



# Findings of interviews with projects involved in working with Traditional Owners

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## Introduction

Between December 2012 and March 2013, interviews were held with three key staff involved in Rangelands NRM projects to identify the key issues that they believe need to be understood and managed in order for successful outcomes when working with Traditional Owners and Indigenous communities on NRM projects. Knowledge was sought from the 'on the job learnings' of these projects in an effort to understand how these can inform the way business is managed in the future.

The interviewees involved were:

- Louise Beames, Project Co-ordinator, West Kimberley Nature Project;
- Alissa Smart, Project Manager, Keeping Desert Country Healthy Project; and
- Gareth Catt, Fire Officer, Western Desert Traditional and Contemporary Fire Project

Interview questions focussed on:

- The level of community engagement necessary to ensure positive outcomes and strategies for engaging with individuals, groups, and communities.
- Project planning and implementation issues that can affect outcomes.
- The role of traditional knowledge within the project and the way in which knowledge is transferred between cultures and within culture and from generation to generation.
- The impacts of geography (i.e. tyranny of distance) on the capacity to project manage and engage with people positively and regularly.
- The processes required to form strong relationships with community members.
- The impact of culture (e.g. community business, work readiness) on capacity to achieve outcomes.
- Common issues/nuances confronted when working with ranger teams, particularly gender based teams.
- The impact of working with other agencies/organisations on program/project delivery.

Knowledge and understanding gained by each of the three interviewees over the course of their project work was reviewed and consolidated in an effort to identify some learnings that can be used to inform all new projects that seek to engage Indigenous communities. This knowledge will continue to be evaluated through an improvement cycle that seeks to enhance both the implementation of Indigenous engagement and the outcomes achieved through Rangelands NRM funded projects.

## Findings

### **Community engagement necessary to ensure positive outcomes**

- Projects should be collaborative in spirit from the outset – the work should operate under a culture of 'doing it together'. This needs to be manifested in consistent and continued acknowledgement of partnerships, individuals, and common goals.
- It is very important to listen to the communities' wishes and work to support groups to achieve what is important to them, creating programs based on what communities want. Success comes from matching both what the funder seeks to achieve and what the communities want on-ground. Progress can be slow or halted if there is a mismatch between community and funder interests. Trust in the project team can also be reduced if the project is unable to meet the communities' expectations and demands.

- When undertaking new group engagement, ensure that discussions are held with key stakeholders in the body corporate about ideas at the initial concept stage in order to gain early understanding and acceptance. Be aware, however, that consultation and engagement processes can take a long time – endorsement of the community should be sought and then ensure results of the work are consistently taken back to the community. Finding and involving a community based ‘champion’ can be beneficial so that partners can learn and work together, with awareness and motivation continually increased.
- The key strategies for the proven success with some groups have been to “listen, learn, remember, and value”. It is vital to understand what groups are saying and show respect for people and culture. Avoid, at all costs, the “seagull approach” where the ‘white fella’ is seen as flying in and out and making a lot of noise, by ensuring that the project manager regularly goes into the community and contributes. Commitments, promises, and agreements should always be followed through.
- Appropriate remuneration is critical. Where appropriate, fee for service arrangements should be utilised in order to place value on the services provided.

### **Project Planning**

- Project planning for NRM projects should take into account that land management activities on Aboriginal land need to focus equally on social engagement and well-being, and land management. Appropriate levels of funding need to be built into project proposals. It is necessary to recognise the need for both land management targets and engagement/social outcomes, and the differing processes needed to achieve these.
- When planning work it is important to understand previous activities, the effectiveness of the processes implemented and ways to link in to the previous work.
- Common goals, agendas, and level of engagement between partners are vital if successful, positive outcomes are to be achieved. Clarity of purpose and values is the key to achieving desired outcomes.
- The program and the ultimate outcomes should be built in a stepped approach. Trust built in earlier projects is consolidated when continuing in the spirit of working together.
- Business timeframes won’t necessarily match those of the community and patience is required to ensure effectiveness. It can take a significant amount of time for planning to be put into effect. It is necessary to obtain sign off by all relevant stakeholders if trust is to be maintained. This can mean that progress can be delayed but full and accepted agreement is vital in order to maintain relationships.
- Cultural values can impact on work readiness and this will result in delays to the execution of activities. This is exacerbated when engagement levels are variable. This needs to be factored into allocated time frames and budgets, particularly when distance is involved.
- Including an Indigenous member on the project team can assist the team to have a good understanding of cultural respect. A lack of cultural understanding and traditional knowledge can impact on the ability to engage successfully with community members.
- Cultural awareness training should be provided to all members of a new project team. Mentoring for key personnel can also be of benefit. Implementation of connections to other Indigenous work can offset mentoring, if this is not available or appropriate.

### **Traditional knowledge and transfer**

- It needs to be understood that some of the young people have a huge gap in knowledge. The community may have been away from country for a generation and the younger members do not have the traditional knowledge. Many elders also have a lower than expected level of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).
- It should neither be assumed that communities hold traditional knowledge nor that traditional knowledge will automatically lead to an understanding of NRM concepts. It

should also not be assumed that knowledge is passed between different groups. In some cases inter-group transfer is not appropriate.

- Communication documentation, such as media releases and publications, must always be undertaken jointly and cover what is of value to Traditional Owners (TOs). Where possible, direct quotes taken from the TOs should be included. It is also necessary to ensure all spellings and names are correct and obtain sign off by all relevant stakeholders if trust is to be maintained. This can mean that the deliverable may be late but accuracy is important in order to maintain relationships.
- Communities seek cultural based activities in order to maximise the transfer of knowledge and prefer interaction that involves demonstrations more than meetings.
- Care should be taken to find ways to encourage non-resident TOs to become involved when communities are no longer 'on country'.

### **Impact of geography**

- The ability to maintain contact between the project team and the community will impact on the success of planned community engagement activities. This is exacerbated when large distances exist between the locations of the project team and communities involved. This affects planning processes and impacts on the success of visits to the community, particularly when cultural events take priority.

### **Forming relationships**

- Each community has different ways of doing things. It is vital to understand the differing cultural components between groups and to know the language nuances of each group particularly in relation to community values. Care should be taken with interpretation and use of an interpreting service may be necessary. Wherever possible, ensure information is gathered in the group's first language.
- Ensure that individual and personal relationships are put in place and maintained. These relationships can be enhanced through regular information sharing and consistency in both communication and interaction. Be aware that gatekeepers may limit access to key relationships.
- Be prepared to wait for everyone to be ready to reconnect again when reconnecting with the community.
- Take care to remember and acknowledge key connections between people such as which country they are from and who are their relationships with other community members.

### **Impact of culture**

- It is necessary to fully understand cultural protocols. It is not appropriate to access the community without determining who speaks for the country and respecting where boundaries are (e.g. cultural law areas).
- Contemporary hunting methods with greater mobility and greater access to firearms - therefore greater effectiveness - are leading to the potential for issues with sustainability and cultural continuity.
- Care should be taken of the potential for gratuitous concurrence - a widely recognised cultural tendency whereby Aboriginal English speakers often agree to a question even if they do not understand it in order to be obliging and socially amenable.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Australian Human Right Commission (2007). *Cultural issues affecting communication*. Submissions of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner on common difficulties facing Aboriginal witnesses. No QUD300/2005. Downloaded from <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/commission-submission-1> on 15/4/2013.

### **Working with on-ground teams**

- Different approaches are needed with different genders especially if the project manager is of a different gender to the on-ground team. The ability of the project manager to discuss important issues with members of community can be hindered when opposite genders are involved.
- When a project manager is working with a ranger group of the opposite gender it is necessary to have a good relationship with the marital/relational partners within the community in order to negate any potential jealousies. Care should also be taken to ensure that the project manager is not placed in situations of being alone with one member of the team.
- The levels of motivation and desire to manage the environment through a traditional approach can differ between male and female teams.
- A key theme with men and women's work is to maintain awareness and accommodation of where different genders can't go and ensure that such information is sought from appropriate community members with the relevant authority (the 'right' people).
- An effective ranger team can be built through ensuring the following foundations are in place:
  - A good governance structure from the steering committee, land council, or other arrangement.
  - Teams understand their processes and who manages the different functions.
  - A team mix of older people with cultural knowledge and respect and younger people who have motivation and enthusiasm and today's skills (IT, GPS etc.).
  - A good co-ordinator with appropriate skills is employed.
  - Team members know how to work with partners but have confidence to be assertive enough to stand up for themselves – this necessitates having clarity of purpose and effective, equitable contractual agreements.
  - Pastoral care of team members is implemented through acknowledgements that life in communities is difficult. Issues should be worked through but team members need to remain accountable.
  - Good representation of family groups within the team and members have good relationships with each other external to the team.
  - Skills to operate in a professional environment are provided and expectations are matched to the team's capability.

### **Working with other agencies**

- Ensure that negotiations about working together are effectively undertaken during the initial phase of the project and then updated on an ongoing basis. This includes ensuring that contractual agreements are in place that acknowledge 'good faith' relationships and ownership is shared. The partnerships must be endorsed and valued.
- Involvement with Native Title litigation issues can affect access and engagement of partners.
- Roles and relationships within, and between, agencies may need to evolve in line with the evolution of the project/program.
- Implement processes for joint development of plans and ensure intellectual property is vested with the group or partnership (other than TEK, which always remains with community).
- Consistency in key personnel is important. The partners and partnership need to grow together.
- On-ground decision making by co-ordinators may need to be confirmed by senior personnel in the partnership particularly if communication not good.