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## 4.0 The Indigenous research reform agenda

Increasingly, Indigenous communities are voicing concerns about research ethics and the practices of research organisations. A body of work offering a critique of conventional research methodologies has developed over the past twenty years, largely within the health research arena. This critique also questions the extent of benefits from research practice derived by Indigenous communities (Henry *et al.* 2002; Dodson 2000). Since the 1980s there has been a greater ethos of reflection in Indigenous health research. Henry *et al.* (2002) refer to the work of Indigenous research reform advocates as a reform agenda, characterised by the following key elements:

- involvement of Indigenous communities in the design, execution and evaluation of research;
- defining a co-ordinating role for Indigenous community controlled organisations associated with the research;
- consultation and negotiation with Indigenous organisations as ongoing throughout the life of a research project;
- mechanisms for ongoing surveillance of research projects by Indigenous partner organisations;
- ownership and control of research findings by participating Indigenous community controlled organisations;
- processes to determine research priorities and benefit to the Indigenous communities involved;
- transformation of research practices from ‘investigator-driven’ to an adoption of a needs-based approach to research;
- determination of ethical processes for the conduct of research;
- linkage between research and community development and social change;
- the training of Indigenous researchers, and
- the adoption of effective mechanisms for the dissemination and transfer of research findings (2002: 1).

Notwithstanding the differences between health research and natural and cultural resource management research, there are close parallels between the above elements and the issues that emerged during the course of this scoping study. Effective river science requires multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches to better understand the complexity of socio-ecological systems and inform decision-making processes. Whilst many scientists are interested in integrating their endeavours across disciplines, some researchers, policy analysts and numerous Indigenous land managers are calling for a

form of interaction and integration across cultures which exhibit 'parallel, co-existing, but different, ways of knowing' (Langton 1998: 8; Dodson 1996). Marcia Langton has advocated this form of collaboration across cultures and knowledge systems:

Indigenous knowledge has not been, in all cases, superseded by western conservationist knowledge, nor is it a subset of the latter. It brings different and applicable views of the world to the task of conserving biodiversity. Indigenous knowledge exists wherever there are living Indigenous customary systems, and wherever this is the case, Indigenous and western systems of knowledge are parallel, co-existing, but different ways of knowing. Scientific descriptions of nature and precepts of the natural world cannot subsume traditional ways of knowledge. Collaborative projects are not merely annexing traditional systems of knowledge, but rather, interacting with them, and thus the outcomes are neither absolutely the result of scientific thought nor that of Indigenous thought. Rather each is a source of understanding the very difficult issues that are posed by the natural world on this continent (1998: 8).

Gillespie *et al.* (1998) cite a number of impediments to Indigenous participation in biodiversity conservation which are pertinent to river management. These include 'a lack of respect for traditional systems of knowledge and the ownership of information' (p.58). Gillespie notes that a number of institutions have developed guidelines for research in Indigenous communities and that 'it would seem timely to reach agreement on a code to cover research in the biological and resource planning fields,' adherence to which would be a 'compulsory part of any approval or funding process by Government agencies, universities and private bodies' (1998: 59).

In response to the Indigenous reform agenda, the medical research sector has sought to change research project development processes, methodologies and forms of communication and application. Changes have also been made to research institutions, particularly their methods of engaging with Indigenous communities (Henderson *et al.* 2002). Methodologies are a central component of the research paradigm, and hence have been subjected to critical examination:

Historically, tensions between Indigenous peoples and the broader research community have related to issues of power and control of the research process, and control over the outputs of research. Research methodology has been significantly implicated in the playing out of these tensions (Henderson *et al.* 2002: 3).

Henry *et al.* (2002) describe the emerging theoretical work being undertaken by Indigenous academics and researchers on the question 'what could Indigenous research methodology(ies) look like' (2002: 2).

According to Henry *et al.*, proponents of Indigenous research reform are not necessarily advocating for the development of new research methods, rather to re-position Indigenous people within the construction of research and to ensure that Indigenous systems of knowledge are central to processes of inquiry and investigation (2002: 4; see also Storrs *et al.* (2001). Some methodological approaches offer a means of achieving this aim. For instance, Winch and Heywood (1999) identified some preferred methods of qualitative data collection, including oral history, ethnography, participant observation, community study and collaborative inquiry.

Within the medical research arena, at least, the incorporation of new methods has been accompanied by greater emphasis on reflection in research practice and a greater participation by Indigenous people in research (Baum 1998). Collaboration between researchers from varied disciplinary backgrounds has also been sought in an attempt to develop an 'interface' between bio-medical and social science research. The development of Indigenous research capacity is crucial to the achievement of methodological reform (Henry *et al.* 2002). Research activity is transformed when undertaken by Indigenous people in the following ways, according to Tuhiwai Smith:

- questions are framed differently;
- priorities are ranked differently;
- problems are defined differently; and
- people participate on different terms (1999).

Methods such as collaborative research and action research are generally identified as being compatible with the Indigenous research reform agenda. These methods challenge the view that a distinct separation should be drawn between research and management response or action. The very strong emphasis given to land management issues by Indigenous communities suggests that this type of research could be well suited to meeting Indigenous people's needs.

Action research has three common attributes:

- Shared ownership of research projects;
- Community-based analysis of social problems, and
- An orientation towards community action (Henry *et al.* 2002).

The requirements of this research practice, such as negotiation and adaptation of research projects to meet community goals, requires a significant amount of time. According to Baum (1998), the length of time required often conflicts with the needs

of funding bodies such that 'it is not easy to reconcile these conflicting demands' (cited in Henry *et al.* 2002: 9). The Ord Bonaparte Program suffered from short time frames, limiting the ability of the Indigenous component to reach its objectives (Pursche 2004).

## **4.1 Issues relating to research process raised during the interviews**

The following responses were given to questions relating to the conduct of research: how people would like to see research done, and what improvements could be made to research processes. Many people stressed the need to ensure that research was targeted to benefit Indigenous people. Field-based research provides welcome opportunities for custodians to demonstrate knowledge and maintain attachment to significant landscapes. Questions were raised about how well Indigenous people understand the research process, the role of certain kinds of knowledge and research institutions. A feeling of being excluded from research was conveyed by two of the Carpentaria Land Council representatives. Many of the organisations interviewed have developed effective relationships with researchers. Respondents were very clear about the characteristics of a good research project and there was a good deal of uniformity in their responses.

### **4.1.1 Understanding research objectives and processes**

- Research as most non-Indigenous people understand it would be a foreign concept to most people in the Arafura swamp area (Andrew said he was not sure that the rangers would easily identify research priorities even if formally interviewed due at least in part to their lack of familiarity with the concept) (Andrew Martin, Murwangi Community Aboriginal Corporation, pers. comm.).
- Indigenous people are characteristically disadvantaged through lack of successful education outcomes, which places additional barriers to participation in research. In many cases a grasp of issues and concepts which may require tertiary education levels is needed when there are almost no people in remote areas successfully completing secondary school (Sean Kerins, Northern Land Council, pers. comm.).
- Understanding of the research process in general in the NLC region is very low making it easy for miscommunication or misapprehension of what people are researching, why they are researching it and what the implications of this might be for Indigenous people or their country. This is coupled with the a very poor track record of research delivering back useful or understandable information to Indigenous participants in the research or communities affected by it. The benefits of engagement in research for Indigenous people are often questionable in terms of tangible outcomes. People often do not see what use research is to them or clearly understand the nature of the research (Sean Kerins and Marc Wohling, Northern Land Council, pers. comm.).

#### 4.1.2 Benefits of research should be clear

- Any research that is not seen as a priority by Tiwi or does not return clear benefits to Tiwi is likely to be treated with some suspicion by Tiwi (Kate Haddon, Tiwi Land Council, pers. comm.).
- Kowanyama like to take a very proactive role to research wherever possible. They prefer research to be on community identified priorities rather than priorities identified by outside researchers (Jim Monaghan, Kowanyama, pers. comm.).
- Externally generated research proposals for the Kowanyama area are rarely treated particularly favourably – unsolicited research is not encouraged (Jim Monaghan, Kowanyama, pers. comm.).
- One of the big questions we have about research is how does it benefit people and where is the information going to end up. A lot of people have come and gone and taken everything away and we get bugger all (Ron Archer, Northern Gulf Indigenous Savannas Group, pers. comm.).

#### 4.1.3 Reporting back

All respondents raised the need to give due attention to the value of reporting back to communities in appropriate formats. People stressed visual communication materials (pictures, DVD etc), plain English materials, and face-to-face communication. Radio was also mentioned as an effective medium. Frequent interaction and communication is preferable to one-off meetings, particularly large ones that limit participation.

‘On-country’ visits were seen as more suitable locations for research about a particular place or type of environment. Researchers should recognise that building relationships requires time and consideration of the best ways of engaging. Good communication is a vital part of this process and it requires sufficient resources. Indigenous organisations do not have sufficient resources to fund this aspect of a research process, and nor do many research organisations.

- Translating appropriate information back to Tiwi people in their communities could be a lot better. At the moment most of the information Tiwi’s receive is in reaction to a particular incident rather than a proactive arrangement to provide information ahead of impacts (Kate Haddon, Tiwi Land Council, pers. comm.).
- In general giving verbal and visual feedback is preferred. This should be done face-to-face and preferably on the country that is the **subject** of the discussion, not necessarily in the nearby community or settlement where most people live (Andrew Martin, Murwangi Community Aboriginal Corporation, pers. comm.).
- Researchers sitting down with people could be an option to report back also-but with the older people, they might forget something that someone told them. If it was on a DVD with local people in the story people will get the message and they can look at it again and again (Ismahl Croft, Kimberley Land Council, pers. comm.).

- Often the experience has been that there is never any money left in the project to come back to the field (ie to the people who are interested). This should be factored in as a budget consideration and factored in, in terms of time available to carry it out (Sean Kerins and Marc Wohling, Northern Land Council, pers. comm.).
- Generally I think that face-to-face meetings with people are the best way of communicating. With other forms of communication things can go wrong. I think you get a more positive attitude when you meet someone face-to-face (Gail Fisher, Kuku Yalanji, pers. comm.)

#### 4.1.4 Importance of building research relationships early in the research development phase and remaining flexible

Many respondents emphasised the need for researchers to engage with Indigenous communities and organisations at the earliest possible stage in the development of a research proposal or project, and for projects to have long-time frames. This would ensure that Indigenous people could influence the project's objectives and build community participation into the research program.

- Indigenous people need to be extended the courtesy of asking for their permission to visit areas and their authority to grant or refuse permission recognised. Researchers must contact the relevant landowner or *jungayi*<sup>14</sup> and must invest time and effort at the early stages of formulating their research project. This should ideally include face-to-face visits (Andrew Martin, Murwangi Community Aboriginal Corporation, pers. comm.)
- Researchers and people who are successful at interacting with Indigenous people are flexible. They can come back again if the time is not right or if circumstances change in the community – they will be patient and fit in with community needs (Andrew Martin, Murwangi Community Aboriginal Corporation, pers. comm.).
- Projects have to be built which have timeframes which allow for capacity development within the Indigenous community where the work is being conducted. There also needs to be more time built into projects to allow for engagement of Indigenous people at a more realistic pace eg proper explanation of research techniques, debriefings on the day's progress etc so as to draw people more constructively into the research activity itself (Sean Kerins and Marc Wohling, Northern Land Council, pers. comm.).
- It is important to ensure that the research process/project has plenty of 'space' to incorporate local skills of Indigenous people and for discussion about the project as it is happening-ie daily feedback and reinforcement (Sean Kerins and Marc Wohling, Northern Land Council, pers. comm.).

<sup>14</sup> In some parts of the Northern Territory rights and responsibilities are allocated to owners and managers (*jingayi*). These roles are traced through patrilineal and matrilineal lines respectively.

- Funding bodies should really develop a longer term - e.g 20 year vision to engage Indigenous people-this cannot be done with a few years project funding (Sean Kerins and Marc Wohling, Northern Land Council, pers. comm).
- The Kimberley fish researchers were flexible and adaptable within their research program and the project itself was fairly straightforward in conception lending itself to some simple ethno-ecology work etc. Even though this was not particularly sophisticated it was nevertheless appreciated by local Indigenous people as it provided information of interest to them at the time and demonstrated the cross cultural nature of the work adequately (Tom Vigilante, Kimberley Land Council, pers. comm).

#### 4.1.5 Control and transfer of knowledge

Control of information is a contentious issue. For example, the Tiwi Land Council nominated the control of information as one of the biggest problems observed.

- Tiwis are often nervous about research happening precisely because they feel they may have little control over how it is conducted and what happens to the information. Some relationship building is needed early on to enable negotiation and clarification of the terms of reference and protocols for the research (Kate Haddon, Tiwi Land Council, pers. comm).
- People have been bitten by giving out local knowledge in the past when their intellectual property was not respected and was used in the wrong context (Andrew Martin, Murwangi Community Aboriginal Corporation, pers. comm.).
- Any research that is done is done under strict control and high contact supervision by members of the community (Jim Monaghan, Kowanyama, pers. comm).
- We want to restrict access to sensitive cultural information e.g. there might be a burial site at a waterhole. We don't want everyone to know that. If you are mapping that area you should just put down 'cultural site' or something like that. Sensitive stuff needs protection – perhaps an access code so that only the right Indigenous people can access it (Ron Archer, Northern Gulf Indigenous Savannas Group, pers. comm.)
- When researchers are doing work, the proper law people for the country should be engaged and the opportunity taken to get young people out on country with old people and learning for them. This should happen regularly so that the stories can be passed on (Murandoo Yanner, Carpentaria Land Council, pers. comm.).
- A good research project might be to answer the question 'How do you make intellectual property something that is respected and paid for?' (Andrew Martin, Murwangi Community Aboriginal Corporation, pers. comm.)

#### 4.1.6 Successful research experiences

Respondents were readily able to nominate successful experiences where satisfactory terms of engagement were negotiated, such as payment for traditional owners as consultants, research assistants and guides. Payment for people to participate appears to be regarded as an important feature of a good research arrangement. Effective communication, for instance, through translators, was also raised as a key feature of a successful research experience.

- Tiwis have actively participated in research of many different kinds. There is rarely any difficulty in getting people to work with researchers if they are appropriately paid and looked after (Kate Haddon, Tiwi Land Council, pers. comm.).
- Payment for Indigenous people, provided it is for the right thing, is a good idea. This can help with acknowledging people's intellectual property. Payment might be especially important where the outcomes of the research itself will return little or no benefit to the Indigenous people involved or whose country it is conducted on. It might be seen as a way of compensating for the imposition of research of little relevance to Indigenous needs (Andrew Martin, Murwangi Community Aboriginal Corporation, pers. comm.).
- If you make Indigenous people part of the research project by paying people for their knowledge ... if this kind of thing is incorporated you will find the co-operation comes – people will feel valued. When you look at the Cultural Heritage Act it sets some standards for things like site assessments and paying people for their knowledge (Ron Archer, Northern Gulf Indigenous Savannas Group, pers. comm.).
- The right way to involve people is always in a participatory fashion. The Traditional Owners will respond best when they are actually valued participants rather than just passively consulted. People need active involvement in research as owners of country, their participation needs to be paid for the time they are contributing to the research, they want access to useful outcomes and information and they need to talk about who else might get access to any information generated on their country. These are common views across the Kimberley (Anna Mardling and Ben Wurm, Kimberley Land Council, pers. comm.).
- Research funders should consider that specialist information from technical or research experts comes at a high daily cost-eg often up around \$1000 per day or greater. When senior Indigenous people contribute their knowledge however it is almost never recognised in the level of compensation/payment they receive. Traditional Knowledge is often underpaid and undervalued (Sean Kerins and Marc Wohling, pers. comm.).
- In the longer term there needs to be some kind of a mentoring system and/or scholarships to assist Indigenous people with education so they are more able to participate in things like research (Sean Kerins and Marc Wohling, pers. comm.).

- Use locals wherever possible for carrying out the research or assisting with it. We want to understand what is happening and get some exposure to the technical issues so that we can build our own experience base (Murandoo Yanner, Carpentaria Land Council, pers. comm.).

The NLC and KLC listed a number of projects that they regarded or were perceived by others as successful, or had elements that were viewed favourably: good personal interactions, attention to communication and appealing to local priorities were common ingredients. For example, a good relationship with Murdoch University's fish biologists working in the Kimberley has led to further collaborations:

- This constructive relationship led to further work on other projects such as research looking at the rare freshwater sawfish in the region. This has led to some work on other endangered rays and sharks as well as on work on the effects of a barrage on the Fitzroy River. ie the initial activities, being successful, led on to other project work as some confidence and trust in the working relationship had been built. Amongst other things there were products such as posters with the language names of fish beside the scientific names which were distributed to communities and schools and a source of satisfaction to Indigenous people in the region (Tom Vigilante, Kimberley Land Council, pers. comm.).
- People enjoyed being part of that research. They had to be involved because they are the Traditional Owners for the river so they know what's happening. People had dreaming stories about sawfish. Each animal in the river is important to Indigenous people. The researchers paid people to be part of the research, they also got advice on which way to go and how to catch fish and the names of the fish (Ismahl Croft, Kimberley Land Council, pers. comm.).
- The Murdoch University guys were good guys to work with. They were good at communicating with Traditional Owners. They built up relationships with Traditional Owners and spoke in a way that Traditional Owners could understand. We had interpreters working with us too to improve communication. Those researchers understand the background of Indigenous culture now and they treated people with respect. We (the Traditional Owners) would be happy to have them back now (Ismahl Croft, Kimberley Land Council, pers. comm.).
- The Kimberley fish researchers were quick at getting their results back to people they had worked with which enhanced the working relationship also. The researchers sent back a fairly simple booklet which clearly set out work they had done with photos of research areas, maps, relevant Indigenous language names and a short comment from the researchers (Tom Vigilante, Kimberley Land Council, pers. comm.).

## 4.2 Recommendations relating to research processes, protocols and brokering

A high standard of ethical practice is expected from Indigenous communities and many research organisations have responded with the development of ethics procedures and policies relating to benefit sharing (e.g. Australian Institute of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the National Health and Medical Research Council, International Society for Ethnobiology). Universities very often have a human ethics process to vet research projects before they commence. NAILSMA's member organisations have also developed their own protocols for assessing and improving the ethical conduct of research with Indigenous communities or on Indigenous land. The Kimberley Land Council has had a number of agreements with researchers over the past ten years (e.g. Cooperative research agreement with Murdoch University's Freshwater Fish Research Group) and the Northern Land Council requires researchers to seek approval of a research permit prior to accessing Indigenous land for research purposes (see for example, the NLC's online application form at [www.nlc.org.au](http://www.nlc.org.au)).

NAILSMA is seeking to develop research capacity within the Indigenous communities of north Australia, and often acts as a representative Indigenous body in research project development. It is recommended that LWA consider endorsing the AIATSIS Guidelines (see Appendix 7) and promoting them to all researchers involved in tropical river research. For example, researchers working under the auspices of the newly developed Tropical Rivers and Coastal Knowledge Research Consortium could be encouraged to follow the Guidelines. LWA in collaboration with NAILSMA could offer assistance to researchers seeking to negotiate agreements, on the means of communicating with Indigenous communities and maintaining effective partnerships. Researchers interested in working with communities could also benefit from guidance on the circumstances requiring payment to traditional owners and custodians and on what terms.

The Australian Institute of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) has played a significant role in developing guidelines for research it sponsors, and in contributing to the Australian Research Council's inquiries into this issue (see ARC Commissioned Report No. 59 1999). The AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies include a statement of the principles of ethical research in Indigenous studies, followed by an explanation of each principle, accompanied by some practical applications (see Appendix 7). These practical points are not intended to be directive but are recommendations and suggestions to achieve a high standard of ethical research (Australian Institute of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2000). There three principles underpinning the Guidelines are;

1. Consultation, negotiation and mutual understanding;
2. Respect, recognition and involvement, and
3. Benefits, outcomes and agreement.

The Guidelines address all the issues relating to research process raised during the consultations for this study.

Collaborative research requires improvements in Indigenous and non-Indigenous capacity and equitable, ethical partnerships. LWA's role in improving capacity *per se* may be limited. However, we believe there is a role for LWA in raising the collective understanding of the barriers to improved capacity, the circumstances conducive to social learning and the conditions under which knowledge exchange across cultures can be enhanced.

The following recommendations have been developed in order to increase Indigenous access to LWA's Tropical Rivers Program and to increase the number and effectiveness of collaborations between Indigenous communities and researchers:

1. That the LWA Board considers ways of ensuring a high standard of ethical research from the research it sponsors where Indigenous people are involved, including research conducted by Indigenous organisations. It is suggested that the AIATSIS Guidelines should be adopted as a basis for satisfying LWA's human ethics requirements.

Practical information should be provided to supplement the Guidelines. A better understanding of the elements of successful approaches, case-study illustrations and explicit descriptions of engagement methodologies could contribute to this goal while maintaining sensitivity to the various different types of research.

Final reporting against project objectives should include an evaluation of how the project has met the ethical guidelines.

This initiative would demonstrate to Indigenous people that LWA takes seriously the Indigenous research reform agenda which has been influential in many other research quarters. There is much that research ethics frameworks can do to enhance the quality of research activity and to protect the interests of a sector of the community that is sceptical and sometimes distrustful of research.

2. In recognition of the importance of early engagement with Indigenous communities and the under-resourced nature of Indigenous organisations, that LWA consider mechanisms for discussion and negotiation of research project ideas with Indigenous communities, organisations and research providers. For example, LWA could fund the development of research proposals and a greater number of pilot projects or proof of concept proposals from Indigenous communities. Similarly, LWA and/or the Tropical Rivers Consortium could play a role in facilitating meetings or workshops that bring Indigenous communities together with researchers who may be able to assist in developing proposals in anticipation of the various annual calls for research projects.

The Gulf of Carpentaria appears to have a particularly low level of research engagement (based on the information gathered here). This approach could be trialled in a number of locations around the Gulf. Ideally what is needed is a mechanism that connects communities to researchers, assists the community to pursue its priorities and to improve Indigenous access to research funds by developing sound proposals.

As with any 'action research' approach, difficulties may be experienced in providing the required research expertise at a initial planning meeting without sufficient prior knowledge of the set of issues of importance to the communities in a particular region. This may be overcome with careful preparation and close liaison with Indigenous representative bodies.

3. Given that the opportunity for Indigenous participation in research is a key ingredient in successful arrangements and relationships nominated by people consulted during this study, LWA should consider tailoring its investments to encourage LWA sponsored researchers to work collaboratively with Indigenous organisations in the tropical rivers region. All projects should be encouraged to consider the potential for collaboration with Indigenous partners. Training and employment of Indigenous people and effective consultation processes are expensive and time consuming. As a further incentive, some funds could be dedicated to 'top-up' projects that demonstrate a very high degree of participation by Indigenous communities. A standard of paying Indigenous people for their expertise and participation in research activities could then become embedded in research practice.