



Indigenous Water Knowledge, Indigenous Water Interests – An International Indigenous Expert Exchange on Issues and Opportunities arising from Emerging Trends in Mainstream Water Management

Meeting Summary

On August 7-8, 2008 a group of Indigenous representatives from Canada, USA, Guatemala, the Andes and many parts of Australia met in Gulkula, Australia at the site of the Garma Festival in north east Arnhem Land to exchange perspectives on Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and interests in water. This expert exchange was convened by the United Nations University Traditional Knowledge Initiative (UNU TKI) in collaboration with the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) and the welcome and support of the Yothu Yindi Foundation and the Gumatj people of north east Arnhem Land.

The concept for this meeting arose from the discussions of the Indigenous Water Policy Group (IWPG), a regular group convened through NAILSMA, and the UNU TKI. The IWPG identified that access to international experience and perspectives on Indigenous water knowledge and interests would broaden the frame of reference for the group in such a way that would enhance its capacity to identify and advocate Indigenous interests in water as well as benefiting participants from across Australia and around the world.

There were several objectives of the exchange, including to:

- Reflect on the relationship between Indigenous water knowledge and Indigenous water interests, and provide an avenue for the international sharing of experiences on issues and opportunities arising from emerging trends in mainstream water management systems, with particular attention to issues arising from emerging water trading and water property rights regimes, as well as the increasing recognition by western science of the value of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous science for natural resource management.
- Develop a statement and a set of recommendations and/or a declaration on Indigenous water knowledge and interests for the World Water Forum in Turkey, 2009 and other international forums; and,
- To support ongoing informal international networks of Indigenous experts engaged in Indigenous knowledge and interests in water.

On the first day of the exchange, representatives presented case studies on Indigenous Water Knowledge and interests in their communities. Several of the case studies will be compiled as a single publication that will be available for the 2009 World Water Forum and the Eighth session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. During the North Australian panel session, the IWPG had the opportunity to premiere its first proposed policy statement.

On the second day of the exchange, discussions revolved around the process for drafting a declaration on Indigenous water knowledge and interests and the guiding principles that this declaration would follow. Representatives formed working groups to discuss important issues to be included in the declaration. These robust and fruitful discussions benefited from the wisdom of the international and Australian participants as well as from Sir Tipene O'Regan of the University of Canterbury, Marcia Langton of the University of Melbourne, and Tom Calma of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. A small working party is being convened to continue the drafting process on behalf of the group.

This meeting was not only a great opportunity to exchange international perspectives but also served as a platform for northern and southern Australians to come together and discuss a common way forward on what is one of the great challenges of this time – water. At the meeting, Australian participants agreed to continue this regional collaboration. A meeting is being planned for later in the year in southern Australia to discuss a national approach to Indigenous water policy on interests and issues and toward Indigenous integrated water planning and management strategies for Australia.

Charles Darwin University hosts both UNU TKI and NAILSMA, proving instrumental in fostering collaboration between these organisations and thus linking international policy with national concerns here in Australia. The support of the Government of the Northern Territory and the Christensen Fund were crucial in the establishment of the UNU TKI and this forum, as too was the support from the Australian National Water Commission for the IWPG.

