

Indigenous and environmental philanthropy – the role of land management in economic and health development

By **Amanda Martin**, Executive Officer, Australian Environmental Grantmakers Network.



DJELK Rangers Maningrida.

In June 2011, the Australian Environmental Grantmakers Network (AEGN) held its annual conference with a theme of Indigenous and environmental philanthropy. Participants enjoyed a fascinating range of speakers, from academics and Federal Government officials to philanthropists and Indigenous practitioners involved in land management.

Sean Kerins from the Australian National University gave us an excellent introduction to why Indigenous and environmental issues represent an important convergence for philanthropy. We learnt that 23 per cent of Australia is owned by Indigenous people and that this is made up of either specifically owned Indigenous land or native title determinations. Sean showed us a number of maps illustrating that this Indigenous estate contains large areas of high conservation value:

- The Indigenous estate includes a diversity of ecosystems spanning a continental-scale climate gradient from the monsoonal tropics to the arid desert.
- Significant portions of the Indigenous estate remain ecologically intact, having escaped the intense commercial development pressure experienced in more temperate parts of Australia.

- Much of the Indigenous estate features vast areas of relatively undisturbed, connected and ecologically healthy environments.
- Because of this there is a high degree of species biodiversity, whereas elsewhere species have either declined or become regionally extinct.

Despite this, the Indigenous estate is subject to serious threats including the introduction of feral animals and invasive weeds, land disturbance, especially vegetation clearance, changed fire regimes, overgrazing and marine debris and pollution.

Given continuing development and land pressure across Australia, increasing water scarcity and the projected impacts of climate change on species composition and distribution across the continent, there are strong global, national, regional and local grounds to prioritise conservation in the Indigenous estate.

AEGN conference participants also learnt that land holds a very important spiritual and cultural place in Indigenous peoples' lives and that land management can play a vital role in Indigenous employment and economic development and in Indigenous health prospects.

Small groups at the conference came up with some guiding principles for philanthropy to successfully support Indigenous land and sea management. Many of these principles are not specific to funding in the Indigenous sector, but offer a good summary of things to think about when funding Indigenous organisations:

1. Strength of relationships is critical.
2. Support individuals – leaders, visionaries and their institutions.
3. Fund people and capacity building (including local groups).
4. Build governance structures and vision in early stages.
5. Build strong accountability in institutions and people.
6. Consider long term commitment and funding.
7. Work in a collaborative/co-investment style.
8. Consider how to build scale and impact.



Kakadu National Park – AEGN Arnhem Land Field Trip.



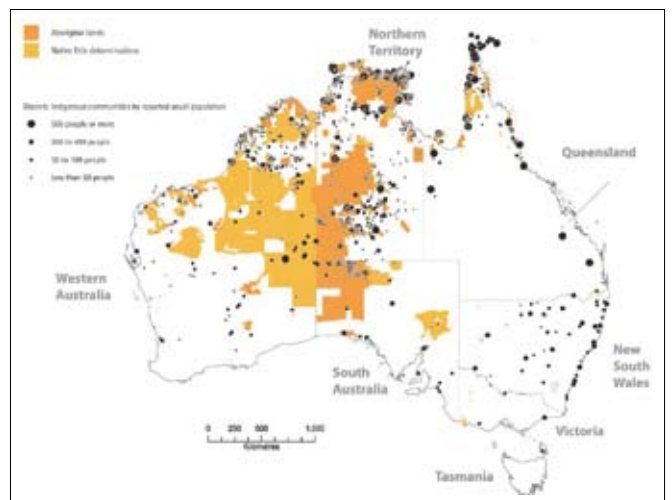
AEGN Conference.

9. Remember to be flexible and entrepreneurial.
10. Invite Indigenous input in decision-making, particularly in the beginning.
11. Importance of untied funds – both philanthropic and government funds.
12. Importance of asking each community what works best for them.
13. Don't wait for applications – you need to be proactive.

The conference encouraged discussion about ideas that philanthropy could consider in funding in the Indigenous and environmental sector. While there were many discussed, the following is a small snapshot of some of the ideas that emerged:

- Endowments – How to do them? How to set them up as a project?
- Commitment to regular income grants.
- Broker networks for capacity building and training.
- Support leadership to give voice to influence mainstream Australia.
- Need to understand and utilise the role of traditional knowledge and ecological processes and how this relates to different landscapes, e.g. agricultural landscapes in the SE of Australia.
- Support Indigenous organisations to record Indigenous knowledge.
- Some Indigenous groups choose to work through another body so as not to manage funds.

The conference was followed by a field trip for 18 people to Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. The trip further explored Indigenous and environmental management and got to see first-hand how Indigenous communities are managing enormous tracts of land with nationally significant environmental values in harsh and remote conditions. We visited the Kabulwarnamyo outstation community where Indigenous people live and work on their homeland with funding from the Federal Government's Working on Country and Indigenous Protected Area programs, as well as various philanthropic and non-government sources. These include the West Arnhem Land Fire Management Agreement, which utilises carbon trading opportunities.



Indigenous estate and discrete Indigenous communities, 2010.

The field trip participants have agreed to fund the Djelk and Warddeken Rangers to produce a field guide to local flora and fauna. It would include a species picture and name in English and Kunwinjku (and possibly other local language names), and some basic information on the habitat of the species in Kunwinjku and English. The guide would stay in glove boxes and around work sheds and homes where people could flick through it and use it as necessary. We hope that it will fill a major gap for people, especially younger rangers and families, in identifying new species they see when working, building knowledge of what species are in the Warddeken and Djelk Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs), and their habitat needs. It will also be a resource that would facilitate cross cultural learning and literacy and fluency in multiple languages for rangers and the increasing number of visiting scientists and others who visit the IPAs.

If you are interested in learning more about the work that the AEGN is aiming to do on Indigenous and environmental issues, please email me at amanda@aegn.org.au. Please note that due to resource limitations, the AEGN can only work with grantmakers, not grantseekers. ■

Altman, Jon, Buchanan Geoff and Larsen, Libby (2007) 'The environmental significance of the Indigenous estate: natural resource management as economic development', CAEPR. Discussion Paper No.286/2007 (available at: <http://caepr.anu.edu.au/Publications/DP/2007DP286.php>).