

Indigenous Land Management

By Fiona McGill

Some important (and popular) books have been written recently on the topic of Indigenous Land Management. Without wanting to jump on any bandwagons, I wish to contribute to this topic with information about work done over many years, that has not received such widespread dissemination or critical acclaim.

For many years now, anthropologists and archaeologists in Australia have been writing about what they have learnt from Indigenous people, about the extensive and skilled methods used by Australia's First Nations people to manage vegetation and animal resources over millennia.

Let me explain the principles:

Ancestors

The creative powers who made the land – mountains, hills, rivers, forests, rocks, heavens and climatic conditions – are not in the past. They live still in the present, such that the land itself is imbued with their spirits. Indigenous people are descendent from those spirit Ancestors – related to them by direct descent, therefore directly connected to those landscape elements. Hence Indigenous people say: 'we ARE the land, the land is us', and 'the land is our mother'. This direct connection to landscape is expressed in the system of Totems. A person has several Totems, given to them individually or as part of their relationship to Elders and Clan. Your totems tied you to the ancestors but also predicted your responsibilities to protect and preserve elements of your land. (Bell 1983)

Particular ceremonies and rituals must be carried out on a cyclic seasonal basis to reiterate and reinforce the links between people, Ancestors and land. Some ceremonies are especially sacred and only to be engaged in by senior men and women. Others are for general consumption and to teach children about the importance of these connections to land. (Berndt & Berndt 1964)

When moving about their country, people travel along the 'Dreaming Tracks' or 'Songlines' which trace the journeys of the Ancestors to their current resting places. (Berndt & Berndt 1964)



Berndt & Berndt: boys preparing for initiation with Totem body paint

Kinship

Indigenous Australians have the most complex kinship system known in the world. People knew their ancestry 10 generations back in their heads (modern day white Australian's would only know such detail if they'd had access to written data bases from State registered archives). Such detailed knowledge of the social order meant that, in a relatively small population, you could trace a kin connection to every person you ever met in your lifetime. It also meant you had an expected and proscribed relationship with everyone in your local community – no-one was a stranger. No-one was to be dismissed as the 'other'. Everyone deserved your attention and respect. A network of obligations and expectations governed daily life. (White Australians think of 'obligations' as onerous, but in a collective society, obligations and expectations go hand-in-hand to create harmony and support.)

Your kin connections determine your Clan affiliation, and this governs your connection to the land. You inherit duties and responsibility to look after areas of land from your mother's and your father's families. As part of your Clan obligations you must contribute to the management of areas of land, its ancestral formations and current resources. Your totems indicated your affiliations and subsequent obligations. (Bell 1983) (Scheffler 1978)



Jacqueline Reid Nakamarra: On My Mother's Country

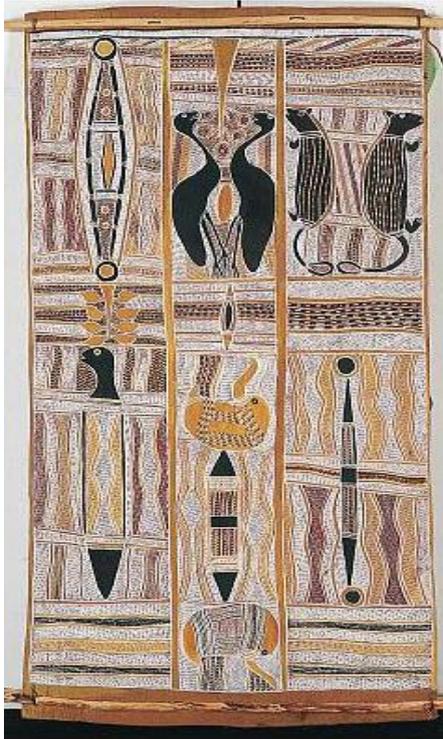
Ecosystem Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge of fauna and flora, climatic conditions (seasons), landforms and water resources was profound in its detail and extent. But not only did they have a taxonomically detailed understanding of these environmental elements, they had a whole of landscape understanding of ecosystems and how all elements were interrelated. They 'read' the conditions to inform them of, for instance, oncoming rains leading to certain plants fruiting and corresponding animals breeding. The arrival of migratory birds might herald the concurrent incidence of plentiful fish stocks. The dry season might predict a glut of certain seeds or the likelihood of animals collecting at permanent water. (Mulvaney 1975) (Mulvaney & Golson 1971)

In dryer areas of the continent, this meant moving about the country in a predictable and routine manner over several years, to make best use of resources. In coastal areas and along water courses, people moved less, resources were more plentiful, and populations were higher. (Flood 1983)

The medicinal properties of native plant species and their use in addressing problems was mostly the province of women (whilst 'men of high degree' took care of the spiritual and social aspects of illness (Elkin 1977)).

Art



Narritjin Maymura: Creation Stories of Mangalili Clan

Most people will be familiar with Indigenous art of various styles. Art was not for 'art's sake'. Art was for describing the ancestral world, acknowledging Clan connections to that world and teaching children of their place in that world. Indigenous art tells the stories of the ancestors, describes their travels over the landscape (such that some art is actually a map of Clan land), their creation of landscape elements, their trials and tribulations – to explain landscape formation but also to tell moral tales of correct behaviour and social order (ancestors didn't always behave well (Groger-Wurm 1973) Some of those stories tell us of times of great upheaval, massive climatic and environmental changes. (Morphy 1998) Remember – Indigenous people have lived on the Australian continent through the last ice age, seen 2.5 million hectares of land go under water as the sea level rose to its current height, Tasmania become isolated, and seen major changes in rainfall, forest patterns as well as living with amazing mega-fauna, only to see their demise as the climate changed. (Flood 1983)

Fire-Stick Farming

The main method of environmental management utilised by Indigenous communities in Australia has been described as 'fire-stick farming'. This whole-of-landscape management system was used to encourage the growth of beneficial plants, encourage their flowering, fruiting and seeding, as well as to maintain areas of fresh grass growth to attract grazing animals, making hunting easier. Fire was used carefully to burn small patches ('mosaic' burning) in sequence, in the cool season. The resultant pattern of burnt and unburnt areas precluded catastrophic bush fires from taking hold.

Fire-stick farming allowed for the management of vast areas of land, to preserve resources that needed burning to be useful, and also those that needed to be protected from uncontrolled burns. Large areas of rainforest were protected to ensure their rich fruit supplies. Areas of grass that produced seed for flour was burnt strategically to maintain its productivity. Areas of root crops were replanted and reseeded to maintain them. (Mulvaney 1975) (Flood 1983) (Jones 1969)

Hunting & Gathering

The Indigenous economic system is called 'hunting and gathering', but if you thought that was about wandering aimlessly in a dire search for food, you are sorely mistaken. Hunting and gathering is the most reliable way to garner a rich variety of resources and requires the least amount of effort of any economic system. It is also the land use system used by humans for the majority of human history, with agriculture and animal husbandry coming very late in our history, to areas where resources are limited or populations preclude seasonal movement. In land you know well, you are guaranteed reliable resources, fresh and in season. The important points to note are: you need to understand the land well, and you will need to follow the resources around your country. (Lee & Devore 1975) (Sahlins 1972)

Indigenous people in Australia used the same technology as people in New Guinea, who do small scale farming - which Australian's knew about. But they did not 'farm' here, because they didn't need to: farming is less reliable and takes much more effort. Hunters and gatherers have been described as the 'original affluent society', with people spending the least amount of time on subsistence activity of any economic system – lots more time for ceremony, then! (Lee & Devore 1975)

In Australia, most food was provided by women's gathering – 60-80% depending on where you lived on the continent. Gathering is entirely reliable when you know your country. Australian vegetable foods are

extremely nutritious – better than any of the hybridised European vegetables most of us rely upon today. People routinely ate about 120 different vegetable foods through the year. (Gale 1974) (In Tasmania people ate more high fat animal foods (seal, abalone, wallaby) to protect against the cold. (Jones 1995; Flood 1983))

Hunting is more difficult and a hunter might spend some hours pursuing game and come back to camp with little to show for his efforts. However, Australian meats are lean and better for you. People also utilised the rich resources of reptile, sea food and insect foods for protein.

This resulted in a healthy population of people with a diet rich in highly nutritious vegetables, smaller amounts of lean meat, and a lifestyle that included plenty of exercise! (Many Indigenous people today are unable to pursue this excellently healthy lifestyle now, because they do not have access to their ancestral lands. (Gale 1983))

These elements give us the whole picture of a society that was vibrant, where people worked together for the common good, using profound spirituality and social connection to draw each other together and cement their adherence to the system of land management that they'd developed to understand and manage a vast continent. They had ample leisure time for social and artistic pursuits. They were healthy and confident in their country. People lived a peaceful life in a rich environment that was predictable and relatively benign. We seriously underestimate their achievements if we judge them by Western notions of material culture. Rather, we should seek to understand their complex social and religious systems, their deep knowledge of their country and extraordinary adaptation to this beautiful land over millennia of change and upheaval. Their ascendancy has been described as the 'Classical period' of Australian history. As European descendants, we might be honoured to call ourselves 'Australian' if we were ever to succeed in understanding even just a little of the way Indigenous people understood this place. We might begin by truly honouring their achievements and knowledge as the Original and true Australians. (cf Flood 1983; Gammage 2012)

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Biography: Fiona McGill

Fiona studied Anthropology & Archaeology at the Australian National University. She worked for many years with disadvantaged people, and most recently, as a lecturer at the Australian Catholic University. She is not an Indigenous person and does not claim to speak for any Indigenous group. She is a member of the Sunshine Coast Reconciliation Group and hopes this article is received in the spirit of reconciliation.
