

# Foreword

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In these times, when much of the public discourse about Indigenous Australians is focused on community problems, perceptions of dysfunction and closing metaphorical gaps, it is refreshing to read this collection of essays about Indigenous people managing their country.

From humble beginnings (often supported by the much maligned Community Development Employment Projects program) Indigenous organisations have established themselves as successful and innovative natural and cultural resource managers across the nation. The Indigenous Protected Areas program and other Government initiatives now offer some support to these initiatives.

These essays represent the outcomes of a unique collaboration between researchers at the Australian National University and a group of these Aboriginal resource management organisations. They speak in the voices of researchers, Aboriginal people and their trusted colleagues. They are focused on understanding Indigenous people's perceptions of the issues, problems and benefits that resource management brings and some of the ways in which their efforts can be supported.

There are a number of resounding highlights in this volume for me:

- The vision and determination of people to manage their estates and to deal with the environmental threats that they face – from the Yolngu elders of Dhimurru and Laynhapuy, to the senior men and women of the Maningrida region and the Gulf and Roper River, the Banbai people in New South Wales, to the late Wamud Namok of the Arnhem Land Plateau and his vision that 'the country needs its people'. Success has been achieved through dogged persistence and a refusal to be confined by mainstream natural resource management ideology;
- The creative innovation that the organisations have brought to their relationships with government, universities, private enterprise and the non-government conservation sector. The success of these partnerships, based on the principle that Indigenous and non-Indigenous scientific knowledge have equal validity, has been recognised by national awards. A spectacular example is the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement project, where the leadership of the Warddeken land managers and their scientific colleagues has gained Indigenous people in the Top End a seat at the table in carbon economy negotiations;

## FOREWORD

- Managing country for community development. All of the groups in the book testify that managing their country is a source of pride and cultural continuity, meaningful work and a range of economic opportunities – both mainstream and customary – irrespective of their organisational strength. Looking after country helps people to be healthy and happy.

However there is also a strong sense of realism here. No one underestimates the size of the management task, the need for training, organisational capacity and infrastructure and the danger of dependence on government funding that can be a soft target when national budgets are tightened.

We need to focus our nation's attention on two key facts:

- Indigenous land managers are now looking after great national treasures in the form of some of the country's most biologically intact terrestrial and coastal ecosystems and extraordinary cultural property in the form of rock art and archaeological sites and cultural landscapes – treasures that are the envy of the world.
- The work is being done on a shoestring and many of the successful outcomes so far are small miracles.

At the outset, Jon Altman describes how in 2006, when developing the project on which this book is based, he experienced an epiphany about the overlap of the Indigenous estate and much of Australia's most environmentally intact areas of global conservation value. I hope that this publication helps our national political and opinion leaders towards a similar enlightenment.

I congratulate the authors and the editors for their efforts. They deserve a wide readership.

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