

PROCEEDINGS OF THE AUSTRALIAN RANGELAND SOCIETY BIENNIAL CONFERENCE
Official publication of The Australian Rangeland Society

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Form of Reference

The reference for this article should be in this general form;

Author family name, initials (year). Title. *In*: Proceedings of the nth Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conference. Pages. (Australian Rangeland Society: Australia).

For example:

Anderson, L., van Klinken, R. D., and Shepherd, D. (2008). Aerially surveying Mesquite (*Prosopis* spp.) in the Pilbara. *In*: 'A Climate of Change in the Rangelands. Proceedings of the 15th Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conference'. (Ed. D. Orr) 4 pages. (Australian Rangeland Society: Australia).

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FOR HEALTHY COUNTRY AND HEALTHY PEOPLE: INDIGENOUS LAND MANAGEMENT IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Jocelyn Davies and Sandy Marty

Overview paper for the Indigenous Land Management session incorporating contributions written by Donald Fraser, Tim Hill, Frank Young, Lexie Knight, Nic Gambold, Meg Mooney, Veronica Dobson, Jenny Cleary, Jason Downs and Rodney Edwards.

BACKGROUND

Indigenous people have a very important place in the management of Australia's rangelands and this is highlighted by the location of this conference in Alice Springs. Contributors to this session, including David Ross, Director of Central Land Council, as keynote speaker and a panel of Indigenous land managers will show some of the diversity of Indigenous peoples' management of rangelands and its significance. This overview paper introduces contemporary issues in Indigenous land management in central Australia and the perspectives that speakers bring to this session.

Within a thousand kilometres of Alice Springs, about half the land is held by Indigenous people in freehold or leasehold ownership. On other lands in the region – pastoral leases, protected areas and Crown lands in townships such as Alice Springs – native title has achieved broad legal recognition. Though most Indigenous people struggle to realise any tangible benefit from this legal recognition, it has pushed 'mainstream' natural resource management institutions to slowly reform because they are now realising that they need to involve Indigenous people effectively.

This reform is a big task because mainstream Australian approaches to natural resource management have their origins in the legal fiction of 'terra nullius', which said Australia was 'no-one's land', made Indigenous peoples' customary law invisible to governments and settlers, ignored its significance for sustainable management of country, and destroyed much of its effectiveness. Mainstream institutions for natural resource management – such as planning processes, funding programs and information services – are slowly adapting to recognise Indigenous peoples. Reality today in central Australia is that Indigenous people are significant managers of country both in their own right and in partnership with other people and organisations. Nevertheless there is still a long way to go before legislation, funding sources, government and non-government services are all effective at providing the support that Indigenous groups need to rebuild their own governance institutions and achieve healthy people and healthy country. This session will feature some innovative efforts by Indigenous people, Indigenous organisations and other partners that are working towards healthy people and healthy country. It will also point to barriers that continue to affect progress to these goals.

Indigenous people are the poorest residents of rangelands, in terms of income, and indications are that their social and economic well being is declining in many respects. Indigenous populations are also the fastest growing population sector in remote Australia. The size of the non-Indigenous population in remote Australia declined between 1986 and 2002, but the number of Indigenous people increased by 23% since 1981. There are now 36,000 Indigenous people in desert Australia and the number of working age people is predicted to increase by 34% by 2016, presenting a huge challenge for development of livelihoods. Many Indigenous people travel frequently across large areas of the desert including moving between small settlements and larger towns such as Alice Springs to access urban based services. Mobility raises many issues about the demand for services and equitable and effective funding regimes (Taylor 2003).

On Aboriginal owned lands, living places include settlements of several hundred or more people sometimes from a variety of clan or language groups, and smaller family centred outstation or homeland communities. People live in these places because it is their country and their home, not because of the economic opportunities. The viability of these settlements worries government policy makers and Aboriginal leaders alike. Can Australia as a nation afford the economic cost of servicing

these areas as living places? Alternatively, can the nation afford the social, economic and ecological costs of the current situation in which so very few Indigenous families who are living on country have chances of sustainable livelihoods? A further important consideration is that, as Altman and Whitehead (2003:1) point out, Indigenous owned lands are generally quite underpopulated for effective management of the land.

The economy of remote Indigenous communities can be characterised as a hybrid (Altman 2001) between customary sectors (such as hunting and gathering; exchange within extended families); government (such as government funded community employment programs and jobs in the community services sector; social security payments) and enterprise (notably arts and crafts). While jobs and enterprises are scarce on Aboriginal lands and income levels of Indigenous people are critically low, the existence of these lands and their resident populations nevertheless contributes significantly to the regional economy in remote Australia. Crough *et al.* (1989 and see Howitt *et al.* 1990) concluded that a third of the economy of Alice Springs is attributable to the presence of Aboriginal land and Aboriginal people, and it is likely that this proportion has increased steadily in the 15 years since that research, because Aboriginal populations, the area of Aboriginal owned land and Aboriginal arts and craft production have all increased. As well as the Aboriginal contribution to the flow of money in central Australia, Aboriginal lands are likely to contribute significantly to the flow of ecosystem goods and services in the region. These factors are not yet properly recognised in research directions or in policy responses (Altman and Whitehead 2003). Thus Aboriginal people who are now managing lands, natural and cultural resources, struggle for the resources they need to fund paid jobs, vehicles and other basic necessities that will enable their management to be effective.

The important contribution of traditional ecological knowledge to sustainable land management is now being widely recognised, influenced by the impetus of the Convention on Conservation of Biological Diversity, and the tangible outcomes demonstrated by collaborations between traditional knowledge holders and scientists (e.g. Baker *et al.* 1992, Pearson and Ngaanyatjarra Council 1997, Kennet *et al.* 1998, Horstman and Wightman 2001, Kwan *et al.* 2001, Nesbitt *et al.* 2001; Robinson *et al.* 2003). As indigenous people participate in a search for new livelihood opportunities that draw from their knowledge and skills, they are also very concerned about making sure that their own rights and opportunities to get economic benefit from their knowledge and from the natural and cultural resources of their country are safeguarded and not put at risk by research and other kinds of knowledge sharing. The research and policy community is also now coming to understand that improved economic outcomes in remote indigenous communities depend less on marketable resources and access to markets than they do on the effectiveness of indigenous governance institutions (Cornell and Gil-Swedberg 1995, Cornell and Kalt 2003, Dodson and Smith 2003). This effectiveness is itself influenced by outsiders' recognition of indigenous rights to self determination, and by the mechanisms that indigenous groups themselves use to achieve a balance between the benefits that group members realise from communally owned or managed resources and the effort those members put in to maintaining these resources. This kind of balance, existing under customary governance institutions, promoted sustainability (see Ostrom 1990, Rose 1997, Berkes 1999, McKean 2000).

At the same time as outsiders are coming to recognise the achievements of indigenous people in sustainable management derived from customary law and traditional knowledge, this knowledge and indigenous people's relationship to country is under greater threat than ever from ill-health and premature death in indigenous communities, changing priorities of indigenous youth attracting them away from traditional lands, and degradation of country through unmanaged fire, feral animals and human use.

How important is it to turn this situation around? The Indigenous land managers presenting in this session will talk about their positive initiatives and outcomes to address this situation, and why their efforts are important. They operate 'two-ways' in managing country, drawing from traditional knowledge, language and customary law and practices, and from partnerships with government agencies, other funding bodies, scientific researchers, and NGOs. Key issues for them include generating jobs in land management and getting income to cover their land management costs and to

provide for their other economic needs. Other significant issues include: keeping traditional knowledge and language alive; protecting cultural values and customary knowledge of country and natural resources; and addressing threats to land rights, and to the realisation of Indigenous rights to self determination. ‘Umbrella’ Indigenous organisations and government agencies that provide land management support services play a significant role in supporting Indigenous people in contemporary management of country. Staff of several such organisations have worked with community members to develop this session⁴.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER, DAVID ROSS

In opening the session, keynote speaker David Ross will draw from his experience as Director of Central Land Council and the significant responsibilities that entails under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976 (NT) and the Native Title Act 1994 to promote the rights and interests of traditional owners in land management and land tenure across the southern part of the Northern Territory. Mr Ross’ career has also spanned national responsibilities in indigenous land management as the founding chair of the Board of the Indigenous Land Corporation, a former ATSIC commissioner and Board member from the Northern Territory and a member of the task force responsible for developing the ATSIC & DPIE National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rural Industry Strategy (1997).

PANEL MEMBERS

A panel of Indigenous community based land managers from Ngaanyatjarra, Yankunytjatjara, Warlpiri and Arrernte countries in Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory will talk about contemporary land management covering:

- Scope – What is happening?
- Significance – Why is this effort important?
- Successes – What has been working well, and why?
- Disappointments – What are the problems? What is not going well and why?

Panel members include:

Donald Fraser, Chair Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park Board of Management

Frank Young, Director of Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Management

Tatjitjara Robertson, Ian Ward and Mr Richards of the Ngaanyatjarra lands

Neville Poulson of the Warlpiri community ranger group

Veronica Dobson from Tangentyere Council’s Land and Learning project

George Cooley from the Aboriginal Lands Interim Natural Resource Management Group, South Australia.

The panel presentation will finish with discussion, offering opportunities for the conference to consider questions such as:

- How does Indigenous land management contribute to sustainability in the rangelands?
- How does land management link to community development and health, making it a holistic undertaking?
- What actions can other people take to support sustainable outcomes from Indigenous land management?
- How can livelihoods for indigenous people in land management and related areas be promoted?

⁴ A further contribution to the conference’s consideration of these issues comes from Northern Land Council - see Mark Ashley, Anita Hudd, Alistair Trier, Garry Richardson and Max Gorringer: *The Indigenous Pastoral Project: People achieving development, conservation and people outcomes*, Poster presentation at this conference. Further, Jocelyn Davies, *Engaging Indigenous partnerships* from CSIRO is a poster addressing considerations for effective research partnerships between scientists and Indigenous organisations/Indigenous land managers.

Donald Fraser is Chair of the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park Board of Management in the Northern Territory. Donald also operates a pastoral business based on agistment of cattle in the eastern part of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands, north-west South Australia. His involvement in land management spans a very wide spectrum from balancing cultural values, mass tourism and biodiversity conservation in the World Heritage listed joint managed park at Uluru where he is a traditional owner, through to balancing pastoral use, commercial outcomes and cultural values of land in the APY lands on country where other people are traditional owners. His situation highlights the range of different kinds of relationships and responsibilities that Aboriginal people can have for managing country.

Donald Fraser works closely with **Tim Hill**, Central Land Council support officer for the Aboriginal owners of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. Together they will talk on the topic of *Consulting with Traditional Owners regarding Land Management and Land Use proposals*.

Donald will discuss the term Nguraritja (traditional owner in Yankunytjatjara) and the Anangu (i.e. Yankunytjatjara-Pitjantjatjara peoples') system of land ownership and title. Tim will give a short overview of the relevant sections of the *Land Rights Act* (NT) 1976 and the history of missions and government communities in the south-west Northern Territory and north-west South Australia. Donald will talk about why some Aboriginal people live away from the country where they are traditional owners, and examples of consulting with traditional owners about land use.

Frank Young is Director of Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Management (APYLM) and a traditional owner at Waturu community and Indigenous Protected Area in the western part of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands, north western SA. **Frank Young** and **Lexie Knight** (coordinator of APYLM) explain APYLM's role as follows:

"The key aspiration of Anangu (Aboriginal people) for management of their land is strong, healthy families. In achieving this it is important that the people who hold the Tjukurpa (customary Law) for country are actually the ones doing the land management work.

"Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Management (APYLM) brings voice to Anangu aspirations with regards to the stewardship of the land. This ensures continued economic engagement of Anangu with their land and that natural resources are managed in culturally appropriate, ecologically sustainable ways, drawing upon both traditional and contemporary expertise".

"There is a synergy between the land management projects that APY facilitates and biodiversity outcomes, even though the starting point for APYLM is Tjukurpa and the aim is managing country for family, not for biodiversity. For example, rock holes in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands are a key water source for many native animals. Cleaning rock holes has a major impact on biodiversity with minimal input. Patch burning stimulates the regeneration of sweet grasses and vegetable foods used by Anangu. Patch burning creates mosaics of vegetation that increase biological diversity. On Walalkara and Wataru Indigenous Protected Areas, Anangu use patch burning and rock hole cleaning to look after country. They look after country according to Tjukurpa (the Law)."⁵

Other land management projects in the AP Lands include harvesting wild camels to reduce grazing pressure and conflicts with people as well as for economic benefit, described in **Rick Hall** and **Lexie Knight**'s poster paper elsewhere in these proceedings.

⁵ Frank Young & Alex Knight, *Manta Atamankupai. (Land Management) on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands*, Abstract submitted for ARS 2004 conference. Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Management, Umuwa via Alice Springs, NT, 0872 lmapy@bipond.com

Tatjitjara Robertson, Ian Ward and Mr Richards are Ngaanyatjarra men who live and work on their traditional Lands in the western desert region of Western Australia. Within the Ngaanyatjarra Lands there are two vast conservation reserves, namely the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve and the Ngaanyatjarra Indigenous Protected Area. In practical terms, both Reserves are very remote from mainstream support yet contain eight established communities with fully developed infrastructure and an available labour force. The Gibson Desert Traditional Owners balance their land management activities with cooperation and support for activities conducted through the WA Department of Conservation and Land Management. Adjoining the Reserve, the Ngaanyatjarra Indigenous Protected Area provides for a contribution of Commonwealth government resources to support conservation outcomes. As with the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve, the Ngaanyatjarra IPA is unique in providing an area of unbroken continuous occupation and traditional land management. The biodiversity resulting from this management includes significant populations of endangered species. Through the continued practice of traditional management and linkages with mainstream conservation programs, the Ngaanyatjarra are ensuring the survival of these species and the integrity of the associated bioregion. These three men have been instrumental in the development and focussing of the Ngaanyatjarra Council Land Management Unit on cultural and conservation outcomes. This presentation complements poster papers at this conference by other Ngaanyatjarra contributors: **Mrs Giles, Mrs Davies and Matjuwa Jones** from Patjarr with **Madeline Hourihan** on management of Tjakura, (*Egernia kintorei*, Great Desert Skink) and by **Daisy Ward and Rodney Edwards** on the Land Management Education Continuum which is promoting inter-generational transmission of traditional ecological and cultural knowledge.

Neville Poulson is a Warlpiri man and a community ranger in the newly established Warlpiri land management unit which operates in the southern Tanami desert, north-west of Alice Springs. The group is involved in developing collaborative management with Birds Australia for Newhaven Gap bird sanctuary, in biological survey in association with Newmont's Granites and North Flinders Mines, and in a feasibility study for the management of the Tanami Region as an indigenous protected area. Neville works closely with **Nic Gambold** of the Central Land Council Land Management Unit. Their efforts in establishing this new Indigenous land management service highlight some of the strategic issues involved in resourcing Indigenous Land Management in Australian rangelands. Nic Gambold explains the context for their collaboration as follows:

“Indigenous land management (ILM) is an expanding initiative on Aboriginal lands throughout Australia. Given its potential to deliver significant socio-economic as well as environmental benefits, it is a highly advantageous community-based activity. Moreover, when considered in relation to its prospective extent (e.g. c. 820,000 sq km for Aboriginal freehold lands in the NT) imperatives for its wider instigation and support are clear.

“As a result of collaboration between Aboriginal land owners, land councils, government agencies, tertiary education institutions and the Tropical Savannas CRC, savanna-based ILM groups have been relatively well supported in recent years. Multi-agency cooperation in the Top End has led to a semi-formalised support network, the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Association (NAILSMA). This and the development of broad, strategic funding approaches have allowed the indigenous ranger movement in the tropical north to flourish. Conversely, ILM in Central Australian has been slow to emerge. Support has been limited and discrete. Few formal structures exist and most community-based ILM ‘programs’ are little more than a series of disjunct land-based projects. In this context there have been few opportunities for training, capacity building or the development of impetus within or between communities.

“However, sweeping reforms occurring across the NT, for example the hand-back of Territory parks and reserves to traditional owners, prescribe a vastly increased expectation of Aboriginal traditional owners, and their representative agencies, to manage their land for conservation benefit. Increased levels of responsibility for these, essentially private, landowners clearly justify far greater public investment in ILM. This focuses attention on developing options for a more

strategic approach to supporting, resourcing and promoting Aboriginal land care in the southern NT.”⁶

Veronica Dobson is on the steering committee of Tangentyere Council’s Land and Learning project, which focuses on teaching the land managers of tomorrow. Tangentyere is an Aboriginal organisation that supports Aboriginal management of 18 town camps within Alice Springs and their resident and mobile visiting populations from across the southern Northern Territory. Tangentyere runs a major community development employment program and associated training and is a job network provider. Its land management section supports projects on Aboriginal lands across the southern Northern Territory, including propagation and bushcare activities. Tree-planting activities will be highlighted by **Kevin Ronberg’s** poster presentation at this conference. **Veronica Dobson** and Land and Learning project officer **Meg Mooney** describe the Land and Learning project as follows:

“Young Aboriginal people need to learn about managing country from their elders. They also need to learn about western land management theory and practice. Two-way education in land management will equip interested young people to carry on the work of their elders and make future decisions about their land. Ideally this education will link in with employment and training opportunities in parks and elsewhere.

“Tangentyere’s Land and Learning project has been developing a land management education program for children in central Australian Aboriginal communities for a number of years. This program has received enthusiastic feedback from students, teachers and community elders, and the NT Education Department.

“We work through schools, doing activities for at least a few days a term with each of the schools we work with, and providing teachers with preparation and follow up activities and resources. The idea is for there to be ongoing learning, rather than a once-off exercise. With community elders we teach children about the animals and plants in their country and contemporary land management issues such as the decline of native species, feral animals and weeds.

“There are often one or two children in a class who are outstanding in their interest and/or knowledge of a particular topic. It may be useful to develop a mentoring program for these children, linking them in particular with training and employment opportunities in the area.

“Land and Learning has developed a 90 page two-way activities book, based around the themes of animals, plants, water, fire and tools. The book is now an official resource of the NT Curriculum Framework, and is widely used by Education Department resource staff and community schools.

“We have found that working through schools is an efficient way of using our resource, builds capacity in indigenous teachers, and models the value of involving community elders to non-indigenous teachers.

“We are planning to extend our activities by working with NT Parks and Wildlife staff on junior ranger activities, and involving indigenous students in animal survey work on parks. Parks and Wildlife and Central Land Council are interested in the Land and Learning model in relation to education and training provisions for the agreements they are developing for joint management of parks.”⁷

⁶ Gambold, Nic (2004). *Strategic Resources for Indigenous Land Management in the Central Land Council Region*, Abstract submitted for ARS 2004 conference. Land Management Section Central Land Council, Alice Springs. Ph (08)8950 5008.

⁷ Dobson, Veronica and Mooney, Meg. (2004). Teaching the land managers of tomorrow. Abstract submitted to 2004 ARS conference. Tangentyere Council, Alice Springs. Ph 08 8952 8029.

George Cooley is an Aboriginal community leader from Coober Pedy and member of the Aboriginal Lands Interim Natural Resource Management Group for South Australia. George has a strong interest in community sustainability, including recent involvement with planning processes undertaken with Rural Solutions SA to develop community sustainability in a holistic sense, looking at environmental, social and economic outcomes. **Jason Downs** and **Jenny Cleary** of Rural Solutions SA describe this planning further, as follows:

“Rural Solutions SA has been working on holistic planning processes with Indigenous Communities and groups across South Australia, including several in the rangelands. The outcome from the work with each group is a 'plan' for long term sustainability, which considers social, environmental, economic and cultural impacts, and most importantly, is determined by the community. Such a plan enables communities and groups to be much more directive in their dealings with government and non-government agencies, from a basis of sound decision making that is wholly owned by the community as the decision makers.”

“Participants are encouraged to view their situation as a continuum and to plot their current and preferred futures. Requirements for training and development naturally fall out of such a process and support the vision for development of the community rather than what tends to happen currently, where training often occurs in complete isolation of any planning by the community. Often the outcome of training isolated from community development is highly trained people with technical skills but with no real job prospects or potential to use the skills in the community because there is no appropriate enterprise or infrastructure to support a suitable enterprise.”⁸

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⁸ Downs, Jason and Cleary, Jenny (2004). Community sustainability – a continuum? Abstract submitted for ARS 2004 conference. Rural Solutions SA, Primary Industries and Resources, 12 Tassie St, PORT AUGUSTA SA 5700; ph 08 8648 5160

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