

## Caring for Country: the rapidly developing formalised structure for land management on Aboriginal lands of the Top End

Michael Storrs<sup>1</sup>, Mark Ashley<sup>2</sup> and Matthew Brown<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Northern Land Council, PO Box 42921, Casuarina, Northern Territory 0811, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Northern Territory Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries, GPO Box 990, Darwin, Northern Territory 0801, Australia

<sup>3</sup>Indigenous Land Corporation, GPO Box 652, Adelaide, South Australia 5001, Australia

**Summary** On Aboriginal lands in the Northern Territory's 'Top End' there is a rapidly developing formalised structure for land management. This is characterised by a strong community-based movement towards more active land management facilitated by the Northern Land Council's Caring for Country Unit.

In consultation with Aboriginal communities, the Caring for Country Unit works with a range of government and non-government organisations to build the capacity of Aboriginal people to deal with relatively new land management issues such as weeds, feral animals and changed fire regimes. In many communities, this movement has been driven by the need to respond to invasive weeds such as mimosa, (*Mimosa pigra* L.) that threaten to destroy important natural and cultural resources.

The Caring for Country Unit facilitates an issues-based community approach that over time has broadened into a more comprehensive land management program. Currently there are over 20 Aboriginal community-based land management programs dotted across the Top End. These land management programs are beginning to network regularly with each other and work collaboratively with a wide range of other land management organisations. This expanding network is developing into a powerful formalised structure for land management on Aboriginal lands across the Top End.

**Keywords** Mimosa, community empowerment.

### INTRODUCTION

In Australia, Aboriginal people constitute 2.1% of the total population and own 14% of the landmass while in the Northern Territory (NT), Aboriginal people constitute 28.5% of the population and own over 40% of the landmass with a further 10% under claim.

The Northern Land Council (NLC) is the principal representative body for Aboriginal people in the Top End of the NT. In the NLC region about half of the 28 000 Aboriginal people have retained or regained ownership of traditional lands – an area of land totaling about 170 000 km<sup>2</sup>. These lands remain some of the most intact and biologically diverse landscapes in Australia. Aboriginal people live in approximately 200

communities ranging in size from small family groups at outstations up to townships of over 2000 people.

The NLC, establishment in 1977, has been through an intensive land claim period on behalf of the Aboriginal people it represents. With the sunset clause on land claims in 1997, the NLC has started to shift its emphasis toward the management of Aboriginal land. Effective control of weeds, feral animals and fire are the core land management issues identified by Aboriginal landowners in the NLC area. To meet this land management need the NLC instituted the Caring for Country Unit (CFCU) in 1995.

### GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The CFCU's catch cry is 'the land needs its people'. The unit operates under a philosophy of building the capacity of the people to look after their land (which is empowering) versus the philosophy of setting up an agency to look after the land on behalf of the people (which is disempowering).

Furthermore the CFCU believes indigenous land management programs must:

- recognise and assist Aboriginal people to conserve indigenous traditional knowledge;
- recognise and assert indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights in relation to native plants, animals and genetic materials;
- create opportunities for the transfer of knowledge and development of leadership across generations, particularly through 'back to country' programs;
- acknowledge the existing and potential future economic value of intact landscapes (e.g. food, tourism, carbon sinks);
- provide increased and secure long-term funding arrangements for indigenous land management activities;
- support networking and skill sharing between indigenous owners and managers of land and sea across northern Australia; and
- provide employment opportunities and foster the development of indigenous enterprises;
- foster partnerships between indigenous owners and managers, government, and relevant organisations.

### THE MAJOR LAND MANAGEMENT ISSUES

The main environmental problems facing Aboriginal landowners in the Top End are the spread of weeds and feral animals onto Aboriginal lands and the effect of wildfires in areas where traditional fire regimes have been disrupted

Weed invasion, in particular, is a major land management issue (Storrs *et al.* 1996) and has been used as a hook to engage Aboriginal people in community-based land management (Storrs *et al.* 1999). Smith (2000) recorded 223 unwanted exotic plant species on Aboriginal land within the Top End, of these, 52 species were given a high priority. Community-based control programs are essential to not only manage current weed infestations, but to provide a mechanism to search for, and locate, satellite weed incursions. This ability is essential given aggressive exotic weeds such as mimosa, mission grass (*Pennisetum polystachion*), and Gamba grass (*Andropogon gayanus*) continue to spread through the Top End despite control and containment efforts of government and private land owners.

Aboriginal people are also looking for ways to maintain their traditional use of natural resources while developing sustainable commercial uses that could in part fund future community-based land management programs.

**Major constraints to undertaking land management at a local level** Aboriginal landowners and managers across the northern Australia share many common issues, which include:

- owning vast tracts of land with relatively few people to look after it (about 1 person per 12 km<sup>2</sup>), and in certain areas (e.g. Arnhem Land Plateau) there are few if any people still living on the land;
- a shift to towns and settlements makes it difficult to maintain the links between families/clans/language groups and specific areas of land;
- in many areas the traditional ecological knowledge held by elders is not being passed on;
- lack of community awareness and skills (local capacity) to deal with environmental problems such as changed fire regimes, and the spread of weeds and feral animals;
- lack of appropriate succession plans to enable seamless transfer of project knowledge upon departure of key personnel;
- sometimes fraught intra- and inter-community disputes and politics that can hinder multi-community collaboration and derail the achievement of goals;
- Aboriginal organisations have limited resources to undertake land management due to other local priorities such as housing etc.; and

- lack of a commercial base to support land management. Landowners and managers need money and other resources to deal with these issues.

### THE PROCESS

Where traditional land management practices are inadequate to address emerging environmental problems, the goal of the CFCU is to assist Aboriginal landowners develop a formalised land management program that is locally appropriate. Although a generalised model for developing this type of community-based land management program is outlined briefly here, the process is always flexible and driven by the community.

In a region with existing organisations assisting Aboriginal people, the CFCU does not create new bodies or organisations. Rather attempts are made to build on existing strengths through approaches to regional organisations, such as community-based outstation or homeland resource centres, that might have the capacity to expand their roles to include land management.

**Consultation** Initial priorities are set with the Aboriginal landowners and managers through participatory planning. Intensive consultation and coordination underpins this process and programs are implemented at a pace and in a form set by the community. The process is most often issues-based, where a particular issue seen as important by the community is used as a concrete focus around which a larger more comprehensive program is built. In the majority of cases the priority issue amongst landholders has been the control of mimosa but other issues used as a catalyst have been dust suppression, management of tourist/recreation areas and, more recently, fire management.

**Land management team** A team of land management workers chosen by landowners is employed through the community-based agency. Where it is available, employment is based on the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) – a starting point from which to work towards the ideal of self-funding full-time land management positions.

**Land management coordinator** In several locations existing local capacity has been supplemented by employing a land management coordinator with a suitable background (e.g. community development, participatory planning, or natural resource management) for a defined period to work within the community-based agency to facilitate development of the land management program. Where there is no one in the community with the requisite background to assist

in land management activities, the CFCU facilitates the recruitment process and seeks funding for salary and associated operational expenses.

**Land assessment** Land assessment is undertaken at the level of clan estates by land management workers and their coordinator, usually in collaboration with traditional owners and managers. This helps ensure the development of a shared understanding of priorities for on-ground action. Collaborative research with government and other agencies can be incorporated when the process is well established.

**Acknowledgment of two sets of knowledge** A key element of the CFCU approach is to recognise two kinds of knowledge – indigenous traditional knowledge and western science-based knowledge. As such there should be two ‘tool boxes’ available to indigenous land managers. Indigenous knowledge is critical in areas such as fire management, although Aboriginal land managers are increasingly finding science-based technology such as satellite fire mapping is also useful. Science-based knowledge is critical in dealing with issues such as invasive weeds for which there are no traditional prescriptions.

**Training/education** The CFCU facilitates accredited, issues-based training (e.g. weed control) and the delivery of tertiary level broad-based land management education where desired by the community. These courses also emphasise literacy and numeracy skills as well as developing a broader ‘world view’.

Tertiary land management courses available to Aboriginal people range from full-time, on-campus courses to delivery on the management site. In the context of these community-based land management programs, delivery to the participants on-site is seen as important. Also necessary is a training provider with: a flexible approach; extensive experience in remote communities; familiarity with the differing learning styles of Aboriginal participants; and familiarity with learning requirements and anticipated outcomes of land management training programs. A core role of the land management coordinator is to ensure that follow-up work programs provide opportunities to reinforce learning through action.

**Networking** The CFCU recognises the value of networking and regional support mechanisms, and provides support to foster these networks. Field trips and workshops are used to increase land management workers’ knowledge and networking skills. The annual series of Indigenous Rangers Conferences in North Australia held over past three years have showed the

value placed by indigenous land managers on networking across bioregions. Networking and vision-sharing opportunities provided by these conferences are helping to drive the developing formalised structure for Aboriginal land management across the Top End.

CFCU is a driving force of a consortium under the collective title North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) that will include local land management agencies right across the tropical savannas of northern Australia.

**Collaboration with outside agencies** Collaboration with outside research and management agencies is seen as essential to dealing with new problems with which landowners are unfamiliar. Collaboration to undertake projects on issues-based land management and enterprise development based on the sustainable use of natural resources is facilitated by CFCU and land management coordinators. As a general rule projects start small, involve landowners, contribute to capacity building and grow with the community. Corresponding with this activity is the development of confidence and skills within communities to approach and deal effectively with institutions and individuals making policy that impinge on local land management issues.

**Getting people back onto country** The work of CFCU in certain areas involves assisting landowners with planning and resourcing for them to move back onto country, either permanently as outstations, or seasonally to deal with issues such as weed control.

**Conservation of indigenous knowledge** Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments have committed to providing programs to support the conservation of indigenous knowledge, through the National Strategy for the Conservation of Biodiversity (Obj 1.8) and the International Convention on Biological Diversity (8j). However, it is becoming apparent that indigenous ecological knowledge across northern Australia is being lost as elders die. Developing strategies to conserve traditional knowledge is an urgent task for Aboriginal communities. CFCU are trying to address the issue through ‘on country’ and ‘off country’ programs.

**Economic initiatives to fund land management** The commercial returns from most Aboriginal lands do not come close to funding land management needs. CFCU, through its major partner the NT University Key Centre for Tropical Wildlife Management, supports local initiatives to develop sustainable enterprises based on the use of native flora and fauna. This requires the development and implementation of appropriate monitoring regimes to ensure sustainability.

Such things as the sustainable harvest of wildlife, sports fishing, buffalo and pig safari hunting, and collection of assorted plant products for essential oils and cosmetics are currently being investigated by communities. Potentially monies generated from such programs can be turned back into land management in the future.

As well, more 'mainstream' opportunities are being explored such as contract work to maintain remote telecommunication facilities, roadside weed spraying contracts and national park and pastoral station operational contracts.

**Partners** The CFCU's approach is to work collaboratively with a range of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies to build local capacity to deal with land management issues. Partnerships with the Indigenous Land Corporation, the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business and the NT Employment and Training Authority have been essential to the development and resourcing of community-based land management programs across the Top End. The NT Department of Business, Industry and Resource Development (Weeds Branch) and CFCU has a strong collaboration centred upon the management of mimosa. This has now been expanded with the secondment of a Weeds Branch Officer to CFCU for a twelve-month period. This secondment is a positive initiative and provides a practical mechanism to achieve greater government support of the community-based land management agenda.

Major training providers include Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and the Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies at the Northern Territory University.

Greening Australia and CFCU have a long-term partnership in the Aboriginal Landcare Education Program that is managed by Greening Australia.

Given the critical importance of effective quarantine protection on Aboriginal lands a partnership is being developed with the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service's North Australian Quarantine Strategy (AQIS NAQS). Other agencies involved in close collaboration with CFCU include: Parks and Wildlife Commission of the NT, Bushfires Council NT, World Wide Fund for Nature and the Northern Territory University through the Key Centre for Tropical Wildlife Management and the Centre for Natural and Cultural Resource Management.

#### DISCUSSION

With the assistance of the CFCU and its partner agencies, a loosely formalised structure of community-based land management programs is rapidly

developing on Aboriginal lands across the Top End with some very successful community ranger/land management programs pointing the way forward.

Community-based land managers currently network with a range of government and non-government organisations and have recently started to network with each other through such forums as the annual Indigenous Rangers Conference. It is vitally important that Commonwealth and Territory Governments further recognise and support the development of this community-based land management structure on Aboriginal lands across the Top End. Such a structure is not only important for the environment and providing much needed jobs for Aboriginal people but also for the nation, as it enhances the potential to develop more strategic links for quarantine, defence, customs and immigration.

Currently these land management programs employ local Aboriginal people through the CDEP with additional short-term funding coming from a variety of programs. With short-term support generally available, there is a need to source broad-based flexible, medium-term funding for the larger region to consolidate and expand the developing community-based structure for land management across the Top End.

In the meantime many community-based land management programs are exploring ways to partially or fully support themselves through enterprise development. However, in many instances, for this to be successful, key community personnel will need to build upon their skill base.

The current involvement of Aboriginal people in formalised land management could be seen as the next major phase of the land rights movement since the outstation (movement back on to land) of the 1970s.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Kate Duigan for useful comments and editorial input.

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