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## **Working Within the Framework of Aboriginal Culture: Indigenous Initiatives for Sustainable Development Through Landcare**

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*[Submitted Paper]*

### **Introduction and background**

The views expressed in this paper have been developed over many years working with and for Aboriginal people and communities in the Northern Territory. It is important to point out that although one of the authors is an Aboriginal man, the concepts and issues as described below are an attempt to highlight processes through contemporary eyes, and as such may not represent the information in a way that Aboriginal people would themselves use. Approaching problems or projects from very different world views is part and parcel of working within the framework of Aboriginal culture.

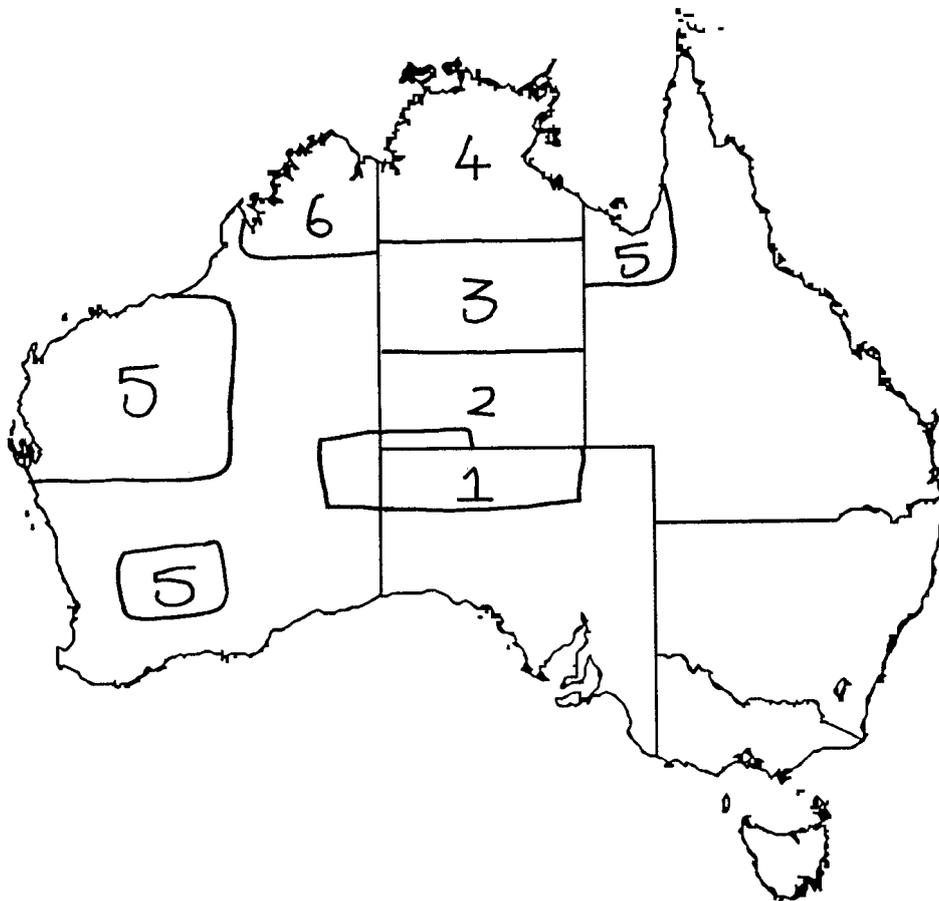
Landcare is a relatively new term which for the purposes of this paper is taken to mean activity aimed at protection, rehabilitation and sustainable utilisation of natural resources. As such it has capacity to incorporate traditional land management with contemporary "Western" land management practices to provide a unique blend of projects and activity for sustainable development into the future.

The capacity for the blending of the traditional and the contemporary has largely come about as a result of indigenous land rights in parts of Australia. Essentially landcare has followed land rights, which in one sense is obvious, as unless people have access and rights of ownership to their land, they are unable to exercise the level of management control necessary to achieve results.

Historically this has led to a growth in landcare activity within Land Councils and other Aboriginal and environmentally based non-government organisations that has followed shortly after Aboriginal people have had their traditional rights to land recognised through land rights. The first projects the authors are aware of began in the 1970's with the Pitjantjatjara Council staff and members in northern South Australia, parts of Western Australia and the south west of the Northern Territory. Soon afterwards Tangentyere Council and Central Land Council began to service

areas around Alice Springs, followed by Julalikari Council in the Tennant Creek region, and on up to the Top End with Northern Land Council and Greening Australia NT. Simultaneously activity in the Pilbara and Goldfields regions of Western Australia began to emerge, as well as more locally-based services in the Gulf country in Queensland, Arnhem Land and the Katherine region. The most recent developments have been in the Kimberley region of northern Western Australia where pastoral leases or community land areas have been purchased rather than granted under formal land rights.

Figure 1 indicates this spread of landcare activity on Aboriginal land following the success of land rights. Area 1 – Pitjantjatjarra Council; area 2 – Tangentyere Council and Central Land Council; Area 3 – Julalikari Council; area 4 – Northern Land Council and ALEP at Greening Australia; area 5 – Pilbara, Goldfields and Gulf country regions; area 6 – Kimberley region.



**Figure 1:** Spread of landcare activity on Aboriginal land

In general terms, the role of the Land Councils has been to support access to land through land rights claims, and then to help develop broad resource management strategies, and the other groups have focussed on practical community-based projects for environmental health and sustainable development through the creation of healthy living areas. As time passes the roles are becoming less distinct, and the groups are networking more strongly for common goals and outcomes.

## **Land, law and people – an unbroken triangle**

Critical to the capacity to work effectively within the framework of Aboriginal culture, is a basic understanding of past and present world views of the cultural group. In this section a brief overview of Aboriginal reality is presented with the understanding that it is a non-Aboriginal conceptualisation of that reality, but never the less important to refer to. Unless practitioners work within this framework little progress can be made to support sustainable development processes. There is also an enormous diversity within Aboriginal groups as to how the world views are expressed and maintained.

Essentially the concept is that the land and its resources don't exist in isolation from the people. The two are intimately linked, where people are spiritually part of the land, and the land is maintained and cared for by the people. It is not a world view that sees land as a saleable commodity for exploitation, but rather one where the land and the people are one and the same. The relationships between land and people are maintained through complex and all-encompassing system of traditional law, where certain people have rights and responsibilities to manage and maintain areas as part of the law, and transfer these rights and responsibilities intergenerationally through the law.

Thus land, law and people can be seen as parts of an unbroken triangle, where all elements must be in place together for integrity of the system, and this holistic mix is the reality throughout time.

Although through the colonising process in Australia over the last hundreds of years much damage has been done to Aboriginal culture, land and people, it is important to reinforce that today, even where people are living in urban situations the land, law and people are still intimately linked through a weakened but unbroken triangle.

A basic understanding and respect for the concepts presented above leads anyone working within the cultural framework to a point of being able to undertake research, project development or other landcare work through the proper channels. For example a local community government council may appear to have authority to make decisions about land within a community, but the Aboriginal reality still insists it is the traditional owners through the law that really have decision making power. The two may in fact coincide, but often council structures are set up independently from traditional decision making arrangements, and for projects to work they have to respect the law of the people adequately.

As such, even today, there is a traditional management system which is facing new and contemporary land management problems, and unless the two-way flow of ideas and information forms the basis of negotiation little progress at solving problems can be expected.

Of particular interest here is the assumption that many non-Aboriginal people make that the overriding ethic for Aboriginal people is one of conservation. The reality is that hunter-gatherer societies have always been based on resource utilisation and exploitation that is sustainable. The point, really, is that to be effective as a practitioner of landcare within the Aboriginal cultural framework, you have to get

close to the local cultural reality which may not be any thing like a non-Aboriginal person may assume it to be.

## **Key land management issues in northern Aboriginal development**

There is a huge diversity of local issues based on the history of land use, the geographic and climatic factors of the region, level of economic or social and cultural activity, pressure from external groups for access to and use of resources and so on. However the key issues still tend to be grouped around those based on environmental health and community development within the relatively recent sedentary dwelling patterns of small townships, and the sustainable management of surrounding rangelands, waterways and seas. Most of Northern Australia is not suitable for farming as such, which is why rangeland management is far more significant.

### **Community and township issues**

As communities and towns have developed on Aboriginal land, a large range of issues related to landcare and land management and planning have arisen. From an environmental health perspective, (and health is a major issue in Aboriginal communities with conditions often described as fourth world) the need to develop strategies for dust control, soil erosion control, shade, shelter, food supply, recreation areas development, local economic activity such as market gardening and so on has emerged. In this arena the concepts within permaculture have a lot to offer when linked to the local cultural setting. It is obvious that in order for communities to become sustainable long-term residential and commercial centres, much work is needed to address the health of the local environment, which has major implications for addressing the fundamental causes of ill health within the Aboriginal community.

### **Sustainable management of rangelands, waterways and seas**

Aboriginal people in Northern Australia face enormous external pressure to come up with strategies for management of Aboriginal land that allow for multiple land uses such as mining, tourism, pastoralism, conservation and so on. Added to that is the need to satisfy all the economic, social and cultural needs of the people themselves. In the context of an Aboriginal reality based on the unbroken triangle of law, land and people this is a unique and difficult task for the people to work through. It is also a process that is very recent in terms of land rights and access, and as such has a long way to go to achieve the desired results for Aboriginal people.

In particular, the regaining of land by Aboriginal people has usually been after a period of ownership and land use by non-Aboriginal people. Much of this non-Aboriginal land use has been exploitative and unsustainable or unmanaged to the point where land degradation is now a major issue. Prevention and rehabilitation of areas experiencing rapid and large scale soil erosion, the control of feral animals and weeds often on a massive scale, management of fire regimes in changed ecosystems, the maintenance of biodiversity and protection of species from extinction, and the rehabilitation and care of waterways and seas are probably the biggest of the issues that affect most Aboriginal groups in Northern Australia. The point is that Aboriginal people are now being asked to fix this degradation, which they generally did not

cause, out of limited current resources, and many of the potential solutions have little or no cultural history for them to draw on. They are contemporary problems requiring contemporary solutions that must fit a cultural framework nevertheless.

## **A model for planning and developing integrated landcare strategies with Aboriginal communities**

This model first came to the attention of the authors through discussions with Mike Last and other staff at Pitjantjatjara Council in the early 1980's. Mike had developed the concept during his work in northern South Australia in the 1970's. It is a model that has proved to be applicable in virtually every situation the authors have had to deal with in terms of planning and developing strategies for the last 15 years.

Essentially the model defines 'areas of activity' that can be readily identified and linked to ownership relationships, which then allows development of plans and strategies to deal with local issues in each of the areas of activities.

### **Area 1**

Area 1 is defined as individual households. This is sometimes referred to as 'one camp fire'. In area 1, the people living in the household and its immediate environs are responsible for the management of that area, usually as tenants in community-owned housing. Strategies for tree planting for shade and fruit, ground cover plantings to avoid erosion from wind and water, privacy or aesthetic landscaping and so on are easily identified and integrated with construction, refurbishment and other infrastructure programs related to housing. Construction and maintenance of landcare works is usually the family responsibility.

### **Area 2**

Area 2 is defined as the common or community-based area of activity within a township, community or outstation. This is sometimes referred to as 'many camp fires'. It is limited to the town or community boundary and includes all roads, schools, stores, recreational areas, vacant land and so on. In these areas no single person has responsibility for the planning and development, rather the whole community is responsible. The exceptions are where communities have grown up around areas where specific traditional ownership relationships for sacred sites, etc. are paramount, and the senior traditional owners maintain authority despite other community development structures. In Area 2 projects for soil erosion prevention and repair, tree planting, commercial gardening, landscaping, waste disposal etc. are common. They tend to be bigger projects than in Area 1, and often involve employment of individuals on community projects. Any landcare projects can be linked or integrated with other community strategies such as health, housing, employment and training, enterprise or economic development, and traditional or cultural strategies and events. The planning, consultation and negotiation, and project development requirements are more complex than for Area 1.

### **Area 3**

Area 3 is defined as all areas of activity surrounding the community but external to the normal community boundary. Area 3 can be extensive rangelands involving cattle grazing, mining, tourism, traditional management and ceremonial sites,

river systems and so on. There are often major roads, water and electricity supplies and infrastructures to be considered. Area 3 tends to be the responsibility of the traditional land-owning family, group or clan, and may be split up for planning purposes into defined cultural groupings so that people are making decisions about land management that reflect cultural relationships to areas. This is the area where planning and developing strategies is very complex, dealing with multiple land use pressures, sustainable economic development, many external agencies, and larger resource requirements. Projects tend to be large scale, resource intensive, and involve greater linkages to government and non government agencies, and often bring diverse groups of Aboriginal people together in new regional groupings to deal with problems or issues.

In summary, the areas of activity model allows for the full range of landcare and development issues to be included, whether they be traditional or contemporary in nature, in any planning and strategy development. It allows for detailed integration with any other community or economic development strategy as part of a broader process, and readily leads to local prioritisation of projects in each area of activity. Although simple in concept, it is a very powerful tool when working within the framework of Aboriginal culture, and has successfully been applied across a huge range of very diverse situations. We have yet to come across one Aboriginal group who has not been able to readily understand and work within the concept of the model. It also ensures that new non-Aboriginal participants are working properly with the right people on any projects, and can get a better handle on what is expected of them.

## **The Aboriginal landcare education program**

A good example of the types of landcare services and projects that have developed over recent years is the Aboriginal Landcare Education Program (ALEP), which extends over Aboriginal communities in the 'Top End' of the Northern Territory. The program is jointly run by Greening Australia NT, a non government environment organisation, and the Northern Land Council, the peak Aboriginal body in the region. Funding for the program comes from Federal Government programs under the National Landcare Program and through the Australian Nature Conservation Agency, and other minor sources. It has its main base located in Darwin, but staff spend extended periods out in remote Aboriginal communities.

Figure 2 shows the extent of the program's influence, achieved in just over 2 years of operation.

ALEP employs a program coordinator and two Aboriginal landcare education officers, one of whom is Joe Morrison, co-author of this paper. Essentially, the program has four main elements which contribute to the process of sustainable development through landcare. They are:

- *Project development* – After initial consultations with a community, and by working through the areas of activity model described above, a number of projects are usually identified for priority development. The ALEP team provides support and professional advice for detailed development of individual projects within communities, often linked to other employment, health, recreation or similar strategies. Examples of projects to date include tree planting

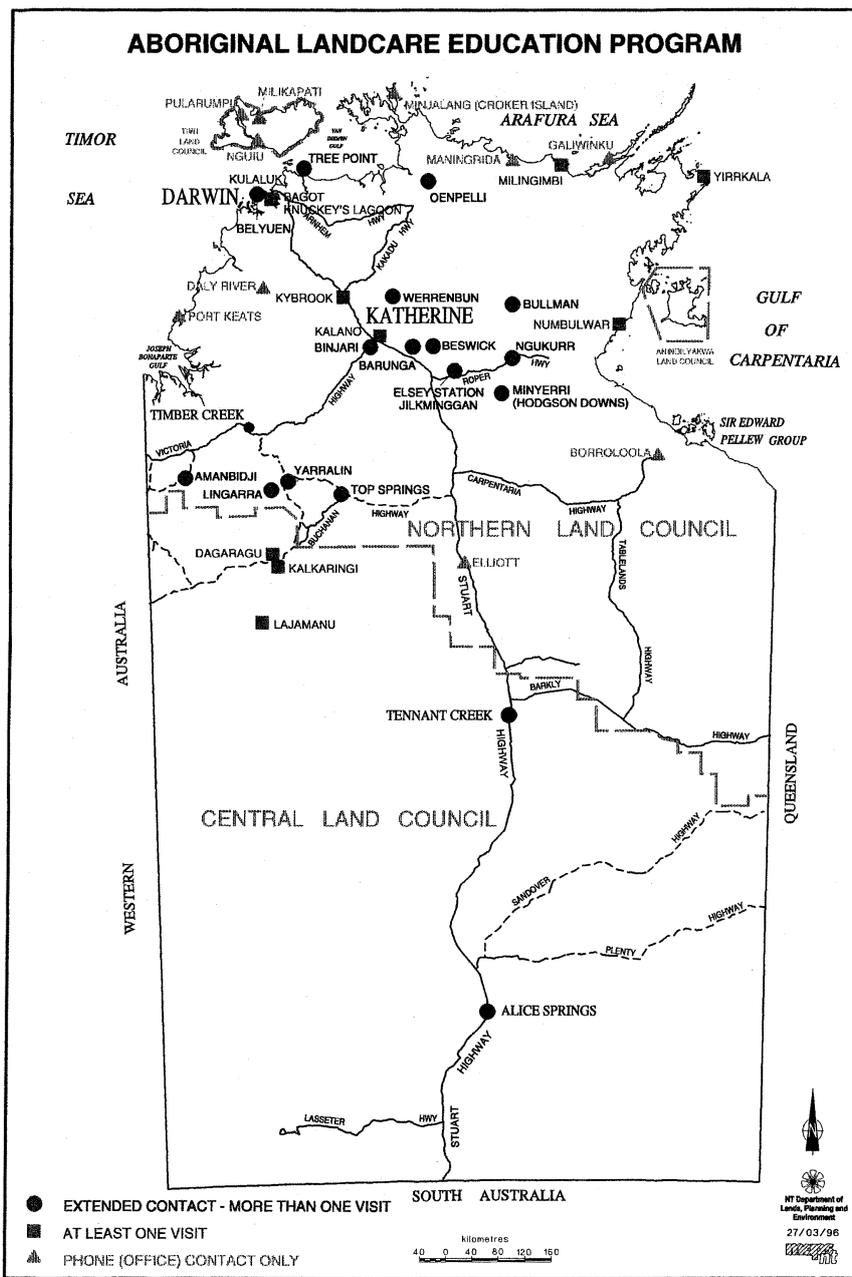


Figure 2: Extent of the program's influence

for shade, shelter, bush food and medicine, a major attempt to control woody weeds and feral pigs through a system of lagoons along the Roper River system, direct seeding of areas with native trees, shrubs and grasses for erosion control, and many similar activities. The ALEP team gets involved in all stages of project development and implementation, at a level that is needed by the particular community. For example, a community that already is involved in substantial tree planting may only need minimal support at the start-up stage,

whereas another may need close contact and advice for several months in order to implement a project that is a relatively new concept to the people.

- *Education and training* – A significant activity for ALEP is the organisation of and delivery of appropriate education and training for community members to become competent in often very new skills (for example seed harvesting and propagation). ALEP is involved in the development and sometimes delivery of new courses within institutions that will meet the needs of client community members, and runs practical workshops in many communities around specific issues such as planning, irrigation design and installation, nursery practice, direct seeding, and so on. The education component also involves increasing people's awareness of the importance of issues related to landcare, environmental health etc., through the supply of information in a format that Aboriginal people can use. Often numeracy and literacy in English are not strong skills in communities, and visual aids, videos and so on are needed to pass on information in a useable form. The education and training role is very important when communities are needing to develop skills and capacities that relate to long term development needs.
- *Planning* – ALEP assists communities with planning at a number of levels including whole community strategies for sustainable development through to small scale planting plans for individual projects. Again, for the development planning process the areas of activity model is utilised. Often the planning support needed relates to accessing funding for materials or labour or training etc., or the scope for integration of several community development strategies into one project. There is also an away-from-community planning role in letting other agencies know of proposed projects in order to have input at different stages, whether through direct involvement or indirectly by preparing education and training materials for ALEP use, for example.
- *Linkages and networks* – A key role of ALEP is to provide a linkage between Aboriginal people, often in geographically remote locations, and government or other agencies or sources of information. These linkages can be as simple as connecting a community to an education institution like the Northern Territory University so that people can access training courses, or as complex as bringing several agencies together to work on a particular community development project. In particular it is a two-way linkage process, as often non-Aboriginal agencies need briefing on traditional or cultural knowledge in order to understand how they can have meaningful input, as well as Aboriginal people needing access to 'Western' scientific or technical input. The linkage role is often described as the oil or lubricant needed for the machinery of development projects to work, and can not be underestimated in importance.

In order to undertake these roles effectively, ALEP staff often have to travel vast distances in four wheel drive vehicles just to get to a community. Camping out is essential as accommodation is scarce, and communications technology is often unavailable. The team also run plant nurseries in Darwin and some smaller regional centres to propagate and make available suitable native trees and shrubs for use in landcare projects.

To sum up, ALEP is a practical service which offers holistic support to communities to develop sustainable development strategies through landcare that achieve real results and outcomes for the communities involved.

## Future directions

The future of all the Aboriginal landcare and sustainable development initiatives relies heavily on continued support financially from all sources. Programs like ALEP are continually having to fight for annual funding just to be able to survive, let alone expand to meet the increasing demand, and Aboriginal communities face a continuous struggle for economic development and independence sufficient to resource all the community development needs.

Having said that, it is likely that the process will continue in various shapes and forms. There is an ever-expanding network of Aboriginal resource groups providing landcare support services to Aboriginal community groups across Northern Australia, and probably elsewhere as well. Groups with practical functions like those described for ALEP are building on their strengths, particularly by involving Aboriginal staff, and will adapt to any new challenges as they arise. The land councils are becoming more involved in regional resource management strategies that look more at the 'big picture', and are providing leadership and coordination that enable strong linkages to the ALEP type agencies.

Economic development through sustainable land use management, and the development of local and regional strategies to deliver that development is fundamental to progress for Aboriginal people and will remain a priority just as housing, health, education, social justice and cultural survival will.

What was once an activity based around a few dedicated individuals, has grown into a major industry that engages many Aboriginal people across vast areas of the continent. We believe that further growth and expansion of the programs is inevitable, as awareness of the importance of this work is raised within Aboriginal societies and also by the wider society and its bureaucracies.

*Mike Carmody has worked extensively with Aboriginal communities and organisations throughout Central and Northern Australia for nearly 15 years. He established, developed and managed the Tangentyere Council Landcare Program, the joint Greening of Australia NT and Northern Land Council Aboriginal Landcare Education Program, and was instrumental in the establishment of the Northern Land Council's Caring for Country strategy. Mike is currently the Darwin Regional Manager for the Federal Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.*

*Joe Morrison is an Aboriginal man from Katherine in the Northern Territory. He jointly helped Mike establish the Aboriginal Landcare Education Program within Greening Australia NT, and continues as the senior Aboriginal Land Education Officer in that program across "Top End" Aboriginal communities of the Northern Territory. Joe is also a tertiary student, studying land management externally part-time through Orange Agricultural College as part of a Sydney University program.*