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The Australian Rangeland Society

Plans are useless: but Planning is essential. A Warning and a Promise for Northern Development

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Abstract

Will Northern Development be driven by fake news and alt-right conspiracies?

Civic process internationally is now dominated by actors who claim "there is no alternative" to their chosen worldview. Leaders insist we must make painful trade-offs instead of insisting that we work together to co-create new forms of mutual benefit. And vast segments of reality are privatised. Data is the property of powerful interests who weaponise the facts to support their specific viewpoint.

We think of regional development and national policy in Australia as being immune to virulent strains of coercive power-politics as seen overseas. But listen to a day of Parliamentary sittings and you will find strong evidence that Australia's political and corporate culture is deteriorating rapidly.

Decisions for Northern Development are being taken in this dysfunctional civic context, and we are the worse for it. This paper argues for a planning-centric approach that leverages our strongest collective abilities.

Humans possess an extraordinary capacity to cooperatively manifest new realities. Our innate intelligence can be deployed in our common interest, but to do so will demand a significant maturation of our plan-making processes. Regional Natural Resource Management (NRM) and planning provide a foundation on which to build this discourse.

Planning, the verb, the consensual activity, is the ideal way to achieve fair, just, and healthy development. In the North we have an unprecedented opportunity to realise the benefits of a planning culture. Let's do it.

Wasted water or wasting our breath?

Look at all that water running straight out to sea (Fig. 1). Six thousand gigalitres going to waste every year. What a missed opportunity. It smacks of a kind of backwardness. Recall that previous generations used the term *terra nullius* to describe lands where the local inhabitants failed to put their natural resources to good use.



Fig. 1. Fitzroy River in flood

“Wasted” is the emotive trigger here, menacingly directed at the body politic. More nuanced, inclusive discussion is held hostage. To disarm emotional arguments, we rely on facts. Here’s a sample of recent fact-finding missions into the matter of wasted water:

- Prof Michael Douglas led a \$30M Tropical Rivers and Coastal Knowledge research program from 2005-2016. The resulting science thoroughly debunks the notion that northern water is going to waste.
- Prof Andrew Campbell, inaugural Director of the Research Institute for Environment and Livelihoods, urged innovation and creative development opportunities because RIEL’s 50 researchers reached the inescapable conclusion that northern ecosystems are fragile.
- The nation’s most conservative academics issued a blunt warning to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia: large-scale agricultural developments are profoundly vulnerable in the North where profits cannot be hitched to a reliable production cycle (Australian Academy of Sciences 2014).

Cubic metres of research has concluded that: (1) savanna and marine ecosystems are highly dependent on flood waters; and (2) the vast monsoon-driven runoff volumes occur in places and at times unsuited to large-scale irrigated agriculture and grazing land developments.

In the face of the facts, we might expect that our political leaders and captains of industry would shift gears and champion a more plausible future based on the actual realities of the country.

Far from it. One salient example: at this year’s prestigious Develop the North Conference, Gina Rinehart, now the imposing captain of the Kidman Empire, pleaded for common sense to prevail as she lamented (you guessed it) the gigalitres of water “going to waste down the Fitzroy” (Hancock Prospecting Group 2017).

Reinhart shamelessly puts the “wasted water” meme back into the headlines where we are forced yet again to expend civic energy to refute it. But Gina is not alone. Messaging from the cashed-up spruikers of kayfabe capitalism saturates every corner of public space (Tilove 2015).

Powerful voices will always speak from a position of banal self-interest. In current discourse, however, we have difficulty channelling that energy into common good outcomes. We are not equipped to absorb Gina into a mature decision-making process. It is increasingly difficult to locate the Commons, the civic space and time where we conduct the business of community.

We need a plan. A useful one.

In Eisenhower’s re-telling of battlefield wisdom, Plans are useless because once the enemy is engaged anything can happen...and most of it will not have been foreseen in the Plan. But planning is essential: for two reasons.

First, planning brings focus to an anticipated future. A group of people united in the act of planning will consider many possible angles and options. The consultative and brainstorming phases of planning give everyone involved a chance to develop insights, exercise imagination, and co-create the point-cloud of partial truths that will illuminate a whole.

Second, the act of planning is both evidence of--and a commitment to--social cohesion. Planning cannot occur when the plannees are not speaking to one another. Planning cannot be faked. It demands an egalitarian ethic, and collapses in the presence of coercion. Ministers and magnates can proclaim Plans. But they cannot proclaim planning.

What makes a Plan good?

I am involved with Regional NRM (natural resource management) Plans and have asked myself many times: what makes a plan really great? Fig. 2 helps me frame an answer. This is an entity relationship diagram, the “plan” that sits under a database. It is similar to one featured in a story shared by renowned Top End linguistic researcher Prof Michael Christie to attendees at a Desert Knowledge CRC conference (c. 2007).

He wanted to know if a database could accurately encode the laws and permissions related to traditional stories of some Arnhemland peoples. This encoding took years. The resulting database was, by many accounts, impossible to operate.

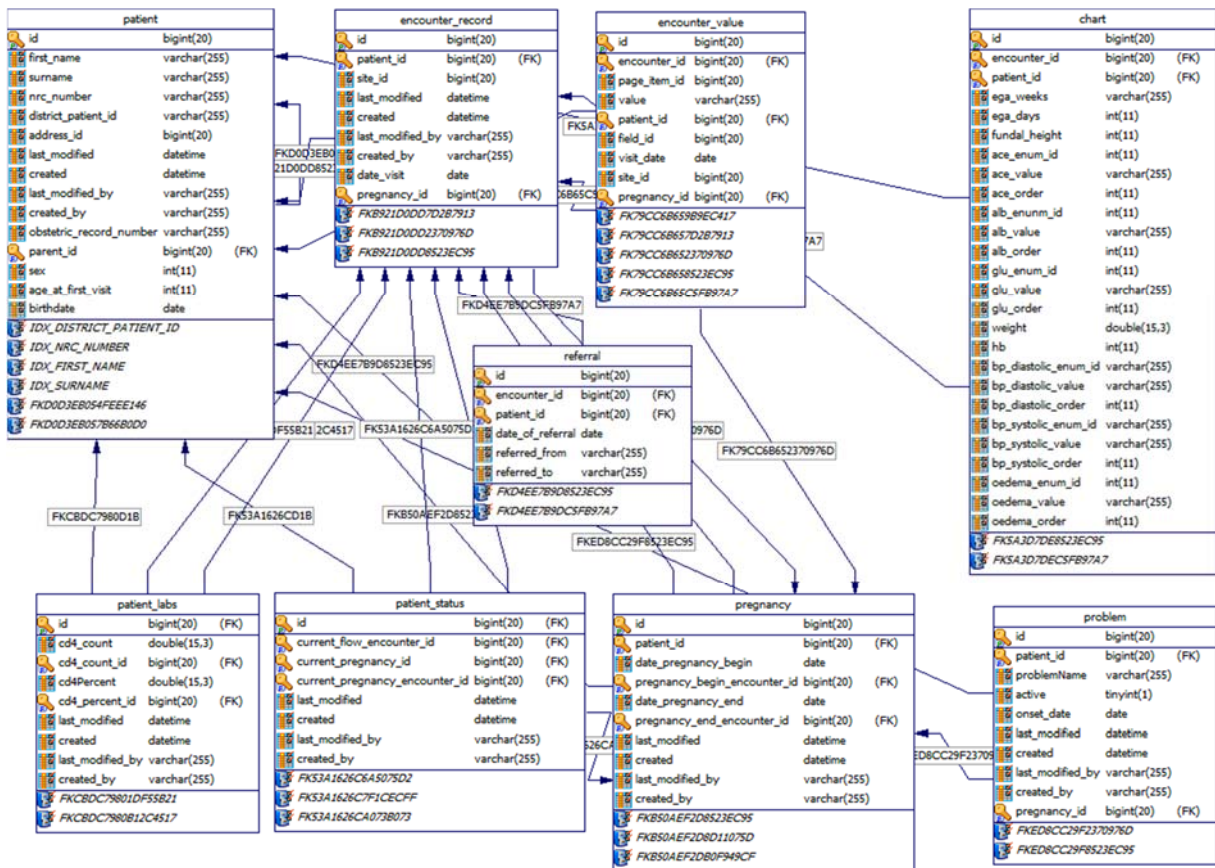


Fig. 2 A Plan expressed as an entity-relationship diagram

He asked the elders: “Do you think this is an accurate reflection of your laws and stories?” They guffawed. Not even close. “But,” they said, “look here.” They pointed to dust on the floor. “This is what we’re looking at...the footprints around the computer. We want to know: who is curious? Who comes to learn about their culture? These are the ones we watch.” The elders were keenly observing the process of planning, and did not give a stuff about the plan itself.

A Plan must be good enough to attract footprints. What are the key attributes of such a Plan? What makes it so compelling that people will be drawn into its processes not just once, but time and again?

I believe a Plan should tell the people’s story by answering seven questions:

- 1: Who has been involved, and how?
- 2: What are the aspirations and perils that the Plan is concerned with?
- 3: What are the limits of coverage: physical, conceptual, and temporal?
- 4: What other plans does it reinforce or draw upon?
- 5: Are there differing or conflicting Plans?
- 6: What are the consequences expected by following (and not following) the Plan?
7. Who is most affected by these consequences, and what do they have to say?

Regional NRM Plans must address these questions if they are to inspire a culture of planning.

Our Regional NRM Plans have been rightly critiqued as erratic, inconsistent, and poorly implemented. But these critics are looking at the finger pointing to the sky, not the moon at which the finger is pointing.

Regional NRM Plans are evidence of a remarkable social process that opens new understanding of ourselves and the land we are part of. These Plans are evidence of a culture of cooperation displacing a cult of coercion.

Which way is north? Who decides?

North isn't real. The Earth exudes something we call *magnetic force*, but the Earth exists in completeness without the idea of *north*.

It is we humans who overlay the world with north. We agree to its meaning and thereby intensify our capacity for societal cooperation. North is an example of what Yuval Noah Hariri calls "inter-subjective reality" (Holding 2015):

The inter-subjective is made up of the things in which many individuals, within the larger community, believe. Thus if an individual changes his or her beliefs it makes little to no difference to the beliefs of the community as a whole. Inter-subjective beliefs only change, mutate or disappear at societal level.

The inter-subjective has no actual existence within the natural world in the same way that radioactivity does. It is made up of the socially constructed ideas that exist in our collective imagination. Nevertheless the impact of the inter-subjective on the world is enormous: law, money, gods, nations, the notion of human rights and justice are all examples of inter-subjective phenomenon.

Hariri observes that our species exhibits an astonishing ability to invent cooperative realities, like the implacably infectious money meme. In fact, modern humans are completely dependent on their talent for making stuff up. Without inter-subjective reality, we would find it impossible to cooperate at the scale of a city, much less across global networks.

It is our gift for imagining something that does not exist which allows us to cooperate in changing that which does exist. An alarming proposition, and perhaps the key to our survival over coming generations.

Singing up a culture of Planning

The future confronting us is ominous. We have burdened ourselves with a gargantuan machinery of economics that turns out to be indifferent to biological imperative. Worse: we have yet to admit to a staggering ignorance of our proper place in the ecosphere. We simply don't know what we're doing here on the planet (or in North Australia).

Invented realities ought to serve our best interests, so the critical question is: who decides what our best interests are? Can we improve our capacity for "collective best interest-making"?

What we're aiming to shape, through the protocols of planning, is a social habit of mind, primed for life-affirming inter-subjectivity. Great plans reveal the tortured path, the trade-offs, the misgivings, and the outlier ideas. Planning requires us to be explicit about who was involved and what was said. The construction of North Australia is a cooperative act, and planning requires us all at the table, including Gina (Fig. 3).

We already have a terrific foundation in place: the regional NRM Planning culture. We can build a social norm around planning. It's time to get over the cringe and stand up for our Plans, because planning is how we will find the most commendable paths into the unforeseeable futures before us.



Fig. 3 Planning session, Mt Surprise 2016 (photo Melissa Bethel)

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