Uniquely Australian: How Indigenous and Non-Indigenous People Are Working Together to Conserve the Land

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From the reintroduction of threatened wallabies, the return of aboriginal peoples to their ancient homeland and the discovery of new plant species, inspiring stories about some of Australia’s most successful land and water management projects reveal the conservation benefits of cross-cultural partnerships. The projects are featured in a new special issue of *Ecological Management & Restoration*, a publication of the Ecological Society of Australia.

Freely available online, the papers showcase how Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are working together in remote parts of central and northern Australia to develop innovative land and sea management projects. These projects combine indigenous and non-indigenous scientific knowledge and methods, highlighting the seldom documented voices and the input of indigenous peoples into conservation work.

“Successful partnerships between indigenous and non-indigenous organisations are increasingly being formed to conserve and manage some of the most intact and unique parts of the country such as Amhem Land, the Great Victoria Desert, the Queensland coast and the Kimberley,” said Dr Emilie Ens, Guest Editor of the special issue. “These partnerships and the lessons learnt are documented to guide the way for enhanced cross-cultural approaches to managing country in Australia – a way that is uniquely Australian.”

Indigenous people manage around 20% of the Australian continent, contributing to a substantial proportion of Australia’s National Reserve System. This includes some of the most intact and biologically diverse landscapes on the continent, lands which also have important spiritual meaning to Indigenous people.

“Many of the papers in this issue showcase new and innovative techniques or approaches to management and are showing how involvement in ecosystem management is reinforcing indigenous capacity to manage their country on their own terms,” concluded Dr Ens. “This is not only beneficial for environmental conservation but has ramifications for indigenous wellbeing and cultural survival.”

Highlights:
• Synthesis: Australian approaches for managing “country” using Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge: This paper reveals how Australia is leading the way in relation to the scale of indigenous owned and managed land. This supports the international push for increased recognition and inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the natural and cultural conservation effort, which has well-known links to indigenous health and wellbeing.


• After 80 years absence, Wuthathi people plan for the return and management of ancestral homelands on Cape York Peninsula: Displaced from their ancestral homelands since the late 1930s, the Wuthathi people are now preparing for the return of their homelands as either Aboriginal freehold land or as Aboriginal owned national park. This paper shows how the Wuthathi, like many other Indigenous groups Australia-wide, are planning to overcome a number of barriers to once again take up active ecological and cultural land management of their lands.


• Cross-cultural systematic biological surveys in Australia’s Western Desert: Combing science and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK) surveys conducted with the Pila Nguru (Spinifex People) in the Great Victoria Desert found a total of 185 native plant species, three of which were new to science. Only six of the 148 vertebrate animals recorded were introduced and many animal names used by the Spinifex People were documented. This project reinforces how cross-cultural surveys can not only build scientific knowledge, but contribute to broader social goals of assisting Aboriginal people with cross-generational transfer and documenting of IEK.


• ‘Looking after Country two-ways’: Insights into Indigenous community-based land management in the Southern Tanami: Reporting on a major planning project to guide management of 10 million hectares of biologically and culturally significant land in the Southern Tanami Region of Central Australia, this paper demonstrates the importance of combining both Indigenous...
and non-Indigenous ecological knowledge in environmental planning and management.


The Warru reintroduction project is a ground-breaking collaboration between Traditional Owners, central Australian Anangu communities and scientists to reintroduce warru (Black-footed Rock-wallaby) to Anangu lands: 22 warru young have been successfully bred in captivity and 11 warru have been returned to the Indigenous lands, protected by a 97 ha predator-proof enclosure which will allow the animals to adjust to the local environment and learn the survival skills of their ancestors, prior to being released into the wild.

To complement the issue, short summaries of a range of other successful indigenous projects are also accessible online at www.emrprojectsummaries.org

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