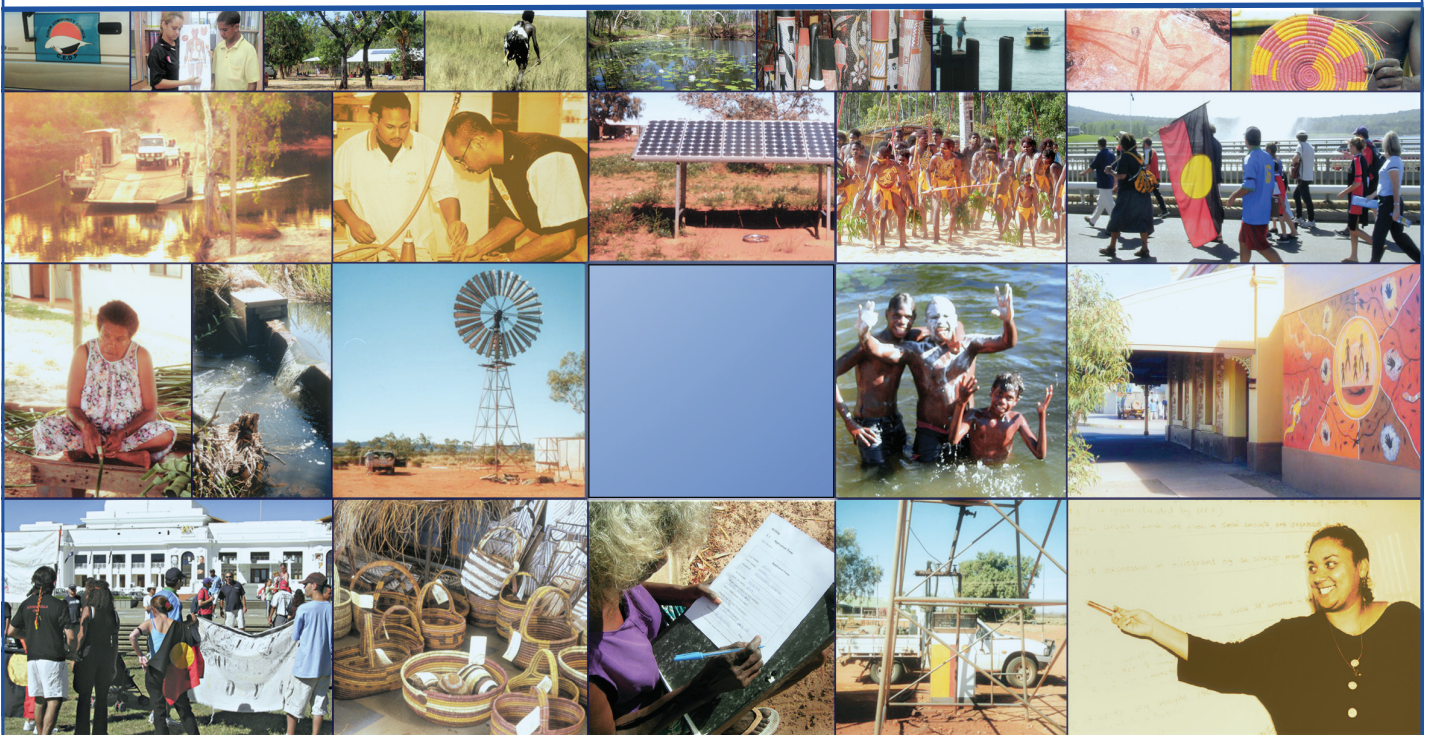


Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport on Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges

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This submission addresses the Inquiry's terms of reference in a general sense but with a specific focus on natural and cultural resource management activities undertaken by Indigenous Australians.

The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University is currently undertaking a three to five year research project 'People on Country, Healthy Landscapes and Indigenous Economic Futures'. This research project is collaborative, working with a number of community-based 'caring for country' ranger projects in north Australia currently engaged to varying degrees in cultural and natural resource management (CNRM) activities (see Northern Land Council 2006).

The research has two aims: firstly to provide business planning and monitoring of employment and CNRM outcomes to get the projects onto a sustainable footing and operating more effectively; and secondly, to forge alliances with key Indigenous regional representative and natural resource management agencies to assist them with evidence-based research on outcomes and to assist to reduce institutional barriers to growing the sector with transportable best practice models. This will facilitate enhanced Indigenous involvement in the provision of environmental services at a regional scale and in emerging new industries (like carbon abatement) that will generate economic benefits for remote Indigenous communities currently lacking conventional commercial opportunities. Such activities will also generate national benefits during a period of climatic and related environmental uncertainties.

Over the past three decades over 20 per cent of the Australian land mass has been returned to Indigenous Australians as a result of successful land rights and native title claims and land acquisition programs (Altman and Dillon 2004). The Indigenous estate includes some of the most biodiverse lands in Australia. Official natural resource atlas maps indicate that many of the most intact and nationally important wetlands, riparian zones, forests, and rivers and waterways are located on the Indigenous estate. Mapping also shows that these lands are at risk of species contraction and face major threats from feral animals, exotic weeds, changed fire regimes, pollution and over-grazing (Woinarski *et. al.* 2007). On top of these threats, the latest available climate science suggests that substantial biodiversity impacts on this crucial part of the continental landmass are inevitable. In the face of this, an innovative national policy approach is required to support community-based efforts to ameliorate threats and minimize adverse biodiversity outcomes. This position is based on the documented recognition by CSIRO that effective resource management is much less expensive than environmental repair, something that is very clear from recent experience in the Murray-Darling Basin in south-east Australia.

While much of the Indigenous estate is not commercially viable for 'old-economy' pastoral and agricultural uses, it is a significant environmental and ecological asset (Altman and Dillon 2004). Some bio-regions are largely intact, while others face pressures from wildfires, weeds, feral animals and other threats like marine pollution. The recent *Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* found that many regions will face an increased threat to biodiversity with the onset of climate change, including an increase in pests, weeds and wildfires (Hennessy et al. 2007; see also Dunlop and Brown 2008; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005; NRMCC 2004). This may result in adverse patterns of biodiversity change over relatively short timeframes (Altman et al. 2007: 33).

Historically, natural resource management on the lands that now constitute the Indigenous-owned estate has been either absent or significantly under-resourced (Altman and Dillon 2004; Altman, et al. 2007). While some Indigenous land-owners currently engage in natural resource management activities, much of this is conducted informally and outside the market or is poorly remunerated, pointing to a significant opportunity for enhanced investments (Altman 2007). Opportunities exist both in managing ecosystems to minimise environmental damage and in developing environmental programs that help reduce Australia's carbon emissions. For example, the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement (WALFA) project was built using the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), along with funding from the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT), philanthropic organizations and the private sector (TSCRC n.d.).

In May 2007, The Howard Government initiated the Working on Country Program (WoC) which builds on the Indigenous-initiated Caring for Country programs, by contracting Indigenous people to provide environmental services and paying them proper award wages. This work will help to maintain, restore, protect and manage Australia's environment often in very remote and sparsely populated regions. The 'Working on Country' program represents a symbolic and practical breakthrough in recognising, respecting, and recurrently resourcing innovative community-based resource management effort on the indigenous-owned estate.

In 2006, the signing of the Northern Territory Bilateral Schedule 'Healthy Country Healthy People' also sought to build on Northern Territory Caring for Country programs by identifying \$10 million for additional investment over a two year period, to be supplemented by another \$10 million from the Indigenous Land Corporation. Despite this timeframe and the development of an investment strategy the implementation of this strategy has been very slow, possibly owing to the Northern Territory Emergency Response intervention and strained Commonwealth/Northern Territory relations.

The Northern Territory Emergency Response nevertheless effectively increased government investment for CNRM through an expansion of the WoC program to include a Working on Country Northern Territory (WoC NT) program. This hasty expansion was largely driven by the poorly considered decision by the Howard Government to abolish the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) from July 2007 and a need to demonstrate that so-called real jobs were being made available as a partial offset. While this investment was welcomed in principle by land and sea management groups, the speed of its introduction, without subsequent community development investment and the slow delivery of funding from the Healthy Country Healthy People Schedule may undermine both the WoC and WoC NT programs.

In recent years there has been much debate on the viability of remote communities, especially small outstations. This debate is generating growing uncertainty for Outstation Resource Agencies and CDEP organisations that provide much of the infrastructural and service delivery base that sustains Caring for Country projects. The emerging dominant discourse of defining economic development success only in terms of mainstream jobs sends a very negative message to Indigenous Australians that the land and sea management work they are currently involved in on country is not 'real work'. This very public, and at times poorly informed, debate creates a high level of uncertainty in remote communities where land and sea management work is of great economic, social, cultural and environmental importance. Examples include the recent proposal by Andrew Forrest, warmly embraced by the Prime Minister and powerful Indigenous spokespeople, to create 50,000 full-time private sector jobs within two years (see <<http://www.crikey.com.au/Politics/20080805-The-Forrest-plan-A-high-risk-strategy-to-close-the-Indigenous-employment-gap.html>>); and the more recent propositions that have garnered much public attention to force unemployed Indigenous people to take on low-skilled work as seasonal fruit and vegetable harvesters, often at great distance from the land that they own that requires active management.

We believe that this focus solely on mainstream opportunity is misguided. There is a crucial and strategic role for Indigenous people residing on the massive Indigenous estate and engaging in CNRM.

A clear example of the negative ecological impacts of a depopulated landscape can be seen on the Waanyi/Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust on the Northern Territory/Queensland border. This land trust covers 12,000 sq kms and contains areas of high national conservation value. Since traditional owners moved off the land trust, because of the lack of provision of basic services (health, housing and education) that they should enjoy as a citizenship entitlement, their country has experienced large-scale late dry season hot fires. In some years these fires burn in excess of 16,000 sq kms, beyond the land trust area. The long-term result of these uncontrolled hot fires is evident across much of the land trust where vast areas of country have lost significant areas of vegetation. The loss of this vegetation means the loss of feeding and breeding habitats for many native—especially endemic, threatened—species. The loss of vegetation also causes the exposure of skeletal soils to erosion. In all likelihood, without people living on country and the resumption of Aboriginal fire management, these soils will slowly choke the rivers and billabongs and significantly reduce the habitat of marine species. Such hot fires also emit additional greenhouse gases that marginally exacerbate global warming.

Indigenous people play a crucial role in CNRM. Indigenous ecological and local knowledge combined with scientific practice are essential tools in the sustainable management of much of remote Australia. This role is likely to grow owing to the challenges posed by climate change, the scarcity of fresh water resources, and associated biodiversity issues.

Recent legal decisions, such as the Blue Mud Bay High Court judgment of 30 July 2008, which confirmed Indigenous people in the Northern Territory are the owners of 5,600 kms of intertidal coastline, suggest that Indigenous people will also potentially have a growing role to play in coastal and fisheries management issues (see <<http://www.crikey.com.au/Politics/20080801-Understanding-the-Blue-Mud-Bay-decision.html>>). This again indicates the need to ensure that Indigenous people are provided employment opportunity where they reside and in the national interest rather than elsewhere in mainstream industries.

We end this submission with the following five recommendations:

1. It is important that the significance of a peopled landscape or 'people on country' is recognised as a fundamental principle in the natural resource management of the Australian continent. In the case of the vast Indigenous estate that now covers 20 per cent of the continent, or 1.5 million sq kms, this means Indigenous occupation and management of their land.
2. The environmental management work of Indigenous Australians participating in Caring for Country and Caring for Sea Country programs needs to be recognised and appropriately remunerated. Such contributions, often based on Indigenous and local knowledge, are in the national interest and assist to maintain Australia's unique continental biodiversity.
3. It is imperative that the crucial roles that institutions, such as CDEP organisations and Outstation Resource Agencies, with proven track record play in supporting Caring for Country programs. The current policy focus on mainstream opportunity and depopulation of the remote Indigenous estate needs careful consideration, as does the threats to CDEP and to the provision of basic services to remote outstations.
4. The recently established WoC and WoC NT programs are important developments that need to be carefully grown. It is imperative that these investments are supplemented by additional public sector funding for equipment, ranger training and capacity building for robust governance.
5. Place-based assessments of additional jobs that could be generated in land and sea management and in the management of threatened species such as turtle and dugong should be undertaken urgently. Such labour force planning is important to ensure that the Indigenous estate is not prematurely emptied of the manpower and expertise needed for its management in the national interest.

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