An Unequal Coexistence

From ‘station black’ to ‘Aboriginal custodian’ in the

Victoria River District of Northern Australia

DAVID COOPER

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at a university or other institute of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and list of references given.

David Cooper

December 1999
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This thesis would not have been possible without the generous help, advice and friendship of many individuals along the way.

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Abstract

The thesis addresses the broader theme of coexistence between black and white Australians through an extended case study of the mediation of overlapping Aboriginal ‘heritage’ interests in land with the interests of non-Indigenous landowners and land managers in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory (the ‘VRD’). The thesis shows that while an historical perspective reveals marked changes in many of the outward manifestations of intercultural relations (for example, changes in white categorisations of Aboriginal people from ‘station blacks’ to ‘Aboriginal custodians’, and changes in the conduct of relations from violent to non-violent behaviours), the overall tenor of relations has changed little. The VRD community remains ‘racially’ segregated, characterised by separate cultural domains, poor intercultural communication and entrenched Aboriginal marginality and socio-economic disadvantage. The thesis shows how recognition of Aboriginal heritage interests in land is largely determined by the parameters of this pattern of relations, which are analysed in the thesis through the themes of power, cultural difference and strategic action. The thesis also examines the Western paradigm of heritage, from its conceptual origins to the structures and processes which have subsequently been developed in Indigenous heritage policy, including heritage protection legislation and processes of consultation. The integration of heritage protection with development approvals processes has created many difficulties for Aboriginal communities in the VRD, whose heritage interests are often placed in opposition to the economic interests of the wider Australian community. The thesis endorses a coexistence approach to mediating Indigenous heritage interests with the interests and needs of non-Indigenous land owners and land managers. This must include effective statutory protection of Indigenous heritage interests together with mechanisms and resources to promote and negotiate voluntary agreements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders.
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# Glossary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAPA</td>
<td>Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHC</td>
<td>Australian Heritage Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIATSIS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATSIC</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CERD</td>
<td>United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLC</td>
<td>Central Land Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLC</td>
<td>Northern Land Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTCA</td>
<td>Northern Territory Cattlemen’s Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTCPC</td>
<td>Northern Territory Cattle Producer’s Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTPWC</td>
<td>Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLC</td>
<td>Rural Landholders for Coexistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VRD</td>
<td>Victoria River District</td>
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