

Chapter 4

Indigenous rangers and the customary economy

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When doing research at our desks and in the field, we have found contestation around notions of economy, development and conservation to be fundamental when exploring Indigenous people's livelihoods and wellbeing on country. We start this chapter from the view that how we define such things as 'the economy', 'work', 'livelihoods', 'development', 'wellbeing' and 'conservation' influences what we see and experience as real and possible. How we define, construct and represent these things in the abstract – for example, through concepts, models and statistics – has material impact on the reality we experience in our everyday lives.¹ In this chapter we explore the relationship between the abstract and the real in relation to how the Australian state views caring for country and food security in remote Indigenous Australia. We define the Australian state as the institutions of national administration, including government, the public service and the judiciary.² We look specifically at the case of the customary harvest of bush foods, its place in remote Indigenous economies, and its contribution to people's livelihoods and wellbeing on country. In exploring this topic we have sought to address a number of important questions. How does the state's production or selection of evidence about customary harvest reflect an abstract or imagined economy as opposed to the real economy in remote Indigenous Australia? To what extent does this production and selection of evidence reflect the limits of the concepts, models and statistics being used? Might the state produce or select evidence to fit with preconceived notions or ideologically-driven visions of what reality is and should be? What other reality might the state be able to see or help to create if other concepts, models or statistics were used?

1 See, for example N Rose (1999) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; JK Gibson-Graham (2008) Diverse economies: performative practices for 'other worlds', *Progress in Human Geography*, 32 (5): 613.

2 Adapted from F Stillwell (2002) *Political Economy: The Contest of Economic Ideas*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 37.

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