



project in progress summary

knowledge for managing Australian landscapes

Development of Indigenous knowledge capacity across north Australia

Research project number TRC3 of the Social and Institutional Research Program of Land & Water Australia. Commencement date: July 2004; Anticipated completion: July 2006.

Background

Indigenous Australians have made, and continue to make, invaluable contributions to the maintenance of healthy ecosystems and overall environmental health. However, in mainstream natural resource management (NRM) circles these contributions are often misunderstood, misrepresented or simply ignored. This project is intended to redress this situation.

Working in close collaboration with Traditional Owners across the tropical north, researchers have been tasked to devise a strategy, which will represent the aspirations and interests of Indigenous Australians as well as complementing wider NRM objectives. These two goals are not mutually exclusive but inextricably linked. The key to realising this aim lies in acknowledging the value of Indigenous Knowledge, past and present, in Indigenous terms.

What problems/issues/information gaps led to the idea for this project?

- A failure to recognise the ongoing contribution of Aboriginal Australians across the tropical savannas to the maintenance of biodiversity and healthy natural systems;
- A lack of effective engagement with Indigenous interests, aspirations and priorities;
- A lack of protection and support (IP and otherwise) for Indigenous knowledge and its effective application to NRM;
- The failure of many mainstream NRM approaches to effectively manage tropical ecozones;
- A tendency to subsume Indigenous Knowledge and interests according to mainstream agendas, in spite of the above;
- Inappropriate, adhoc and inconsistent support for Indigenous engagement in NRM planning and implementation;



- A reluctance to acknowledge the value of the knowledge older generations of Indigenous Australians possess and limited support for the intergenerational transfer/transmission of that knowledge;
- A paucity of appropriate methodologies and technologies for the collection, collation, application and storage of Indigenous Knowledge.

Project objectives

The strategy document will be written in plain and detailed English thus providing an accessible reference tool for both Traditional Owners and other NRM agents and agencies. Over the course of the project, researchers will draw on the extensive Indigenous networks and resources available to the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) in collaboration with the Tropical Savannas Management Cooperative Research Centre (TSM-CRC). This collaborative approach will engender a greater understanding of the value of Indigenous knowledge, thus enhancing current NRM approaches, as well as fostering a network of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and land managers across the region.

Key research questions

Can knowledge derived from a diverse range of traditions be adapted to address contemporary natural resource management challenges, and if so, how is this best achieved?

Study areas

The tropical savannas or wet/dry tropics with specific reference to areas in the Kimberley, Arnhem Land, Gulf and Cape York regions.

Target audiences for project findings

The advice and direction of Traditional Owners has informed every stage of the research process. Consequently, the strategy will reflect their interests as well as providing some direction as to how to engage with mainstream NRM agents and agencies. Additionally, the document will develop a wider understanding of Indigenous Knowledge and provide appropriate methodologies for effective engagement with Aboriginal Australians and the implementation of appropriate support mechanisms for their current and future activities.

- In listing the key audiences consider whether the key findings will address on-ground management issues or the policy, social, legal, economic and institutional settings of these. Will the key findings be relevant to the particular attributes of policy problems in ESD/NRM)?

The main thrust of the project is towards finding practical solutions to on the ground issues. Toward this end, Traditional Owners have clearly identified how current policy and institutional settings sometimes exacerbate existing problems and have suggested innovative solutions. In addition, considerable research has already been conducted into Intellectual Property regimes and toward devising an effective adoption strategy for government/s and other key agencies. All of these developments will be of particular significance for any individual or agency with a NRM focus.

Progress to date

A series of formal and informal workshops with Indigenous and other researchers have been held across the Tropical Savannas and the findings documented. A strategic outline has been developed and valuable collaborative linkages have been forged.

Project reference group

Kimberley Land Council (KLC); Northern Land Council (NLC); Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation (BCYDC); Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (CLCAC); Tropical Savannas Management Cooperative Research Centre (TSM-CRC); North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA).

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