



Indigenous knowledge helps manage our land

Traditional knowledge and land management are being harnessed on Cape York Peninsula to help tackle 21st century environmental issues.

This has been made possible with the help of two senior Kuku Thaypan Elders, Dr George Musgrave and Dr Tommy George Senior, who have taken part in a project which has recorded their language and knowledge of traditional landscape management, for use by future generations.

Having narrowly escaped being taken away by police officers early last century, these two men grew up on their traditional land, around what is now Lakefield National Park. They became the only two surviving Elders fluent in the Kuku Thaypan language. Sadly, Dr Musgrave passed away in February 2006, but his work continues. Use of his name and image in this leaflet has been agreed to by his family, out of respect for his commitment to passing on his traditional knowledge.

Saving knowledge

It was feared that Dr Musgrave and Dr George's knowledge would be lost, that led to the development of the Kuku Thaypan Traditional Knowledge Recording Project which began in 2001.

The Elders participated, with the support of the Balkan Cape York Development Corporation and Project Manager, Victor Steffensen. The project obtained an initial grant of approximately \$170,000 in 2000 from the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust and in 2003 received just over \$23,000 from Envirofund for the ethnobotany and flora aspects of the research.

The Traditional Knowledge Recording Project aims to research, record, document and use inherited traditional knowledge systems to show how these can help in managing natural and cultural resources in today's world. It also hopes to ease

welfare dependency by providing training and employment opportunities for the local Indigenous community.

Armed with a video camera, digital camera and computer, Victor Steffensen has recorded and transcribed sessions with the Elders. This information is then entered into a database and cross-linked to main subject groups and sub-categories under each subject.

All aspects of language, country and culture are recorded including spirituality, ceremony and story places. Fire, land and water management are included, as well as Indigenous medicines, uses for flora and fauna and the way these elements are connected. Practical skills and techniques are presented in a culturally appropriate way, so that information is easily accessible to Indigenous people and land managers, not only across Cape York Peninsula, but in other areas of Australia as well, via a website: www.tkrp.com.au



One practical result from the project has been the implementation of strategies based on traditional practices, to protect the Low Lake area within Lakefield National Park and to help rehabilitate what is a spiritual story place.

Traditional fire management

For the first time in decades, traditional fire management is now being undertaken in Lakefield National Park. The Traditional Knowledge Recording Project has provided a catalyst for the Kuku Thaypan Elders to re-introduce therapeutic burning regimes to their country, whilst documenting the traditional knowledge that underpins fire practices.

“Getting back out onto their country to record traditional knowledge with a video camera has the Elders out burning again,” says Victor. “In the process of explaining, they have started doing, which is very much the philosophy of the Traditional Knowledge Recording Project.”

Peta Standley, a James Cook University doctoral student has worked with the Elders to measure any vegetation and fauna changes as a result of the burns. Remote sensing imagery, field-work and informal interviews are the basis of data gathering before, during, and after the fires.

In this way, western science and traditional knowledge are combined under the direction of traditional Elders. Historical and contemporary knowledge about fire and vegetation is also gathered to support findings. The project aims to show how traditional burning practices can help in reversing weed infestation and biodiversity decline in this tropical savannas area of Cape York Peninsula.

“At the time European people arrived in Cape York, species of flora and fauna relied upon an established Indigenous fire regime,” says Peta Standley. “This means that species such as the Golden Shouldered Parrot continue to need similar regimes to cater for all of their survival needs. The species loss we are now seeing in Cape York is linked to changed fire regimes and land use patterns.”

The Indigenous philosophy of fire management attempts to avoid hot fires and focuses on small, cool, controlled burns at specific times, also taking into consideration ceremony and rock art areas.

The future

Victor Steffensen, together with Jim Davis, Indigenous Land Management Facilitator based at the Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation, hope to involve school-aged children and the youth of Cape York in the project and plan to visit schools and demonstrate how the database works.

Biodiversity encompasses the variety of all living things. Conserving biological diversity gives us the best chance of adapting to our rapidly changing world.

This leaflet is one of a series showing how farmers, Indigenous communities, local government and community groups have either initiated special biodiversity projects, or have successfully incorporated biodiversity protection into their work and daily lives.

We hope these success stories provide useful information and inspiration to others in similar situations.

For more information: www.nrm.gov.au; or freecall 1800 552 008

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The two eldest grandsons of one of the Elders are exploring ways of keeping the project going in the future. And there have been flow ons from the project to other communities in North Queensland, including the Kuku Yalanji from around Wujal Wujal and the Wik from Aurukun, who are embarking on their own traditional knowledge recovery project. The Kuku Thaypan Elders have mentored this initiative. Other traditional owner groups from South West Queensland and interstate have also expressed their interest.

The two senior Kuku Thaypan Elders' work has been acknowledged by James Cook University by awarding them each an honorary Doctorate of Letters. These awards recognised their efforts in demonstrating the importance of traditional Indigenous knowledge systems and their relevance in contemporary settings. While the Elders jointly held traditional responsibilities and knowledge, their honorary doctorates particularly acknowledged Dr George Musgrave's knowledge of traditional law, and Dr Tommy George's ecological expertise.

Lessons learnt

- Traditional knowledge and land management can provide important information to help manage land sustainably today and protect biodiversity.
- Timely action is important to ensure that traditional knowledge is not lost.
- Active involvement of traditional Elders is vital to ensure the knowledge is passed on to younger Indigenous people who can communicate it to others.
- Employing traditional fire management can reduce wild fires and play an important role in conserving biodiversity.

Photo Credits

Front: Fire management; Georgia Curry.
Saltwater Crocodile;
Brolga; both Parks Australia.
Dale Musgrave recording Dr Tommy George Snr collecting water lilies;
Victor Steffensen

Back: Dr Tommy George Snr (l) and the late Dr George Musgrave (r) receive honorary doctorates from Chancellor James Cook University, Lieutenant General John Grey; Linden Woodward JCU.

Banner: Bark; Joseph Lafferty. Lichen; Peter Ranyard. Hand; Andrew Tatnell.