

NT lawyer David Morris wins Mahla Pearlman Award for the Australian Young Environmental Lawyer of the Year

The Law Council of Australia has announced David Morris as the winner of the 2015–16 Mahla Pearlman Award for the Australian Young Environmental Lawyer of the Year.

The Award is presented to a young practising barrister or solicitor who has made a significant contribution to environmental law.

Greg McIntyre SC, Chair of the Australian Environment and Planning Law Group of the Legal Practice Section of the Law Council, said the quality of nominees had been outstanding.

“David has topped a truly outstanding group of nominees this year,” Mr McIntyre said.

“As the sole employee of the Northern Territory’s Environmental Defenders Office, David’s work has been nothing short of heroic. In the context of the withdrawal of Commonwealth funding from EDOs, David has had to not only conduct all the work of the office, but also ensure it had the funds to continue.

“During the course of his career, David has had the conduct of Supreme Court proceedings challenging licences to extract water from ground water aquifers underlying tropical rivers in the Territory. He argued cases in the Lands, Planning and Mining Tribunal and Civil and Administrative Tribunal under the NT Heritage Act. He prepared an application for protection under the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act of the Watarrka National Park on behalf of traditional owners.

“He successfully lobbied the NT Government to reverse its decision on hydraulic fracking in the Watarrka National Park. He exposed the NT Government’s failure to require an environmental assessment of Port Melville in the Tiwi Islands. And he acted for traditional owners in the Borroloola region in relation to environmental pollution by the McArthur River Mine and Redbank Copper Mine.

“On top of this David has engaged in a significant outreach programme, speaking at community meetings in 22 remote and rural communities and on Indigenous radio and television.”

Mr McIntyre noted the glowing testimony of Mr Morris’s clients over the course of his relatively brief career to date.

“Mr Morris’s clients cite his legal knowledge and his capacity to always be on top of his brief. Yet in addition to this, they make special mention of his ability to communicate effectively and respectfully. They reference his easy rapport with all stakeholders, including Indigenous community members in remote areas,” he said.

The Award was presented on 10 March in Sydney after the Mahla Pearlman Oration in the Commonwealth Law Courts Building. The Award honours the memory of Mahla Pearlman AO, the former Chief Judge of the Land and Environment Court of New South Wales and former President of the Law Council of Australia, who died in December 2011.

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