

Chapter 1

People on country as alternate development

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This book tells a story about Aboriginal Australians who live on, work on and care for the land and seas that they own. It is a story about community-based natural and cultural resource management at a time in history when such management really matters. Like all such expositions, it is only partial but, significantly, draws on a diversity of local Aboriginal and researcher perspectives. I want to begin with two personal epiphanies that foreshadow a transformation that is occurring on the Indigenous estate, as community-based groups increasingly embrace state-sponsored resource management as an alternate approach to development. I then provide some broader historical, political and environmental policy contexts, before signposting some of the difficult questions that the book and its contributors address with their stories about the struggles to establish a sound footing for the very new Caring for Country movement.

Epiphany I: Layered maps

The proverbial penny dropped for me in June 2006 at a seminar in a series on improving integration in natural resource management hosted by Land and Water Australia. I was invited to present a paper after I had made some comments at an earlier presentation by renowned climate scientist Professor Will Steffen. Steffen had used a persuasive PowerPoint presentation to map some of the predicted impacts of climate change on biodiversity, but his impact assessment did not separately identify the vast areas held under a variety of titles by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In a presentation addressing this lacuna, I too deployed some PowerPoint slides (aspects of which are shown later in Figure 1.1 *see page 11*). I began with a map of Aboriginal land holdings that I have referred to, since then, as the Indigenous estate, and a map showing the more than 1000 small Aboriginal communities

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