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Senior Garawa man Jack Green burning country.

People On Country

Garawa

Traditional Owners and Area of Operation

The Garawa are the traditional owners of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria: their country covers approximately 30,000 sq km. Garawa estates also include sea country in the southern Gulf. The Garawa own some of their country under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (ALRA) and Northern Territory pastoral leases for Greenbank, Pungalina and Seven Emu.

The main area of land management activity for the Garawa rangers is currently focused on the Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust (ALT) (also known as Robinson River). The Garawa ALT, which is approximately 8,000 sq km, is located in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria region of the Northern Territory. The nearest service town is Borroloola, which is about a 1.5 hour drive from the Garawa ALT in a westerly direction along a formed gravel road. The community is cut off in the Wet season with the only access being by aircraft.

On the Garawa ALT there is the community of Robinson River, with approximately 150 people resident, and six outstations—five occupied permanently and one seasonally.

Landscape Description

Garawa country falls within two bioregions, the Gulf Fall and Uplands, and Gulf Coastal. The Gulf Fall and Uplands bioregion is the second largest in the Northern Territory stretching from the Arnhem Land Plateau into western Queensland. It covers some 111,783 sq km of land, with some 36 per cent of the bioregion owned by Aboriginal people (NRETA 2005:88).

The most extensive vegetation in the Gulf Fall and Uplands bioregion is woodland dominated by Darwin Stringybark (*Eucalyptus tetrodonta*) and Variable-barked



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Garawa traditional owners at a land management planning meeting, 2005.

Bloodwood (*Corymbia dichromophloia*) with Spinifex understorey and woodland dominated by Northern Box (*Eucalyptus tectifica*) with tussock grass understorey (NRETA 2005:88). There are substantial stands of the fire sensitive Cypress Pine (*Callitris intratropica*) especially on the Garawa ALT (NRETA 2005: 88).

The Gulf Coastal Bioregion comprises gently undulating coastal plains along the southern Gulf of Carpentaria from near the Roper River to near the Queensland border, with scattered rugged areas of Proterozoic sandstones. Soils are predominantly red earths with shallow gravely sands. The annual rainfall in this bioregion is between 800 and 1200 mm per annum, falling mostly between December and March; cyclones are

seasonally frequent. Eucalyptus woodland and tussock or hummock grass understorey dominates the bioregion, with significant areas of tidal flats, mangroves and littoral grassland. (NRETA 2005:82). Wetlands of national importance in the bioregion include part of the Port McArthur tidal wetlands system. Significant seabird breeding, feeding and roosting sites and significant shorebird feeding and roosting sites are located in the bioregion's coastal margins.

The main rivers in the Robinson River basin are the Robinson, Wearyn and Foelsche. These rivers flow from the escarpment country (Bukalara Range) into Gulf of Carpentaria. The basin has relatively large areas of samphire flats (samphire are plants, adapted to saline environments) and *Vetivera elongata* grasslands at its coastal margins.

Significant numbers of feral animals, particularly feral horses, are present throughout Garawa country. There are also low to medium densities of feral pigs. Feral pig numbers are slowly increasing through natural increase and migration from areas to the south east. There have been reports of feral pigs digging up marine turtle nests on the coast and eating the eggs. It has also been reported that a number of goats escaped from the Robinson River community some years ago, their current status is unknown. Buffaloes are also reported in this region (NLC 2004).

Feral animals pose a significant threat to the wetlands in the region, riparian margins and water quality. The feral animals, pigs, horses and buffaloes, trample the earth around the wetlands killing turtles that hibernate in the mud. Senior Garawa women have also reported feral animals damaging important sites used for gathering dyes for weaving. These wetlands contain important sources of bush food for Garawa people, such as barramundi, black bream, cherubim, turtle, mussels, seeds, bulbs and rhizomes. Feral animals impact not only on the biodiversity of the region but also Garawa

culture and economy. For example, as wetlands become more degraded with less and less biodiversity there are fewer food resources for people to hunt and gather. When people stop using resources Indigenous ecological knowledge is slowly eroded.

Feral animals and the diseases they may carry pose a threat to pastoral enterprises within the region as well as agriculture across Australia. Management of feral animals on Aboriginal lands is not only important for Aboriginal people but wider Australia. Significant resources are required to assist Aboriginal people with this introduced and swiftly growing problem.

Cane toads have been resident in the Gulf country for a decade and the impact of this is evident with the absence of goanna, which traditional owners report as far less abundant than they once were. This is another food resource that traditional owners have lost.

There has been little comprehensive fauna survey work undertaken in this area. Threatened species recorded include: Bustard (*Ardeotis australis*) and Northern Quoll (*Dasyurus hallucatus*). Senior Garawa women also identify Emu as being threatened at a local level.

There are a number of weeds found on the Garawa ALT that threaten biodiversity. Many of these are weeds associated with past pastoral activities. They include Khaki weed (*Alternanthera pungens*), Goats' head burr (*Tribulus terrestris*), Snakeweed (*Stachytarpheta* spp.), Spiny Head (*Sida acuta*), Paddy Lucerne (*Sida rhombifolia*), Flannel Weed (*Abutilon oxycarpum*), Mossman River Grass (*Cenchrus echinatus*), Coffee Bush (*Breynia oblongifolia*), Noogoora burr (*Xanthium pungens*), Hyptis (*Hyptis suaveolens*), and Parkinsonia (*Parkinsonia aculeate*).

Parkinsonia is a weed of national threatening significance and is regarded as one of the worst weeds in Australia because of its invasiveness, potential for spread, and economic and environmental impacts. Parkinsonia threatens the tropical savanna and wetlands in Northern Australia if left unmanaged, it displaces native vegetation and reduces access to land and waterways.

Economic, social and cultural costs to traditional owners stem from an increased difficulty in mustering stock, a reduction in access to waterways for hunting and gathering and a decrease in native grasses and their biodiversity that are replaced by parkinsonia. Additionally, Parkinsonia infestations provide refuges for feral animals, especially pigs, making their management even more difficult.



Jack Green talking about clan estates with traditional owners of the Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust.

Land and Sea Management History

In 2000 traditional owners of the Garawa ALT held a meeting to develop a land management plan for the land trust. Initial funding for implementation of the plan was secured from the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and held by the Mungoorbada Aboriginal Corporation (The Robinson River Community Council). The NHT grant was for two years and was to support work focussed on fire management, weed control and revegetation around the community. At the time traditional owners received little support in managing the grant from Mungoorbada Aboriginal Corporation and no further funding was received, which led to the program becoming dormant.

In 2004 traditional owners again requested help to undertake land management work on the land trust. The Northern Land Council (NLC) with Bushfires NT funded a land management planning meeting. The meeting was attended by senior traditional owners for the land trust who set out their long-term vision for Garawa people and their land and sea country. Their primary aim included returning the land trust to an environmentally sustainably managed pastoral station, creating employment for people living on country and managing the biodiversity of the country. At this meeting traditional owners decided to re-establish a land management group (the Garawa Rangers) to work on caring for country projects on the land trust and eventually across all Garawa estates (NLC 2005).

At this meeting traditional owners were able to view satellite imagery of their country for the first time, which showed fire scars over a 10-year period. After viewing these maps it was evident to traditional owners that their country was being burnt too often with late hot season fires. Late season burning was being undertaken to aid mustering on the land trust. However, such repetitive use of late hot fires was damaging biodiversity. Many of the senior women at the meeting reported a decline in bush tucker, especially emu. They told how emu build their nests on the ground and sit on the nest for 55 days. The repetitive fires destroy the nests and eggs and often the male bird on the nest. The fires also destroy the fruit producing plants that emu feed on making the habitat no longer suitable for emu.

In re-establishing the land management program Garawa traditional owners worked closely with the traditional owners of the Waanyi/Garawa ALT and the Northern Land Council's (NLC) Caring for Country Unit (CFCU) to secure grant funding. Initial funding was secured through another Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) grant, administered by the NLC CFCU, for a period of two years. This funding was to pay for a land management coordinator, operational costs and 'top-up' of CDEP wages for fire management on the Garawa and Waanyi/Garawa ALTs. The land management coordinator position was won by a senior Garawa man, Mr Jack Green. A second NHT grant was secured in 2007. However, this grant was only for one year making it difficult to undertake longer-term planning for land management work on the Garawa ALT.

Recently, with the support of the NLC's CFCU, the Garawa rangers were successful in receiving funding from the Department of Environment, Heritage, Water and the Arts' (DEHWA) Working on Country (WoC) Program. This will mean that four Garawa

rangers will now be employed full time to work on land management on the Garawa ALT.

Despite the success of the WoC program funding the Garawa rangers have no other funds, except the one year NHT fire grant, to undertake broader cultural and natural resource management work across their country. It was envisaged that operational costs would come from the Healthy People Healthy Country Bilateral Schedule. However, two years after the signing of the HCHP schedule significant funds are yet to flow.

Land Management Activity

Gulf Fire Abatement Project

Since the land management planning meeting in 2005, Jack Green—who is also the Garawa and Waanyi/Garawa fire coordinator—has been active in developing numerous partnerships to assist with fire management in the southern Gulf region. One innovative project that is swiftly evolving through these partnerships is the Gulf Fire Abatement Project (GFAP).

The Gulf Fire Abatement Project is a partnership between traditional owners of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria (on both sides of the NT/ Queensland Border), the Garawa, Waanyi/Garawa, Yanyuwa and Ganggalida peoples. It also includes the Northern Land Council, the Carpentaria Land Council, the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA), Bushfires NT, Tropical Savanna CRC and a number of private investors.

The project has two components. The first is savanna fire abatement, which seeks to manage fire and reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions (GHG) to the atmosphere over a specified period of time. The second, and equally important, component is Aboriginal traditional owner engagement and reconnection with country. Here, the project seeks to build traditional owner capacity in strategic fire management and combine 'two-way' knowledge about fire for the southern Gulf region.

To date the Garawa rangers have been working with Bushfires NT to establish a number of fire fuel monitoring sites across the southern gulf. These sites will provide traditional owners and Bushfires NT with scientific data that will assist with measuring fuel loads and develop methods to measure savanna fire abatement offsets in the region.

Governance

At the meeting in 2005 when traditional owners decided to re-establish the land management program (the Garawa Rangers) to work on caring for country projects on the land trust they also established a 'board' of senior traditional owners with representatives from each of the Garawa clans (Wurdaliya, Rumbbarriya, Mambaliya, Wayaliya) to guide the caring for country program, represent Garawa on caring for country issues at meetings with government and other agencies and to ensure that Garawa culture remains strong and sacred sites are protected. They described their

job as keeping Aboriginal law strong, solving environmental problems, and passing knowledge to younger Gawara people (NLC 2005).

There are on-going discussions about what type of governance model should be developed to support the growing caring for country projects in the southern Gulf. To date, the NLC assists by administering grant monies, providing an office for the fire coordinator and some storage space for equipment.

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This version: 22 September 2008.

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