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LEARNING THROUGH LAND: SKILLING ALL GENERATIONS TO CARE FOR COUNTRY

A. Drenen¹, R. Edwards¹, M. Hourihan¹ and D. Ward²

¹ Ngaanyatjarra Council Land Management Unit, PMB 71, Warburton via Alice Springs NT 0872

² Ngaanyatjarra Education Area, WA DET, PMB 5, Warakurna via Alice Springs NT 0872

Land management offers real opportunities for Indigenous employment in the rangelands. The provision of education and training programs to meet land management objectives is a challenge for both indigenous and non-indigenous land management and education systems. Senior Traditional Owners hold an extensive ecological knowledge system and are charged with the responsibility for its practice and delivery. If education is to be relevant to Indigenous people and achieve contemporary land management objectives, it must build on this existing knowledge base.

For the Ngaanyatjarra people in the Western Desert region of Western Australia, a model of land management and caring for country education is gradually coalescing. There is no particular lead agency or institution, and no particular model being sought. Equally, there is no articulated vision directing or influencing its development. Instead, components are being developed in an opportunistic and unstructured fashion that is presenting its own opportunities for a continuum of education spanning the generations and incorporating mainstream education and the practice and transmission of traditional ecological knowledge.

Resources on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands are not inconsiderable and encompass eleven communities with over 2000 Ngaanyatjarra members across 18,586 sq km. Each community has a WA Department of Education and Training Remote Area School providing education services to students from ages five to about fifteen. In Warburton there is also the Ngaanyatjarra College, an independent, community-controlled, registered training organization that provides a range of post-secondary vocational training programs. In addition, the Ngaanyatjarra Council has an established Land Management Unit that services the Indigenous Protected Area and greater Ngaanyatjarra estate.

Ngaanyatjarra people have an unbroken history of occupation and land management practice on their Lands that are unique in that industries such as mining or pastoralism have never taken hold. Consequently the body of traditional ecological knowledge that sustains the landscapes and maintains the unique biodiversity values is relatively intact. Today, every opportunity must be taken to get people back onto country to practice this knowledge and to facilitate its appropriate transmission to younger generations. The Land Management Unit is continually seeking creative ways to promote inter-generational transmission of traditional ecological knowledge and aims to provide a broad range of opportunities for this to occur.

Mainstream education and attendance at school is a very small part of the overall life of Ngaanyatjarra people. Consequently the time spent at school must provide relevant education – but relevant to participation in both the local indigenous and non-indigenous community. With support from the WA Department of Education and Training, the Ngaanyatjarra Council embarked on the development of its own curriculum using land-based activities and bush trips to bridge the gap between traditional and institutional knowledge transmission processes and bring relevance to mainstream school-based education while simultaneously passing on the knowledge needed for caring for country.

In 2003, the Land Management Unit implemented the *Learning Through Land* project that arose from the curriculum. It is based on contextual learning in overnight bush camps where the land-based activities and learning experiences raise awareness of the issues and work required to maintain and enhance the environment and heritage values of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. The knowledge transmission and reception is undertaken with practice, guidance and direction from senior practitioners at appropriate times and places. These activities affirm cultural responsibilities and contribute directly to the maintenance of traditional ecological knowledge and the sustainability of land management

practices. An additional strength of this project, that cannot be underestimated, lies in the relationships fostered between schools, community members and the Land Management Unit as a result of the time together.

The Land Management Unit is also involved in a wide range of activities from which schools can draw inspiration for classroom work, including: feral animal management; rock hole cleaning; cultural site maintenance; surveying and monitoring for rare and threatened species; collection of resource-use data; and fire monitoring. Such activities provide significant opportunities for literacy and numeracy development in the classroom.

Land management is inextricably linked with all activities of Ngaanyatjarra day-to-day life. Health and well-being in its total definition demands that land management be practiced. The Ngaanyatjarra Health Services delivers some of its training packages through methodologies similar to that used for the *Learning Through Land* program with significant spins-offs to land management including: monitoring of land condition; burning for hunting; harvesting of resources; teaching of children; reaffirming the position of the senior practitioners; and, getting young mothers and senior women onto country. The Land Management Unit and the Health Services are jointly investigating ways of sharing resources to ensure that this methodology can be expanded.

Some schools have students participating in Vocational Education Training and have expressed interest in a land management stream. The Ngaanyatjarra College is currently recruiting trainees in the nationally accredited Certificate of Conservation and Land Management. Trainees will develop the skills and language to enable participation in the dialogue with external land management agencies. Delivery of the training will rely heavily on the participation and employment of people skilled in traditional ecological knowledge as mentors and trainers.

The emerging model for land management education and caring for country is moving towards a life-long learning process incorporating both traditional ecological knowledge and contemporary land management issues with delivery provided through both traditional means and recognized institutional structures.