THE CAIRNS INSTITUTE
Research in tropical societies

Newsletter

Issue Two | 2025



Cairns
Singapore
Townsville

JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY
AUSTRALIA

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Research in tropical societies





Welcome!

The Cairns Institute supports JCU's strategic intent to create a brighter future for life in the tropics world-wide through graduates and discoveries that make a difference. www.jcu.edu.au/about/strategic-intent.

The Cairns Institute's location in tropical north Queensland and proximity to neighbouring countries in the Pacific and South East Asia offers unique opportunities to enhance human life in the tropics and contribute to a brighter, more equitable and enriching future for its peoples. The Institute is committed to understanding and informing critical processes of social and environmental transformation in the tropics.

As the world's tropical zones face immense social, economic and environmental challenges, the Institute aims to provide innovative research with local, national and global applications. The Institute's core business of research, training and dialogue is embedded in commitments of excellence, social justice and engagement with the societies in which we work. Our unique profile is built on the following key concerns:

- Creativity and innovation
- Culteral and linguistical transformations
- Indigenous futures
- Social and environmental justice
- Sustainable development

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Kuol Garang



A journey worth undertaking

Kuol Garong arrived arrived in Cairns for the first time on 19th December 2023 after having travelled just under 3,000 kilometres from Melbourne. Kuol recalls that Cairns felt like a country of its own. He found it invigorating to arrive in a new place and it had been made more exciting as he had been been accepted by James Cook University (JCU) Graduate Research School to commence his Doctor of Philosophy adventure. Kuol shares his experience with us.

"Driving from Melbourne through Sydney, Brisbane, and Townsville before finally reaching Cairns was a scenic and memorable experience. The journey allowed me to stop and appreciate the natural beauty of Australia's East Coast, parts of central Australia, and Far North Queensland. This journey to JCU was not just a change of location—it has created lasting memories."

"The commencement of my studies at JCU was a smooth process, thanks to the committed and helpful advisors and colleagues at the university. The people were welcoming, and that alone made the move to Cairns far less stressful."

"Now in my third year, the time seems to have passed in the blink of an eye. Years feel like months, months like weeks, and weeks like days. This is the reality for many PhD students—when your study desk becomes your second home."

"Today, I am proud to have published work on a topic that is deeply personal. Having lived through political turbulence in the former Sudan and witnessed this turbulence into the newly independent South Sudan, my life has been a journey of seeking answers and finding ways to contribute to peace."

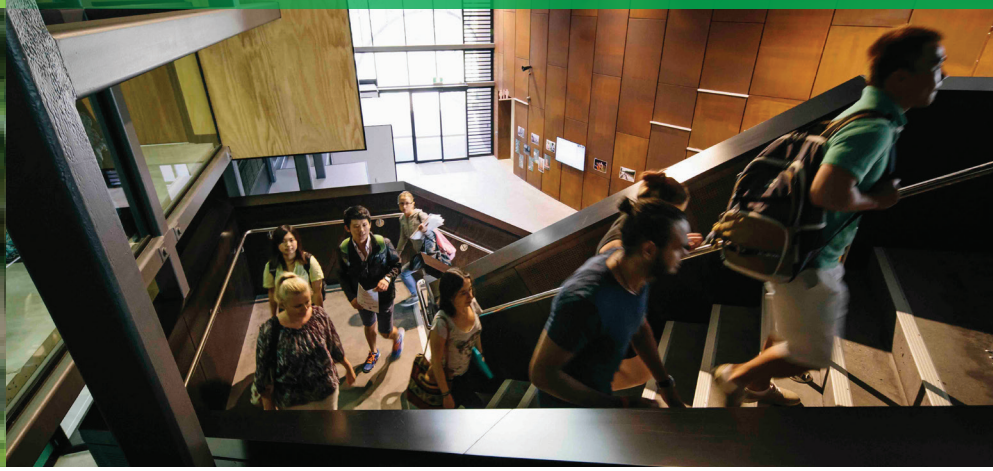
"My upcoming peer-reviewed journal article—Chiefs' Courts and Peacebuilding in South Sudan: Bridging Tradition and Modernity— with Dr Kearrin Sims, sheds light on the important role that chiefs' courts play in grassroots peacebuilding. Chiefs' courts are a traditional justice system led by community chiefs. They handle local disputes in a manner that is accessible, transparent, and grounded in local customs, often focusing on compensation to restore broken relationships."

"However, the system also faces context-specific challenges, including issues related to human rights. In response, the article recommends aligning the operations of chiefs' courts with contemporary human rights standards. This can be achieved by providing training to traditional chiefs and increasing the involvement of women and youth in these courts."

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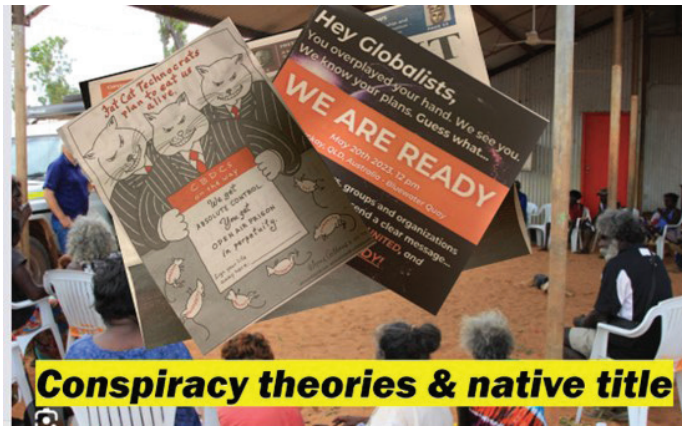
Dr Claire Holland



Top-Viewed Research Shines Light on Conspiracy Theories and Native Title

Congratulations to Pascale Taplin, Dr Claire Holland, and Lorelei Billing, whose article "The Sovereign Citizen Superconspiracy: Contemporary Issues in Native Title Anthropology" was ranked in the top 10% of most-viewed papers in The Australian Journal of Anthropology for 2023! This standout piece explores how sovereign citizen conspiracy theories are seeping into the native title process in Australia, creating challenges for legal practitioners and impacting Indigenous communities.

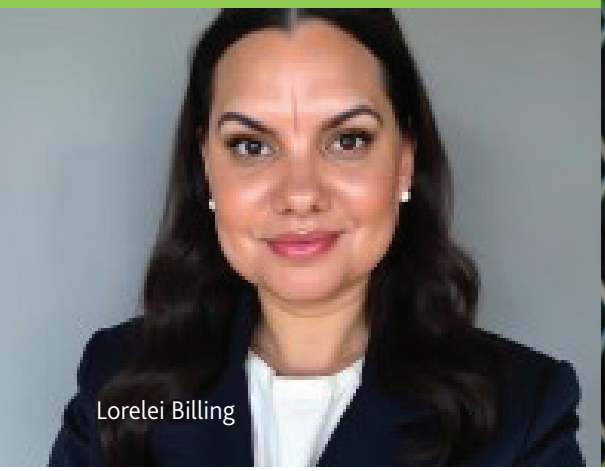
The collaboration between anthropologist Pascale, conflict management specialist Claire, and lawyer Lorelei was sparked at the inaugural James Cook University Research for Ethical Development (JCU RED) Symposium in July 2022, hosted by The Cairns Institute. The event brought researchers together to share ideas, challenge assumptions, and encourage cross-disciplinary partnerships. It worked—Pascale's presentation on the rise of conspiracy belief systems in native title contexts struck a chord, and robust conversations quickly turned into a joint research project.



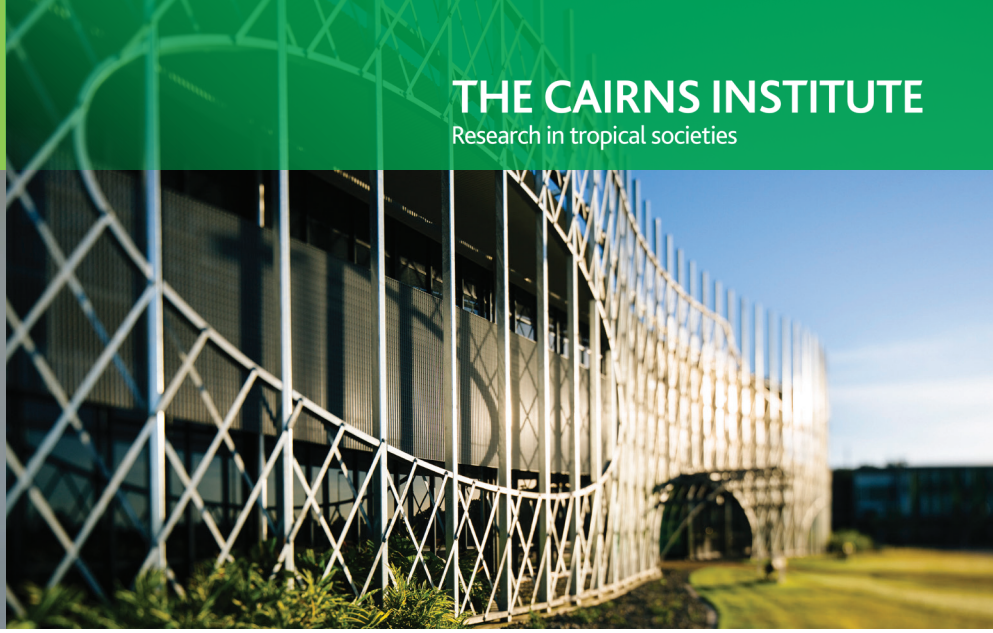


Their article reveals how individuals disillusioned by the outcomes of native title claims may turn to pseudolegal beliefs drawn from the sovereign citizen movement—ideas that reject the legitimacy of the Australian legal system. These views, while often incoherent from a legal perspective, are gaining traction and derailing legitimate native title claims. The team emphasises the urgent need for native title practitioners and institutions to understand and counter these narratives through targeted training and community engagement. Thanks to open access through the Wiley-CAUL agreement with James Cook University (JCU), the article is freely available to all.

Pascale and Claire continued their partnership with a follow-up article in the Journal of Information Warfare, on "Sovereign Citizen Rhetoric as Narrative Warfare," which reframes these conspiracy theories as strategic narratives designed to undermine democratic legitimacy. They argue for a policy approach that addresses the cultural and emotional appeal of these ideologies—not just their legal contradictions.



Lorelei Billing



continued.



Their research is making waves in both academic and practitioner circles, demonstrating the power of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing complex societal challenges.
Pascale is now undertaking a PhD at the Australian National University (ANU) researching conspiracy thinking and its policy implications.

Dr Claire, an adjunct Senior Researcher with The Cairns Institute, is applying her skills in international development projects in Papua New Guinea and teaching conflict management courses.
Lorelei is a criminal lawyer with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service in Townsville, and teaches the subject Indigenous Peoples and the Law at JCU.

Pascale and Claire also have a chapter forthcoming on how anthropologists can navigate legal proceedings involving pseudolaw and sovereign citizen rhetoric.
From casual symposium chats to nationally recognised research, this collaboration is a testament to the value of ethical, cross-disciplinary scholarship that addresses real-world issues.

See relevant publications:

Taplin, P., Innes, T. and Holland, C. (forthcoming). Strategies for anthropologists navigating legal proceedings involving sovereign citizens and pseudolaw adherents. In J. Rose, K. de Rijke, P. Taplin, & R. Martin (Eds), Forensic and Expert Social Anthropology in Australia Today (chapter 3). Berghahn Book Series.

Taplin, P. and Holland, C. (2023) 'Sovereign Citizen Rhetoric as Narrative Warfare. Journal of Information Warfare', Journal of Information Warfare, 22(3).

Taplin, P., Holland, C. and Billing, L. (2023) 'The sovereign citizen superconspiracy: Contemporary issues in native title anthropology.', The Australian Journal of Anthropology, 34(2), pp. 110–129.

Taplin, P. (2023) 'Contextualizing Belief in Conspiracy Theories: A Case Study in Native Title.', Dispute Resolution Review, 2(1), pp. 1–11.



Image: Pascale Taplin. Credit: National Security College


Nitol Chakma



Impact on the 2017 Rohingya Refugee Influx Report

Fellow of The Cairns Institute and PhD Candidate at the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASE), James Cook University (JCU), Nitol Chakma is under supervision of JCU's Dr. Ju-han Zoe Wang and Dr. Kearrin Sim, JCU CASE Adjunct. His PhD research aims to explore the ongoing identity crisis and the process of 'unpeopling' the ethnic communities in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh.

It investigates the historical and political processes that have contributed to the ethnic communities marginalization, displacement, and cultural erosion—collectively referred to here as the "unpeopling" process to the ethnic communities in CHT. The project promises to generate new knowledge on how the ethnic communities shapes their identity and strategies of resistance within a conflict situation. The outcome of this research includes exploring the generational shifts of identity, contributing to the identity formation and the political and social implication of ethnic communities in CHT, Bangladesh. His research interests include nationalism, ethnic identity, ethnic conflict and resolution, inequalities and everyday struggle of ethnic communities.

Recently, Nitol collaborated as a co-researcher and author with Deakin University's Associate Professor Anthony Ware and Senior Lecturer Vicki-Ann Ware, and Associate Professor Fatema Begum Popy at Noakhali Science and Technology University, Bangladesh. They published 'Impact on the 2017 Rohingya Refugee Influx on 'Social Cohesion Between Host Community Groups in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh'. This research was completed and published under funding provided by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade AHP Bangladesh Multi-Year Program, as a sub-deed with Plan International Australia.

Nitol explained they examined the arrival of a total 1,006,670 Rohingya refugees and ongoing presence of the refugee community has further weakened the socio-political power and increasing the vulnerability of indigenous minorities within Cox's Bazar society and polity. The research investigated the impacts on the indigenous minorities' perceptions of their safety, vulnerability, livelihoods and social relations, and collect positive stories of everyday peace formation helping to stabilise their situation.

Key challenges to social cohesion between hosts and refugees in Cox's Bazar, identified in the literature, are:

- Economic impact—Cox's Bazar was already among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged sub-districts of Bangladesh, and the arrival of the refugees has led to intense competition over scarce resources, opportunities and services.
- Perception of inequitable access and distribution
- Insecurity and fear of both intra and inter-group violence, crime, armed gangs and insurgent groups, and so on. The fact refugees outnumber hosts by almost 2:1 exacerbates fears.
- Perception of incompatible moralities and values.
- Disruption of social lives and other unintended consequences

Nonetheless, the fact that many Rohingya who arrived prior to 2017 remain fairly well-integrated and accepted, shows there is positive potential for strong social cohesion.

More information on the research, including recommendations can be found here. https://adi.deakin.edu.au/project/every-day-peace-and-rohingya-refugees/

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Dist. Prof Stewart Lockie



World Environment Day 2025

Each year, World Environment Day is celebrated on the 5th June and its aim is to encourage awareness and action for the protection of the environment.

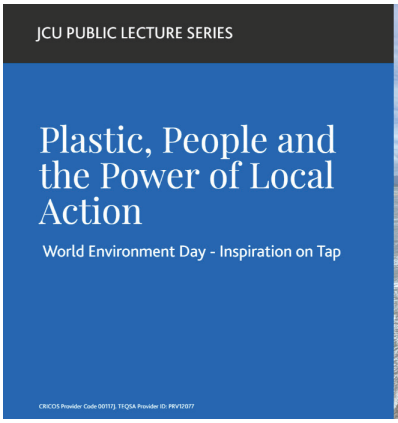
World Environment Day 2025 calls for the collective action to end plastic pollution. So just how serious a problem are plastics? Learn about the scale of global plastic production and waste, and explore how tackling plastic pollution connects with restoring ecosystems, responding to climate change, and building more resilient communities. Distinguished Professor Stewart Lockie, Director of The Cairns Institute's presentation on Plastic Futures will address these at the next Inspiration on Tap Series in June 4 at the Salt House in Cairns.

TropWATER's Seagrass Ecology expert Dr Abbi Scott who works on seagrass and coral monitoring and restoration as well as seagrass herbivory research will share findings from their recent surveys. TropWATER's Senior Research Fellow Dr Katie Chartrand will present on Reef Connections: Local people, Shared Purpose. She will share how the Cairns-Port Douglas Reef Hub brings people together to protect the local reefs.

The Cairns Institute Researcher Dr Rana Dadpour says "I will speak about the often-overlooked role of emotion in shaping public support for reef interventions. My talk, Hope, Trust, and the Future of the Reef, draws on a multi-year study involving over 12,000 Australians to explore how emotions like hope, pride, worry, and caution influence how people respond to reef restoration and adaptation technologies. We often think of innovation as a technical challenge, but public trust and emotional connection are just as critical. Without them, even the most promising solutions can struggle to gain legitimacy." She says this work highlights the importance of understanding emotional responses as not just background noise, but as active forces that shape climate action, perceptions of risk, and the long-term success of environmental initiatives.

"I look forward to sharing these insights at Inspiration on Tap, and to connect with the local community around the shared values and feelings that bind us all to the Reef."

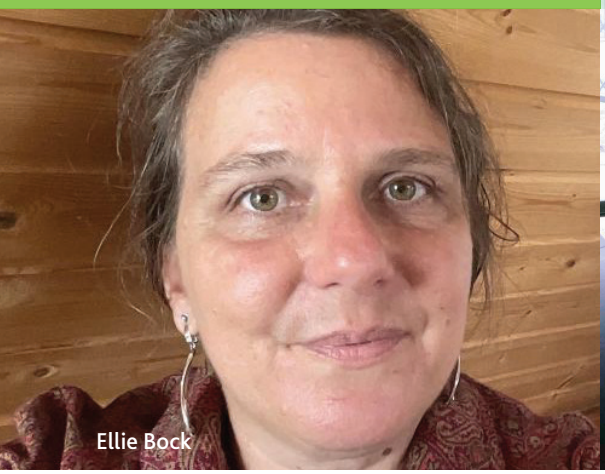
This is a free event, however, seats are limited. Register yourself on https://bit.ly/WorldEnivronmentDay




Dr Abbi Scott


Dr Katie Chartrand


Dr Rana Dadpour



Ellie Bock



Collaborating for stronger peoples and healthier country

The Cairns Institute's Development in The Tropics (DiTT) program is continuing to support diverse First Nations governance networks at varying scales. DiTT Regional Planner Ellie Bock and her colleagues have been supporting multiple Traditional Owner groups in their strategic planning for country and self-determined governance processes. Undertaken in diverse Queensland regions, Ellie's support work is resourced through the Tropical North Queensland Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub (TNQ Drought Hub) initiative; 'Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Enterprises' (SATSIE).

SATSIE's overarching objectives are to promote involvement in initiatives that provide positive social, cultural, and economic opportunities for Indigenous community members and to build regional resilience to future shocks and to support Indigenous individuals and organisations to ensure that the management of land and sea resources in TNQ aligns with the rights, values, and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

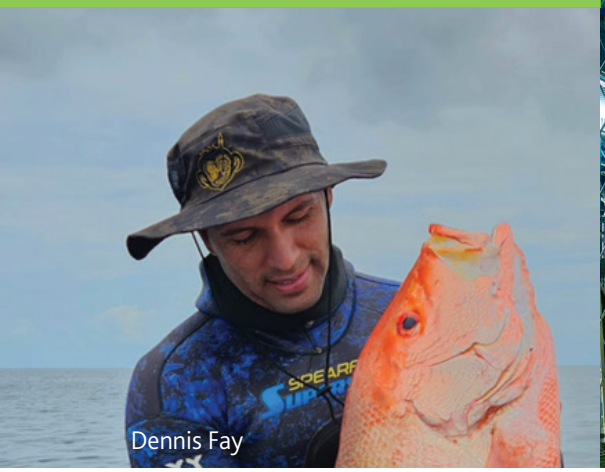
Her work has included collaborations with the Koinmerburra Aboriginal Corporation (KAC) of Central Queensland and the Dulabed and Malanbarra Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation Registered Native Title Bodies Corporate (RNTBC), situated in the central Wet Tropics. Each collaboration is built on the self-determined priorities of the organisation concerned. Her support work aims to enhance each collaboration's potential for positive impact at local scale and beyond, and their overarching aim to deliver direct benefits for people, country, and community.

In 2024, SATSIE support for the KAC assisted the corporation's members, the Koinjmal People, to successfully develop their inaugural strategic plan for Koinmerburra Land and Sea Country. Centred on St Lawrence and featuring diverse estuaries, wetlands, and islands. Koinmerburra Land and Sea Country is the site of nationally significant Flatback Turtle rookeries. The strategic plan for country will inform Koinmerburra Ranger work plans, and help to better position the corporation in strengthening their existing Land and Sea partnerships, and to also build new partnerships across Koinmerburra Land and Sea Country.

Ellie's work with the Dulabed and Malanbarra Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC centres on strategic planning for country, people, and enterprise development for, and on behalf of the Dulabed and Malanbarra Yidinji peoples. The Mulgrave river flows through Dulabed and Malanbarra Yidinji county, and includes the Goldsborough valley and the Gordonvale district. The RNTBC is also a registered Cultural Heritage Body and the health of the river is a primary concern for the people and their communities. This work continues into 2025, and also benefits from earlier water planning support provided by the DiTT team.

"Having the opportunity to plan for country in a strategic way helps Traditional Owners to obtain empowering levels of insight, and an enhanced understanding of, the complexities of mainstream jurisdictional structures that impact their country, themselves as custodians, and their communities every day. Meaningful strategic planning for country requires time, resources, and flexibility for the agreed planning process to take place, and every process will always be a process of shared learning. SATSIE's resourcing support over several successive years helps with time, resources, and flexibility."

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Dennis Fay



Celebrating leadership and growth at DNAC25

The 2025 Developing Northern Australia Conference (DNAC25), scheduled for July 22–24 in Cairns, promises to be a landmark event, highlighting the evolution of leadership and the power of opportunity in the North. At the forefront is The Cairns Institute's Professor Allan Dale, who returns as Chair of DNAC25 for the 11th and final time. His leadership has been instrumental in steering the conference since its inception in Townsville in 2015; fostering a platform for collaboration across government, industry, and communities.

"DNAC is more than a conference—it's a catalyst for real change. It brings together the people, ideas, and partnerships needed to drive sustainable development and unlock the full potential of Northern Australia." — Professor Allan Dale, Chair, DNAC25

A testament to the conference's impact is the journey of Dennis Fay, who attended a previous DNAC as a TNQ Drought Hub-sponsored delegate. He now returns as a keynote speaker. In 2023 he was a sponsored delegate for the Darwin Conference, in 2024 he was a sponsored session speaker, and in 2025, he will take the main stage with other keynotes including Isabelle Bond, Analyst, Climate and Security Policy Centre, ASPI, The Hon. Dale Last, Queensland Minister for Northern Australia, Dr Dan Smith, Group CEO, NORSTA Maritime and Professor Barney Glover, AO, Commissioner, Jobs and Skills Australia.

As one of several keynotes, Dennis will chronicle the evolution of Salty Monkeys, a First Nations-owned social enterprise.

'Attending the DNA Conferences through the support of the TNQ Drought Hub has been a game changer for me. In Darwin, I was focused on networking and learning, but by Karratha I had progressed to presenting on stage, sharing the Salty Monkeys journey and impact. The response leading to national media exposure and an invitation to be a keynote speaker for DNA 2025 in Cairns. This progression has opened new doors for collaboration, exposure, and regional impact.' Dennis Fay, founder Salty Monkeys.

It blends Indigenous culture, marine conservation, and ethical apparel—producing dive gear featuring artwork by Indigenous artists. The organisation leads environmental clean-ups in the Torres Strait, develops recycled products like EcofinZ fins, and runs youth programs focused on leadership and ocean stewardship.

The conference continues to draw a diverse audience of policymakers, Traditional Owners, entrepreneurs, researchers, and industry leaders from across the country and the wider Indo-Pacific region. DNAC25 will delve into critical themes such as Indigenous-led development, sovereign capability, sustainable infrastructure, and economic diversification. DNAC25 reaffirms its role as the flagship event shaping Northern Australia's future by building on the foundations of past gatherings and fostering discussions that lead to actionable outcomes.

Join us in Cairns to be part of these transformative conversations and witness firsthand the stories of growth and leadership that DNAC25 celebrates. https://northaust.org.au/





Seeing nature through many lenses:

Why diverse values matter for sustainability.

When we think about protecting nature, what comes to mind? Forests, oceans, maybe some endangered species. But have we asked: what does nature mean to different people? This simple question lies at the heart of a call to rethink how we value nature, made by profound voice in global sustainability science—Professor Patricia (Patty) Balvanera, visiting from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Her work exemplifies the transformative potential of valuing diversity—in nature, in people, and in ways of knowing.

For too long, political and economic systems have focused almost exclusively on market-based values of nature—how much a forest is worth in timber, or how tourism contributes to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). While these instrumental views can be useful, they tell only part of the story.
Around the world, Indigenous peoples, farmers, and local communities connect with nature through relationships of stewardship, reverence, and identity. These connections are often overlooked in environmental decisions, leading to policies that are ineffective—or worse, unjust.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has led a groundbreaking effort to capture the diverse values of nature. The Values Assessment, involving more than 300 experts from 47 countries, offers a new way to think about these values—from spiritual and cultural to ecological and economic.

"A key insight? There's no shortage of ways to value nature—there is just a shortage of ways to include all voices in the conversation. Over 50 methods exist to assess nature's value, yet fewer than 5% of studies influence policy. To change this, we need to embed valuation into the entire decision-making process, from planning and budgeting to monitoring outcomes. That means respecting different knowledge systems, enabling inclusive participation, and recognizing power dynamics that determine whose values count."

"At its core, valuing nature is about justice. More equitable policies emerge when diverse values are not only recognized but balanced—especially in ways that address the historical and social inequalities often embedded in environmental governance."

Prof Patty Balvanera inspired the audience with the Cocina Colaboratorio in Mexico—a transdisciplinary project that brings together cooks, farmers, artists, students, and elders to co-create just and sustainable food systems. Through shared meals, storytelling, and agroecological practices, participants nurture a sense of communal care and resistance to extractive models of development. This grassroots model shows that transformative change towards sustainability doesn't always start in policy rooms—it often begins around a kitchen table.

See https://colaboratorykitchen.com/es/


Prof Patricia Balvanera



Continued.

"Expanding how we see and value nature will help us confront the biodiversity crisis and climate challenges ahead.
That means:

- Recognizing diverse worldviews and knowledge systems
- Creating space for Indigenous and local voices about nature and culture
- Reshaping decision-making institutions to support diverse perspectives
- Aligning development with values like unity, justice, stewardship, responsibility and reciprocity."

'Nature isn't just a set of resources—it's a living relationship. And the more we honor that relationship in all its forms, the better equipped we are to build a sustainable, thriving future."

Dr Ro Hill's introduction to Prof Balvanera's seminar highlighted how the conversation is part of a longer journey one that many in The Cairns Institute and partners have been on for decades. "It is a journey that insists we honour diverse knowledge systems, support Indigenous leadership, decolonise research and rethink how we define value, progress, and wellbeing."

"As we deepen our collaborations, both regionally and globally, we reaffirm a shared truth: Diversity is not just something to include—it is the foundation of resilience and sustainability."

Interested in learning more? Explore the IPBES Values Assessment and follow ongoing initiatives at www.ipbes.net.
https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-15829-300117



Image: Cocina Colaboratorio in action. Credit: Prof Patricia Balvanera



Dr Rana Dadpour



Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act turns 50

The Social Science Community for the Great Barrier Reef Symposium, now in its fifth year have themed the symposium as *"Reeflections, understanding the Great Barrier Reef though time"*. The symposium returns to Townsville where it debuted in 2021.

Assistant Director Social Science Dr Michelle Dyer of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) explains they are celebrating fifty years of protection of the Great Barrier Reef through legislation. Also honouring and acknowledging other perspectives and relationships with the Reef; from the timeless relations of First Nation's communities and more recent settler colonial experiences to the contemporary milieu of shared Reef heritage across diverse communities.

GBRMPA's Project Manager Social Science Cindy Huchery says "Reeflections" isn't just a look back – it's a call to action, to envision a future where diverse ways of looking, seeing and knowing, create a resilient future for the Great Barrier Reef and its people.

"As someone working on the social dimensions of reef interventions and climate adaptation, I found last year's symposium to be refreshingly open—both intellectually and relationally," said Dr Rana Dadpour, Research Fellow at The Cairns Institute. "It created space for difficult questions about legitimacy, equity, and uncertainty, without reducing them to technical problems. That openness really stayed with me, and it's what motivated me to join the organising committee this year."

"This year, we're encouraging contributions that don't just describe the Reef, but critically engage with how it's imagined, governed, and lived with—across time and from diverse standpoints," Rana added. "We hope to see presentations and workshops that challenge disciplinary boundaries, centre place-based knowledge, and reflect on the evolving social contracts shaping the future of the Reef. It's a space where practice, research, and lived experience can meaningfully intersect."



Call for abstracts to present at the symposium (9 September) and/or **Expression of Interests for workshops** (10 September) are open. The submissions deadline is Friday 6th June.


Samantha Guy



Visiting scholar - Samantha Guy

In March, Visiting Scholar Samantha Guy successfully achieved Confirmation of Candidature, marking a significant milestone in the first year of the PhD. Samantha previously graduated from James Cook University after completing a Master of Global Development in 2023, and is completing her PhD through Griffith University. Samantha has been working in the water industry across the Southeast and Far North Queensland for the past eight years.

Samantha's research explores intercultural collaborations in drinking water management with remote Australian communities, with a particular focus on elevating Indigenous knowledge systems alongside western knowledge systems.
It aims to provide guidance on how diverse knowledge systems can work together to improve drinking water outcomes.
If you would like to know more about this research an abstract was recently published in the Australian Water Association Water e-Journal - Student Edition and is available here. https://lnkd.in/gS4k92Cu.

Acknowledgement is extended to the external supervision provided by Dr Jim Turnour from the Development in The Tropics (DITT) team for his ongoing support and expertise. As a visiting scholar within the team, Samantha has been able to connect with professionals experienced in navigating intercultural contexts, enriching both the academic and practical dimensions of the research. In additional to Jim, Samantha's supervisorial team includes Professor Cara Beal, Dr. Melissa Jackson and Professor Kerry Bodle from Griffith University.

As the research progresses, the next phase will build on literature review work, moving toward framework development and deeper engagement with place-based knowledge holders. This PhD research is supporting a broader research partnership with Griffith University, the iKnow, weKnow Project which aims to co-design a resilient water and energy toolbox for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities. It is a three-year project (2023-2026) funded by project partners in Queensland, Western Australia, Northern Territory and Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage grant. More information is accessible here. https://www.griffith.edu.au/cities-research-institute/research/iknow-weknow

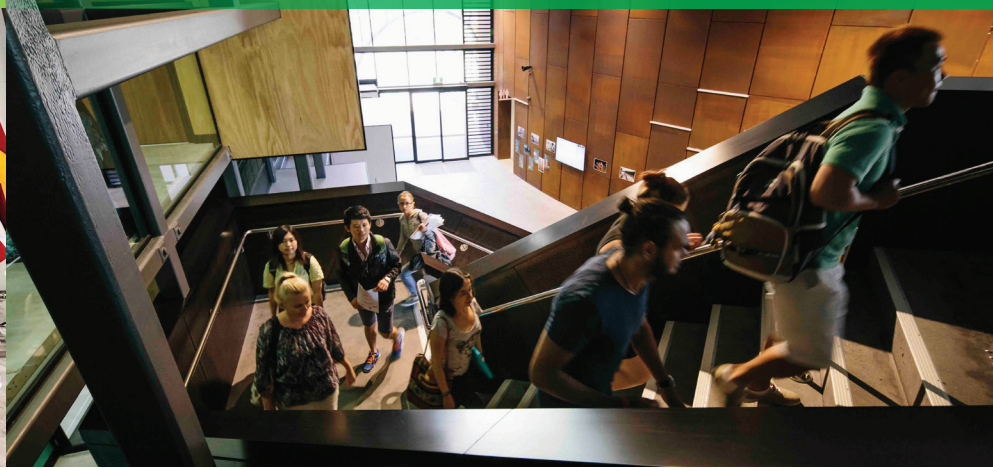
Beyond the PhD, Samantha volunteers with the Australian Water Association's Queensland Young Water Professionals Sub-Committee as secretary, contributing to initiatives that support the growth and development of emerging professionals.

She is always seeking to connect with other water folk to ensure other young professional access the support and opportunities offered through the broad array of Australian Water Associations initiatives. Please reach out to Samantha if you are looking to connect with fellow emerging professionals.

linkedin.com/in/samantha-guy-5875996b



Prof Adrian Kuah & Prof Hurriyet Babacan



JCU participation at BRIN

Professor Hurriyet Babacan recently returned from Jakarta, Indonesia after completing a prestigious Short-Term Visiting Research Fellowship with the The National Research and Innovation Agency (Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional - BRIN) from 11 March-12 April 2025, with ongoing research for the year. Hurriyet worked closely with Indonesian researchers on critical topics aligned with global sustainability priorities.

This fellowship builds on a long-standing collaboration between Professor Babacan and Indonesian institutions, strengthening academic ties between The Cairns Institute (TCI) and Southeast Asia (SEA). During her time at BRIN, she focused on the intersecting themes of decarbonisation, circular economy, resilience, disaster risk reduction and economic transitions—topics central to her current research at James Cook University (JCU).

Professor Babacan's role involved both applied research and research mentorship, offering guidance to early-career Indonesian scholars engaged in sustainability and economic reform studies. The research project's focus areas involved circular economy in the textile industry and other projects energy transition. Working with a team of 11 researchers, the research had commenced literature review, context review and research design. The project will continue to data collection by BRIN with Hurriyet having oversight.

A major colloquium was organised on circular economy and with keynote presentations from Prof Hurriyet Babacan and Prof Adrian Kuah from JCU Singapore.





Images: Fellow BRIN delegates (above) and (below) Adrian & Hurriyet meeting with the Deputy Secretary General of ASEAN for ASEAN Economic Community Mr Satvinder Singh and colleagues



BRIN Colloquium

Continued.

"This fellowship was an excellent opportunity to share knowledge and strategies on managing economic and environmental transitions across our region," said Professor Babacan. "The collaboration with BRIN allowed for deep engagement on circular systems, decarbonisation pathways, and inclusive innovation—areas that are not only academically important but practically urgent."

This international engagement not only reinforces JCU's regional research impact but also showcases the university's commitment to fostering high-level academic diplomacy and applied sustainability leadership in the Indo-Pacific.

Hurriyet also had the opportunity to connect with a diverse range of government agencies, non-governmental organisations and universities. She met with one of the most senior Ministers of the Indonesian Government, Minister Airlangga Hartarto, Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs of Indonesia.
She met with Queensland Government Trade Commissioner for Indonesia and the Chairperson of the Australia-Indonesia Business Council as well as key staff in a number of embassies, including Australia. Prof Babacan and Prof Kuah were able to have other key encounters including a meeting with the Deputy Secretary-General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Economic Community, Mr Satvinder Singh and Indonesian government agencies.



The engagement with Indonesia and other parts of ASEAN is continuing and Prof Babacan is excited for emerging research collaborations focused on shared challenges across the Indo-Pacific region.

Images: The BRIN Circular Economy Colloquium (above) and (below) Hurriyet with Minister Airlangga Hartato. Credit: H. Babacan




David Phelps & Jason Salvetti



Burdekin Irrigation Toolkit Expands to FNQ

Following the success of a transformative irrigation automation toolkit in the Burdekin, a new trial site has been launched in Dimbulah, on the Atherton Tablelands. The innovative toolkit aims to improve water and energy efficiency in sugar cane production, reduce labour costs and create a more sustainable farming practice by combining irrigation automation hardware, crop growth modelling solutions, real-time energy usage tracking and a unified data platform, all designed to provide farmers with precise irrigation control.

The initial toolkit trial began in the Burdekin through collaborative research at James Cook University (JCU), which is home to the Tropical North Queensland Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub (TNQ Drought Hub).
Hub Director Professor David Phelps, said the hub is building on the success of this previous trial through the Dimbulah site to highlight the importance of data-driven irrigation practices in the face of increasing climate variability.

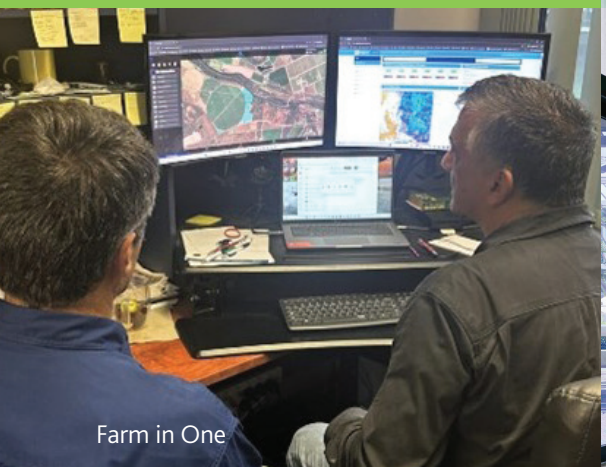
"One of the things we are trying to achieve at the TNQ Drought Hub is to help producers adopt new practices to become more resilient through better profitability, better productivity, and more sustainable systems," Professor Phelps said. "In 2025, we have seen a record-breaking wet season, and this technology can take into account moisture levels in the soil, to deliver the amount of water needed through more precise irrigation scheduling to maximise crop growth and conserve water for when the farms need it. This really shows how farms can become more resilient heading into a drought. As we know, it's not 'if' but 'when' the next drought arrives."







Images above: Jason Salvetti & Ben Jarihani at the various demonstration sites. Credit: E. Harrington



Farm in One



Continued.

"In this situation, we're trying to take technologies that have worked really well in the Burdekin sugarcane production area, up to the Atherton Tablelands, and iron out the local issues."
Steve Attard, Irrigation Agronomist and Managing Director at AgriTech Solutions, is supervising the technological implementation in Dimbulah. Steve said many farmers lack precise insights into their water usage, cost and whether it meets their crops' specific needs.

"The results in the Burdekin have shown us that there has always been an opportunity to reduce their energy costs and their water costs. We understand very similar processes are used in the Tableland region, and so there was no reason why this technology, wouldn't translate to making benefits for farmers around energy costs and water costs in those regions."

"The natural thing to do then was to set up a local demonstration site through the TNQ Drought Hub to showcase the technology and hopefully to inform other farmers and advisers about the possibilities that this technology can bring them."
Salvetti Farming farm manager Jason Salvetti said when the opportunity presented itself to trial the toolkit on his farm in Dimbulah, he was keen to get it up and running.

"I've always been interested in technology and computers, and we started off with some basic systems like weather stations and soil moisture probes, and then the next step was to try and start some automation processes on the farm," Mr Salvetti said. "Our home farm is about a 20-minute drive from here, and on the previous irrigation systems, we would come out here anytime between two and three times a day.

"The advantage of this technology is that it will basically do those trips for us, in that it will change the irrigation valving required to move to the next irrigation set by itself, without anyone having to be around to do it.

Professor Phelps believes that with continued success, the toolkit could redefine water management practices across multiple crop types, contributing to long-term drought resilience and productivity growth for agricultural communities.

"As this technology continues to deliver results, we have a unique opportunity to reshape water management practices across various crops and regions," he added. "It all comes back to our mission at the hub of supporting projects that build resilience within local communities.

"By investing in innovative technology like this, we're equipping farmers and producers with the tools to adapt, thrive, and contribute to the sustainability of the agricultural industry well into the future."



Image above: Mareeba Actuator & Bracket. Credit: E. Harrington



Dr Zoe Wang



Coffee and Change: How Crop Booms Are Reshaping Rural China

Rural China is undergoing major changes as modernization and globalization take hold. One key driver of this transformation is the rise of "crop booms"—a term used to describe rapid growth in commercial crop production, often linked to increased capitalist investment. These booms have become common in tropical and subtropical regions of the Global South, but they come with a mixed track record.

Globally, crop booms have sparked concern. They have been linked to land grabs, growing inequality, and environmental harm. Yet, many studies overlook two important elements: the voices of smallholder farmers and the role governments play in shaping these agricultural shifts.

A new study shines a fresh light on this issue by focusing on coffee plantations in Southwest China. Using both interviews and data analysis, researchers found that—notably different from other parts of the world—this coffee boom brought some positive outcomes. There were fewer cases of large-scale land transfers, and profits were more equitably shared among local communities.

The big takeaway? When crop booms are shaped by inclusive policies and local engagement, they can create opportunities rather than problems. For policymakers across the Global South, the message is clear: invest in land tenure security and strong market infrastructure, and take local realities into account when planning agricultural development.

Professor Jun He and Dr Siyun Xiong from Yunnan University's School of Ethnology and Sociology, along with The Cairns Institute Fellow Dr Zoe Wang published their paper in the Journal of Rural Studies.

Read more here. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016725001123





Barry Hunter



Cane toads take centre stage

Cane toads were the invader of choice in April's special Cairns screening of ABC's Eat the Invaders, hosted in partnership with the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA), the Tropical North Queensland Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub (TNQ Drought Hub), and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Around 80 people attended the event at the waterfront iconic Salt House at the Cairns Pier.

The episode was followed by a lively panel discussion moderated by Adam Stephen, host of ABC Queensland Northern Drive. The expert panel explored how invasive species—particularly cane toads—can present not only ecological challenges but surprising opportunities for culinary innovation, cultural insight, and sustainable management.

The diverse panel included:

- Barry Hunter, CEO, NAILSMA
- Samantha Martin, author of Bush Tukka Guide and founder of Tribal Voice Connections
- Dr Allan Dale, Professor of Tropical Regional Development, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University
- Dr Alexander Watson, Northeast Regional Ecologist, Australian Wildlife Conservancy
- Gerry Turpin, Senior Ethnobotanist, Tropical Indigenous Ethnobotany Centre, Australian Tropical Herbarium
- Dr Angie Reid, Senior Project Coordinator, NAILSMA

These experts discussed how cane toads and other pests are changing Australia's natural landscapes—and how science, Indigenous knowledge, and innovation can offer new ways of thinking about biosecurity and biodiversity. They also responded to thoughtful questions from the audience, creating a dynamic and inclusive conversation on managing invasive species.

Dr Allan Dale, also a TNQ Drought Hub partner, said, "It was such a great atmosphere, and I really enjoyed the informal setting and broad Cairns audience. The event was a great opportunity to explore landscape-scale biosecurity, biodiversity, culture, and resilience through the lens of invasive species management."
The event offered a refreshing and engaging look at complex environmental issues, blending science, culture, and community in a truly local experience.

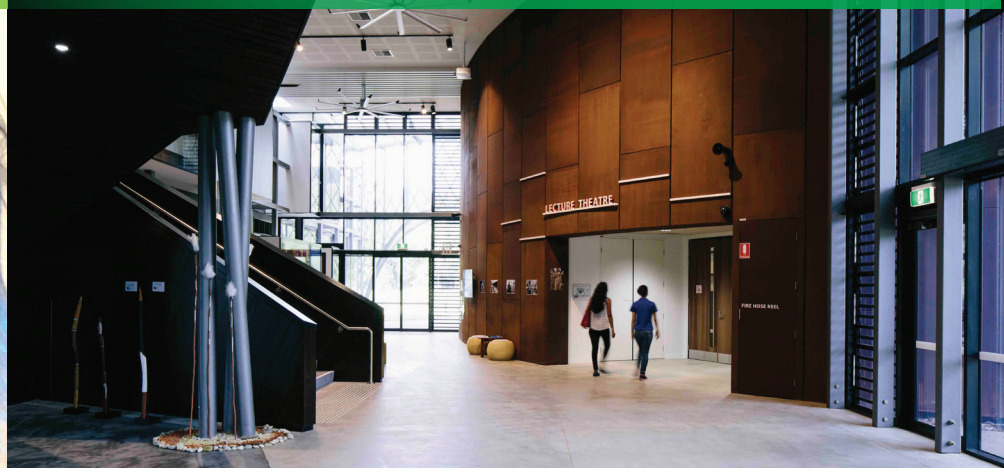
The whole series is enlightening on the various invasive species we now have in Australia. Eat The Invaders can be viewed on ABC iview.



Image: left to right are Gerry Turpin, Samantha Martin, Angie Reid, Adam Stephen, Alexander Watson, Allan Dale, Gavin Singleton and Barry Hunter at the Salt House in Cairns 2nd April 2025.

THE CAIRNS INSTITUTE
Research in tropical societies


Adjunct Prof Ernest Hunter



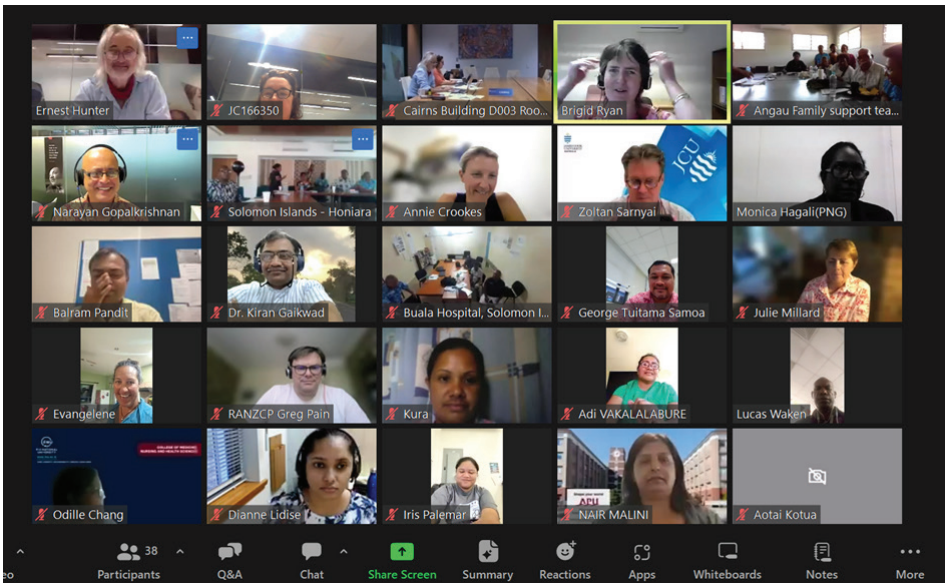
Creating Futures special recognition

The Creating Futures initiative—an independent, task-focused collaboration of individuals and institutions—has been recognised in the 2025 special edition of Australasian Psychiatry *(Vol. 33, Issue 2),* which focuses on mental health in Pacific Island countries. Coordinated through The Cairns Institute (TCI), Creating Futures (CF) is built on a foundation of long-term, trust-based relationships across geography, sectors, and interests, with the shared goal of strengthening mental health systems across the Pacific.

The edition commemorates the 20th anniversary of the Creating Futures initiative and follows the success of the 2023 Creating Futures Conference (CF23), held under the theme *"Responding to Mental Health Challenges in Uncertain Times"* and in conjunction with **Oevaru,** the inaugural mental health conference in the Maldives. The journal invited submissions from CF23 participants and contributors, resulting in a dedicated issue that reflects the breadth of collaboration fostered over two decades.

Adjunct Professor Ernest Hunter, a founding member of the initiative, provided the editorial and facilitated the connection with colleagues in the Maldives – what is hoped will be the beginning of an Indo-Pacific Island Nations collaboration that had it origins in the Leadership in Mental Health: Island Nations courses run under the auspices of Creating Futures and TCI.

A deeper understanding of the relevance and history of CF is outlined in the article "Creating futures out of the conference: 20 years of strengthening mental health capacity in the Pacific", co-authored by Brigid Ryan (St Vincents), Jennifer McHugh (TCI), and Annie Crookes (University of South Pacific). The article traces the evolution of the initiative and highlights the power of ethical, inclusive partnerships in addressing regional mental health needs. The 2023 conference drew 420 participants from 25 countries, linking virtually with Oevaru, and expanding the initiative's reach into the Indian Ocean region.



THE CAIRNS INSTITUTE
Research in tropical societies



CREATING FUTURES 20th ANNIVERSARY
20 years of Strengthening Mental Health Capacity in the Pacific in 2023

Continued.

Featured Articles in the Special Edition: Pacific Islands Mental Health (partial list)

1. *Different oceans; Common challenges. Ernest Hunter.*
2. *Creating futures out of the conference: 20 years of strengthening mental health capacity in the Pacific. Brigid Ryan, Jennifer McHugh & Annie Crookes.*
3. *"Oevaru" 2023:Ocean Currents and the journey of an inaugural mental Health conference in the Maldives. Arif Mohamed, Shanooha Mansoor.*
4. *Challenges and opportunities in the mental health landscape of the Maldives. Arif Mohamed, Shanooha Mansoor.*
5. *A new mental health initiative in the Maldives: A preliminary study of group therapy in Male.' Fathimath Sofiya Rasheed, Fathimath Rishtha Abdul Majeedh, Fathmath Lubaina Rasheed, Sidra Abdulla, Ali Mikhail Mahmood Razee.*
6. *Weaving the strands together for a stronger future; Responding to mental health need of Pacific children and young people. Nicholas Kowalenko, Monica Hagali, Paul Robertson, Craig Heron, Mandy Douch, Juana Katze, Ben Rodgers and Ruby Awram.*
7. *Framing the future: Ensuring vulnerable island communities are engaged. Natalie Cutler, Michele Ramsey, Odille Chang, Silina Motofaga and Julie Millard.*
8. *Creating a mental health Talanoa to promote a collaborative approach to wellbeing across Pacific peoples. Jioji Ravulo.*
9. *A call for multi-agency collaboration in the Pacific Island countries' mental health – The World Federation for Mental Health viewpoint. Neeraj Gill.*
10. *Making It Real: Actioning the Mental Health Strategy with Pacific Island Communities. Narayan Gopalkrishnan and Annie Crookes*
11. *The mental health impact of climate change on Pacific Islanders: A systematic review focused on vulnerability and resilience. Netsanet Ayele Mengesha and Zoltan Sarnyai.*
12. *Contextualising Psychological First Aid for the Pacific Island Countries. Malini Nair and Serik Meirmanov.*
13. *Balancing progress and well-being: Assessing impacts on mental well-beiong from development initiatives in the Maldives. Mizna Mohamed, Mariyam Shabeena Ahmed, Ahmed Jameel (will appear in the next issue of Australasian Psychiatry).*

The appearance of five papers from the Maldives in an international journal will serve to launch the leadup to Oevaru 2 which will be held in the Maldives in 2026. With COP26 potentially being in the region, preliminary discussions are underway regarding some activity under Creating Futures to support those from different oceans facing common challenges.

Articles can be accessed https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/apya/33/2





Prof Allan Dale



WCFS2025 celebrates Innovation, Resilience and Opportunities

Over 250 delegates gathered in Weipa on 7–8 May 2025 for the sold out Western Cape Futures Symposium (WCFS)—a landmark event that celebrated innovation, regional leadership, and the cultural and economic potential of Far North Queensland.

Coordinated by Jennifer McHugh from The Cairns Institute (TCI), the symposium brought together Traditional Owners, policymakers, business leaders, community organisations, and young people to explore future-focused opportunities across the Western Cape. The event was locally driven and held in partnership with the Western Cape Chamber of Commerce, Aurukun, Mapoon, Napranum and Cook Shire Councils, the Weipa Town Authority, James Cook University (JCU), the Torres & Cape Indigenous Council Alliance, the Western Cape Communities Trust, and Rio Tinto.

Attendees travelled from across Australia and internationally—including Singapore, the Northern Territory, Perth, and Canberra—to be part of this important regional conversation. The two-day program featured over 50 inspiring speakers. Keynote presentations from national leaders such as Professor Tom Calma AO and Prof Veena Sahajwalla highlighted themes of social justice, sustainability, and circular economy. JCU contributors included Allan Dale, Hurriyet Babacan, and Jim Turnour, alongside Tropical North Queensland Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub (TNQ Drought Hub) members Jen McHugh, David Phelps, and Karen George, who chaired sessions.

Topics spanned Indigenous innovation, regional development, water and food security, tourism, marine sustainability, and the emerging space industry. Breakout sessions provided opportunities for dialogue and reflection among community members and stakeholders, while evening networking events celebrated local arts and culture. One of the event highlights was the Business Support & Security Public Forum, which offered community members direct access to practical advice and services from leading agencies.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with participants valuing the diversity of voices and perspectives. The event proved to be a powerful platform for regional collaboration, capability building, and future planning.




Prof Venna Sahajwalla & Jaime Gane



Continued

Reflecting on the event's success, Symposium Chair Jaime Gane said: "The 2025 Western Cape Futures Symposium was a powerful testament to what's possible when passionate people come together with purpose. The energy, ideas, and connections sparked here will shape our region for years to come."

Building on the momentum, a Youth Symposium (*pictured below*) was held on 9 May with around 50 students from Western Cape College. This session empowered young people to share their vision for the region and explore career pathways in innovation, environment, business, and leadership.



Supported by the Tropical North Queensland Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub and sponsors including Space Centre Australia, National Australia Bank, QANTAS, and Cape York Natural Resources Management, the Symposium reinforced the region's commitment to inclusive growth and long-term sustainability.

With its strong focus on solutions grounded in culture, community, and resilience, the Western Cape Futures Symposium affirmed its role as a catalyst for transformative action and a vital meeting ground for shaping the region's future.



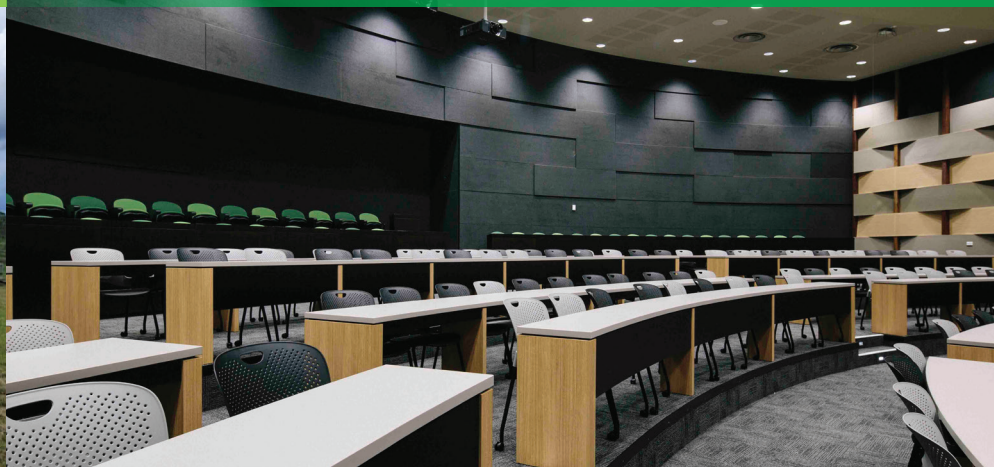
Images:Above are MP Bryson Head Member for Callide, MP Bree James Member for Barron and MP David Kempton Member for Cook and Jennifer McHugh. Below are Former PM Scott Morrison with local business-owner Brooke Quartermain. Bottom image is Ernest Madua.







Cooktown State School students



AgInspiration tour cultivating curiosity in youth

Over three action-packed days (1-3 April), 27 students from Cooktown State School set out on an unforgettable journey into the heart of Far North Queensland agriculture as part of the 2025 Cooktown Ag Inspirations.

With support from Tropical North Queensland Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub (TNQ Drought Hub) and Cape York Natural Resource Management and delivered by the AgForce School to Industry Partnership Program, this initiative continues to spark curiosity, build understanding, and inspire the next generation of agricultural leaders.

Day 1 – Fruit, Fun and Future Thinking at Lily Creek Farm

The tour kicked off with energy and excitement as students explored Lily Creek Farm, a tropical oasis growing dragon fruit, passionfruit, rambutan, and jackfruit. For many, it was their first taste of these exotic fruits – and judging by their reactions, certainly not the last.

Electric vehicles whisked students across the property, giving them a unique view of sustainable farming in action. The day was a hands-on introduction to the diversity of agriculture and the transferable skills it offers.

Day 2 – Innovation and Impact at Red Valley Farms

Next stop was Red Valley Farms, home to Australia's largest exotic mushroom facility. Guided by Peter and Derick, students discovered the complex science behind mushroom production, peeking into cool rooms and witnessing the logistics behind an enterprise powered by 150 passionate staff.

From banana cable carts to recycled mulch in the avocado orchard, innovation was everywhere. The group gained insight into how sustainability, technology, and teamwork underpin this successful ag business, highlighting real-world career pathways right on their doorstep.

Day 3 – From Bananas to Branding at Kureen and Crocodile Station

The final day delivered a mix of crop production and livestock handling. Kureen Farming offered students the chance to try cutting banana bunches and learn about irrigation and cropping techniques. Then it was off to Crocodile Station, where Karlene and Roy gave a crash course in cattle work, from branding and tagging to low-stress stock handling.

Ag Inspirations is more than a school excursion, it is an investment in the future of agriculture. By connecting students with local ag enterprises, the program shows how diverse, innovative, and rewarding careers in agriculture can be. It is a chance to build awareness, spark ambition, and cultivate the skills needed to ensure the long-term sustainability of the sector.

With demand for ag professionals growing and regional challenges becoming more complex, empowering young people to be part of the solution is essential.

Image: Cooktown students at Lily Creek Farm. Credit: AgForce School to Industry Partnership.



Prof Allan Dale



Northern Australia Food Futures Conference

At the 2025 Northern Australia Food Futures Conference, held April 8–9 in Darwin, Professor Allan Dale, delivered his keynote address titled "Where to Next: Development in Northern Australia." His presentation emphasized the necessity of integrated regional planning and collaborative governance to unlock the region's agricultural potential. Allan highlighted the importance of aligning infrastructure development, policy frameworks, and community engagement to foster sustainable growth in Northern Australia's agri-food sectors.

In addition to his keynote, Professor Dale chaired the Industry Roundtable Breakfast, an invitation-only event that convened key government and industry representatives. The roundtable facilitated open discussions on pressing challenges such as biosecurity resilience, infrastructure development, and investment barriers. Participants, including policymakers and industry leaders, collaborated to identify actionable strategies aimed at enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of Northern Australia's agricultural sector.

The conference, centered around the theme "Innovative Agribusiness in Northern Australia: Nurturing Natural Assets for Future Growth," served as a pivotal platform for stakeholders to explore opportunities and forge partnerships. Allan's contributions underscored the critical role of strategic leadership and cross-sector collaboration in shaping a resilient and prosperous future for agriculture in the region.





Images: Northern Australia Food Futures Industry Roundtable (above) and (below) Northern Australia Food Futures Panel. Credit: J. McHugh.



WCFS 2025 Delegates



What's happening in the Institute?

Details for these events can be found at: www.cairnsinstitute.jcu.edu.au/upcoming-events/

Events in 2025	Date & location
Hot Pursuit: Maritime & Port Law JCU Law Series | Dr Michael Underdown	29 May, Cairns and online
Plastic, People and the Power of Local Action JCU Inspiration on Tap Series | Salt House	4 June, Cairns
Lapita Rochia shell rings in Vanuatu: Manufacture and Use CIEHF Seminar Series | A/Prof Michelle Langley	5 June, Online
Ceremonies of Kinship CIEHF Seminar Series | Dr Jacinta Walsh	3 July, Online
Developing Northern Australia Conference 2025 Convention Centre	22-24 July, Cairns
The Power of Conflict Coaching JCU Law Series | Dr Judith Rafferty	29 July, Cairns and online
Museum Collections and Repatriating Ancestors CIEHF Seminar Series | Dr Leah Lui-Chivizhe	7 August, Online
The importance of Indigenous Astronomical Knowledge when studying Environmental Histories CIEHF Seminar Series | A/Prof Duane Hamacher	4 September, Online

