

**Executive  
Summary**

**INDIGENOUS  
COMMERCIAL  
FORESTRY  
OPPORTUNITIES:**

**East Arnhem,  
northern Australia**

**February 2024**

**University of the Sunshine Coast**

John Meadows  
Mark Annandale  
Dallas Anson  
Michael Brand  
Rob McGavin

**PROJECT NUMBER**

VNC506-1920

# Indigenous Commercial Forestry Opportunities: East Arnhem, northern Australia

There is growing interest in the commercial potential of northern Australia's vast Indigenous owned and managed forest estate. At the same time there remain strong aspirations among Indigenous elders and communities for self-determination and economic independence. Economies that align with Indigenous notions of value and continue to care for Country are critical to fulfilling these aspirations. Against this background, the '*Indigenous Commercial Forestry Opportunities*' project investigated the potential for Indigenous-led commercial native forestry, focusing on the East Arnhem Land region of the Northern Territory.

The project team undertook research to facilitate sustainable forest-based livelihood benefits for East Arnhem Traditional Owners and Indigenous communities. 'Sustainable' in this context emphasised environmental and cultural health and resilience, and long-term (perpetual) Indigenous-led commercial forestry livelihood opportunities and benefits. [Download full report](#)

## Project objectives:

- Better understand the interests and capacity of East Arnhem Traditional Owners to participate in a regional commercial native forestry industry
- Better understand the East Arnhem commercial native forest resource
- Develop new value-added timber products derived from East Arnhem Indigenous-owned native forests.

## The project involved four concurrent and interrelated phases:

1

**Traditional Owner Engagement:** Indigenous community consultation to inform Traditional Owners about the project and seek their free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) to proceed with project activities on their Country. Consultation was also conducted with Indigenous communities interested in commercial forestry to share information about the project, to understand their commercial forestry business aspirations and capacities, to inform them of industry opportunities and practicalities, and to prioritise locations for the forest resource assessments.

2

**Forest Resource Assessment:** Surveys (forest inventory) of potentially commercial forest resources. Desktop analysis and field-based surveys (forest inventory) of commercial native forests of East Arnhem were conducted. Simple but credible forest assessment tools, (including a mobile phone app) were developed, supporting the capacity of Indigenous communities to undertake future commercial assessments of their forests.

3

**Forest Product Development:** A harvesting and marketing pilot to identify, manufacture, and market-test value-added timber products. A Sustainable Native Forestry Demonstration Site was established in an Indigenous community-owned forest. Harvested timbers were processed in the community and used in community infrastructure constructions, demonstrating the potential for reduced reliance on imported timbers. Traditional artefacts were produced from sawmilling offcuts. Bark 'canvasses' were processed using traditional techniques and sold through local markets, generating income for Traditional Owners. The Demonstration Site was showcased to regional stakeholders through multiple workshops. A market assessment of the prototype bollard product was conducted, identifying strong interest alongside high demand for multiple applications and sales into regional and potentially interstate markets.

**Indigenous Community Capacity Building:** Forestry workforce and business development initiatives. Traditional Owners were trained in technical forestry operations, sawmilling for local value-adding, and construction of sought-after community infrastructure. Traditional Owners from communities with commercial forestry potential were linked with prospective product purchasers and other collaborative business partners and investors, (including certification bodies).

Other outputs included a Forest Management Plan template, a culturally appropriate Northern Territory forestry training program proposal to develop the regional forestry workforce, and recommendations for a proposed East Arnhem Indigenous-led commercial forestry 'hub and spoke' business model. This model envisions project partner Gumatj Corporation operating as a regional processing and marketing 'hub', and remote Indigenous communities with commercial forestry capacity operating as 'spokes' of forestry operations to support the construction of community infrastructure and/or the sustainable supply of raw and/or processed timbers to the Gumatj hub.

### **Project achievements supporting industry development:**

The project has filled many knowledge and process gaps, providing a clearer pathway for future development of Indigenous-led commercial forestry in East Arnhem, including:

- A best-practice, community-defined FPIC process utilising a local Indigenous interpreter that can be replicated (and adapted in future consultations) to determine an Indigenous community's commercial forestry interests, needs and desires.
- Inventory results providing a clearer picture of the distribution, productivity, and product mix of East Arnhem native forests, indicating a predominance of small-diameter (150-300 mm), high durability Darwin stringybark (*Eucalyptus tetrodonta*) logs.
- New prototype value-added timber products (Darwin stringybark bollards and a 'shelter kit') were developed, alongside processing protocols and promotional materials, providing confirmation of the suitability of the commercial forest resource for production of small-diameter, short-length (up to 3 m) solid roundwood products.
- Multiple tools to support, and progressive steps towards, Indigenous commercial forestry workforce and business development in East Arnhem were delivered.

### **Conclusions:**

The project achieved its key objectives and delivered on its core goal of supporting development of an Indigenous-led commercial forestry industry in East Arnhem.

The project has demonstrated the potential for multiple timber and non-timber forest products, including ecosystem services that could underpin a financially and environmentally sustainable Indigenous-led commercial forestry in East Arnhem.

The project has also successfully raised regional stakeholder awareness of sustainable commercial native forestry in the East Arnhem context, and created expanded interest in this industry, and its potential to support Indigenous livelihoods and regional development. It is recommended to build on this momentum through continued work with remote communities, Gumatj Corporation, and other collaborative partners in a follow-on project to further test the commercial viability of the proposed 'hub and spoke' business model.

[Detailed report available here](#)