



Walking in Country:

A medium for protecting and transmitting culture
and managing the land

A research essay by P. Yates



Walking in Country – a medium for protecting and transmitting culture and managing the land is licensed by NAILSMA for use under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Australia licence. For licence conditions see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

This essay should be cited as: Yates P (2018) *Walking in Country – a medium for protecting and transmitting culture and managing the land*. NAILSMA, Darwin.

Cover photographs

Front and back covers: *Walking in the Northern Territory* (photo NAILSMA).

This essay is available for download from the NESP Northern Australia Environmental Resources Hub website: www.nespnorthern.edu.au

Disclaimer: This essay is presented by the Northern Australia Environmental Resources Hub for the purpose of informing discussion and does not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the Hub.

The Hub is supported through funding from the Australian Government's National Environmental Science Program. The NESP NAER Hub is hosted by Charles Darwin University.

ISBN 978-1-925167-98-6

September 2018

Printed by Uniprint

Contents

Executive summary	2
1. Introduction	3
2. Science and Traditional Ecological Knowledge	5
3. The research	8
4. Analysis of walks data	9
5. Inherent qualities that motivate walking on country.....	11
5.1 Connection to country	11
5.2 Protest	13
5.3 Corrections	13
5.4 Health	15
5.5 Making a living	16
5.6 Intergenerational knowledge transfer	17
5.7 Land management	19
6. Case studies	22
6.1 Kimberley fire walks	22
6.2 Borrooloola and the Gulf - two walks and 29 years	22
6.3 The Lurujarri Heritage Trail, Dampier Peninsula.....	24
7. On efficiency	26
8. Research directions.....	28
9. Conclusions.....	29
10. References.....	31

List of tables

Table 1. Walk motivation references.....	10
--	----

About the Author

Peter Yates is an anthropologist with 20 years experience in Aboriginal Land Mangement and International Development. He holds a Doctorate in Tropical Environmental Management from Charles Darwin University.

Executive summary

Aboriginal people have conducted a number of “Walking in Country” events of various size across central and northern Australia over the past 25 years. A survey of ‘walks in country’ across northern and central Australia over the past 25 years shows a range of motivations for these events, including fostering connection to country, land management, health promotion, juvenile corrections, intergenerational teaching and other cultural reasons. We explore the qualitative dimensions of walk motivations and point to the cross sectoral positive outcomes that such events can yield. Following Walsh *et al*, 2011 we argue that western scientific approaches to land management tend to recognise a very limited range of phenomena as ‘knowledge’, and thus inadvertently derogate much of the broad-based and culturally infused knowledge that informs Aboriginal understanding. We see a high likelihood that sustained marginalisation of this Aboriginal discourse will result in either disengagement or an erosion of this deep cultural knowledge. By contrast, practices such as walking in country are strongly resonant with aspects of traditional life, and as such are a powerful means by which Aboriginal values concerning country, Traditional Ecological Knowledge and culture can be expressed and maintained. We argue that many land management objectives can be achieved by people working on foot, often with superior results, because being on foot enables great flexibility of movement, detailed observation, nuanced decision-making and highly targeted actions. We conclude that walking in country can be usefully included in the land management ‘toolbox’, and that benefits far beyond the targeted sector can be reasonably expected in terms of health, intergenerational learning and social and emotional wellbeing. The benefits that are shown to have resulted from this type of activity improve Indigenous capacity, resilience and confidence to engage meaningfully in contemporary Australian society and can be expected to make a positive impact on the land and sea management and enterprise.

1. Introduction

There may well be a movement afoot. A quiet, contemplative movement, but potentially, a powerful one. It is a movement that draws on deep roots, linking a past of immense antiquity and cultural riches, to a difficult and fractured post-colonial present. For Aboriginal people, the past infuses the present in many ways, but it is through walking, and specifically walking 'in country', with all the complexities and cultural nuances that term implies in Aboriginal English (Bradley, 2011), that the echoes of the past are most urgent, and the light they shine toward a better future particularly insistent.

This paper explores some of the recent history of walking in country activities; what motivated them, what was their purported value, where they fit in the context of the erosion of Indigenous cultures and the (re)building of cultural futures. The paper sets the foundation for further discussion about the interaction of Indigenous and 'western' style knowledge systems, to come from proposed participatory action research, walks on country, with Aboriginal land owners and managers in the Northern Territory Gulf country.

There have been a number of "Walking in Country" events of various size across central and northern Australia over the past 25 years. These events have been run for a wide range of reasons including fostering connection to country, land management, health promotion, juvenile corrections, intergenerational teaching or other cultural reasons. The idea of 'Walking in Country' seems to have resonated with a great many indigenous and non-indigenous people as a potentially powerful way of achieving their various goals, yet very little has been written down about these experiences, and there has been no systematic investigation of whether these types of interventions yield the results their proponents hope for.

That Walking in Country yields a superior quality of engagement with country at almost every level can be safely described as self-evident. Compared to the dissociation of driving in vehicles, on quad bikes or in helicopters, walking offers a wealth of sensory engagement (one sees and hears and even smells things), and a spatial versatility (you can go wherever you like, stop and look further if you want). The problem, if there is one, lies with efficiency. Land management agencies have responsibility for vast areas of land, and the vast distances and slow speed of walking makes for some serious challenges in delivering interventions such as fire management in a timely and cost-effective manner.

In this research project, the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA), in association with the CSIRO, and with funding support from the Commonwealth of Australia through the National Environmental Science Program (NESP) Northern Australia Environmental Resources Hub, aims to collate information on the various experiences of Walking in Country across northern and desert Australia in order to understand what has been done and why, what outcomes were achieved and whether this paradigm of indigenous land engagement warrants further exploration.

Gathering the required information was not always easy and we used personal and community contacts, contacted Indigenous Land Management organisations and scoured the internet for accounts of walking 'events'. A "boots-on" part of the project, to be undertaken in 2018-19 will undertake more detailed investigation of quality vs efficiency, and also collect indigenous

perspectives on the experience of walking and assessment of the various outcomes achieved. This practical part of the project will be run on the Garawa (Robinson River), and Waanyi Garawa (Nicholson River) Aboriginal Land Trusts in the NT¹.

The project seeks ways of combining Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK) and Science, with a view to making better planning decisions for country. 'Country' is as a person. The collectivity of physical land, dreamings, spirits, ancestors and living things function in Aboriginal consciousness as a sentience, at once dispersed and particular. A player in the drama. A stakeholder in the meeting. A force to be reckoned with. It is for this reason that Central Land Council staff in the 1990's were forbidden to undertake country planning unless they were in-country (Moxham pers. comm.). To do so would be akin to excluding the most senior elder from the discussions. At a time when researchers and land management workers seem increasingly willing to use abstract notions of 'country' that elide much of the richness and complexity that Aboriginal people bring to the concept, we felt that it was appropriate to consider the value of actually *being there*.

¹ Ethics approval was granted by the CSIRO Social Science Human Research Ethics Committee on the 31st August 2016 (089/16).

2. Science and Traditional Ecological Knowledge

IEK and science do not exist on an equal footing in the contemporary world, since science, for all that its individual practitioners might profess otherwise, is an instrument of managerial governance, a phenomenon too often experienced by Aboriginal people as 'colonisation', whereas IEK is rarely ascribed a status beyond 'anecdotal' and its function is 'complementary' to the definitive epistemologies of science. This is true unless you are Aboriginal, in which case IEK is more likely to be part of that knowledge and practice that defines and enlivens the world, ascribing meaning and connection within and between human, animal and vegetable, living, non-living and metaphysical worlds.

Despite this dissonance, there has been an uncomfortable alliance between science and IEK, made possible because both the biological sciences and Aboriginal knowledge are based on acute and informed observation that has often generated real mutual respect. The engagement between scientists and traditional landowners has at times found a mutual interest in protecting and improving the management of natural values on land, and from this has grown some very effective practical partnerships.

The relationship is strong where pathways to mutually valued outcomes are not contradictory, but it can be fragile and potentially destructive where each group's unshakable claim to a deeper truth is inequitably supported. Despite somewhat unpredictable benefits the relationship fails on the relative power that scientific knowledge systems, through association with managerial governance – and thus access to money – are able to wield in shaping an agenda and controlling meaning. Put another way, whitefella concerns and interests are funded a whole lot better than Aboriginal concerns and interests.

To illustrate what this really means, consider the 'Framework for Enhanced Application of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge' developed by Walsh *et al.* (2011). One can think about any element of the environment in terms of Dreaming, Country and/or People. Around these motifs cluster 25 areas of knowledge: things like 'burning or not', plant ecology, harvesting rules, skin groups, totems, body designs and so on. The biological sciences might perhaps be interested in 5 of these areas of knowledge. An ethnoecologist might be interested in 12 and somewhat aware of the rest. For an Aboriginal person, all 25 categories are required if one is to claim real knowledge of the element in question.

Walsh *et al.* demonstrate that IEK is inextricably woven into Aboriginal life, and that Aboriginal life is inextricably woven into the idea and the physical reality of country. Except that today, that connection is weakening, with the vast majority of 'bush' people living 'remote urban' lives away from country, having been dispossessed of both land and economic independence.

Even when land has been successfully won back, most Aboriginal people in remote areas struggle to find the resources to access their country in the ways they would wish. Distances can be great, and roads rough, leading to very high motor vehicle costs. Living on the land is challenging due to poor levels of health and fitness, lack of services such as schools and access to health care, and difficulty in accessing food, fuel and (unfortunately essential) discretionary goods such as tobacco.

The belated recognition by Australian governments that savanna and desert landscapes need active management, and that Aboriginal traditional practices, and burning in particular, are essential to the maintenance of country health, have led to a welcome increase in resources for indigenous ranger groups and protected areas. This has made country access easier, but being government funded, the program inevitably privileges science-based knowledge and action, with the Aboriginal agenda left to piggyback as best it can on the official 'whitefella' program. Over the long term, this subtle 'colonisation' process risks disengagement by Aboriginal people, promoting an equally subtle resistance manifesting as the 'mis'-direction of funds and activities (c.f. Scott, 1992), or an erosion of the importance of traditional values to Aboriginal people themselves.

The role of technology

Technologies encompass both material tools and the processes by which people achieve specific ends. Technologies emerge from particular economies and cultures and serve in particular ways that tend to reflect and reproduce aspects of the originating culture. They do this through a functional logic, built into what they do and how they do it (Limonnier, 1992). A new technology purports a better way of achieving a given outcome, and indeed it may, but the transition is never without cost and unforeseen, unintended consequences. The question is whether people are able to adequately reconcile a technology's benefits against its costs. The suite of new technologies that comprised the Industrial Revolution boosted human productivity enormously: one of the unintended consequences is the global challenge of climate change. Only time will tell which material sacrifice we will ultimately make as a species – profligate materialism or a thriving planet.

Aboriginal people have 'bent' several western technologies to new and surprising ends, but this is an influence that goes both ways, and as the adopter changes the technology, so too does the technology change the adopter. The ubiquitous use of motor vehicles in land management is an important example. Cars (now essential to remote travel) drive for the most part on roads and tracks, the location and destination of which are decided years or decades in advance of any given journey. A ribbon of road is observed by the traveller, but is generally passed by with rapidity, with the destination firmly in mind. The Aboriginal way of moving through country, meandering, observant, watchful for food and game, firestick in hand is submerged in the logic of speed, diesel and destinations. Rarely does the road bend past that great patch of bush foods, or through that kangaroo habitat in the way a walker will instinctively do. The motor vehicle becomes indispensable, along with the tyres, diesel, motor oil, licensed driver and operating budget that tie Aboriginal people to the modern world. Without the vehicle, and without the many connections to the mainstream, the country cannot be visited. This situation is not a 'natural' state of affairs: the nuanced Aboriginal practice of 'footwalking' has been largely replaced by a foreign technology and Aboriginal values, skills, health and experience have been lost or devalued as a result. The adoption of the motor vehicle has served many contemporary Aboriginal interests very well, including accessing some country, but when the vehicle (car or helicopter for example) becomes the only way, there are unseen costs. By deliberately pursuing hybrid strategies that involve footwalking, Aboriginal subjectivity could be reinvigorated and engagement increased.

In a rapidly changing world, 'tech' – in the form of data, gadgets and new 'efficient' ways of doing things – is increasingly a logic in its own right, a trend that offers great opportunities, but also great threats. When a Traditional Owner can 'visit' the land remotely using a drone, even

perhaps placing a cat bait, lighting a fire or teaching a song to a younger person, what does this do for connection? Is a virtual visit better than no visit? What happens to the health of the Traditional Owner, sitting in front of a computer? What happens to the complexity of Aboriginal understandings – things like IEK, kin systems and the numinous landscape – or to motivation when managerialism takes over from experience and the future takes over from the past? Being on country is often expressed as a primary objective for Aboriginal people, an apparently simple ‘state of being’ that hides a complex weaving of connections between people, the land, its creatures and its spirits that encompass identity, authority and livelihoods. Bradley puts it well:

“For people such as the Yanyuwa, “real” cultural identity, or sense of place, is the outcome of effective and ongoing relationships with country; without these human-country interactions, people do not know how to behave” (Bradley, 2011).

With most of the resources that support Aboriginal presence on country coming from government (e.g. Working on Country, Indigenous Protected Areas programs), or corporate markets/investment (carbon farming, environmental offsets), the on-country activities that are emphasised lean strongly to the concerns of ecology and managerial governance. Aboriginal people own or control more than 50% of the land in the Northern Territory, and comprise the only viable long-term workforce in most remote areas, and yet many of the key values that motivate Aboriginal people are unrecognised in the design of work programs or in selecting the metrics that will be used for measuring program success – values associated with time, connectedness, kin, ancestral law for example. In other contexts these have been seen as strong resilience factors, as assets to Indigenous participation in the economy and broader public life (James *et al*, in Press). The omission is all the more lamentable because the social benefits of widespread and empowered Aboriginal employment in land management impact across a wide range of important social domains including education and health, a fact that is widely recognised but consistently fails to draw the positive action that is warranted.

3. The research

The data we sought in this study concerned ‘walking in country’. We were interested in walks of even a few hours, so long as they were ‘in country’, and were purposeful – whatever that purpose might have been. The ideal example would have been a walk by a person or people, in their own country, in which participants have the opportunity to connect with the land in a psycho-cultural sense (language, teaching, visiting sites, feeling, communicating with ancestors/spirits), but also to some degree in an economic sense (hunting/fishing/gathering, employment, thinking about livelihood options).

We wanted to understand the full range of reasons Aboriginal people are getting back to walking in country. Most walks have more than one motivation, and most report more than one outcome. Though the headline reasons for walking may be different, exploring the underlying motivations reveals significant common concerns and values. The data collected was far from exhaustive since it relied heavily on the willingness of individuals to share information, on someone within a network knowing that that the event had even happened, or on some information being recorded in the (usually grey) literature or available on the internet. Our primary interest was in walks that focused on land management outcomes, and yet these are in many ways the least likely to be recorded - if a group of rangers make regular walks over half a day or a day, this seems not to warrant a report on the internet . . . it just feels normal. In order to deal with the disparate collection of accounts that were able to be collected – and acknowledging the limitations in data caused by time shortage and the scattered nature of the data – we have made a tentative analysis of the reasons walks in country were conducted, and whether those objectives were met, as well as drilling deeper into how each stated objective might be understood from different perspectives. We have tried to bring the experience of walking on country to life by interspersing brief case studies that illustrate particular elements.

Whilst acknowledging some local trends to contrary, Aboriginal people are ‘walking in country’ more than they have done since perhaps some time in the 1960’s and earlier when people walked in country because this was what they had always done: there was a strong continuity with the traditions of life on the land. People walked to hunt. People walked to get from one place to another. People walked because they often did not have access to motor vehicles. Walking was easy and free, and through it people felt some freedom from the mission and government people who had come to control so much of their lives (see for example, Hume, 1991).

In contemporary times, the walks are purposeful in their very nature. They are often assertive of land estate ownership, and they are always emically political in that they speak to Aboriginal people themselves of holding the connection to country, protecting culture and teaching children of the old ways. There is something of the neo-classical at work – at times verging on absurd, with the giant walks supported by government funds and twenty Toyotas and a small army of whitefellas – but the upsurge in walking may also mark a renaissance of Aboriginal engagement with that most essential of values: Country

4. Analysis of walks data

In this study, information on 28 'walks' was gathered. Some data draws directly on the author's experience. Data quality was greatly limited by the scope and methods for information collection that could be deployed in the available timeframe. In reality, many of the walks listed occurred multiple times over a number of months or years, but are entered into the dataset only once. A great many other walks were not discovered and so not reported at all. Of course, every day dozens of people walk out from their homes in remote communities, or stop by the roadside and walk into the bush, to hunt. These people are not represented in the data, though they represent arguably the truest examples Aboriginal walking. We sought data on the location, duration, number of participants and the reasons, or motivations for the walk.

Analysis of the stated reasons for walking yielded 10 broad motivations (see Table 1). Some of these categories of motivation arguably overlap, whilst others could be split². There is no doubt though, that all the categories describe aspects of Aboriginal connection to country, and all overlap in complex ways. The statistical analysis offered here is indicative at best.

Walk motivations were cited a total of 125 times. Of the 28 walk descriptions, the average number of motivations mentioned was 4.3, with the highest being 7. The top four rows in Table 1 (shaded) could be considered as being particularly central to Aboriginal values and connection to country, and it would appear that these values are major motivating factors in country walks. These four motivations account for almost 65% of all references, with the remaining 6 motivations totalling only 35.2%. Furthermore, these four 'core value' motivations occurred *together* 12 out of 28 times, whilst on a further 8 occasions 3 of the 4 occur together, the omission quite likely an artefact of the data collection methods, the person telling the story or the intended audience of the story. If this additional 8 reports are added to the initial 12, then fully 71% of walks are clearly motivated by core Aboriginal values *vis-à-vis* land. Interestingly, the same four motivations are cited as only 39% of primary references, perhaps underlining the earlier observation that Aboriginal concerns and interests are difficult to fund. Indeed, it may be that Aboriginal concerns sometimes need to be disguised as whitefella interests in order to attract funding?

No firm conclusions could be drawn from the data concerning walk duration or participant numbers. Walk duration ranged from <1 day to 28 days. The typical walk ran for 4-5 days. Numbers of participants reported were often very vague, and ranged from 1 to >200. Longer walks, and those with more participants tended to be run by organisations and to be very expensive, though some protest walks were long (10-28 days), relatively large (15-30 people) and run on very small budgets. What is important in the data is the unmistakable fact that walking in country is valuable to Aboriginal people. It is an activity that seems to be inherently desirable and which makes sense in terms of people's identity and history. Walking is also an activity that can serve many of what we might call whitefella objectives – things like promoting

² It is to be expected, and this was reflected in the data collection process, though not specifically expressed in the results, that the motivations cited by Aboriginal people were articulated and stressed differently than those described by Whitefellas or in material published on the internet. The data is thus quite imprecise with respect to subtleties of meaning, and in this respect it reflects some of the contested realities of our 'post'-colonial world.

healthy lifestyles, addressing challenging behaviours in young men or burning country for carbon emissions abatement, and walking can harness real Aboriginal motivation and enthusiasm to help achieve these things. The next section explores some of the qualitative dimensions of walking on country in order to explain and demonstrate the depth of this motivation and enthusiasm.

Table 1. Walk motivation references

Motivation	Times referenced	Times referenced as primary motivation
Strengthen connection to Country	26	3
Promote cultural heritage	23	5
hunting/bushfoods	18	0
Intergenerational transfer of knowledge	14	3
Reconciliation	11	0
Health and healthy lifestyles	11	3
Land management	9	3
Livelihoods (esp. tourism),	6	6
Protest	5	4
Corrections/diversion	2	1

5. Inherent qualities that motivate walking on country

5.1 Connection to country

Being connected to country can mean many things. At the simplest level, it is about feeling at home, about feeling the land and being comfortable. One woman said of her country: “It is the place where I can just relax. I feel deep peace. I sleep and sleep” (Steph Armstrong, Pers Comm). But being connected to country is also about knowing one’s place in the network of places, totems and skin groups, knowing the spirits and ancestors in the land, knowing one’s right neighbours, one’s right relationships, knowing the plants and animals and what each needs to live and thrive, knowing their names, their uses and the rules that govern harvest and use.

Being connected to country is about holding the knowledge particular to a place, and living according to that knowledge. It is about feeling country, but also a way of life. It is a way of life that too few enjoy anymore.

Two or more generations of settlement have robbed most people of their fitness, their finer skills and the detailed reserves of knowledge that made life possible ‘in the bush’. Meanwhile, the wind-back of government services such as education and health for outstations and smaller communities means that people have often been forced to live, and raise their children, in large communities a long way from home. Many older people have not visited their land in decades. Many young people have never visited their land at all.

When Aboriginal people left their country, whether that was 15 or 150 years ago, they held a firm connection in their minds, with stories, both sacred and profane forming a ‘memory palace’ that kept the places alive and present in the mind. And they always expected to go back - one day. One day is still coming for most. But in the intervening years and decades, stories were lost and the land changed. If the people suffered for losing the land, so too the land suffered for losing the people. Who now was moving every day, firestick in hand, creating patterns of regeneration in the land? Who now scraped sand from the bottom of rockholes, chasing the last water, and in the process kept that essential vessel open for wallabies, kangaroos and emus? New animals came and wrought destruction. Foxes decimated the small marsupials. Cats decimated the birds and lizards. Camels destroyed the quandong trees, drank the desert rockholes dry and then died in them. Buffalos pugged and muddied pristine northern billabongs, and pigs rooted up tubers and destroyed the eggs of ground nesting birds.

In the memory palaces of the displaced, the land held its Arcadian purity. The idyll persisted even as wildfires burnt across thousands of kilometres of desert or savanna. Even as miners came and dug up landscapes, leaving pits and poisoned rivers behind. During a biological survey on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yangkuntjatjara Lands in the 1990’s, a search for Black-Flanked Rock Wallabies was underway, and Traditional Owners stated confidently that *Waru* were plentiful, pointing with their lips to the many outcrops that punctuated the spinifex and mulga plains. As site after site was visited, and *Waru* were found in only two (and years later another two), *Anangu* faced an uncomfortable truth: that they no longer knew what was happening in the country that they no longer lived in, no longer visited (Robinson et al. 2003).

Life no longer happens on the land. Now the economic centre is in the settlement. The offices, where government payments are won and lost is here. The store, that endless source of easy food is here. For sure, people still hunt such game as they can, tracking up perentie, shooting or knocking down kangaroos and digging rabbits live from their warrens, and going out on weekends to dig *tjala* (honey ants) or *maku* (witchetty grubs), or to gather from sandy river beds the great roots of red gums which they carve into bowls or animals to sell to tourists through Maruku Arts at Uluru. But, economically speaking, this is the cream (such activities hold many more meanings than the economic). The bread and butter of economic existence is firmly in the settlement. Once, this same 'bread and butter' was won by scouring the land on foot, noticing and knowing the meaning of every mark on the sand, knowing every step of the country and knowing that one's ancestors knew every step in just the same way.

Walking in Country is the next step in the assertion of land ownership, wherein the assertion is to oneself, felt through the visceral reality of being there, of opening oneself up to what the Yawuru people around Broome call '*liyan*', the feeling of the spirit of the land (Emmanouil, 2015), and to engage in what informants have described as a dialogue with the 'Old People' – the ancestors and spirits who still reside in the land but are, as the Pitjantjatjara would say it, *tjituru-tjituru* (sad and lonely, desolate). There are songs that need desperately to be sung and places that need desperately to be visited.

Jack Green described an encounter with a spirit man at Wallis Creek, when the man stood back and threw small stones at Jack's swag.

"What did he want?", I asked

"I don't know", Jack replied. "Maybe he wanted food?"

"No", I said. "He wants you to come back. That bloke's missing his mob, all gone to Borroloola". Jack had to agree. He looked like he had swallowed poison.

Compare an incident from twenty years earlier when my dear departed friend and mentor Robin Kankanpakantja walked with me 'in country'. Robin encountered and spoke to spirit people regularly. He talked of them without any hint of the bizarre and absolutely no fear as though they were right before us and we could share a cup of too-strong, too-sweet tea. The spirits were like people with business to attend to, livelihoods to chase, living on a parallel plane as it seemed to me.

With the ravages of dispossession, many people have been lost before their time, and with them has been lost sections, or even the entirety of songs and stories that relate to particular places. With such knowledge lost, even senior people are frightened about approaching these places. Without knowing the songs, one cannot know the dangers, nor can one be known to the spirits who reside in these places. Such places become exclusion zones. Aboriginal land that can never be used, can never be enjoyed, can never be cared for by Aboriginal people. Yet, the answer lies in walking, camping close to such places with respect and openness and waiting for the nature of the place to be revealed. Country gives up its stories to those who have the time and can listen.

'Walking in Country' was once 'just' life. But it has become an essentially political act because through walking, Aboriginal people express the continuity between past and present, and assert the properness of a way of relating to land and each other and a set of actions that flow from these proper relationships. Many Aboriginal people see being Aboriginal as an act of

political resistance in itself, and for many there is no more powerful way to be Aboriginal than to be 'in country'.

5.2 Protest

Several of the reported walks were overtly political in nature. It seems almost to be cheating to mention the Wave Hill Walk-Off of 1966-67, when over 200 Aboriginal people declined to work for rations and walked off Wave Hill Cattle Station, but this was the quintessential protest³, and the footsteps of those people shape the land rights agenda to this day. The 20km walk from their initial camp near Wave Hill to Wattie Creek, (Dagaragu) was a powerful gesture that both asserted Aboriginal identity, demand for land rights and the solidarity of the group against exploitation by the Vestey empire (ABC, 2012).

More recently, Martu people have walked in country - Yeelirree to Leonora in 2012 - and in the Karmamalyi National Park near Parnangkurr in 2017 to protest against a proposed uranium mine on their country. These walks involved a significant number of non-indigenous people who share the political agenda and the sense of shared struggle certainly contributed to intercultural understanding and respect.

Jack Green is a Garawa artist and activist who has unflinchingly opposed the MacArthur River Mine near Borroloola in the NT. The mine has a very poor environmental record and has benefited from some very questionable government decisions (on both sides of politics) that ignored the wishes of many traditional owners throughout its existence (Mudd, 2016, Young, 2015). A current application to enlarge the mine rather ludicrously proposes a 1000-year royalty and rehabilitation timeframe (Campbell, 2017)!

Jack has been very concerned about the diversion of the Macarthur River to make way for an open pit and the impact this has had on the dreaming sites. In 2017 Jack organised a group of Traditional Owners to walk through the mine area in a gesture asserting their rights and responsibilities over the area. The walk took only one day and the group was small but the mine's management were sufficiently concerned that they sought to prohibit the involvement of non-traditional owners (these people not enjoying a legislated right to enter the site), and the duty manager walked with Jack and his group, ostensibly to 'keep them safe'.

5.3 Corrections

In 1990 and '91 the author ran a youth program in association with the Brosnan Centre, taking 'at risk' youth from Melbourne out into the desert with camels. The program was not targeted to Aboriginal youth but the harsh realities of intergenerational trauma and Aboriginal poverty meant that a high proportion of the youths (mostly boys) who came out were in fact Aboriginal. The program took two, or very occasionally three boys out at a time, for a period of a month. We travelled through the Flinders Ranges, northern South Australia and as far north as Alice Springs. During the course of the month a remarkable change unfolded in most of our 'clients'.⁴ There is no doubt that the transition into the hardships and rigours of camel travel was

³ Though far from the only station walk-off.

⁴ A term that I loathed then and I loathe now.

challenging. Every single thing was strange: sleeping under the stars, cooking on a fire, baking our own bread, getting used to the vast horizons and bright light, the flies, the huge animals that needed both respect and care, and the walking. Every day, the rhythm of walking. In the beginning the loathing of every aspect of the trip was usually colourfully expressed and tedious. After two weeks the volume was lower and the gaps between bouts of vituperation grew longer. By the last week they did not want to go home. Many did not go home - I was able to find them jobs on cattle stations. I have met several of these 'boys' in the years since, and they have identified this month with camels as the turning point in their lives.

This type of transformation is unlikely or impossible even in well-conceived outdoor education programs, not because the activities and the physical activity is not good but because an afternoon or two days or even a week is simply not enough time to break through entrenched behaviours, attitudes and lifestyles. Many young people offend because drinking, taking drugs and breaking into buildings is *fun*, or at least exciting. It is sometimes the only excitement in an otherwise dull and hopeless life. Time walking in the bush is time to discover new horizons, new ways of feeling happy, and new ways of dreaming of a future.

When I started researching this paper, a friend commented that she was recently returned from Italy where corrections authorities were looking to implement extensive walks with juvenile offenders, based on a very successful Spanish model where youths walk for a month on the pilgrim trail, *Camino de Santiago*. In jurisdictions where rehabilitation is valued over punishment, such interventions are best practice⁵.

A good example of a walk used for correctional purposes in coastal Arnhem Land (circa 2009) is included in a project evaluation for a IEK project run by NAILSMA, CLC and Territory NRM⁶. A group of six young men were referred by the courts to undertake diversionary activities in the community. The boys had been getting into trouble and had fronted court on minor charges such as break-an-enter and shoplifting. Marijuana use was identified as a contributing factor.

The boys:

"... were dropped in remote locations with just a spear, a woomera, and a sleeping bag, and there were Elders there and they had to walk home, which was usually 4 to 5 days...On the boys walk, the boys learnt stories of their particular clan and their particular country. And they hunted a turtle down there and cooked it up on the beach. In one of the spots they were dropped off at, there were caves full of paintings there, so they learnt all those stories. A lot of the young people hadn't heard the stories because they hadn't been to that part of the country. They learnt traditional ways of hunting with their spears. They learnt cooking techniques. Even the Elders hadn't been there for 30 years" (Moxham and Mitchell, 2011; 36).

When the first group of boys returned home, their friends all wanted to do the same, and in the end five walks were conducted, with the last involving 21 young people.

⁵ It is important to note that what is being described here is not a "Boot Camp", which could be characterised as authoritarian and militaristic in nature: rather they are extended journeys into the bush, with deep cultural links (Tjukurpa, Catholic/pre-Christian in the case of Spain), and guided and mentored by respected senior people.

⁶ The project assessment is deidentified and as a result, many details are omitted.

In 2005 the Yirriman Project and the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre ran a camel-supported walk aimed help 'at risk' youth "to build confidence through culture" (Wallace-Smith, 2005; 17). The walk took men and women between 14 and 30 out into the bush, visiting country and looking after the sites. Said Nyikina elder and cameleer Harry Watson, "We want to do more of these sorts of walks; looking after country, 'Jila' (water) and looking after animals – instead of young people stopping around towns and those places...where suicide, drinking and other bad things happening" (cited in Wallace-Smith, 2005; 17).

5.4 Health

Health, in the context of 'walking in country' is an idea that crosses into all other categories. Walking is generally good for human health. Lee and Buchner (2008) reviewed a large number of epidemiological studies and concluded that: "Walking is a simple health behaviour that can reduce rates of chronic disease and ameliorate rising health care costs" (2008; 512). Specific benefits of walking to human health include improved cardio-vascular health, increased core strength, weight loss or healthy weight maintenance, improved flexibility and strength in joints, improved insulin/ glucose dynamics (reduced risk of diabetes mellitus), and increased bone density (Morris and Hardman, 1997).

Roe and Aspinall, (2011), showed that all people, especially those with poor mental health respond well to walking in rural settings, with improved measures of "affective and cognitive restoration". Other research indicates that walking in natural or high heritage value settings (one's *own country* perhaps?) has a particularly positive impact on mood and feelings of self-esteem, with negative feelings such as anger, depression, tension and confusion all significantly reduced (Barton *et. al.*, 2009).

These direct health benefits of walking are certainly important: the epidemic of obesity and Type 2 Diabetes in Aboriginal communities (indeed the world), will exact a terrible social and financial cost before it plays out, but for many Aboriginal people, the idea of health is much more broadly understood.

Waltja Tjutanku Palyalpayi ran two 9-day walks, Kintore to Haasts's Bluff, and Mt Leibig to Haasts's Bluff in 2012, involving a total of 80 Aboriginal women and children. The walks were aimed at promoting a healthy lifestyle, healthy eating and to encourage regular walking for exercise. Vehicle support was available to ferry people who were unable to walk.

The walk's co-organiser, Kate Crossing commented that: "Some people got tired, and some worried for home, but these feelings wore off as the days continued, and people commented more and more on how happy and relaxed they felt. Some participants commented on feeling stronger/fitter as well. Feedback after the walk was extremely positive, and stayed in people's minds for a long time as a significant event."

Steph Armstrong, a Kamileroi educator and writer is planning a walk in northern Victoria in 2018. The walk is about health, but the matter of exercise is of relatively minor concern. Steph describes a group of women in Bendigo who are under constant pressure from family and community, who never get the chance to attend to their own needs, whose health is impacted because they are always stretched thin looking after others. The women will spend five days

in contemplation, deep listening and connecting to the bush, taking time out from their unofficial but unrelenting roles as police, nurses, councillors, protectors, teachers, mediators, providers, ambassadors, mothers, grandmothers and wives.

In remote communities, the daily stresses of life can be extreme, and the author has sat in a Ranger compound at a Gulf community one night, as young men stalked by, brandishing star pickets and unleashing a frightening stream of invective on an unseen enemy, promising, if they could only find them, to smash them, and to put them in hospital, to kill them. This was mostly theatre and the men were careful not to actually confront each other face-to-face, but I could feel the stress levels rise in my companions every time one of these boys stormed by. The entire community was their stage and apparently they performed every night. With the performance, excitement and dread rippled through the settlement. People wondered if their children were safe or if they themselves would be drawn into a potentially bloody conflict. Eventually, sometime after midnight an uneasy sleep settled on the community. This is too often the reality of life on remote settlements and the resulting chronically high levels of stress hormones such as cortisol are implicated in a weakened immune system, hypertension, raised blood sugar and obesity (Schneiderman *et al.* 2005).

Contrast the peace of the bush, early to bed and a sleep unbroken by threats of violence. Consider also, how much less spare energy there would be for conspicuous displays of anger and fragile masculinity if more young men had spent the day walking 20km through the bush.

5.5 Making a living

In 1995, the author worked with the Robin family from Walalkara (which later became an Indigenous Protected Area) to explore the potential of a camel-based tourism venture. We ran two trips into the Great Victoria Desert – Robin Kankantjara's land – the first with 8 Aboriginal people (4 of them children) and the second with 22 Aboriginal people and 6 'tourists'. We used some trained camels and a small wagon. All the gear, food and swags were carried on the wagon. People mostly walked. If they were tired they could climb aboard for a rest. Few people took up the opportunity.

As we walked deeper into the desert, a remarkable peace settled over the group. Perhaps it was the seduction of that winter sun in the desert, but people left behind the discord of settlement life. They entered a world where their skills and knowledge were relevant and important. They camped in the shelter of mulga thickets, in soft, red sand, built *yuu* (windbreaks) from branches to slow the chilly breeze and ate bushfoods collected through the day.

The return to country – and to the rhythm of walking – the feel of sand between the toes, reading stories of the previous night written in the sand as they walked, the focus of attention on each other instead of dissipated into a chaotic troubled community, was an obvious source of joy to the Robin family. For Robin though, the pressing need was to make his land the economic centre of his family's life. Robin was not unique in feeling, and fearing the lassitude of life in Fregon. He saw the lack of meaningful work and the lack of hope in the young people. He saw his grandson sniffing petrol. Unlike many, Robin felt a desperate need to act.

“Good Country!”, Robin said to me, looking out over the plains. Country that should, and would provide. It had given Robin all he needed as he walked naked in his childhood, learning the names of things, the meaning of places and his place in it all. A life that began to change that day when, filled with apprehension, he encountered that first strange, pale man on a camel. Now he turned back to that same country to provide means and meaning in this strange new world.

Tourist oriented walks run by indigenous people and focussing on conveying an indigenous perspective on country have become quite common across Australia, with examples ranging from an hour or two, to camping trips of several days. The commercial orientation should not occlude the importance of these walks for the operators: every day they assert in practical terms, their identity, history and their ownership of the land and crucially, they earn their livelihood from their land.

Aboriginal educational and tourist walks have a surprising clientele at times. Steph Armstrong has walked twice with a cultural tour in Melbourne. Steph explained that she often has to go to Melbourne for work, and knowing something of the country makes her feel more comfortable as a visitor.

Whilst running a bush foods enterprise between 2000 and 2013, the author engaged regularly with Anmatjerre people who were collecting acacia seed or *akatyere* (desert raisin). People would drive out to the collecting areas then disperse on foot into the bush, walking several kilometres in the course of a day. This was people making a living, on foot, independent of the State (See also Holcombe et al (2011).

5.6 Intergenerational knowledge transfer

I referred above to an IEK Framework developed by Walsh *et al.* (2011), commenting on the breadth of what is considered to be IEK by Aboriginal people. Knowledge in this framework encompasses all aspects of life. It is language, correct structures of relationships, dreaming stories and the meaning of country, the location of resources such as waterholes, hunting skills and metaphysical understandings of the world.

Most such knowledge is situational and deeply practical in nature, embedded in life, or more recently, memories of a fragmented life. It is also embedded in specific places: in country. Settlement and life on the margins of Australian society removed the pressing need for hunting skills and shrunk the mental map that was necessary to provide for one's family. Much energy is now expended managing social relations in large settlements and in meeting obligations imposed by outsiders. A different set of skills is called for, replacing maps of the land with maps of institutional resources, and a knowledge of how to navigate the perplexing, (and ever changing) set of rules that now govern access to resources. Connection to country takes a back seat.

If there is any hope of passing on traditional knowledge (whatever we mean by it) to the younger generation, then the knowledge must have some physical and economic relevance. It cannot be the relevance of the past but it can echo that, and actually being in country is essential, as somewhat understated by Hill (2004): “Repetition of interactions in situ allows

country to speak to the people and people to speak to country, an important element of [Indigenous Ecological Knowledge]” (Hill *et al.* 2004, cited in Hill *et al.* 2013).

The Traditional Owners and Manwurrk Rangers of the Warddekan Indigenous Protected Area in Arnhem land have been running bushwalks most years since the late 1990’s. The central Arnhem plateau is vast and very rugged and there are very few roads so access to many areas is viable only by helicopter or by foot. These walks are driven by the senior people who want to ensure that the younger generation, most of who now live in the larger settlements, are given the opportunity to visit their country and learn how to look after it, and to learn special knowledge such as the old trade and walking routes that criss-cross the area. The walks do not seek to undertake other work, they are solely about getting people back onto country and every effort is made to maximise the opportunity. Walks are timed to coincide with school holidays so that families can come along and senior people who are unable to manage the walk are flown by helicopter to the next campsite where they instruct the walkers as to where they must go, what they will see, and what they must do the next day. Walks have ranged in size from 20-30 people up to 150 people.

Where intergenerational transfer of knowledge is a central objective, the presence and engagement of elders is crucial. Yet elders are the people least likely to be able to participate in extended walks on country. Writing of their work with Rembarrnga clans in central Arnhem, Austin *et al* describe the tradition of *wulken*, wherein clan members, including the elderly, can be together on country for an extended period:

“...a tradition of Ngala Dakku (right people) travelling to a place on their dawal (ancestral estates) to make a temporary camp. This camp is lived in for around one month (a single lunar cycle) and allows clan members to walk on country, hunt, eat bushfoods, maintain cultural sites and conduct ceremony. It also allows for knowledge to be remembered through storytelling, singing, painting, weaving, dancing and other forms of knowledge transmission. While on *wulken*, clan members make many day trips and overnight trips to visit specific places. It takes Ngala Dakku away from buildings, telephones, televisions, fans and other distractions. It allows country to talk to Bininj [Aboriginal person of that region], and Bininj to talk to country. For Bininj, being on country makes you think, makes you remember, makes you speak the right language, positions Ngala Dakku within malk (kinship), country, culture and ceremony. Visiting country opens peoples’ minds and ensures that all planning, monitoring and evaluation, research and decision making is conducted within the complexity of here-and-now moments on country. Or, in short, within locally defined realities” (Austin *et al*, in Prep).

At a much less grand scale, it is also worth noting two small examples from Victoria: In the township of Maldon, Julie Mchale runs a ‘Bush Kindy’ each week taking children, both indigenous and non-indigenous, into the bush for a few hours, telling the children indigenous stories, teaching them about the plants and teaching them to be comfortable in and love the bush. Similarly, Steph Armstrong tells how she made a conscious decision to ensure her granddaughter (growing up in urban Bendigo) is connected to the land, and so takes her out into the bush every week, to “say hello to the trees and to learn to feel the country”. Connection, says Steph, is not automatic. It must be fostered.

5.7 Land management

Looking after the land well demands close observation and for this, nothing beats walking. Remote sensing captures landscapes, helicopters give unique aerial perspectives and make short work of long distances and rough terrain and are indispensable for some types of survey and for truly broad-scale fire work, whilst Toyotas remain the only reasonable way to get to a starting point. The walker however, sees, smells and hears the bush. The walker notices subtle differences in vegetation, in wind direction, in contour. The walker can see a tiny track, stop and check something, respond to an intuition, bag a goanna and talk to a spirit person. Given time, the walker can go to places only a walker can go, and can *connect* in a way only a walker can.

Traditional Aboriginal skills can provide a particularly acute lens onto what is happening on the land, but these skills are not inherent and immutable. Skills must be relevant, or they will not be developed, honed and passed on. Regular walking in country can provide that relevance. Walking has been an important tool of rangers as they visit and often rediscover sites in remote areas. Rangers footwalking in Arnhem Land have located rock shelters adorned with art (ABC News, 2017). In the Kimberley Rangers on foot have re-discovered the Narbalek (*Petrogale concinna* - a small rock wallaby) that were thought to be extinct in W.A. (Australian Geographic, 2018). In the deserts of South Australia, rangers on foot, equipped with Cyber-tracker® technology (re)discovered mallee fowl thriving in *Acacia minyura* woodland (Robinson et al. 2003), and contributed crucial tracking skills in a study of the elusive marsupial mole (Benshemesh and Johnson, 2003).

Of course, it is a normal part of ranger work to ‘walk around a bit’, having driven to a particular site. What is being proposed here is different only in scale: if the Watarru rangers found a site of *Egernia kintorei* only metres from the road to Emu Junction, how many more sites, how many more rare species would be found if those vast areas where no road, and therefore no person, goes were to be visited again?

Fire management in northern and desert Australia needs to happen at a vast scale, and it is tempting to think that it can only be achieved with the use of helicopters. Yet within living memory (just), this work was managed by people on foot. In practice, a lot of work will still be done by helicopter, but there are regions where it may be practical to undertake more work on foot, and there are burn objectives (such as around sensitive vegetation communities) that are better served by slower, more considered work on foot.

In the modern context, there are two elements of a fire management strategy. The first is the creation, by mechanical means and/or by burning, of a set of strategically placed firebreaks that can limit the spread of the inevitable late dry season fires. The second is the creation, through early dry season burning, of a mosaic of differently aged vegetation across a 3-10 year range, and a pattern of burned and unburned country in any given season (Anderson *et al.* 2006). This second approach encompasses most of what might be called ‘cultural’ burns⁷ as well as ecological burns and in practice distinguishing between the two may be more a function

⁷ Cultural burns may also include kangaroo fire drives, small area burns for hunting, signalling, burning for water, rain making, clearing, late season seed germinations and so forth.

of cultural perspective than management intent. Petty *et al.* (2015) make some good points about the ways Aboriginal objectives and priorities can be submerged in a generalised management framework based firmly in the values of another culture (eg. biodiversity or carbon abatement). The reasons a group of people want to burn contributes a logic that decides *how* they burn. But resources are more readily allocated to the *whitefella* approach. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it could have implications for Aboriginal engagement and therefore outcomes.

Patchiness is of key importance outside of designated firebreaks. Patchiness allows less mobile birds and animals to gain refuge from a fire front and remnant vegetation to provide important survival habitat from which this fauna can recolonise. Higher levels of patchiness increase the likelihood that fire sensitive vegetation will survive and persist (Palmer, 2004; Oliviera *et al.* 2015). Patchiness is more likely to result from fires of lower intensity, such as those burning under cooler or windless conditions such as at night, when humidity and or vegetation moisture content is at higher levels or when fires burn into the wind. Higher levels of patchiness also result when single ignition points are employed (Williams *et al.* 2015), such as is typically the case with walkers. Bowman comments that Aboriginal people burning on foot:

“...had much greater situational awareness of likely fire behaviour and impacts...By contrast, most planned burning programs have much less flexibility. They are typically constrained to the working week, specific seasons and weather conditions, and often rely on starting fires from the air to get sufficient landscape coverage in remote areas. This style of fire management is a poor facsimile of Aboriginal fire. Fire agencies can only drop incendiaries under specific weather conditions in the middle of the day, when flying is safe. This results in bigger fires and consequently much coarser burn mosaics than was achieved by Aboriginal people burning their estates on foot. In principle, well-trained field crews traversing the landscape can carefully use fire to create very localised fuel reduction, using specific weather windows (such as foggy conditions) and times of day (such as the evening) to maximise the likelihood that that fires remain under control and do not damage fire-sensitive habitats” (Bowman, 2016).

Cooke reports that Aboriginal people in Kakadu National Park have been well aware of the subtlety of their foot based burning methods all along:

“Some landowners complain about aerial burning by park staff, saying that it marginalises landowners from continuing fire management as a cultural practice and also suggesting that it lacks the ecological finesse and effectiveness delivered by a person walking through the landscape and lighting fires” (Cooke, 1999; 104).

Similar contrasts between the brute efficiency of the aerial approach and the ecological finesse available to the walker is reported by Patrick Hookey, former Senior Ranger at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park (Pers. Comm.).

In July 2017, NAILSMA and the Waanyi Garawa Rangers conducted a fire walk across 15km of rough terrain on the Garawa ALT. After the walk, the rangers commented that the fires they produced were of good quality. The major difference that was noted was that there was a lot of control. Seeing the state of the vegetation, the ranger could make an informed decision to set a fire. If he felt that his immediate vicinity was too green or sparse to carry, he could walk

10 or 50 metres to find a better ignition point, and light up there. If he felt the vegetation was unsuitable for burning, he could walk on. Such choices are largely beyond the reach of the helicopter-borne operator. Incendiaries fall at a set frequency. They fall where they fall, and they burn, or fail to burn, whatever they fall upon according to its nature. An indication of the high ecological quality of the burns achieved on the Garawa walk is that most were too small (ie. $<1\text{km}^2$)⁸ to be picked up under the data resolution available to the Northern Australia Fire Information (NAFI) system.

As a final word on the ecological qualities of human-scale burning, Kate Crossing has this to say: “Kiwirrkurra provides a good example of burning done by the community on their own hunting trips (which is partly on foot, partly by vehicle). The mosaic of patchy burns in an approx. 50km radius around the community is much finer than elsewhere on the IPA, and we believe it is a major reason why bilbies and great desert skinks still exist there” (Kate Crossing Pers. Comm.).

⁸ NAFI pixel size is officially 250m^2 however fires of this size rarely display in the publicly available imagery, especially if the fire is cool and patchy, creating the ironic situation that the best fires, from an ecological and quite possibly cultural perspective, are effectively invisible.

6. Case studies

6.1 Kimberley fire walks

In the Wilinggin Native Title Area in the Kimberley Region of W.A., the Wunggurr Rangers have been undertaking fire walks as a small but important part of the early dry season burning regime since 2012. The rangers walk every year, and sometimes twice a year. The walks tie in with the helicopter based burning program and helicopters are sometimes used to ferry the group to a remote point from where they start their walk. The walking group is generally 6-7 people, comprising rangers and Traditional Owners if they want to be involved. On occasion senior traditional owners who are unable to walk have been brought in by helicopter to join the group for the night. Participants carry backpacks with their own camping gear, food and other equipment. Walks are generally three to five days in duration with a 5 day walk typically covering up to 70km. Walk participants are very positive about the experience.

Wunggurr Rangers Coordinator Danyel Woolf said that the walks are organised around fire, but were as much about getting people back on country, often taking people to visit their land for the very first time. People love to “see what’s out there”, and often visit or find rock art sites and record other cultural sites. Walks are also used as a platform for training, and many important bush and land management skills are taught along the way. It is critical, Danyel says, that the walks be easy and fun. The walking part is quite short, often only 10km or so and camp is made near a waterhole and there is time for fishing, collecting bush foods and exploring the locality.

Danyel reported that though the contribution of the fire walks to the overall burning program on Wilinggin is small, the work is still important and very effective. Burns produced on fire walks have pulled up large late-season fires on occasion. A firebreak produced by walkers can be much more reliable than one created by air since, unlike those working from an aerial platform, walkers can see the fuel conditions, ignition points can be much closer together and workers can target the right ignition points, right down to individual grass clumps.

To ensure the group’s safety when walking in remote areas, Danyel ensures that people with health conditions or critical medication needs do not go along. The group carries more than one satellite telephone and calls in to the office daily. Individuals carry spot trackers so that they can be easily located if they become separated from the group. Because the walks coincide with aerial fire work, a helicopter is in the general area, and could be used for an evacuation if an emergency arose. According to Danyel, the Wunggurr fire walk participants are not greatly concerned about risks such as snake bite. What they are deeply concerned about is cultural matters: having the right people, the right permissions and the right knowledge to make the walk safe.

6.2 Borroloola and the Gulf - two walks and 29 years

The journey east

In 1988, a group of people walked from Borroloola, east, to Manangoora (Sonenberg, 1989). The walk echoed the past, when Borroloola had been a major site for ceremonies, and young men had walked in from other parts of the Gulf of Carpentaria to participate. The boys involved

in the 1988 Journey East were also being prepared for ceremony, which in that year was to be held near Manangoora. The walk took around two weeks and covered around 90km. The walk was about a return to country, to reclaim the campsite of Malandari (abandoned since “all” the old people died there in an influenza epidemic in 1968), and to visit country no-one had seen for decades.

Senior Garawa man and Northern Land Council Representative, Keith Rory was a boy on the walk and reminisced: “The walk involved 30-40 people maybe. Garawa and Yanyula people. We walked on a dreaming track, every night camping, telling stories and dancing, listening to Elders, getting knowledge of country, songlines, names of places. Travelling, burning as we went. Those days there were no cane toads...loads of goannas...There were plenty of Toyotas...the old people went in the vehicles each day...From this walk, I carried away my pride.”

The journey west

In September 2017 the Journey East walk was re-enacted as the ‘Journey West’, following the same route as the former walk, but in the opposite direction. Many of the boys who had been on the original walk now returned some 29 years later as leaders on this new walk. The Journey West was entirely initiated and organised by a group of Aboriginal men. The walk was a major community event aimed at reconnecting young people with the land.

Organisers worked to draw in support and resources from a wide range of organisation and individuals around Borroloola including the Wesley Mission, Mabunji (the local outstation services organisation), the Roper Gulf Shire, Borroloola School, Waanyi Garawa Rangers, the Borroloola clinic and the police. The Journey West inspired a lot of excitement in the township with a buzz building up about it for several weeks, even as half the community seemed not to know when it was actually on.

The walking part of the walk involved well over 50 people, the supporting people might have contributed another 30. The uncertainty over numbers arises because of the constant coming and going of vehicles from Borroloola, with people dropping in for a day or two, a night or a few hours.

If the Journey West lacked something of a sense of remoteness, efforts were still made to recreate something of the original. Evenings were filled with stories, songs and dance. Day time, when the group were not walking, were spent fishing or teaching young people how to hunt turtle. Walkers progressed in small groups, sometimes friends, sometimes family, sometimes colleagues sometimes strangers. The atmosphere was happy, friendly and even as the dust and heat sapped people’s energy, excitement was always palpable. A film crew was employed to come along, and this resulted in some rather absurd moments, such as staged ‘setting out’ scenes, and dances danced without song.

The scale of the Journey West posed logistical and other problems. The Roper Gulf team charged with keeping the water supply up were hard pressed in the warm weather. The school team who undertook to feed the hungry masses from their barbeque trailer worked long hours. The amount of traffic was at times disruptive and the well planned and marked access tracks were carved to deep dusty ruts by the time the procession had passed. At times the walkers were enveloped in clouds of dust from passing traffic.

The Journey West was about land and culture, but not about land management. The event inspired a lot of interest in land management circles however, and the Waanyi Garawa Rangers began thinking more seriously about walks that they would like to do. Amongst these discussions were acknowledgements of the limitations of such a big walk: the organisational difficulties, the cost, the intrusion of so many cars coming and going, and with the lessons learned came ideas on how walking events could be made better.

6.3 The Lurujarri Heritage Trail, Dampier Peninsula

The Lurujarri Trail was established in 1987 by senior Goolarabooloo lawman Paddy Roe, who wanted to encourage and enable his community to remain connected to their country into the future. The Lurujarri Heritage Trail is walked every year in the cool season, as Emmanouil puts it: "...during *barrgana* season, the time when the nights are cool, the salmon are fat and the humpback whales are migrating north" (2016; 10). The walk takes 9 days, beginning in Broome, and following an ancestral dreaming track from Minyirr to Bindinganygun.

One of the more remarkable things about the Lurujarri Trail is that it was conceived as a cross-cultural experience from the beginning. Paddy Roe's vision was to open the land, in all its dimensions, up to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. The walk owners see *Buggarigarra* (the dreaming) as above ownership, indeed, as a being in its own right that will make its own decisions as to what it will reveal and to whom.

"By narrating the Buggarigarra...stories encoded in the landscape, Goolarabooloo storytellers offer walkers of the trail not only an opportunity to trace the movement of the creative ancestors, but also a discursive lens through which to interpret the material manifestations of spirit beings" Emmanouil, 2016: 10).

The walk has grown in popularity, with 30 walkers in 2000, 60 in 2012 and over 100 in 2013, necessitating four separate walks in order to manage the number of visitors (Emmanouil, 2016;11). As well as being a unique and growing 'enterprise', the Lurujarri Heritage Trail is at the cutting edge of reconciliation in Australia in that people from vastly different cultures are positively engaged in the search to find a common and inclusive language and experience of country.

According to Jeanné Browne who has been engaged with the community for over two decades, Goolarabooloo people involved in the Lurujarri walk have regular exposure to a diverse range of outsiders and this has given them an unusually worldly outlook and sense of empowerment. Aboriginal people involved with the Lurujarri walk feel pride that their knowledge and skills are valued. They see themselves variously as guides, teachers and (in the sense of keeping sacred knowledge strong) storytellers.

Visitors pay for the experience of the Lurujarri Heritage walk, but Aboriginal participants receive only minimal wages. A discussion has been ongoing for decades about the need for and merits of monetary rewards, with some feeling that the activities should yield a livelihood and others following the ideas of Paddy Roe, arguing that the activity is foremost about getting

out onto country and fostering understanding, and that receiving money for this would ultimately corrupt those sacred responsibilities.

The Lurujarri Trail more recently took on a major new role as an event of protest as it became a focal point in the struggle of the Goolarabooloo people against a major industrial development at Walmadany that would have directly impacted on *Buggarigarra* sites, the Lurujarri walk itself and the livelihoods of many in the community. The future of the Lurujarri walk is in doubt since a Native Title Determination awarded in favour of the Jabirr Jabirr/Ngumbarl people against the Goolarabooloo.

7. On efficiency

I commented in the introduction that if there was a problem with the idea of land management being done on foot, it was efficiency. Efficiency is a relative and culturally loaded term however and deserves to be considered further. When we seek efficiency in the contemporary world the typical ‘costs’ are money and time, whilst the desired output is tightly targeted – say to one or two of the knowledge elements described in Walsh *et al* (2011), such as ‘percentage of country burned’, or ‘cat baits distributed’. In an Aboriginal paradigm, things might look very different, and anything up to 25 ‘knowledge elements’ might be relevant and valued. If a number of these elements, or a particular element, were to be neglected, the activity might be deemed ‘inefficient’, though it is unlikely that that specific term would be used! To use the example of fire, an optimal percentage of land might have been burned, but was it the right places? Was the burning done by the right people? Did the traditional owners have real control over the works? Did they get to visit the country, or did they just fly over?

The multiple and ‘cross-sectoral’ outcomes of walking in country echo the complexity of Aboriginal values. We walk today to burn country and this is what we measure, but we have outcomes in terms of health, connection to country, intergenerational knowledge transfer and so on. The western management paradigm is simply ill-equipped to account for outcomes outside of a narrow, predetermined focus.

Even leaving aside Aboriginal values, the apparent ‘efficiency’ of aerial burning is not above question. If the intention is to produce an effective firebreak, then aerial incendiaries may be very effective in producing a large, continuous ‘*nyaru*’ (burnt/regenerating area). If the intention is to produce ecological burns to benefit wildlife and vegetation, then the quick and dirty aerial approach may not in fact be the most efficient, since there is every likelihood that the resulting burns will be too large, insufficiently patchy or, if the vegetation is partially cured, will result in very little burning at all.

I have referred above to the ‘brute efficiency’ of aerial burning, (measured as time-cost effectiveness, and assuming an ecologically adequate result is achieved). If time, and/or Aboriginal labour or engagement is short, then such an approach may be the only viable option, but this is by no means a foregone conclusion even on relatively large land areas. In 2015, an aerial burning sortie was conducted over the Robinson River Land Trust. The flight length was around 310km. This flight distance could be considered to represent an appropriate minimum linear distance over which ignitions should be made in that environment at that particular time (season, state of cure etc)⁹. Could a team burning on foot achieve the same in an efficient manner¹⁰?

⁹ A team burning on foot would not seek to reproduce the actual aerial flightpath since walking paths would need to be decided in consultation with traditional owners, and other considerations such as drop-off and pick-up, safety and campsites would need to be considered, yet the comparison is not without merit.

¹⁰ A team burning on foot would not seek to reproduce the actual aerial flightpath since walking paths would need to be decided in consultation with traditional owners, and other considerations such as drop-off and pick-up, safety and campsites would need to be considered, yet the comparison is not without merit.

To cover 310km on foot, assuming reasonably fit walkers and reasonably open ground would take 62 hours of walking. Assuming groups of three rangers, and not counting travel to drop-off and pick-up, the equivalent to 310km of helicopter burning would require 186 person hours. Assuming less fit walkers, and high grass making walking somewhat difficult, a day's work/walk might be restricted to 15km (and taking 4-5 hours rather than 3), so that an equivalent series of ignitions could be achieved by a single team of walkers in just over 20 days, by two teams in 10 days, or by three teams in just under 7 days.

Shaun Ansell, CEO of Warddekan IPA points out that the Warddekan IPA covers 1,394,951 hectares, and in a typical year, helicopter flight lines total around 12,000km. At 25km per day, this is 480 team days of walking and burning, which would need to be squeezed into a few months of early dry season. Nevertheless, the raw mathematics are not so bleak as they might seem at first glance: assuming 108 burning days (15th April-31st July), the task could be completed in the time by five teams. Where the real problems lie is in land tenure, and having the right people in the right place at the right time. With relatively small estate sizes in the northern savannas, a walking fire team would traverse several estates over a few days, and the team would need to include people with the authority to make decisions in all of them. There are also practical matters such as vehicle access for drop-off and pick-up that would need to be overcome, and it is no foregone conclusion that 15 or more people could be found who have the authority, the fitness or the inclination to undertake such a massive task, but impossible it is not. But this is not an argument against helicopters: it is a suggestion that walking might also be viable under some circumstances. There is room for both technologies in a 'two toolbox' approach. If we were considering such an undertaking in Botswana or Kenya, we would expect success. If we were considering this undertaking in 1970's Australia we would expect success. Could it be that in assuming impossibility in 2018 that we are guilty of the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' (Pearson, 2016)?

8. Research directions

As mentioned above, this research project is in two parts, the first being the current document: a broad review of the types of walking-in-country events that have happened over the years, and a consideration of the values and objectives that may have motivated these events. The second part of the project takes an action research approach to collaboratively explore issues around knowledge and land management that are of interest to the participating traditional owners. As at the time the current document was published, the second part of the project is well underway, and preliminary results are beginning to emerge.

The issue of overwhelming importance to Traditional Owners of the Seigal Creek area of the Waanyi Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust where a 10 day camp/walking visit was conducted turns out not to be how they best care for or manage land, but rather, how they can engage with the land at all. The challenges described are manifold and complex, covering issues of economic marginalisation, poor infrastructure, inadequate or absent services, poor health, substance addiction, low levels of literacy and inflexible, unhelpful and often toxic interfaces between Aboriginal people and the agencies who purport to channel crucial government resources and services to them.

Even more troubling is the abiding sense of grief and loss: the untimely loss of so many family members to disease and accidents. The loss of so many family members to the criminal justice system. The knowledge and confidence that is lost with the death or resignation to drink or bitterness of people who should be the elders. The loss of knowledge and confidence about the country – certainly concerning sacred country that may be dangerous to the uneducated intruder, but more prosaically, it is about the loss of ordinary knowledge – the fishing holes, the bush foods and the stories. One senior man was shocked and chastened on going for a walk, to ‘discover’ a beautiful gorge, teeming with fish, that in all his 60+ years, he never knew was there, though it was his own country.

These concerns are relevant to land management because so long as they are not addressed, the erosion of knowledge and connection will continue. ‘Ownership’ of land will be emptied of its deeper meanings until it is little more than a paper title or an ideological cry. The web of knowledge of the land and the things in it and how they are related – that 25 elements of knowledge described by Walsh et al (2011) – will be reduced to a bare few, less even than the scientists concern themselves with, because few of these traumatised people are able to access education from either world.

The research to date shows that walking in country can play a valuable role far beyond immediate land management objectives. Walking may not be the most efficient way to ‘get the work done’, but it is valuable work in itself. The subject of such work is not only the land, but the people and ultimately, the future. This is echoed powerfully in the words of Joe Williams, who talks of the need to return to the bush to “heal the spirit”, as a necessary precursor to any meaningful improvement in psychological, social or economic wellbeing (ABC The Drum, 29/08/2018).

9. Conclusions

According to the 2011 census, 35% of Aboriginal people in Australia are welfare dependant: 22 percent living in urban or regional areas, and 13% (70,000 people) living remote (Hudson, 2016). Economic opportunities in remote Australia are very limited and largely restricted to government functions (health, education and welfare), and primary production (cattle, fishing and mining). In remote areas there are few livelihood options for Aboriginal people at all, and fewer still that are congruent with traditional values.

Many Aboriginal people have won their land or part of it, back, but regained ownership has rarely come with economic viability under *any* system of understanding. Land is 'out there', hollowed of its ability to provide livelihoods, and attenuated from the daily cycles of life.

The indigenous customary economy is practically gone from the bush, with just a little hunting, gathering and fishing on the weekend, more as a pass-time than as a real contribution to family livelihood, (though this varies widely by region). No doubt, Aboriginal people enjoy their land to the degree that they can access it. The issue is that most people do *not* access or use their land to the degree that they would wish, and that the 'normal' technologies by which people access their land (motor vehicles) place often unperceived constraints on where a person can go, what they can do, what they can learn or teach and on the quality of engagement they can have/feel with country. Vast areas of land are 'orphaned'¹¹. Many people feel guilt and estrangement.

Older Aboriginal people typically express a burning need to 'keep the culture strong' and to 'pass on knowledge', yet indigenous ecological knowledge projects in Australia tend to be short excursions into the bush, where lore and law are imparted to the younger generation, after which everyone goes 'home'. I have argued above that IEK 'knowledge' is largely inseparable from practice. The corollary is that if a way of life is no longer viable or desirable, some of the knowledge that is embedded in that way of life will disappear except (possibly) for the small reservoirs held by passionate individuals and communities. When the knowledge that is in danger of being lost is an intricate network of story-songs that weaves the physical fabric of country and the language and consciousness of the people, representing more than sixty thousand years of accumulated wisdom, the task of protecting and revitalising such a trove is daunting indeed.

Walking in country offers a powerful way of drawing together some of the many threads of Aboriginal past, present and future. A walker can visit places a vehicle cannot go. One can feel and contemplate the land in its entirety, moving at a human pace, wherein one can see the ground, smell the earth and the trees and connect with ancestors. One can also undertake important work, be it singing a song, burning country, shooting feral animals, making a livelihood or engaging with other cultures. On foot, in country one can teach children about the past, and give them hope of meaningful work in the future.

¹¹ Country that has lost its owners and its songs, is no longer visited, no longer actively cared for, is 'orphaned'.

Technology offers incredible new ways to ‘preserve’ and transmit culture, and such efforts are potentially very valuable. But valuable as such efforts are, culture preserved is second best to culture lived. If cultural knowledge is to be stored in electronic databases, it must first be captured and flattened, wrenched from its earthy day-to-day life as *people* interacting with *country*, and digitised, the better to fit into a filing cabinet or a computer. But when no one lives that old life anymore, how can such knowledge remain alive and free, and not go the way of the thylacine and the lesser stick-nest rat? How can these captive songs not echo the desolation of the orphaned country where no-one sings anymore? Better knowledge be lived and living.

The strong desire to return home and live on country is commonly expressed by Aboriginal people. Yet it is extremely unlikely that any significant number of Aboriginal people are going to be able to move back to their country, and even if they did it will be as largely sedentary people. So, it is through walking – extended and purposeful where health allows – feeling *liyan* (meaning and source), visiting the places, attending to the land, singing the songs and practicing some of the old skills, that the most valuable parts of Aboriginal culture (and IEK) have the best chance of retaining relevance and thus surviving. If the generation who are children now were to grow up knowing the riches of walking in country, and were to think it a proper and normal thing to do, then the job is well begun.

10. References

- ABC Archives (2012), Gurindji strike - the Wave Hill walk-off, <http://www.abc.net.au/archives/80days/stories/2012/01/19/3411481.htm> accessed 9/02/2018.
- ABC News (2017), Aboriginal rangers discover rock art sites while conducting burn-offs in Arnhem Land, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-30/aboriginal-rangers-discover-rock-art-site-in-arnhem-land/8750046> accessed 31/01/2018.
- ABC The Drum, (2018), Panel Discussion with Joe Williams, Van Badham, Madonna King, and Warren Mundine. <https://iview.abc.net.au/show/drum> accessed 30th September 2018.
- Andersen, A., Parr, K., McKaige, B., and Setterfield, S., (2006), Burning for Biodiversity in the Top End. *Australasian Plant Conservation: Journal of the Australian Network for Plant Conservation*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Mar-May 2006: 3-5.
- Austin, B.J., O. Bulmaniya Campion, C. Brown, H. Hunter-Xenie & the Balngarra Clan (in prep.). Beyond the nature-culture binary: mobilising Indigenous knowledge systems for sustainability. *Ambio*.
- Australian Geographic, (2018) Australia's second smallest rock-wallaby rediscovered in WA, *Australian Geographic*, January 2018.
- Barton, J., Hine, R., and Pretty, J., (2009), 'The health benefits of walking in greenspaces of high natural and heritage value', *Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences*, Volume 6, Issue 4.
- Benshemesh, J. and Johnson, K., (2003). Biology and conservation of marsupial moles (Notoryctes). *Predators with Pouches: the biology of carnivorous marsupials*. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne, pp.464-474.
- Bowman, D., (2016), Aboriginal fire management – part of the solution to destructive bushfires, *The Conversation*, Feb 2016.
- Bradley, D., (2011), Chapter: "Whitefellas Have to Learn About Country", in Malpas, J., (ed), *The Place of Landscape : Concepts, Contexts, Studies*, MIT, Cambridge.
- Campbell, (2017), Wishful zinking: Economics of the McArthur River Mine, Australia Institute.
- Cooke, P., (1999) Fire Management on Aboriginal Lands in the Top End of the Northern Territory, Australia, in Russell-Smith, J, Hill, G, Djoeroemana, S and Myers B (Eds.) *Fire and Sustainable Agricultural and Forestry Development in Eastern Indonesia and Northern Australia*, Proceedings of an international workshop held at Northern Territory University, Darwin, Australia, 13–15 April 1999.
- Emmanouil, O., (2015), 'You've got to drown in it', *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature* no. 11, 2014/15.
- Emmanouil, O., (2016), Being with Country: The performance of people–place relationships on the Lurujarri Dreaming, PhD Thesis, Charles Darwin University.
- Healy, C., (1999), 'White feet and black trails: travelling cultures at the Lurujarri Trail', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 55-73.

- Hill, R., P.L. Pert, J. Davies, C.J. Robinson, F. Walsh, and F. Falco-Mammone (2013) *Indigenous Land Management in Australia: Extent, scope, diversity, barriers and success factors*. Cairns: CSIRO Ecosystem Sciences.
- Holcombe, S., Yates, P., and Walsh, F., (2011), Reinforcing alternative economies: Self-motivated work by central Anmatyerr people to sell *Katyerr* (Desert raisin, Bush tomato) in central Australia, *The Rangeland Journal*, Sept 2011.
- Hudson, S., (2016), Mapping the Indigenous program and funding maze, Centre for Independent Studies, Research report; 18.
- Hume, L., (1991), Them Days: Life on an Aboriginal Reserve 1892-1960, *Aboriginal History*, 15:1. <http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p72251/pdf/article029.pdf> Accessed 17/04/2018.
- James. G, James. B, Morrison. J and Paton. D. (In Press), 'Resilient Communities and Reliable Prosperity', in Russell-Smith, J, Pedersen, H, James, G and Sangha, K., (eds). *2Way Country: transition to a resilient North Australia land sector economy* (working title). CRC Press (Taylor and Francis Group) Florida, USA.
- Lee, I., Buchner, D., (2008), 'The importance of walking to public health', *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise* 40 (7 Suppl.)
- Lemonnier, P., (1992), *Elements for an Anthropology of Technology*, Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan.
- Morris, J., and Hardman, A., (1997), 'Walking to Health', *Sports Medicine*, Volume 23, Issue 5.
- Moxham, N., and Mitchell, P., (2011), Indigenous Ecological Knowledge Program NT 2007 – 2010. Territory NRM Evaluation Report. (Unpublished).
- Mudd, G., (2016), The Macarthur River Project: The Environmental Case for Complete Pit Backfill, Mineral Policy Institute, <http://www.mpi.org.au/2016/08/the-mcarthur-river-project-the-environmental-case-for-complete-pit-backfill/> (Accessed 14/April 2018).
- Oliveira, S., Campagnolo, L., Price, O., Edwards, A., Russell-Smith, J. & Pereira, J. (2015), "Ecological implications of fine-scale fire patchiness and severity in tropical savannas of Northern Australia". *Fire Ecology*, 11 (1), 10-31.
- Palmer, C., (2004), Chapter 3, Biodiversity Conservation in *Sustainable Fire Management for the Kimberley Region of W.A. Vol.2*. Report of the Kimberley Regional Fire Management Project.
- Pearson, N., 'The soft bigotry of low expectations', In the News, Speeches - December 10, 2016, Customs House, Brisbane. <https://capeyorkpartnership.org.au/news/noel-pearson-the-soft-bigotry-of-low-expectations/> Accessed 15th February 2018.
- Petty, A., de Koninck, V., and Orlove, B., (2015), "Cleaning, Protecting, or Abating? Making Indigenous Fire Management "Work" in Northern Australia", *Journal of Ethnobiology* 35(1):140-162.
- Robinson, A.C., Copley, P.B., Canty, P.D., Baker, L.M. and Nesbitt, B.J., (2003). *A biological survey of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands, South Australia*. South Australian Department for Environment and Heritage, Adelaide.
- Roe, J., and Aspinall, P., (2011), 'The restorative benefits of walking in urban and rural settings in adults with good and poor mental health' *Health & Place*, Volume 17, Issue 1.

- Schneiderman N.; Ironson G.; Siegel S. D. (2005). "Stress and health: psychological, behavioral, and biological determinants". *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*. 1 (1): 607–628.
- Scott, J., (1992), *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press.
- Sonenberg, D., (1989) *Buwarnala Akarriya*, journey east [videorecording] Yanyuwa community; script, Jan Wositzky. Marndaa Productions.
- Wallace-Smith, H., (2005), Gotta take these kids back: The Yirriman Project Experience, *Kantri Laif*, Issue 2, Wet 2005.
- Walsh, F. J., P. V. Dobson, and J. C. Douglas. 2013. Anpernirrentye: a framework for enhanced application of indigenous ecological knowledge in natural resource management. *Ecology and Society* 18 (3):18.
- Williams, P., Collins, Blackman, M., Blackman, C., McLeod, J., Felderhof, L., Colless, L., Masters, K., Coates, S., Sturgess, A, Martin, G., (2015) "The influence of ignition technique on fire behaviour in spinifex open woodland in semiarid northern Australia", *International Journal of Wildland Fire* 2015, 24, 607–612.
- Young, A., (2015), McArthur River Mine: The Making of an Environmental Catastrophe. *Australian Environmental Law Digest*, January 2015, 2(1): pp 15–22



National Environmental Science Programme

www.nespnorthern.edu.au

This project is supported through funding from the Australian Government's National Environmental Science Program.

