

Preface

This book documents, in a series of essays, the findings from a direct action research project largely funded by philanthropy, as well as the Australian National University, the Australian Research Council and the New South Wales government. The project is called People on Country, Healthy Landscapes and Indigenous Economic Futures. I want to recount, with the aid of some archived email correspondence, the origins and life course of this project.

In March 2006, the Poola Foundation (Tom Kantor Fund) and Oxfam Australia provided a grant for a short-term pilot project with three aims: to quantify the extent of the Indigenous land holdings in Australia; to assess the environmental significance of this land; and to look for development opportunities for Indigenous land owners in the conservation economy. From the outset this was an ambitious project that provided a final published report just over a year later *The environmental significance of the Indigenous estate: Natural resource management as economic development in remote Australia* (co-authored by Geoff Buchanan, Libby Larsen and myself).

Two things became clear to me as this pilot project got underway. First, that to address this issue properly would be a major undertaking that would need long-term support and a team of staff. Second, that there was an idea here about linking the environmental condition of the Indigenous estate and development that had important policy implications for Indigenous Australia, and possibly beyond.

I started to discuss prospects for such a major project with The Myer Foundation and was fortunate to be invited to two separate workshops on Poverty and Disadvantage and Sustainability and the Environment convened in May 2006. These workshops, held in Melbourne, were an opportunity to consider how the combined Myer Foundation and Sidney Myer Fund, as an Australian philanthropic leader, might proactively revamp its grant-making processes to focus effort on some key big picture issues, to take significant grant making risks that if successful could have national significance.

After a further 12 months of proposal writing, presentations, and negotiations the Sidney Myer Fund agreed to support this project under the new large grants program of its Poverty and Disadvantage Committee. As our discussions on prospects for support neared positive conclusion, Committee members expressed concern that the proposal I had put to them looked a little too much like academic research when their preference was for practical applied projects. I assured them that my intention was that the project be direct action research and subsequently, with the Committee reassured, funding for five years was generously provided. I sincerely hope that this book and other outputs from the project are sufficiently

applied, innovative and potentially path breaking to vindicate the trust of the fund's directors who approved a significant grant to employ three dedicated staff over the life of the project 2008–2012.

At inception, the People on Country, Healthy Landscapes and Indigenous Economic Futures (or People on Country for short) project aimed to establish a productive partnership between a small group of researchers at the Australian National University and a number of land-owning ranger groups in the Top End of the Northern Territory. But, as it developed the People on Country project evolved in two other directions.

First, in late 2007 I received support from the Australian Research Council for a complementary, but more academic project, Hybrid Economic Futures for Remote Indigenous Australia. Arguably these two projects are two sides of the same coin, but importantly an Australian Professorial Fellowship provided salary support for me to join the dedicated staff funded by the Sidney Myer Fund for a significant portion of my time.

Second, in 2008 the then New South Wales Department of Environment and Climate Change proposed to fund another complementary project for three years to examine the socioeconomic benefits to Aboriginal people of working on country in jointly-managed national parks and Indigenous Protected Areas in New South Wales. This funding allowed Janet Hunt to be employed to focus on the comparative situation in New South Wales.

This book does not seek to cover all the work we have done in the Northern Territory and New South Wales. Instead most of the book is divided into two inter-linked parts. The first provides perspectives by researchers based at the Australian National University on the broad issues of environmental benefits and the livelihood possibilities generated from community-based involvement in natural and cultural resource management in the Top End of the Northern Territory and in the 'top end' of New South Wales. The second reports the perspectives of most of our partners, consisting here of seven community based ranger groups in the Northern Territory and one in New South Wales operating in two Indigenous Protected Areas.

Much of this book espouses the essential requirement to deploy what is often metaphorically referred to as the 'two toolbox' approach, western and Indigenous, to ensure effective resource management and the need for this approach to be based on equality born of a dialectical interdependence. I am confident that if nothing else this book is a testament to such a productive approach; and hopeful that it provides important insights into the role that Indigenous people living on the Indigenous estate, on country, can play in delivering environmental services in both their and the nation's interest.

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In a project of this scale that has extended over five years it is very difficult to acknowledge all the people whose contributions have been integral to its successful completion.

To begin in a general and rather obvious way I would like to thank all our ranger partners many of whom are not listed as authors here. It is testament to our robust relations that ongoing projects with most are already planned to continue beyond the life of this project. As a first step we started talking with various land owning groups to see if they were interested in working as partners with us. We received such an overwhelmingly positive response that we had to quickly limit our coverage to manageable numbers. From the outset it was clear that land-owning ranger groups were not only keen to get some assistance from researchers, but also saw their direct involvement as a way for them to get their remote voices heard in Canberra, the place where Indigenous policy is dreamt up and shaped.

The People on Country project could never have been undertaken without the financial support of the Sidney Myer Fund and I would like to sincerely thank Christine Edwards who was the chief executive officer of The Myer Foundation for her belief in this project from the outset and for her unstinting and generous support until her 'retirement' in September last year. Subsequently, her successor Leonard Vary has maintained a keen interest in, and support for, our work.

Our proposal was submitted to the Poverty and Disadvantage Committee of the Sidney Myer Fund whose chair Sandy Clark and members championed our project to Trustees. I would particularly like to acknowledge the efforts made by two members of the Committee the intrepid Dr Peter Hollingworth AC OBE and Professor Brian Howe AO who, along with Kirsty Allen program manager, travelled with me on a whirlwind visit to four of our partners in Arnhem Land in late 2009 to see firsthand what our project was achieving on the ground in some very isolated and hard to access locations.

I would also like to thank some other financial backers. It was Jason Ardler, then Executive Director, Culture and Heritage, New South Wales Department of Environment and Climate Change (now the Office of Environment and Heritage in the Office of the Premier) who took the extraordinary and brave initiative as a senior Indigenous bureaucrat to approach me with a proposal to extend the People on Country project into New South Wales. The significant funding provided by the New South Wales Government up front was very welcome and such initiative and bureaucratic risk taking, from my experience, extremely rare.

This project has been based at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University. As an element of negotiations with the Sidney Myer Fund, the Australian National University undertook to provide considerable cash and in-kind support.

The former came primarily from the Centre's Visiting Indigenous Fellowship Fund that generously allocated most of its annual income, an amount of \$30,000 per annum, to provide support for Indigenous rangers to visit Canberra, give

seminars and engage with the federal bureaucracy; and to convene annual gatherings of all partners in Darwin. The Centre also purchased two vehicles with priority use allocated to the project staff, provided office accommodation and administrative support and earmarked a portion of the time of John Hughes, publications editor and web maestro, to manage the project's web presence and publications.

Many of our colleagues at the Centre, beyond project staff (of which John Hughes really was one, but on a fractional basis), have contributed to the project, but we would especially like to thank Denise Steele, Centre administrator, for her unstinting energy and enthusiasm and Gillian Cosgrove who worked in tandem with John Hughes in producing the maps and figures for this book and also assisted us admirably with communications and design. There are others too who have been employed to work on the project including Gillian Towler, Sam Bentley-Toon, Annick Thomassin and Susie Russell whose assistance has been greatly appreciated. In February 2012 Elisabeth Yabarkhsh replaced the very capable Katherine May (who had left to pursue further study in England in 2011). Elisabeth's work since recruitment has almost entirely focused on this publication as editorial assistant, a role that she has slipped into with uncanny ease and skill.

In 2008 a steering committee was established that met annually, with membership consisting both of individual experts in their own right and representatives of key collaborating institutions.

The independent chair of the steering committee was Dan Gillespie who has had decades of experience in Indigenous natural and cultural resource management issues beginning at Kakadu National Park in 1978 and then traversing a number of senior parks management roles with Commonwealth, State and Territory governments. Dan has very generously provided exceptional support to this project pro bono and has been a very welcome advisory sounding board for me as project leader, as well as to other project staff. On behalf of all I would like to thank him most sincerely for his big hands-on stake in this project and for providing the foreword to this book.

Other individuals whose service on the Steering Committee is greatly appreciated include Dr Sue Jackson from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Tropical Ecosystems Research Centre, Darwin, Dr Peter Whitehead as both an independent member and representing the Northern Territory Department of Natural Resources, the Environment, the Arts and Sport and Professor Peter Kanowski from the Australian National University's Fenner School of Environment and Society. Institutional representatives who provided important links with Indigenous organisations and government agencies included Anna Morgan and David Crea from the Commonwealth Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities; Joe Morrison and Samara Erlandson from the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance; Dr Benedict Scambary and Chris Capper from the Northern Territory Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority; and Justine Yanner and Brooke

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Watson from the Northern Land Council. The Myer Foundation and Sidney Myer Fund were represented by Kirsty Allen, Christine Edwards and Leonard Vary. We thank all very much for their efforts.

In 2010, and again in 2012, the Sidney Myer Fund engaged Dr Dermot Smyth to independently review the project's performance and effectiveness over its life. It is important to acknowledge the role that Dermot's first report in 2010 played in assisting us to adaptively finesse the project; and along with Dan Gillespie (as facilitator) he also attended an important writing workshop convened in Darwin in November 2011 that gathered together almost all contributors to this book. Furthermore, we have greatly appreciated Dermot's thoughtful comments on a final draft of this book.

I am not entirely sure why I approached Ann Cunningham, commissioning editor at The Federation Press, with this book proposal. I think I liked the fact that Federation is an independent Australian-owned and run publishing house and some of its titles on Indigenous issues have been important. My friend Tim Bonyhady also told me that Ann is great to work with. Her enthusiastic response to my book proposal was most encouraging. In an email in March 2011 she stated 'This is just to say that I think your proposal is terrific and of really immense importance – in terms of being a scholarly resource and practical book and in promising a readable account and especially in correcting widely held ignorance and misinformation around indigenous land management'. Such a response was music to the ears of the editors of this book, as well as all contributors, and I hope that her early judgment is vindicated by both the final product and sales. In the production of the book we would like to thank John Hughes and Gillian Cosgrove for the cover design and expertly drawn figures, Gillian Armitage for copy editing, Rebecca Fung for proofreading and final editing and Puddingburn Publishing Services for professional indexing.

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Canberra
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