

# **Growing the Alliance**

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***Caring For Country***

**2<sup>nd</sup> National Indigenous Land and Sea Management Conference**

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**Management Alliance**

**(NAILSMA)**



First of all my appreciation to the Giringun Aboriginal Corporation on behalf of the Traditional Owners for inviting me to their country so I can contribute to this very significant second National Land and Sea Management Conference on Caring for Country.

I also would like to acknowledge a number of colleagues who have assisted me in some way or another in the preparation of this presentation, but particularly Joe Morrison, Executive Officer of NAILSMA and Rachael Armstrong from Perth.

I believe quite profoundly that this current epoch is a watershed period for the Australian nation of which the position of the “first peoples” of this country has a defining place both symbolically and in practical economic, social, political and cultural terms.

Never in our shared history have we seen such enormous opportunities so sharply contrasted with such fearful apocalyptic threats. We, as a nation, will soon be forced to make decisions on how full or how empty the glass is going to be for our children and their children. How to manage lands, natural resources and our fragile eco systems in the face of inevitable climate change, demographic change and increasing integration into the global economy.

This is fundamentally the premise of my address today.

But firstly let me introduce myself and the organisation NAILSMA, whom I am representing today as Chair.

The North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance was conceived around 1997/98 in cross regional discussions between the Aboriginal Land Councils of northern Australia in response to the need for integrated Indigenous consideration and action about the management of Aboriginal owned lands and waters within the institutional and political framework of the Australian nation state, and the increasing impact of economic globalization.

The appalling and politically driven response by the Howard Government to the High Court Wik decision made it imperative that Indigenous people should lead a more considered public discourse about land and sea management in northern Australia on the basis of sound research and practical land management initiatives.

Coincidentally at this time serious public debate was beginning to emerge around climate change and the future of water resources in the north and insert itself in local speculative conversations about the timing and nature of the “wet” and predictions of cyclones that were framed by a rudimentary understanding of the El Niño and La Niña systems.

NAILSMA primarily exists to support Indigenous land and sea management with research and resources to care for country, through a partnership of cultural and customary skills and knowledge of Traditional Owners with the technological knowledge and ability of the scientific community.

A fundamental philosophical foundation of NAILSMA's existence is to sustain the capacity of Indigenous people to live on and work for their country. Much of our work involves investing in the use of indigenous intellectual knowledge and the capacity to grow and sustain this knowledge and practices for future generations.

This is knowledge that has been refined for thousands of years.

A complimentary part of this objective has been the establishment of a small scholarship program in land and sea management studies to encourage young Indigenous people, the future managers of our country, to support their community's land and sea management activities. NAILSMA believes that this is a crucial area of future significant public and private investment in Indigenous capacity development.

Let me outline some of the work that NAILSMA is sponsoring on the ground.

Many of you will be familiar with the Dugong and Marine Turtle Management Project, the North Australian Fire Project and the Indigenous Knowledge Strategy Project. Recently we have formed a partnership with TRaCK (Tropical Rivers & Coastal Knowledge) research hub and will soon employ 6 Indigenous Project Officers in key locations in each region across the north to ensure that Indigenous aspirations with respect to the water reform agenda be considered.

This initiative along with the establishment of the Indigenous Water Policy Group (IWPG) provides a strategic gateway for Indigenous participation in public policy development and debate about northern waters through the demonstration of Indigenous knowledge that is entwined with scientific and technical data.

While these programs are an important stepping stone to securing a meaningful engagement with traditional owners and an acknowledgement of the importance of cultural knowledge as something to be respected and embraced by the mainstream, they are not a long term, comprehensive and sustainable approach for better management of the land and sea environment and resources.

Numerous academics and other NGO's have supported NAILSMA's view that a comprehensive and integrated approach is required to ensure that public investment in land and sea management initiatives

supports the overall cultural, social and economic objectives of Indigenous communities.

We need to address the current policy framework and funding system where short timeframes stifle long term planning and development of Indigenous institutional structures and where the agenda of different agencies involved do not necessarily correspond with Indigenous priorities and caring for country priorities.

In their 2003 paper, *Caring for Country and Sustainable Indigenous Development*, Jon Altman and Peter Whitehead neatly summed up this dilemma:

*the caring for country movement remains fragile, being dependent on difficult to manage bundles of often small individual projects, funded from the sale of public assets, responding to apparently arbitrary shifts in priorities, eligibility criteria, and the details of complex, multi-layered assessment processes imposes unnecessary additional costs for administering Indigenous institutions. Uncertainty and difficulties of maintaining continuity are exasperated by ad hoc interventions of State, Territory and Federal Ministers, who sometimes ignore the technical and operational advice offered by regional assessment committees. Maintaining and building capacity under circumstances creates major challenges.*

The central question and challenge facing Northern Australia and the nation as a whole is how do we build a sustainable land and sea management regime that takes us beyond this reliance on project based government funding so that Indigenous people can look after country that meets both inherited cultural obligations and contemporary responsibilities as custodians in the context of managing a significant part of the national estate on behalf of all Australians.

Altman and others such as Neil Westbury and Michael Dillon make a further point that we cannot ignore. That is, in the context of international interests in conservation and sustainability of biodiversity, the Indigenous land estate includes bioregions that are of global conservation significance and that we as Indigenous landholders and owners have a responsibility to global humanity to ensure the ongoing maintenance of the integrity of ecosystems on our lands.

Clearly there is a desperate need for substantial public investment in the capacity of Indigenous people to manage this vast estate and on this point I welcome last week's announcement by Federal Labor as a positive initiative in the quest to develop a comprehensive policy for Indigenous land and sea management.

The gravity of the issue was reinforced recently by the publication of *The Nature of Northern Australia, Natural Values, Ecological*

Processes and Future Prospects that confirmed the Tropical Savannas across our north as the last remaining in-tact continuous savanna ecosystem in the world. The same landscape that has been managed by indigenous custodians for millennia will need to be managed into the future by us. In partnership, Traditional Owners, governments, and various users of natural resources have an awesome responsibility to manage and protect this vast fragile environment.

The question is: how do we respond?

To answer that question we need to appreciate and understand where we stand today, so I might quickly attempt to contextualize that before I move to the second part of what I want to say.

I stated at the outset that I believe that this period of history is a watershed in Indigenous people's relationship with governments and mainstream Australia.

I'm not going to give you a lesson on the ongoing depressing demographic position of our socio-economic status that you'd all be familiar with, but I want to make comment to try and address the questions I have just raised.

Directly or indirectly Indigenous people have substantial land holdings across Northern Australia. Some estimates suggest that around 40%

of northern Australia constitutes the Indigenous land estate through lands acquired under the Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Rights Act, through Native Title Determinations, pastoral leases, joint management and other lands purchased, and/or leased. In much of northern Australia it is an accepted fact of life for third parties that to seek access or use of Aboriginal land, you need to engage in some sort of negotiation with Aboriginal interests.

While Indigenous people understand that there are numerous other issues and factors that might influence any outcome, satisfactory or not, the fact remains that we have potentially a large asset base currently under utilized, minimal infrastructure but with a growing private and public interests in the use of those lands and its resources.

Drought, climate change, national water reform, and the insatiable demand by China and India, for mineral resources combined with the social implosion of many Indigenous settlements have created the perfect storm which is forcing Indigenous people to crystallize the circumstances of our threats and opportunities.

I want to now link this background on the work and objectives of NAILSMA and the challenge confronting northern Australian land and sea managers with the theme of this presentation that I have called “growing the alliance”.

I started my career working for the welfare in the Kimberley's in the mid seventies just as the full impact of the pastoral award wages combined with the closure of missions and the lifting of all restrictions on alcohol availability was being felt. What I witnessed was a massive refugee situation, of people being pushed off their traditional country into the pastoral service towns of Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Derby, Wyndham, and the sudden creation of new towns such as Turkey Creek.

There was an explosion of about 1 – 2000% increase in some of the town populations overnight (relatively speaking), with the ensuing chaos and dysfunction creating havoc between cultural groups, families and individuals.

This week, some 4 decades later in Derby and Fitzroy Crossing there is a coroner's inquest into an estimated 20 alcohol related deaths, a figure disputed by Indigenous leaders in Fitzroy Crossing who estimate that there has been about 200 alcohol related deaths over the last 5 years. A significant number of those deaths are suicides giving the Kimberley region the tragic reputation as having the highest per capita suicide rate in the country.

This aftermath of the traumatic refugee experience of the 1970s continues to permeate every aspect of our social, family and cultural lives.

In 1972 we didn't have any land in a way that was recognised by European title. We didn't have community owned organisations representing our interests. There was little or no engagement with government or planning for consequences of the actions taken in far away centres of political and economic power.

There was no ownership by the people. People had their language, law and culture and their pride and dignity that was nurtured and supported by traditional authority and obligations to family and community.

A lot of this has been undermined and stripped away. Some places are still strong but a lot has been replaced by rhetoric and the echo of romantic memories of yesterday without understanding why today is just as important.

Today we have land and organizational representation to advocate for Indigenous interests and argue against the ill conceived and planned policies of the south. While the starting points are different, as I have described, the ultimate experiences of such imposition and intervention will in my view register a far greater consequence.

Despite the substantial Indigenous land holding interests, we are cash and asset poor and with little opportunity to attract investment. Governments, both State and Commonwealth, have been irresponsibly inept at providing a statutory land regime that links our

common law rights with our potential for economic and social development. At the same time we know we have a very young and rapidly growing population, many having their life opportunities stifled by an appalling under funded education system and a wider political culture that too readily accepts Indigenous people as welfare mendicants.

There has been much controversy in the press lately in regards to Galarrwuy Yunupingu's decision to sign up on a MOU with Minister Brough regarding the granting of a 99 year lease of his clan's traditional country. I suspect the immediate response was one of aghast by many in our community, and I would have thought that not to be an unreasonable response given the nature of the politics that had been there preceding this decision.

However, in looking more closely at the details of the proposition, the aspirations of the community and the historical circumstances that led Galarrwuy and members of his group to sign up perhaps there was a reason that justified the group to decide on this course.

So if you set aside the politics most people could say Galarrwuy got the better deal than Brough. He gets to keep his group's tenure and primary interest in the land. He is confident it gives him ongoing control and protection of the cultural sites and practices, he is able to use the land to further the economic interests of his community and, what's more, he gets the Federal government to pay for it!

I recall Galarrwuy at public forums with his charismatic humour, warning us about the whitefella line's that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

The light Galarrwuy came to realise was the whitefella government bloke running fast backwards with a torch. So when I heard the news on the radio about the proposed land deal I thought he musta caught up with that bloke!

But all jokes aside. This case brings to the fore and illustrates a number of key dilemmas the traditional land and sea managers and many more communities will have to confront in the coming years.

For most of my time working amongst the communities in the Kimberley and more recently as Chair of NAILSMA the majority of people in communities have just wanted to get on with life, meaning they want to be on their country and wanting to be doing something meaningful that combines respecting and fulfilling their cultural obligations and doing something productive on their traditional lands.

On most occasions people have always said to me, we don't mind people coming on to our land and using some of it, if they want, all we want is their understanding and respect for my culture and my country and we have a fair deal about what happens on our land.

The main obstacles continue to be poor governance through an outdated centralist colonial administration system, over-regulation and inflexibility.

All this while we have the proverbial road train coming over the hill!

Let me conclude by returning to the case of Galarrwuy Yunupingu's proposed land deal and to thread together some of the issues I have raised in this paper. While the details of the land deal might be debated it should be remembered that it was forged in a climate of wedge politics.

Galarrwuy was a Howard Government trophy in a culture war between the white tribes of Australia – those liberal minded progressives generally known as the Left who champion equality and fight injustice and those hard headed conservatives referred to as the Right who believe that individual responsibility and private property as a basis of wealth creation, should prevail over policies and actions of governments designed to build communal social capital.

Indigenous people are a necessary backdrop in this conflict because ideas about the rights of Australia's "First Peoples" help define the ideological positions of either side as well as leveraging political support from a broad constituency that has a history of hostility towards black Australians.

Indigenous people are passive victims of the culture war between the white tribes of Australia.

However we want to debate the details and motives of the Howard Government's take over of Aboriginal settlements in the NT, the manner of the intervention must be seen in the context of the whitefella culture wars amongst other things.

There is no doubt that we have a crisis in Indigenous communities – many of us have been calling for drastic government action for years – but the national government's decision to intervene without a dialogue and a partnership with Indigenous leaders and their organisations demonstrates the dysfunctional relationship that exists between Indigenous people and governments.

While this culture war continues, the dysfunctional relationship between Indigenous people and governments will also continue.

That dysfunctional relationship results in failed public policy and a worsening of the social and economic crisis in Aboriginal Australia.

The development of a sound partnership between Indigenous people and governments must start with an acknowledgement and respect for Indigenous people's cultural integrity.

It should also involve a re-imaging of northern Australia within Australian nationhood.

Northern Australia has always been seen as a vast colony for the benefit of the majority of the population who live in the south. Its lands, resources and people have been seen as something to exploit for economic benefit. For over a century, pastoralists made their profits managing huge cattle runs in northern Australia based largely on the unpaid labour of Aboriginal people.

When international human rights standards dictated that equal wages had to be paid to Aboriginal stock workers, thousands of workers with their families were discarded to live in the ghettos of welfare dependency. As I have mentioned we are now dealing with the horrendous consequences of that history.

Now with the minerals boom and the consequence of climate change, southern Australia is focusing on the north more than ever for wealth creation and a possible destination for large numbers of southern Australian migrants.

Whether this renewed interest in the north is a continuation of the history of colonial exploitation or a genuine effort in sustainable nation building will depend on the relationship between Traditional Owners and governments.

A serious investment in the capacity of Indigenous people to live on their country as recognition of traditional ownership and as partners of northern development of land and natural resources management, should be a fundamental plank in a new relationship.

The Australian Government - which ever party forms it – should immediately engage with key Indigenous representative groups to make a comprehensive policy for sustainable development in northern Australia as a matter of national priority.

As part of that policy commitment a public policy institution should be established in northern Australia in partnership with Indigenous people and other stakeholders so that a sustainable cultural land and sea management industry plan can be developed and implemented.

Such a plan can link the established industries of pastoralism, mining and fishing with the new, emerging and expanding industries of horticulture, tourism, land management, the carbon economy, Indigenous knowledge and artistic expressions and offer a sound vision for sustainable development of northern Australia for generations to come.

There is no greater justification or time to make the paradigm shift to do things differently.

I believe what will be good for us as the “first people” will be overall beneficial for the Australia community.

Thank You