Northern Territory Government

DEPARTMENT OF
NATURAL RESOURCES, ENVIRONMENT, THE ARTS AND SPORT

North Australia Railway corridor, The Narrows

Background Historical Information

Prepared by the Heritage Branch, November 2011

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Cover Photo: Remnant of the North Australia Railway line, The Narrows

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1. Introduction

This background historical information was compiled in September 2010 as part of a heritage assessment report prepared on a remnant of the North Australia Railway line located in the suburb of The Narrows, Darwin, for the Heritage Advisory Council, as per the requirements under the *Heritage Conservation Act*.

2. Location

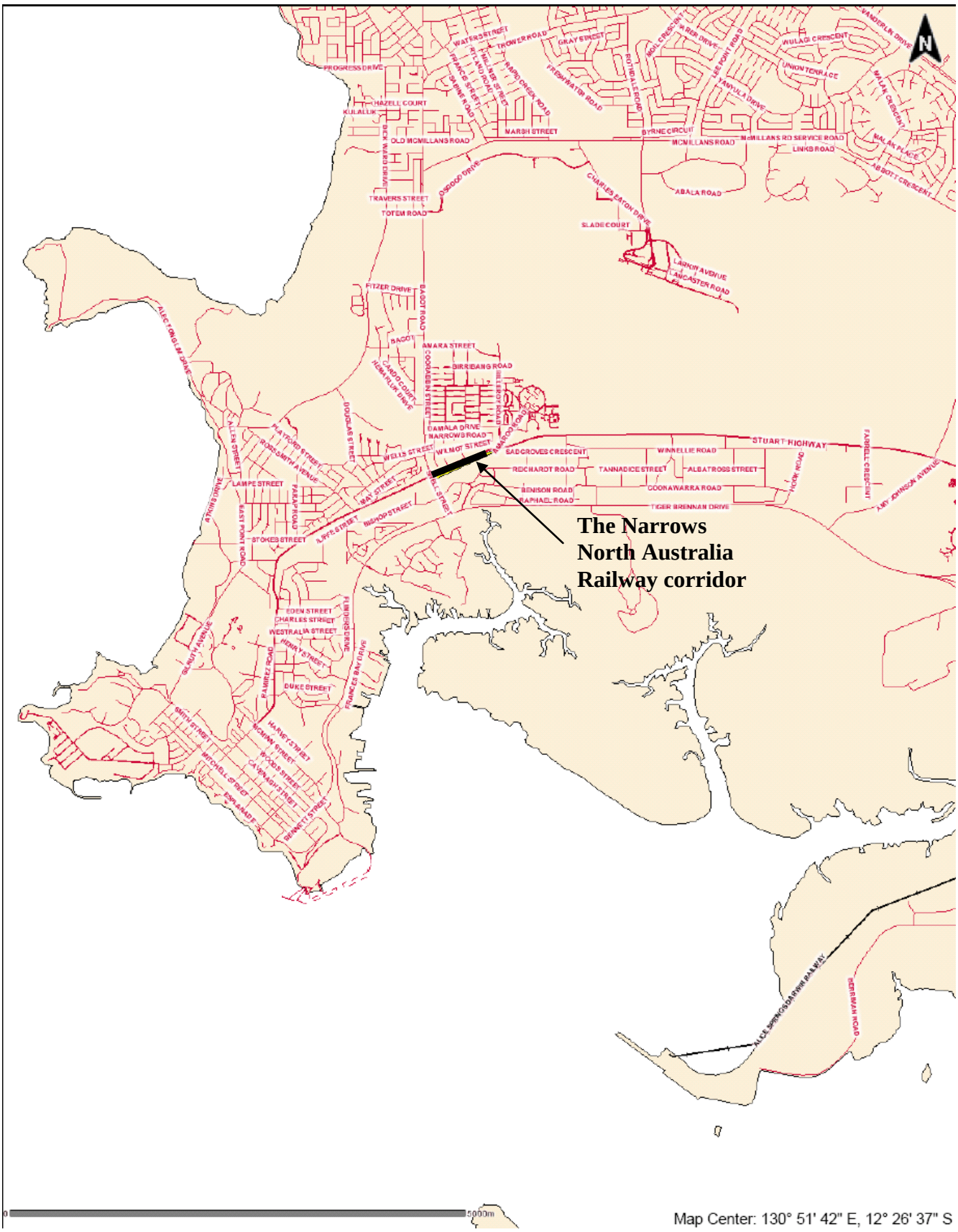
The NAR corridor is located within Lot 5636 Town of Darwin, adjacent to the Stuart Highway near the suburb of The Narrows (see maps 1 and 2).

3. Historical Overview

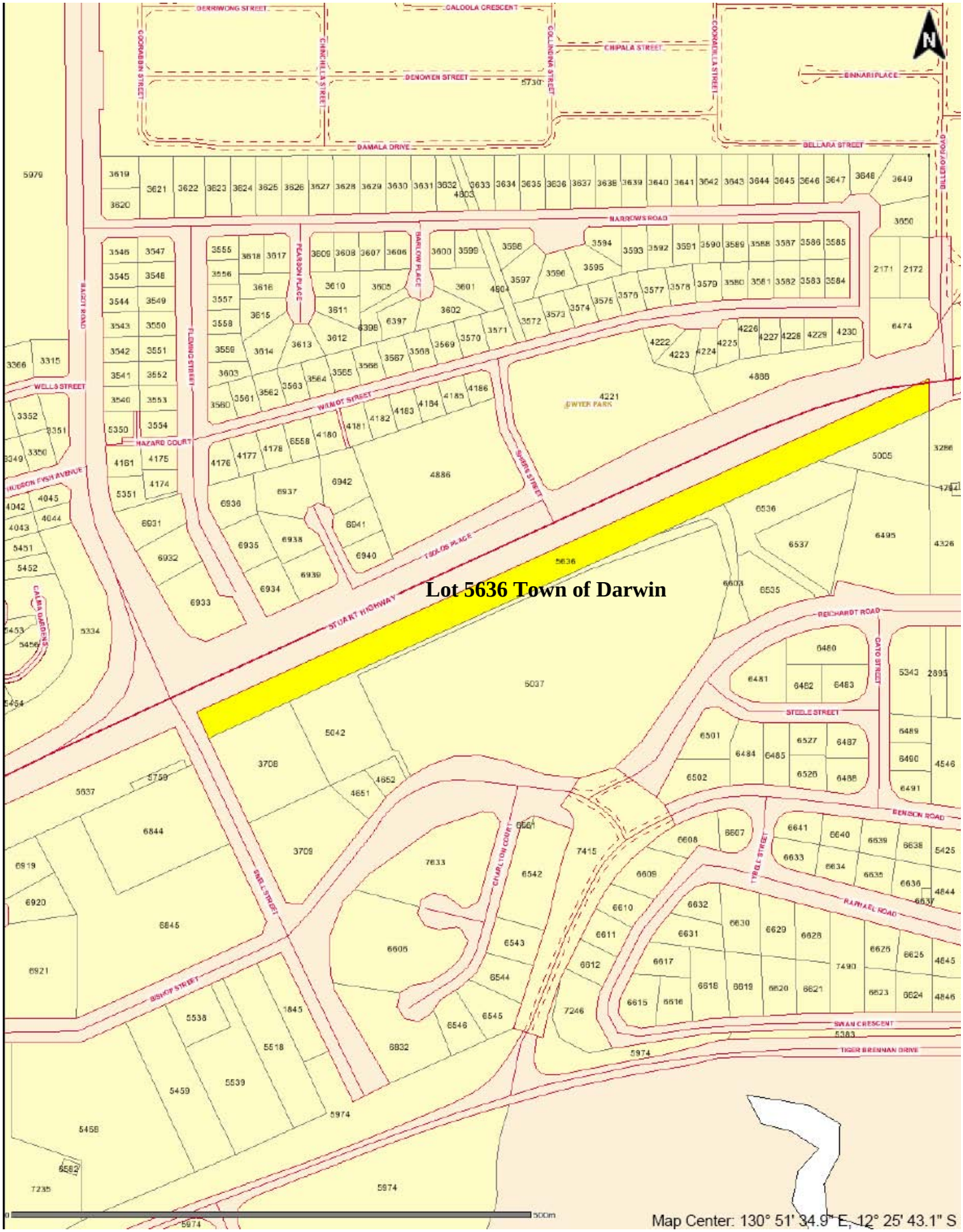
The John Cox Bray Government in South Australia introduced the Palmerston (Darwin) and Pine Creek Railway Bill in 1883. The construction of the narrow gauge railway commenced in 1887 and was completed by 1889. The contractor for the project, C & E Millar of Melbourne, employed 369 Europeans, 800 Tamil Indians who undertook clearing the surveyed line and earthworks, whilst 2,970 Chinese Coolies laid sleepers and tracks. Over ½ kilometre of track was laid a day and by the end of the project 310 bridges and floodwater culverts were constructed at a cost of £959,300 (Harvey 1987 & Wikipedia Encyclopedia 2006).

The line, which had been built as the Palmerston division of the South Australian Railways, was transferred, along with the control of the Northern Territory, to the Commonwealth Government in 1911. During 1912 a survey was commenced for the proposed extension of the railway to the Katherine River, which included a provision for a further extension to Mataranka. The pastoral prospects of the Territory were being realised and according to Harvey:

> *The Bovril organisation of England took up the well known Victoria River Downs run, and likewise English Vestey Brothers established the Wave Hill station. Vestey's also offered to build a meat freezing and packing plant at Darwin, worth not less than £100,000 provided the government agreed to extend the railway to Katherine* (1987, p:81).



Map 1. Approximate location of Lot 5636 Town of Darwin.



Map 2. The nominated NAR corridor is located within Lot 5636 Town of Darwin.

By July 1914 construction of the extension officially started and by April 1917 the line, which terminated 2km north of the Katherine River, was operational. It did not take long until the small township of Emungalan sprung up beside the railhead. Fitch (1989) suggests that even as early as 1896 a number of private organisations had made offers to the South Australian Government to extend the railway from Oodnadatta to Pine Creek under a land grant scheme but their offers were declined.

According to Abbott the Commonwealth Government:

> *extended the line southwards in driblets. In 1928 it was extended to Mataranka ...and finally in 1929 to Birdum … but when the depression hit Australia in 1929 all railway construction work was stopped* (1950,p:109).

Maddock (1988) explains that prior to World War 2 the majority of freight consigned to Darwin and the Top End was handled by ship and a few truck operators hauled freight between the railheads at Birdum and Alice Springs.

Hauschultz (1995) suggests that with the bombing of Darwin and the fall of Singapore to the Japanese forces, shipping lanes were disrupted, and at times, the enemy controlled the shipping lanes to Darwin. Freight to the Northern Territory now had to come overland, but with a gap of some 1,700km between the rail heads at Birdum and Alice Springs, it was decided that the quickest way to solve the transport problem was to upgrade the North-South road (Stuart Highway) and the dirt track across the Barkly Tableland to Mt Isa. “The Main Road Authorities of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, the Royal Australian Engineers and the Department of Interior carried out the construction as a joint effort” *(CoA-DoW, section 2,:2, 1969)*.

Defence convoys ferried thousands of tons of stores, equipment and troops between the Alice Springs and Birdum railheads, where they were transferred to trains, to continue their journey north. Bromby (2004) maintains that:

> *The crucial role of the Northern Australia line is shown in the fact that from 1939 when it accounted for 52,085 train km, the traffic grew to 1,193,372 train km in 1944, with up to 147 trains per week operating in the latter part of the war. Traffic in 1943-44 was up 6,000 per cent on pre-war years* (p:37).

After World War 2 the railway returned to normal operations. The mining of iron ore at Mt Bundy and Francis Creek during the 1960s and 70s increased traffic on the line, but the closure of the mines signalled a lull in the export era for the Territory. With its high operating costs and continuing financial losses the railway was doomed. Kent states that “notice was given in May 1976 by John Howard, Treasurer of the Fraser Government, that NAR operations were to be suspended on 30 June 1976” (2004, p:50).

According to the AustraliaAsia Railway Corporation following the closure of the NAR the “rails were disposed of, at $50 a tonne, to Queensland, and as reinforcing rods to Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Philippines. Sleepers were donated to Indonesia under the Colombo Plan. And wagons went to Port Augusta in South Australia” (nd).

4. Site Description

Today the remnants consist of a section of the former NAR line exhibiting the rail, embankment, an iron bridge with concrete abutments. The NAR was substantially upgraded in 1967 to carry the heavy iron ore trains. However the bridge located at The Narrows did not need upgrading and consists of the original Dorman and Long steel from Middelbro, United Kingdom (the same firm that supplied steel for the Sydney Harbour Bridge).

The railway bridge is in good condition and has recently been repainted by volunteers from the Institution of Engineers Australia and Friends of the NAR. Prior to repainting the wooden sleepers were also replaced.

The thirty feet long - 80lb/yard rails (36 kilogram/9 metre) were recycled from the East West Transcontinental Railway when the upgrade took place in 1967. The steel sleepers supporting the rails are in a good condition.

Apart from trees growing in the railway embankment it is in a fair condition with little soil erosion and the railway ballast is still very evident. There is a original concrete drain that passes through the embankment and this also appears to be in good condition and is still serviceable.

There are four posts in various locations made from railway line which at one stage held signals and mileage indicators for the train operators. Also present are two sets of switching devices that originally operated the warning signals at the Stuart Highway and Snell Street low level crossings.

Plate 1. The eastern end of The Narrows railway line almost comes into contact with the Stuart Highway near the Winnellie Post Office.

Plate 2. The railway looking west from the Stuart Highway.

Plate 3. One of the railway warning signals.

Plate 4. The original creek or storm water drain that passes below the bridge has been upgraded.

Plate 5. Top of the railway bridge showing the recently installed timber sleepers.

Plate 6. The recently repainted railway bridge made from Dorman and Long steel.

Plate 7. Height of the railway earth embankment approaching the bridge.

Plate 8. The railway line looking west towards Snell Street.

Plate 9. An original concrete drain which passes underneath the embankment.

Plate 10. One of two sets of switches that operated the railway warning signals that were located on the Stuart highway and Snell Street.

Plate 11. A sign post made from railway line with signal switching gear in the background.

Plate 12. Railway line sign post with a new 5 mile sign attached.

Plate 13. Footpath/bike track located beside the railway embankment runs from Snell St. to a bus shelter located half way along the railway corridor.

Plate 14. The western end of the railway line at Snell Street.

Plate 15. An unidentified switch or recorder located inside of the rail.

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