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Conservation planning in a cross-cultural context: the Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Project in the Kimberley, Western Australia

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Abstract

This article illustrates how a conservation planning approach combined Indigenous knowledge and Western science to support Indigenous Traditional Owners to make decisions about managing their ancestral lands and seas, and communicate more strategically with external stakeholders.

Keywords

country, healthy, context, gaambera, western, australia, wunambal, planning, conservation, cultural, kimberley, project, cross

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By Heather Moorcroft, Emma Ignjic, Stuart Cowell, John Goonack, Sylvester Mangolomara, Janet Oobagooma, Regina Karadada, Dianna Williams and Neil Waina

This article illustrates how a conservation planning approach combined Indigenous knowledge and Western science to support Indigenous Traditional Owners to make decisions about managing their ancestral lands and seas, and communicate more strategically with external stakeholders

Key words: conservation planning, Environmental Non-Government Organisations, Indigenous knowledge, Traditional Owners, Western science.

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Figure 1. Traditional Owners and project partners in the men's group during a planning workshop for the Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Project. (Photo: Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation).

is a Gaambera elder, a Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owner and WGAC Director; **Sylvester Mangolomara** is a Wunambal man, a Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owner and Wunambal Gaambera Senior Cultural Advisor; **Janet Oobagooma** is a Wunambal elder and Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owner; **Neil Waina** is a Gaambera man, a Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owner and Head Unguu Ranger; **Dianna Williams** is a Gaambera elder, a Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owner and WGAC Cultural Advisor Director; [PMB 16 (Kahumburu) via Wyndham, Western Australia, 6740, Australia]. This article is a narrative of aspects of a conservation planning process. It is based on the views of the authors who were involved in the process. Traditional Owners have approved the article and the use of the images.

An Emerging Collaborative Conservation Space

There is growing recognition in the Australian conservation sector that to address national environmental challenges and achieve conservation outcomes, partnerships with Indigenous land owners are essential (Ross *et al.* 2008; National Biodiversity Strategy Review Task Group 2009).

This recognition provides new opportunities for Indigenous land owners. In 2008, the total Indigenous land estate was approximately 20% of the Australian continent (Australian Government 2010). Most Indigenous held land is remote, largely intact and

has high conservation value (Altman *et al.* 2007). However, the natural and cultural assets of this estate are facing increasing threats and pressures, many that were not present in pre-European Australia, such as destruction of cultural sites as a result of development actions (Vinnicombe 2002). Managing these vast and largely inaccessible landscapes can be resource intensive, and Traditional Owners and their representative bodies are seeking support from external organisations to help plan for (Fig. 1) and manage these areas, particularly for conservation (Dhimurru 2008; Hoffman *et al.* 2012; Preuss & Dixon 2012; Wallis *et al.* 2012).

The Indigenous estate has made a substantial contribution (at least in terms of area) to Australia's National Reserve System (NRS), mainly through Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs). IPAs are Australia's equivalent to internationally recognised Community Conserved Areas, which are landscapes of natural or cultural significance, voluntarily managed or conserved by local communities (Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.* 2004). In 2008, the NRS covered 12.8% of Australia (Fig. 2). Private reserves, owned mainly by Environmental Non-Government Organisations (ENGOs), contributed to over 4% of the NRS. In contrast, IPAs made up 19.4% of the NRS and shared management protected areas (includes

reserves jointly managed or co-managed with Indigenous Traditional Owners) added another 9.8% (Australian Government 2010). In other words, Indigenous held lands can be considered a cornerstone of Australia's protected areas.

A new conservation approach is evolving in this context, providing opportunities for collaborations between Indigenous Australians and the conservation sector. Historically, ENGOs based their conservation efforts on cultural perspectives dominated by non-Indigenous people, 'a community of scientists' (Brockington 2010) and a preservationist belief. The Western preservationist view of 'wilderness' contends that there is an inverse relationship between humans and the natural environment, a dichotomy of nature and culture (Berkes 2008). By contrast, Indigenous Australians' relationship with the environment is firmly based on the connectedness of humans and the natural environment, on ancestral association and resource utilisation (Rose 2005). Reinforcing dualistic world views in environmental campaigns and management has sometimes resulted in conflict between Indigenous people and the conservation sector (Herath 2002; Adams 2008; Pickerill 2009). It has also resulted in imposed control and restrictions on Indigenous people's ability to use and occupy their ancestral estates (Langton *et al.* 2005).

Alcorn (1993) argued that conservation is best achieved through partnerships between conservationists and Indigenous peoples. With a growing recognition of Indigenous peoples' rights, particularly as owners of areas of high biodiversity, there has also been support to address the social impacts of conservation (Springer 2009). The recognition of the interconnectedness of biological diversity and cultural diversity (Pretty *et al.* 2009) is driving a major paradigm shift among Western conservationists who accept human use and occupation of the environment as integral to finding a common ground of sustainability (Berkes 2008: 237). A number of ENGOs in Australia have developed Indigenous engagement policies, employ Aboriginal people and have Indigenous Australians on their management boards. Many, such as WWF Australia and Bush Heritage Australia (BHA), have Indigenous partnership programmes. Some ENGOs further acknowledge that conservation outcomes on a collaborative project with Traditional Owners can only be achieved if the project also supports cultural, social and economic outcomes, such as sustainable livelihoods for Traditional Owners (Fitzsimons *et al.* 2012).

Castree and Head (2008) ask whether we are reaching a time in Australia when we have passed this dualism of world views, and note the importance of reporting on approaches that challenge this dualism. In this article, we describe the challenges of adapting a widely used 'dualist' conservation planning and prioritisation tool so that it respects and privileges Indigenous knowledge and ownership whilst maintaining the benefits of its Western science base.

Wunambal Gaambera Country and its People

Wunambal Gaambera Country covers approximately 2.5 million hectares of the north Kimberley region of

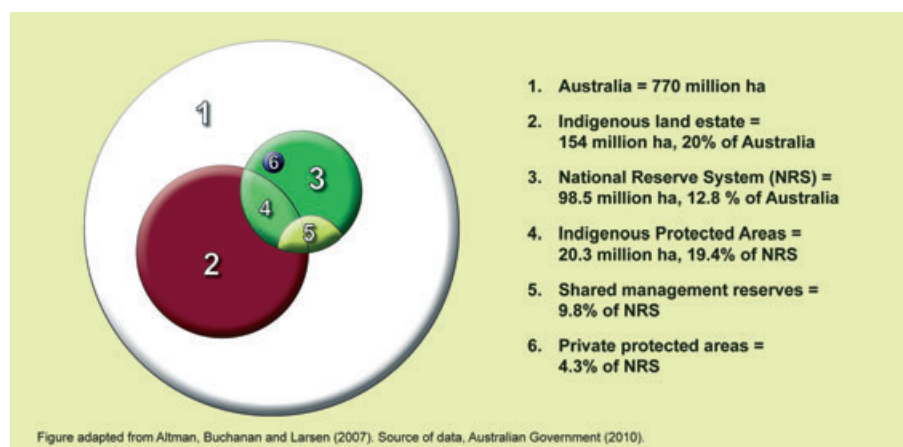


Figure 2. Diagram highlighting the importance of the Indigenous estate in Australia's expanding National Reserve System.

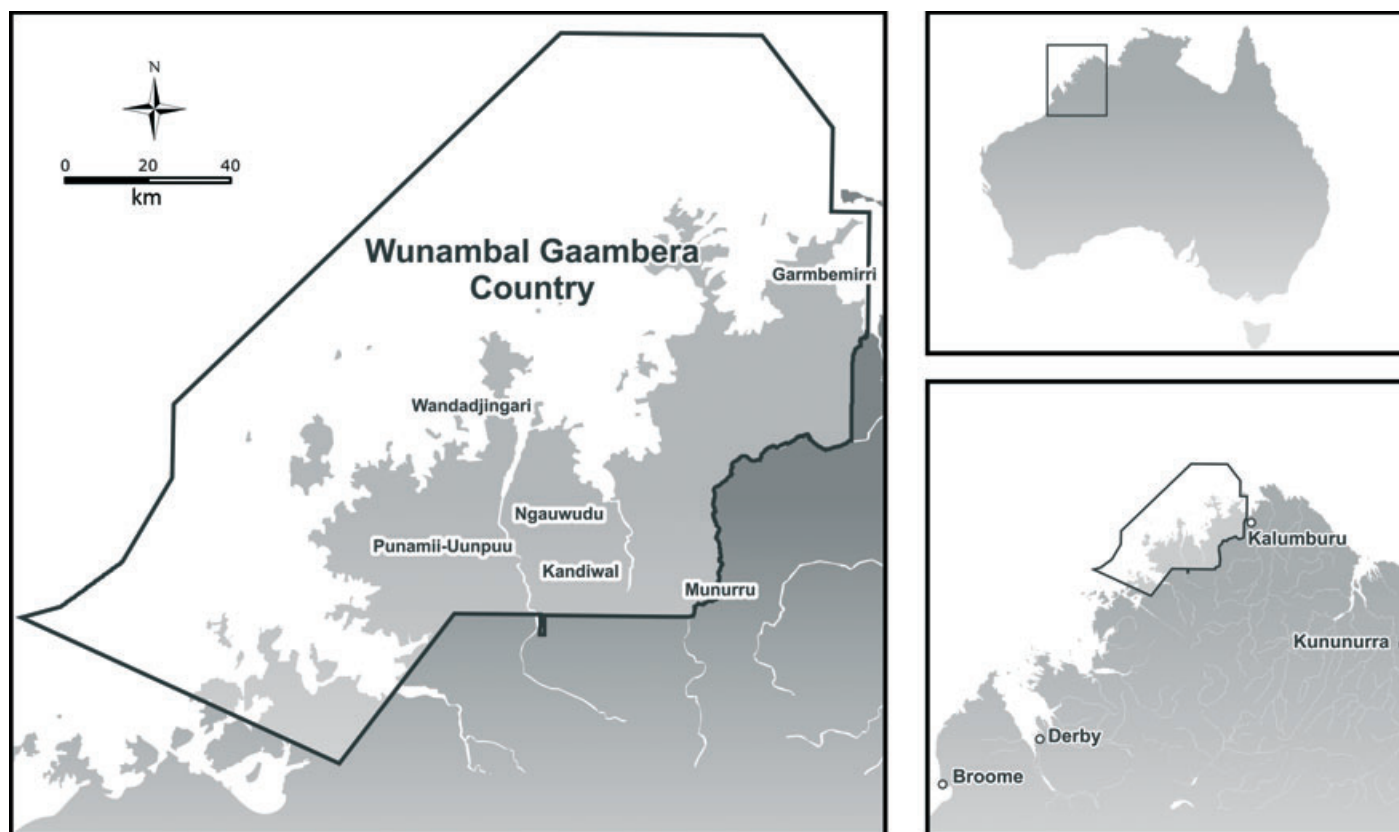


Figure 3. Maps showing the location and area of Wunambal Gaambera Country.

Australia, including land and sea (Fig. 3). Wunambal Gaambera Country is part of the *Wanjina Wunggurr* community. Wunambal Gaambera people call their ancestral estate, their 'country', *Uunguu* – their living home. *Uunguu* culture is based on *Wanjina Wunggurr* Law, and it is unique to, and can only exist in, Wunambal Gaambera Country, as it has for millennia. Its ongoing contribution to the diversity of Australian culture is dependent on Wunambal Gaambera people maintaining their natural and cultural assets on country. Wunambal Gaambera people's long-term presence is depicted in the extensive rock art sites and in the wealth of Indigenous knowledge that continues to be maintained.

Wunambal Gaambera Country is recognised for its rich cultural and natural assets. It is part of the area covered by the West Kimberley National Heritage Listing and the North Kimberley National Biodiversity Hotspot. It

has a number of listings of Nationally Important Wetlands and Priority 1 and Priority 2 Wild Rivers (Australian Government 2011). Three of the World Wide Fund for Nature's Global 200 Priority Eco-regions include Wunambal Gaambera Country (World Wide Fund for Nature 2010).

The Wunambal Gaambera people (of approximately 400) reside mainly in the Kimberley towns of Kalumburu, Derby, Broome and Kununurra. Today one family group lives permanently on their family group's ancestral estate (their *graa*) at Kandiwal on *Ngauwudu* (the Mitchell Plateau), and other families regularly visit their own *graa*. There are 10 *graa* in Wunambal Gaambera Country.

Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners have striven to ensure that they are respected and recognised as the owners and managers of their ancestral estate. In 1998, the Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners incorporated the Wunambal Gaambera

Aboriginal Corporation (WGAC) as the formal governance body responsible to them for management of Wunambal Gaambera Country. The Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners lodged their native title determination application under Australia's *Native Title Act 1993* in 1999. Subsequently, in 2001 they prepared a management plan for a part of their estate, *Ngauwudu*, in response to the Western Australian Government's declaration of four conservation reserves over parts of Wunambal Gaambera Country, which included *Ngauwudu*. The Traditional Owners believed these declarations were imposed without adequate consent as required by the *Native Title Act 1993*. Despite this, the reserves remained and Traditional Owners have continued their efforts for proper recognition and responsibility.

Coinciding with Wunambal Gaambera actions, public and private sector interest in the north Kimberley region increased through tourism,

mining, oil and gas processing, the establishment of further reserves, and National Heritage assessment under the Commonwealth's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. Along with these increasing external pressures, the passing of a number of Wunambal Gaambera elders who had the vision and strength to pursue recognition and control of their ancestral estates added urgency and significance to the task of seeking respect and recognition as the owners and managers of their ancestral estate.

In 2006, the WGAC, on behalf of Traditional Owners, prepared the Uunguu Tourism Plan (WGAC 2006) to manage impacts and secure benefits from tourism activities on Wunambal Gaambera Country. Development of a 'healthy country' (see Rose 1996; Burgess *et al.* 2005) framework to support these activities was identified as a priority under the Tourism Plan.

Consequently, the WGAC sought assistance from a number of organisations to help develop and then implement a 'healthy country' framework. That framework, the Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Project (the WGHCP), was conceptualised in two phases: with a 2-year participatory planning process followed by a 10-year implementation stage, both formalised by legal agreements between WGAC and their partners. In 2011, Wunambal Gaambera native title was determined over 25 000 km² of land and sea.

The Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Project

The Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners sought the right to make decisions about their estates, through a voluntary commitment to conservation management and the use of non-Indigenous planning approaches in a 'community-centric' way. The WGHCP identifies and articulates the principle values of 'healthy country' in modern contexts and maintains those values consistent with *Wanjina*

Wunggurr Law under the direction of Traditional Owners (Vigilante & Mangolomara 2007).

Although the WGHCP is coordinated and directed by the Traditional Owners through WGAC, it is a collaborative project involving a number of partner organisations: BHA – a national not-for-profit ENGO that provides funds, advice, technical support – facilitated the planning process; and the Kimberley Land Council (KLC) – as the regional Traditional Owner representative body that supports Traditional Owners with technical expertise, advice, logistics – promotes Traditional Owner interests as paramount. Other partners include the Australian Government's IPA Program, which provides funds towards the planning and management of IPAs; the Northern Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA), which provides technical advice; and The Nature Conservancy (TNC), which provided funds in support of the planning process. WWF Australia Program funded the completion of the ethnobiological project during the time of the 'healthy country' planning process.

As Sylvester Mangolomara, Wunambal man and Wunambal Gaambera Senior Cultural Advisor, explains:

We got to go back to country and look after our place. That's where we get more stronger – from the country and from the spirit in our country. We got to work all together now and find somehow to protect them. Not just the land but the islands too, and look after the songs – keep them alive. That's why we need others to give us a hand to see what to do – business way you know ... When we're helping each other we can really go out and do it ... I can't do it by myself – I need support too. From people who maybe want to help us – how to set up and all that.

The Planning Process

By working through the structured CAP process (see Box 1), it became

evident to the planning participants that the wider socio-economic well-being and Wunambal Gaambera capacity is central to achieving conservation outcomes. Biodiversity, within the *Wanjina Wunggurr* cultural context, would need to include the human element. The planning process and timeframes also had to be flexible. The process had to respect and support Traditional Owners' local priorities, governance structures, knowledge systems, capabilities and objectives. The following sections outline some examples of how the planning process was adapted to achieve these requirements while trying to maintain the strengths of a 'Western' conservation planning tool.

Respecting and valuing the different social constructs

Conservation Action Planning was adapted in two key ways. Firstly, to support meaningful contribution by planning participants, the process, typically driven by conservation planners and facilitators, incorporated Indigenous governance structures, local protocols and priorities. Secondly, core CAP concepts, based on ecological processes and systems, were adapted so they included categories defined by Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners and incorporated Indigenous knowledge. These changes, elaborated below, reflect the *Karparti* approach described by Horstman and Wightman (2001) when commenting on their ethnobiological work with Traditional Owners of the same area.

Although the non-Indigenous facilitators from the partner organisations, who have a Western science background, were well respected by other Indigenous groups they had worked with, they were vetted by Traditional Owners. This was to ensure they had adequate understanding and respect of Indigenous world views, Wunambal Gaambera circumstances and that their approach would be inclusive.

Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners and their 'healthy country'

Box 1. Conservation Action Planning

Conservation Action Planning (CAP) is a process for planning, implementing and measuring results for conservation projects developed over the last 25 years by the US-based TNC (<http://www.nature.org>). CAP guides project teams to prioritise strategies through a consistent process that links targets (assets) to actions and outcomes. CAP is supported by Excel-based software and an extensive global network of practitioners and coaches. CAP is gradually becoming synonymous with three other tools and approaches used for conservation planning globally – the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation (<http://www.conservationmeasures.org>), the Miradi planning software and the ConPro database.

The Open Standards were prepared to 'bring together common concepts, approaches, and terminology in conservation project design, management, and monitoring in order to help practitioners improve the practice of conservation' (<http://tinyurl.com/67rzxve>). They were developed by the Conservation Measures Partnership, a collaboration of 13 NGOs, including WWF, TNC and Conservation International together with the World Commission on Protected Areas and International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Miradi (<http://tinyurl.com/5r8yd7a>) is a software tool developed to support the Open Standards. Miradi helps to manage the information relationships between the many objectives, strategies and actions that ultimately go to make up a conservation plan, rather than having to try and do many of these tasks manually.

ConPro (<http://conpro.tnc.org/>) is a web-based database that records the outputs of either the CAP Excel tool or Miradi and allows other teams/individuals to search those projects based on a range of criteria.

Both CAP and Miradi are increasingly being used in landscape and property conservation planning projects throughout Australia, including well-known landscape projects (e.g. Gondwana Link), and as the primary planning tools for a number of ENGOs. The tools are also increasingly being adapted to support Indigenous community use (<http://tinyurl.com/683gedb>).

partners recognised that *Wanjina Wunggurr* needed to be inherent in the process. This presented some challenges as *Wanjina Wunggurr* and the chosen planning approach of CAP are very different constructs, as illustrated in Fig. 4. Traditional Owners and the partners respected and valued the differences that these two

constructs brought to the process and adapted the process to incorporate both ways.

Adaptations for supporting meaningful contribution

We developed adaptations to the typical conservation planning process to support meaningful contribution by

participants. Four of these are discussed below.

Planning on country

Location was an important part of the planning process, as such, workshops were held on Wunambal Gaambera Country. Several large workshops were run with representatives from all the Wunambal Gaambera family groups. These workshops were held at the dry season ranger camp at *Gar-mbemirri*, on the Anjo Peninsula (Fig. 1). Following these, a smaller workshop was held at Kalumburu to specifically work on developing objectives, strategies and actions. The final planning workshop was a 'travelling road show', with meetings in Kalumburu, Kandiwal and Derby and visits to country at *Munurru* (King Edward Crossing), *Wandadjingari* (Port Warrender) and *Punamii-Uunpuu* (Mitchell Falls).

The larger workshops and the travelling workshop provided people with the opportunity to visit country and supported the Indigenous protocol of 'being on country in order to speak for

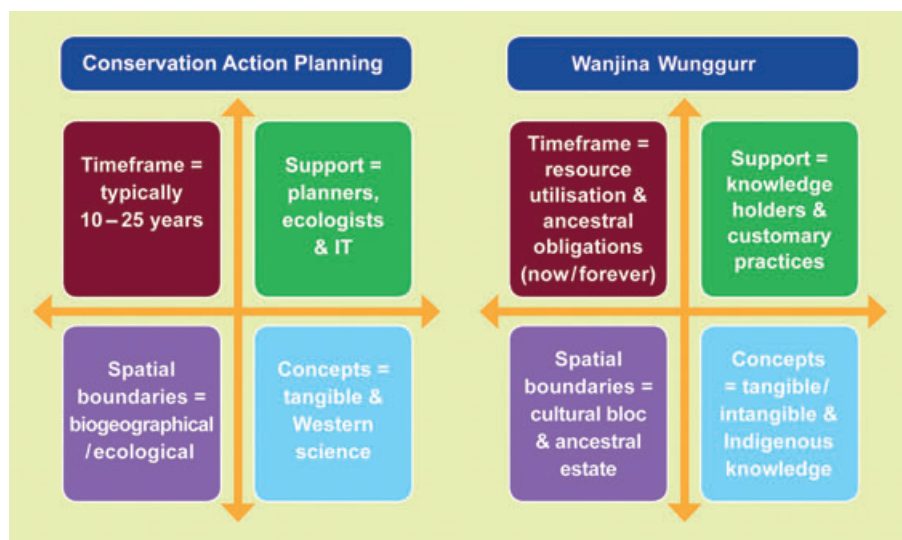


Figure 4. Diagram illustrating the different constructs of Conservation Action Planning and *Wanjina Wunggurr*.

country'. As Dianna Williams, Gaambera elder, stated:

The most important thing is for people to get in contact with the land – the soil. All them young ones. To take care of country you need to sit on it.

Convening large group meetings on country is logistically challenging and costly. Some Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners are quite elderly and immobile, and some require regular medication. However, despite these challenges and the cost, the large workshops held at the early stages of the project made it easier for people to understand issues and relate non-Indigenous, relatively abstract planning concepts to Indigenous knowledge. Concurrent flora and fauna survey work and recording Indigenous knowledge as part of the ethnobiological project helped to inform workshop discussions, as well as supported transfer of knowledge within the Wunambal Gaambera community. Conducting workshops over a few days also meant that people could visit nearby cultural sites, go hunting or fishing, collect bush foods or paint. As discussed by Walsh and Mitchell (2002), such gatherings are viewed as critical in Indigenous society today where the process can be just as significant as the outcome.

Utilising Indigenous governance structures

Local governance structures were supported in numerous ways, including establishing a steering group made up of a majority of senior Traditional Owners and convening a working group representing each family group, to develop objectives, strategies and actions, some of which were specific to each *graa*. Breaking into men's and women's groups during workshops encouraged free discussion and accommodated avoidance relationship restrictions (see Fig. 1). Issues about particular cultural matters were referred to relevant senior

people. As Neil Waina, Head Uunguu Ranger and Gaambera man, noted:

... most of the time some women too shy and that encouraged them to speak up... broken into the two groups... feel comfortable with that group so more willing to talk... even our young people had a bit more thing to say too. I don't like talking over our old people... I take advice from them.

Adopting flexible timeframes and providing regular feedback

The process for developing the plan was not hurried and it respected people's obligations and priorities. Meeting dates changed several times because of cultural responsibilities such as 'sorry business' (mourning and funeral practices). This resulted in extensions to the initial planning timeframe.

Regular feedback was given to participants throughout the process. This included revisiting what had been discussed and agreed to during previous workshops, summing up at the conclusion of each workshop, and preparing regular pictorial reports for participants to read between workshops.

Using appropriate terms and language

One of the first steps in any participatory planning process is to ensure that participants understand and are familiar with the process. CAP has its own language with terms such as *critical threats*, *situation analysis* and *stressors*. These terms are technical jargon derived from the Western science disciplines of ecology and conservation planning. Such terms had little meaning to Traditional Owners. To address this issue, a plain language glossary was developed and referred to throughout the process (<http://tinyurl.com/683gedb>). Local Indigenous language terms were also used, particularly for places, plants and animals.

Adapting the concepts

In addition to supporting meaningful contribution during the actual planning process, the concepts within the CAP were also adapted in various ways – from definition of the project area, inclusion of tangible and intangible cultural targets and threats to culture, as well as the incorporation of social and cultural indicators. These adaptations enabled an Indigenous world view and respect for *Wanjina Wunggurr* to be combined with a non-Indigenous world view and Western science.

Identifying the project area as the whole of Wunambal Gaambera Country, including both land and sea, reflected cultural responsibilities and relationships, rather than bio-geographical or other non-Indigenous spatial boundaries.

Conservation Action Planning targets are usually natural assets such as ecological systems. However, the value of an asset for Traditional Owners reflects resource utilisation and/or cultural significance and customary obligations as well as the biodiversity value. Animals such as *jebarra* (emu, *Dromaius novaehollandiae*), *aamba* (kangaroos and wallabies), *mangguru* (marine turtles) and *balguja* (dugong, *Dugong dugon*) are valuable food species and were therefore identified as targets (WGAC 2010).

For Wunambal Gaambera people, customary practices passed down through generations honour ancestral obligations. Traditional Owners believe that if such practices are not maintained, then this will impact negatively on the 'health' of the country, as these activities interconnect with everything – with *Uunguu*. In addition to identifying tangible targets such as valuable food species, Traditional Owners also identified customary obligations, which have intangible benefits such as 'Wanjina Wunggurr Law' and 'right way fire', as described below. The conservation targets became simply the 'really

important things about country'. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, a number of the 'really important things' identified by Traditional Owners had parallels to what would be considered standard or usual conservation targets in a non-Indigenous context. The main threats identified were threats to the 'really important things about country', such as 'loss of traditional knowledge', 'not being secure on country' and 'visitors not being respectful'. These were combined with the more standard ecological threats, such as invasive species, that Traditional Owners recognise as important. Similarly, as well as the usual biological indicators, social and cultural indicators were identified to monitor the health of country.

'Wanjina Wunggurr Law' as a conservation 'target'

Wunambal Gaambera people believe that if they are not on their *graa*, passing on their Indigenous knowledge and following traditional *Wanjina Wunggurr Law*, then the Country, including its people, will not be healthy. As Sylvester Mangolomara explains:

Traditional knowledge makes us stronger and shows that we belong to the land. Keeping our culture strong, that makes us the person we are – Wunambal. If we don't look after country – that makes us nobody. We need to hang onto that and teach our younger generations so they can follow our footsteps. We got to keep it alive all the time.

During the planning process, *Wanjina Wunggurr Law* was implicit to all decisions made about the 'really important things about country'. However, it was not until after the second workshop that it became evident that 'Wanjina Wunggurr Law' needed to be the number one conservation target. 'Wanjina Wunggurr Law', as the most important target, anchored the plan to an Indigenous world view, rather than that of a non-Indigenous perspective

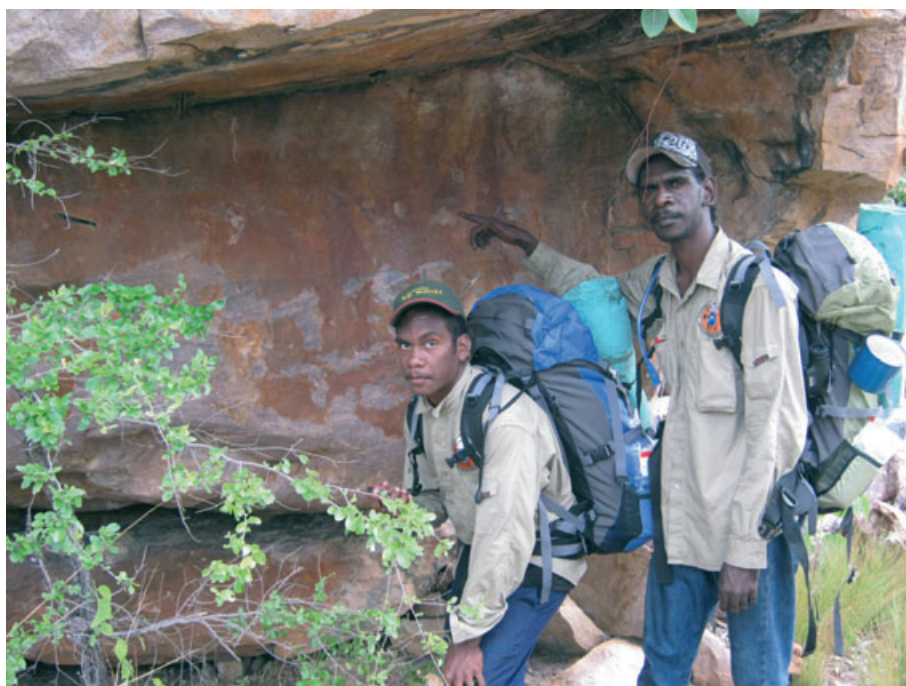


Figure 5. Unguu Rangers Elton Waina and Raymond Waina checking cultural sites while doing a 'firewalk'. Carrying out field activities such as 'firewalks' during the planning process informed workshop discussions. (Photo: Robert Warren).

privileging biodiversity conservation. It clearly demonstrated the cultural reality of Traditional Owners' connection to their Country. It supported Traditional Owners' expertise and primary aspirations to maintain control and ownership of the process and the plan.

'Right way fire' as a conservation 'target'

'Right way fire' refers to burning according to customary responsibilities (including who can burn, when to burn and where to burn) to ensure that cultural sites are maintained and so that there are resources available to hunt and collect, such as animals and bush foods from plants, and so that these foods taste good. When asked how to tell if the Country is healthy, Regina Karadada, Gaambera elder, responded:

look around you – there's more animals ... if you're not burning right there's no food up that way ... you don't see them anymore. This last year nothing – too much late burning. Burn it anytime just hot, hot, hot. We

got to teach them, they got to know how to burn right way ... Long time ago a person had a job – that was to burn country. They had their own people who went and light up the fire. So they were looking after their animals and plants too – that was their food. It has to be done at certain time you know so you have the right vegetation for the animals – and the people. Our old people passed that on and we got to keep it going.

During the planning process, a number of 'right way fire' activities were undertaken, including Unguu Rangers doing multi-day 'firewalks' with Traditional Owners from the relevant *graa*, walking through country, checking and maintaining sites and carrying out 'right way fire' (Fig. 5).

'Loss of traditional knowledge' as a threat

The CAP process identifies critical threats to targets. For Wunambal Gaambera people, threats to culture are as relevant as threats to



Figure 6. Unguu Rangers Terrence Marnga (left) and Neil Waina (right) with Senior Cultural Advisor Sylvester Mangolomara (centre) installing a sign for the Unguu Indigenous Protected Area. (Photo: Robert Warren).

biodiversity. Subsequently, 'loss of traditional knowledge' was identified as one of the key threats because the 'health' of the cultural and social aspects of people's lives will impact on achieving 'healthy country'. As Wunambal elder Janet Ooba-gooma explained, contemporary practices are important but it is also important to make sure that Indigenous knowledge and customs are maintained and passed on.

There's lots of new ways – sometimes it's good. Some young ones try to learn the old ways too but they see it's too hard. The Western things come across their mind – like they brushing it and they put a different view of things there. They see new things and they more interested in the new things than the old things – that of the land.

Applying social and cultural indicators

Measures such as species abundance and distribution, species range and diversity, number of hectares burnt

and water quality were complemented by social and cultural indicators such as amount of time spent on country, amount of Indigenous knowledge being passed on, the availability and taste of certain foods, the amount of fat on some animals, the number of visits to cultural sites, who is making decisions about management and who is carrying out the management (see Fitzsimons *et al.* 2012). For example, if the bush apple is sweet and juicy, or if there is a good amount of tail fat on a kangaroo, then this can be an indication that burning is being carried out in the right way and that the country is 'healthy'.

Some of the cultural and social indicators identified were based on subjective measurements, such as the taste of foods and the amount of Indigenous knowledge being passed on. At the time of writing, an expert panel advising on research and monitoring of biological, social and cultural indicators was being established and will include senior Traditional

Owners and knowledge holders as well as experienced ecologists trained in Western science.

Planning Outcomes

Although the WGHCP is ongoing, the finalisation of the first phase, the planning process, has proven to be a powerful tool for the Traditional Owners. The Unguu Indigenous Protected Area Stage 1 has been declared (Fig. 6). The Australian Government has included the planning process and the resultant plan as an example of a participatory planning model for other IPAs (Hill *et al.* 2011). TNC is also using the planning process as a template to support other IPA consultative projects in northern Australia. Funds from the private and public sector have been secured to assist with the project and the WGAC has entered into a 10-year partnership agreement with BHA to assist with implementing the plan, providing a measure of long-term security for the project.

The Healthy Country Plan itself, now being implemented, has also been used in negotiations with other stakeholders such as the Western Australian Government and the business sector, with the engagements being defined by Traditional Owner aspirations, as articulated and structured in the plan, rather than those being imposed externally.

As John Goonack, Vice Chair of WGAC, explains:

That Healthy Country Plan is a good thing – we know what direction we are heading in – seen as having one group, all pointing in right direction. Everyone real happy about it. Changed a lot from when we didn't have [partners] helping us. All good now. Got this IPA set up. Bit more meeting yet.

Implications for Other Collaborative Conservation Planning Projects

Historically, conservation planning in Australia has been embedded in a

specific cultural context that privileges Western science, linear views of time and bounded notions of space, and asserts particular assumptions about the separation of nature and culture, resource management and human intervention (Howitt & Suchet-Pearson 2004). Application of such planning approaches into an Indigenous context risks impacting on Indigenous governance structures, by constructing and imposing external frameworks that undermine local authority, expertise and knowledge systems. Structural constraints to participatory planning processes, such as the organisational systems of partners, funding program requirements and accountability, can also impede on delivering outcomes (Trickett and Ryerson Espino 2004).

Although conservation planning processes in post-settler nation states such as Australia have in the past often resulted in the marginalisation of Indigenous groups, planning can achieve positive outcomes for Indigenous groups if it is community-based, and centred on community objectives, capabilities and knowledge systems rather than those imposed by another party (Lane 2006). The Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners view Western science as one of the key contributions ENGO partners can offer. Using Western science provides validity to external stakeholders, it supports articulation of 'healthy country' principles to a wider audience and it provides for contemporary management in dealing with new threats.

The challenge with the planning process for the WGHCP was adapting a widely accepted conservation planning approach so that it continued to be informed by Western science whilst respecting and complementing Indigenous knowledge. As Jacobson and Stephens (2009) stated, this meant respecting and valuing the differences in the knowledge systems of the partners 'without compromising their independence or distinctiveness' (Jacobson & Stephens 2009: 161).

Ensuring the process was controlled by Traditional Owners and incorporated Indigenous language and core concepts respected and supported community integrity. This affirms the assertion that Indigenous-controlled planning can shape a more equitable intercultural conservation space (Hill 2011). The WGHCP planning process supported local governance structures. The success of the planning process was also dependant on open communication between the partners, and a willingness to take a flexible and adaptive approach in terms of timelines for reporting and funding. Results of research into other aspects of the project, including analysis of the engagement between the Traditional Owners and the project partners, will be presented in the future.

The WGHCP has shown that the success of a collaborative conservation planning process in a cross-cultural context requires support of Traditional Owners' interpretations of 'healthy country' as well as the recognition of cultural, social and economic outcomes. Most significantly, the WGHCP demonstrates that Indigenous Traditional Owners' aspirations to drive the conservation planning agenda for their ancestral estates can be achieved.

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