Aboriginal peoples have expertise in managing water resources and a vested interest in managing their traditional lands and waters, which has not been acknowledged by the Northern Territory Government water planning process to date,’ says Northern Land Council CEO, Kim Hill.

The submission includes provisions for a Strategic Indigenous Reserve (SIR) to be stated in the Plan and recommendations for its recognition under the NT Water Act. A SIR is recognised by Traditional Owners as a water entitlement to support future water trading and economic development that also provides an opportunity to meaningfully participate in government water management processes.

The North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Alliance Ltd (NAILSMA) together with the Northern Land Council (NLC) is working with Indigenous people across north Australia to assert Indigenous rights to water. NAILSMA and NLC have most recently been working with Mataranka Traditional Owners to discuss the potential opportunity for an Indigenous allocation of water for commercial purposes within the Mataranka Water Allocation Plan.

Alan Maroney, Chair of the Mataranka Traditional Owner Water Allocation Reference Group (MTOWARG), said the Reference Group is concerned about the impact of over extraction on sacred sites, particularly that water used by the mining industry does not come under the NT Water Act and subsequently is not considered in the Plan.

‘We need to make sure that water extraction does not affect sacred sites within that Plan area. Mines must be made accountable for their water use in all water planning,’ he said.

Co-Chair of MTOWARG, Marjorie Hall said: ‘We should be working together... Consult each other, come into one voice and talking together. Getting agreement – not just putting us aside. We own this land, we own this country. We must participate in water planning with government.’

You can watch a short version of the submission to the Plan, ‘Making Our Submission Our Way’ [here](#). The Reference Group has dedicated the DVD included with the submission to family who have passed away and to future generations.

ECOS also notes that 95-year-old Indigenous Elder, [Laurie Baymarrwangga](#), was chosen as Senior Australian of the Year 2012. The citation acknowledged that ‘In the face of many obstacles, this great, great grandmother has shown extraordinary leadership and courage in caring for the cultural and biological integrity of her beloved Crocodile Islands’. ECOS had earlier reported on the awarding of NT Senior Australian of the year to Laurie in November 2011.

Sources: NAILSMA & Australian of the Year Awards 2012

From ECOS online <http://www.ecosmagazine.com/?paper=EC12291>