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The XXI International Grassland Congress / VIII International Rangeland Congress took place in Hohhot, China from June 29 through July 5, 2008.

Proceedings edited by Organizing Committee of 2008 IGC/IRC Conference

Published by Guangdong People's Publishing House

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Townsville tropical savannas—an innovative approach to urban-rural education and ecotourism

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Key words : tropical savannas , urban nature , ecotourism , education , co-learning

Introduction On the eastern coast of Australia the northern tropical savannas intermix with the urban environments of Townsville City . The city itself is surrounded by and lies within a mosaic of naturally grassy , near pristine savanna hills and valleys . Further this mix of tropical savannas and urban environments abuts the iconic Great Barrier Reef World and Wet Tropics World Heritage Areas . Hence special consideration is demanded from a sustainability perspective in terms of catchment protection and management of the total water cycle . The newly amalgamated City of Townsville has a regional jurisdiction of 4000 sq km and only 200 sq km of this area is actually urban , the rest is natural or degrading rangelands awaiting urbanisation . The opportunity to link urban and rural people to each other and to their environments exists and seems important (Hodgkinson , et al . , 2002 , and Dagget , 2000) .

Materials and methods Encapsulated by the term Urban Nature-Townsville City Council is utilising and applying the concepts , theories and practices of Ecotourism (as a surrogate conversation about sustainability) ; Community Development (CD) principles ; and organisational learning in order to enable people to connect to the environment in which they live and act sustainably . Ecotourism offers obvious environmental benefits accompanied by socially responsible , culturally sensitive , economic opportunities . With a growing interest by international tourists for eco-experiences the ecotourism business model offers innovative options to connect and educate locals and visitors on our environments . The application of ecotourism principles for educating locals and school students flows from the development of an integrated or total water cycle management approach-Creek to Coral program (Bruce , 2005) .

Discussion Townsville City Council has developed an innovative-Community-Based Education & Involvement (CBE&I) suite of processes , projects and partnerships with NGO's and community built around the 4 C"s (Catchment tours , Curriculum , Creekwatch , and Coastal-marine) and designed to foster ownership of our savannas and water resources from "Creek to Coral" (Bruce and Mackenzie , 2005) . The creek part starts in the grassy catchments surrounding (Mt Stuart) and within the city itself (Castle Hill) . Beyond traditional education our "ecotours" commence at the top of the catchment where the various areas to be visited are pointed out from the summit and then these educational tours descend into the catchment visiting sites often allowing otherwise hidden environments to be disclosed . These same wooded grasslands are important for water quality protection and offer important opportunities to connect urban dwellers to the landscape in which they live-a dry tropical or monsoonal landscape for which they generally know little about , an attribute which is shared globally (Hodgkinson , et al . , 2002) . As such it also offers an opportunity to link urbanites to the vast and surrounding rural savannas of northern Australia as well as the people that live in them . Council staff now average 1500 local school students participating on these ecotours annually . In November 2006 Townsville City became the first known local government in the world to receive *Advanced Ecotourism Certification* for our "Eco-catchment Education Tours" product (as awarded by peak organisation-Ecotourism Australia) . This product though non-commercial incorporates thematically based interpretation ; curriculum approaches to education (of students , youth and community) ; outdoor practical learnscapes ; youth forums (local/international) ; and collaborative learning (co-learning) . The product enables us to foster opportunities to promote and support development of ancillary tourism opportunities in the peri-urban and rural rangelands enhancing enterprise and interactive understanding (via workshops , seminars and conferences) . The Council also fosters connection to the surrounding wider rural landscape via an electronic network of local governments-Burdekin Dry Tropics Local Government Network (NRM) , involving Landcare and local regional NRM group (Burdekin Dry Tropics) .

Conclusions The Council's path of obtaining accredited ecotourism product for educational initiatives offers the opportunity to diffuse knowledge through partnerships and collaborative learning thus creating enhanced networks which can foster rural-urban relationships in the tropical savannas as well as educating residents , visitors and students .

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