

Preface

Northern Australia holds a special place in the hearts of most Australians, but it is particularly important to the million or so people who actually live north of the Tropic of Capricorn. While I grew up and live in Queensland's Wet Tropics, I've also had the pleasure of having worked across several of the north's diverse landscapes and communities, including Cape York Peninsula, the Torres Strait, the Gulf of Carpentaria, and the Northern Territory. My career has also been spent working closely with key northern industries, including mining, pastoralism, and tourism. Given my long experience in the north, I reckon it is a place like no other on the planet; a rich history and diverse set of cultures close to the Asia Pacific, a stunning landscape and a place of tremendous opportunity. These are just some of the reasons why northern Australians so deeply value the unique lifestyle that the north offers. Having also spent time working and living in Australia's populated capitals, however, I can also see why many in the nation's south also hold passionate views about the development and conservation of this special place.

No matter where you live in Australia, it would be hard not to notice that lately there has been much excited chatter in government circles, the media and academia about the future development and potential of northern Australia. Australian agriculturalists are looking to the nation's north to escape the high profile decline in water and soil resources in places like the Murray Darling. At the same time, many national governments across the globe are also looking to the north with a weather-eye on their own food security. Many Australians are also conscious that booming mineral and gas exploration and development across the north has helped underpin the nation's economic success in recent years. At the same time, the south's conservation sector would like to see much of the north preserved as iconic wilderness. Additionally, both conservation and resource development interests alike are often at odds with the interests of the north's traditional owners, many of whom remain trapped in welfare dependency and poverty.

There is indeed much opportunity for northern Australians within these new national debates. The past five decades of north Australian history, however, have largely been characterized by several national-scale conflicts being played out within and around regional and local communities in the north. Some of these have centered on the impact of major mining development such as the Coronation Hill dispute in Kakadu National Park and the development of gas processing facilities at James Price Point in the Kimberley. Others have concerned the growing

regulation of development opportunities within the northern Australian landscape, best represented by the proposed *Wild River* declarations in Cape York Peninsula. These types of development and conservation-based conflicts, however, strongly interface with the bigger policy debates about ‘closing the gap’ between Indigenous and other Australians. Importantly, all three of these conflicts have strong south-to-north drivers as it is the south that has the political power, money and population to deliver big changes in northern communities and landscapes.

With the view of learning from the past to help secure a brighter future for the north, this book explores the deep cultural drivers behind these south-to-north conflicts and suggests that a cultural divide between the north and the south needs to be reconciled if the nation as a whole is to benefit from this new phase of northern development. I first explore where the continuation of these historical conflicts could take us without a clear forward or guiding agenda. To do this, I tell personal stories from my long and diverse experiences in the north. To seek some conclusions, the book draws on these stories to help shape a cohesive agenda for the future.

My key take-home message is that the coming new phase of northern development doesn’t have to repeat the litany of major policy and development conflicts that have riddled the recent past. The key to genuine progress relies on new approaches to policy development, planning at the regional and landscape scale and decision making about major projects. This will require governments, conservation interests, industries, and those in the north changing the culture away from how things have been done in the past. In all cases, this culture change means the parties *really* sitting down together to jointly decide the future directions that we will need to be taking together for the long term. Quality science and evidence need to infuse the decision-making processes being used, and together we need to monitor our joint progress toward shared goals. Much more also needs to be done to devolve the power for decision making into the north.

In telling these stories and in drawing out these conclusions, it could have been argued that there is no real north–south divide in Australia but instead just a rural–urban one. Others would argue that a similar east–west divide exists in Australia as well. I’d argue that while this case *could* be made, the north is so much less populated, less developed, and so culturally and climatically different to the south, that the difference is well worth highlighting. I’d make the case that the divide is real, even if only to draw attention to the importance of the north in a national context and the need for these conflict themes to be resolved to secure the whole nation’s future.



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Future

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