



project in progress summary

knowledge for managing Australian landscapes

Sustainable northern landscapes and the nexus with Indigenous health

Research project number NTU7 of the Social and Institutional Research Program of Land & Water Australia. Commencement date: July 2003; Anticipated completion: December 2006.

Background

The future of Australia's landscapes and biodiversity cannot be considered without specific consideration of Indigenous lands and people. Internationally significant landscapes predominantly contained within inalienable Aboriginal communal titles amount to an area the size of NSW in the Northern Territory alone. While Northern Australia has unparalleled opportunities to avoid treading the same path of environmental ruination as southern Australia, without active management, wildfires, weeds, and feral animals will degrade these lands. Indeed, a core problem in managing northern Australia is the recent depopulation of Indigenous people from their lands that has almost uniformly resulted in unemployment, poverty, ill health and social disruption. Will there be a continuing decline in biodiversity and Indigenous well being in the north mirroring the 19th and 20th Century trends of southern Australia? Or can Indigenous participation in land management activities result in nationally significant benefits to both northern Australian landscapes and Indigenous health?

Project objectives

- To seek Indigenous views about sustainable northern Australian landscapes
- To determine if landscape health, using a number of simple measures, is different under contrasting Aboriginal land management regimes
- To initiate critical evaluation of policy options for land management contributing to the development of Indigenous sustainable futures
- To compare the health and well being of Aboriginal participants in NRM compared with non-participants



Key research questions

Does Indigenous participation in natural resource management activities result in nationally significant benefits to both northern Australian landscapes and to Indigenous health?

Study areas

Health studies: Central Arnhem Land

Ecology studies: Wider scope across north Australia to provide context for the Central Arnhem Land Health study

Target audiences for project findings

- Northern Territory and Australian Government Health and Environment Departments
- Natural Resource Management Agencies
- Indigenous land councils, health boards and community ranger programs

Progress to date

Health component

- Review paper published with Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health and announcement in EcoHealth
- Stage one data collection completed

Policy component

- Expanded project headed by Dr Bev Sitholi funded by package from CSIRO, NLC, NTG (NT Research and Innovation Board) and LWA
- Evaluation framework for enhancing Aboriginal community-based natural resource management
- Evaluation of ranger programs

Landscape component

- Large scale fuel survey provided evidence of a grass-fire cycle with heavier fuel loads where spear grass is dominant and that spear grass is rare on land managed by Aboriginal people.
- Ongoing weed and feral animal surveys in Arnhem Land and Kakadu regions.

Project reference group

Indigenous community members, advocacy agencies, health service providers and natural resource management groups including: Northern Land Council, Maningrida Council, Maningrida Health Centre, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation – including Djelk rangers, Menzies School of Health Research, Co-operative Research Centre (CRC) for Aboriginal Health, Tropical Savanna CRC, Indigenous Protected Areas Program of Environment Australia, Parks and Wildlife NT, Kakadu National Park and the Northern Lands Council, Caring for Country project.

Contacts

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Further reading

Burgess CP Johnston F Bowman DMJS and Whitehead PJ. Healthy Land: Healthy People? Exploring the health benefits of Indigenous Natural Resource Management. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health. 2005;29(2):117-121

Bowman DMJS and Johnston FH. Natural Resource Management (NRM) as an Intervention for Indigenous Health. EcoHealth 2, 1-3, 2005. see http://www.ecohealth.net/pdfs/Vol2/ECH_2_2_WhatsNew.pdf

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