

Chapter 10

Countrymen standing together

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'Djelk' is a Gurrgoni word for 'land' and 'caring for the land'. The Djelk logo embodies the land management approach of the Djelk Rangers and their supporting community. The fish trap represents the group's role in bringing land owners together to make decisions about the land.

The water lily links the earth, water, air and people – it is a plant of both beauty and a source of food.

The two stems represent the dual laws Djelk recognise – Bininj/Yol (Aboriginal) and Balanda (non-Indigenous). The lily bulbs and roots represent the many land-owning clans in the area. The dilly bag holds important messages for the people, alluding to the contemporary land management knowledge Djelk can offer land owners.²

This is a story about the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation's Djelk Rangers and some of the things we do. It is a story about how we began, where we are now and how we got here. But most of all, this story is about the future. This chapter is our effort to talk about a future for our country and our people. We want this to be heard by as many people as possible, so we are telling this story to you – to all the Bininj, Yol and Balanda.³

Our story as the Djelk Rangers begins in Maningrida. About 3000 people live in Maningrida (and the surrounding outstations), which is in western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, right on the Liverpool River. The country we look after belongs to over 100 different clans and there are seven major languages spoken in

1 We would like to thank Djelk coordinator Brendan Bainbridge for assistance with this chapter.

2 K May, S Ansell and J Koenig (2010) *Djelk Rangers Annual Report 2009/2010*, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, Maningrida, <<http://caepr.anu.edu.au/poc/partners/Djelk.php>> viewed 13 March 2012.

3 The terms Bininj (used in the west of the Maningrida region by the Bininj Kunwok cluster) and Yol (used in the east of the Maningrida region by the Burarra/Djinang language groups) are words for 'Aboriginal people'. The term Balanda is used colloquially throughout the region to describe non-Aboriginal people and is derived from the word 'Hollander'.

the region – Bininj Kunwok, Burarra, Dangabon/Dalabon, Djinang, Gurrgoni and Rembarrnga as well as 22 different dialects (see Figure 10.4 page 171).

But Maningrida is just a Balanda name for a town to us; it is really called Manayingkarirra, the place where the Dreaming changed shape.⁴ This town belongs to the Dhukurridji clan of the Kunibidji people and they speak Ndjebbana. While we have our office and work sheds in Maningrida, the Djelk rangers do not just work in the town. We work for lots of people's places. All of these language groups and clans come together to make up the 'people on country'. We all belong to places – parts of country including the sea – that we own and share. This country covers 10,000 square kilometres of Arnhem Land and another 10,000 square kilometres of the Arafura Sea.

Our history is in the old people and their spirits. Many are gone now, but they helped us move back to our country and to get some services on our country when they set up the outstations during the 1970s. In partnership with some key non-Aboriginal people like Dan Gillespie, Peter Cooke, David Bond and Ian Hughes, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation is the organisation that we set up in 1979 to help us make the outstations a place for the future. This was 33 years ago and there has been much change, but the outstations and Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation are still the 'heart' of the Djelk Rangers.

The early days

Our ranger program began through Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation in Maningrida in 1991 as a project under the Community Development Employment Projects scheme. We were formally established as Djelk on 18 September 1995 after a big meeting where all the land owners got together at a place called Dukaladjarrang. Otto Campion and Dean Yibarbuk and those two men, Gamerrang and Wamut, they were talking really strongly about our land and our future.⁵ Some of the first Dhimurru rangers were at that meeting too and the Northern Land Council came and said they would give us support. At that meeting there were also lots of old people and the land owners for all the outstations.

To start with, we all talked about some of the problems that we had on our country. Some of these problems were environmental and some of these problems were social. The environmental issues we had were pretty clear. The first one was a problem with weeds. We had all seen other people's country, like over at Daly River, where weeds like Mimosa were spreading everywhere. Also, we had problems with Gamba grass, Buffel grass, Mossman river grass, Hyptis and Mission grass. Old people talked about how, when they were younger, the country was clean and clear

4 This is the Njebbana name used by the Dhukurridji land owners of the township.

5 Peter Bunda-Bunda and Charles Godjuwa, both deceased, were key instigators and early leaders of the Djelk program. Their 'skin names', which are a subsection term of address, were Gamerrang and Wamut respectively.

Figure 10.1 Djelk Rangers logo

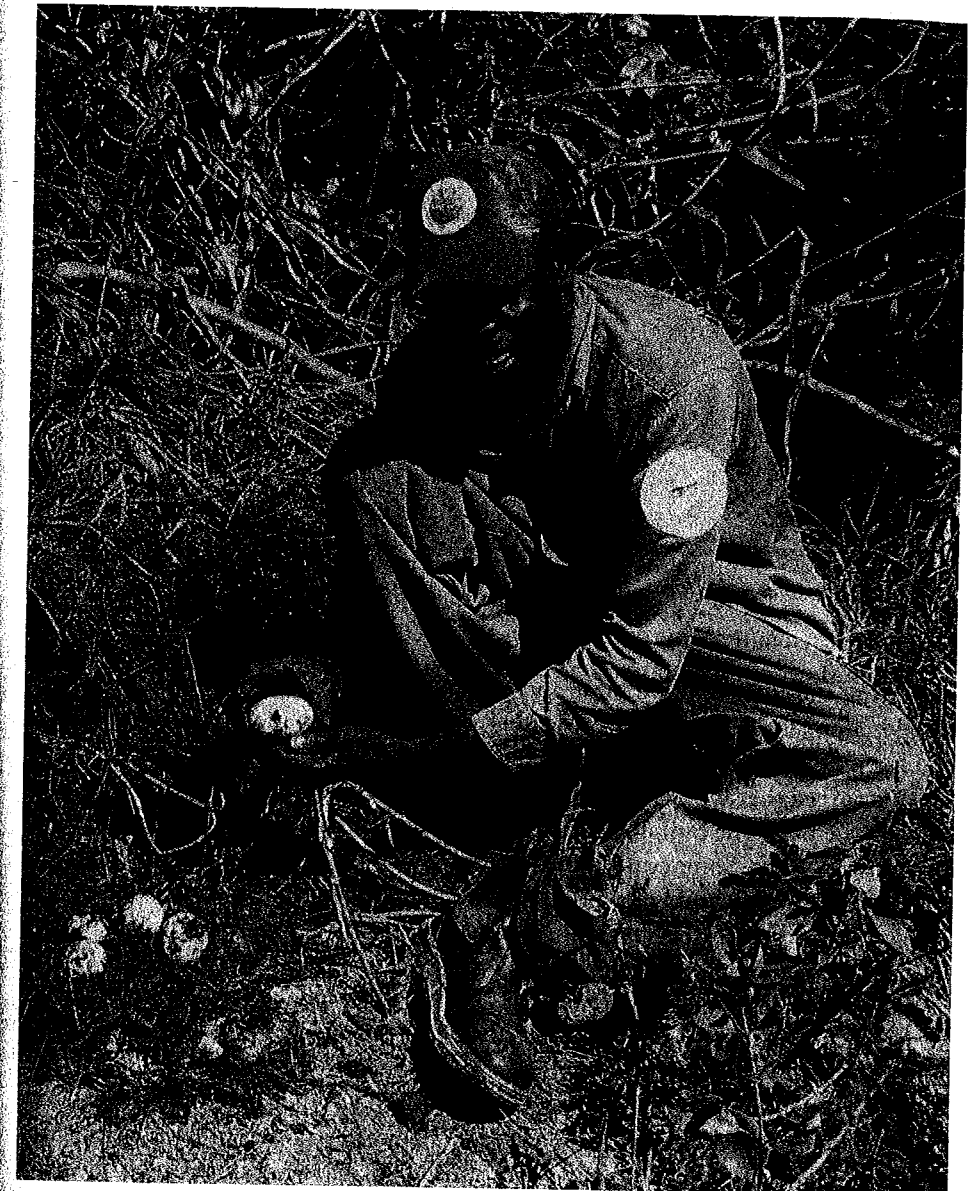


(Courtesy: Djelk Rangers)

of all these weeds. Now, they said, the weeds were starting to get a hold. One old man said that these weeds are like a really bad sickness for the country. It starts like a sore throat, like a cold. Just a few little weeds tickling that country and making him cough. Then, if you've got no medicine for that 'weed flu', it might get worse and worse. The weeds might get hold of that country like a really bad cancer. They might grow and grow and when they spread out all over his body that country might be finished – dead. Poor fellow. This was how that old man talked and we listened and everyone agreed that we needed to have work that stopped weeds on our country.

Another story that came out of that meeting was about the damage to country that feral animals were doing. The old people were worried about the water around billabongs and rivers and the real problem we talked about at that time was the pigs. Pigs are like a big tractor with a plough on the back that chops the country up into a big mess. Sometimes one or two big mobs of pigs come through our country and leave football fields of country broken and destroyed. They dig up all the water chestnuts that the magpie geese need to feed up on so as to get fat and healthy. This makes us really sad because when the time comes for baby geese to hatch, we see that they are poor in condition and sad and weak because their family didn't get enough to eat. We also see how those pigs are changing our country by letting water run through their mess, washing away soil and dirtying up the billabongs.

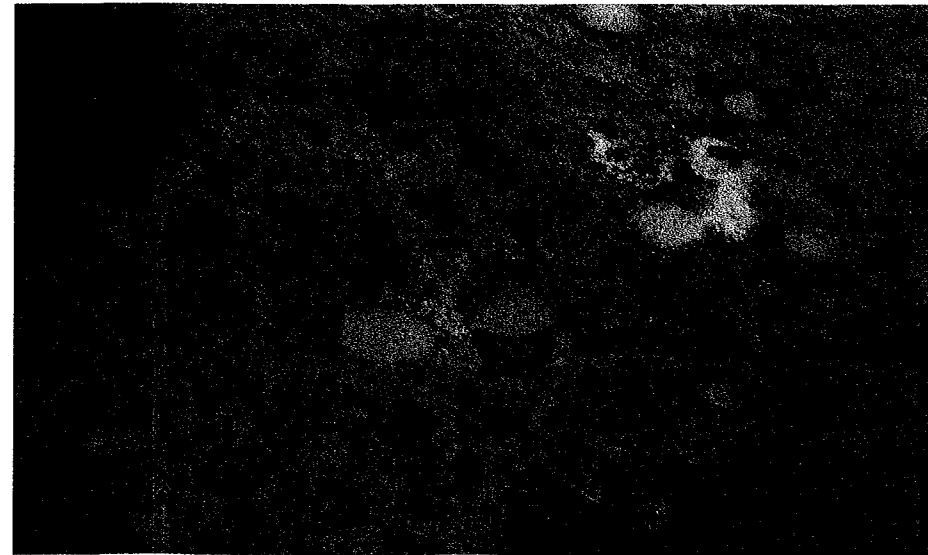
Figure 10.2 Michat Rostron collecting crocodile eggs on the Liverpool River



(Photo: B Fogarty)

The billabongs are very important to us and they provide a sanctuary for many animals and birds, but the pigs ruin the water. Also the pigs eat the eggs of all the fresh water goannas, crocodiles and the long-neck turtles. Sometimes they even go onto the beaches and dig up the marine turtle nests. Really, in this way the pigs

Figure 10.3 Buffalo damage to floodplain country



(Courtesy: Djelk Rangers and Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation)

are eating the food that we hunt and destroying the country that we live from. People, animals and country go together but around this place the wild pigs are bad for all of us.

We agreed that we needed to work together across the different clan estates to manage the pigs. The buffalo were also talked about; this has always been a bit of a hard issue for us. Some countrymen like to have buffalo living in their country as they are good to hunt and they provide a lot of meat for families. On an outstation, such a big load of protein can be hard to come by and is highly valued. However, the damage buffalo cause to country is severe. The main problem we have is caused by their feet which break down the banks of rivers and billabongs and they trample the native grasses that hold the soil together. Like the pigs, they chop up the ground and the water courses in our country get destroyed.

We are still working through this issue with the buffalo, but in 2010 we shot 662 buffalo in our region and we concentrated our efforts on one major fresh water spring at Budkorol, which is south-east of Maningrida. This area is now showing signs of regeneration. Slowly, we are showing land owners the benefits of getting rid of the buffalo, but we need to do more (see Chapter 3).

One other part of our work has always been at the centre of our business, and that is the proper burning of country. Ever since people were first on country, long before Balanda and way back to the really old people, we Aboriginal people always cleaned the country with fire. Sometimes we used that fire to push food towards us

but other times we used fire to help the country get refreshed and re-grow, drawing food closer to us. However, with the changes that came after people began moving off country into the government settlement, we found that our country was not always getting burnt at the right times. To tackle this problem we started talking with science experts in fire. Together, we began to use Aboriginal ways of managing the country with fire, as well as western scientific methods for monitoring burning patchworks and hazard reduction burns. In the last few years we have been using CyberTracker technology and satellite imagery to better gauge the results of our burning. This use of western and Indigenous knowledge in combination has had very positive results. One of the major outcomes for us is that we have reduced the number of very hot fires that happen late in the season and damage the country. Instead, we are getting country burned earlier. Another spin off is that we have been drastically reducing the carbon emissions associated with hot fires in our region. We are now funded to do this through the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement project, which is a carbon reduction program funded through ConocoPhillips' Darwin Liquid Natural Gas subsidiary. We are also working on the new Central Arnhem Land Fire Abatement project.

For a long time now these three areas – weeds, ferals and fire – have formed the backbone of Djelk's environmental work, and in many ways they still do. We mentioned earlier that, as well as Djelk being about the environment, we have also always had a focus on our social role within the community; looking after country and looking after people go hand in hand for us. In practice there have been three main things that we have concentrated on. These have been the links between country and people, keeping culture and language strong, and teaching our kids.

For example, we did some work to help researchers on the 'Healthy country, Healthy people' study.⁶ This work demonstrated what we have always known. Caring for your country makes you healthier. The study found that people participating in a land and sea management program like the Djelk rangers have much better health, including less diabetes and heart problems, mainly because working to keep country healthy means that you eat better and get more physical activity. This is an important message that we try to pass on to governments and other groups that we work with; living and working on your own country and eating bush plants and freshly caught fish and meat makes you happier and healthier.

Another message that we try to get through is that our health and our country depend on our culture being kept strong. Sometimes, we get very frustrated when Balanda don't understand this. It can be hard to explain that keeping our language and culture – the Aboriginal law – looked after and taught in the right way is what we call 'life'. This is what lets us look after ourselves and our land. To do this there is a lot of work that non-Aboriginal people just don't see. For example, we have

⁶ C Burgess, F Johnston, H Berry, J McDonnell, D Yibarbuk, C Gunanbarra, A Mileran and R Bailie (2009) Healthy country, healthy people: The relationship between Indigenous health status and 'caring for country', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 190 (10): 567–572.

ceremonies that we have to attend. We call this 'business' because that is what it is for us. Ceremony is where we perform the rites and rituals that regenerate our relationships with the land and each other. It is very important to us that our secret/sacred knowledge – *Mardayin* – is both respected and protected. We see this as a key part of the Djelk's daily work for which each of us is individually responsible. In the same way each of us understands how important it is that we pass on this knowledge to the next generation.

Passing on knowledge to young people is not just about keeping ceremony strong. Much of the day-to-day work we undertake on country is underpinned by knowledge about things taught by our grandfathers' grandfathers, and our grandmothers' grandmothers, then to our immediate families, and in turn to us. This Aboriginal knowledge about country is our science, and we bring this together with the secret knowledge from ceremony and an eon of observations to help us manage the land and sea. This knowledge must be taught to young people. Lots of kids here won't go to school, but if you give them a chance to learn out bush they attend and listen. At the same time, we understand that there is a great deal of western scientific and technological knowledge needed to manage our lands in the best possible way. Because of this, we have always tried to keep education and learning at the forefront of Djelk's activities. For over 10 years now we have been working to make links with the Maningrida school and other education people to keep the importance of 'learning through country' alive. This has been part of our work since we began (see Chapter 5).

Growth and change

While Djelk began with a clear focus on some things we wanted to achieve, there have also been really big changes in the role of the Djelk Rangers since we first had that big meeting at Dukaladjarrang. Since we started the Djelk Rangers we have been getting more complex; exploring opportunities for growth and taking on different types of work. One of the major changes in the last 10 years has been the start of our Djelk Women Rangers program. The Djelk Women Rangers were officially formed in 2002 with the assistance of a National Heritage Trust grant, although we have always had both older and younger women working together in our program. Some of the work the women rangers have been doing since they started has included seed collecting for the nursery, weed monitoring, collection of the Kakadu Plum, aluminium recycling programs, fauna and flora surveys, some small nursery and plant enterprises and participation in junior ranger camps and training. We now have women trained with coxswains tickets to drive boats and to help with customs patrols. The women also do fee-for-service work for the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service, as well as helping old people in the

aged care centre by bringing them bush food like mud mussels or yams. Everyone at Djelk is very proud of the work the women rangers are doing and we want to focus more with them on their development for the future.

A second really big change came for us when we got our sea rangers up and going. This was also in 2002. We started off with no real funding. That old man, David Bond, gave us an old barge boat. We called it 'Djelk I' and we were very proud to have our first sea ranger boat. 'Djelk I' was a bit of a 'cheeky' boat though, and sometimes it gave us a lot of 'humbug' and would just not go.⁷ Also, we could not spend much money back then on fixing things up. One of us was always mucking around trying to fix that boat. Then we got 'Bawinanga I', 'II' and 'III'. These were 6 metre Stabicrafts and this was when that sea ranger work really began 'proper way'. Northern Territory Fisheries saw that we were reporting on a range of recreational and commercial fishing activities in our area and provided annual funding to the Djelk Sea Rangers. They were the first government group to recognise our work. Now that we had good boats we started doing regular patrols of our sea country. It did not take long until we started making a bit of a name for ourselves in the media. We kept finding foreign fishing vessels that were in our waters illegally. These were mainly from Indonesia and they would come across to our waters, looking for shark fin and trepang (sea cucumber). We know all their hiding spots and where they need to come for fresh water because we have been trading with fishermen from Makassar for many centuries. This gives us a bit of an edge. We can find these boats because we know where they go and because we know our sea country. Sometimes we would embarrass the Australian Government in those days. In one year (2006) we found 26 boats in our waters. Customs people then said, 'Hey, these guys are really good, let's work with them'. So in 2007 we started off a contract with Australian Customs and they became like partners with us in protecting Australia from illegal boats and fishing. During 2009–2010 our sea rangers conducted 214 sea patrols travelling over 17,000 nautical miles.⁸ Customs now pay us on a regular fee-for-service basis. Our sea rangers also work to collect and monitor ghost nets and other marine rubbish which drift in the ocean and kill turtles and other marine life.

Back in 1998, the Djelk Rangers also started the development of a sustainable wildlife enterprise. The first enterprise involved the harvest and incubation of saltwater crocodile and northern long-neck turtle eggs. Then we sold the croc hatchlings to crocodile farms and the turtles as pets for the domestic market. Along the way we have looked at lots of different ways to make this operation viable, including research and feasibility on growing and harvesting morindas to

⁷ In Aboriginal English, the term 'cheeky' can mean 'quite dangerous' or 'vicious'. The term 'humbug' is used colloquially and with wide meaning to convey anything annoying, problematic or troublesome.

⁸ May et al, *Djelk Rangers Annual Report*, 18.

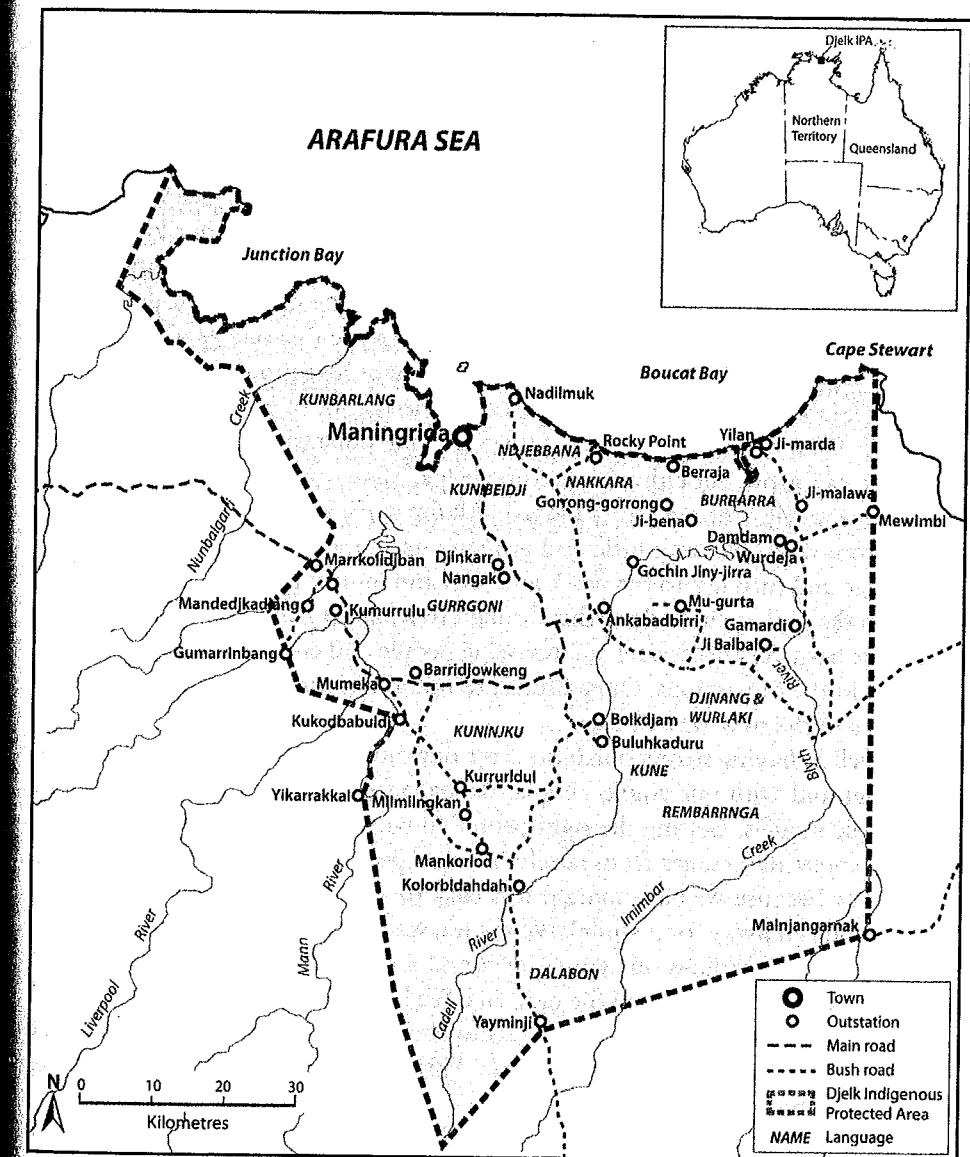
make cosmetic products, cycad trees for sale, as well as goannas, aquarium fish, trepang, sea sponges, mud mussels and crabs for various forms of commercial development. Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation formally established the Wildlife Centre in 2006 as an enterprise, separate from the Djelk Rangers, to promote the development of sustainable wildlife industries in the Maningrida region. In 2007 a new building was constructed and the centre was staffed by three Indigenous rangers and a non-Indigenous wildlife enterprise manager with specialist expertise in wildlife management. Still, this enterprise is a struggle. We know that there is a great demand, but regulations and external costs make doing this sort of business difficult. Still, Djelk is proud of getting this business off the ground and we will keep supporting it and finding ways to make it more effective.

The way in which we work has also changed since we first began Djelk. One example of this is the growth of salaried positions at Djelk. Djelk originally started as a Community Development Employment Project and we managed to generate 14 fully funded positions through careful use of this money, combined with top up earnings from fee-for-service contracts. In addition to these positions, we always maintained more flexible positions which allowed us to increase staffing for seasonal work and to cater for the training and development of younger rangers. Just before 'the Intervention'⁹ and proposed changes to the Community Development Employment Project scheme came into effect, the then federal government introduced the Working on Country program in May 2007. This has provided us with more reliable operational funding and better pay and conditions for some of our workers, although we are also keen to keep the flexible component of the arrangements we had in the past. This is proving to be an ongoing challenge, but we are establishing a good partnership with the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities through the Working on Country program.

The latest big change for us has been a really positive one. In September 2009 our Indigenous Protected Area was declared at Nabbarla Kunindawabba, following many years of talking, thinking, planning and development. We began our consultations back in 2002. Talking through changes to how country is used and managed takes time but the results were worth the wait. All the land owners and proper people from 102 different clans gave their support to the establishment of the Indigenous Protected Area. It covers 6672 square kilometres and we are working in a partnership with our neighbours from Warddeken Land Management Limited (see Chapter 9). This Indigenous Protected Area means a lot to us at Djelk. It means that we feel our way of looking after country is being recognised and that we have some increased protection over our lands as part of the National

⁹ The 'Intervention' refers to the swathe of changes introduced by the Howard government in June 2007 under the Northern Territory Emergency Response laws.

Figure 10.4 The Djelk Indigenous Protected Area



(Courtesy: JC Altman and J Hughes)

Reserve System. Most importantly though, we see the declaration of the Indigenous Protected Area as another step in securing and managing our country for the future of our children.

Challenges for the future

While we are very proud of Djelk's achievements, we have some major challenges to confront. One of the biggest challenges is how we are going to make our future strong if we don't have strong outstations. How will we grow our young people up, knowing their country and being able to use our knowledge if we don't have a place for kids to live and grow on country? The big township of Maningrida does not provide that for our kids. The school does not teach this stuff (see Chapter 5). The town can bring alcohol and drugs and suicide and misery for our kids. In the outstations we can regulate these problems. We want jobs in our outstations and we think our land and sea management program can be one way of doing this; we also need health and education services. But we see this one as a big politics and policy problem. It seems that government cannot listen to this story. We keep telling them this is the way forward for us. We need a lot of help from each other and from Balanda to make a new future for our outstations because they are where we can grow our culture and knowledge. That is what the outstations are for us; they are like the seed for a big tree. All the work we have done at Djelk has grown from when we were little and growing up in the bush. Then we take that knowledge and turn it into the work and jobs and money that we need to make a future. In the past we have done this through Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, which has been very successful at employing people and creating enterprise. But it all starts in the outstations. Outstations are not about the old ways, they are the birthplace of the new ways for us.

As well as having strong outstations for our future, we need to be honest with each other and with our young people. We have to show the right way to work and be role models. Getting the right people to work at Djelk is not always easy. Pressure sometimes comes from family or some people get jealous for our trucks or boats or because we have money. It is easy to say 'it's too hard, I might go to Darwin and run away for a while'. We say no, we will stay strong to our jobs and for our pride. Sometimes our young men and women don't want to work hard enough or they won't get up in the morning. We have to help them grow into hard working Djelk rangers and it is up to us to show them the way. We want to set tough goals and expect people to make it. This is how we will try for the future, but it will be hard to do.

Also, we need to be upfront and get others to recognise the importance of having non-Aboriginal people working for and with us. For example, our coordinators have mostly been non-Aboriginal and they have done a great deal of work in helping make Djelk so successful. We respect that and we want to continue to partner with non-Aboriginal people. This is an important part of getting the right balance between western and Aboriginal ways of managing land and sea. In the same way, we also realise that sometimes Djelk can become too focused on particular areas of land. This is natural because we have such a large area and so

few rangers that sometimes we tend to work more in regions where our rangers have deep connections. In particular, we need more Burarra and Djinang rangers to help on the eastern side of our region. Recently we established a small outstation ranger base at Jimalawa to help with this issue, but we have more to do.

Finally, we know that we are all facing some big challenges with the changes in the climate.⁹ Over the last few years in particular we have seen how the changes to animals and plants in our country are not happening at the right times. We see how the natural cycles we have recorded in our song-lines for generations are getting broken. This is a big worry for us. Rain is changing, wind is changing and the life of our country is changing. Sometimes we struggle with English to tell these stories in a scientific way, so we create partnerships with researchers. Also we want to learn from other people in lots of other places about what this all means for our future. Partnerships with other Aboriginal people and with organisations from other places have always been a part of Djelk's success. Now we think that making these partnerships strong is more important than ever.

Young people and old people, Bininj, Yol and Balanda; we need to stand together for the future. The health and wellbeing of our people and our country depends upon us all.

⁹ JC Altman and K Jordan with I Munro, M Ryan and M Mirikul (2009) Case study: Maningrida region Central Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, in D Green, S Jackson and J Morrison (eds) *Risks from Climate Change to Indigenous Communities in the Tropical North of Australia*, Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, Canberra, 105.