

THE KULALUK LEASE:
FROM PRAWN FARM TO CRAB FARM TO MARINA.

By Dr William B Day

2011

Since the granting of the Kulaluk lease in 1979, the Gwalwa Daraniki Association who hold the lease have proposed schemes from quarries to canal housing estates, motels and golf courses, all of which have been prevented by public opposition. On Bagot Road a sublease has been granted for a McDonald's restaurant as 'an anchor lease' on the hope that one high profile business will attract others. However, no similar proposals have eventuated, because much of the land lies under the flight path of the Darwin International Airport or is in the cyclone surge zone - two factors which have hindered zoning approval.

Despite public concern for the future of the Kulaluk lease, hidden from public view between monsoon forest and mangroves deep within the lease, two attempted aquaculture projects have devastated the natural landscape since 1997 when excavation machinery began work in a tidal area draining into Ludmilla Creek, used by Aboriginal people for crabbing, fishing, shellfish gathering and general picnicking. Five ponds varying from 9000 square metres to 1300 square metres, bordered by levee banks, were being gouged from the salt flats to create a three-hectare 'prawn farm' with approximately 2000 to 4000 cubic metres of seawater flowing through the system daily. The three-hectare area being excavated was also a roosting site for migratory wading birds at high tides. At low tide the mud flats came alive with flashes of colour as red-clawed fiddler crabs darted from their burrows to feed.

The 1997 aquaculture project aimed to produce two crops of tiger prawns per year, to be sold through SAFCOL. As the work proceeded 'keep out' signs, fences and gates appeared. Obviously, recreational crabbers and fishers would no longer be welcome in this part of the lease. At the same time, new access roads were bulldozed and mangroves cleared for powerlines. A project spokesperson stated that objectors to the prawn farm were 'condemning Aboriginal and Islander people trying to pursue sustainable economic and social progress.'

Within four years the \$150,000 ponds lay as an abandoned mosquito-breeding haven. Beside the cleared but unused power line easement, dumped steel poles lay rusting in the mud while a Darwin headstone for the instigator of the project was to be tragically inscribed, 'Aquaculture was his dream. He died doing what he loved.' No restoration work has ever been attempted, although Schedule 10 of the Development Permit DP97/0077 states, 'upon cessation of the use, the area used for ponds shall be rehabilitated to the requirements and satisfaction of the Secretary, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment.' Despite a defence of the project that its construction had 'cleared a lot of coffee bush,' in fact the earth works had actually spread the seeds of this woody weed.

Ignoring the fact that the prawn farm had been a colossal failure, in 2005 the Howard Government signed a Shared Responsibility Agreement (SRA) with the Gwalwa Daraniki Association to provide ‘the foundations for a mud crab business to provide employment and develop business skills ‘amongst indigenous communities in Darwin harbour’ (www.indigenous.gov.au/sra/nt/fact_sheets/nt06.pdf). The SRA provided \$450,000 for the conversion of the failed prawn farm to a crab farm by providing ‘specialist aquaculture support as well as a project officer to coordinate business development.’ A media release stated that the SRA funding was to be coordinated through Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) and Structured Training and Employment Projects (STEP), providing for six aquaculture trainees and two administration trainees. Meanwhile, it was announced that a steering committee made up of representatives from the Gwalwa Daraniki Association, Northern Territory and Federal Government agencies and the Charles Darwin University would oversee operation of the new development.

Earlier statements claimed that the crab farm would be restricted to the original ‘footprint’ of the prawn ponds; however, media reports later claimed that the application had been held up by the NT Environment Protection Authority (EPA) because of plans to double the farm’s size to 5.25 hectares by clearing more mangroves at Kulaluk. The *NT News* reported (March 20, 2006): ‘Although [the crab farm] is yet to be approved, the Territory Planning Department said small-scale operations have already started.’ Earlier, a NT Government media release stated that the new venture was proceeding ‘following years of negotiations with the NT Government’s Department of Business, Industry and Resource Development (DBIRD). According to the media release, fifteen tons of mud crabs a year will generate around \$235,000 in the first three years before expanding in future years.

By 2007 the much heralded crab farm had failed and the expensive infrastructure and equipment lay abandoned on the Kulaluk lease. Dense coffee bush had colonised the levee banks and mangroves were growing amongst crab pots in the drained ponds. No attempt has been made to restore the area as required under the permit. Then in 2008 came the announcement that a caveat had been signed over the Kulaluk lease encompassing Ludmilla Creek tidal areas, including the abandoned aquaculture ponds. As predicted by critics in 1997, it seemed the excavations for a prawn farm were the preliminaries for future canal housing and marina. Indeed, plans exhibited by the developers had deftly converted the failed aquaculture project into a 200-metre ‘rowing course’, thereby once again turning failure into lauded pipedreams. The ‘Arafura Harbour’ proposed by Hans Voss and the Gwalwa Daraniki Association would also conveniently cover over the scandal of ‘Crabgate’, just as the announced crab farm was a distraction from the scandal of ‘Prawngate’. Neither of these disastrous schemes was ever investigated, much to the relief of NT Politicians. In 2011, the Arafura Harbour scheme remains alive while the Kulaluk leaseholders continue to receive payments from the caveat holders.