

Mark Horstman, ACF's Campaigns Coordinator for Queensland and Kevin Guy of TWS, recently returned from five weeks on Cape York Peninsula. There they visited several Aboriginal communities, with the aim of establishing and reinforcing the ties between the locals and conservationists, and to identify common goals to protect the Peninsula from large scale commercial exploitation.

CAPE YORK

the second wave of occupation

A common European perception of wilderness is of a pristine environment; an alien place we can only visit temporarily; land that relies on our very absence to retain its wilderness qualities. We often describe Cape York Peninsula as wilderness, in terms of its vast areas of land that remain relatively unchanged by the ravages of industrial "progress". Such places are all too rare in the world's tropics. But to describe the same areas to the local Aboriginal people as wilderness is to meet a cultural impasse, and to render the definition meaningless.

Aborigines and Islanders of Cape York Peninsula are intimately familiar with this humanised landscape. The non-Aboriginal idea of wilderness, as a separate entity, holds little meaning to these people. They regard the region – the rivers, the rock outcrops, the forests, the beaches, the sand dunes – as part of themselves. Upon returning after many years to their tribal lands they have expressed dismay that no one has been 'looking after' their country.

"The Aborigines regarded the land – the actual shape of the country they lived in – as inextricably bound to the people, who "belonged" to it. Europeans on the other hand, regarded the land and associated fauna as an inorganic and alien mass to be kicked into life or destroyed at their pleasure."

R Fitzgerald, *From the Dreaming to 1915*

The ugliness of commercialism is rife in Queensland's far north. Isolated Aboriginal communities are overwhelmed by the rising wave of capital-intensive development and extractive industries poised over the Peninsula. The pre-election agreements from both the Queensland and Federal Governments to undertake a joint land-use study, emphasising the significance of the Peninsula to Aborigines and

Islander people, have faded in favour of major development proposals.

On the Peninsula's eastern coast, a community of about 450 people at Lockhart River is besieged by large-scale development proposals, such as at Lloyd Bay, where a \$400 million tourist and subdivision complex on freehold land is planned by the company Farndale. It will include three motel complexes, golf course, dude ranch, marina, and a permanent non-Aboriginal settlement of more than three hundred people. The boundary of the complex runs uncomfortably close to the *bora* ground, a sacred place for initiation ceremonies, and the last such active site on the eastern seaboard. Aboriginal communities have no secure tenure to their land under the inadequate land rights legislation of Queensland known as the Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT). Under this Deed the traditional owners act as caretakers to their land while the Government retains possession of it. The State Government has absolute power in determining the use and disposal of the DOGIT lands and can allow forestry, mining or other commercial purposes without the approval of the Aboriginal community.

Just north, at Temple Bay, the Cape York Space Agency proposes to construct a commercial spaceport facility involving a town, airport and up to ten launch pads, which is expected to initially attract at least half a million tourists each year.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Lockhart River community feels acutely threatened. The community is opposed to becoming a minority in their own land, and resent the expectation from the developers that they will perform as a kind of living souvenir shop. Following an unsuccessful action in the Supreme Court, the community council has launched a High Court appeal against the rezoning of the land for tourism.

The Aurukun community, on the west-



Two Yir Yoront girls, Selina Possum and Sharima Greenwool, from the Kowanyama community.

□ Photo: Anna Reynolds

ern coast, face comparable pressures. For over a decade this community has been battling against the incursions onto their land by the company Comalco, which owns the world's largest bauxite mine at Weipa. The company now intends to expand with the addition of an alumina refinery and will encroach further into Aurukun land. Aurukun elders recently met with the Queensland Government asking them to stop Comalco from seismic exploration on their land and to express their opposition to the refinery – but to no avail.

Another Aboriginal community, at Kowanyama, situated near the mouth of the Mitchell River, is developing a long-term strategy to empower the community in the management of their land. The

Mitchell River is one of the largest rivers in Australia and runs from east to west across the base of the Peninsula, finally draining into the south of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Goldmining, fertilisers, pesticides, grazing, planned sand-mining by Geo-Peko, recreation, and a commercial barramundi fishery all considerably effect the overall condition of the river.

The Kowanyama community depends on the Mitchell River for food, and their council is proposing that all river users cooperate in a management plan for the entire catchment to keep the river healthy. This enterprising community has been running a helicopter surveillance program to monitor commercial and recreational fishing, funded entirely from camping fees. Last

month they brought Ministers, government departments, representatives of the private sector, ACF and Aboriginal councils together to discuss a co-operative approach to land management.

Conservation policies must be developed with the involvement and advice of the Aboriginal and Islander people if they are to bear any social relevance to Cape York Peninsula. Yet pre-election commitments to a moratorium on developments until the land-use study is completed do not appear to be honoured, as detailed proposals for a RAAF base, spaceport, and alumina refinery continue to be pushed through. To the Aboriginal and Islander people of the Peninsula, the second wave of occupation is well under way. □