

# myview

with Bill Cummings



## Undeveloped north has rich potential

FROM the foreshore of the Torres Strait island of Saibai, you can look across a few kilometers of shallow water to the mangrove-fringed coastline of Papua New Guinea's Western Province.

On the foreshore is a small simple memorial recording a battle that took place more than 130 years ago, the last to occur between Saibai Islanders and the people of the PNG mainland.

The memorial records that in the battle, the Saibai chief, Mam-mose Alis Nadai, was killed but the fight settled where the traditional and subsequently Australia's northern boundary was between Saibai and PNG.

The fact that this international border is almost 1000km north of Cairns underlines the sheer size of the Far North Queensland region serviced by Cairns.

The region's northern border is as far from Cairns as Rockhampton is to the south.

Flying over the intervening area between Cairns and the PNG border also underlines how potentially rich and underdeveloped much of it remains.

At this time of the year Cape York Peninsula is soaked by a heavy and highly reliable wet season.

Along the east coast is the northern half of the Great Barrier Reef.

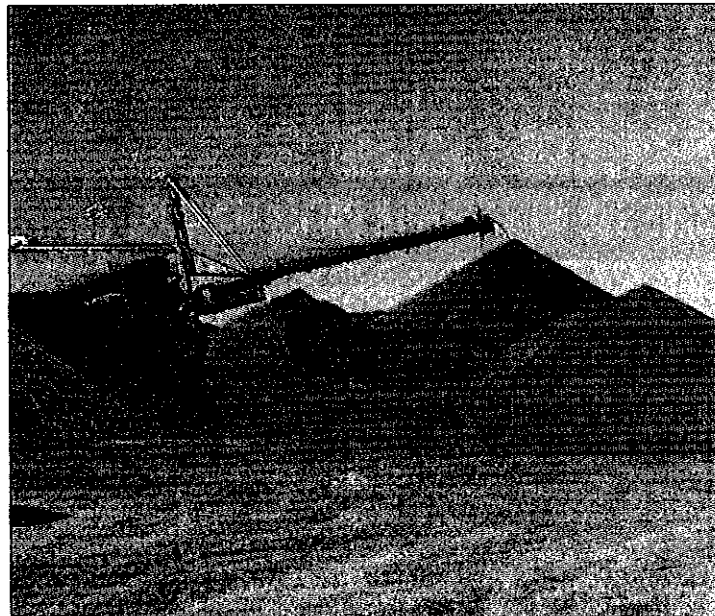
The 48,000sqkm of shallow waters of the Torres Strait teem with marine life.

The area contains vast deposits of bauxite and silica sands.

The area's eventual tourism potential is outstanding.

But the 20,000 people who live in the area's communities are made even more remote and their costs of living extremely high by the fact the Peninsula Rd remains unsealed and impassable during four to five months of the year.

Almost all cargo access is by sea and passenger access by expensive air travel.



Simply shipped south: Comalco Alumium's bauxite operations at Weipa.

Costs of remoteness suppress chances of business development.

The area's bauxite deposits at Weipa are simply shipped off to the south, transferring the benefit of processing and jobs outside the area.

The same pattern is about to be repeated with the Aurukun bauxite deposits.

Some 2.9 million ha adjacent to the deep-water port of Weipa have been identified by the Queensland Department of Primary Industries as potential agricultural land.

The Lockhart and the Northern Peninsula Area have obvious agricultural potential.

But conservation pressure from capital cities results in suppression of opportunities for communities to undertake agricultural development.

However, despite the negatives, the area's population and economy is growing.

The increasing population of

more than 20,000 is now greater than Queensland's Central West Statistical Division based on Longreach and will soon overtake the South West Division.

Mining income is expanding and probably has a market value approaching \$400m a year. Fisheries income stands at about \$40m a year.

About 20,000 4-wheel drive visitors are reaching the northern peninsula area each year, providing expanding income and jobs at centres like Bamaga and Seisia.

Governments have invested a great deal in basic community infrastructure of housing, power, water, barge facilities and airports, in education and training and in employment support through the CDEP schemes.

There is a new determination evident in the communities of the area to achieve real development and throw off dependence on special government support.

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## Briefcase

BUSINESS WEEK SAYS

### We must all sing from same sheet

NEW figures featured in the latest *Cairns Watch* reveal provincial towns across the Far North such as Mission Beach and Port Douglas are growing at a rate of about 4 per cent a year.

While the population of some sugar towns is static or declining, the upward swing in most outlying areas is fantastic news for the Far North.

Strong satellite towns add up to a vibrant economy in the entire region.

But as Herron Todd White's Rick Carr points out, the growth in such towns also highlights the need for Cairns to remember its central and vital position as the "capital" of the Far North.

The city's ability to cater for a growing regional population hinges on infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, and water.

The tendency for cities to be inwardly focused and insular has the ability to eventually damage the region as a whole.

Given the potential for further growth in remote areas such as Cape York, as economist Bill Cummings argues in the *My View* column, the need for constant attention to future infrastructure cannot be underestimated.

With a federal election looming, now is the time to begin the lobbying process to both sides of politics to ensure the Far North is not forgotten in the bigger scheme of national affairs.

Organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce, Commerce Queensland, Advance Cairns and Tourism Tropical North Queensland need to sing from the same hymn book when it comes to the region's infrastructure needs.

As evidenced by the continuing debacle over bed shortages at Cairns Base Hospital, measures must be in place sooner rather than later to cope with the Far North's growth.