

Increasing First Nations Participation in Northern Australia's Forestry Sector



This submission has been prepared by the members of the Forestry Industry Association Northern Territory, Tiwi Plantation Corporation, Gumatj Corporation, Charles Darwin University, the Northern Territory Government's Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade, and Midway Limited.



We acknowledge and respect the traditional custodians whose ancestral lands we live and work on and we also pay our respects to their Elders past and present. We acknowledge and respect the deep spiritual attachment and the relationship that Aboriginal people have to country. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this publication may contain images or names of deceased persons or sites of cultural significance. We sincerely apologise for any distress, sadness and/or offence this may cause.

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Executive summary

Aboriginal owned and controlled forestry enterprises in Northern Australia are rapidly developing and can provide place based economic opportunities for Traditional Owners. The emergence of the carbon credit market and the capacity to generate these through plantation and native forestry offers an additional income stream to wood fibre and sawlog products. Increasing the Aboriginal workforce participation in forestry in the Northern Territory and Ord Valley could generate hundreds of job opportunities and be transformational for individuals, families and communities. This submission, led by the Forestry Industry Association Northern Territory (FIANT), identifies a locally developed, collaborative pathway to increased and sustainable employment.

There are 13 million hectares of Aboriginal-owned and/or managed native forest in the Northern Territory. There are more than 30,000 hectares of plantation forest owned by Indigenous landholders in the Northern Territory. Significant opportunities exist to increase employment levels by First Nations people in their own plantations and through sustainable native forestry on their traditional lands.

The key recommendations in this submission to Forestworks Ltd's scoping study for the Australian Government's Forestry workforce Training Program are drawn from the practical wisdom – or lived experience – of people that have worked in the Northern Australian forestry sector for many years. The submission recognises the local challenges and opportunities to develop programs that, if sustained and well managed, offer the best prospect for success.

Importantly, training courses and the development of skills need to occur as close to existing forestry operations as possible. First Nations' communities are best served by ensuring these communities are strengthened, not depopulated, in the approach to establishing training and development. The appointment of Training and Development Managers attached to the TPC and Gumatj Corporation, and the engagement of mentors and First Nations 'local experts', is predicated on the basis that local communities are strengthened, not weakened, due to the local delivery of skill development.

It is evident that highly motivated, talented people are working together, every day, guided by First Nations organisations, to improve their forestry futures in Northern Australia.

FIANT

Aboriginal forestry development is a priority initiative for FIANT: the targeted objective being to develop First Nations led forestry enterprises. A further area of focus is to attract, develop and retain an increasing proportion of First Nations people in the Northern Australian forestry sector.

The membership of FIANT have worked together to define three platforms off which the objective of increasing the participation of First Nations people in forestry can be reinvigorated.

Each platform is linked to the other, and success from the initiatives of each platform reinforces the others.



Central to this new approach is recognition of the following fundamental 'success factors':

Local context

Local context is particularly important considering the specific cultural, social and geographic influences on each First Nations forestry operations: what works on the Tiwi Islands may not necessarily transfer to East Arnhem or elsewhere.



Local trainers and mentors

Local trainers and mentors are critical to the successful development of skilled and engaged First Nations people in local forestry operations. 'Train the trainer' programs need to be developed in key locations. First Nations forestry workers who have an interest in mentoring new employees encouraged and paid to do so.

Awareness

Greater awareness among First Nations communities about the opportunities in forestry is needed to generate the thinking and desire to be involved.

Engagement

Structured engagement needs to start at the primary school level and work through the secondary school levels to provide awareness and context about the importance of commercial forestry locally, nationally and internationally.

Training framework

A tiered yet comprehensive training framework needs to be built that includes locally contextualised subject matter and culturally appropriate materials. For example, training and development programs need to be constructed taking into consideration the following features:

- Opportunities to learn in first language to build initial capabilities to work in the forestry and ecosystem services industries,
- Locally delivered non-accredited 'Ready for Work' preparation courses (like the 'Tiwi Ready' program), co-delivered in first language by local First Nations industry mentors,
- 'On-the-job' non-accredited training for basic forestry skills provided by employers, as well as,
- Opportunities to undertake formalised training to secure credentials that can lead to recognized qualifications that facilitates career progression, both within and outside the Northern Australian forestry sector.

Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital (LLND) skills

The development of the training framework needs to take into consideration LLND capability. Resident adult LLND trainers are required in communities on the Tiwi Islands and in East Arnhem where forestry and ecosystem service industries provide major employment opportunities.

Dedicated Training and Development Management

Increasing the proportion of First Nations people in the Northern Forestry workforce will be substantially improved by the establishment of dedicated Training and Development Management roles within both the Tiwi Plantation Corporation and Gumatj Corporation. A commitment to fund these two roles for 4 years, and the development of a Workforce Development Plan by members of FIANT that outlines the specific deliverables of the role, will provide the focus, connection and continuity required to sustainably improve First Nation people employment outcomes in the Northern Australian forestry sector.

Developing the capability of First Nations people to participate in a sustainable forestry industry in Northern Australia is a key priority for FIANT.

The members of FIANT together with other industry stakeholders want sustained improvement in employment outcomes for First Nations people in our industry: new approaches are required to achieve these outcomes.

The strong linkage to Country is a key 'pull factor' for First Nations people. The lack of well developed, and well supported training and development pathways has limited participation levels. Additionally, the ability to transition from forestry to other sectors (mining, environmental protection, local government) has resulted in volatility in First Nations participation in forestry operations. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic, and volatile pulp market cycles have impacted on work availability, creating challenges for all forestry sector workers in recent years.

The stakeholders in the Northern Australian forestry industry are committed to greater collaboration, working with FIANT, to develop and sustain effective programs that create rewarding and sustainable employment opportunities and pathways into and across an expanding forestry industry in Northern Australia.

Commercial operators recognise the benefits of creating sustainable jobs. First Nations Elders are leading the way collaborating with industry, government and training and research organisations to create the foundations for jobs recognising the socio-economic benefits these bring to their communities.

While there are many initiatives commercial operators can and will adopt, based on their long-term commercial interest, there are several initiatives that require the support of the Territory and Federal Governments.

These initiatives will ensure the benefits of successful training and development programs can be shared across all forestry operations across Northern Australia, support the development of new forestry businesses in the region, and have positive 'spill-over' benefits to other local industry sectors.

Commercial operators recognise the benefits of creating sustainable jobs, and First Nations Elders are leading the way on creating collaboration between industry, government, training organisations and research organisations to create the basis for jobs and the socio-economic benefits to their communities that good jobs generate.



Opportunities for further progress

For forestry to contribute more to the economic self-determination of First Nations people in Northern Australian, it needs to be sustainable – environmentally, culturally, socially, and commercially

First Nation's landholders aspire to own and manage forestry operations on their land, which creates jobs, business opportunities and economic self-determination.

To achieve this objective, training and development opportunities must be structured to create the capabilities to work effectively in complex commercial operations, while also maximising opportunities for employment and career progression from entry level jobs through to executive management and business governance.

The key to success is to create and maintain training and development programs, and recognise and address the critical skill gaps, while also embedding and embracing the cultural norms and practices for each First Nations group on their Country that will attract, develop and retain First Nations people in forestry businesses in which they share or hold ownership.

First Nations people have a reciprocal obligation to be aware and acknowledge the opportunities in forestry if they want forestry to contribute to their economic futures.

Three 'platforms' have been identified that need to be established and suitably funded and resourced to secure the opportunities and overcome the persistent challenges identified by the industry.

This paper details the platforms required to support and increase First Nations participation. Each platform consists of a series of initiatives, some of which are opportunities to be developed at a company or business level, many are best tackled through a collaborative industry approach (where benefits are shared, including learnings on successful methods), and some require the Territory and Federal Government's sustained support

Platform 1

Coordination of training and development for the Northern Australian forestry Industry

Platform 2

Building awareness through engagement

Platform 3

Appropriate training and development initiatives for First Nations people in the Northern Australian forestry industry



Platform 1 – Coordination of training and development for the Northern Australia Forestry industry

Initiative 1.1

FIANT will coordinate the development of priorities and actions required in a Northern Australia Forestry Training and Development Initiative (TDI) in collaboration with all of its membership, stakeholders and First Nations people.

A new approach is needed to increase the number of First Nations people working on-country and managing their own businesses in the forestry industry in Northern Australia.

Training and mentoring systems need to be developed based on First Nations local contexts, contexts that don't align with western modalities of learning and recognition of competency or achievement.

Industry participants need to be culturally responsive if they expect outcomes that are different from past outcomes, which have not been satisfactory.

First Nations people have a different way of teaching their young people. Industry need to support First Nations people to deliver learning/training and provide mentoring in ways that align with their particular way of doing or experiencing training, and recognise, incentivise and celebrate those who are taking on these roles.

There is a need to create a collaborative forum to share information, identify solutions and develop training and development programs for forestry in Northern Australian contexts.

The creation of the Northern Territory and Ord Valley Forestry Hub (NTOVFH) has established the collaborative forum: the membership is embracing the opportunity to engage, share, learn and collaborate in order to achieve the objective of increasing First Nations participation in the Northern Australian forestry sector.

Collaboration does require coordination.

Across the north – from the Ord Valley to Tiwi to Groote Eylandt there is a need to work with Midway Limited, Tiwi Plantations Corporation, Gumatj Corporation, Land Councils, Clan groups, Local Government, Northern Territory Government, Employment Service Providers, RTOs, Group Training Providers, and schools.

FIANT will continue to work with its members and First Nations people to develop the detailed plans for specific forestry operations. Wherever possible the learnings of successes and failures can be shared and progress accelerated to achieve sustained success.

FIANT will work with the Territory Government, the Federal Government and Industry organisations such as NTOVFH, FWPA, AFPA and Forestworks to drive the desired outcomes.

Initiative 1.2

Establish a dedicated position in both the Tiwi Plantations Corporation and Gumatj Corporation for a Training and Development Manager to drive forestry employment outcomes for the local First Nations communities in which they operate and the forestry companies of these areas.

The Training and Development Manager will be responsible for coordinating and/or developing agreed programs that combine to lift employment outcomes for First Nations people in the Northern Australian Forestry industry including:

- Execute a communication strategy to increase awareness of the benefits and opportunities in Northern Australian Forestry to First Nations communities.
- Engage with primary and secondary schools about careers as 'Future Forestry workers, employees, staff or Rangers'.
- Coordinate the development of primary-middle school forestry curriculum content suitable for English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learners.
- Coordinate the development of an 'Integrated Learning Unit' in forestry that meets the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) requirements, like the 'Learning on Country' initiative.¹
- Coordinate support for the implementation of these programs in schools and mentor teachers delivering them.
- Coordinate First Nations mentors to engage school aged and school leavers

¹ <https://learningoncountry.com/>

- Provide support for local First Nations forestry employees who are also working on-the-job as trainers (delivering non-accredited training) and mentors.
- Coordinate plantation and forestry industry managers to analyse and develop specific First Nations employment plans to lift participation on a sustainable basis.
- Provide information to assist Registered Training Organisations to develop appropriate training programs.
- Provide information to assist Employment Service Providers to develop appropriate pre-employment, ready for work, transition to work programs, potentially through local transition enterprises that also provide the wrap-around-services of contextualized LLND and mentoring and support.
- Provide information to assist Ranger programs to develop common training pathways for shared skill requirements (e.g., heavy equipment, forestry protection, environmental management).
- Coordinate the building of cross-cultural capability of non-First Nations Northern Australian forestry employees and managers.
- Elders in each community are willing participants in initiatives to mentor and communicate the benefits of commercial forestry to younger First Nations people. 'Forestry Elders' need to be engaged in the process of raising local community awareness of the benefits of well-run plantation and forestry operations to the long-term success of those local communities.

The development of a budget for two funded Northern Forestry Training and Development Manager roles for a minimum of 4 years with an associated training and development budget to fund/co-fund activities/programs in the TDI is needed for this initiative to succeed.

In addition to the Training and Development Manager's remuneration, the following components need to be funded to coordinate and support each of the platforms identified in this proposal.

The budget needs to include funding for the following components:

- Primary and Secondary school curricula development in conjunction with targeted schools
- Integrated Learning Unit development
- A communications budget, and,
- Funding for regular travel to support programs in remote locations across the Northern Territory.

The Training and Development Manager will need to work with the plantation manager and 'Forestry Elders' as well as, FIANT management, relevant RTO's and other stakeholders to develop an industry workforce plan. This is the obvious starting point to ensure that the right training programs are developed and deployed, and the necessary skill base is created within local communities that can serve the needs of the forestry operations and create the greatest benefit to those First Nations local communities.



Platform 2 – Building Northern Australian forestry industry awareness through engagement

Initiative 2.1

Local community awareness

Develop a bi/multi-lingual awareness campaign on the Tiwi Islands and in East Arnhem to raise awareness of the benefits of forestry and the opportunities for local First Nations people in forestry.

In key First Nations communities there is a lack of knowledge about commercial forestry and the opportunities it can offer for economic participation and self-determination.

There is a lack of knowledge of how using forestry-related skills can translate into responsible environmental management.

Career progression opportunities vary depending on the nature of the forestry activity – native forest harvest versus plantation, tree species and lifecycle stage of forest operations (establishment versus harvest) and the extent of processing/value chain undertaken locally – that impacts on jobs within the forestry operation, and also on opportunities for small businesses providing services to the forestry industry.

Very few First Nations people living outside of Darwin would have regular access to a computer, and internet access remains extremely unreliable.

Creating awareness of the opportunities and the context of forestry operations in First Nation communities is an important step to increasing First Nations employment in forestry.

Initiative 2.2

Branding First Nations Forestry

FIANT and other stakeholders/industry members will develop a compelling brand for the Northern Australian forestry industry that assists in raising awareness, interest and pride in the contribution of forestry to the benefit of First Nations communities.

Development of the forestry industry (timber and non-timber forest products (NTFP's)) for First Nations in northern Australia requires increased investment in the promotion of the opportunities it offers for ecosystem management and associated ecosystem services, training, education, and business development.

Initiative 2.3

Empowering mentors in local communities

Identify and fund mentors; Elders and/or experienced First Nations forestry workers, who can assist to raise awareness of the existence and benefits of forestry to their First Nations communities. First Nations forestry workers who have an interest and the capability to mentor new forestry employees on their employment pathways in the Northern Australian forestry industry should also be incentivised to do so.

Workplace and local community mentors need to be identified who can assist 'both ways communication' and understanding. They need to be able to engage with primary and secondary schools as 'local forestry champions', raise awareness of the forestry industry and the associated benefits it offers their communities. They also need to be able to support workplace attendance and retention and assist in contextualising and supporting training and development.

Initiative 2.4

Structured engagement with schools

Work with local primary and secondary schools to include locally contextualised 'forestry related' course work into their studies to support school-based education to work pathways in forestry.

Science, history, geography, economics, business management, woodwork, mathematics and English curricula can be developed to create awareness of their local forestry industry.

The Training and Development Manager will work with Forest Learning² to identify if there are any appropriate resources already available that could be modified for local contexts and EAL/D learners. Opportunities exist for plantation and native forestry representatives to participate in 'Career Days'. Regular 'field trips' into the plantation and/or native forest, with plantation/ forest management support, should be structured into the annual calendars of local schools. School-based Traineeships should be available and resourced for interested and capable students.

Secondary schools exist on the Tiwi Islands, in Nhulunbuy, Laynhapuy Homelands and in Angurugu. Boarding schools in Darwin and Nhulunbuy host secondary students from across the Northern Territory including the Tiwi Islands and East Arnhem Land. School based engagement may include the following:

- Develop contextualised primary and middle years curriculum resources for EAL/D learners for remote schools.
- Develop an 'Integrated Learning Unit' in forestry that meets the SACE requirements, like the 'Learning on Country' initiative.³
- Support the implementation of these programs in the classroom and mentor teachers who are delivering them.
- Potential to use culturally informed seasonal calendars mapped to seasonal work in the forestry industry to better connect forestry work, land, and culture.

- Develop local forestry careers materials and make them available to teachers in spaces they regularly go to for career information and advice for students. Teachers don't have the time to visit the website of every industry and every profession. The website 'MyFuture'⁴ is the standard 'go-to' for careers teachers and VET coordinators in schools.
- Students need to be introduced and engaged in the forestry industry to talk about future jobs.
- Students need regular site visits to see the industry in action at different times of the year.
- Students need to see local people obtain real jobs in the forestry industry.
- Students need to see and hear from current First Nations forestry workers from their communities.

Much of this type of program can also be delivered in schools across the north and in Pickertaramoor (Tiwi Islands), Nhulunbuy and Darwin where students from other regions are boarding. On-country learning would need to be built into any delivery model.

Initiative 2.5

Recognising achievement

The Northern Australian forestry industry should instigate a high-profile recognition initiative that showcases the successes of First Nations people. Success needs to be visible to the broader NT and Australian forestry communities and be celebrated.

This should apply to new entrants that achieve a minimum threshold and for longer term employees that are working their way through the system, all the way to long term employees that are 'role models' for their communities.

All achievements need to be recognised. Every opportunity to showcase achievements should be seen as an opportunity, not only to reward an individual employee, but to share their achievements with their family and community. Showcasing achievements can also be used to further engage and inform schools/students and the communities about forestry on their country and the opportunities it offers for employment and economic self-determination.

² forestlearning.edu.au

³ <https://learningoncountry.com/>

⁴ <https://myfuture.edu.au>

Platform 3 – Developing appropriate approaches to First Nations training and development for the Northern Australian forestry industry

Initiative 3.1

A tiered yet comprehensive training framework needs to be built, that includes locally contextualised subject matter and culturally appropriate materials.

Clarity on the role of Employment Service Providers, Training Boards, RTO's, local First Nations forestry organisations, and forest management senior leadership needs to be established so that each 'link in the chain' works together to deliver the required training, at the right time, in an appropriate manner and setting, to maximise the success of the training and development initiative.

Approaches to training and development need to include access to a range of opportunities dependent upon an individual's preferences and their previous formal and non-formal education, English LLND and work history.

These approaches need to include:

- Opportunities to learn in first language to build initial capabilities to work in the forestry and ecosystem services industries.
- Ensuring there are contextualised opportunities to develop English Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital (LLND) capability both on- and off-the-job.
- Locally delivered non-accredited 'Ready for Work' preparation courses (like the Tiwi Islands Training & Employment Board (TITEB) 'Tiwi Ready' program), co-delivered in first language by local First Nations industry mentors.
- 'On-the-job' non-accredited training for basic forestry skills.
- Further training to support career extension for experienced, capable and interested First Nations forestry employees.
- Opportunities to undertake formalised training to secure credentials that can lead to recognized qualifications that facilitates career progression, both within and outside the business.

Successful on-the-job training requires forest managers to be trained and supported to develop experienced forestry staff to the point that they can confidently and capably train new staff on specific skills that are needed to undertake forestry work. This initiative requires cultural awareness training for senior staff who will accept opportunity to 'train the trainer' while developing training capability in with a culturally appropriate approach.

Training new First Nations employees on-the-job is likely to be more successful if it is delivered, or co-delivered, in first language. On-the-job training helps support staff retention, build more resilient workforces and create a learning community within the business, simultaneously building the business profile locally.

Forestry-specific skills training and development should consist of on-the-job training and mentoring, combined with repetitive practice, building complexity over time, delivered primarily in first language, alongside scaffolded LLND that matches the skills being developed.

As a worker's skills, capability and confidence builds, so does the contextualised English LLND over time, and with that, the potential to successfully undertake accredited training is more likely to increase.

There is a need to work with forest managers to identify specific industry skills and knowledge that can be mapped to nationally accredited training, most likely, across a range of qualifications that can be rolled out by contracted RTO's to enable delivery and assessment of accredited training.

Accredited training can supplement non-accredited and accredited on-the-job training, vendor training and the informal learning supported by mentors that occurs both on- and off-the-job.

Opportunities also exist for Midway Limited/TPC and Gumatj, together with Tiwi Rangers, Yirralka and Dhimurru Rangers to deliver training on-the-job and to share limited training opportunities and resources across industries with similar capacity building needs.

Initiative 3.2

The development of the 'training framework' needs to consider Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital (LLND). Resident adult LLND trainers are required in communities on the Tiwi Islands and in East Arnhem where forestry and ecosystem service industry provide major employment opportunities.

Regular revision of skills should be offered to school leavers and long term unemployed to ensure basic LLND competency is maintained.

English Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy levels are, in the majority, extremely low in remote northern Australia. Any training framework that assumes that the majority of First Nations people can access information and study independently and remotely is, at least for the short-medium term, not accurate. There are successful examples where this has and is occurring, but more needs to be done to allow learners to access information and training in ways that are structured to succeed.

A pre-VET LLND forestry and ecosystem management curriculum needs to be written to achieve adequate VET literacy and numeracy entry levels (Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) 2/3).

Ideally training content provision needs to be supported with a resident, (not FIFO) adult LLND trainer, who can contextualise learning in these domains around those in forestry and broader ecosystem management.

Initiative 3.3

Preparing to be 'Ready for Work'

TITEB and equivalent organisations should be funded to ensure the regular availability of contextualised 'Ready for Work' programs for First Nations people in communities where forestry and ecosystem management employment opportunities exist. Similar programs should also be available to students boarding in Darwin from these communities.

There is a need to develop awareness and command of 'work ready' competencies, and to explore and understand differing cultural dimensions and expectations, prior to entry into the workforce.

The benefit of this approach has been demonstrated by the Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (ALPA) 'Ready for djama' program which has supported hundreds of First Nations jobseekers to gain the confidence and skills required to successfully transition to sustained employment.

Required knowledge, concepts and skills will vary according to the workplace but is likely to include:

- Understanding basic workplace documents and establishing an individual 'e-profile' (MyGov, Bank Account, Email Account, Tax File Number, Superannuation membership),
- Being ready for work – access to PPE, time management, communication obligations,
- Importance of drug and alcohol testing to enable safe work to be conducted,
- Working in a team – understanding roles, responsibilities and obligations, and,
- Working in culturally diverse environments.

In addition, basic skills for operating in remote locations could include:

- C Class Driver's licensing
- Operating 4WDs on unsealed roads
- Fire equipment operation (extinguisher)
- First Aid and CPR



These courses need to be run regularly to ensure that potential employees are not deterred from the lack of timely training on the fundamentals required to secure the benefits of paid work in forestry and ecosystem services.

Training and development participation data should be maintained to ensure those people willing to divulge their training and skill development status can have their skill set status disclosed to potential employers.

Initiative 3.4

Transitioning to employment

Forestry companies need to develop pathways into forestry and ecosystem management-related enterprises that support work-readiness and progressive transition to employment (e.g., part shift extending to full shift work programs over time).

‘Transitional’ arrangements offer a model to deliver ‘employment ready’ capabilities and contextualised basic skill development.

Ensuring that jobs in the Northern Australian forestry industry consider the reasonable transition to ‘full day’ working for new First Nations employees is now widely recognised as an effective pathway for new entrants.

‘Transitional’ pathways are those in which the employees are paid proper wages (when they attend work), with associated conditions, where they gain an understanding of financial literacy and have access to supported, contextual development of their English LLND.

Development into roles may require quarter, half and three-quarter day progression: work programs, transport arrangements and pay schedules need to accommodate the need for flexibility to sustainably induct First Nations employees into the workforce.

Initiative 3.4

On-the-job training

‘Train the trainer’ programs need to be developed in key locations.

Forestry managers need to identify suitably skilled local community members, ideally existing First Nations forestry workers, to be supported and incentivised to become ‘local trainers in forestry’ for their communities. The Training and Development Managers and RTOs must provide support and guidance in this process.

There should be a specific ‘First Nations’ approach to developing recognised trainers in remote contexts.

- These people – local trainers, supported by the Training and Development Managers, ideally First Nations – could deliver aspects of accredited and non-accredited training and culturally appropriate support, using the most effective approach for their communities. Training is conceived to be delivered through a mix of accredited and non-accredited training as is appropriate in regard to a variety of factors, including safety. Training in remote First Nations contexts has to be flexible, and have the ability to support both one-on-one and/or group learning as preferred by the student/s.
- Local First Nations recognised ‘trainers’ and mentors, some who may aspire to be qualified trainers and assessors, can present in first language to scaffold the learning. These key roles need to be incentivised by the employer.
- The building of local capacity to sustain training and development programs over time is critical. This will embed training and development capability in the communities, the place that is also home to existing and future employees.

A community of practice should be cultivated. Allowing First Nations trainers to provide and receive peer support, share knowledge, undertake joint problem solving and encourage sector level collaboration.

Experience of sector level workforce development initiatives for other industries has demonstrated that this is a critical step to support First Nations trainers to continue in the training role long term. It safeguards against trainers feeling isolated in their work and wanting to revert to an operational role.

More needs to be done to train local First Nations trainers, developing local capability to supervise and mentor students on-the-job, and to deliver entry level training in first language.

Initiative 3.5

Skill development plans for individual employees

Forestry managers and each Training and Development Manager should prepare 'knowledge and skill' development' plans for each employee and ensure that records are maintained to support non-accredited (and accredited) on-the-job training for possible micro-credential recognition.

Additionally, opportunities for validation of any on-the-job training should be arranged so that RTO's can confirm competencies have been achieved.

Ultimately, upskilling of current Gumatj/ TPC/ Midway Limited forestry employees with Vocational Education and Training (VET), Training and Education (TAE) qualifications (or similar) to deliver in-house training as part of a 'train the trainer' model for workforce development will be critical to ongoing workforce development over the long term.

On-the-job training for example, could include:

- Felling trees with a chainsaw
- Trimming and cutting felled trees
- Maintaining chainsaws
- Inspecting and cleaning tools and machinery to preserve biosecurity
- Using hand and power tools
- Nursery work
- Silvicultural work
- Environmental work
- When suitably guided – heavy machinery operation.

Plantation and other forestry industry managers accept and prefer to conduct key skill development and training once employees are in their role. There are opportunities to work alongside RTOs to have on-the-job training structured, managed, assessed and validated facilitating maximum employment opportunity/ career progression for employees – both within and beyond the business. Ideally, on-the-job training can be delivered by, or at least supported with, First Nations workplace-based 'identified' trainers and assessors.

Specialisations within certain job roles can allow for the identification of specific training that could lead to the creation of micro credentials. Micro credentials can be stackable awards that lead to full qualifications. Micro credentials must be ratified by an RTO during both design, and award. Once micro credentials are approved by an RTO, individuals would be financially rewarded as they attain additional higher-level skills, knowledge, and experience.

Not all employees are seeking to achieve a 'full qualification' against an industry recognised standard, however every individual should be made aware of the opportunities that industry recognised qualifications can create for career development.

This type of 'industry work preparation program' is ideally structured by the forestry manager. This enables the manager to track the development of their staff from entry level to mid-level and senior job roles, with clearly defined skill, knowledge, and experience requirements. The forestry manager's expertise can determine when an individual has the requisite knowledge, confidence and experience to manage the progression in skill development.

Opportunities for 'formal recognition' of these skills, to ensure micro credentials can be achieved on a pathway to an accredited qualification should be embedded by the forestry manager in the development plan of each employee. This approach benefits the manager and the employee and should lead to a mutually reinforcing and strengthened bond between employer and employee.

Investment in capacity building leads to higher productivity and better remuneration with improved employee retention prospects.

Initiative 3.6

Access to resident qualified trainers and assessors

Targeted financial support is needed for RTOs and training coordination organisations so that remote workforces do not become reliant on FIFO training, delivery and assessment for their development.

Whilst acknowledging that non-accredited on-the-job training provided by First Nations forestry workers in first language is the key requirement for supporting the engagement, development and retention of First Nations employees in entry level positions, consideration must be given to the training and development requirements of First Nations (and all) employees in, or who aspire to work in more senior roles in forestry and ecosystem services.

In the short term, Northern Territory based RTOs with nationally recognised Vocational Education and Training (VET) Training and Education qualifications on scope, should be selected to deliver and/or assess and support training programs that meet the skills and knowledge requirements identified by industry. There must be no 'tick and flick' training. Completion of accredited training can only be awarded to individuals who have been properly trained, using approaches co-designed with First Nations people, forestry managers and the Training and Development Manager. Requirements for a trainer include:

- Ideally, trainers need to be resident, not Fly-In-Fly-Out (FIFO) – but housing and transport are often difficult to find and expensive – but only if trainers are resident can they be responsive to local conditions, using on-the-job opportunities to train and retrain to attain competency.
- Both on and off the job training is required.
- Training needs to be offered on a regular and recurring basis to:
 - Facilitate reinforcement of learning,
 - Support learning where workforces are mobile, and
 - Enable development of a workforce 'pool' suitably skilled to work in forestry and/or ecosystem management industries more broadly.

Initiative 3.7

Establishing VET programs in Forestry and Ecosystem Management for the Northern Australian forestry industry

Forestry and Ecosystem Management VET programs suitable to Northern Australian contexts need to be developed. This development could be coordinated by the Training and Development Manager, in conjunction with the Northern Australian forestry industry, local RTOs and other coordinating organisations. VET Training Programs (VETPs) currently offer a mechanism by which to develop these programs. Flexibility in the roll-out of the program needs to be considered as well as supporting bi/multi-lingual interpretation of the curriculum.

Development of these programs needs to consider the other components of the 'training framework' and how they can be combined or 'stacked' to make appropriate training and development pathways for First Nations workers in forestry and ecosystem management.

Training needs to consider sociocultural fit, be adaptive and responsive using local content and delivery and have strong applied learning outcomes. Appropriate training and employment programs for capacity development take time to develop and need to focus on results in the longer run.

With the development of entry level and mid-level capability in forestry across First Nations communities, the longer-term objective of developing remote study options for highly skilled technical forestry roles needs to be considered. The needs on Tiwi may differ in this respect to East Arnhem, however the local plantation managers and Training and Development Manager should give consideration to establishing pathways for advanced forestry skill development without the need for First Nations people to leave their local communities for extensive periods of time.



Initiative 3.8

Supporting associated trade skill pathways in Forestry and Ecosystem Management

Ensure that secondary school students, and other First Nations job seekers, are aware of the skilled trade opportunities, and potential to create their own businesses, from the 'base' of undertaking apprenticeships critical to the forestry and ecosystems management industries. Apprenticeships held and completed by First Nations individuals should be acknowledged and celebrated as a great career path for committed and aspiring community members.

The forestry and ecosystem management industries needs supporting trades workers. School and non-school based Traineeships and post-school Apprenticeships offer opportunities for young people, and indeed, all job seekers.

However, all trainees and apprentices need appropriately qualified tradespersons in the workplace to support their RTO-provided training.

Identification of skilled workers interested in gaining formal recognition of their skills, knowledge and experience is critical and so are their mentors. Furthermore, identification of local First Nations and non-First Nations trades qualified Individuals with an interest in training and assessment is a priority.

Initiative 3.9

Learning from other successful First Nations programs in Northern Australia

The Training and Development Manager must coordinate engagement with relevant parties to ensure that collaboration opportunities are leveraged, learnings are drawn upon and potential common program development is harnessed to ensure the success of the Northern Forestry sector.

For example, the 'Ranger Ready' program offered by CDU can potentially inform the development and delivery of any 'Forestry Ready' program. Training needs to be broad based with options to build specific skills in areas of interest.

Individuals can take different pathways into the 'Ranger Ready' program. Development of standard yet flexible programs also facilitate trainers and Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy (LLND) specialists to work together and support each other. Participants can also support each other, making programs more sustainable, whilst providing the potential to offer training across multiple sites, including in Darwin. Over the lifecycle of a rotation in forestry, the skill needs and scale of workforce change. Plantation establishment involves a larger workforce, with a relatively less skilled profile. Harvesting requires a large workforce and a relatively more technically skilled capability, especially in relation to heavy equipment. In the longer interim – maintenance or growth phase – less people may be required, and more emphasis is placed on forest protection (fire management, biosecurity control, environmental monitoring).

Developing programs that engage First Nations people consistently and have training programs developed to progressively skill individuals so that they can play a role across the lifecycle of a rotation will reduce the dependency on 'fly in-fly out' personnel and maximise the benefits of forestry operations to First Nations communities. The important consideration of this rotation lifecycle is to create awareness and demand from First Nations people in becoming 'foresters' rather than just participants at various stages of the cycle.

The development of 'ranger' skills in conjunction with 'forester' skills will create greater retention of these skills in local First Nations communities that are adjacent to both: the development of training and development needs to be constructed with the view that these roles are highly complementary – skills can be transferred easily and capability in both fields enables local people to create employment options and protect their capacity to generate income over their working lives.

Northern Australian Forestry Sector

More than 70% of northern Australia's land base is Indigenous owned and more than 70% of northern Australia's native forests are found on this Indigenous land.⁵

Northern Australia, although vast, has a history of collaboration. There is mutual respect between those who have made a commitment to work alongside First Nations people to help make it a better place.

Caring for Country is central to the spiritual, cultural, social, and economic well-being of First Nations people. Ecosystem management is critical for a sustainable forestry industry. The two are mutually inclusive.

Tiwi Land Rangers and Dhimurru Rangers and Yirralka Rangers (Laynhapuy Homelands), local Tiwi and Yolŋu respectively, work alongside forestry operations on their respective Country.

Fire protection, ecological burning, road and track maintenance, threatened species monitoring and management, water quality and water supply testing and monitoring, weed management and feral animal control, vehicle and equipment operation and maintenance and forestry management are activities commonly undertaken by both Forestry and Ranger workforces.

Engagement with all levels of government, industry and researchers has underpinned this success. For example, Plant Health Australia (PHA), the Northern Territory Government's Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade's (DITT) Forestry group, forest health surveillance experts from Queensland's Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (QDAF), and the University of the Sunshine Coast's (USC) Tropical Forests and People Research Centre all support forestry and biosecurity skills and knowledge development with Tiwi, Yirralka and Dhimurru Rangers and forestry employees from Plantation Management Partners, Tiwi Plantations Corporation, and Gumatj Corporation through the PHA funded 'Safeguarding the Indigenous-led Forestry Industries' project.

The Tiwi Plantations Corporation (TPC) and Plantation Management Partners (PMP) manage a 30,000-hectare commercial plantation on the Tiwi Islands. With the assistance of the Cooperative Research Centre for Northern Australia program, TPC has benefited from the work of the University of Melbourne's School of Ecosystem and Forest Sciences and Charles Darwin University's Northern Institute research teams. These initiatives were supported by Midway Limited and the Forest and Wood Products Association (FWPA).

Gumatj Corporation developed the native forest industry in East Arnhem. Further opportunities for forest-based livelihoods, sustainable forest management certification and payment for ecosystem services are being explored within the 'Indigenous Commercial Forestry Opportunities – East Arnhem' project, funded by FWPA and led by USC's Tropical Forests and People Research Centre, with DITT's Forestry Group, Developing East Arnhem Limited (DEAL), National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and Gumatj Corporation as project partners.

The Northern Territory Ord Valley Forestry Hub whose mission it is 'to work together for a better north', is led by an experienced forester, supported by a board of foresters, researchers and business managers representing all Northern Australian forestry plantations. In turn, many of these board members are associated with the CRCNA's 'Maximising northern tropical forestry-linking communities and cutting-edge technology on the Tiwi Islands' project, FWPA's 'Indigenous Commercial Forestry Opportunities' project, and PHA's 'Safeguarding Indigenous-led Forestry Industries' project, as is DITT's Forestry group, Midway Limited, Charles Darwin University (CDU), USC's Tropical Forests and People Research Centre, the Tiwi Island Training and Employment Board (TITEB), and the University of Melbourne.

⁵ Meadows, Annandale, Bristow, Jacobsen, Ota & Read 2020



Forestry on the Tiwi Islands

In 1996, Tiwi leaders advised the Northern Territory Government of their determination to establish commercial industries in forestry, fishing, tourism, and mining, to remove Tiwi people from dependency on welfare and government grants.

The Tiwi Plantation Corporation website⁶ shares that 'in the late 1990s the Tiwi Land Council (TLC) advised the Northern Territory Government of their determination to establish their own private College, Tiwi College at Pickertaramoor, to provide education for younger generations of Tiwi'.

The TLC also planned to establish a Tiwi Industry Training Centre of Excellence at the Yapilika Forestry Centre, working with TPC and PMP, the tropical forestry specialists working on the Tiwi islands; Tiwi College and Xavier College, and TITEB to recruit, employ and train Tiwi people to work in forestry.

The training was to include forestry, fire, and environmental management, harvesting, wood chipping and export, leading to supervisory and managerial positions within the forestry industry.

In 2001 Sylvatech (previously the Australian Plantations Group), together with the TLC planted the first commercial *Acacia mangium* plantations. In 2005 they were bought out by Great Southern Plantations, who invested millions in the plantations expanding them to 30,000ha of predominantly *Acacia mangium* and small areas of *Pinus Caribaea*. Great Southern also supported the broader community through land rental and ranger programs before going into receivership in 2009 at which time the entire plantation estate reverted to the Tiwi landowners.

The Tiwi Islands plantation is now owned and managed by the Indigenous enterprise, Tiwi Plantations Corporation Trust (TPC), a not-for-profit Trust entity, with eight Traditional Owner shareholders representing the eight landowning groups of the Tiwi Islands. TPC commenced in 2009 to ensure the continued management of the plantations. The Tiwi Plantation Corporation website⁷ states, 'The principal purposes of the trust are to relieve poverty, advance education and religion and any other charitable purposes beneficial to Tiwi people'.

TPC engaged PMP to manage the plantation estate on their behalf whilst maintaining oversight with a Board made up of Tiwi people.

In March 2014 Mitsui, one of the world's largest trading and investment companies, completed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Tiwi landowners confirming contractual intentions for five year's purchase and supply of Acacia chip valued by the parties at more than \$220M (TLC 2014). The first shipment of woodchips was exported to Asia in 2016.

In 2017, Midway Limited, Australia's largest high quality woodfibre processor and exporter acquired PMP. PMP undertakes plantation management, harvest, haulage, protection burning and environmental management, and Midway sell the woodchips to China, Japan and Indonesia on behalf of TPC.

Over the past three years TPC have been lead participants in the CRCNA Tiwi Forestry project⁸. Together with their partners, they aim to develop a model combining cutting-edge genomics, molecular marker and plant breeding technologies across selected eucalyptus species with community-based enterprise development approaches to improve productivity and provide new options for economic development and employment on Aboriginal-owned lands.

⁷ <https://www.tiwiplantations.com.au/about>

⁸ <https://www.crcna.com.au/research/projects/maximising-northern-tropical-forestry-linking-communities-and-cutting-edge-technology>

⁶ <https://www.tiwiplantations.com.au/about>

North-East Arnhem Forestry

North-East Arnhem Land has a history of Aboriginal-led forestry activity, predominately small-scale sawmills and timber workshops established by missionaries to build housing and other infrastructure in Yolŋu communities throughout the region.

There are vast areas of Aboriginal-owned forests throughout the East Arnhem region that have the potential to support a sustainable native forestry industry for the benefit of the local Aboriginal Traditional Owners and communities. These forests contain the native hardwood Darwin stringybark (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*), a species with attractive wood properties – high strength, hardness, natural durability, and other features – that make them suited to many value-added applications.

Gumatj Traditional Owners currently run a sawmill and woodworks facility near Gunyanara which is focused on replacing imported construction materials including timber roof trusses, decking and floorboards, and supplies specialty timber for local and regional markets. Currently, all timber is salvage harvested from the Rio Tinto mining lease – a bauxite mine along the northern coast of Arnhem Land. Rio Tinto will close the mine by 2030 and Gumatj Corporation have decided that the forestry business should be maintained and expanded to provide future benefits and opportunities to local communities.

Gumatj Traditional Owners are involved in a three-year research and development project for East Arnhem forestry which is exploring regional models for sustainable forest-based industries with livelihood benefits for Yolŋu traditional landowners. A small pilot site has been established to enable harvesting, product identification, manufacturing, performance testing, market assessments and workforce training and skills development. This project will deliver its final report to Traditional Owners and other partners in late 2023.⁹

⁹ <http://www.developingeastarnhem.com.au/assets/uploads/2021/07/East-Arnhem-Forestry-Project-Summary.pdf>

It is evident that highly motivated, talented people are working together, every day, guided by First Nations organisations, to improve the future for forestry and for First Nations people in forestry across Northern Australia.

But much more can be achieved with ongoing collaboration between First Nations people, their supporting organisations, the local forestry companies and the supporting ecosystem of researchers, forestry industry organisations and government to create jobs, economic benefits and improved livelihoods from the development of healthy forests in Northern Australia.

The backbone of the Northern Territory forestry industry has been created and sustained, at significant cost but guided by a consistent vision of economic and community progress, by Indigenous owners.

Each Nation involved in forestry is committed to developing the sector for their people and the wider Northern Territory community.



70%
of northern
Australia's
land base is
Indigenous land

Strong foundations are in place in the Northern Australian forestry industry

The foundations of the Northern Territory and Ord Valley forestry sector are in place.

The key foundations include:

- **Strong governance by Indigenous owners of forestry land and operations,**
- **Investment in research and development in tropical forestry,**
- **Two well supported industry organisations – the Forestry Industry Association of Northern Territory and the regional Forestry Hub.**
- **Collaborative forums to develop employment pathways in forestry for First Nation's people.**

Governance

Strong First Nations vision and governance is in place where current forestry initiatives exist in the Northern Territory and Ord Valley: specifically through the leadership and vision of the Tiwi Plantations Corporation and Tiwi Land Council, the Anindilyakwa Land Council, Gumatj Corporation, Rirratjingu Aboriginal Corporation and the Northern Land Council.

First Nations Governance intersects with western governance including that associated with forestry businesses/management, Northern Territory and Australian Governments, NGOs, and RTOs.

The role of the FIANT to support decision making and tactical execution of training and development initiatives will be important in delivering the sought outcomes.

Central to the vision for commercial forestry is the economic and social benefits that result from creating sustainable jobs and resources in forestry.

The Elders of First Nation's communities appreciate the need for long term decision making associated with forestry, which accords with the approach that Elders take to considering the needs of their families and their Country.

Given the natural advantages that exist in high rainfall regions of Northern Australia, there is a shared commitment from existing plantation management companies, researchers, governments and First Nations communities to develop a successful and sustainable forestry industry. This Industry needs to be underpinned by good governance, culturally competent workplaces and identified training and development pathways.

This submission outlines the key initiatives that existing industry stakeholders have identified to assist First Nations people to maximise their participation in the industry, focusing particularly on creating rewarding and enduring employment opportunities.

Investment in research and development

Strong industry engagement is particularly evident on the Tiwi Islands where Midway Limited, not only manage the operation of plantation and port on behalf of the Tiwi Plantation Corporation, but they have also made a significant investment in the Cooperative Research Centre for Developing Northern Australia's (CRC NA) project "Maximising northern tropical forestry – linking communities and cutting-edge technology"¹⁰.

This project invests in better understanding the genetics and science of a potential future species for the Tiwi plantation and develops a Workforce Profile and Workforce Plan that seeks to identify employment and training pathways for First Nations people in the tropical forestry sector. Researchers from Charles Darwin University (CDU) have been instrumental in providing insight, support and direction to assist the industry to develop a more rigorous and structured approach to job creation and the associated social and economic benefits to First Nations' communities. The data, 'on the ground' experience, networks and resulting recommendations of the work of the CDU research team has been of significant value to the Northern Forestry industry.

¹⁰ <https://crcna.com.au/research/projects/maximising-northern-tropical-forestry-linking-communities-and-cutting-edge-technology>

The CRC Northern Australian forestry project initiative would not have been possible without the commitment of Midway Limited, the plantation manager for the Tiwi Plantations Corporation, Forest and Wood Products Australia, and the Northern Territory Government's commitment to provision of funding and in-kind support.

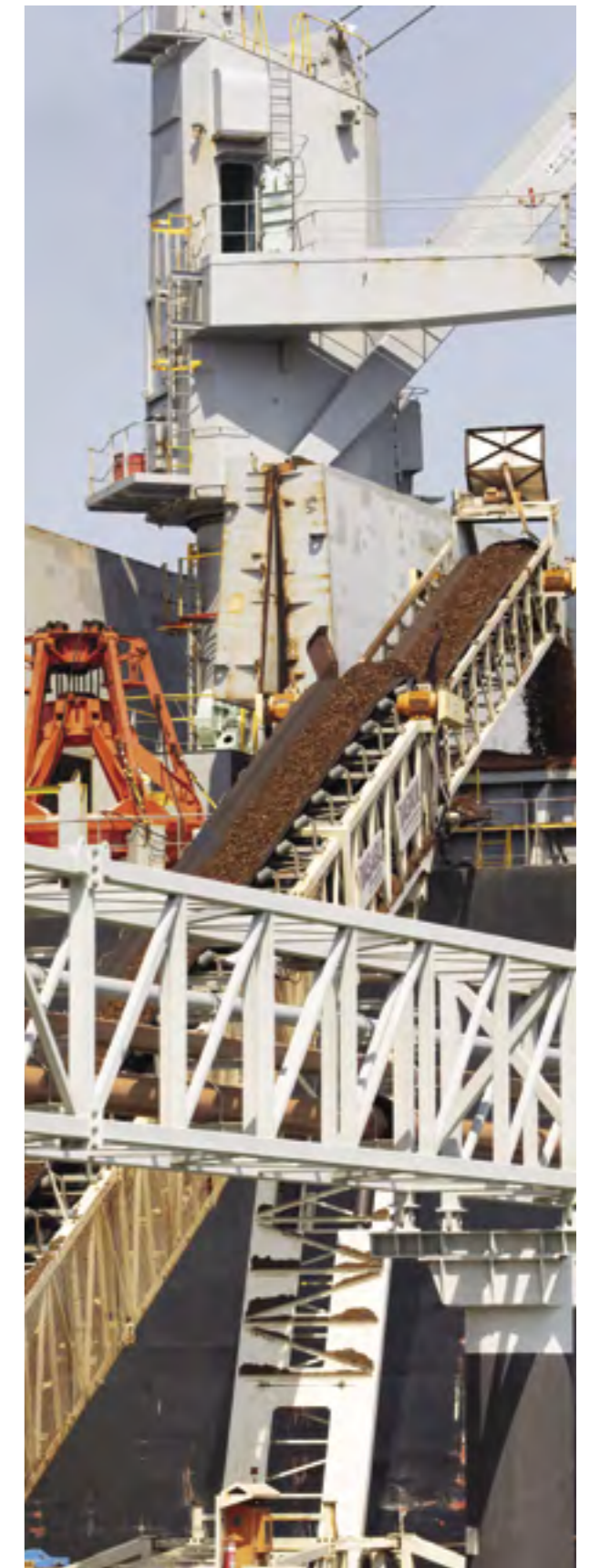
Similarly, in East Arnhem, Gumatj Corporation's partnership and financial investment to support the research and development projects – 'Indigenous Commercial Forestry Opportunities' and 'Safeguarding the Indigenous-led Forestry Industries' aligns with the aspirations of Gumatj Traditional Owners for forestry to be a key component of the post-mining economy and provide ongoing employment opportunities for Yolŋu people across the region.

The PHA and FWPA funded projects in East Arnhem are the foundational R&D projects for Gumatj's native forest industry, aiming to understand the forest resource, potential product development opportunities, develop sustainable forest management plans, explore certification options, and build workforce capacity and skills development in forestry activities, milling, building and construction, and forest biosecurity practices. The current research and development projects in East Arnhem would not have been possible without the commitment from USC's Tropical Forests and People Research Centre, the Northern Territory Government's DITT and the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, and the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) to support these projects through significant financial and in-kind contributions.

Northern Territory and Ord Valley Forestry Hub

The mission of the NTOVFH is to work with all key stakeholders to undertake strategic planning, technical assessments and analyses to identify constraints and support improved productivity, investment and expansion in the Northern Territory and Ord Valley forestry industry.

Of the five key focus areas of the NTOVFH, one focus area is 'Indigenous Forestry Project Development', specifically targeting the creation of successful Indigenous-led businesses.



Collaboration in training and development initiatives

Local Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) with local knowledge and expertise have been servicing the Tiwi Islands and East Arnhem Land for many years.

Although not specialising in Forest and Wood Products and/or Manufacturing, local RTOs deliver from within a range of National Training Packages including Agriculture, Horticulture and Ecosystem Management, Resources and Infrastructure, Business Services, Construction, Plumbing and Services Integrated Framework and many more.

Tiwi Islands Education and Employment Board (TITEB)¹¹ is an all-Tiwi governed RTO, a Group Training Organisation who also hold the Community Development Program contract for the Tiwi Islands.

TITEB coordinate and auspice training provision by other RTOs where they don't have programs on scope and have previously done so with Timber Training Creswick, CDU, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE)¹², and others.

Charles Darwin University (CDU)¹³ delivers training across most of Northern Territory, Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA) not only deliver training, but host Regional University Centres in Nhulunbuy, Ramingining and Galiwin'ku, and, more recently, New Territory Training has been delivering a range of Units of Competency, including some from the Forest and Wood Products Training Package.

Given the relatively remote nature of the forestry operations in the Northern Territory and Ord Valley, both from each other and from the rest of the Australian forestry industry, there is a strong commitment of the operators and First Nations owners to collaborate on matters of mutual interest: creating a well skilled and expanding workforce is central to the vision of a successful Northern Forestry industry for FIANT and its membership.

¹¹ <https://www.titeb.com.au/>

¹² <https://www.batchelor.edu.au/>

¹³ <https://www.cdu.edu>



Case Study

Growing an Indigenous-led forestry industry in East Arnhem Land

Overview

The people of the Gumatj clan of the Yolŋu nation are Traditional Owners (TOs) for a significant proportion of land leased for bauxite mining in North East Arnhem Land (NEAL) without TO consent in 1965. Rio Tinto now holds that lease and has advised it will close the mine before 2030, which will see the land return to TO control pursuant to the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*.

While Rio Tinto's exit presents a number of opportunities for TOs, it also means the end of mining royalties, which have provided a level of financial security for decades. Recent amendments to ALRA mean that TOs can also make decisions about future land use now, providing certainty for the future for themselves and other investors. TOs have articulated a clear vision for self-determination, and intergenerational prosperity through a diverse post-mining economy.

Gumatj TOs also want to ensure that there are significantly more employment opportunities created for local Yolŋu people through economic diversification, with one of the highest priority initiatives centering on Indigenous-led forestry enterprises. This emphasis on scaling current forestry operations is driven by the opportunity to both create more jobs and increase revenue for the Gumatj clan.

The project involves vertical integration from existing milling operations (in place for over 15 years) across the value chain to include 1) harvesting, 2) expanded milling operations and 3) manufacturing. While environmental outcomes are not framed as the primary purpose of the enterprise, TOs consider they are closely connected to the self-determination that flows from Indigenous land management practices, which will be central to all decision making. To that end, the premise of the business strategy is to maximise (social and financial) value extracted from timber, rather than continuous growth in harvest volumes.

While not the primary focus of the Gumatj strategy, a broader regional sector strategy centres on Gumatj's enterprise as a hub to facilitate forestry activities by other Yolŋu clans on their respective homelands.

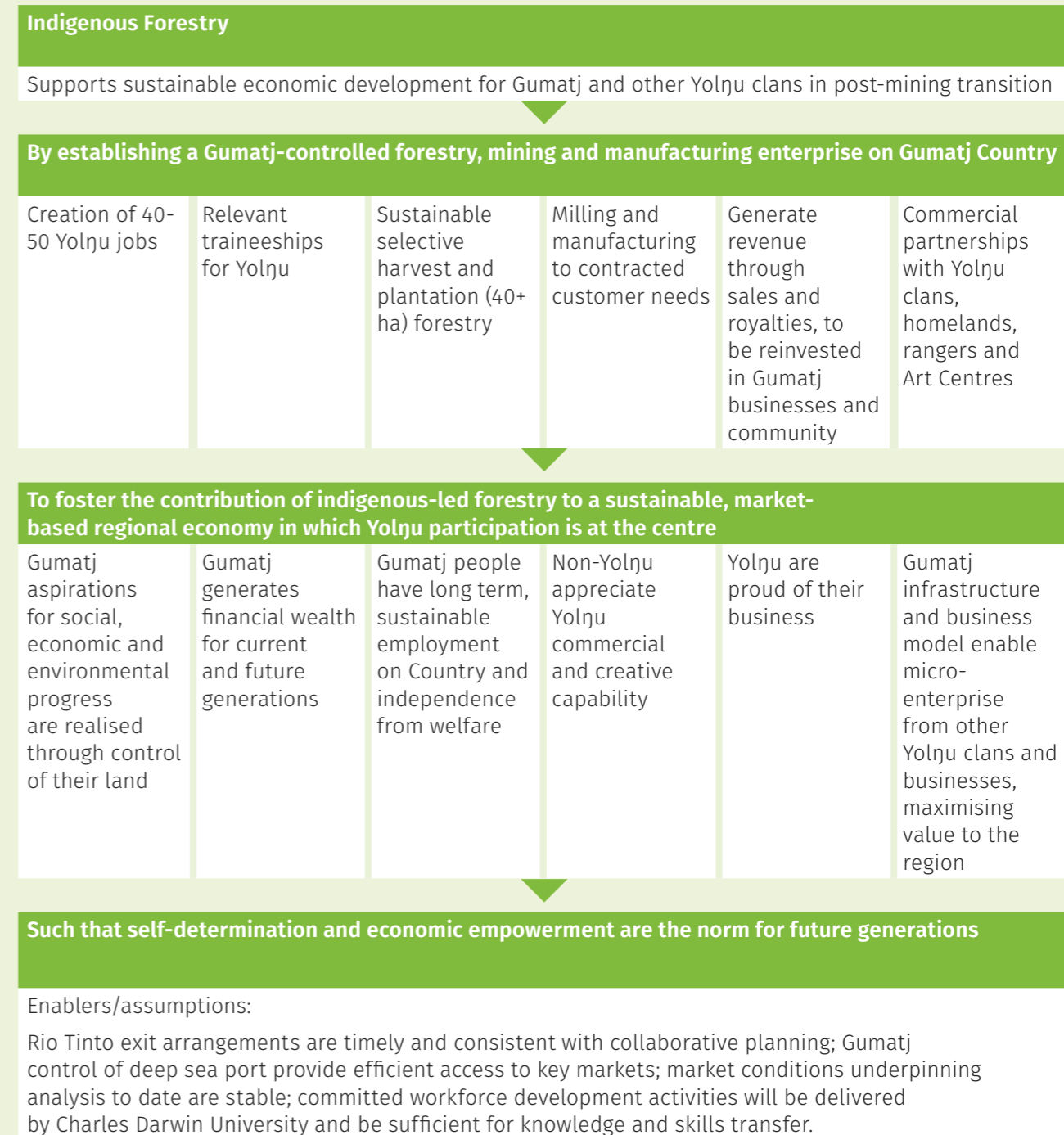


Figure 1: Theory of change

A model for sustainable commercial forestry in East Arnhem

Gumatj’s strategy to expand the region’s existing forestry industry centers on scaling the existing forestry, milling and manufacturing operations managed by Gumatj Corporation in partnership with their subsidiary enterprise Delta Reef Gumatj.

There is currently strong demand for a variety of hardwood products manufactured by Gumatj utilising *Eucalyptus tetradonta*, commonly known as Darwin stringybark, harvested from traditional Gumatj lands.

The increased productivity required to meet demand is currently constrained, as the sawmill currently relies heavily on salvaged resources from forests that are cleared by Rio Tinto prior to bauxite mining. Gumatj Corporation is in the process of securing access to additional timber resources through both increased selective harvesting within the Rio Tinto mining lease as well as the development of plantations of Darwin stringybark through the rehabilitation and return of the mine site.

Increased secure supply of timber will allow Gumatj Corporation to scale both milling and manufacturing activities to meet the existing market demand for Gumatj timber products. These efforts will include the installation of a third mill in Gunyangara, purchasing spindleless lathes to allow the processing of logs into roundwood products, adjustments to the range of products taken to market and a new pricing strategy.

A variety of initiatives have been undertaken to support the development of this model inclusive of comprehensive independent research and market sounding via the *Indigenous Commercial Forestry Opportunities: East Arnhem, Northern Australia* project.

Developing a forestry workforce

The Gumatj Board of Directors have been clear in their expectations that this economic activity will deliver a direct benefit to the clan through the creation of a workforce than consists of predominantly local Yolŋu workers.

Whilst elements of the strategy to scale Gumatj’s forestry operations are in the medium-term, rather than the immediate future, there is a need to begin developing a workforce now. A tailored approach is required to ensure that training is appropriate, engaging and accessible for prospective local Yolŋu forestry workers.



Figure 2: Workforce Development model

Ensuring training is appropriate for the context and learner cohort

A key consideration is that Yolŋu learners have grown up within an environment of lifelong participatory learning, in which knowledge comes from the context of the learning. This Yolŋu pedagogy centres on the observation and replication of practical skills or the transfer of songs and stories by the correct knowledge holder in the correct place.

For a workforce development strategy to be successful with this learner cohort it is essential that appropriate knowledge holders from both the First Nations and Western academies are engaged and that training is delivered within a workplace or ‘workplace like’ environment.

Achieving this will require the identification, development and ongoing support of local First Nations trainers, capable of providing non-accredited training and culturally appropriate support in first language. These individuals will need to have sufficient cultural authority and recognition as traditional knowledge holders that they will be respected and supported in this role by both the learners and the broader community.

These First Nations trainers will work in partnership with resident VET trainers to deliver a combination of non-accredited on-the-job training and accredited VET packages, whether through micro-credentialing or the flexible delivery of full qualifications. It is essential that trainers are permanently based in the region rather than FIFO to ensure that they are able to provide continuity and stability to learners as well as being responsive to local conditions, using on-the-job opportunities to train and retrain to attain competency. To achieve this training approach changes may be required within current funding models. Gumatj have commenced preliminary discussions with the NT Department of Industry Tourism and Trade (DITT) to better understand whether this model can be supported through existing programs.

Integrating English Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital capability building

This approach must contemplate the fact that many Yolŋu learners will not have the English Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital (LLND) capability required to participate in a mainstream vocational education training program at the commencement of their training. These skills will instead need to be developed in parallel with their forestry skills through the integration of specialized LLND training that is delivered in the workplace as a part of both employment and training activities. For this approach to be successful qualified LLND specialists must be engaged as resident trainers in partnership with First Nations and VET trainers. This capability does not currently exist in the NEAL region and new positions would need to be funded.

Clear pathways into forestry employment

There is existing interest in forestry careers throughout the East Arnhem region, with many communities and homelands actively seeking information on how they can participate. However, there are no clear pathways currently defined for people looking to enter the workforce. There are a variety of mechanisms for the identification and engagement of prospective forestry workers inclusive of a direct pathway from school, employment via the Community Development Program or referrals from existing First Nations forestry workers or appropriate community and cultural authorities.

Structured engagement with schools

There are several schools with whom Gumatj can partner to develop a direct pathway from school-based education into forestry employment. Primary amongst these are Dhupuma Barker Primary School and the Garma Institute, with whom Gumatj already have formal partnerships in place. Another important institution is Nhulunbuy High School, which is attended by a large cohort of Gumatj students from Gunyangara.

There are two critical elements to the success of school-based engagement as a component of a workforce development model of this nature. The first is the promotion of employment in the forestry sector and the second is ensuring access is provided to learning and training relevant to a career in forestry.

These elements will be achieved through partnerships at both a school and department level. Initiatives such as participation in 'career days' and providing opportunities for students to engage with forestry activities as a part of their curriculum through existing arrangements with school. The delivery of school-based traineeships should be delivered through the same training provider as is working with forestry employees.

Supporting prospective forestry workers to be 'Ready for work'

There is a need to develop awareness and command of 'work ready' competencies, and to explore and understand differing cultural dimensions and expectations, prior to entry into the workforce. A critical component in this is exploring the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous concepts of work and how these differences impact on the expectations that employers and employees have in the workplace based on their unique perspective.

The benefit of this approach has been demonstrated in NEAL by ALPA's 'Ready for djama' program which has supported hundreds of First Nations jobseekers to gain the confidence and skills required to successfully transition to sustained employment.

This program is currently fully funded through the Community Development Program (CDP) for jobseekers within the CDP caseload. A fee for service model is available if prospective forestry workers are identified who are not a part of the CDP program or if they meet eligibility requirements they can be supported to join the program. CDP in NEAL is currently delivered by ALPA, whilst there are program reforms and re-contracting arrangements in place for 2024 it is expected that support of this nature will be available regardless of the provider.

Transitional arrangements that support long-term workforce retention

Regardless of the mechanism for someone to enter the forestry industry in NEAL, it is essential for long-term retention that there are transitional arrangements in place that support new employees to feel comfortable, confident and supported within the workplace.

Due to the current scarcity of employment opportunities within NEAL for Yolŋu workers it is likely that in many cases a worker may not have had previous employment or is reentering the workforce after an extended absence.

For this reason, there must be flexibility built into the employment model to accommodate the transitional arrangements that will best support each individual worker. In some instances, this may be reflected in commencing with half days of work and progressing to full days over the first six months of employment. In other cases, there may be a need for more intensive mentoring support or participation in a formalised peer support network.

Whilst there will be universal aspects to these transitional arrangements such as wages with associated conditions, LLND training and skills development other elements of employment over the first six months can be adjusted as required to provide the maximum support to the individual.

An example of this being successfully applied within the NEAL region is Manapan Academy¹, an initiative of Manapan Furniture. The academy was developed to create a low-risk pathway for new employees to help them gain confidence and experience before progressing into a full commercial manufacturing environment. The academy is successful because it is co-located with the furniture factory, delivers a tailored curriculum providing a mix of technical skills and general workplace skills, LLND training and intensive mentoring.

Some employers may need support in establishing an internal training program of this nature and in some cases, it may not be commercially viable to offer this without external funding.

Empowering mentors in local communities

Local First Nations mentors will play a dual role in supporting the forestry sector in that they will be critical to supporting new forestry workers to successfully transition into the workforce, as well as acting as ambassadors within the community.

These senior roles will be for identified First Nations leaders with either cultural authority or existing forestry experience. They will play a hands-on role in supporting each worker with their training and development, act as an intermediate between workers and employers, support the contextualization of training materials and participate in community and school engagement activities.

There are several examples of similar roles being used to good effect by a variety of employers in the NEAL region, particularly in the construction sector which has a variety of similar employment characteristics. Preliminary discussions with DITT have provided confidence that mentoring positions can be funded at a ratio of 1 FTE mentor per 10 new employees.

Key activities to be funded to support a pilot workforce project in NEAL

There are a variety of existing supports that can be leveraged in the NEAL region to support the role out of a pilot forestry workforce development project. There are however some elements that required additional funding either from existing or new funding streams:

- Training funds to support a residential training model consisting of First Nations led non-accredited training and VET Training.
- Training funds to support integrated LLND training delivered within workplaces and in parallel to accredited and non-accredited training.
- Funding to subsidize 'transitional' work arrangements to offset reduced productivity for the first twelve months of employment.
- Funding to support the employment of First Nations mentors.

¹ <https://manapan.com.au/academy>

