

LOOKING AFTER freshwater country — Indigenous research priorities

By Patrick O'Leary

Indigenous people in Northern Australia have an intimate knowledge of tropical rivers and freshwater systems. Right across the North people depend on healthy rivers, wetlands and estuaries for food for subsistence including fish, freshwater turtles, waterbirds like magpie geese, and to provide fresh clean water for daily use. Water in all its forms is also culturally important. Groundwater, creeks and rivers, billabongs and estuaries, and the plants and animals that depend on them are not only vital for survival but an integral part of songs, ceremonies, hunting and collecting, and other activities that bind people to their country. Mythological accounts involving neglect of water management may operate as ecological warnings pointing to the need to manage and share water carefully (Jackson et al., 2005 in press).

Because people have these strong responsibilities and ties to their country arising from traditional law and everyday life, their interest in the health and management of freshwater country is intense. Historically, however, indigenous people have struggled to gain a seat at the negotiating table as important owners, users, and managers of Northern Australia's river and freshwater systems. While this is slowly changing, there are still many barriers to overcome. River research is

an area where there needs to be greater acknowledgement of indigenous interests. Land & Water Australia has supported the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) to produce a report on indigenous research interests and priorities for tropical rivers.

NAILSMA is the body formed by a coalition of Land Councils and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations with an interest in land and sea management in Northern Australia. NAILSMA's focus is to support indigenous people on country through their representative and other bodies to assist indigenous land and sea management right across the North. Currently hosted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Tropical Savannas, NAILSMA is building its profile with indigenous land and sea managers and other stakeholders in Australia's North.

NAILSMA has contracted the CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems group in Darwin to undertake the research to inform Land & Water Australia's Tropical Rivers Program. CSIRO will produce a report aimed at assisting Land & Water Australia to shape the Tropical Rivers research program so that it will effectively engage with the North Australian indigenous community and their research interests.

*Meeting of Aboriginal people
from the Daly River, 2004.
Photo Northern Land Council.*



for tropical rivers

While the project is still at early stages, it will have a number of components including:

- ~ an information brochure to be circulated to interested indigenous organisations and individuals in the Tropical Rivers program area explaining the project, introducing the Tropical Rivers program, and posing a number of questions about river research and use to think about;
- ~ a series of interviews with Aboriginal organisations across WA, NT and Qld discussing river usage, regional issues and priorities for research;
- ~ a combination of meetings, workshops and case studies focussing on particular river catchments to see what the local on-ground issues are and how research might help. The emphasis will be on research that can provide useful information across Northern Australia, even though it may be concentrated in particular regions; and
- ~ a review of the management arrangements across Northern Australia including legislation, government policy, natural resource programs and other arrangements to see how well they serve indigenous people.

Some of the questions that will be used to assist people in thinking about their input include:

- ~ How do you tell whether the rivers in your area are healthy?
- ~ Have the rivers changed in your lifetime/ experience-if so how? What has caused this?
- ~ How does this affect indigenous people in the area?
- ~ Is there any information you would like to help you in keeping your rivers healthy?
- ~ How do you think rivers could be used in the future? How would you like to see rivers in your area used?
- ~ Have people in your area been involved in research? What kind of research?
- ~ Has the experience of research in your area been a good or a not-so-good experience? Why? What could make research practices better?
- ~ What kind of research would you/your organisation like to see done on rivers, groundwater, wetlands, estuaries?
- ~ How would you/your organisation like to be involved?

The project team will be talking to relevant organisations and their stakeholders throughout the North from May and June, and aim to deliver a final report later this year.

If you would like further information about this project

Patrick O'Leary
CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems
Winnellie NT 0822
Tel: (08) 8944 8447
E-mail: patrick.o'leary@csiro.au

Joe Morrison
NAILSMA (North Australian Indigenous
Land and Sea Management Alliance)
Tel: (08) 8946 6702
E-mail: joe.morrison@cdu.edu.au

Reference: Jackson S., Storrs M., & Morrison J. 2005, in press. 'Recognition of Aboriginal Rights, interests and values in river research and management perspectives from Northern Australia', *Ecological Management and Restoration*.



Australian Government Land & Water Australia

CALL for high innovation R&D projects

Land & Water Australia is calling for highly innovative R&D projects to address critical and emerging issues and opportunities for achieving the sustainable use and management of Australia's natural resources. We currently fund a range of national R&D programs across the biophysical, economic and social dimensions of natural resource management with a strong focus on improving current practices. In this Innovation Call, we are deliberately seeking out new ideas and technologies not likely to be funded in these more applied programs.

Total funds available for this Call are \$1.5 million, with projects eligible to commence from 1 July 2006. Applicants must be permanent residents or citizens of Australia.

Further information...

including guidelines and application forms are available at www.lwa.gov.au/funding

For administrative inquiries

e-mail: innovation.call@lwa.gov.au

For technical inquiries

e-mail: nick.schofield@lwa.gov.au