



**North Australian
Indigenous Land &
Sea Management
Alliance**

**Indigenous Land and Sea Management and Sustainable Business
Development in Northern Australia**

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Abstract

Indigenous people have had a presence for thousands of years throughout Australia, and have in the process, developed a sustainable society based on close connections to both terrestrial and marine environments. In recent times, the colonisation of Australia, has left the Indigenous people marginalized and often subject to entrenched poverty. Nonetheless, across northern Australia, an area of over 2 million square kilometres, people have gained some of their country back and are now the majority resident population, although still subject to exist largely on welfare handouts and other benefits. The North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance is examining the development of innovative business development across the north based on strong foundations of culture, land and people for future generations to come. This paper will discuss the developments, highlight the greenhouse abatement opportunities and mention the ‘culture based economy’.

Introduction

The North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance is a bioregional Indigenous alliance across the North of Australia that supports Indigenous land owners to customarily manage their land and sea country. This paper provides some background to the alliance, and to Northern Australia in general, and explores some of the ideas that arise in the development of a strategic direction, with a particular focus on linking customary land management to sustainable business development through a culture based economy.

Background to the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance

The North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) began in 2001 as a bioregional forum to bring together Indigenous land and sea managers and regional Indigenous organisations. It is based on recognition of the many shared circumstances across North Australia, such as ongoing links between people and country, similar ecology and contemporary natural and cultural resource management issues, ongoing external pressures for development and a need to create a stronger economic base to sustain Indigenous occupation of country. It provides opportunities to access new resources to support land and sea management, share knowledge and experience, develop leadership and intergenerational capacity, and to achieve a strong voice to advocate for Indigenous land and sea managers on issues that are of concern across the North of Australia.

NAILSMA is built around a number of practical land and sea management projects that are important across the North of Australia. These projects include:

- The development of an Indigenous knowledge strategy
- A Leadership, scholarships and communications project
- A Marine Turtle and Dugong management project
- An Indigenous water policy project
- A fire management project; and
- A Business Development Unit

Linking NAILSMA projects to sustainable business opportunities on Indigenous lands, and to the creation of a more sustainable economy for Northern Australia as a whole is a strategic goal of NAILSMA. This evolving vision is being discussed in terms of a culture-based economy—an economy that builds on Indigenous culture, knowledge and connection to country and that supports their ongoing maintenance whilst creating genuine opportunities for employment, income and business development.

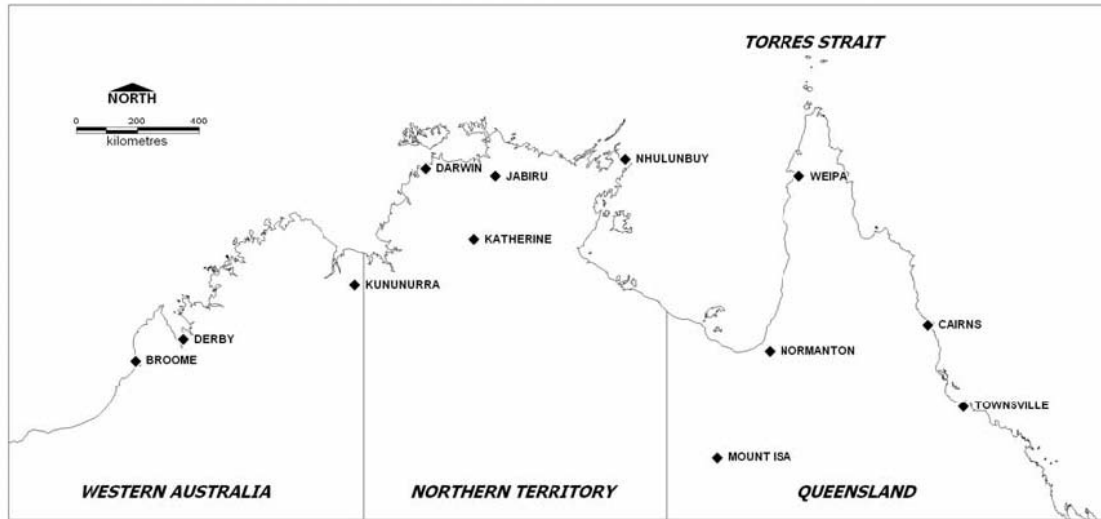


Figure 1 Northern Australia

A broad context for Northern Australia

NAILSMA operates within the broader socio-economic context of Northern Australia, where Indigenous people have historically been marginalized and dispossessed and continue to experience economic and political marginalisation. The alliance is linked to an ongoing movement that seeks to end this marginalisation. Three related factors—Indigenous land ownership and management, Indigenous demographics in Northern Australia, and the future sustainability of remote and northern economies in Australia are discussed here to provide a broader context for NAILSMA’s strategic development.

Australia was colonized without any recognition of Indigenous sovereignty or land ownership. Whilst there is an ongoing lack of recognition of sovereignty, over the last 30 years a large proportion of land in Northern Australia has been progressively returned to Indigenous ownership, with more likely to follow.¹

Contemporary Indigenous land ownership and management builds on a rich mosaic of spiritual and cultural affiliations to land, and associated management practices that have been refined for at least 60,000 years. Opportunities for Indigenous created businesses on the Indigenous estate that builds on and does not threaten these traditions is vital for future sustainability. In many places, the return of ownership of traditional country has formed a basis for re-engagement in customary land and sea management activities, and supported cultural maintenance and revival. It has also provided opportunities for engagement between customary practices and the market through business development,² and provided new opportunities for more equitable engagement with the wide range of resource development and management activities and issues across Northern Australia, including mining, pastoralism, tourism development and conservation (Morrison 2003). However there is some way to go to achieve a vision of an economy that maintains and builds on Indigenous land, knowledges and management practices whilst creating genuine opportunities for employment, income and business development on Indigenous lands.

¹ It is estimated that Indigenous Australians now own around 13% of the Australian land mass, with the vast majority of this land being in the remote northern and central regions. Around 50% of the Northern Territory is Aboriginal owned under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (Pollack 2001). 30% of the Kimberley region of Western Australia has been successfully claimed through the Native Title Act with undetermined claims existing over the majority of the remaining land (Kimberley Land Council no date)

² See for example:

Kalit, K. and Young, E. (1997). *Common Property Conflict and Resolution: Aboriginal Australia and Papua New Guinea* in *The Governance of Common Property in the Pacific Region*. P. Larmour. Canberra National Centre for Development Studies, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, : 183-204.

Altman (2005). *The Hybrid Economy in Remote and Very Remote Australia: Hybrid Economies and Joint Ventures*. Culture Economy and Governance in Aboriginal Australia, University of Sydney, University of Sydney Press.

The colonisation of Northern Australia proceeded alongside the development of new economic frontiers such as pearling, pastoralism, mining, and forestry, with Indigenous people central to industry development, but excluded from the material benefits that would stem from it (Loos 1982; Hunter 1993). These industries have been predominantly focused on wealth extraction with limited multipliers in local and regional economies, (Jull and Roberts 1991) and therefore regional economies in Australia have maintained ongoing dependence on state support, despite the fact that the wealth extracted from them is crucial to the economic well being of the nation. Transfer of wealth from remote and Northern Australia has occurred alongside insufficient investment in regional infrastructure and services, and a decline in the social, economic and cultural well being of Indigenous peoples, who frequently remain marginalized in the development process.³

Resource rich sites in Northern and remote Australia are also the focus of an ongoing resources boom that is fuelling the Australian economy. Discussions on sustainability in remote Australia frequently refer to the need to reverse the pattern of wealth drain, to return more positive benefits to regions that are currently sites of resource extraction, and to plan for socio-economic as well as environmental sustainability when mining operations cease (Newman, Stanton-Hicks and Hammond 2005; Newman, Armstrong et al. 2006). Innovative agreements between resource developers and Indigenous people, and ongoing opportunities for Indigenous engagement with the mining industry are clearly part of this, however mining related opportunities do not always coincide with the small, and geographically dispersed communities on country where many Indigenous people choose to live and for this and other reasons, many Indigenous people are likely to remain disconnected from mining related employment and business development (Taylor 2002; Taylor 2005).

There are also significant issues with the capacity of the current mix of industries in many remote areas to support a sustainable economy in the long term. For example, the capacity of Australian landscapes to support agriculture and pastoralism has been historically overestimated, leading to long term degradation, with flow on impacts to other industries such as tourism, fisheries and recreation, yet pastoralism remains the major land use in Northern Australia. Additionally, approximately one-third of the profits from agriculture are used in tax subsidies, drought assistance, research and extension to support agricultural industries (Diamond 2005). Mining dependent regions experience difficulties in sustaining settlements and local economies and services to support them due to high population mobility, and long term insecurity in the event of mine closure (Armstrong 2004).

Enhancing the sustainability of existing industries, including greater local and Indigenous participation in them as well as economic diversification outside existing industries are both important (Armstrong 2004). In this context, Indigenous innovations, building on Indigenous land and knowledge in remote economies has potential both to reduce Indigenous economic marginalisation, and also to greatly enhance the sustainability of remote Northern development.

More than one-quarter of Indigenous Australians live in remote or very remote areas, frequently on or close to their traditional country. Indigenous people account for close to half of the population of remote Australia, and a far higher proportion of the population living outside remote towns (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005; Taylor and Biddle 2005). The Indigenous population is young, migration away from remote area is small, and birth rates are high, meaning that continued growth of the Indigenous population in remote Australia is likely. However much of remote Australia is undergoing population and economic decline, particularly in spaces that are remote from mining resource development (Ah Kit 2004; Taylor 2005).

Ending marginalisation within the context of population growth and an externally focused, resource based economy is a complex challenge. The cultural and spiritual links that Indigenous people have to country and their commitment to long term residence means that there needs to be fundamental recognition that Indigenous people, their land, knowledges and aspirations for the future are central to sustaining Northern Australia in the long term. Recognition that Indigenous people are important contributors to remote and regional economies, spending money locally and supporting local business, attracting significant flows of government money into remote Australia, and engaging in business and business development within local and regional economies at an increasing rate is important (Sutherland and Pritchard 2001; Ah Kit 2004).

³ See for example:

Collins, B. 1998, Kakadu Region Social Impact Study. Kakadu Region Social Impact Study Implementation Team <www.energyres.com.au/community/krsis/>

Newman, P., Armstrong, R. and McGrath, N. (2006). The Pilbara Regional Sustainability Strategy—a Discussion Document. Perth, Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy, Murdoch University

The future of Northern Australia: A Culture-Based Economy?

There is clearly a need for an innovative approach to economic development in North Australia that can support greater social, cultural, economic and environmental sustainability and that leads to positive change for Indigenous people. The evolving idea of a culture based economy is being used to articulate an approach to this that builds on contemporary Indigenous culture, knowledge and connection to country and that supports their ongoing maintenance whilst creating genuine opportunities for employment, income and business development. The emergence of a culture based economy is based on innovative Indigenous engagement in traditional (eg. Mining and Pastoralism) and emerging (eg cultural and eco tourism, carbon sequestration and abatement, conservation management) sectors of the Northern economy building on Indigenous knowledges and land assets so that the Northern economy sustains Indigenous culture in a contemporary way. It is also about building recognition of the important role of Indigenous Land and Sea Management in maintaining remote Northern landscapes. Figure 2 provides a conceptual interpretation of a Culture Based Economy in Northern Australia.

The evolution of an innovative approach to the Northern economy corresponds with a clear need for new directions on the ground and also with global economic trends. For example, there is a growing recognition that economic diversification is crucial for the long term resilience of resource dependent regions and the global market is increasingly interested in niche products that are authentically Indigenous and signify cultural and/or ecological sustainability (Brown 2001; World Resources Institute, United Nations Environment Program and World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2002). The concept of a culture-based economy provides a strategic link to these opportunities.

Figure 1 – A Culture Based Economy

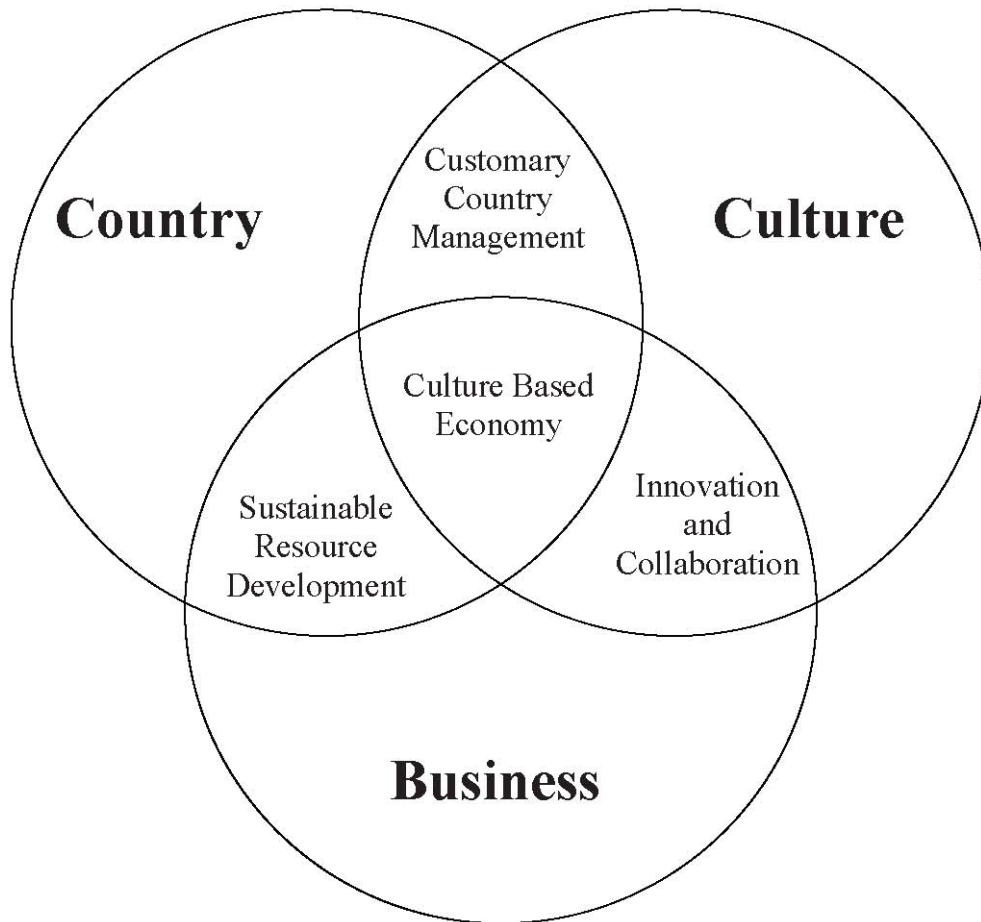


Figure 2 Conceptual interpretation of a Culture Based Economy in Northern Australia

There are significant benefits both for Indigenous Australians and Australia as a whole in pursuing such an approach to economic development in Northern Australia. These include:

- Development of an economy that enables Indigenous people to remain on their country and supports the ongoing reproduction of culture whilst providing opportunities for jobs, income and business development;
- Ongoing benefits of customary management of land and seascapes
- New opportunities for economic diversification and sustainable business development
- Linkages to quarantine, surveillance and defence across Australia's remote coastline
- Ongoing support for people who have a long-term commitment to living in remote Northern Australia and who are central to its long term sustainability (Altman and Whitehead 2003 ; Whitehead 2003 ; Altman, J 2005; Armstrong 2005)

It is also important to note that all economies are essentially culturally based, and choose to support or subsidise particular cultural values. For example, approximately 1/3 of the profits from agriculture in Australia are used in tax subsidies, drought assistance, research and extension to support agricultural industries which may be of questionable long term sustainability (Diamond 2005). Similarly, suburban fringe development costs close to twice as much per dwelling as urban consolidation in inner and middle suburbs in terms of government and corporate infrastructure subsidies and is also attended by a range of negative environmental, and social impacts (Kenworthy and Newman 1992). Yet suburban development on Perth's fringes continues, and receives significant government subsidy, based upon a cultural value for suburban life and a negative reaction against urban consolidation.

This paper suggests that Indigenous cultural values should be central to reconsidering what (and whose) cultural values remote northern economies should support. Therefore articulating and developing economic and business opportunities that build on Indigenous lands and knowledge, and support the ongoing reproduction of culture are needed. Whilst there are a range of possibilities, many of which will depend on local knowledge, resources and so on, one business opportunity, Carbon abatement through using traditional fire management knowledge and techniques provides an illustration of the type of connection that may be possible in this new economy.

Carbon Abatement through Indigenous fire management

In Northern Australia, late in the dry season, hot fires, often sparked by lightning strikes, but usually by human ignition burn across much of the landscape—approximately 350,000 kilometres square per annum are burnt. The smoke from these fires is a major contributor to greenhouse emissions as well as contributing to smog in South East Asia, and posing a major threat to biodiversity (Collis 2004). The intensity of these fires represents a recent phenomena, along with the disruption of traditional fire management practices due to the colonisation of Northern Australia. Fire management has been a part of complex traditional Indigenous land management practices for tens of thousands of years, resulting in improved foraging for native herbivores and favoring the growth of certain plants. The resulting mosaic of burnt and unburnt areas of land effectively reduces the intensity and scale of late dry season fires (Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre no date). Creating partnerships between corporations who wish to offset their carbon emissions and Indigenous people, who have the knowledge and cultural obligations to manage fire in these regions provides a major opportunity to support customary land management on indigenous owned lands and foster economic development through participating in an emerging economy – namely payment for environmental services.

Bridging customary management and business development in a culture based economy—some considerations

The potential for innovative economic development within a culture-based economy is in stark contrast to the current levels of Indigenous economic marginalisation in remote Australia. This provides strong impetus for business development that matches the needs of Indigenous people living on their country. The remainder of this paper discusses some of the challenges that need to be overcome in order to achieve business development at a local level as well as some ways forward

Overall it is not surprising that current levels of engagement between remote Indigenous communities in Northern Australia and National and Global economies are not providing for economic self sufficiency. Whilst free market capitalism is well entrenched as *the* system for economic development across the globe it has consistently failed to,

- ensure equitable economic opportunities across space, with remote areas in particular posing largely unmet challenges;
- prevent the development of persistent income disparities within and between nations; and
- solve persistent environmental issues (Douglass 2001).

Additionally, global capitalism has its historical roots in western European cultural values, a long history of colonial exploitation and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples, tending to ignore the particular requirements of local people in local places (Blaser, Feit and Mcrae 2004). These market failures are all present in Northern Australia, and highlight the need for an innovative approach to business development. Linking customary management of Indigenous lands across Northern Australia to these strategic and innovative opportunities for business development requires a considered approach. Some ideas to be explored in relation to business development within a culture based economy, in remote areas of Northern Australia may include:

- The role of local and regional governance structures.
- Local participation and ownership of business development.
- Dynamic engagement with capitalism in a way that matches the needs and aspirations of Indigenous people.

Each of these points is briefly discussed below.

Local and regional governance and institutions

The Harvard Project on American Indian economic development has highlighted the importance of political dynamics and political institutions to social and economic development on Indigenous lands in the United States (Cornell and Kalt 2003). The roles of governance and institutions has also received much attention in Australia and development. Dodson, and Smith (2003) argue that in Australia, development of sound governance structures and development strategies and policies are the areas over which indigenous people can assert most effective control towards achieving self determined outcomes. They argue that there is no universal solution to governance but that broad principles of good governance⁴ need to be applied in local contexts to achieve local solutions through the engagement of community and regional leaders. In terms of regional organization, flexibility to enable both local autonomy and regional integration, and a capacity to be intercultural—to support the both the needs of Indigenous people, and to make connections across culture and vast distances to markets have been noted as two important factors for success (Martin 1999; Altman 2005).

Local participation and ownership

There is a wide body of literature in international development that suggests a participatory approach is central to achieving sustainable development at a local and regional level. A participatory approach establishes local institutions, aspirations, knowledges, and resources at the centre of development— as its agents rather than its objects. It also has potential to build collaborative regional networks from the ground up. Some of the core aspects of a participatory approach that are relevant to local and regional sustainability are summarized by McGrath and Armstrong (2004). They include:

- Facilitation at a local level to enable local people to determine their own development priorities.
- Capacity building so that local people and local institutions develop the skills and confidence to take control of development
- Empowerment so that local people are the agents of change in their own communities.
- Networking so that local institutions are linked across space to facilitate collaboration, communication and coordination of local initiatives with broader strategic regional agendas, and to enable regional collaboration to evolve from the ground up.

⁴ Which, according to Dodson and Smith, include: Stable and representative organizations structures, capable effective institutions, sound corporate governance, limitation and the separations of powers, fair and reliable dispute resolution, effective financial management and administration, simple and locally relevant management systems, effective development policies and realistic strategies, cultural match or fit.

- Conflict resolution towards collaboration and cooperation at a local and regional level.

Dynamic Engagement with capitalism

Research suggests that contemporary business development building on Indigenous knowledges around land and sea management practices will require a dynamic approach that is local, place based and participatory and that connects Indigenous people into local, national and global markets. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development envisage a future for capitalism with sustainability as dynamic engagement between business, civil society, non government organisations and government in a way that supports innovation, attention to local issues, and fosters accountability between business, society and government. Core factors of this approach include:

- Minimal reliance on government in getting things done and a proactive approach to determining futures and developing capacity and partnerships as appropriate to making them happen.
- Reflexivity to local and regional issues, and a focus on partnerships
- Futures orientation with a recognition that the way things are now is not sustainable and will require innovation, leadership and a proactive approach to change (Brown, Hall et al. 2000).

A core theme of the three ideas explored here towards linking customary country management to business development—governance, participation and dynamic engagement with capitalism is the need for a reflexive approach that facilitates aspirations and opportunities at a local level as relevant to particular people and places.

Conclusions

There is some way to go in Northern Australia towards realizing a culture-based economy that supports the ongoing reproduction of Indigenous knowledge, language, culture and connections to country and sustainable business development. Whilst the vision of a culture-based economy encompasses the whole of the North, it is also dependent on the aspirations resources and opportunities available to particular people in particular places. At a regional, whole of the North scale this requires flexibility to facilitate local autonomy within supportive regional structures can facilitate in areas such as:

- collaboration between local Indigenous knowledge systems, non-indigenous knowledge systems and market;
- support in business development that links customary land management to market opportunities, including research, accessing markets and capital; and
- ongoing support for Indigenous land and sea management as a basis for maintaining Indigenous cultures and knowledges, which are also central to a culture based economy.

However it is argued that working with this idea provides opportunities outside the mainstream trajectory of resource exploitation and development that are more sustainable, in social, economic and environmental terms and more relevant to Indigenous people living on their country in Northern Australia.

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