Peeling off the profits

CARRYBAGS, wallets, greeting and business cards made from banana fibre are scoring a hit with Far North tourists.

The long-life, biodegradable products are value-added items from Transform Australia's new factory in Mareeba.

They have been selling like hot cakes at tourist outlets and art galleries from Port Douglas to Mission Beach.

Transform Australia director and designer of the world's first mechanical banana harvester, Tom Johnston, is celebrating the successful launch of the new Tableland industry.

The former Tully banana grower and his joint director, South Australian inventor Ramy Azer, have been working for more than four years to

By Duncan Paterson

get it up and running. Mr Johnston's mechanical harvester and Mr Azer's process for making paper from banana tree stems, based on ancient Egyptian papyrus techniques, were natural partners.

Denied support from Tully Valley banana growers and government agencies, they took their plans to Mareeba, where they were welcomed with open arms by the shire council.

They set up an environmentally-friendly factory at Walkamin, which uses no water and produces no waste or discharges, and in May, began harvesting banana trees and churning out produce.

Mr Johnston then hit the road, and has achieved encouraging market acceptance for his

MAKING a splash: Tom Johnston (left) and his first Innisfail customer, Ross Overton.

range of packaging and art paper, business and greetings cards, wallets, lampshades and carrybags.

Most popular items are prints of Australian animals by Melinda Lennen of Tully, and Aboriginal designs by Majella Anderson of Atherton, set up and printed on natural-coloured fibre by product consultant Jo Doecke.

Mr Johnston is now thumbing his nose at bureaucrats who said it could not be done.

"The Department of Primary Industries told everyone it was not a viable technology, and I got no assistance from the Department of State Development or the Environment Protection Authority or Workplace Health and Safety," he said.