

Caring for Country

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It's 1 September 2004 at the Wynbarra waterhole on the Mennggen Aboriginal Land Trust, Wardaman country, in the Northern Territory. More than 200 Indigenous people, from the Kimberley to Cape York, have arrived to discuss and learn how they might further their futures around the management of their ancestral lands and seas as community rangers. They are seeking recognition for their roles in caring for country as legitimate jobs. People at the meeting talk about a new organisation — the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance — and what it should do on behalf of Indigenous people. It is a new Indigenous structure facing challenging times. But more importantly, the meeting reinvigorates thinking around the roles and responsibilities taken up by Indigenous people from all across the north in relation to their country, their kin, and themselves as responsible citizens looking after important country for all the citizens of Australia. This has been work mostly carried out on the back of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP). Time and again, it is stated: change can only happen on mutual terms between government and Indigenous people, and only with the full engagement of traditional owners so that ownership, protection of cultural values and development are driven by local people. The meeting ends after two days with hope that the government will see the opportunity this presents and support Indigenous people in the bush.

IN THIS CHAPTER, I WILL EXPLORE the natural and cultural resource management opportunities in rural and remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, linked to employment, economic development, community leadership, education, and social and cultural justice issues. I will also highlight the importance of the flexibility of the CDEP scheme in situations where a 'one size fits all' approach to work has severe limitations, owing to the absence of mainstream labour markets in Aboriginal communities. Finally, I will argue that these caring for country programs provide sustainable community-based opportunities for long-term social, cultural and physical development in the Northern Territory's

rural and remote locations, while making significant contributions to the conservation of globally valued environmental and cultural assets.

The Start of a New Era

The passage of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* created a significant opportunity for traditional owners in the political economy of the Northern Territory. These opportunities have, and continue to be, seriously underestimated from a biological and resource management perspective. Today, Indigenous people comprise 30 per cent of the NT population and own just under 50 per cent of the terrestrial landmass and 87 per cent of the coastline.¹ This places Indigenous people firmly in control of globally significant land and sea assets. Indeed, this on the ground reality epitomises the Indigenous situation right across Northern and Central Australia, where the popular mainstream belief that Aboriginal people are ‘land rich’ but ‘dirt poor’ reigns supreme. What this conception does is highlight the gulf between Indigenous and non-Indigenous values, beliefs and aspirations in relation to the land and seas. There are two broad, competing discourses about environmental rights and responsibilities at play in Australia. Nonetheless, it is essential now to understand the contributions Indigenous people and their lands can and do make towards national and international goals of managing the planet’s dwindling biodiversity, reducing greenhouse emissions, reducing the risk of entry of exotic pests and diseases into Australia’s north and managing valuable water resources and fishery stocks.²

Positive Community Action — A New Light in the Landscape

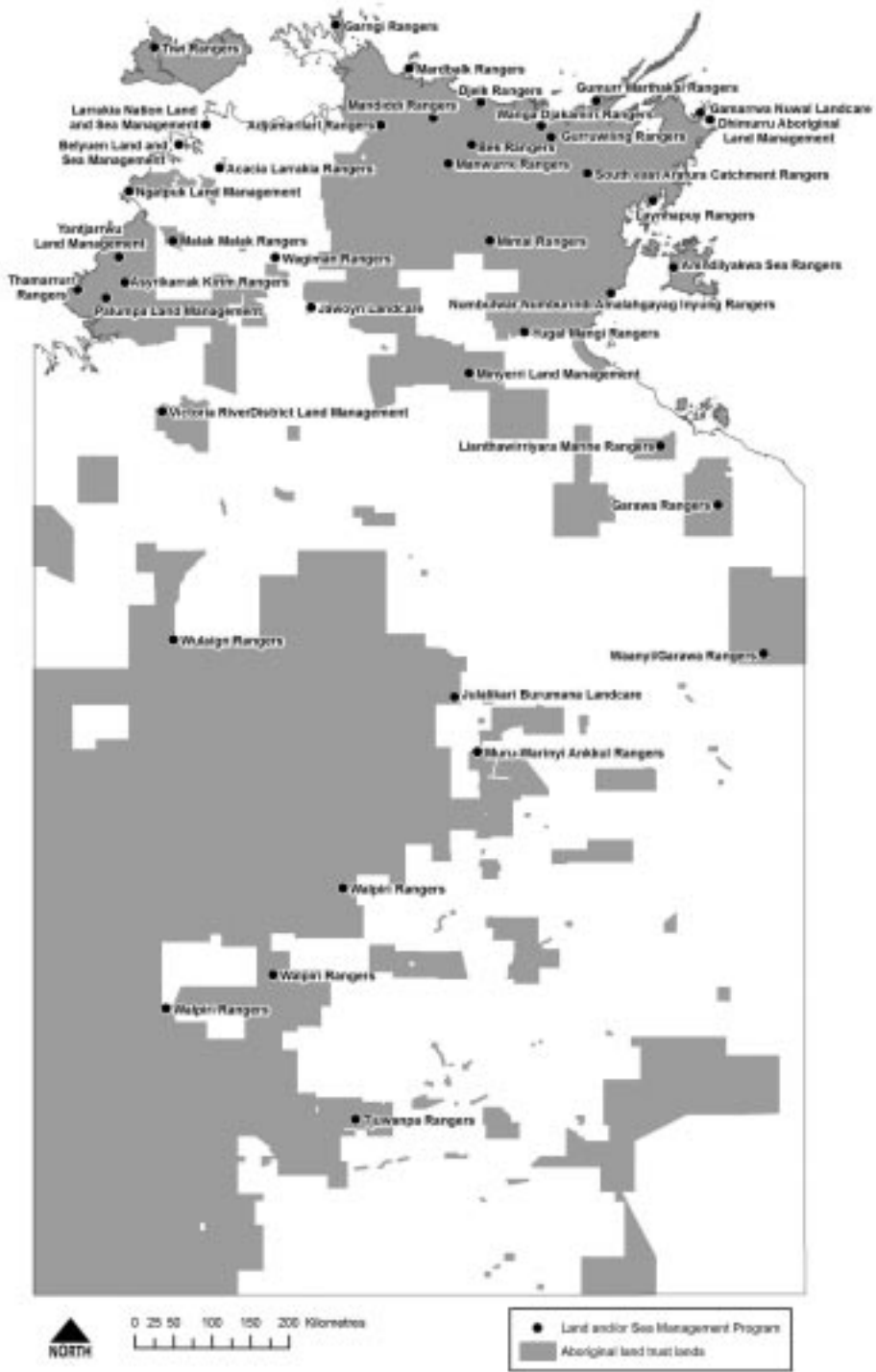
Clearly, indigenous peoples have the knowledge and cultural base on which to build healthier societies. But they cannot do so alone. Governments have a responsibility and an obligation to do their part as well.³

For the last two decades and most of my professional working life, I have been part of an exciting development that emerged from rural and remote communities across the Northern Territory and northern

Australia. This quiet and little recognised revolution has seen Indigenous people express a strong desire to manage their country, while exploring economic development options that sustain them, and potentially future generations, on their traditional estates. These revolutionary ideals have found expression in what are commonly referred to as ranger programs, and have provided much inspiration for Indigenous people in the Northern Territory. They combine Indigenous knowledge and practices with modern methods of managing important areas of high biological and cultural diversity. More recently, these groups have started to market their services on a fee-for-service basis, generating employment and business opportunities that match local aspirations, whilst meeting global and national goals of managing natural resources.⁴

But it is not just the opportunity to create jobs based around environmental service provision that is driving this revolution. Positive human health outcomes from caring for country activities are also becoming apparent. Research shows that the practices involved in natural and cultural resource management, or caring for country, have a positive impact not only on the health of the landscape, but on the populations that inhabit them as well. Non-Indigenous Australians have generally failed to appreciate the depth and dynamism of Aboriginal people's continued association with land and sea and the well-being that tends to follow.⁵ In terms of environmental research, caring for country reflects a growing global trend towards intercultural approaches that combine Western scientific and Indigenous knowledges. This kind of research tends to justify what Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory have been saying all along — when our country is healthy, so too are our people.

It is also recognised internationally that building Indigenous capacity and knowledge helps to sustain global biodiversity. At the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, 150 world leaders agreed on a comprehensive strategy for sustainable development. An important outcome of this meeting was the Convention on Biological Diversity, which has three major focuses: the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of genetic resources. The Convention also recognises that biological diversity is about more than plants, animals



RANGER PROJECTS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

and micro-organisms and their ecosystems — it is about people and our need for food, security, medicines, fresh air, water, shelter and a clean and healthy environment in which to live. Australia is a signatory to the Convention and reports regularly to it. Relevant here are two Articles — 8(j) and 10(c) — which refer to the holistic support and protection of Indigenous knowledge, biodiversity and customary use of resources.⁶ The Convention establishes Australia's international obligations to its Indigenous people by connecting biodiversity to the management of its globally significant natural and cultural assets.

The Work

Local Aboriginal communities play a vital role in managing sea country, with a number of community sea ranger groups having started in recent times. These groups are involved in population monitoring, coastal feral animal eradication programs ... [and] ... also play an important role in the early detection of new populations of invasive species.⁷

The strength and resilience of Indigenous knowledge and cultural practice is an immense asset ... and informs all areas of economic life.⁸

The caring for country movement is fluid and adaptive. It is essential to ensure that Indigenous people are the drivers of the development, rather than just passive stakeholders. Testimony to the importance of the caring for country movement is its origin in communities, not in institutions or the government. An example of caring for country work based on Indigenous knowledge, but using supportive Western science, is the reduction of destructive wildfires that devastate landscapes and contribute to respiratory stress and atmospheric pollution. Rangers are enabled by their community-based projects to access very remote, uninhabited locations to implement mosaic burning by breaking the landscape up, thus limiting the amount of country that gets burnt. This also reduces the intensity of fires as there is less fuel to burn later in the hot dry season. In addition to this, rangers undertake surveys of their country for weeds and feral pests, carry out autopsies on feral animals to

check for diseases, survey the coast for illegal foreign fishing vessels, and collaborate with scientists who want to better understand the ecological processes of threatened or vulnerable species. Who else can do such work where the only permanent residents of remote regions with extensive knowledge of the local environment are Indigenous people?

From the cultural point of view, ranger work means that young Indigenous people can interact with their elders and their estates, garnering important knowledge about country, strengthening their language and receiving direction from their elders. This work also reinvigorates their obligations to their country and extended family, at a time when the values of mutual obligation are being constantly reiterated. Little consideration is given to the reality that Indigenous people have obligations outside the dominant white world, to their own communities. The outcomes from these initiatives include better managed country, but also strengthened local governance, cultural values and protocols, and an increased capacity to interact with the outside world through training, education and collaboration with scientists, government and other bodies. Having this kind of working environment allows mutual exploration of innovative economic opportunities to occur in regions where there are limited employment opportunities.

While these caring for country opportunities may seem minor alongside the 'national emergency' response to child sexual abuse, these land and sea management activities do align closely with community aspirations, as shown by the continual growth of these programs. The North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance strongly supports this holistic perspective, which encompasses environmental, socio-cultural, and economic approaches to Indigenous lands. A fundamental tenet is that traditional owners be the drivers of caring for country programs. A significant challenge here lies in getting Indigenous people to actively participate in programs that could both inform and be recognised by government. A broader challenge concerns the question of whether the two paradigms, of Western science and Indigenous knowledge, can be productively combined, or whether we will see a continuation of paternalistic colonial dominance of the first Australians in our supposedly post-colonial era.

Building on the CDEP Scheme — Three Examples

The Australian and Northern Territory Governments ... acknowledge the range of environmental, socio-cultural and economic benefits provided by the engagement of Indigenous people in land and sea management. These benefits provide a clear case for on-going government support and investment in this area. There is growing evidence that activities in the area enhance the self esteem and confidence of participants; reduce social alienation; and act to promote and preserve health, particularly in remote communities.⁹

The Northern Territory and Australian Governments have agreed to a strategic approach to investment in Indigenous land and sea management across the Northern Territory through the Healthy Country, Healthy People Schedule. This Schedule is part of the overarching bilateral agreement between the Australian and NT Governments committing to deliver services to Indigenous people in the Territory. Its aim is to better enable Indigenous land and sea management groups to achieve environmental, economic and social sustainability.¹⁰ It also provides opportunity for greater mainstream recognition of Indigenous contributions in this area and to create employment and enterprise opportunities through innovative partnerships. Fundamental to the success of the ranger programs has been the CDEP, an Indigenous employment and community development scheme first established in 1977. For the majority of community-based ranger groups in remote locations, the CDEP is the basis for their establishment and ongoing operations. The long-term success of such community-based projects depends on strengthening such schemes rather than their abolition. (The gradual abolition of the CDEP between 1 October 2007 and 30 June 2008 throughout the Northern Territory was announced by the Australian Government on 23 July 2007.¹¹)

The Healthy Country, Healthy People Schedule has been dependent on the CDEP as there is no financial allocation to fund full-time ranger positions. Currently, there are more than 400 people participating in thirty-six community-based ranger projects in the Top End alone.¹² The

abolition of the CDEP will have disastrous consequences: rangers will be required to participate in the work-for-the-dole program, clearly a backwards step from the current situation, and those who used to work as rangers will earn less. (Working on country provided opportunity to top up part-time CDEP pay with additional income from contracts and commercial harvesting of wildlife.)

The second example is the recently announced Working on Country program, a national funding initiative within the Commonwealth environment portfolio. Through it, Indigenous people will be contracted to provide environmental services, predominantly on Indigenous land in rural and remote locations. Initially, \$47.6 million has been earmarked to fund one hundred Indigenous ranger jobs in 2007–2008, to increase to 200 by 2010–2011.

The third is the Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) program, which encourages Indigenous people to contribute to the objectives of the national reserve system by declaring that some or all of their country will be managed in a manner consistent with the Convention on Biological Diversity. This program is so successful that demand for IPA declarations is outstripping the supply of allocated funds. The Indigenous Land Corporation has been invited to co-fund the IPA program, involving bilateral initiatives. This initiative will go a small way towards providing financial support for the work of Indigenous land and sea managers currently only funded by the CDEP.¹³ Importantly, all of these programs were not designed to replace the CDEP in remote locations and in fact are entirely reliant on CDEP organisations to administer project grants.

These initiatives provide formal recognition of the important role that Indigenous rangers play in managing country. However, in light of the abolition of the CDEP, there is no doubt that there is a marked disjuncture between the Indigenous affairs, employment and environment portfolios in their policy approaches. This national emergency measure is likely to undermine the good work the environment portfolio has done in providing employment and development opportunities for Indigenous people in remote regions. Surely the best approach to policy making is to take note of and build on the programs that have been demonstrated to work on country — an approach the government appears to have taken in the recent past, but more recently to have abandoned.

Development in the North and Indigenous People — Learning from the Past

There are some who would claim that the Outstation Movement, or the desire of Aboriginal people to live on their traditional lands, is a failed experiment. According to this way of thinking, Aboriginal people would be better off if they moved into towns and cities. This raises a number of important questions. Who, for instance, would keep the land free of weeds? Who would keep existing feral animal populations under control and prevent the spread of diseases or the establishment of new pests and diseases? Who would watch out for the spread of dangerous diseases that could impact disastrously on Australia's native and farm animals? Who would be providing on-ground surveillance to monitor Australia's northern coastline for the arrival of illegal immigrants and fishermen? What, in short, would be the benefit and cost of leaving such huge and remote areas of land devoid of human occupation?¹⁴

Most of north and central Australia has long been seen as devoid of any serious agricultural potential. Hence the lack of large-scale cropping and traditional farming that one finds, for example, in the Murray Darling. It was inevitable that with land rights Indigenous people would return to live on their country because land looms so large in our worldview. There are some examples of pastoral operations, tourism ventures, recreational fishing enterprises and other economic development opportunities being taken up. In some situations these enterprises are economically viable but most are struggling to attain social and economic sustainability. An exception here is the Aboriginal arts industry, which has reached a level of sustainability over the past thirty years owing to widespread talent among thousands of indigenous artists, sustained market demand, and ongoing marketing support from government.

In spatial terms, the predominant form of commercial land use in the Northern Territory is pastoralism. The Cooperative Research Centre for Tropical Savannas Management identified the key challenge facing the pastoral industry to be the need to ensure increased return on large capital investment, while maintaining the long-term environmental

integrity of pastoral landscapes. Cooperative Research Centre research also identified potential for increased cattle production, including on Indigenous-owned land and leases, and a need to support the development of Indigenous small- to medium-sized enterprises in pastoral and associated land and resource-use initiatives. This research also notes that if pastoral production is to be increased, it should occur where innovative programs are implemented to enhance biodiversity values and ecological function. Access to new markets could be expanded as a result of the industry's improved credentials as a responsible environmental steward. This is an area where Indigenous properties might have competitive advantage.

Mining is another important driver of the NT economy, although much of the value added and profits from mining are transferred off Aboriginal land and outside the Northern Territory. There are only a few major mines on the vast Indigenous estate that return royalties and offer jobs to Aboriginal people. It is estimated that there could be many more jobs (with CDEP support) for Indigenous rangers in the Top End, more than in the mining industry throughout the rest of the Northern Territory.¹⁵ This industry, whilst significant in wealth generation, provides fewer employment opportunities for Indigenous people compared to the potential of caring for country.

The opportunities for engagement in emerging markets such as carbon, water and biodiversity trade or offsets are significant. These markets are associated with climate change, water scarcity and the need to protect and manage resources that are abundant on lands owned and managed by Indigenous people. The problem is not so much the current and future availability of work, but the definition of work. Many customary activities associated with country, such as ceremonies, hunting, burning, the production of art and crafts, and wildlife use account for considerable work effort. The problem is that the free market fails to recognise the contribution of such efforts. How do we increase our prosperity whilst maintaining the beauty, integrity and diversity of our culturally and ecologically important landscapes?

Stabilise and Normalise Caring for Country — for National and Global Benefit

From the time that settler, then state colonisation of the Northern Territory began, Indigenous people and communities have experienced profound upheaval. Arguably, this process of marginalisation and disempowerment continues today. The legacy of missions, government settlements and European pastoral stations has left numerous small Indigenous communities scattered randomly throughout the remote Indigenous estate. Many of these communities have an extremely limited economic base and remain highly dependent on the state.

In the Top End, Indigenous people are actively managing the world's most intact and healthy savanna landscape, including centres of biodiversity and marine ecosystems that are extraordinarily rich by world standards. This work goes on today in extremely challenging circumstances, much of it unrecognised. As well, there is the constant threat to small communities' established family structures and connections to country — the outstations movement — which indirectly threatens ecosystems of global significance.

The Federal Department of Environment and Water Resources is showing strong and sensible leadership in recognising that caring for country through community-based ranger activities delivers environmental services of national and global importance. Expanding such contributions will require rapid policy development and enhanced resourcing because of the urgency of the environmental challenges we face on the Australian continent. There is a growing recognition that workable solutions will require a significant level of Indigenous input in terms of natural resource management practice.

I would like to conclude by reflecting on my own experience of what is at stake here. I believe that Indigenous Territorians are at a crossroads in the realisation of their hard won rights — rights fought through the struggles of previous generations, including by my own forebears. I reiterate, in the caring for country revolution we are witnessing one of the most inspiring and positive opportunities that could ever be presented to the nation in terms of 'stabilising' and 'normalising' these remote locations. Similarly, any policies that are designed to reform welfare must ensure that Indigenous cultural and social values are not

overlooked. A better future for Australia's First People must be created in partnership with Indigenous people. I have witnessed firsthand the building of self-esteem, support of community leadership, creation of employment and education opportunities, and the use and power of Indigenous knowledge and skills that occurs through such partnerships.

Finally, being a pragmatist, I would suggest that the focus on reforming Indigenous service delivery, particularly the CDEP, might allow the Australian Government to take the lead demonstrated by the environment portfolio and invest in caring for country jobs where, instead of one hundred full-time positions being created, all of the ranger positions in the Northern Territory would be fully funded: why have one hundred when you can have four hundred-plus Aboriginal people in the Top End alone earning proper wages, supporting the building of economically, socially, culturally robust and sustainable communities, for only \$25 million per annum? Surely this is a great investment with potentially high returns.

ENDNOTES

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Caring for Country

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