

Sundays at 9.10am, repeated Tuesdays at 7.10pm

NAILSMA: Black Hands on the Steering Wheel

Sunday 21 November 2004

Produced by Mark Horstman



Program Transcript

Mark Horstman: This is Wardaman country, owned by the Menngen Aboriginal Land Trust. I'm at Wynbarr Waterhole in the Northern Territory.

It's late in the dry season, and we're deep in the savannas. Darwin is five hours' drive north, Western Australia a couple of hours west.

A fire's cut through here a few days ago. Dry leaves and charred grass carpet the blackened, stony plains. Squadrons of red-tailed cockatoos cruise over hunched rocky outcrops. Brahman cattle pick their way through yellow grass and scattered trees.

I roll my swag out under the shady trees along the creek; it's a chain of deep waterholes fringed by spiky pandanus and smooth white eucalypts.



Wynbarr waterhole – Photo::Todd Condie, Northern Land Council

For a place that seems remote, it's about to get pretty crowded. Two hundred people from Broome to Townsville, from Cape York to Katherine, are on their way here, too.

Aboriginal people own so much country like this across the tropical savannas, they're getting together to talk about what to do with it. At the same time that ATSIC is being dismantled, people here are setting up a new organisation. It's called the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance, or NAILSMA for short.

Peter Yu: With the demise of all these other institutions, a lot of these institutions by the way are not necessarily Aboriginal institutions, they're institutions that are constructs of government, so in some ways it's not

surprising. ATSIC itself, ATSIC is a government construct, it's not an indigenous construct, it never was, and most of the statutory-type of organisations representing indigenous interests have been.

I think what NAILSMA offers is a purely indigenous initiative, and its starting base is quite different. We're not talking about consultative processes to engage with government, what we're talking about are land management projects where people are occupied physically on the ground, actually doing something. And what it's doing really is trying to build a process around that. I think it's working completely the opposite way around.

Mark Horstman: That's Peter Yu; and what's also different about this new alliance is that it stretches right across the top of Australia, from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.

For the next two days, we're camping with people who are ignoring the State borders in the north, and making their own federation for managing country.

For 31-year-old Joe Morrison, who's responsible for putting this meeting together, this is a kind of homecoming.

Joe Morrison: I was born and raised in Katherine in the Northern Territory which is only 145 kilometres east of here, where we're meeting. My family is all from there, my mother's country is actually out this way, descendants of Dagoman people on my mother's side, and my father's side we're from Mabuig and Moa [islands] in the Torres Straits.

Mark Horstman: Joe's got a degree in environmental science, and for the last ten years or so he's been using his local knowledge to help Aboriginal communities manage their country throughout the Top End.

Joe Morrison: Today we're expecting the bulk of 200 people to come in from the Kimberley right through to the Torres Strait; people are coming in to talk about setting up an alliance of indigenous land and sea management.

Mark Horstman: How do you think it's going to go?

Joe Morrison: Fine. It's going to be quite an event. I think it's going to be an historic occasion and we're on the brink of starting something really good here.

Mark Horstman: Why are you setting up a land and sea management alliance?

Joe Morrison: Because people are interested in getting on with looking after country, caring for country, after 20 or 30 years of going through land claims and the native title process, so this is a kind of logical follow-on from the land rights era to help people to get on with managing country.

Mark Horstman: Joe and his team have arrived early to get ready. The locals have already built an impressive boardroom out of about 50 posts and a black plastic roof that billows in the breeze.

Joe Morrison: This is a bough shelter. A bough shelter is a bush bit of shade, where people are just using here old rails from the stockyard, using a bit of weed-mat I believe, for the roof.



The bough shelter once it fills with people

Mark Horstman: This'd have to be the biggest one I've ever seen.

Joe Morrison: They don't muck around here, it's humungous.

Mark Horstman: Visible from space, I reckon.

Joe Morrison: Probably is.

Mark Horstman: There's plenty to do, the usual stuff for bush meetings: set up the longdrop toilets, start the generator for the coolroom.

And eventually, there's nothing left but wait for people to arrive.



Turn right here to get to the meeting

Sitting by the creek after a swim, Joe's doing his best to relax. His job is to coordinate NAILSMA, and the next few days are its first real test. The people here will decide if they like the idea and whether it should go ahead.

Joe Morrison: Having these meetings is always a good event. There's always lots of people that come with different ideas and lots of people want to get up and say what's going on in their country and share knowledge. And this is our first forum for the alliance. I take the view that I'm not going to stress about these sorts of things, and especially these bush meetings, they usually come off quite successfully. I'm feeling pretty good about this meeting actually, we're hoping to get some clear direction from traditional owners and some of our partners, and some of the other groups in Northern Australia that want to become members of NAILSMA as well.

Mark Horstman: At the core of the Alliance is an agreement between the executives of the Kimberley, Northern and Cape York Land Councils. Although the membership is only open to indigenous groups, whitefellas like me are invited to the meeting as observers. But Joe regards it as more than just a Landcare group for blackfellas.

Joe Morrison: One of the things that I constantly think about and something that I hold close to my own heart, is hoping that my kids grow up to enjoy the benefits that I've been able to grow up in, that is, being able to share knowledge and experience with some very special people out bush and to be able to go and do things like hunting and harvesting of resources without having to worry about what the repercussions are and what people in cities and so forth think about that. I would hope that we're moving to deal with things like welfare dependency, so people aren't necessarily receiving welfare-type benefits to do very important work that contributes to the nation, looking after very important landscapes. I see that Aboriginal people who are providing these services are not just for their own good, but for the national good.

Mark Horstman: We hear the grader coming from the small community of Menggen down the road, scraping the track so people don't lose their mufflers on the way in. There's a slow convoy of vehicles bailed up behind it.

People meeting and greeting.

Mark Horstman: First in line is Peter Yu, former Director of the Kimberley Land Council. He used to be my boss when I worked there some years ago. Peter wears at least two hats: one chairing Western Australia's Aboriginal Housing Council, the other, chairing NAILSMA.

Peter Yu: Very nice to be back out bush and seeing old friends and communities and people that I worked with over the years. I'm feeling invigorated and excited about the fact that - you can tend to get stale after a while, everybody gets stale - and you need something new to give you a bit of a kick along, and it's very exciting in my view, this is the next big thing, other than the other area that I'm involved in, housing; I think housing is a crucial element. Seeing people engaged so productively and so enthusiastically really gives you a kick, and that's the best thing for me.

Mark Horstman: Aboriginal people in the north are no strangers to large meetings in the bush. As the camp fills up quickly, the Kimberley mob arrive just on dark.



The area covered by NAILSMA, with the Ngarinyin land claim area in yellow

Mark Horstman: They've travelled for hundreds of kilometres, straight from another large meeting. Elders climb stiffly out of the bus, while the young ones unload swags off the top.

To find out where they've just come from, let's backtrack a bit.

A few days earlier, 600 people gathered in the Western Kimberley. They were there to celebrate northern Australia's largest native title win with the Ngarinyin people, nine years after their first claim was lodged.

Man: All stand. Federal Court is now in session. Please be seated.

Justice Sundberg: Yes, would you call the matter for determination please.

Man: Matter of Paddy Neowarra, Paddy Wama and others vs the State of Western Australia...

Mark Horstman: The Federal Court was in session, with Justice Sundberg presiding at the small community of Mt Barnett.

Justice Sundberg: The applicants were successful in establishing that native title existed in the most ample form over most of the claim area.

Mark Horstman: His verdict: that native title is alive and well within a huge area of gorges, rivers national parks and pastoral leases. The claim is so large it takes 17 pages in the legal documents to peg out the boundaries. Even Justice Sundberg was impressed at the extent of Ngarinyin country.

Justice Sundberg: Altogether, the claim areas covered 67,375 square kilometres. That may not seem much for those who live in Western Australia, but to those of us from more modestly constructed States, it is a vast

expanse, the size of the whole of Tasmania, and one-third of the State of Victoria.

Mark Horstman: Ngarinyin people lodged their native title claim in the name of Wandjina and Wungurr, the creators who split the rocks, made the rivers, and will continue to bring the wet seasons if treated with respect.

Their traditional law is shared with three neighbouring language groups, so the court's recognition sets a precedent for an even larger part of the Kimberley.

Justice Sundberg: I now publish the Wandjina Wungurr native title determination bearing the seal of the Federal Court of Australia.

Applause

Pansy Nulgit: We didn't know we were going to win native title, but we won it. The judge handed the native title to us; I'm real happy inside. Real happy.

Mark Horstman: For senior matriarch Pansy Nulgit, the court has confirmed the responsibility of her people to control the use of their homelands. And in particular, who visits their sacred Wandjina places.

Pansy Nulgit: Like we let tourists see it but we have to be there and tell them the story about our painting site. So we don't want to let them go themselves, but we take them.

Mark Horstman: What happens to tourists who go there and they're not with the right people to show them the right way?

Pansy Nulgit: You never know ... a tourist might get lost or get sick.

Mark Horstman: What kind of sick?

Pansy Nulgit: Well they might go about getting – you know, some tourists wander away from the painting site. Wandjina make you mad too, unless the owner of the painting is going to be there all the time.

Mark Horstman: Pansy Nulgit, from Mt Barnett in the north-west Kimberley.

Decisions about large areas like this barely cause a ripple these days. Despite the sound and fury that came with the introduction of the Native Title Act, it's become the norm for North Australia. Nearly 20 percent of the tropical savannas are currently in Aboriginal ownership. Around a quarter of the pastoral leases in the Kimberley are owned by Aboriginal communities. To date, there have been 35 determinations that native title exists. All but one have been in Western Australia, Northern Territory, or Queensland.



The Kimberley mob - pic: Todd Condie, NLC

It's one of the reasons why a meeting about managing that land is relevant now.

Back at the NAILSMA meeting the next morning, everyone assembles under the bough shelter, Kimberley down one side, Northern Territory in the middle, North Queensland on the other.

Joe Morrison puts a seat out front for the boss of the Menggen community, Bill Harney, to welcome his guests.

Bill Harney: Now I'm thanking all of you whoever you come from all over the east coast to West coast, to the Kimberley, I don't know about desert mob, might be, I'm not too sure. But you are all welcome in this the Menggen area at Wardaman land, and thank you very much for coming here. And we've got seven bullock we killed, they're all in the freezer, lots of rib bones, lots of everything there, you'll get fat and tired at the end of the day when you all go home. Anyway thanks very much, that's what the Wardaman does, look after you people here while you are in this conference. Thank you very much.

Mark Horstman: Bill Harney has the gnarled hands and weathered hat of a lifetime's work with cattle. There's a few thousand head running here, well, seven less now, and lots more nervous ones. As well as a cattleman, Bill's an author and expert on Wardaman astronomy.

Bill Harney: I was taught and went through the law system with the Aboriginal law and all that. I knew so much about law and I still got it today. And I speak really Wardaman, I speak Jaminjung from next door neighbour, I speak a little bit of Warlpiri, I speak Ngaliwurru, I speak Ngarinyman you know, I can understand a little bit of Jawoyn, I speak a little bit of Mayali, and I understand Wagiman, I speak a little bit Dagoman, I speak a little bit Yangman, I can understand Mangarrayi, all that sort of thing. It's a lot I can understand and I can speak. Anyway, for me, all I learned off a tomato sauce label and a fruit tin label. You know, that's all I learned. I used to sit up, one old Scotsman showed me how to spell A, B, C and then when I took it up in my mind and I used to sit up and read it in me own mind. I could read all his spelling, and I was self-taught more or less, counting the bullock and all these sorts of type.

Mark Horstman: Bill ends up making three speeches, before the meeting settles down for the next speaker. Peter Yu has been overseeing the group of Land Councils that laid the foundations for NAILSMA. A Yawuru man from Broome with a wispy beard, Peter tells the crowd that the time is right to move beyond native title to the next stage.

Peter Yu: With native title, as important as it is in terms of recognition, there's been a lot of questions asked about what is actually delivered in real terms for people, how can people hold something in their hands, being able to get a decent job, earn a decent wage, about the health of our communities, about the wellbeing in terms of dealing with poverty in our communities and all that sort of stuff. There's been a lot of pressure on the organisations that have been representing us, mainly because the last, whatever it is, six, eight years we've had Howard in government, there's been a very significant attempt to wind back that clock, to take away what has been achieved today, and to try and undermine any new ideas that traditional owners and Aboriginal people generally in Australia have about how they want to move forward. You know, things like reconciliation seem to have gone somewhere, hiding away a bit these days after we had all those millions of people walking the bridges a few years ago. But out of that confused sort of state, have come certain opportunities, and those opportunities usually relate to other people wanting to use Aboriginal people's land. No matter where you go, you've got to deal with the traditional owners of the land. There's all different forms of tenure, but it's Aboriginal land. And a lot of the communities are starting to demonstrate by their own actions, by involvement in these natural resource management projects, that they have a vision in terms of what they want to do and in terms of getting more control about real things that affect their lives.

"A lot of the communities are starting to demonstrate ... that they have a vision in terms of what they want to do and in terms of getting more control about real things that affect their lives."

So in some ways, it's timely that this meeting happens and you look at what are the alternative strategies? Land Councils are now restricted in terms of just dealing with a lot of the legal sort of stuff that comes out of that Native Title Act, where in the early days it was Land Councils and a lot of the communities themselves were the ones who started the outstation movements, the homeland movements, got people together, took them out back onto their country, helped them set up, helped them negotiate with government, help them negotiate with mining companies, whoever else, to get resources. And as a consequence it seems to me that the project work that you people are doing here, most of you are actually practitioners who actually work in your communities and working on these projects, is where it's really happening. And it's something perhaps that we ought to start discussing a little bit more openly and in terms of how our organisations like Land Councils are going, because they're caught up in a situation which is very difficult for them. In some ways they've been pulled away, so the connection with the

community needs to be reinforced and strengthened. And it seems to me that this is the area in terms of where that reconnection can happen.

Mark Horstman: Right now, there's around 50 Aboriginal groups doing scores of practical projects using traditional and scientific knowledge. They deal with fire, control weeds and feral animals, develop management plans, survey wildlife, monitor quarantine, map water flows, or reduce the impact of cattle grazing, and tourism.

Paul Josif works for the Northern Land Council in Darwin, where he manages the Caring for Country Unit. Paul spends the morning leading a discussion about how NAILSMA could help projects like these, and he stops for a breather when the meeting breaks for lunch.

Paul Josif: I think that NAILSMA has got a really important role to act as something of a showcase of what can be achieved on a macro regional level, as a big picture kind of view of things. Fire, weeds, feral animals, are really major threats across the tropical savannas as is the use, or misuse of our fresh water resources, as too the use or misuse of the saltwater country. So NAILSMA can provide an opportunity where those issues can be managed on the big level, rather than in a bits and pieces level. It's very important to work at a small level, but if everyone is synchronised in the way in which they're operating or co-ordinated, some of those activities can be a lot more effective. For example, weed management, and it's the old story. If your neighbour isn't looking after the weed problem and you are, and you're constantly frustrated because of your neighbour's inaction, but if everybody's working in a common way towards managing these issues, it can certainly be a lot more effective. And I think the ability to transcend political boundaries based on the key environmental issues if you like, or the key natural resource management issues, is a great step forward.



Lunch

Mark Horstman: But not all Aboriginal communities are equally ready for the challenge. In North Queensland, some find native title difficult to prove.

Melissa George: When you've got groups of TO's who in some cases haven't actually spoken to each other for some time because of native title disputes, getting them mob in the room and trying to talk about a new way of getting

them involved in managing country again, it's been a bit of a challenge, but we've been able to get a lot of wins I suppose.

Mark Horstman: Melissa George is a Wulgurukaba cover woman, who's a Traditional Owner, or TO in the jargon, from Magnetic Island, off Townsville.

Melissa George: I think too you know, just changing the perception of the general community that traditional owners have a place to play managing country has taken quite some time. I mean we're not at the end and we're nowhere near the end of the process because there are still a lot of people who view traditional owners in Queensland in particular, as still being on missions, and that's where they should remain and not be able to participate in any process.

When traditional owners want to get back to country, native title isn't necessarily the way that they want to do it. For a long time people have been locked out of country and for them to be able to get back there and even in the case of some of the TO's in the Burdekin, just to go out and work on country spraying weeds on a pastoral property is a first step to getting back there. Some of the projects that NAILSMA has put on the table will benefit traditional owners in Queensland, and it's probably the first time that a lot of the groups would have been asked to come into this type of alliance, so we just wait and see how far NAILSMA goes I suppose, as far as the area that it covers.

Mark Horstman: Would it be fair to say that groups in Queensland, Aboriginal groups in Queensland, have generally looked east, and this is the first time that people have started looking west?

Melissa George: Well in one way. There's always this perception that real land management and real traditional owners actually live west of the border of Queensland, or they live within Cape York in Queensland, and that's been a really hard perception to try and crack.

"When traditional owners want to get back to country, native title isn't necessarily the way that they want to do it."

Traditional owners are aware that Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory and the Kimberley particularly, have had a lot of time doing business on country. They do look to that example, but there's always that question you know, the only way that mob can get back to country is through negotiating things with National Parks or graziers.

Mark Horstman: Women are gathering to talk amongst themselves. A group from the Kimberley lean forward as they listen intently to women rangers from Ngukurr in south-east Arnhem Land.

In red pen on her notepad, senior ranger Cherry Daniels sketches arrows into a circle. They're what she calls the 'main ideas' that inspire her women's team of 11 Yugal Mangi rangers.

Cherry Daniels: When I first started this I gave them this word 'commitment'. When you want to work, especially for your country, you've got to commit yourself, I said. Commit yourself that you want that job. And I explained to them what commitment meant. And they looked at me and said, oh, we will. And I told them, you've got to write that word 'commitment' in your brain in red.'

And another one is a main one in the Aboriginal lifestyle, it's identity. It's the main thing, because without identity you are nothing in our way, the Aboriginal way.

Mark Horstman: What do you mean by identity? How do you explain identity?

Cherry Daniels: Identity has given us our land, have given us our ceremony, have given us our languages, without all that we don't have identity you see. Know what I mean?

Mark Horstman: Yes.

Cherry Daniels: So you, you see, you've got your identity on a piece of card. Everywhere you go you must have your identity. But us Aboriginal people, our identity when you go to a ceremony they say, ah, they know where you're from, what's your skin, what's your tribe, what your clan is.

Mark Horstman: How do women do land management different from men?

Cherry Daniels: It's not really different, you know, but the difference is the men have the higher part where they go to a sacred site where we can't go. But there are sacred sites that women can go to, that's where we're mixing together. We worry about our country, our billabongs, our creek beds, people who just want to go and fish, and they leave their mess.

Mark Horstman: At this meeting there seems a lot of women and women's groups getting involved in land management, is that something that you can see more women getting into, is it a growing thing?

Cherry Daniels: Yes, I think so, yes. Because I think women are better labourers than the men.

Mark Horstman: You reckon they work harder?

Cherry Daniels: Yes, they work harder, I tell you, you should come up there and see what my girls do.

Mark Horstman: For that, I need a quad bike. That's what Cherry and her rangers use when they go out to eradicate feral ants, poison weeds like spiky mimosa, and do post-mortems on buffaloes to check for introduced diseases.

Having a vehicle is one thing. Another attraction of being a ranger is looking like one. Like the young men in uniform from Maningrida, in their dark green king gees with colourful badges on their shoulders.

They're relaxing by their fire at the end of the day.

Matthew Ryan: My name's Matthew Ryan, I'm from Maningrida community and I work with the Djelk rangers.

Mark Horstman: What do the Djelk rangers do?

Matthew Ryan: Everything really. We've got a lot of projects happening at the moment, yes. Probably the turtle project, long-necked turtles, doing like sustainable harvest, wildlife and that, collecting their eggs.

Mark Horstman: You make money out of collecting eggs from turtles?

Matthew Ryan: Yes, we do. Yes.

Mark Horstman: How do you use that money, does it pay your wages?

Matthew Ryan: Yes, that covers our wages and we pay the TO's as well, so that covers everyone, makes everyone happy.

Mark Horstman: What do you think about this kind of work?

Matthew Ryan: Well we're quite happy to do anything. We try and trial things.

Mark Horstman: Are you just trying this out, or are you going to stick with it for a while?

Matthew Ryan: Well we'll see what happens, because we've got a lot of things happening at the moment. Like during the wet season we collect croc eggs and we incubate them and we sell the hatchlings in Darwin.

Mark Horstman: What are some of the main problems you have to deal with on your country to look after it?

Matthew Ryan: I think convincing the TO's why you're doing it and it will probably benefit them in the long term.

Mark Horstman: Why do you have to do that? Why don't people already think that way?

Matthew Ryan: Well I think in some areas people don't have the resources that we have. It's a good thing that we do it as a Ranger, looking after their country as well.

Mark Horstman: I've never been to Maningrida, I don't know your community.

Man: You might come there some day...

Mark Horstman: I might come there one day, I'd like to, thanks. Where do most of the jobs come from?

Matthew Ryan: Most people are on CDEP, and the aim is we're trying to get off CDEP and find a way of trying to create money I suppose, or income from different areas.

Mark Horstman: The CDEP that Matthew refers to is the Community Development Employment Program, the Aboriginal work-for-the-dole scheme. It's an employment subsidy from the Federal government that many communities use as the basis for wages that are topped up from other income they can generate.

A lot of the community rangers also say they want the authority to prosecute people doing something illegal, like giving on-the-spot fines to fishermen and crabbers caught exceeding their bag limits. Paul Josif.

Paul Josif: It's been a common cry across Northern Australia but also all over Australia by indigenous people to have enforcement powers. And it's a source of immense frustration that in order to obtain those powers you have to join mainstream organisations like the Police, like the Fisheries service, like Parks and Wildlife services of various kinds. Those services are not necessarily consistent with positions available, where people live, or budgets that are available to service the needs of indigenous people. The move in the Northern Territory at least is for people to make agreements with government whereby there is an opportunity for people to acquire the training that's necessary to have enforcement powers.



From left: Peter Yu, Bill Harney and Joe Morrison. Photo: Todd Condie, NLC

Mark Horstman: If NAILSMA was a child, it's been brought up by a marriage of the Land Councils with the Cooperative Research Centre for Tropical Savannas Management, or the CRC for short.

It hasn't always been a happy relationship. When the CRC started nearly ten years ago, Aboriginal groups felt they were on the margins. They wanted recognition as landowners, not just another interest group.

There's an expression I'm hearing a lot at this meeting, about 'getting black hands on the steering wheel'. It's the sort of strategy that's led Aboriginal groups to become core partners of the CRC they once regarded with concern.

These days, NAILSMA passes the hat around the Land Councils to raise an annual contribution which buys a seat on the CRC Board, along with 16 other partners from government, universities, industry and the community.

Joe Morrison says the partnership is now a good one.

Joe Morrison: When it comes to something that's stretching from the Kimberley coast right through to the tip of Cape York, the CRC is the only show in town, so it's hard to imagine getting as far as we have without the CRC being around. So they've provided a really good vehicle and the means for us to get on with looking after country because there's a lot of mutual outcomes that are shared by Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people.

Mark Horstman: For its part, the CRC believes its relationship with Aboriginal people through NAILSMA is unique in the environmental field.

Chief Executive Officer is ecologist Gordon Duff.

Gordon Duff: It all starts with the recognition that the academic institutions and the CSIRO and government agencies don't know everything there is to be known about everything, and when you actually look beyond those organisations there's a huge body of knowledge and understanding out there, that if you can capture it and communicate it effectively, it's going to contribute quite significantly to doing better business in this part of the world. So yes, it's a break from tradition, but it's a refreshing one, there's nothing stuffier than a group of academics sitting round thinking they know everything there is to be known and convincing one another that they've got all the answers.

"There's nothing stuffier than a group of academics sitting round thinking they know everything there is to be known and convincing one another that they've got all the answers."

Mark Horstman: How's it changed the way the CRC operates?

Gordon Duff: Ah. I think over the last few years in particular, we would be looking for where the benefit might lie from those sorts of activities for Aboriginal people, and the management of Aboriginal land. We've learned over the years to engage more closely with our stakeholders generally there are other groups and other interests. Many of them overlap too, we talk about working with the pastoral industry or conservation interests, but there are Aboriginal pastoralists out there and there are plenty of Aboriginal people with concerns about conservation and biodiversity. So I mean things don't fall neatly into boxes.

Mark Horstman: Not to read too much into Gordon's boxes or into headgear, but at this meeting there's definitely more conservationists - who tend to wear caps - than there are pastoralists - you can tell them by their big hats.

I'm told pastoralists were invited but weren't able to come. After all, they've already got their own groups, like the Kimberley Aboriginal Pastoralists Association, or the Cape York Cattlemen's Alliance.

But maybe there's some lingering mistrust, or just indifference, between the caps and the hats. To overcome that, Joe Morrison wants to work on issues that are relevant to all indigenous people right across the north, whether they run cattle or not.

With an annual budget of around a million dollars raised from government and non-government sources at the moment, NAILSMA has four priorities in mind. One is to strengthen fire management; another is about maintaining indigenous ecological knowledge.

Joe Morrison: We've also got a project which is focusing on leadership, support and development for young, aspiring indigenous people, and that is targeting the people who are living on outstations, speak English as a second language, and have had no formal access to education. So these people are, we view them as being the future managers of much of Northern Australia, through inheritance. So the idea is to support these people when they're growing up to access formal education if they need to and be able to look after country with some of the other interests.

Mark Horstman: NAILSMA has also won a \$4-million contract with the Natural Heritage Trust, for communities to develop a management role in ensuring the survival of turtles and dugong populations. Scientists have just published another report estimating that dugongs in the Torres Strait and eastern Cape York could become extinct within 50 years. Whether that's a matter of too few animals or too much hunting is a touchy issue for many people at the meeting. Paul Josif.

Paul Josif: As we know, governments particularly and non-government agencies don't really understand what's going on on country and that I suppose the other example, a really good one, has been some of the environment ministers, particularly when indigenous people are blamed for the decline in dugong and turtle for example, and how the efforts of other developers, the fishing industry, recreational fishers etc. is also having a severe effect on the numbers for example of dugong and turtle.

Mark Horstman: With more than half of North Australia's coastline now in Aboriginal hands, Paul says the Alliance is custom-made to take on the turtle and dugong project.

Paul Josif: What we do is actually work to a plan, it's not ad hoc. We work within the resources that we've got, and they're the human resources as well as the financial and equipment resources, and I think a lot of the role of the

alliance is to provide a very strong and effective network so people actually know what's going on, as is the case currently with the turtle and dugong management program. It's a major issue, and it's one where there'll be consistency and I might add a consistency of skills that are going to be accrued by these groups all across Northern Australia, and a consistency of monitoring, so it'll provide fantastic new opportunities for the management of marine animals, of some marine animals, which has never been there before.

Mark Horstman: Maningrida is one of the large coastal communities from five regions of saltwater country that want to be involved in the dugong and turtle project. The Djelk sea rangers will have an important role. Matthew Ryan.

Matthew Ryan: If you keep harvesting the wildlife turtles, you'll have not enough numbers. Probably teaching countrymen, TO's, to stop collecting turtle eggs, leave them there, you know. That way it'll benefit them in the long term when they grow more.

Mark Horstman: Is that a problem now, people are taking too many?

Matthew Ryan: Yes, once countrymen see turtle tracks, they just get into it. That's part of their bush tucker too.

Mark Horstman: Just eggs, or is it also catching the adult turtles too?

Matthew Ryan: Well they catch both of them if they can get their hands on them.

Mark Horstman: What do you reckon's the main way: you're going to try to teach people, or do you have to go out there and try to stop people taking too many?

Matthew Ryan: Well we're going to try and teach them and talk to them, and try and encourage them not to take a number of turtles or eggs.

Mark Horstman: You sound really organised, doing all this stuff. You seem to have more rangers than many other places, and doing all these enterprises. Do you have a lot of other communities coming to you for advice and to see what you're doing and find out how to do it?

Matthew Ryan: We get a lot of researchers ... but we want to see like we talked about the last couple of days, we want to start doing the research for them, rather than getting them and get the government paying them, why can't they pay us doing the research for them? Get them to come up and teach us, we'd be happy to do their research.



Maningrida Ranger Matthew Ryan and Paul Josif in the meeting. –Photo: :Todd Condie, NLC

Mark Horstman: It's hot during the day and people who didn't score a camp by the creek, cluster under whatever shade they can find. But when the sun goes down and the meeting finishes for the day, the camp spreads out under the blaze of a full moon.

Frogs shout in Mexican waves down by the water. Cane toads crash through the undergrowth on their way to the Kimberley. Trees arching over the banks of the creek are lit silvery orange by the glow of campfires and the night sky.

Woman: *What's on the menu? Curried chicken, chicken and oyster, stewed goose, beef stew, fried rice, stir-fry vegies.*

Mark Horstman: After dinner, people swap stories, play music, have a laugh. And conversation often turns to ideas for making a living from working on country.

Why shouldn't we be paid for what we do, they say, we know our country and how it works. Why shouldn't we make the best of our natural advantage and create jobs out of what we know best?

Melissa George is blunt about what the priorities should be. She reflects the tension between country and city.

"Geoff Clark, who receives a salary of \$240,000 a year, if that money was spent on employing 20 to 26 rangers then that would mean that more traditional owners could actually be on country."

Melissa George: If you look at some of our leaders, even as an example, and I mean no malice or anything, but as an example, Geoff Clark, who receives a salary of \$240,000 a year, if that money was spent on employing 20 to 26 rangers then that would mean that more traditional owners could actually be on country, and participating in looking after it. And when you look at mob, particularly in a Northern Australian context, who are there at the doorstep, we've been through this whole thing of national security, and who protects our borders, these mob are on country that's where they live,

why can't they be paid to actually do that, because they do give a huge service to the Australian public and people just don't recognise it and it's unfortunate.

Mark Horstman: For a meeting like this, it's perhaps surprising that the loss of ATSIC wasn't a hot topic. No doubt the needs of communities managing their country will need to be represented. Certainly people want to elect their representatives. But to a veteran campaigner for indigenous governance like Peter Yu, does the end of ATSIC leave a gap that needs to be filled?

Peter Yu: No. Not in my personal point of view, I don't think so. I think that representation these days should be by action, and what the NAILSMA project is actually doing is action, it's not reaction. What the projects of NAILSMA are doing is initiatives that have been generated from the communities with supporting partners in mainstream agencies, be they government or non-government. The difference here when you talk about representation is the fact that people are actually doing things, and people we have at the conference here are practitioners. That's what we really need to happen today.

Mark Horstman: As Aboriginal people regain ownership of their land in Northern Australia, they're beginning to manage it with fire as they did before white settlement.

People from Arnhem Land have started walking hundreds of kilometres along the escarpment at the right time of year to revive the traditional burning patterns. At the same time, researchers from the CRC are measuring how carbon moves around tropical savanna ecosystems.

Now these activities might not seem to have much in common. But there's an elegant business opportunity emerging that could be worth millions. Companies and governments are looking for so-called 'carbon credits' to purchase, to offset the climate impact of greenhouse gases. And Aboriginal people might have some for sale, because they can use fires in ways that just happen to reduce greenhouse pollution.

Gordon Duff: In Australia, and particularly in the savannas, I think we've got an enormous opportunity here through the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from savanna environments. Very large areas of the northern Australian savannas burn every year, about 80 percent of the fires that occur in Australia in terms of area are in the savannas in northern Australia. Through careful management and particularly use of early dry season burning, we can quite significantly reduce the amount of greenhouse gases that are coming off these savanna fires. And there exists I think, a very real opportunity to essentially turn this into a business.

Now what that does of course, apart from reduce greenhouse gas emissions, is it has real consequences for biodiversity conservation as these big, hot late

dry season wildfires in many areas are severely damaging some very fire-sensitive habitats; it provides meaningful opportunities for employment and for economic engagement for Aboriginal people, that's not stuff that they're being asked to do in someone else's culture, this is burning country, caring for country is something that they know more about than anyone else. And there's an argument that says there is a valuable service being provided by managing country in such a way, and that service is something that the wider community can and in some instances should be prepared to pay for.

Mark Horstman: As well as employment, a major challenge facing indigenous communities is the health of their people.

Annie Milgin works at the community clinic in Jarlmadangah in the Kimberley. She takes doctors on trips to teach them about traditional medicines and bush tucker. And she worries that diabetes is affecting a new generation even younger than before.

Annie Milgin: Now that it's 8 to 14s, diabetics, and they're giving themselves insulin; that's why we make aware of our young ones, they're the next generation and that people before, they didn't know what they were eating you know, we didn't know what we were eating, and then we come to that stage where we end up with the diabetics and keeping their problems and a lot of people on dialysis machines now, and they're not here. Some of them have gone and some of them are away from their country, away from their family, and that's why we're trying to stop diabetics getting into that state.

Mark Horstman: Early next morning, I visit my neighbours on the creek for a cuppa.

Paul Burgess: I'm Paul Burgess, I'm a GP from Darwin, and I'm here at the NAILSMA conference as the GP in residence.

Mark Horstman: So have you been on call much?

Paul Burgess: I've been on call 24 hours, but I haven't had a call yet. They're too healthy, this mob. Expect the unexpected is the normal rule working the health round. I just thought I'd see the normal run of events such as a little diabetes, a bit of heart pain, or even as the odd run of cuts and abrasions or whatever. But it's been pretty quiet actually.

Mark Horstman: People are too skilled with axes and knives here you think?

Paul Burgess: More skilled than me. I've had more damage than they have I think. I've actually got another reason I'm here; I'm doing a research project with a few Aboriginal communities in Arnhem Land looking at the health benefits of managing country. People on country, they're exercising more, eating better, they're much, much healthier in terms of getting more exercise and much healthier in terms of there's so much less stress, when you compare to living in a centralised township. And Aboriginal people have been saying that for decades.

Mark Horstman: That sounds like a pretty obvious thing; has it been overlooked by medical research up to now?

Paul Burgess: Undoubtedly. I think medical research has really concentrated on death and mayhem. They've concentrated on documenting high rates of disease and early mortality, but we haven't really looked at health, as curious as it may seem.

Mark Horstman: Is your research suggesting that land management, spending more time in the bush, eating bush tucker, is a serious health strategy that could really make a difference?

Paul Burgess: The medical profession's got to face up to itself and for the last 30 years we've been telling people what to do. We've been saying 'Stop smoking, exercise more, go for a walk around the airstrip', things like that. We just need to get real. People have a good idea what keeps people healthy. It is a fantastic health promotion message that's coming from this community themselves, and it's just looking for a reasonable amount of backing to make it much more achievable, and I think what our research, or I hope it will show anyway, that it really is affordable. My own experience has been as a practitioner, when I'm seeing people come in day-to-day as a GP, people are much healthier when they're coming from that setting. There's a lot more old people there for a start, on country, that is. So it makes you think that there must be something good about it.

Mark Horstman: But while he's convinced of the health benefits, Paul's not starry-eyed about the realities of going back to country. Moving from a community to an outstation is the same as leaving a town and building your own place in the bush. It's hard to maintain access to medical and education services.

Paul Burgess: I think we've got to look at what we make the easy choice. The easy choice for a lot of people is just sit in a township and eat the takeaway food and we haven't really given a lot of support to the health promotion messages that Aboriginal people promote themselves, and that is getting back to country. A lot of the things we could do to help, we would like to increase the availability of contact for medical services on outstations, increase education support for people who want to live on country, just even basic infrastructure, if people want to go back to their homelands. It's just not an easy choice to do, to leave a place where all the education and health services are and to go back and to stay in your homelands. No matter what connection you have with it spiritually, if it's really hard materially, it's an awesome obstacle to overcome. But people still do it, and I know certainly many places people have been doing that forever basically, but never come into townships because of that strong link they have to country.



Wardaman Dancers – Photo: :Todd Condie, NLC

Mark Horstman: The message of ‘healthy country, healthy people’ has been around for years, but its full potential is yet to be realised.

Peter Yu warns that the success of these projects depend on Aboriginal communities doing the office work to keep them going.

Peter Yu: These projects will be very hard to sustain if we don’t have good management in those communities. Currently what we need to do, we need to be working with community organisations, you know, community councils, to build better management practices. We need the help from outside people to do that as well. And we need to rationalise the number of our own organisations. I’m not suggesting that this is what everybody else from outside should be coming in to do in our communities, what I’m also throwing out is a challenge for our own communities to critically self-assess about what we need to do to be better organised and better prepared, and if that means rationalisation of some of our organisations, we only have a limited resource base to operate with, and how do we capitalise that in the best sort of way? What any of this requires really is significant trust, and a damn lot of courage in relation to taking the leadership and doing it.

Mark Horstman: The meeting decides that NAILSMA is an organisation worth having, and asks the Land Councils to continue supporting their work.

Joe Morrison gives me a lift back to Darwin. There’s lots of road trains to overtake.

Driving sounds

Mark Horstman: That’s a big project, are you going to pull it off?

Joe Morrison: Yes, I feel pretty confident we would. I mean I wouldn’t embark upon anything if I didn’t feel confident that we were going to pull it off.

Mark Horstman: Do you lose sleep at nights?

Joe Morrison: Yes, Mark, to tell the truth I do. I do sit up sometimes; a couple of weeks leading up to this meeting I sat up quite a bit thinking about, oh my God, how are we going to do this meeting, what the hell are we going to ask people, what are we going to tell people? I was wondering what sort of response we're going to get, are people going to be able to grasp coming from the community level, and people that were speaking English as a second language, are they going to be able to work out what the hell is this alliance; we're sort of just working out what a ranger group is, let alone thinking about what's going on in other people's country. So yes, I did lose a bit of sleep over it.

Mark Horstman: So how about now?

Joe Morrison: No, I think I'm going to sleep quite well tonight, I tell you.

Mark Horstman: Thanks to ABC Regional reporters Adrienne Francis, Claire Moodie and Kate Sieper for sharing their material. Background Briefing's Co-ordinating Producer is Linda McGinness; Webmaster, Paul Bolger; Technical Production, Mark Don; and Executive Producer is Kirsten Garrett. I'm Mark Horstman. You're listening to ABC Radio National.

Further information

NAILSMA:

<http://www.nailsma.org.au>

Northern Land Council

<http://www.nlc.org.au/>

Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation

<http://www.balkanu.com.au/>

Northern Australia – CRC for Tropical Savannas Management

<http://www.savanna.cdu.edu.au/>

National Native Title Tribunal

<http://www.nntt.gov.au/>