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The Australian Rangeland Society

DEVELOPING RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN CSIRO AND INDIGENOUS ORGANISATIONS

Jocelyn Davies

CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems, PO Box 2111, Alice Springs, NT 0871

CSIRO is exploring how its research can be more responsive to indigenous people's concerns and issues. Action is underway through:

- My work at the Centre for Arid Zone Research. *Engaging Indigenous Partnerships*, a project co-funded by CSIRO and Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre¹, aims to develop strategic research directions in partnership with indigenous organisations to meet priorities of indigenous people in desert Australia. It involves capacity building inside and outside CSIRO.
- CSIRO's participation in the Desert Knowledge CRC with two Alice Springs based Indigenous organisations – Central Land Council and the Desert Peoples Centre (a partnership of Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and the Centre for Appropriate Technology).
- A CSIRO wide Organisational Learning project on the Cultural Context of Knowledge and Research that includes a review of international, national and CSIRO experience in conducting research with and for Indigenous people, an issues paper and workshops.

GOALS AND PRIORITIES

CSIRO's interest in research partnerships with Indigenous organisations is part of its overall concern with research approaches that benefit both the public good and private stakeholders. CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems wants its research to help Australian ecosystems sustain viable enterprises, allowing biodiversity to prosper, and supporting the development of robust communities.

Indigenous people's priorities in desert Australia include jobs and independence, ending poverty and welfare dependency; respect and protection for cultural values and cultural property; recognition for people and for how culture and nature are interconnected; protecting and maintaining traditional knowledge; effective participation in decision making about management of traditional country and an equitable share in the flow of benefits from traditional country.

PARTNERSHIPS IN RESEARCH – SOME INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCES

In the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands, a 10 year biological survey program was a partnership between the SA Department of Environment and Heritage and Anangu (Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara people) (Robinson *et al.* 2003). Anangu, with support from their Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Management service, decided what traditional knowledge was collected. They control access to it. The survey set directions for ongoing biodiversity management involving traditional owners and scientists.

In north-east Arnhem land, turtle research was conducted in partnership between Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation and Dr Rod Kennet (then of the Centre for Indigenous Natural and Cultural Resource Management, NT University) for several years in the 1990s (Kennet *et al.* 1997). The partnership strengthened Aboriginal and scientific understandings, and turtle conservation.

In South Australia, the Strategy for Aboriginal Managed Lands, documented in 1999, built on partnerships between the SA Government, Indigenous Land Corporation and Aboriginal landholding bodies to improve natural and cultural resource conditions on Aboriginal managed lands. It researched land management priorities and support needs. Partnerships have continued to evolve in the new Aboriginal Lands Integrated Natural Resource Management Region and now include new relationships with other regional resource management bodies in SA and interstate.

¹ DISCLAIMER: This paper does not necessarily represent the views of DK-CRC partners.

Government health and community service agencies have a new interest in collaboration and in partnerships with Aboriginal organisations (see Wakerman and Mitchell 2004). Their starting point is different to CSIRO's. Spurred by Indigenous leaders' and other critique that welfare policies hold back improvements in Indigenous well being, governments are seeking partnerships with Aboriginal communities that recognise mutual obligations for reducing disadvantage and welfare dependency.

WHAT MAKES A PARTNERSHIP EFFECTIVE?

A partnership should meet the needs of each partner in a better way than any partner working alone. Partnerships involve benefits and responsibilities for each partner, in an equitable balanced relationship. Research partnerships can produce better research outcomes such as through more appropriate framing of research questions and better adoption of results. Partnerships need time, flexibility and extensive negotiation to develop. Trust is critical in partnerships; many people say it is the key ingredient. But research is often not trusted by Indigenous people. Like Indigenous people's other experiences of colonisation, research has been invasive and exploitative, offensive to their dignity and cultural protocols, and blind to their values, knowledge and wisdom.

Developing trust involves engagement between people over time with openness and honesty - sharing objectives and needs, values and principles, based on mutual respect. Research involving indigenous knowledge and cultural resources carries an ethical responsibility to Indigenous communities and cultural groups as well as to the individuals who are directly engaged in the research. Indigenous people ask that research processes respond to six core values of their culture – reciprocity, respect, equality, responsibility, survival and protection, and spirit and integrity (NHMRC 2003). These and other ethical considerations are as fundamental in the design and conduct of research as scientific considerations (NHMRC 1999).

HOW DOES TRUST DEVELOP FOR RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS?

- *Respect between individuals.* Trusting personal relationships, built up over time, are the foundation for many research partnerships.
- *Participatory research methods.* Drawing on the expertise of Indigenous community members and building in their participation throughout the research process – in design, data collection, analysis and evaluation of the research – transforms power relations. This is very different to involvement of indigenous people only as paid informants, or research assistants (e.g.: see the Arctic Borderlands Ecological Research Cooperative - <http://www.taiga.net/coop/>).
- *Agreements, MOUs and project management procedures.* Negotiation of agreements can allow trusted relationships to extend over time between organisations, reducing reliance on relationships between individuals (e.g. the Cultural Safety Contract between Rakiura Maori and University of Otago - <http://www.otago.ac.nz/titi/bicultural.html>).
- *Indigenous peoples' control over the research process.* Indigenous people and organizations are increasingly setting priorities, leading and implementing research activity, promoting their trust in the process (e.g. experience of the CRC for Aboriginal and Tropical Health).

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