

Chapter 2

Caring for Country to Working on Country

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The title of this chapter, Caring for Country to Working on Country, refers to two idioms that you often hear when working with Indigenous Australians in the field of cultural and natural resource management. The first, 'caring for country', is an Aboriginal English expression that I expand on below. The second, 'working on country', has recently been adopted by the Australian Government as the name of a program that 'provides sustainable employment for Indigenous people in protecting and conserving the environment'.¹

Both caring for country and working on country form part of the discourse of Indigenous policy in Australia. Discourse has been described as systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of actions, beliefs and practices that shape reality by systematically constructing the subjects and the worlds of which they speak. Discourse plays a role in wider social processes of legitimation and power; emphasising the constitution of current truths, how they are maintained and what power relations they carry with them.² Those who have the ability to shape discourse define what is possible to think, while suppressing other ways of thinking. The ability to shape discourse, legitimatise and reproduce it builds power. By defining what is possible to think and suppressing others, those with institutional power – like government agencies – do not need to draw on coercive force to change people's behaviour because the dominant discourse has established a framework, or 'rules of the game', that individuals and groups must 'play to' in order to be recognised and participate.³

1 See Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (2012) *Working on Country*, <www.environment.gov.au/indigenous/workingoncountry/index.html> viewed 3 March 2012. 'Working on Country' was first used as the title of a book on Indigenous cultural and natural resource management, see R Baker, J Davies and E Young (eds) (2001) *Working on Country: Contemporary Indigenous Management of Australia's Land and Coastal Regions*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

2 M Foucault (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Pantheon, New York.

3 M Foucault (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, New York.

In this chapter I look behind the language of caring for country and working on country to see what sets of values and worldviews they contain. I do this by exploring how caring for country began in the Northern Territory, what it entails, and the methods and processes used as it developed into a uniquely Indigenous development pathway. I then briefly examine some of the institutional barriers encountered in its development, before outlining how the state responded to these by providing funding through its Working on Country program. I conclude by looking at how the Working on Country program, encompassed within a much broader Indigenous policy framework, articulates another set of values and a worldview that is in opposition to that encapsulated in caring for country.

My first experience of working with Indigenous Australians

On 22 August 2002, I began work in Darwin at the Northern Land Council as a policy and research officer. My first substantial task, as part of a multi-disciplinary team, was negotiating a Northern Territory parks settlement to resolve native title claims that came about through the 2002 Ward High Court decision.⁴ The Ward decision found the exercise of government power to declare Northern Territory parks under the Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act miscarried. This meant that Keep River National Park, the subject of the decision, along with 48 other Northern Territory parks had potentially been invalidly declared between 1978 and 1998 and native title rights and interests remained in the land in question. The decision also opened up the possibility of 11 of the parks becoming available for claim under the Commonwealth's Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976.

While the Ward decision presented a significant opportunity for some Aboriginal peoples to reclaim their ancestral lands enclosed within the Northern Territory's conservation estate, it soon appeared to me to be fraught with difficulties. First, to get their ancestral land back Aboriginal peoples had to agree to immediately relinquish it back to the Northern Territory Government – under 99-year lease agreements, at nominal rent. This was hard to swallow for some groups who saw their land unjustly taken in the first place. Once this had been agreed to, they were required to enter into joint-management arrangements with the Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission to manage their land as a park, within an already established park management system. What was being offered was not an entirely new way of doing business, but rather, one where Aboriginal land owners would have to fit within an already existing park management structure; a structure primarily concerned with visitor management and conservation. It was, as other people working in this area have described, 'A trade-off between the rights

4 Also see L Strelie (2009) *Compromised Jurisprudence: Native title cases since Mabo* (2nd ed), Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.

and interests of traditional owners, and the rights and interests of government conservation agencies and the wider Australian community'.⁵

As the negotiations progressed I became more concerned about the lack of new investment by the Northern Territory Government both in financial resources and in people skilled in cross-cultural communication and community-based planning methods. The lack of investment was most evident in the small number of new employment positions created for Aboriginal land owners within the parks. It seemed to me that once the negotiations were over and lease agreements in place, Aboriginal land owners would struggle to find their place as equal partners in what has been described as a 'hegemonic system of technocratic park management'.⁶

After this experience I was excited to be taking up the executive officer position in the Northern Land Council's Caring for Country Unit. I remember telling one of my colleagues at the time that I was happy to be throwing away the joint-management straightjacket. I was hoping to focus solely on the aspirations that Aboriginal peoples held for their lands and waters not enclosed within the parks system and to learn more about their way of caring for country.

The context of the Caring for Country Unit

The Caring for Country Unit was established in 1995 following a consultation process between the Northern Land Council and Aboriginal peoples whose land ownership had been legally recognised following passage of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act. Land rights law transferred gazetted reserves to Aboriginal land trusts who held this land in perpetuity on behalf of traditional owners; it also established a process whereby unalienated Crown land and Aboriginal owned pastoral stations could be claimed.

The consultations occurred at a time when over 40 per cent of the Northern Territory's land mass, including 85 per cent of the coast, was back in Aboriginal ownership, and the 20 year sunset clause for lodging land claims was drawing near. Under these changing circumstances, the land council was repositioning itself from being an organisation that focused primarily on claiming land to one that would assist Aboriginal traditional owners to manage and develop their land. In doing this the Northern Land Council was trying to address two problems. First, how to deal with the environmental damage that had occurred, and was still occurring, on Aboriginal land – some land, particularly in the pastoral zone, had been in severely degraded condition when returned. And, second, how to create

5 D Smyth (2001) Joint management of national parks, in R Baker, J Davies and E Young (eds) *Working On Country: Contemporary Indigenous Management of Australia's Lands and Coastal Regions*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 75–91, 75–76.

6 L Palmer (2007) Interpreting 'nature': The politics of engaging with Kakadu as an Aboriginal place, *Cultural Geographies*, 14: 260.

employment in remote regions where there are few mainstream opportunities. One solution proposed by the Northern Land Council was a Caring for Country Strategy linking employment aspirations with environmental management.⁷

On reading files from this period, seven years on, I soon discovered that while there was wide support from land owning groups for the Northern Land Council to assist them to achieve their land and sea management needs and aspirations, they rejected the narrowness of an approach limited to an environmental employment program.

This is because, as Indigenous authors in Part 2 of this book assert, caring for country constitutes something far greater than a person, or group of people, having a job and physically managing a geographic area by dealing with the problems created by weeds or feral animals. Caring for country encompasses being spiritually bound to country through intimate connections with ancestral beings still present in the land and waters. For Aboriginal people, caring for country is first and foremost about looking after these powerful and sacred places; protecting their values, ceremonies, songs and stories, as well as associated processes of spiritual renewal, connecting with ancestors, food provision and maintaining language, law, knowledge systems and, importantly, kin relations.

With environmental damage to Aboriginal lands increasing in scale and severity the impacts were encroaching on Aboriginal people's ability to care for their country. This was especially so in protecting hunting and food gathering places, which were showing increasing signs of damage by feral animals, invasive weeds and changed fire regimes, resulting in the declining availability of bush foods. Cultural sites, as well as being endangered by these environmental threats, were also at risk from trespassers and mining.

Aboriginal land owners who had been forced to move off their country and migrate into regional townships – sometimes far removed from their ancestral lands – struggled to maintain their cultural, spiritual and economic connections to country. This was, and remains, a major concern to many traditional owners who worry that by losing connection to their country they are also losing cultural, spiritual and ecological knowledge; and that such processes are unravelling the social fabric of their communities.

Reports from the 1995 consultations reveal that many community members were also frustrated at the way government departments had previously engaged with them. There was a history of inadequate involvement in the design and implementation of government programs with decisions made by outsiders who appeared to lack the ability to listen, and failed to take into account community needs or priorities.⁸

7 P Taylor (1995) *Caring for Country Strategy, an Indigenous Approach to Regional Environmental Programs*, Northern Land Council, Darwin.

8 Ibid, 19.

It was this lack of power and the broader social and cultural problems it created that Aboriginal peoples were seeking to address. Because most aspects of Aboriginal community life are closely connected to the land and sea, an active role in their management was proposed as a way to empower communities.⁹ Aboriginal people having more control in planning their own futures from the bottom-up,¹⁰ was proposed as a way of bringing change. Instead of focusing solely on linking employment aspirations with environmental management, Aboriginal communities proposed the Caring for Country Strategy be more broadly focused on 'community, economic, social and environmental development'.¹¹

The Caring for Country Unit originally focused on both community development and environmental management. Its primary aim was to support land owning groups and their local organisations 'to strengthen customary skills and practices', to enable them to continue caring for country.¹² Its task was to facilitate this through community-based planning and to introduce the new knowledge and information systems needed for adaptive cultural and natural resource management. It was also to act as a broker between land owning groups and government agencies to build collaborative partnerships, secure funding and facilitate training and employment opportunities.

Community-based plans

The way in which the Caring for Country Unit began to work with Aboriginal land owners in its early days was a crucial factor to much of the success that followed. Its work involved facilitating community-based planning meetings using participatory action methods regarded as standard practice in development contexts.¹³ These methods were introduced to counter the passive and powerless position that Aboriginal communities had described themselves as being in.¹⁴

Community-based planning provides a way for land owners to take control of their own future, to shape it and give it meaning. It recognises that 'poor people are creative and capable, and can and should do their own investigation, analysis

9 Ibid, 18.

10 Northern Land Council (1995) *Caring for Country Flyer for Community Consultation*, Northern Land Council, Darwin.

11 Taylor, *Caring for Country Strategy*, 9.

12 Northern Land Council (2003) *Healthy Country Healthy Families Caring for Country Strategy 2003-2006*, Northern Land Council, Darwin.

13 While there are many heroic claims made for participatory approaches to community development there is also a body of literature illuminating some of its pitfalls. See B Cooke and U Kothari (eds) (2001) *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, Zed Books, London and New York; S Hickey and G Mohan (eds) (2004) *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation? Exploring New Approaches to Participation in Development*, Zed Books, London and New York.

14 Taylor, *Caring for Country Strategy*, 19.

and planning; that outsiders have roles as convenors, catalysts and facilitators; and the weak and marginalised can and should be empowered'.¹⁵

Community-based planning meetings facilitated by the Caring for Country Unit were rarely one-off events. They sometimes involved a series of meetings over a period of months, or sometimes years, as projects progressed and in-depth consultation was undertaken. They varied in size from a few people to many dozens of families, and there was almost always participation by several generations. The meetings were often held on country; away from the stress of township life and in places where people could see the changes occurring to their country from the environmental threats, or associated absence of their customary practices. These types of meetings are important, especially in places where families have been dispersed across vast regions. They provide opportunities for wider kin groups to reconnect and make decisions about their common property, and work out ways of managing their country to protect it, and in the process, create benefits for themselves. As described in Chapter 11 for the Waanyi and Garawa, these meetings help reaffirm customary decision-making processes and build consensus between families and across groups. They introduce children to country and facilitate the passing of knowledge between generations.

Community-based planning, as well as helping land owners to take ownership and set the direction of their own projects, introduces people to new knowledge and information systems. An example of this was the introduction of satellite imagery of fire histories, which illustrate the extent, intensity and frequency of fires occurring across large regions. In some places, this data, presented in the form of maps, demonstrated to land owners that fire regimes on their country had become characterised by frequent extensive burning, occurring in the late dry season and typically under parched, hot weather conditions. Once armed with this information land owners were able to make some decisions about how they would go about replacing this destructive pattern of wildfire with their own customary early dry season mosaic-burn fire regime, which is significantly more beneficial to flora and fauna fecundity.

At some meetings senior land owners would describe how they used fire in the past when they lived on, and travelled through, country. They would describe how seasons, time of day, prevailing winds and vegetation affect the extent and intensity of fire, and how animals and plants respond to fire and its effects. On maps they marked habitats sensitive to fire and geographic features that could be used to 'pull-up' fire. They pointed to old trading routes that people used to travel, hunting and gathering, as well as creating effective fire breaks by burning as they went. Using this knowledge, along with new fire management tools such as satellite imagery, helicopters and incendiary devices to make work more efficient, they set about developing management plans to reinstate their customary fire

15 R Chambers (1994), The origins and practice of participatory rural appraisal, *World Development*, 22 (7): 953-969, 954.

Figure 2.1 Garawa community-based planning meeting 2005



(Photo: S Kerins)

management. The plans were rarely focused solely on environmental outcomes but also on community development; identifying new skills and technologies that community members needed to learn to be more effective in caring for country. They also identified important cultural knowledge that was once passed between generations through daily life on country but would now have to be passed through organised events such as 'back-to-country walks' or 'back-to-country camps'.

Indigenous ecological knowledge played an essential role in identifying and solving environmental problems. Its use in planning meetings (along with scientific knowledge) was crucially important in recalibrating the power relationship between Indigenous people and government agencies – past models that placed Indigenous ecological knowledge and scientific knowledge as 'opposing extremes of a scale of accuracy and therefore, authority' were rejected outright.¹⁶ The use of both Indigenous ecological knowledge and science, described by others in this book as two-way (see Chapter 3), is important because it facilitates ongoing relationships

16 M Blaser, HA Feit, and G McRae (2004) Indigenous people and development processes: New terrains of struggle, in M Blaser, HA Feit, and G McRae (eds) (2004) *In the Way of Development, Indigenous Peoples, Life Projects and Globalization*, Zed Books, London, New York, 2.

between Aboriginal groups, scientists and government officials working together to solve environmental problems; often resulting in more effective and efficient natural resource management outcomes. The ongoing collaborative partnership between the scientific staff of Bushfires Northern Territory and Aboriginal land owners in Arnhem Land and the south-west Gulf region is an example of this.¹⁷

The steady growth of Caring for Country projects and their benefits

Over a 10-year period, by following community-based planning processes similar to those just described, numerous Aboriginal land owning groups across the Top End established ranger groups. The rangers' role is to carry out the day-to-day management of country on behalf of the wider land owning group. Senior traditional owners guide their work giving permission to enter and work in places of cultural significance or sometimes accompanying the rangers to ensure cultural rituals are performed properly and sacred sites protected or to transfer knowledge.

By 2007 there were 500 men and women employed through the Community Development Employment Projects scheme, working in 36 Caring for Country groups across the Top End of the Northern Territory.¹⁸ In addition to those employed under the scheme, many others undertook caring for country activities as part of their daily routine, often on an unremunerated voluntary basis.

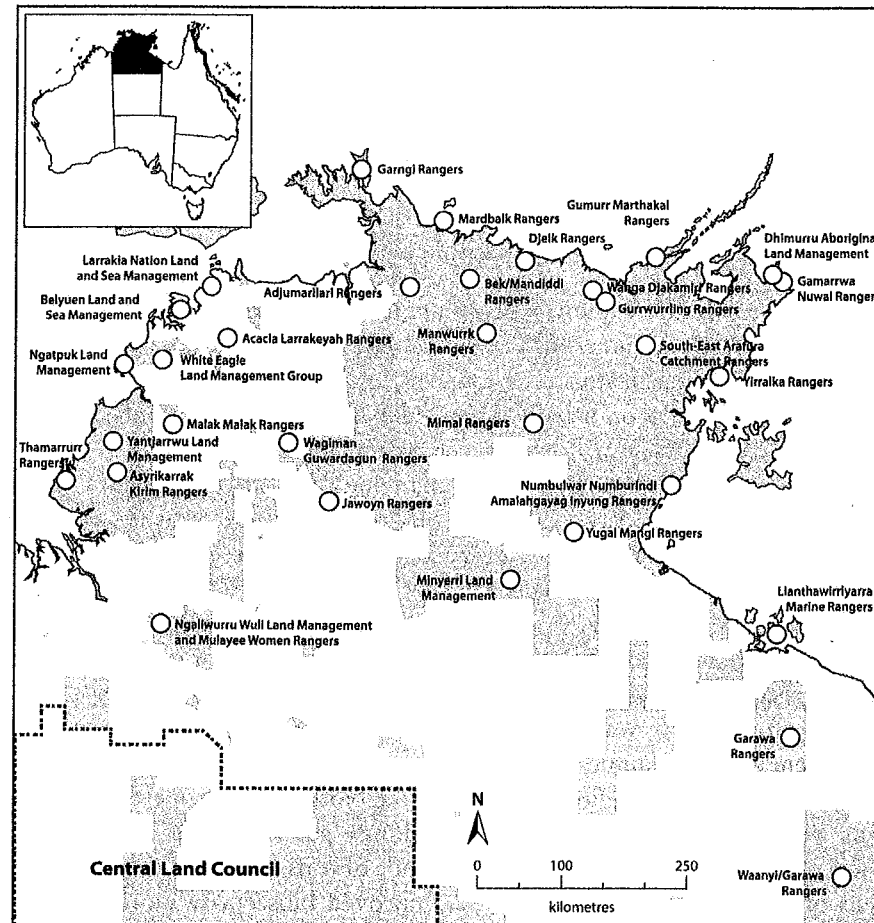
Caring for country was achieving significant results in both environmental management and community development. Across many regions it reversed the impacts of destructive wild fires, thus protecting biodiversity, property and human life, as well as significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It lessened the impacts of invasive species, removed thousands of tons of marine debris, detected dozens of illegal foreign fishing vessels, improved biosecurity monitoring, and instigated small-enterprises based on wildlife utilisation and much larger commercial projects, such as those based on carbon off-sets and now carbon farming (see Chapter 9).

In terms of community development, caring for country was also having a significant impact. In remote locations there were now skilled groups of Indigenous people trained in conservation and land management, who proved to be very adept in identifying new environmental threats and quickly mitigating their impacts. Many people had obtained drivers and fire-arms licences and coxswains tickets (it is worth noting that being caught driving without a licence multiple times is a common entry point for Aboriginal people into the criminal justice system). Others

17 J Russell-Smith, P Whitehead and P Cooke (eds) (2009) *Culture, Ecology, and Economy of Fire Management in North Australian Savannas: Rekindling the Wurrk Tradition*, CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.

18 Northern Land Council (2006) *Celebrating Ten Years of Caring for Country – A Northern Land Council Initiative*, Northern Land Council, Darwin.

Figure 2.2 Caring for Country groups in the Northern Land Council region, 2007

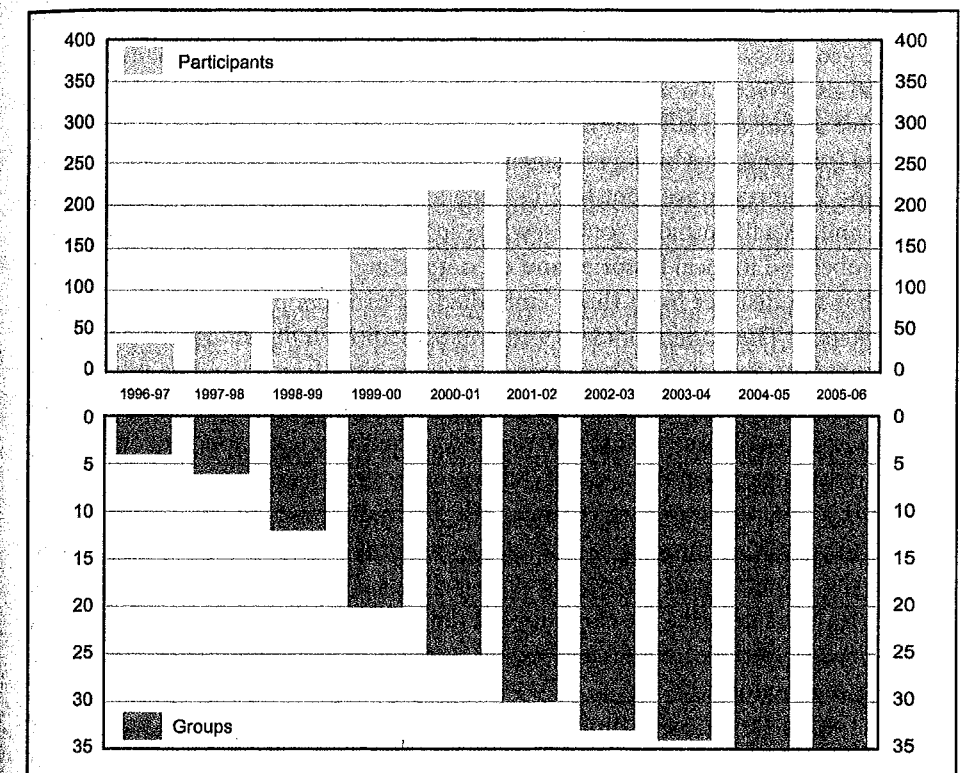


(Courtesy: S Kerins and J Hughes)

had, often for the first time, learnt to use computers and software designed specifically for land and sea environmental work, thereby improving their management and reporting capabilities. Others still, learnt skills associated with digital media and were recording Indigenous ecological knowledge and languages to create DVDs about caring for country, making this knowledge more available to young people growing up off their ancestral lands. Rangers were reporting personal and community pride in their work and a sense of personal achievement in working for, and sometimes representing, wider land owning groups. Community members were describing rangers as role models for younger people.¹⁹

19 B Sithole and H Hunter-Xenie with L Williams, J Saegenschnitter, D Yibarbuk, M Ryan, O Campion, B Yunupingu, M Liddy, E Watts, C Daniels, G Daniels, P Christophersen, V Cubillo, E Phillips, W Marika, D Jackson and W Barbour (2008) *Aboriginal Land and*

Figure 2.3 Graphs showing increase in ranger groups and participants in Caring for Country projects, 1996–2006



Caring for Country as a unique Indigenous development pathway

The Caring for Country Unit began its work on two fronts. It worked at a local level with land owning groups to plan for country management, strengthen customary skills and practices and target identified environmental threats to their country. At a regional level it worked to create a network of small community-based land and sea management groups that needed to collaborate at landscape and catchment scales to ensure sound environmental practice especially in managing fast moving fire.²⁰

Sea Management in the Top End: A Community-Driven Evaluation, CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems, Darwin.

20 M Storrs, P Cooke and P Josif (2003) *Caring for Country: The rapidly developing formalised structure for Aboriginal natural resource management in the Northern Land Council*

The creation of a network of groups was an important development because caring for country had developed into more than just a suite of place-based activities. It had emerged as a social movement of group action often involving large informal groupings of Indigenous people focused on cultural, political, ecological and social issues (see Chapter 10). As a social movement it was attempting to reverse destructive social and cultural change that had come about from people being separated from and thus losing management control of their ancestral country. The Caring for Country movement had become a uniquely Indigenous development strategy, and, as a life project, seen elsewhere in 'fourth world' contexts like Canada it was 'embedded in local histories and encompassing visions of the world and the future that are distinct from those embodied by projects promoted by the state and markets'.²¹ The dominant ideas and practices about Indigenous 'development' promulgated by the state and bureaucracy, were built solely around problems and deficits, and were rejected by those engaged in caring for country. Instead, distinct Indigenous forms of land tenure built around community common property along with the cultural and social capital of Indigenous peoples were used as the building-blocks for a new development pathway. Together these would bring both social benefits to remote communities and environmental benefits to wider Australia, through the protection of ecosystems and ecological processes. In Chapter 8, the Yirralka Rangers describe the early days of the Caring for Country movement and the importance of the emerging network as a source of information about possible strategies and actions.

The Caring for Country movement is neither heroic nor problem free and as it has evolved issues have arisen that need to be resolved to ensure its continuation and re-invigoration.

At the regional level there is the issue of ensuring that peak Aboriginal organisations remain committed to, and aligned with, local and regional aspirations. At the local level there are emerging problems in places where community-based participatory planning processes have been by-passed, leaving some groups with neither a long-term vision, nor widespread land owner support. This has resulted in some groups floundering and making little headway in either environmental management or community development.

Despite these emerging issues, I see the Caring for Country movement as being at the cutting-edge of cultural and natural resource management and Indigenous development. What Indigenous Australians have created through their own agency and collaborative partnerships is a uniquely Australian conservation movement. When compared with the joint-management arrangements discussed at the

region of the Northern Territory, in *Proceedings of the National Landcare Conference*, 28 April–1 May, Darwin.

21 M Blaser (2004) Life projects: Indigenous peoples' agency and development, in M Blaser, HA Feit and G McRae (eds), *In the Way of Development, Indigenous Peoples, Life Projects and Globalization*, Zed Books, London, New York, 26.

beginning of this chapter, it is an innovative, adaptive and collaborative approach that delivers environmental, employment and community development outcomes in what are often extremely remote and difficult circumstances.

The administrative machinery of Caring for Country

With so much going on in so many places across remote regions of the Northern Territory there was a lot of administrative machinery chugging under the bonnet of caring for country. And, it was here that some of the biggest institutional barriers were emerging.

Financial arrangements to keep all these groups and the wider Caring for Country movement going were unduly complex. It is important to note that prior to the mid-1990s Aboriginal landowners had little success in obtaining mainstream land management funding. This is because mainstream programs were targeted mainly to highly degraded agricultural land in long-settled areas, and a clientele of commercial operators. Little Aboriginal land was located in these target areas and the types of degradation found on Aboriginal land and their remedies differed. Aboriginal groups also lacked the independent finance to contribute a share of the cost of redressing degradation – an expected component of the government funding programs.²²

The financial resources mainly came from the Australian Government, arguably because this was a land tenure created by Commonwealth law and administered by statutory authorities accountable to the federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. Funds came through a number of different government agencies, arrangements and funding streams. Part-time wages came through the Australian Government's Community Development Employment Projects scheme, with operational costs provided from competitive grants administered by the National Landcare Program, the National Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, as well as the Indigenous Protected Area program (from 1997) and the Indigenous Land Corporation's land management program. Capital items, such as vehicles and boats, came predominantly from the Aboriginals Benefit Account. Funds in this account were generated from mining on Aboriginal-owned land and grants provided were under s 64(4) of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 'to or for the benefit of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory'. In some instances conservation and philanthropic organisations and private companies also made significant investments on a case-by-case basis.

There were many problems with these funding arrangements, too numerous to fully canvass here; I highlight the three most severe that I encountered.

22 See E Young, H Ross, J Johnson, and J Kesteven (1991) *Caring for Country: Aborigines and Land Management*, Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Canberra, x.

The first and most significant problem was related to the issue of fiscal equity. The overall amount of natural resource management funding that was allocated to Indigenous organisations across Australia was minuscule when compared to the vast size of the Indigenous estate, its rich biodiversity and the complexity of the environmental threats faced. Some might argue that as this is private land Aboriginal people should address environmental threats at their own cost, but such a view overlooks the external imposition of degrading processes, the poverty of Indigenous land owning groups and the positive externalities for other Australians generated by caring for country activities. Between 1996 and 2005 Indigenous organisations across Australia received less than 3 per cent of the natural resource management funds allocated by the Australian Government,²³ yet Aboriginal peoples owned, under one form of title or another, an expanding share of the Australian land mass that totalled about 20 per cent of the continent by the end of that decade.

The second problem was the short-term nature of the funding cycle. Grant funding was only provided for a period of two to three years. This made it enormously difficult to do any long-term planning. At the end of the funding period there was never any guarantee of further funding to resolve difficult-to-manage threats. For example, the massive infestations of *Mimosa pigra* across wetlands cannot be eradicated in such a short timeframe, as seeds have a life of 20 years plus and infestations need to be chemically treated annually. Similarly, populations of feral animals can be culled on an annual basis, but cannot be eliminated and so ongoing management is needed.

The third problem was that for each environmental threat that Aboriginal land owners sought to tackle they had to submit a separate funding application. This silo approach to cultural and natural resource management meant that if a group was working across a range of environmental projects, as most do, a separate application had to be submitted and reported on for each component. This substantially increases administration costs and stretches management capacity. In addition, auxiliary funding grants had to be submitted to other funding agencies for top-up wages²⁴ and capital items, such as vehicles and boats, because no single grant covered all three aspects even though all projects require top-up wages, capital items and operational support.

These funding arrangements created many problems and over time began to undermine Caring for Country at both local and regional levels. For example, staff in the Caring for Country Unit and those working as coordinators based

23 R Hill and L Williams (2009) Indigenous natural resource management: Overcoming marginalisation produced in Australia's current natural resource management model, in M Lane, C Robinson and B Taylor (eds) *Contested Country Local and Regional Natural Resource Management in Australia*, CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.

24 Under the Community Development Employment Projects program wages were available for only four hours per day with any additional hours worked paid from other funding sources and commonly known as 'top-up'.

with remote area ranger groups – most employed on short-term grant-funded contracts – spent an inordinate amount of their time chasing funds, applying for and acquitting grants and hosting delegations of bureaucratic auditors. Such diversion of focus was at the cost of organising community-based planning meetings, facilitating collaborative partnerships and assisting the ranger group with their day-to-day activities. In one case the coordinator of a small ranger group was trying to manage over a dozen separate grants, each with different reporting procedures and timeframes. In mid-2007, in the Caring for Country Unit, I was managing over 100 different grants. Such a funding maze invariably resulted in staff burn-out and associated high staff turn-over, with the subsequent loss of institutional knowledge and crucially important working relationships with remote area communities and partner organisations based on longevity and trust. Much valuable time had to be spent by new staff on learning community engagement processes and forging relationships.

Some days, working in the Caring for Country Unit, I felt like the circus performer whose trick was to keep numerous plates spinning atop bamboo poles. Yes, it could be done, but for how long could it last? And if this was hardly manageable in Darwin, how difficult would it be for those working in remote bush communities?

Working on Country: Every silver lining has a cloud

In trying to resolve these funding problems many of us involved in the Caring for Country movement were lobbying the Australian and Northern Territory governments to both increase and consolidate their investments. We argued that it was time for the state to recognise the substantial environmental benefits that Indigenous people were providing to the Australian public by protecting the country's ecosystems and their ecological processes from a growing array of environmental threats. We were seeking two things; a more equitable and streamlined allocation of natural resource management funding to Indigenous land owners; and a proper wage for Aboriginal rangers on par with the remuneration and work conditions enjoyed by park rangers who performed a similar type of environmental work.

In May 2007, in a turbulent Indigenous policy environment, a small pilot program called Working on Country was announced by the Howard government. This program provided funding for full-time wages and some operational costs to a select number of Caring for Country groups. In the Northern Territory, however, there was insufficient Working on Country program positions to move all 500 Aboriginal rangers from their part-time positions (underwritten by the Community Development Employment Projects scheme) to full-time waged positions. This resulted in some difficult decisions about who should get the first bite at the new program and who would miss out.

In June 2007, shortly after the establishment of the new Working on Country program, the Howard government launched its Northern Territory Emergency Response (the Intervention) focused on 'prescribed' Aboriginal communities across the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory Emergency Response coincided with a raft of other Indigenous policy measures being implemented by the Northern Territory Government which impacted on the Caring for Country movement. These included local government reform, which saw the demise of Indigenous community councils and the establishment of mega-shires. And homelands and outstation policy, which as part of the much broader Northern Territory Working Future strategy, hinged largely on the creation of centralised 'economic hubs' across the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory Emergency Response saw a suite of prescriptive top-down policies, largely relating to welfare, law enforcement and land tenure, which resulted in the closure of some Community Development Employment Projects. This last change directly affected those caring for country groups that missed out on the first round of the Working on Country program and still relied on Community Development Employment Projects for rangers' wages. Without Community Development Employment Projects wages these caring for country groups faced closure and the rangers faced unemployment.

In response, the Australian Government funded additional Working on Country positions, under the Working on Country Northern Territory program. These additional positions, funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 'Intervention' budget, were divided between the then Commonwealth Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts and the Indigenous Land Corporation. While this response was necessary, the problem it was remedying was very much a self-inflicted one, and it led to a further splintering of administration which the new Working on Country program had initially sought to rectify. Another self-inflicted problem occurred in late 2008, when reforms to the Community Development Employment Projects scheme again threatened Caring for Country groups with the government responding this time by funding further Working on Country positions – called Working on Country Flexible.

In November 2007, the Working on Country program was significantly expanded as an election commitment of the newly elected Labor Government and then as part of the Caring for our Country initiative. Caring for our Country is the Commonwealth Government initiative set up in July 2008, integrating the delivery of a number of national natural resource management programs, including the former Natural Heritage Trust, the National Landcare Program, and the Environment Stewardship Program, as well as the Indigenous-specific Working on Country and Indigenous Protected Area programs. The Rudd government honoured its pre-election commitment of investing \$90 million over five years to train and employ up to 300 additional Indigenous rangers working on Indigenous land and waters; increasing investment in the Indigenous Protected Area program

to a total of \$50 million over five years; along with \$10 million to build Indigenous capacity in the fledgling carbon markets and undertaking further research on the scientific and market potential of carbon trading.²⁵

While this new investment looked significant, Indigenous funding to 2009, under the new Caring for our Country initiative, only increased to 6.7 per cent of the total natural resource management funds allocated.²⁶ With Indigenous Australians now owning and managing just under a quarter of Australia's National Reserve System there remained a very wide fiscal equity gap.

By April 2012, the Working on Country program had grown to include 660 Indigenous rangers working at over 80 sites across Australia with a commitment to an additional 50 positions in the Northern Territory as part of the Stronger Futures policy, with an estimated cost of \$243 million for the period 2007 to 2013.²⁷ A significant portion of these Working on Country positions are based in the Northern Territory where they play an important role in assisting Aboriginal land owners to meet some of their caring for country needs.

From Caring for Country to Working on Country

In 2002 when I began working with Indigenous Australians in cultural and natural resource management Caring for Country was the idiom commonly heard. A decade later, in 2012, Caring for Country is slowly fading from common use. In its place is Working on Country, promoted by the Australian Government as part of its mainstream environmental Caring for our Country initiative. One might ask if a subtle change in language matters. Surely the two initiatives represent the same thing; providing employment for Indigenous people in protecting and conserving the environment.

To many outsiders Caring for Country may look like just an environmental employment program. However, talking with Indigenous land owners, participating in the community-based planning meetings or reading the caring for country plans or the chapters by our partner organisations in Part 2 of this book quickly reveals that it is far more than this. It is a uniquely Indigenous development strategy assisting Indigenous people to take ownership of their own future, to shape it and give it meaning. The Caring for Country worldview encompasses a vision of maintaining customary practices like fishing, hunting and gathering, and educating

25 Australian Labor Party (2007) *Indigenous Economic Development*, <www.Kevin07.com.au> viewed 3 November 2007.

26 Hill and Williams, Indigenous natural resource management.

27 The Allen Consulting Group (2011) Assessment of the economic and employment outcomes of the Working on Country program, *Report to the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities*, 16, <www.environment.gov.au/indigenous/workingoncountry/publications/pubs/woc-economics.pdf> viewed 12 February 2012.

young people about culture, resource use and new technologies, participating in ceremonial life and maintaining cultural heritage, protecting sacred sites, and engaging in research and enterprise development to ensure a culturally and ecologically sustainable future – this is much more than mere environmental work.²⁸

The way language is used is important, as it underlies struggles of power and control. Linguistic categories (idioms) legitimise particular versions of reality suppressing alternate or competing visions.²⁹ As language changes people have little choice but to engage government agencies through discourse on terms dictated by the state. In this way state projects shaped by neo-liberal economics seek to impose a new order by laying the ground work for change through the process of reshaping or developing new sets of ideas and world views encompassed in its discourse. To continue to receive state funding caring for country practitioners must now 'play by the rules' set by outsiders and report on outcomes articulated by the state for its support.³⁰

Working on Country, that began life as a stand-alone environmental employment program, is now part of a much wider Indigenous policy framework, which promotes another set of values and world views. This can be clearly seen in the Australian Government's *Caring for our Country Business Plan (2012–13)*, which succinctly describes the Working on Country and Indigenous Protected Area programs place within the broader Indigenous policy framework, where 'the programs work together closely to deliver broader social and economic benefits and contribute to the Australian Government's Closing the Gap agenda'.³¹ The Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities' website states that 'Growth in the successful Working on Country program is one of several measures linked to the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory package'.³²

It is when you begin to examine the set of values and the worldview contained within the Closing the Gap framework³³ and the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory package,³⁴ which is essentially a 10-year continuation of the Northern

28 Northern Land Council (2003) *Caring for Sea Country Action Plan*, Caring for Country Unit, Northern Land Council, Darwin.

29 P Nadasdy (2003) *Hunters and Bureaucrats: Power, Knowledge and Aboriginal-State Relations in the Southwest Yukon*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver.

30 Ibid, 269–270.

31 Australian Government (2011) *Caring for our Country Business Plan (2012–13)*, <www.nrm.gov.au/resources/publications/bp-2012-13/pubs/bp-2012-13.pdf> viewed 7 March 2012.

32 Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *Working on Country*, <www.environment.gov.au/indigenous/workingoncountry/index.html> viewed 7 March 2012.

33 Council of Australian Governments (2009) *National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap)*, <www.coag.gov.au/intergov_agreements/federal_financial_relations/docs/IGA_FFR_ScheduleF_National_Indigenous_Reform_Agreement.pdf> viewed 17 February 2012.

34 See Parliament of Australia (2011) *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory*, <http://aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate_Committees?url=clac_ctte/strong_future_nt_11/report/index.htm> viewed 15 March 2012.

Territory Emergency Response, that the difference quickly emerges. The Caring for Country movement is a community-based development pathway where Indigenous people exercise genuine decision-making control, while the Closing the Gap framework and Stronger Futures package form part of a top-down government 'development' model that seeks to mainstream Indigenous peoples.

The Closing the Gap framework articulates goals to incorporate Indigenous peoples living in remote locations into mainstream education and training and the market economy; it promotes personal responsibility (individualism) and 'engagement and behaviours consistent with positive social norms'.³⁵ It is built on the dominant political view that Indigenous 'development' can only be achieved by rejecting 'traditional' culture, and moving from ancestral homelands to townships to embrace the mainstream. These are the very things that the Caring for Country movement has resisted. While 'the Stronger Futures consultation process and a legislative package do not accord with the evidence of what is required for Indigenous Peoples to achieve their social, cultural, economic, and political aspirations'.³⁶

By participating in, and relying on, state funding programs there is a risk Indigenous people's values and world views will be incrementally captured and reshaped by state processes. Caring for Country's core set of values and worldview is slowly being silenced. This demonstrates the vulnerability associated with high dependence on state funding as well as the state's ability to co-opt Indigenous agency and reshape it through the subtle complexities of language and interactions to meet its own policy objectives at the expense of local autonomy and empowerment.

Back in 1995, Aboriginal land owners clearly rejected the Northern Land Council's proposal to introduce a narrowly-constituted environmental employment program. Instead a 'land owners' movement' promoted a much broader and deeper vision that encompassed their values and world views captured by the idiom of Caring for Country. Today some 17 years later, it appears that through the state's discursive appropriation of Caring for Country into its flagship environmental Caring for our Country program it is revisiting the failed historic attempt to reshape the broad Indigenous vision into a narrow environmental employment program. The new approach is called Working on Country, with normalisation of work patterns and behaviour being one of its stated objectives.

35 Council of Australian Governments (2009) *National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap)*, Schedule E (c) (i-ii), <www.coag.gov.au/intergov_agreements/federal_financial_relations/docs/IGA_FFR_ScheduleF_National_Indigenous_Reform_Agreement.pdf> viewed 17 February 2012.

36 See A Nicholson, N Watson, A Vivian, C Longman, T Priest, J De Santolo, P Gibson, L Behrendt and E Cox (2012) *Listening but not Hearing: A Response to the NTER Stronger Futures Consultations, June to August 2011*, Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, University of Technology Sydney, 11, <www.jumbunna.uts.edu.au/researchareas/ListeningButNotHearing8March2012.pdf> viewed 16 March 2012.

Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory now face a stark choice. Do they reject the very things that have made the Caring for Country movement so successful, to remain dependent on state funding and subject to the governmentality this entails? Or do they pursue alternatives? Perhaps the emergence of a form of economy that recognises the environmental and economic values of ecosystem services and builds on the benefits inherent in Indigenous residence on country, Indigenous common property land tenure regimes, Indigenous knowledge and languages, and Indigenous worldviews is a way to build on the success of Caring for Country.

Chapter 3

Conducting two-way ecological research

Emilie Ens¹

This chapter presents processes that I have explored and challenges encountered while developing collaborative two-way ecological research projects with four Indigenous ranger groups in Arnhem Land from 2008 to 2012. Prior to this I was engaged in largely western forms of ecological research. I offer the following insights and lessons I have learnt to exchange knowledge and information about experiences working in cross-cultural and remote environments, and to enhance Indigenous natural and cultural resource management. Communication about what works, what doesn't and suggestions for enhanced ways forward are essential to maximise the benefits not only for natural and cultural resource management, but also to improve wellbeing and socio-economic outcomes for Indigenous Australians, and the broader public by strengthening Australia's socio-economic fabric and human rights record.

The objectives of my research were four fold: to conduct collaborative ecological research with Indigenous ranger groups in Arnhem Land; to provide evidence of the ecological outcomes of Indigenous ranger work; to build the two-way technical capacity of those involved; and to communicate findings to the broader public. By two-way technical capacity I mean the Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge, preferred methods and skills that contribute to the development of shared aspirations, approaches and outcomes. With a number of rangers and community members, I explored innovative ways of combining Indigenous and non-Indigenous

¹ This research would not have been possible without the openness and interest from Indigenous collaborators from the Manwurrk, Yugul Mangi, Djelk and Yirralka Rangers and their communities as well as the many non-Indigenous coordinators of these ranger groups who allowed me to work with the rangers and greatly assisted in project design, particularly at the start of my work. For this, particular thanks go to Peter Cooke, Cherry Daniels, Mary Kolkiwarra, Georgia Vallance, Jake Weigl, Shaun Ansell, Pascale Taplin, Dave Preece and Fiona Shaw as well as Jon Altman and Seán Kerins for paving the way for this research project and collaborations. Special thanks also to Kim McKenzie, Geoff Buchanan and Anna Morgan for offering ongoing support for my research and Gill Towler and Sam Bentley-Toon for invaluable research assistance. I dedicate this chapter to my grandmother Evniike Toon who gave me the strength and determination to follow my intuition and heart.