

**Immediate release:** Monday 11 February 2013

## **Food bowl could disadvantage many northern residents**

In a new study recently published in the *Biological Conservation* journal, researchers have quantified the economic and social impacts of possible future development scenarios in the Northern Territory.

The team, which includes social scientists, economists and ecologists from the Tropical Rivers and Coastal Knowledge program, used data from several research projects conducted over six years (2006-11) in the Daly River catchment south of Darwin.

The catchment contains very large groundwater supplies which could potentially support increased agricultural development.

James Cook University's Professor Natalie Stoeckl said they found that water-intensive developments affect rivers and fish habitats and that this may have a negative impact on many people.

"Using data from earlier research, we assessed the effect of six different types of economic development on water resources, aquatic habitats and the incomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people," Professor Stoeckl said.

"We found that all six types of 'conventional' development served to widen, rather than close, the socio-economic gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

"Australia's north is important, not just for its ability to produce things like agricultural products and minerals, but because of its biodiversity, which is valued locally by all sectors of the community, and throughout the world."

Griffith University's Dr Sue Jackson said decision makers need to be very careful with any development that will degrade the environment.

"Many Indigenous people rely on a healthy environment for bush tucker and have strong social and cultural connections with the land and river systems, and many non-Indigenous people like to use rivers for fishing and other types of recreation," Dr Jackson said.

"When assessing development proposals it's important to look not just at the dollars earned, but also the social and environmental impacts.

"There may be some good opportunities that are socially and culturally appropriate – for example ecotourism and/or carbon farming – which help to conserve the region's biodiversity and natural assets. If we only look at dollars, we may miss these other chances."

*Additional funding for this study was provided by the Australian Government's National Environmental Research Program.*

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