



Some of the traditional owners of the Waanyi/Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust.

## People On Country

# Waanyi/Garawa

## Traditional Owners and Area of Operation

**T**he traditional owners of the Waanyi/Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust (ALT) (also known as the Nicholson Block) are the Waanyi and Garawa peoples. The land trust is approximately 60 km from the coast in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria and abuts the Northern Territory/Queensland border. The land trust is approximately 12,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Garawa estates lie within the northern end of the land trust and extend north to the coast and west towards Borroloola while Waanyi estates cover the remainder of the land trust to the south and east over the Northern Territory border into Queensland. The Waanyi/Garawa own the Waanyi/Garawa ALT under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (ALRA).

There are few people living permanently on the land trust. The majority of traditional owners of the land trust now live in Borroloola, Doomadgee, Tennant Creek and Mt Isa. Traditional owners slowly moved off the land trust about 10 years ago due to a lack of service provision. There are a number of outstations on the land trust that are occupied seasonally. They are Jilundarina, Burrumburru, Bajaminyi, Nudjabarra, Gumuluji, Ganduwarra, Wangalinji and Murrun Murula. There are few vehicular tracks on the land trust, making access to many areas very difficult. Furthermore, with few people living permanently on country, there are few resources available to traditional owners to undertake cultural and natural resource management work. A pattern of extensive hot late season fires in the southern Gulf region is appearing, some burning over 16,000 km<sup>2</sup>, beyond the land trust area.



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Traditional owners of the Waanyi/Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust meeting with NLC staff to discuss land management.

## Landscape Description

The majority of the Waanyi/Garawa ALT falls within the Gulf Fall and Uplands Bioregion while a very small portion, in the south east of the land trust, falls within the Mount Isa In-lier bioregion.

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 km<sup>2</sup> of land, with some 36 per cent of the bioregion owned by Aboriginal people under the ALRA (NRETA 2005:88).

The most extensive vegetation in the Gulf Fall and Uplands bioregion is woodland dominated by Darwin Stringybark (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*) and Variable-barked 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 Mount Isa Inlier bioregion occupies only a very small area of the Northern Territory east of the Barkley Tableland, on the border with Queensland. It falls within the semi-arid zone, with rainfall averaging 500 mm pa. The bioregion generally comprises stony hills and ranges, with skeletal soils supporting low open Eucalypt woodlands with a tussock grass (*Triodia*) understorey (NRETA 2005:113). The major topographical feature of the Waanyi/Garawa ALT is the linear escarpment called China Wall in the northern section of the land trust. China Wall is an area that has been identified as a site of conservation significance (NRETA 2005a:137). A number of threatened species have been recorded in this area including Emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*), Bustard (*Ardeotis australis*), and Carpentarian Grasswren (*Amytornis dorotheae*).

The major rivers and creeks in the Nicholson Basin include the Gregory, Carrara, South Nicholson, Fish and the Nicholson. These flow from the escarpment country (China Wall) to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Water quality is generally considered to be good on the land trust, with the greatest threat coming from feral animals. The water quality in some wetlands is very poor in the late Dry Season due to feral cattle. Riparian margins are also damaged from horses, cattle, buffaloes and pigs. Feral populations of horses are reported as having a severe impact on watering points.

At Settlement Creek, to the north of the land trust, there have been reports of an algae bloom type occurrence where the water turns blue in colour, possibly related to mining activity near by. This is a major concern to traditional owners.

Permanent billabongs contain an important source of bush food for Waanyi/Garawa people, such as barramundi, black bream, cherubim, turtle, mussels, seeds, bulbs and rhizomes. Feral animals threaten this important food resource. Traditional owners are seeking to control these animals but require technical, financial and logistical support to do so.

The Waanyi/Garawa ALT is relatively weed free with only minor infestations of weeds, in particular Candle Bush (*Senna sp.*), in the northern portion of the Waanyi/Garawa ALT. The occurrence of Rubber Vine (*Cryptostegia grandiflora*), a weed of national significance, which inhabits vast areas of the gulf country in Queensland is of major concern.

Tourists (particularly anglers) have potential to move weeds to or from Queensland. Dirt roads with the low-level creek crossings of the Savanna Highway increase this hazard. The Waanyi/Garawa ALT is in a strategic position in regards to cross-border weed management.

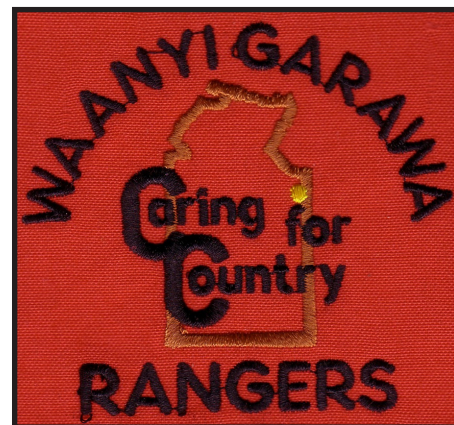
The greatest threat to the biodiversity on the land trust is the lack of a resident population. For example, as a consequence of this lack of a human presence, living permanently, on the land trust, the biodiversity of country, particularly the northern portion, is beginning to suffer from annual late hot fires. These late hot fires are altering vegetation and habitats, particularly in the area of highest conservation significance, the China Wall region.

## Land Management History

The Waanyi/ Garawa formalised their land management activity in 2005 when they held a land management planning meeting facilitated by the Northern Land Council's (NLC) Caring for Country Unit (CFCU) at Jilundarina (Siegel Creek). The meeting was funded from a grant secured by Bushfires NT and the NLC. The grant for "Fire Disaster Mitigation in Northern Territory Remote Locations and Communities Project" enabled Waanyi/ Garawa traditional owners to travel from Borroloola, Doomadgee, Mt Isa, and Tennant Creek to meet on country over a number of days to develop a land management plan for the land trust and set a 20 year vision for Waanyi/Garawa people.

At this meeting traditional owners established a long-term vision for community development and the sustainable management of their country. The primary aim of the Waanyi/Garawa people was to return permanently to country. There was great concern by traditional owners that a generation of young people had never been on country, they had not learnt about country, its songs, stories, sites of significance or its abundant resources and how to care for them. Along with the erosion of biodiversity from the hot late season fires, traditional owners were also witnessing the erosion of Waanyi/Garawa ecological knowledge as their connection to country was slowly being lost.

There was also great concern about the impact that fire was having not only on the land trust and its biodiversity, but also on neighbours whose pastoral stations were also being damaged by late hot season fires. It is impossible for traditional owners to manage fire on country when they were not living on it and have no resources to undertake fire management. Many of the late hot season fires originate in Queensland and pushed by wind move in a westerly direction across the un-peopled land trust and into the pastoral stations. Not only were these fires threatening biodiversity but they were also creating tensions between neighbours. One of the first aims of the Waanyi/ Garawa people was to establish a fire break along the western border of the land trust



Waanyi/Garawa Ranger badges.



Noreen and Astell George and other Waanyi/Garawa women at a land management planning meeting.

to offer protection to neighbours from fire. This fire break was finished in August 2008.

At the land management planning meeting traditional owners established a formal land management program, the Waanyi/Garawa rangers.

In establishing the land management program Waanyi/Garawa traditional owners worked closely with the traditional owners of the Garawa ALT and the Northern Land Council's (NLC) Caring for Country Unit (CFCU) to secure grant funding. Initial funding was secured through a 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 the Community Development and Employment Program (CDEP) wages for fire management on the Garawa and Waanyi/Garawa ALTs. A senior Garawa man

was appointed as the land management coordinator to get the program underway. 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 Waanyi/Garawa ALT.

Recently, with the support of the NLC's CFCU, the Waanyi/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 three Waanyi/Garawa rangers will now be employed full-time on a permanent basis to work on land management on the Waanyi/Garawa ALT.

Despite the success of the WoC program funding the Waanyi/Garawa rangers have no other funds, except the one year NHT fire grant and a small one-off threatened species grant, to undertake broader cultural and natural resource management work across their country. While these three positions are seen as a first step in formalising land management the vast size of the land trust and few resources available to traditional owners will mean very slow progress in managing the wild fires and other threats impacting on the region's biodiversity.

## Land Management Activities

To date, Waanyi/Garawa rangers have been involved in the following activities:

### >> Gulf Fire Abatement Project

Since the land management planning meeting in 2005, Jack Green, also the Waanyi/Garawa and Garawa and 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 aim of the project has two components. The first is 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 Waanyi/Garawa rangers working with Bushfires NT have established 53 fire fuel monitoring sites across NT lands in the southwest gulf. These sites will provide traditional owners and Bushfires NT with scientific data to measure fuel loads and develop methods to measure savanna fire abatement offsets in the region. The Gulf Fire Abatement Program has seen an increase in road and track maintenance on the last trust. This has made it easier for land management activity to be undertaken and it has also improved access for traditional owners to visit country. It has resulted in more people visiting country and residing on country for longer periods of time.

In 2009 there was a six-fold increase in the amount of early dry season burning undertaken by the Garawa and Waanyi/Garawa rangers in the southern Gulf. Senior traditional owners were involved in planning meetings with Bushfires NT and the NLC Caring for Country Unit to decide where and at what scale burning was to occur in the region. This exercise has become a regular event since the establishment of both land management groups in the Gulf. Both groups put in place, via aerial burning from helicopter, over 5800 kilometres of fire breaks as well as undertaking some 250 km of roadside burning along the Savanna Highway and 150 km of fire breaks at strategic points along land trust boundaries and neighbouring pastoral stations (Benmara, Calvert Hills, Greenbank and Seven Emu). Early season burning was also undertaken around a number of outstations and sacred sites. In addition to the 7 WoC positions involved in the project the fire abatement project provided part-time work for an additional 37 traditional owners.



Waanyi/Garawa rangers, NLC and Bushfires NT staff discuss fire scar maps.

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## >> Threatened species

In July and August 2008 traditional owners undertook a fauna survey in the China Wall region. This region, recognised as a site of conservation significance, has had no significant fauna surveys undertaken. It is considered to be habitat for threatened species such as Carpentarian Rock-rat (*Zyomys palatalis*) and Carpentarian Grasswren (*Amytornis dorotheae*) and other species of fauna and flora that are fire sensitive.

Traditional owners surveyed the country around the Fish River and Dry Creek outstation along with scientists from NT Parks and Wildlife Biodiversity Unit and CSIRO to establish what threatened species were present in the region. The survey found no evidence of Carpentarian Rock-rat or Carpentarian Grasswren. Much of the survey work was undertaken in the small area in the vicinity of the outstations that had remained unburnt for at least two years. Such unburnt areas were few and far between. Data collected will be used to develop a management plan for the area of conservation significance to determine how it will be managed in the future.

## Governance

At the meeting in 2005 when traditional owners decided to establish the land management program (the Waanyi/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 Waanyi/Garawa clans (Wurdaliya, Rumbbarriya, Mambaliya, Wayaliya) to guide the caring for country program, represent Waanyi/Garawa on caring for country issues at meetings with government and other agencies and to ensure that Waanyi and Garawa culture remains strong and sacred sites are protected. They, like the Garawa people, described their job as keeping Aboriginal law strong, solving environmental problems and passing knowledge to younger Waanyi/Garawa people (NLC 2005).

There are on-going discussions about what type of governance model should be developed to further support the Waanyi/Garawa land management program. The Waanyi/Garawa face some unique challenges in land management governance as their country is divided by the Northern Territory/Queensland Border. There are also some large logistical barriers that need to be worked through. For example, the Gulf fire coordinator currently lives in Borroloola and supports both the Garawa and Waanyi/Garawa rangers living in communities over 500 km apart. Furthermore, with only two vehicles to undertake land management work across an area of approximately 20,000 sq km, and a limited number of licensed drivers, this places an enormous workload on the Fire Coordinator. To date, the NLC assists by administering grant monies, providing an office, in Borroloola, for the fire coordinator and some storage space for equipment.

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