

27 February 2018

Rainforest Trust
7078 Airlie Rd.
Warrenton, VA 20187
USA

Dear Rainforest Trust members:

RE: SUPPORT TO CREATE A NEW PROTECTED AREA THROUGH LAND PURCHASE OR DESIGNATION AS AN OFFICIALLY RECOGNISED PROTECTED AREA

I write to you about one of the most biologically and environmentally crucial land parcels in tropical Australia—and indeed the world. This parcel faces imminent threats.

The Wet Tropics Bioregion represents a mere 1000th of Australia's continental land area. A major analysis of the biogeographic and the biological uniqueness and irreplaceability of different ecosystems on the planet – over 173,000 different protected areas on Earth – ranked the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area as the sixth most critical and irreplaceable. Further, from a global perspective of the World Heritage Areas, the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area was rated as the second most critical and irreplaceable. These are striking statistics indeed.

The 'Barnwell land', on which I am focusing here, is centrally located in the Myola Valley and spans a large and critical portion (626 hectares) of the ecological north-south corridor for the Wet Tropics bioregion. In a landscape setting, this biogeographic context is critical.

The town of Kuranda falls on the most critical bottleneck—the so called Black Mountain Biogeographic Corridor—and is the narrowest choke point for the Wet Tropics. What you absolutely do not want in such biogeographic contexts is to elevate land use pressures—damaging and constricting critical bottlenecks even further with additional development pressures.

Understandably, land developers are interested in cost-effective freehold rural land, in this case just 30 minutes to Cairns International Airport. But if you were to ask anyone, from anywhere on the planet, they would say that this is absolutely *critical biological and environmental real estate*, laden with endangered species, including several locally endemic species. The Kuranda Tree Frog (*Litoria myola*) and Myola Palm (*Archontophoenix myolensis*) are endemic and confined to the Barnwell land and its immediate surroundings. The entire site is a catchment for natural rainforest creeks that sustain these endemic species.

The Barnwell land also falls on the north-south gene transit zone for an archaic and keystone species, the Southern Cassowary (*Casuarius casuarius*). The Tropical Bettong (*Bettongia tropica*), a wallaby-like animal, has not (yet) been detected on the site after superficial sampling, but this land lies *immediately in the middle of the two last known populations of this species*: one in the Lamb Range and the other on the Windsor Tableland. Any future

development at this site could have severe genetic and demographic consequences for this critically endangered species, given the high specificity of its habitat requirements and the fact that genetic studies indicate that the two surviving populations have had regular gene and demographic flow in the recent past. Such processes will be vital, now and in the future, for increasing the prospects for survival of rare and specialised species, particularly with the looming prospects of harmful climatic change.

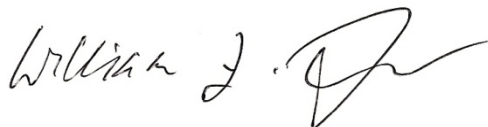
Typically, for large development projects the secondary or 'knock-on' effects are even more damaging than the original project itself. These include the effects of transportation, water, and energy infrastructure—and the ancillary land-use changes and human migration that the project catalyses. It is apparent that developing the Myola Valley, and the Kuranda Region in general—converting it from its present 'soft use' as low-intensity rural land and rainforest regrowth to intensive, high-density human and infrastructure use—could be catastrophic for the greater Wet Tropics bioregion. As a conservation ecologist, this project waves every red flag for me.

It is fundamentally important, 30 years on from World Heritage listing of the Wet Tropics of Queensland, to ensure that what remains is protected and that further incursions into the bioregion are tightly restrained. In this region, most (70%) of the lowland forests have already been destroyed. Much of the upland forests on the Atherton Tablelands and Windsor Tableland have also been cleared and fragmented. Government support for improving protection outcomes for remaining critical habitat on freehold land is the first vital step to protecting the bioregion for the future.

I work in native and damaged forests all over the tropical world, and I can say with complete confidence that the Wet Tropics region is among the most ancient, most biologically unique, and most small and imperilled ecosystems on the planet. It literally leaps off the global map as a hotspot of vital conservation importance.

Without doubt, the best possible outcome for this land parcel is to support the Kuranda community's desire to restore the land to its natural state, and for it to be held in trust for nature conservation in perpetuity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'William F. Laurance', with a stylized flourish at the end.

William F. Laurance, PhD, FAA, FAAAS, FRSQ
Distinguished Research Professor & Australian Laureate
Prince Bernhard Chair in International Nature Conservation

Director, Centre for Tropical Environmental and Sustainability Science