

Mining exploration surges in Cape York as scheme to return land to traditional owners stalls

No new properties have been purchased under the Queensland government program since 2017, a report finds



The Wenlock River at the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve. A portion of Cape York land handed to traditional owners is classified national park and protected, but about half is granted as 'freehold' and remains at the mercy of mining companies.

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Cape York Indigenous groups have warned that a successful Queensland government program to return land to traditional owners is on the verge of stalling, potentially leaving large and significant swathes of the peninsula at the mercy of mining speculators.

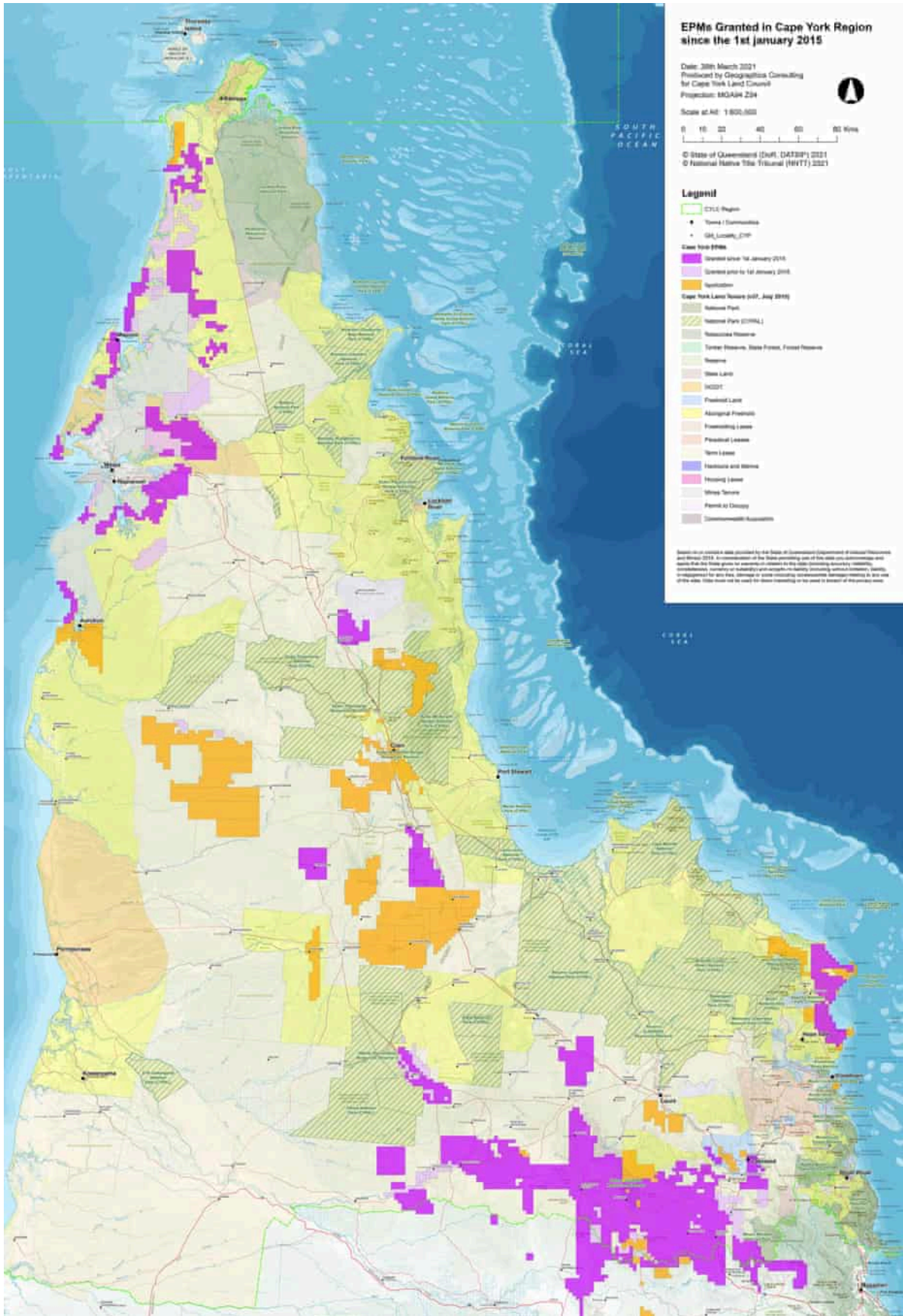
The Cape York land tenure resolution program has returned more than 4m hectares of land to traditional owner groups since 2007, including about 2m hectares that is designated as national park.

A report on the program prepared for the Queensland Conservation Council identifies areas of the peninsula that remain significantly underrepresented by the program.

It also found that no new properties had been purchased for the program since 2017, and that an additional \$50m in funding from the Queensland government would be needed over four years “to fulfil the original objectives of the program to return country to traditional owners and protect natural values on the Cape”.

The Olkola Aboriginal Corporation manages about 1m hectares of land, handed to the organisation in 2014.

“We employ 25 staff full time, most on country and living on country. We have a full-blown ranger base now, which is possible just because we have that land,” the Olkola chief executive, Debbie Symonds, said.



This map, produced for the Cape York Land Council, shows the extent of new mining exploration permits granted (and applications made) since 2015.

“Six years down the track we’re making huge inroads into caring for country. We haven’t reached the ends of the million hectares we’ve got, but we’re doing more and more every year.”

An explosion of mining exploration permits in the Cape has some traditional owner groups worried.

While a portion of land handed to Indigenous groups is classified national park and protected, about half is granted as “freehold” and remains at the mercy of mining companies. Those groups have no say in the issue of permits.

“While we’ve had our land handed back and we were told to go and do what we want with it, mining still comes above us and they can still negotiate tenements [and exploration permits] without even talking to us,” Symonds says.

“Because of the price of gold we’ve got more and more gold miners looking at the cape.”

Gerhardt Pearson, the executive director of the Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation, says there are 71 mining exploration permits covering the Cape – primarily on the Aboriginal freehold land – and that the situation risks becoming a “free-for-all”.

“That’s a huge number,” Pearson said. “Not all traditional owners across Cape York want mining. There are some traditional owner groups that do support mining and jobs.

“What we’ve got is an area in Cape York that hasn’t had a sensible template as to where mining and what type of mining can occur. First Nations people should be able to get on with planning our future.”

Pearson said the continuation of the land resumption program was critical.

“If it is not continued, the threat of open-slather development, free-for-all development, development at all costs come into play.”

The report, which was finalised this week, identified five priority areas for land buybacks – the Northern Peninsula area (including Lockerbie Scrub); Weipa Plateau; Holroyd Plain; Hodgkinson Basin; and the Mitchell-Gilbert Fans subregion.

“A number of priority properties within the areas identified above have been listed for sale over the last 10 years, and opportunities to buy properties of high conservation value have been missed,” the report says.

Andrew Picone, the Queensland Conservation Council’s protected areas coordinator, said the state government had indicated it would review the program’s funding at the end of the 2021-22 budget cycle.

“To always have the ability to acquire a property if it comes up on the market [is important],” Picone said.

A spokeswoman for the Queensland environment minister, Meaghan Scanlon, said the program was “fully funded in the current budget cycle including for acquisitions” and that continued funding would be considered in 2022.

“Negotiations are well advanced on several national park and land transfers and once all agreements are settled and consent confirmed with traditional owners, those dealings will be finalised. Public announcements will occur.

“The state is regularly contacted by landholders wishing to sell their properties. The Department of Environment and Science has been negotiating with a landholder on Cape York peninsula regarding their desire to enter into a voluntary acquisition agreement. These negotiations are commercial in confidence. Should the negotiations result in an acquisition, a public announcement will be made.”