



GANALANGA MINDIBIRRINA A NEW INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AREA

By Dr Sean Kerins, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU

Sometime next year Waanyi and Garawa people will declare the Waanyi/Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust an Indigenous Protected Area. This will be a significant moment in their long struggle to protect and care for their country.

In the mid-1970s, Garawa and Waanyi people heard that they would soon be able to reclaim some of their ancestral land. As soon as the news reached the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria many of them relocated from the harsh and often violent living conditions their families had endured for the past hundred years to settle on their country in the Nicholson River region of the Northern Territory. They erected humpies, built cattle yards and constructed miles of road and airstrips using only hand-tools. Finally, in 1985, 11,000 square kilometres of unalienated Crown land was granted to them as the Waanyi/Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust (ALT).

For 10 years, with government support for housing, health, education and social security (their citizenship entitlements), and with Outstation

Resource Agencies providing for day to day administration life at last seemed to flourish. They lived on their land in small outstation communities running cattle, keeping gardens, and hunting, fishing and gathering. Estelle and Noreen George who first went to live on the land in the 1970s speak fondly of this period of their lives. It was sometimes tough but they were happy as they grew-up their kids, taught them law and how to live in the land.

Things started to change in the late-1990s when outstation support services began to breakdown and schools were no longer supported by government. Slowly, many families were forced to move back to the surrounding townships they had escaped from. Betty Jack says: "It was real sad that time, leaving our country we fought hard for". Some people, like Jack and Iris Hogan, managed to remain living almost permanently on their country where access is less rugged. However, with little upkeep of roads it soon became difficult to even visit country. Many people worried, the less time they spent on their country

the less knowledge their children and grandchildren would receive about law, ceremonies, sites, stories, songs and plants and animals.

Not living on country soon meant that people were not burning the land. This inactivity saw fuel loads increase. Once lit, massive hot late-season wildfires consumed vast areas of land, quickly changing vegetation cover and destroying the habitat of endemic species. Without vegetation cover the sandy soils quickly erode, choking creeks and wetlands. Further compounding this damage were thousands of feral animals.

In 2005, landowners, with help from several agencies, held some planning meetings to decide how to combat the threats to their land. Through consensus decision-making they drafted planning documents and started a ranger program to manage fire and provide some meaningful employment in a region with few opportunities. They also made a decision to work with scientists to establish a number of fuel-load monitoring sites to measure greenhouse gas emissions with the



intention of participating in future carbon markets.

Over the last eight years they have made significant steps in managing their land. They have taken control of fire, replacing the boom and bust cycle of wildfires with an early season mosaic burning regime which has seen a considerable reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. They have improved access, grading roads and tracks to act as fire breaks. They have also reconnected many young people with their country, bringing them to camp on country to participate in burning activities, planning meetings and fauna surveys. They have also been developing a Plan of Management for the soon to be declared Ganalanga Mindibirrina Indigenous Protected Area to help expand their work activities, engage young people, create more employment and develop enterprises such as cultural tourism and carbon farming. While they have been making significant progress in land management in a very remote and rugged region they have been encountering significant barriers. One of the most challenging is their inability to live permanently on the land due to the lack of basic services.

Since the development of their cultural and natural resource management work many more Waanyi and Garawa people visit their country. They stay at the dilapidated outstations, sometimes until the water supplies run out. The outstations play a vital role in Waanyi and Garawa land management activities. Families hosted several of the IPA planning meetings at their outstations organising trips around the

area to look at the sites or areas that had have been damaged from too much fire or too many feral animals. They use them to host young people from surrounding communities who participate in fauna surveys looking for the endangered species such as the Carpentaria Grasswren and the Carpentaria Rockrat. Waanyi and Garawa rangers often stay at the outstations, using some as fuel depots for their aerial controlled burning. The IPA Plan of Management outlines how the outstations will continue to play an important role in land management, knowledge transfer and in the development of small-enterprises such as cultural tourism.

The NT Government in its *Homeland Policy a Shared Responsibility* recognises the important role outstations play in Aboriginal life. The policy states that the: "Government will continue to provide funding to assist homelands residents and service providers to repair and maintain houses where homelands are used as principal places of residence or where formal programs delivering ongoing, social, cultural and economic development activities are run."

Despite this policy, and Waanyi and Garawa developing their IPA as a formal program to deliver ongoing, social, cultural and economic development activities, they have not been able to get any support from the NT Government. During the development of the IPA, Waanyi and Garawa people invited government ministers and officials to their meetings

on three occasions to talk with them about support for homelands. Their invitations were never accepted leaving a bad taste in the mouths of many people. 'They've forgotten us,' says Ringo Jack a senior Garawa landowner, 'Or they're just too comfortable sitting on their padded chairs in their air-conditioned offices to come and meet with us.'

What Waanyi and Garawa people wanted to tell the NT Government is that their hub and spoke model for homeland service delivery doesn't work in border regions when the hub (Doomadgee) is in Queensland and the spokes (outstations) are in the NT. This raises very difficult questions in relation to service delivery and issues of responsibility that have not been resolved.

Jack Green, senior cultural advisor to the Waanyi/Garawa Rangers says: 'We all working hard down here. Solving problems like with the wildfire that government couldn't fix. We been making plans about how we want to look after this country, create jobs, get the young ones off the grog. We are doing our bit, but the government aren't listening to us. They don't show up to our meetings when we invite them. It makes us feel really bad'.

What Waanyi and Garawa people want from the NT Government is some sharing of responsibility. They have stopped the region's wildfires and developed plans for managing the land as a protected area and now they want a little help with service delivery to their outstations.



Above left: Malcolm Spring at China Wall 2012. Credit: N. Gambold

Above middle: Jimmy Morrison Waanyi/Garawa Ranger Coordinator clearing out a spring at Brumby Springs 2011. Credit N. Gambold.

Above: Waanyi and Garawa people participate in an Indigenous Protected Area Planning meeting at Nudjabarra 2012. Credit S. Kerins