

Indigenous Interests in Tropical Rivers: Research & Management Issues

A Summary

of the Scoping Study for Land & Water Australia's Tropical Rivers Program

This leaflet summarises a larger report prepared in May 2006.
The larger report is available from the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea
Management Alliance in Darwin (NAILSMA), or from Land and Water Australia.



Photos: (from left to right) Nancy Broome Dalyu and William Watson (photo by Sarah Yu); Jill Daniels, Valmae Roberts, Julie Nelson, Ezra Thingle and Julie Roy (photo by Patrick O'Leary).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers should be warned that this document may contain images of deceased persons.

Aim of the report

The report was requested by Land and Water Australia (LWA) as a scoping study to provide information for their new Tropical Rivers Program.

The report aims to provide an overview of the key river management and research issues of concern to Indigenous people in the Tropical Rivers Program area. This area covers the northern regions of Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. When LWA talks about a river they include groundwater and surface water, and all the parts of a river, including the river mouth.

The authors of the report (Sue Jackson and Patrick O'Leary of CSIRO) interviewed representatives of Indigenous land management agencies as well as Indigenous people from the region. The authors also read reports that had been written about Indigenous interests in rivers.

The scoping report provides a survey of the issues of greatest interest to Indigenous people. It also identifies areas for further research and makes recommendations to improve the relevance of tropical rivers research to Indigenous communities. It also discusses the importance of partnerships and between researchers and Indigenous people, suggesting a number of ways that LWA can contribute to improvements in this area.



North Australian
Indigenous Land &
Sea Management
Alliance



TROPICAL SAVANNAS CRC
Cooperative Research Centre for Tropical Savannas Management

Rivers and wetlands are vitally important to Indigenous people

The rivers and wetlands of northern Australia are very important to the many thousands of Indigenous people living near them. Many people interviewed said that Indigenous people see rivers differently to non-Indigenous people; they stressed the spiritual side of their relationship with the river:

“Indigenous people definitely look at rivers differently to non-Indigenous people. Often the grazier will want running water as this is better for stock. Indigenous people don’t mind when rivers dry up into waterholes because they are used to this cycle and, in fact, they depend on the waterholes for hunting”

(Ron Archer, Northern Gulf Indigenous Savannas Group).



“Water is our life. No water-no life. This is water that would keep us alive’ is what my parents said to me. The Meg River is such a secret place. The Roaring Meg holds everything together as far as the elders are concerned which goes for me too. My people look at water differently. We look at things in my clan group as being within mother nature. They (the clan group) like to make sure that water is always looked after and maintained to make sure no pollution arises. There are a lot of tourists on the Meg. I work to protect the area. Managing it in the Indigenous way”

(Gail Fisher, Kuku Yalanji).

Throughout northern Australia Indigenous communities are closely connected to the country through daily use of rivers, through customary law, ceremony, songs, spiritual beliefs, and knowledge of the environment gathered over hundreds of generations.

“We have sea country. In the tidal water whitefellas go all over the place. That tidal water is the boss of everything. The water might be in the tidal area but there are names and culture there. Very important thing this Roper River. A lot of ceremony there - it’s a dangerous place” *(Yugul Mangi Rangers, group interview).*

People are seeing changes to their country

Indigenous communities across north Australia are quick to notice changes to the country and their ability to maintain their way of life. Some of these changes include an increasing demand for water from farming or mining. Other changes are brought about by stocking rates for cattle, feral animals, weeds and changing patterns of burning.

“When I was a young fella we would go out to a creek for Cherabin (freshwater prawns) but we can’t catch them like we used to in those old places now. We don’t really know why that is, maybe it’s from overfishing, there is a lack of awareness about why this is happening” *(Ismahl Croft, Kimberley Land Council).*

Loss of traditional environmental and ritual knowledge is a social change that confronts possibly every language, clan or family group. Many Indigenous people express a strong need for access to their lands and rivers so that traditions can continue. They are having problems getting to important places:

“Indigenous people are feeling fenced out of many places they would have once used much more frequently. There are a lot of restrictions placed on cultural pursuits like hunting around rivers because offences and no arrangements for Indigenous access. As far as I’m concerned I don’t need permission to access areas on my country. We won’t interfere with mustering or other things the station needs to do but still we only have limited access to many areas” *(Edwin Jacob, Carpentaria Land Council).*

"The river around my area is really healthy. I don't go hunting for goanna any more because the cane toads have killed them all. I do still go hunting for long neck turtle in the mud. There are still plenty of these turtles around. I take the younger girls with me when I hunt them and show them how to catch turtles"

(Amy Friday, Yanyuwa traditional owner).



Indigenous land management activity is growing

There is a growing movement of Indigenous land management activity across the north, and issues related to water management and river care are part of that focus. In many places Indigenous communities and organisations have collaborated with government agencies and stakeholders, and developed partnerships with researchers to exchange knowledge and solve problems.

According to Indigenous systems of customary law, Indigenous people expect to be fully involved in management decisions. So far, there has been little effort made by governments to involve Indigenous people in discussions about the national changes to water policy. New water policy and funding arrangements under the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Water Initiative need to identify, acknowledge and incorporate the diverse interests of Indigenous people. And Indigenous communities will need assistance to plan for their own water use, consider models and approaches to enhance their participation in management structures and to obtain benefits from the commercial use of water.

The field of Indigenous land and water management is rapidly growing, but the funding that is available is inadequate. This is a concern of many organisations interviewed and it makes it more difficult for organisations like Land Councils to assist researchers and governments to work with Indigenous people.

Practical research is needed

People expressed a need for applied research to address fundamental questions about the changes occurring in their country and the impacts of various threatening processes. Overall, there was a lot of interest in research and resources to deal with immediate management problems and barriers to Indigenous control of their land.

"We want wetlands to be maintained in a healthy state. We don't want to see any further degradation or harmful effects. In fact we would like to see rehabilitation to bring wetlands that have been damaged by cows and ferals back to a healthy condition. We need information that can help us with that kind of task of repairing and rehabilitating rivers and wetlands"

(Marandoo Yanner, Carpentaria Land Council).



Many of those interviewed identified the need for baseline information about environmental systems, including rivers and wetlands. Information is needed to establish to what extent and in which direction (ie. better/worse) things might be changing.

Research needs to involve Indigenous people

The benefits of research to Indigenous people are not always clear. There have been some problems in the way that research has been carried out, but there are also examples of successful collaborations. Researchers need to have the ability to work with Indigenous people. These skills were considered to be very important in getting the research process right and then strengthening working relationships.

"People enjoyed being part of that sawfish research. They had to be involved because they are the traditional owners for the river so they know what's happening. People had dreaming stories about sawfish. Each animal in the river is important to Indigenous people. The researchers paid people to be part of the research, they also got advice on which way to go and how to catch fish and the names of the fish"

(Ismahl Croft, Kimberley Land Council).



"Kowanyama like to take a very proactive role to research wherever possible. They prefer research to be on community identified priorities rather than priorities identified by outside researchers"

(Jim Monaghan, Kowanyama Land and Natural Resource Management Office).

Recommendations to Land and Water Australia

This report identifies a number of ways that Land and Water Australia (LWA) and other research organisations can make tropical river research more relevant and beneficial to Indigenous people and their representative organisations. It describes many research topics that could help to answer questions or solve problems relating to river management.

It makes three specific recommendations to LWA to improve the rates and quality of research conducted in partnership with Indigenous communities:

1. That the LWA Board considers ways of ensuring high ethical standards in the research it sponsors where Indigenous people are involved. It is suggested that the Guidelines developed by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies should be adopted as a basis for satisfying LWA's ethics requirements.
2. That LWA considers ways to bring researchers and Indigenous communities and organisations together to discuss and negotiate research project ideas.
3. Indigenous participation in research was identified by people consulted as is a key ingredient in successful arrangements and relationships. Therefore LWA should consider tailoring its funding to encourage researchers to work in partnership with Indigenous organisations. For example, some funds could be set aside for projects that show a very high degree of Indigenous participation.

For a full copy of the scoping report contact:

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