

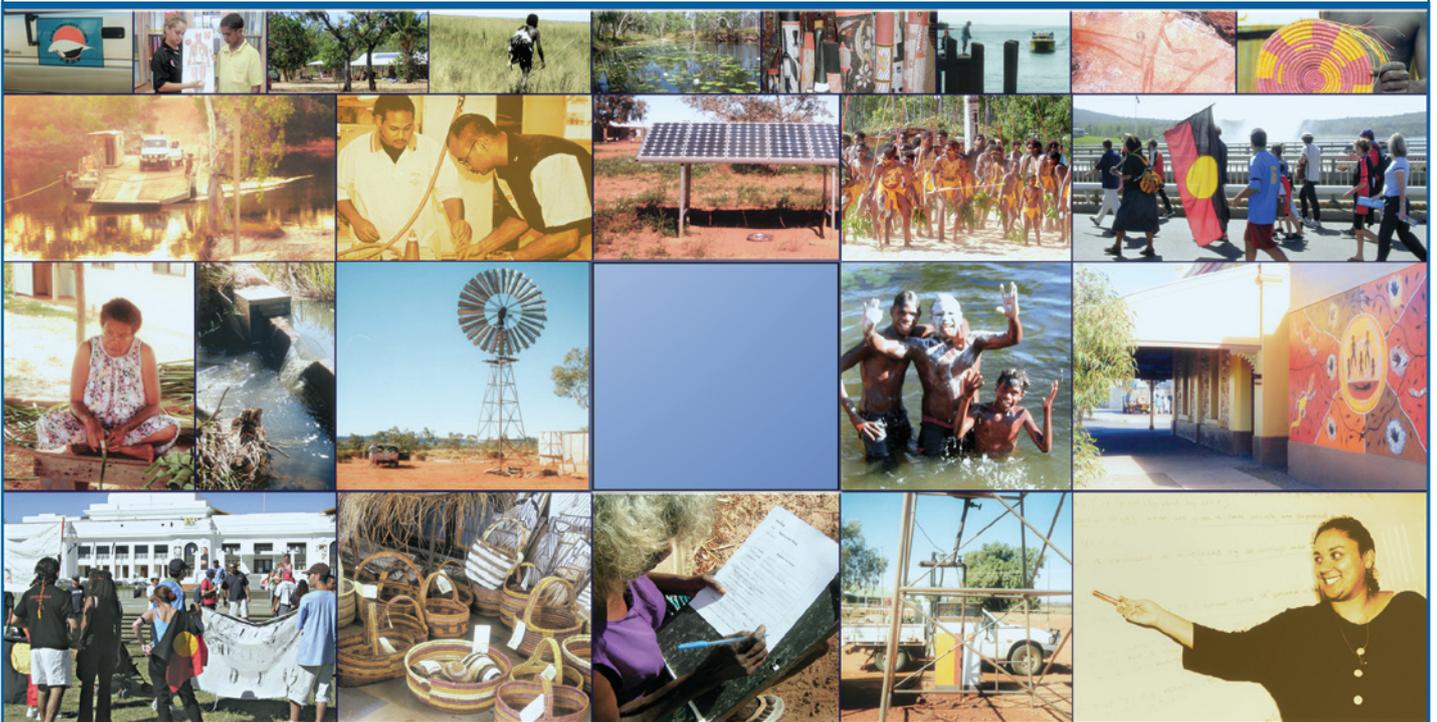
CENTRE FOR ABORIGINAL ECONOMIC  
POLICY RESEARCH



# Looking After Country in New South Wales: Two Case Studies of Socioeconomic Benefits for Aboriginal People

J. Hunt

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J. Hunt

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is about two New South Wales Aboriginal groups that are engaging Aboriginal people in looking after their country. In particular, it highlights the socioeconomic benefits such activity is generating for the people involved.

Banbai Business Enterprises manages the first Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) in New South Wales, 'Wattleridge', on the New England Tablelands north east of Guyra, and is now also managing a second IPA, 'Tarriwa Kurrukun', on land owned by the Guyra Local Aboriginal Land Council. The Nyambaga Green Team operates from the Ngurrala Aboriginal Corporation near Macksville, New South Wales. The Nyambaga Green Team successfully sustains itself through a mix of contracts with a range of natural resource management and other bodies which it carries out on a commercial basis.

At both locations a diverse range of significant cultural, social and economic benefits are emerging which the paper outlines. It then discusses some of the factors and conditions for success in these ventures and reflects briefly on the policy implications.

**Keywords:** Natural resource management, New South Wales, land and sea management, socio-economic benefits, Aboriginal employment; Indigenous protected area, caring for country, Banbai, Gumbaynggirr.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This paper was only possible because of the active participation of the Aboriginal people working at Banbai BE at Guyra on the New England Tablelands, and the Nyambaga Green Team based at the Ngurrula Aboriginal Corporation near Macksville, on the north coast of New South Wales. This paper is about the benefits which have emerged from their determined efforts to create opportunities for culturally significant employment and reconnection with country and heritage sites. I appreciate very much the time they and others working with them in a variety of ways have put in to the research and what they have collectively taught me in the process.

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## INTRODUCTION

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This paper is about two New South Wales Aboriginal groups that are engaging Aboriginal people in looking after their country. In particular, it highlights the socioeconomic benefits such activity is generating for the people involved. It is the second paper to emerge from research being conducted with support from the New South Wales Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water (DECCW) to explore the socioeconomic benefits of Aboriginal people being involved in sustainable management of their country.

The two case studies were written over several months in late 2009 and the first half of 2010. The first, Banbai Business Enterprises (Banbai BE), manages the first Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) in New South Wales, 'Wattleridge', on the New England Tablelands north east of Guyra. Banbai BE is now also managing a second IPA, 'Tarriwa Kurrukun', on land owned by the Guyra Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC). The second case study focuses on the Nyambaga Green Team which operates from the Ngurrala Aboriginal Corporation near Macksville, New South Wales. This is a sub-tropical coastal setting, very different from the granite landscape of the New England Tablelands. Nyambaga Green Team successfully sustains itself through a mix of contracts with a range of natural resource management and other bodies; it carries these out on a commercial basis.

These two organisations were selected for study following a literature review and process of scoping out what is happening in New South Wales in the area of Aboriginal participation in land and sea country management. That research, also supported by the New South Wales Natural Resources Advisory Council (NRAC), has been published previously (Hunt, Altman & May 2010). It drew together existing research on the social benefits of Aboriginal engagement in cultural and natural resource management in northern Australia and drew on literature and some 'strategic interviews' with key players in the field in New South Wales—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, within and outside government—to identify the benefits of and the constraints on Aboriginal engagement in NRM in New South Wales.

The purpose of undertaking case studies was to understand whether Aboriginal people in New South Wales who work in cultural and natural resource management were gaining similar benefits to those being documented in northern Australia. The earlier research had revealed that there were no comprehensive studies of this in New South Wales and some in-depth exploration of what was happening on the ground was required. A case study approach was therefore selected as a first step to understanding what benefits are emerging in New South Wales.

In northern Australia, the Caring for Country work is being undertaken on Aboriginal-owned land under the Working on Country program (see May 2010). Since less than 1 per cent of New South Wales land is owned by Aboriginal people, this study extends to a variety of land tenures, including public and private lands as shown in Table 1. This indicates three types of land tenure (Indigenous, public or private) and whether land is dedicated as part of the National Reserve System (a protected area) or not. This provides a simple six-cell classification of lands and indicates that in the two case studies selected, Aboriginal people are Caring for Country on five different types of land in New South Wales.

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### DECCW:

Department of  
Environment,  
Climate Change  
and Water

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### IPA:

Indigenous  
Protected Area

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### LALC:

Local Aboriginal  
Land Council

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### NRAC:

Natural Resources  
Advisory Council

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**Table 1. Land tenure for two case studies**

National Reserve system status	Indigenous-owned	Public	Private non-Indigenous
Protected areas	Banbai: Wattleridge IPA and Tarriva Kurrukun IPA, owned by Guyra LALC  Nyambaga: work on LALC land	Nyambaga: work on National Parks, Reserves	
Other areas	Banbai: work on Wattleridge non-IPA zone  Banbai: work on other Guyra LALC land	Nyambaga: work at schools, on bike path, etc.	Nyambaga: work on properties  Banbai: contracting work on private land around Guyra
Source: The author.			

While there are only four IPAs at this stage in New South Wales, there are more in the pipeline. IPAs represent a context of significant Aboriginal control because Aboriginal people are working on their own land according to plans of management they themselves have developed. That is, they have a high degree of control over the plans, the activities, and the timeframes of their work. Gilligan's (2006) review of the IPA program highlighted a range of reported benefits that were being experienced across a national program which is heavily weighted to northern Australia; this study aims to explore whether these types of benefit are emerging in New South Wales. As Wattleridge was declared in 2001, sufficient time has passed to explore whether real benefits have emerged in this location.

The Nyambaga Green Team has been in business for a number of years. Green Teams on the northern coast of New South Wales are groups of Aboriginal people who undertake natural and cultural resource management work on a fee-for-service basis. The Nyambaga Green Team appears to have been the first 'Green Team' on the north coast of New South Wales and has inspired the development of many more in that region. However, it only works occasionally on Aboriginal-owned land, when contracted by a local Aboriginal land council. Most of its work is contracted by government bodies of various types on public lands such as parks and reserves, with some work on privately-owned lands as well. This is quite a different situation from that enjoyed by the Banbai people at Wattleridge. Since many of the opportunities for Aboriginal participation in cultural and natural resource management in New South Wales are on land which is publicly owned, it was important to select a site where this situation prevailed.

In each case I made contact with the organisations to explore their interest in participating in this study. Following this I made a short visit to each to discuss the study with them, scope out the task in their specific context and invite them to suggest people to work with me. With their assistance I developed Human Research Ethics proposals and once these were approved, spent one or two initial periods of fieldwork with each. The fieldwork involved getting to know people and finding out what they did, and then arranging relatively unstructured interviews. In these, after some basic information preliminaries, I invited people to tell me what they thought the benefits were of being involved in looking after country through their organisation's work, for themselves, their family and/or their wider community. I left the questions very open so as not to initially influence the answers. After a while, some trends began to emerge and I sometimes prompted people who hadn't mentioned a particular area of benefit that others had mentioned to see if they had experienced or observed that benefit. Interviewing those with whom the teams had worked, I asked them first to describe how they had been associated with the organisation, and then

asked them to identify the benefits or changes that they had observed—again for individuals, as well as for families and the wider community, if they were able to comment. Some also spoke of the benefits their own organisation had gained. In some cases interviews with outsiders also solicited information about the local economy and other sources of employment or activity for Aboriginal people. I also gathered relevant documents and information, including about the histories and Aboriginal nations of the two regions, so as to understand as well as I could the context in which these activities were taking place.

The processes were slightly different in each location. At Banbai I worked closely with one of the staff who helped me set up interviews, and gave me considerable help in locating people. At Nyambaga, the manager gave me all the contacts for people who might be able to comment on the team's work and its benefits, and I followed those up independently; to talk to team members themselves I worked with the two Team leaders to set up meetings at appropriate times, often while they were out working.

In each case I also went out with the teams, and participated in some of their activities. For example, with Banbai I joined in two separate days of their Conservation and Land Management (CALM) Certificate (Cert) IV training on their property. At Nyambaga, I went by boat with some team members to see the work they had done around the islands and estuary of the Nambucca River (on LALC land) and also visited a number of their former and current worksites to see the environmental work they had done or were doing. This was in addition to interviewing them while they were at their current worksite.

Following the first periods of fieldwork during which I had completed most of the interviews, I prepared an early draft of the case study, noting gaps, questions and further people to talk to on a second visit. At this stage I discussed with the key participants the main findings emerging, inviting them to highlight any areas that they thought I might not have explored, or explored sufficiently. I also met with people who had been suggested prior to or during my first visit but who had been unavailable then or time had not allowed me to fit in. I found that there were strong common themes emerging at each site, and by triangulating responses from multiple participants throughout the research process, and from my own observations while in the field, I feel confident that my findings are robust. Following the second period of fieldwork I finalised a draft of each case study and returned it to the organisation for their consideration and comment. I then made a third visit to discuss the draft with them and seek their consent for it to be released publicly. This was followed in each case by some refinement of the draft and some emailing and phone calls to finalise the document.

The resulting case studies reflect the situation at each location at the time it was signed off by the community: Banbai BE in March 2010, and Nyambaga Green Team in July 2010. As the situations tend to be dynamic, because funding available often fluctuates, it is likely that the numbers employed at each site will vary by the time this report is published. These case studies therefore represent a snapshot in time, in a process of change and development going on in the two locations. The process does not always move forward positively—the history of each indicates that there are setbacks and hurdles in their development, which these groups have to overcome. At times they make great strides in the right direction, at other times progress becomes difficult and achievements are hard to sustain until new strategies are put in place to deal with changed circumstances. Then they can move forward again towards the group's goals.

The next two sections of this paper outline the two case studies. The final section draws out some of the similarities and differences at the two sites and discusses some of the policy implications of the findings.

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**CALM:**  
Conservation and  
Land Management

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## PART ONE: THE BANBAI EXPERIENCE AT WATTLERIDGE INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AREA

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This case study is the first to examine the socioeconomic benefits generated through Aboriginal people looking after country in New South Wales as part of a three year study being undertaken between 2009 and 2011. It first provides some socioeconomic data about the Aboriginal people and the history of the Guyra region since settler occupation of the New South Wales tablelands. The study then discusses the conditions in Guyra which led to the Banbai people acquiring Wattleridge, a property which they now manage as an Indigenous Protected Area with funding support from the Commonwealth Government. The many benefits which have flowed to the Banbai people and to Guyra are outlined and then some of the conditions which have enabled these benefits to be attained are briefly discussed.

### BACKGROUND

The Banbai people, who own and manage the Wattleridge Indigenous Protected Area, are traditional custodians of the region around the small New England town of Guyra, New South Wales. Guyra is located approximately 37 kilometres north of Armidale and is the highest town on the New England Tablelands (see Fig. 1). The town serves the surrounding rural area, where the main industries today are a large tomato farm (established in 2004), a small rabbit farm, a variety of rural services, and potato growing, lamb and cattle production.

Some 120 Aboriginal people live in Guyra town and its immediate region, forming 6 per cent of a total population of 1,991 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2007a).<sup>1</sup> A larger number, 433 (10.2% of the total population), live in the Guyra Indigenous Area (an ABS area for collecting and reporting detailed information about Aboriginal people) which ranges well to the east and west of the town including Tingha, Ebor, and Black Mountain, and encompasses a total population of 4,229 (ABS 2007a).<sup>2</sup>

Guyra has a very young Indigenous population. At the time of the census 61.6 per cent of that population were under 25 years old, and there were only 15 Indigenous people 65 years or older (3.5%) in the entire Guyra Indigenous Area. The median age of the Indigenous population was 17 years. Within this entire area, some 103 Indigenous adults (people 15 years of age and over) were in the labour force in 2006, of whom 67 per cent were employed (including on CDEP), and 33 per cent were unemployed, while 119 people were not in the labour force.<sup>3</sup>

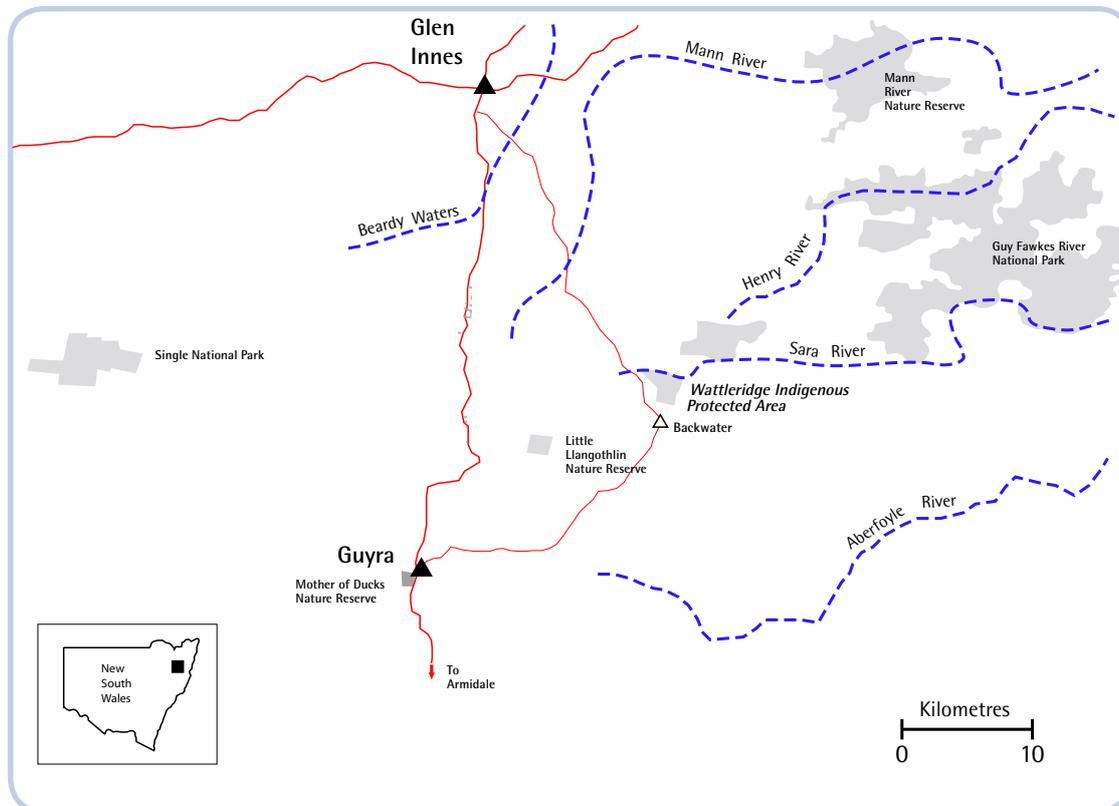
Just over 30 per cent of Indigenous adults had completed Year 10 or equivalent, while 7.4 per cent had completed Year 12. Some 7 per cent of young people aged 15–19 years were in full-time education. Around 60 per cent of the housing for the Indigenous population was rented, and 17 per cent was fully owned, with an average household size of just 3.9 people. Median weekly household income was \$542, and median individual weekly income was \$227.

Guyra's non-Indigenous population has a much older profile, and has a greater proportion of adults employed and owning their own homes. Median weekly income is also considerably higher, indicating a considerable disparity between the incomes and situation of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations of Guyra (ABS 2007b).

### ABORIGINAL HISTORY AND COLONIAL OCCUPATION

There is evidence of long Aboriginal occupation in the rock art sites and range of cultural artefacts found on the New England Tablelands. According to Rodwell, the Banbai people were a 'clan' linked to the Ainawan<sup>4</sup> people 'whose territory stretched from just beyond the Macintyre River in the north to Black

**Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Wattleridge**



Source: Adapted from Hunter (2005).

Mountain in the south and from Kookabookra in the east to near Tingha in the west' (Rodwell 2006: 11). The large high altitude wetland area just to the west of the town of Guyra, now known as the Mother of Ducks Lagoon<sup>5</sup>, would have provided sustenance to the gatherings of tribes from east and west of the Great Dividing Range who met in and around Guyra particularly during the summer months. The plateau became a meeting place for tribal groups from the western slopes and the eastern coastal regions to meet and exchange tools, ochres, fibres and shells among other things.

The climate of the Tablelands is harsh in winter, and food sources were thought to be poor suggesting relatively sparse Aboriginal settlement, in small groups. Yet despite the harsh climate, Beck (2006) concludes that the Tablelands were occupied all year round. Records indicate that people fished, hunted and collected edible plants and honey. Eels were collected from the eastern rivers and cod from the deeper waters of the western ones. The creeks and waterholes provided opportunities for Aboriginal people to catch ducks, pelicans, and other water birds, freshwater turtles, yellow-bellied perch, bream and catfish; while yabbies, shrimps and mussels were also found around shorelines (Rodwell 2006: 12; Walker 1966: 4). They gathered food plants such as yams, the native geranium, bulrush and bracken fern which provided edible roots, while native cherries and geebung (also known as native gooseberries) were common edible fruits. Kangaroo, possums and other marsupials were a significant part of the Aboriginal diet (Walker 1966: 4–5), and kangaroo and possum skins and sinew were used to make warm coverings in the cold winters as well as decorative belts (Rodwell 2006: 13). To the west of the region, the Goolah or Pepper Grass (*Panicum laevinode*) seeds were ground up to make flour (Rodwell 2006: 12).<sup>6</sup>

Banbai people emphasise that they had a complex society, which lived well on the natural resources available; they had good nutrition, they ground flour and baked bread, they knew the plant medicines and were doctors and meteorologists, and had developed the technology of the boomerang. Yet when settlers arrived, Aboriginal people were generally treated as inferior beings, more like animals, to justify the process of colonisation.

Although John Oxley visited the region in 1818, European settlement around Guyra did not begin in earnest until 1828. But from the mid-1820s, as the settlers took over the region's land for their flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, the Banbai people were being displaced, as was the native wildlife on which they had depended. Bora rings and scarred and elaborately carved trees were also deliberately destroyed, while water holes were quickly damaged by the settlers' animals. Soon, desperate Aboriginal people responded by taking sheep, and the violence of the colonial frontier escalated (Roberts 2006). A number of massacres occurred in the New England region, including around Guyra, notably the 1838 Myall Creek massacre near Inverell in which 28 men, women and children died.

Due to concern about the regulation of Crown land, in 1833 a system of Land Commissioners was established in New South Wales. Commissioner Macdonald was appointed the Commissioner of Crown Lands for New England from 1839–1848. His major responsibility was to prevent Crown Lands being occupied without a licence, but he was also responsible for investigation of violent conflicts and acting as a magistrate; he is remembered by Aboriginal people as a cruel man. In 1861 the New South Wales Land Acts required squatters to purchase freehold the land which they had been leasing. This led to increased pressure on the land as purchasers overstocked in an attempt to repay loans (Goodall 1996), contributing to the land degradation which persists in much of the region.

By the late 1830s some Aboriginal people were already working in the pastoral industry, and that employment continued, particularly as convict labour ceased in the 1840s and gold discovery in the 1850s drew other workers away. At the beginning of the twentieth century some 30 per cent of the pastoral labour force in north west New South Wales was Aboriginal, although often their work was only contract or seasonal in nature. As Roberts notes, 'ultimately Aboriginal people were to be confined to fringe camps or impounded on reserves, living under restrictions and surveillance' (Roberts 2006: 106).

The land on which the township of Guyra now sits was taken over as 'Guyra Station' in 1835 by Alexander Campbell, and later split into two properties. The railway arrived in 1883 and an earlier settlement slightly to the east gave way to development of the current town site. In the late 1800s and early 1900s gold and tin mining developed around Guyra, and a diamond mine was established on the Mother of Ducks Lagoon, a significant wetland very close to the town. Most of the mining was to the east of Guyra. Tin was also found to the west, at Tingha, and a significant influx of population, including Chinese miners, rushed into the region. Sapphires and other precious stones have also been found in the area, and lapidary enthusiasts still visit the region today (Guyra 2009: 6–7).

In the same year as the railway arrived in Guyra (1883), the New South Wales Government established the Aborigines Protection Board. The Board had total control over Aboriginal lives, including over their land and property. In 1909 the Aborigines Protection Act (NSW) gave the Board power 'to assume full control and custody of the child of an Aborigine' if a court found the child had been neglected, a power not repealed until the abolition of the Aboriginal Protection Board in 1940 and its replacement by the Aboriginal Welfare Board. The Aboriginal Protection Board supervised the many Aboriginal reserves which were established across New South Wales. A number of Aboriginal missions, managed by churches, were also set up during this era. The 1936 amendments to the Aborigines Protection Act confined Aboriginal people to these reserves until they had received an education, so they could be assimilated (Harrison 2006: 115).

The establishment of the Aborigines Welfare Board ushered in an assimilationist period from the 1940s to the late 1960s/early 1970s. This was a time when many Aboriginal people tried to hide their Aboriginality and families struggled to survive as men worked on properties as low paid labourers or shearers and women worked as domestic servants.

Banbai people, along with many others, experienced the powers of these New South Wales Acts, being forced into three reserves<sup>7</sup> or missions in and around Guyra in the 1950s and 1960s, and having children removed from their families. The Guyra reserves included the One Mile Reserve (gazetted in 1953) on the western side of the town; Stephenson Street Reserve to the north east; Sandon Street, where Banbai BE is located today (the last two were gazetted in 1962); and Oban reserve, closer to Wattlebridge and now known as East Lynne. Memories of these experiences are still vivid today among older people who were children during this time, and among others whose parents and grandparents passed on the stories. Interestingly, the Banbai BE office since around 2004-05 was originally the old wooden church at 'One Mile Mission' where Tanya Cutmore's mother grew up. Tanya is the current Manager of Banbai BE. The church had been removed, initially to Ashford (over 100 kilometres north west of Guyra), and later back into Guyra, on land now owned by the Guyra Local Aboriginal Land Council (Guyra LALC). It is now used by Banbai BE for its office and community centre in return for work undertaken for the Guyra LALC.

#### CONTEMPORARY LAND AND EMPLOYMENT CONTEXT

By the early 1980s, after 160 years of colonisation, the Banbai people had been totally deprived of their lands and to a large degree, as a result of this and other policies, deprived of their ability to practice their culture.

The first organisation in Guyra able to start reclaiming land for Aboriginal people was the Guyra LALC which began in 1983 following the passing of the Land Rights Act 1983 in New South Wales. This Act allowed Aboriginal people the right to claim Crown Land in NSW which was not required for essential services or public purposes. The Guyra LALC has made a number of successful land claims, and also manages Aboriginal housing in the town. While the Guyra LALC membership overlaps significantly with the membership of Banbai BE, the Guyra LALC also includes in its 58-person membership some families that are not Banbai people. The Guyra LALC and Banbai BE now have a generally cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship and some Banbai BE members and staff hold offices on the Guyra LALC Committee.

In 1995, under the auspices of the Guyra LALC, the Banbai Cultural Resource Centre was established. One of its significant achievements was the development of a language booklet with numerous Banbai words and terms, as a first step to the recovery of the Banbai language—this is something which Banbai BE now actively promotes.

Around the mid 1990s there was another important initiative undertaken to reduce the factionalism causing frictions among Aboriginal people in and around the Guyra region. With support from the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, various families and organisations from the region were brought together for intensive mediation, which resulted in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the families and the organisations with which they were associated, in order to work together to promote the best interests of the Aboriginal people of Guyra. It appears that this MOU laid a critically important foundation for the Guyra Aboriginal community to work together.

At this stage, very few Banbai people had jobs. At the same time as employment opportunities for Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry had reduced, an abattoir which had operated in Guyra since 1965 (Toomey 1983: 13) closed in 1995, as a result of meat industry restructuring. It had employed up to 350 staff at that time, including some Aboriginal workers, among them a few Banbai people. Following the closure of the

abbatoir, the Banbai community had only two or three people employed. The town itself was in decline, and there were few employment prospects. Furthermore, only two or three Aboriginal people had driving licences, so transport was difficult, further restricting employment opportunities in the region.

It was in this context that a New Work Opportunities training course began in Guyra for local Aboriginal people. This New Work Opportunities training program was developed by the then Commonwealth Labor Government to assist in providing skills for employment. The idea of using this training in Guyra came from two friends, David Crew (an archaeologist) and Lee Patterson (a Banbai man), working together with Armidale's Jobs Australia. This training enabled Banbai people to learn the necessary skills to do cultural heritage site work, provided them with six months' employment and led to some of them gaining further employment on completion of the course. It also involved them informing and educating local landholders about the new native title legislation and land rights, and documenting cultural sites using Global Positioning System (GPS) technology.<sup>8</sup> Two of these courses were run, each of six months duration, in 1995 and 1996 with a total of 20 participants, all of whom graduated successfully. This was a significant achievement in itself, which David Crew, who became the trainer, attributes to the fact that people were working on something very significant to them—their own culture. Some of the graduates of the first course helped to run the second.

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### GPS:

Global Positioning System

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### DECLARING AN IPA—THE STRUGGLE TO GET THE LAND

Banbai leaders, assisted by David Crew, had started investigating opportunities to purchase land in the early-mid 1990s. During the first of the New Work Opportunities courses a landholder approached Banbai people with an invitation to buy his property. This was Wattleridge, one of the properties whose cultural heritage they had surveyed as part of their training course. They initially tried to raise funds through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and Banbai leaders spent several years travelling to Sydney and constantly lobbying, but although ATSIC was supportive it was unable to help them raise the funds. Eventually they approached the newly-formed Indigenous Land Corporation for assistance, and in 1998 the land at Wattleridge was purchased by the Indigenous Land Corporation in the name of Banbai elder, the late Johnny Naylor.<sup>9</sup> It was not their first choice; they had hoped to buy land nearby which included an important massacre site, but that was not for sale at the time. Instead Wattleridge, which had been owned by a conservationist landowner who had only allowed a small area (about 20%) to be cleared and grazed, was the eventual property purchased 'for its cultural significance to the Banbai nation'; in 1999 they began exploring the possibility of declaring the property an IPA (Indigenous Land Corporation n.d.).

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### ATSIC:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission

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The Banbai people were required by the Indigenous Land Corporation to set up a corporation to hold the title to the land, so Banbai Land Enterprises Limited was established for that purpose in 1998. Its membership is largely composed of several large Banbai families and their relations. The Indigenous Land Corporation also required that a separate corporation be set up to undertake the activities on the land, hence the establishment of Banbai Business Enterprises. The initial task involved developing the IPA Plan of Management, which involved employing David Crew, the archaeologist, and two Banbai men, Clive Ahoy and Carl Jerrard, for one year to carry out the detailed work required. In February 1999 the Indigenous Land Corporation divested land ownership to Banbai Land Enterprises and three years later, on 30 June 2001, the land was declared an IPA. Banbai Land Enterprises has a Board of five and there is a smaller Management Committee. The meetings of both are open to any community members. There is also an IPA Advisory Committee, which is required by the Commonwealth Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA); this advises the Board of Banbai Land Enterprises on the IPA itself; a Plan of Management Team also reports to the IPA Advisory Committee and the Board.

### Wattleridge—what's special about it

Wattleridge is a 643 hectare botanically diverse bushland with high biodiversity values on outcropping granite country on the northern tablelands, some 33 kilometres north east of Guyra. There is also a small basalt area to the western side of the property. The area has not been substantially burned in over 30 years and approximately 80 per cent of the property has not been grazed, so the diverse native flora are largely retained.<sup>10</sup> Some 106 species of birds have been sighted on the property, and the IPA has at least 15 rare or endangered plant species, including the Black Grevillea (*Grevillea scortechinii*) and the New England Mallee and 12 rare or threatened animals and birds, among them the brush-tailed rock wallaby and the endangered glossy red-tailed black cockatoo.

Apart from these extraordinary environmental qualities the land is special to Banbai people because it is the first land which has been returned to their ownership and which they now control. Wattleridge shows evidence of long Aboriginal occupation, including axe grinding groove sites, sacred sites, art sites and scarred trees. It therefore connects the Banbai people to their heritage and culture in a very tangible way.

The Banbai owners have divided the property into five zones, each named in Banbai language:

- Awkendi (water)—the northern zone along the Sara River
- Mundyaba (over there)—largely higher land in the north west; it has restricted access for cultural reasons
- Pimita (in between)—another high country zone in the central and eastern part of the property zone
- Kukra (echidna)—this is the higher part of the south east section, which is where the art site is found, and
- Balidyerri (camp)—this is the land which has been largely cleared and developed in the south and west of the property; it is the area with the main infrastructure: storage sheds, hothouse, cabins and the cattle agistment occurs in this zone.

The IPA is managed as an International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Category VI Managed Resource Use Protected Area.<sup>11</sup>

The management objectives for the IPA are to:

- protect and maintain the biological diversity and other natural values of the area in the long term
- promote sound management practices for sustainable production purposes
- protect the natural resource base from being alienated for other land-use purposes that would be detrimental to the area's biological diversity
- contribute to regional and national development (Crew, Ahoy & Jerrard 2001: 13).

The Banbai people are undertaking significant feral animal, invasive species and fire management strategies and managing the cultural heritage sites on Wattleridge. They are also developing a native plant propagation nursery, training people in horticulture, conservation and land management, establishing seed banks and restoring degraded land through revegetation (Fig. 2). They have fenced the IPA boundaries, developed and maintain four-wheel-drive and walking tracks and signage in each of the zones, and are upgrading the infrastructure on the property for their use.

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**IUCN:**  
International Union  
for Conservation of  
Nature

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## THE BANBAI EXPERIENCE: GENERATING BENEFITS

This study identifies the key cultural, social, environmental and economic benefits which have emerged from the development of Wattleridge as an IPA through the Banbai BE organisation and discusses some of the conditions which have contributed to these outcomes.

### Restoring the connection with land and culture

The return of the land has been a major benefit from the Banbai perspective. It has considerable cultural significance, enabling the Banbai people to recover and pass on their culture for future generations. As Lee Patterson, a Banbai member of the IPA Advisory Board stated:

My grandchildren do not know what it's like to grow up without land—I didn't grow up owning land, nor my Mum. It changes how we think, how we do things. We've got land. Now we have to reacquaint ourselves with our custodial role of land management.

For Lee, to have land which they could call their own, which they control—'no-one can tell us what should be done with it'—was an incredible benefit. Yet it is also a huge responsibility: to care for the land, to maintain what they have and to hopefully restore some of the native plant and animal species.

The wider context of the largely cleared and often degraded land in the New England plateau, and the loss of species to date, highlights for Banbai people the need to care for this particular area of land, and to try to expand the areas over which they have control. But they also feel that they have to develop the expertise to manage the problems facing the land today, as these are new problems. As one said, farmers have emphasised 'productivity' but this has been at great cost to the environment, leading to the widespread loss of bush medicines and bush foods on which Aboriginal people used to depend.

Others emphasise the pride they feel in having the land, being able to take children and grandchildren out to it, and enjoy camping there, especially at holiday times, and how special it is for them to be able to work on or visit their land. Others say how important it is for future generations to have the land, to preserve its environment, and how having the land is motivating young people. As former employee, Bridget Ahoy said, referring to the land, 'the best part of it, working at Banbai, is having your own home, it's yours, you can be part of protecting it and keeping it exactly how it should be'. At the 10 year celebration of the establishment of Banbai BE on 12 November 2009, what struck some people present was the ability of the 10 newly-inducted young members to talk about what being able to work on country meant to them. The engagement of the younger generation with the land and their culture is seen as a very strong and positive development, as this is fulfilling the original vision of the founders.

### Restoring the environment and protecting biodiversity

The first IPA Plan of Management (2001–2006) detailed a range of tasks which needed to be carried out to better protect the environment and the cultural heritage of Wattleridge.

The main feral animal problems have been pigs, foxes, and deer. The property has been fully fenced—a major undertaking, since in some areas the fencing was very dilapidated (Fig 3). Banbai staff believe that the pig problem has been largely overcome, and fox baiting has also been successful, although control of foxes is a continuing challenge. Occasional cats, dogs and rabbits also have to be dealt with. One significant remaining problem relates to feral deer found widely around the region, which were released from a nearby deer farm that closed some years ago.

Another problem is the presence of the eastern gambusia fish in the Sara River and its tributaries, which have contributed to the decline of nine native fish species in Australia and are also recognised as a 'key threatening process' for frog populations in New South Wales. There is no simple way of eradicating them,

**Fig. 2. Checking native plant propagation at Wattleridge nursery**



Photo: Janet Hunt.

**Fig. 3. Fencing work at Wattleridge**



Photo: Tanya Cutmore.

and Banbai BE is exploring what can be done beyond developing reedy areas in the river where small native fish can hide from them. In relation to river health, Banbai BE also carries out monthly water quality testing on the Sara River for the Catchment Management Authority.

Other environmental management activities include removal of weeds (such as Mexican alder, blackberries, broom, paspalum, nodding thistle, particularly from the Balidyerri Zone) and seed collection and the propagation of native plants in order to revegetate and rehabilitate degraded areas, or areas previously weed-covered. A considerable amount of revegetation is already underway, and as more species are propagated they will be used for revegetation of other areas.

Fire management is also an important aspect of managing the land at Wattleridge. There have been no major fires on the property for many years, although there have been some small fires started by lightning strikes which Banbai people have controlled. Banbai BE have worked with the Rural Fire Service to recover and maintain the strategically important Backwater fire trail through Wattleridge connecting access through to the neighbouring property of 'St Ives', and have recently conducted the first hazard reduction burn on the property. This mosaic patch burn took place on a 27 hectare area in October 2009, to reduce the fuel load and hence the intensity of any fire that might start. It was particularly aimed to help protect the assets on the Wattleridge land, without endangering the protected species, or burning trees with hollows which might be important species habitats. The benefits of such a burn from the Rural Fire Service perspective are to protect people who might stay at Wattleridge and to make fires more manageable and hence safer for firefighters. From Banbai perspective such burning may also generate new growth and attract native animals. A number of Banbai people are currently members of the Rural Fire Service and trained in basic fire fighting. Banbai BE's Manager has also joined the Rural Fire Service Communications team and is being trained in communications during a fire incident.

### Mapping and protecting cultural heritage

One of the first tasks the Banbai BE staff have undertaken is to survey the cultural heritage values of the Wattleridge property and to develop plans for managing it well. Detailed Heritage Assessments have progressively been undertaken for all of the IPA's zones. A rock art site, scarred trees and axe grinding grooves have been identified. Protection of the art site has been an important priority, with work to upgrade the access track and viewing platform and install a boardwalk included in the current Plan of Management. The sites at Wattleridge are rare for that region and indicate how that environment was used. The cultural landscape that Wattleridge represents is very important, and the archaeological work which has taken place there complements oral history accounts of contacts with coastal people which Banbai people have had over centuries. Most importantly, the processes have enabled Banbai people to have the major voice in the ways in which they want to manage their cultural heritage, and to develop the capacity to manage it themselves. Similarly, Banbai recognition of their personal connections to that heritage contributes to enhancing their cultural identity, pride, confidence and overall wellbeing. They view the landscape itself as a sentient, cultural landscape. When a large sentinel rock fell not long after the land was back in Banbai hands, they took this as a sign that the rock no longer needed to stand guard over the land, as it was once again being cared for by its traditional custodians.

### Employment

The most significant economic benefit to come from Banbai's landholding and the declaration of the land as an IPA, is the culturally significant employment it has generated for Banbai people. I estimate that there may be up to 50 Aboriginal people in Guyra and its immediate region who are in the labour force.<sup>12</sup> Banbai BE Manager, Tanya Cutmore, says her dream is to be able to offer employment to any local Aboriginal person in Guyra who would like a job.

At first, Banbai employed just three people to develop the IPA Plan of Management, but since then it has grown significantly. The number of people which Banbai BE has been able to employ has varied over the years, according to environmental or jobs training funding available, and in particular the availability of Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) from 2006. The CDEP program ceased in Guyra on 30 June 2009, reducing the staff from 25 early in 2009, to 14 at the time fieldwork was being conducted; a successful application for five more positions had just been notified in early 2010 through the Working on Country Program, including two trainee positions. Of the 14 currently employed, five are under 25 years of age, and four are women.

A review of the people who have worked with Banbai BE since its inception reveals that the organisation has employed 42 Aboriginal people over the 10 year period. In 2006 Banbai BE took over the local CDEP program, following the closure of another organisation which had previously managed it. Banbai BE was able to use CDEP funding to employ an additional 13 people until the program ceased at the end of June 2009. As a result, at its employment height, almost 30 people were working at Banbai BE, although due to funding reductions, that number dropped to 18, causing some difficult decisions to be made and implemented. Thus Banbai BE has provided employment for between one-quarter and one-half of all Aboriginal people employed in the town at different times. They are particularly recognised for their ability to engage people who have been unemployed for long periods, or who perhaps have had no job for several years after leaving school, and to help them develop and make a positive contribution to Banbai BE work.

It is also interesting to note that Banbai BE has employed a total of 27 Aboriginal people who were *previously* on CDEP and of these, five are still employed at Banbai BE in non-CDEP positions, eight now have other jobs or traineeships, one is at university, five are not seeking work and receive relevant pensions/ payments (aged, disability, child care), six are receiving unemployment benefits (and another is unemployed but not registered) and two have moved away and their situation is unknown. Thus, of the 25 former CDEP participants for whom Banbai BE provided a job and whose circumstances are known, all but seven have either moved on to jobs or study or are now receiving other payments. Only seven have returned to unemployment at this point.

According to Jobs Australia's Guyra office, Banbai BE is the second largest private sector employer in Guyra. The largest, with some 280 staff in 2009, is the vast 20 hectare hydroponic tomato farm, where a number of Aboriginal people have worked from time to time (although only a few of these are Banbai people). Banbai BE is certainly the largest employer of Banbai people and appears to be their preferred employer for a number of reasons:

- some like working with family—it's a comfortable place for them to work, where they experience no racial discrimination and are accepted for who they are
- others love the type of work, and particularly the fact that it has more variety than other work in the town (such as the tomato farm or rabbit farm, for example); each day there are different things to do, rather than a set routine which becomes repetitive and can be boring
- there is a great deal of learning and training undertaken, so people feel they are really developing at Banbai BE
- and there is the satisfaction of working on their own land.

Clearly Banbai BE, while it sets clear boundaries for its staff, and makes its expectations clear to them, does offer some flexibility (for example where family or cultural obligations are concerned), some fun, and above all, offers opportunity which other employers in Guyra or close by do not. This opportunity relates both to training and qualifications, and for some, to travel to other parts of Australia for IPA meetings and exchange with others involved in similar work.

Furthermore, some people have been earning better incomes at Banbai BE, even when they were on CDEP (with top up), than they are able to through some other local employment opportunities which may be poorly paid or offer less hours.<sup>13</sup> Another feature of employment in the current funding rounds is that it is secure for four to five years, rather than being only guaranteed from year to year. This enables people to take a longer term approach to life, to be able to plan and save, and to become more secure themselves.

The result of increased income to Banbai BE workers means that individuals have been able to pay off fines, purchase a car, buy furniture or new clothes, build up savings in the bank, take a trip or holiday or help out others in times of need. It means, for younger people and their young families, that they can afford to rent and sustain an independent home, rather than continue living with parents.

### Training, qualifications and capacity development

One of the most significant benefits for Aboriginal people is the training and certification which Banbai BE provides. It is this that most distinguishes Banbai BE from other employers for most Aboriginal people employed there. They feel that Banbai BE allows them to develop their skills, gain real qualifications, and generally develop as capable workers. Apart from the formal training which Banbai BE has facilitated, a great deal of on-the-job training also occurs, both for the office staff and the field team who work on the land. Some examples indicate the extent of training Banbai BE provides to its staff.

For example, the office administrator is a young woman in her early twenties who left school before completing Year 10. She was first employed part-time under CDEP, but is now on a 12-month structured traineeship in which she has on-the-job training and is enrolled with the local community college to complete a Certificate course in Administration. She has been learning payroll, the MYOB finance package, phone protocols and other administrative skills. Like others at Banbai BE she is also completing the CALM Cert IV. She is being actively mentored by the Manager, and this has included attending conferences, including one state-wide conference during which she helped make the presentation. She is developing public speaking skills and gaining considerable confidence.

A young man who came to Banbai BE two years ago straight from school after completing Year 12 has gained certificates for operation of bobcat, excavator, back hoe, front end loader and chainsaw; he is qualified to handle chemicals for weed spraying; he has trained in safe firearm handling (for feral animal control), has his Green Card for construction work Occupational Health and Safety and is currently undertaking the Cert II in Botany and the CALM Cert IV. He sees that his qualifications may in the future enable him to access other opportunities working around mines or undertaking contract work. Another field worker, who has recently become a supervisor, commented that although he had worked in other places, he had gained all his qualifications (similar to those of the young man above) with Banbai BE, rather than elsewhere.

Such stories were replicated across the organisation, including all field staff, office staff and the Manager. The Manager, Tanya Cutmore, has developed an enormous range of management skills on the job as well as gaining formal qualifications, including Cert IV in Training and Assessment, Cert III in Business Management, Cert IV in Governance, and CALM Cert II (along with all others at Banbai BE she is now

studying for CALM Cert IV). She has received training in First Aid and conflict resolution. On the job, she has learned skills such as public speaking and dealing with media, and has learned to work with a range of different partners (despite being very shy initially).

Another important training area is driving. When Banbai BE began only three Banbai staff had a car and a driver's licence; now many more have licences and cars (due in part to the IPA collaborating with the Job Agency to provide licence training and support to obtain birth certificates for nine people). Driving is an essential skill for most staff at Banbai BE, and is important for a range of other reasons, such as accessing specialist services, shopping for major items, sporting activities, and having access to wider employment and training opportunities. More Banbai people not only have licences now, they also own their own cars as a result of their income. Training has also been extended to around nine volunteer workers—both adults and young people—who work with Banbai people at Wattleridge during school holidays. Training for non-Banbai people has also been offered. For example in 2009 nine Aboriginal men from Armidale joined with Banbai BE to earn a number of certificates, such as bobcat, excavator, and heavy vehicle licences.

This emphasis on training is critical to the organisation's strategies to build up its organisational capacity, and give its people the chance to develop and take on supervisory responsibilities. For example, the current Field Supervisor, Doug Cutmore, manages two team leaders who are developing their own supervisory skills, as well as reporting to the Board on the work completed. Similarly the office administrator, Natasha, is being trained with a view to her eventually taking over the Manager's role. Thus the Banbai team is taking a long-term view and actively preparing younger and less experienced workers to eventually run the organisation when senior staff members retire or move on. Special attention is being given to the administrative, reporting, financial and management needs as well as the actual environmental work.

### **Self esteem, confidence and pride working on their own land**

Linked to the training and on the job learning is the self confidence which people develop. As one young woman, Bridget Ahoy, who had worked with Banbai BE for two years said, while she gained certificates the 'biggest thing' was the self confidence she developed; she mentioned learning to talk to strangers when arranging for and making deliveries of wood orders (see below), and gaining a sense of self worth from working at Banbai BE—there was a lot of support from supervisors and everyone there. She felt she had grown a lot during her time there and has now gone on to university study, something she would not have dreamed of earlier. Bridget felt that training she had done with Banbai BE had 'taken her out of her comfort zone' and enabled her to do things she could not have done before. This had considerably boosted her confidence. As she put it, 'you can come here unskilled and they've cut and polished you by the time you've finished—it opens so many doors'. She was also extremely proud of helping to look after Banbai land, protecting it and keeping it 'how it should be'; she felt that she had learned greater respect for culture, for the country, and the art; 'respect for what's yours' as she said.

Organisational confidence has also grown, and this was most evident during the development of the latest application for Working on Country grants. Banbai BE had taken considerable expert advice in preparing two earlier unsuccessful applications to this program, but on the third attempt, it was the Banbai leadership which decided what they wanted to do and what might be achievable, and they designed the application entirely themselves. Their confidence had grown so that they trusted their own judgement, which was well rewarded by a successful bid.

### **Moving to other roles or study**

With greater self confidence, and some qualifications, some people who have worked with Banbai BE have moved on to other study or work. For example, Bridget Ahoy is now completing the first year of a nursing degree at the University of New England. She still has the support of Banbai BE, in that she is able

to access their computers and internet for her study if she needs to, and she clearly values their support. Another young man gained a job in the mining sector, another is a nursing assistant at the hospital, another has gone into local management in the health department, and another to work in a recycling company. Some have moved from other (often contract, part-time or low paid) jobs to Banbai BE, or left Banbai BE for a period and then returned, as Banbai BE is a preferred employer. Thus the flow is not always from Banbai BE to other employment, but particularly for younger people, Banbai BE may help them move into further study or work in new areas with longer term career prospects, should they desire it. One issue for Banbai BE is that if it were simply to become a training ground for people to launch into other jobs or study, its own capacity would have to be constantly renewed, which is time consuming and requires considerable resources. There has to be a balance between keeping experienced staff, particularly those who can mentor and guide younger ones, and enabling some people to develop the skills to launch out into other work.

### Business development

Apart from the work of managing the IPA at Wattleridge, Banbai BE is developing a number of small business activities which enable it to generate some of its own organisational income. These include lawnmowing and gardening work, particularly during the summer months, and wood cutting and provision of firewood to households, particularly in the winter period. These activities use the skills of the Banbai BE team and benefit members of the Aboriginal and wider community. Banbai BE is also able to undertake contract land management and conservation work, such as rehabilitating land around a Federation Viewing Platform (a lookout over the Mother of Ducks Lagoon) on land owned by the Guyra LALC. Due to the IUCN Category VI designation, Wattleridge can be used for agistment of cattle and other enterprises to provide another income stream: the infrastructure for, and much of this activity, is confined to the Balidyerri zone which has been significantly cleared in the past.

There is an emerging eco-tourism business at Wattleridge. Banbai BE is building walking tracks, viewing platforms, and developing interpretation signage to foster eco-tourism. They plan for this tourism venture to grow and provide income, employment and further infrastructure development. At present Wattleridge has accommodation available in three cabins and two houses on the land and this is used occasionally by local community, youth, church and school groups, including visiting Aboriginal groups. The accommodation is currently being renovated, and there is not an all-weather road to the IPA (which has to be accessed through another privately-owned property), so there has been no concerted effort to promote tourism until at least the renovation is completed. However, as this work is finished, and as possible catering arrangements are developed, this activity could grow.

Banbai BE is also being cautious about how they develop this initiative, carefully assessing the likely tourism market and building the capacity of its people to manage the growth in tourism carefully, as they do not want the demands of this aspect of the enterprise to take priority over caring for the land itself. One user of the facilities has been the Local Court Circle Sentencing officer (formerly a Department of Environment and Climate Change staff member), who has taken young people and men's groups out to the land; the Banbai people conduct tours of the land with them, do some mentoring of the young people, and share stories of change in their own lives with them. In at least one known case this experience led one young offender to turn his life around.

### Education and youth at risk

Banbai BE has established good relationships with local schools, particularly the Guyra Central School, which has 49 Aboriginal students (17.5% of the total school population). This school allows two of these Aboriginal students, one in Year 11 and the other in Year 9, to spend time each week with Banbai BE doing

the CALM Cert IV course as an incentive to stay at school and complete Year 12 and Year 10 respectively. These two students clearly enjoy participating in the work and study. The Year 11 student spends two days per week with Banbai BE and apart from the CALM course, he has gained his Learner Driver licence through a course organised by Banbai BE this year. The younger student initially came to Banbai BE on work experience but enjoyed it so much that he now spends one day per week doing the CALM course as part of his education. This flexible and innovative approach to encouraging young men to complete their schooling depends on the Banbai people making the commitment to make space for these young people who are at risk, and having the capacity to supervise them and mentor them through. This is a direct result of their having the land and the environmental funding to support their work. This arrangement is working well for the students and Banbai BE.

Banbai BE is also in regular liaison with the school, and has been a source of good resources and people whom the school can draw on; overall, the school feels that there is a good rapport with Banbai BE which enables a good dialogue between them. Banbai BE leaders have briefed the entire school staff about their IPA and the conservation and land management work they undertake, to assist with cross cultural training of the teachers. The school has reintroduced Aboriginal studies as an elective in Years 9 and 10, a 100 hour course which includes issues such as land practices, language, and enterprises, all of which can be related to Banbai BE work. The Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students undertaking this course have visited the Banbai BE office to talk to Banbai staff and have visited Wattleridge as part of their studies. The school is keen to promote the Banbai language—for example, all the primary classes are named as animals in Banbai language.

In 2010 the school will include Wattleridge in an ecostudy as part of the Year 10 Geography course and in the near future it plans to take the school's students to Wattleridge as part of National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) activities (not in NAIDOC week because of the cold weather in July in Guyra). The students who form a junior Aboriginal Education Consultative Group for the school also hold activities at Banbai. The school, with support from Banbai BE, plans to develop an Aboriginal medicine garden.

The benefits of this close relationship between the school and Banbai BE are that it strengthens the educational opportunities available to all students. For the two students who are training at Banbai as part of their school experience, it provides them with something of significance and something to aim for in the future—and it may be the deciding factor in completion of secondary schooling. For the younger student in particular it has helped raise his self esteem. The school principal believes that it is important for all students to have an awareness of Aboriginal issues and to see this Banbai enterprise in a positive light. For Aboriginal students in the school it is also positive, as they can see their people and culture valued.

Although in the past there was a history of a low retention rate of Aboriginal students to complete Year 10 at Guyra Central School, this is gradually changing. Suspensions of Aboriginal students from school have dropped markedly, and generally there is a more positive attitude towards school among these students as a result of these developments. And even when a student may leave school, for example in Year 11, Banbai BE has been able to offer a traineeship to enable that student to work and continue training. This often means that Banbai BE can offer something of significance that the school is unable to offer for particular young people. Banbai people seem to monitor Banbai students closely and step in before they go off the rails. Similar interest in Aboriginal culture is also being shown at the local primary school south of Guyra at Black Mountain. Here, for example, one of the Banbai children proudly gave a welcome to country in Banbai language at the NAIDOC week celebrations at the school in 2009.

Such support affirms local Aboriginal culture, and the opportunity for employment at Banbai BE provides an incentive for certain young people to stay at school and complete their education.

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**NAIDOC:**

National Aboriginal  
and Islander  
Day Observance  
Committee

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## Health

Various health benefits appear to have resulted from the engagement in Banbai BE work on country for certain individuals. While some of these are physical health benefits, others are more related to general mental health and wellbeing of people who are working with Banbai BE. For some, it is simply good to be working in the fresh air rather than sitting around at home all day, in some cases smoking and drinking coffee or alcohol. One man who before working at Banbai BE was addicted to marijuana no longer smokes, and has gradually reduced his drinking. The hard physical work that the fieldworkers all undertake means they get plenty of exercise which contributes to their health. In one case, a female elder who had earlier had a heart attack found that her health improved dramatically when involved in light exercise such as seed collection at Banbai. She was one of those left without a job when CDEP ended, and it appears that once she stopped this regular exercise, her arthritis worsened considerably.

The negative health effects of excessive alcohol consumption are well known, and this is a concern across the whole Australian community. Many of the Banbai workers report reducing their alcohol consumption—mainly by confining it to weekends now as Banbai BE has strict policies about not working under the influence of drugs or alcohol—which it implements firmly. Similarly, more recently a number of workers are giving up smoking, due to increased awareness about their health. Health workers use Banbai BE as a place to promote health issues—for example, the Aboriginal Liaison Officer at the hospital and the Division of General Practice bring a variety of health checks to people at Banbai. One staff member found out that she had diabetes as a result of one of these checks and it is now being treated and managed. One or two Banbai BE staff have even joined a Guyra-wide 'Healthy Highlanders' health promotion and exercise program.

However, for Aboriginal people health means far more than any of the specifics mentioned above. As Lee Patterson explained to me, the health of the Banbai community comes through its tribal identity and its wider connections—to country and to the networks of Aboriginal kin relationships in the region. These are viewed as an interrelated whole: the degraded environment of the Tablelands is seen to damage the Banbai people's identity; it limits their traditional activities, and hence their cultural continuity; it has interrupted earlier seasonal trading relationships between coastal and Tablelands people as the ecological disruption has reduced such opportunities. For example, the catfish formerly caught in the western flowing rivers, which was seen by coastal people as medicine for them, is now very rare due to the dominance of the introduced European carp in the river systems. Lee linked the number of early deaths of young Aboriginal men (e.g. from heart disease and diabetes) to the environmental degradation and disruption of the whole human ecology of the region.

Banbai BE is attempting to assist other regional groups to develop their own capacities for similar work on country, as a way of building a whole network of healthier country and healthier communities. As Lee said, 'The environmental disruption takes away the harmony of the different mobs. For example we used to take fish down to the coast. It affects the relationships, the social harmony.'

## Transforming social behaviour

Although there are no statistics which indicate Aboriginal-specific incidence of crime in Guyra, Aboriginal people report that crime has reduced in the town since Banbai BE began its work. Before then, its crime rate was very high for a town of its size. Statistics are only available for the Guyra Local Government Area, but they do confirm that crime in Guyra has significantly reduced over the period July 1998 to June 2009 in relation to most major offences.<sup>14</sup> Whilst it is not possible to attribute these downward trends solely to Banbai BE work, they do verify the reports Aboriginal people give of a reduction in crime, which they attribute to the fact that certain young Aboriginal people who were the source of criminal activity in the late 1990s have now been given opportunities for a more productive life. For example, one young

man taken off the streets by Tanya after he had been expelled from school and was already getting into criminal activity, has achieved a Cert III in building and is now an active participant in Banbai BE work, and on a positive track with his life.

### Social and economic benefits in the Guyra community

The employment which Banbai BE has been able to provide to people from across the spectrum of Aboriginal families in Guyra is contributing to improving intra-Aboriginal relations and strengthening the local Aboriginal community. In addition, the activities of Banbai BE have also improved relations between the Aboriginal citizens of Guyra and the non-Indigenous majority. One indicator of this is the recent in-kind sponsorship by businesses to the Guyra Young Guns Aboriginal football team (comprising and organised by members of Banbai BE) who were playing in the 2009 Rugby League Knockout at Armidale. Many said that this would never have happened even three or four years ago. Banbai BE has worked hard to overcome stereotypes which some people hold about Aboriginal people. In conducting their business they make sure that they pay all their bills on time, and wherever they can, they purchase supplies locally in Guyra, bringing many thousands of dollars worth of business into the town. Banbai BE is developing a good reputation locally for the local services it provides, and works hard to maintain the trust it has established with local people. When doing contract work, lawn mowing or wood deliveries they consciously operate very professionally to ensure that they maintain their good reputation.

Having Wattlebridge has enabled Banbai BE to leverage additional resources. Apart from the funds to manage the IPA, Banbai BE has brought additional funds such as Working on Country grants and other funding for jobs and training into Guyra—as well as generating its own earned income from contract and other services. All of this not only benefits the Aboriginal community but also benefits local businesses. For example, for 2008–09, the grants to Banbai BE amount to \$480,549, for the management of Wattlebridge IPA and the new Tarriwa Kurrukun IPA, including a Working on Country grant. Most of this funding is spent on wages and services, and much of it in Guyra, benefitting the local economy.

The ways in which the Banbai people are also contributing to local organisations such as the Rural Fire Service (and the State Emergency Services) is also earning them recognition and respect in the local community.

### Partnership development and contact point for engagement with Banbai people

Banbai BE is now actively engaging with a range of government, scientific and other partners in relation to the IPA work it is conducting. Apart from the relationship established with DEWHA which manages the IPA program, Banbai BE has established partnerships with Jobs Australia, the Border Rivers Gwydir Catchment Management Authority, the Guyra LALC (in relation to the new Tarriwa Kurrukun IPA on its land to the west of Guyra, and managed by Banbai BE). Banbai BE are developing relationships with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney in relation to scientific research about the species on their property and about the bush food and bush medicines of the area. Training partnerships with the local Institute of TAFE (Technical and Further Education) and Community College have also been very valuable, particularly as their courses are generally offered free to Aboriginal people as long as a reasonable number of people participate. Over the years, Banbai BE's confidence and capacity to engage in effective partnerships has grown, to the point where in early 2009 it invited its partners to come together for a meeting to explore future directions. However, Banbai BE remains careful not to overstretch its capacity to engage successfully with partners.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier in relation to health, Banbai BE functions as a point of contact for the Banbai people for other services, both local and from other levels of government. Banbai BE is approached for a range of consultations by different departments seeking the views of Aboriginal people in Guyra.

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**CSIRO:**  
Commonwealth  
Scientific and  
Industrial Research  
Organisation

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**TAFE:**  
Technical and  
Further Education

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## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND POTENTIALS

Whilst a great deal has been achieved in the 10 years since Banbai BE was established and the eight years since the Wattleridge IPA was declared, Banbai BE sees prospects for a great deal more to develop in the future.

As mentioned above, tourism at Wattleridge is one area where there is scope for gradual expansion. This is an area which local and other government bodies could support more, by using Wattleridge for regional meetings and thereby injecting funds which might be spent elsewhere into this Aboriginal venture.

Other business possibilities are to:

- develop a native plant nursery, including the potential to propagate rare and valuable native flora (such as the black grevillea) which may attract high prices in the right markets
- develop contracting businesses for individuals currently employed by Banbai BE, in areas such as feral animal or weed control (this might enable individuals to develop businesses based on their own skills and apply them on other public or private land, whilst still working with Banbai BE in those areas)
- develop bush tucker and bush medicine produce, and associated education
- explore potential benefits from carbon trading or biobanking opportunities.

All these possibilities suggest that the environmental funding can underpin other strategies for economic development which will expand the social and economic impact well beyond the original and ongoing environmental funding support. That is, Banbai BE has the potential to pursue an economic development strategy which builds on their cultural identity and connection to country and their capacity to care for the land.

One major new development is the late 2009 IPA declaration of 'Tarrowa Kurrukun' (meaning 'strong one' in Banbai language), a 928 hectare property owned by the Guyra LALC, and now managed by Banbai BE. Once again, Banbai BE has been able to access and bring DEWHA funds into Guyra region for this new IPA, and also accessed a Working on Country grant for work there. At present, the work at Tarrowa Kurrukun involves setting up some infrastructure, providing facilities for workers, and exploring solutions to some of the environmental challenges including significant chemical spills on the land which have entered the creek bed. Seeds are currently being harvested and propagated for regeneration activities out on the land.

The possibility of gaining other land for further expansion of IPAs in the area to conserve larger corridors of native habitat, remains on the Banbai BE agenda. Similar interest in IPA development is being articulated by Aboriginal groups in other regional towns such as Dorrigo and Glen Innes where IPA consultation projects are already underway. Banbai BE was funded by the Border Rivers Gwydir Catchment Management Authority (CMA) to provide IPA information workshops between July and October 2009 for local Aboriginal groups. These were held in Moree, Mungindi, Tingha and Glen Innes to outline what is involved in obtaining a declaration of, and then managing, an IPA (Guyra Argus 2009). Thus Banbai BE is functioning as a regional model, inspiring others.

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**CMA:**  
Catchment  
Management  
Authority

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## FACTORS THAT FACILITATE OR CONSTRAIN THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE BENEFITS

In this section I want to highlight a number of specific factors and considerations which have facilitated or enabled the above achievements to be sustained to date, or which may have impeded the progress made.

The key factors Banbai people identify in the success of this initiative have been getting the land back and having the funds through the IPA program (and more recently the Working on Country Program) to pay people to work on it. These are the two critical resource factors from which all else has flowed. It cannot be emphasised enough how significant both these factors have been. However, reliance on government funding can bring risks, and Banbai people are well aware of these.

The loss of CDEP in New South Wales at the end of June 2009 clearly presented Banbai BE with some problems as it had to lay off nine staff who had been working on CDEP (with top up). Obviously in such a small close-knit community this was a painful experience, and Banbai BE is trying in various ways to find the resources to bring these people back into work. Most have not found alternatives at present, and appear to be hoping that they will be able to return to work with Banbai BE in the future. CDEP had certainly underpinned some of the success of Banbai BE in being able to make funding for the IPA and environment work stretch to employ a larger number of people than it could otherwise cover. It makes little sense that current arrangements mean these people are now simply on welfare, failing to sustain and gain the ongoing developmental and other social benefits which work at Banbai BE, formerly subsidised by CDEP, offered. New programs have not fully compensated for that CDEP closure.

The ability of Banbai BE to utilise part of the IPA for enterprise development, through developing the eco and cultural tourism opportunities, as well as agisting some cattle and developing the native plant nursery, is important. It offers Banbai people hope that in the long-term the organisation could become less dependent on government program support, although it will always receive funds for managing a part of the National Reserve System, and it is certainly critical for governments to invest in environmental management work.

However, there are other important factors in the way the organisation has been led and developed which also appear to have been critical to Banbai BE's success to date. Banbai BE is a Banbai-controlled and Banbai-managed organisation, setting its own goals and agenda, and operating to retain and enhance Banbai cultural values and knowledge. Its community-based organisational arrangements reflect cultural ways of working, with which people feel comfortable. Its staff and board have recognised the need to build up the capacity of the individuals working there as well as the organisation as a whole if it is to deliver outcomes not only for the current generation but with future generations in mind. The capacity development emphasis is strong; Banbai BE know that they have to develop their people's skills and give them the opportunity to gain experience not only in conducting the environmental work, but in staff supervision and all aspects of organisational management and governance.

Taking some people who have experienced long term unemployment, whose lives are affected by low self esteem, poor health, and at times a range of social or financial problems associated with their low incomes and family circumstances, and supporting them to develop work habits and self confidence takes time and skill. They need significant support to manage not only their work but other aspects of their lives. Banbai BE leaders emphasise that in order to help these people to become successful in their work, they have to help them with whatever life problems they face. The support for them has to be holistic—they need building up emotionally and spiritually as well as socially and physically; some individuals may need considerable personal support and encouragement to turn their lives around. Furthermore, Banbai BE is not an ordinary workplace. One room in the office also functions as a low-key Banbai community centre where individuals, young people, and young families can come. Young mums or dads with their toddlers may drop in for a chat, and the space functions as a hub for the community. Teenagers and older people may call in for a cuppa, to use the computer to check their Facebook site, send an email, use the phone, or seek some help (for example, with forms and officialdom). There is a real sense that Banbai BE is supporting the wellbeing of the whole community in this way.

The leadership evident, though low key, is strong, clear and respected, and has the wellbeing of the Banbai families' network as well as others to the fore. In the earlier years the managers received no higher incomes than the workers in the team in order to spread the money around and share the employment available.<sup>15</sup> The leadership works hard and takes many opportunities to build their own understandings and to network with others who can help them. Whilst they have many skills, they remain very open to learning and building up their experience and knowledge as well as building up the capacities of everyone in the team.

The organisation invests heavily in the training and development of its people, and is very conscious to only expand its activities at a pace which matches its human and organisational capacity. The ready availability of appropriate, free or low cost training, which can be carried out whenever possible on the land at Wattlebridge, is an essential ingredient. Such training supports the goals the organisation has set itself, and is therefore seen as highly relevant and valuable by the people. Nurturing newly recruited young workers, developing their work ethic and their skills, is time-consuming and resource intensive, but it is clear that people appreciate the investment the organisation makes in them and the trust it places in them. The interest that young people are showing in the enterprise also bodes well for the future, and it has succession in mind as it actively develops their skills and experience.

Banbai BE has also had to develop its organisational systems as it has grown. For example, as Banbai BE has gained more funding from different sources its financial systems have had to become more sophisticated to keep pace, and that has also required new software and training of personnel who manage the finances. It has been able to draw on the support of mentors, notably the archaeologist David Crew (now living elsewhere) and his parents, both of whom are skilled professional people committed to the empowerment of Aboriginal people and experienced in community work and organisational requirements. Two of these people are on the Banbai BE Board for the present, but aim to be able to step down as the skills and confidence of Banbai BE staff and members grows.

Banbai BE is clear that for sustainability the organisation needs to develop and retain a good reputation, in order to maintain the support of funding partners and others who use Banbai BE's services. An important part of maintaining the good reputation is the rules it has in place and the standards it sets and expects for its staff. Banbai BE is also conscientious about meeting the compliance requirements of funding bodies, for example, and maintaining positive relations with them, knowing that this positions the organisation well for future funding support.

Banbai BE has developed quietly, not wanting to draw attention to its achievements prematurely, but having consolidated a strong base. From its current position it has the potential to extend the scope of its work in the directions outlined above and sustain and enhance the benefits it has already achieved.

## APPENDIX A

### SOCIOECONOMIC DATA FOR ABORIGINAL AND NON-INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN THE GUYRA REGION

For the purposes of this study, socioeconomic data on Indigenous people has been taken from the 2006 Census for the wider Guyra Indigenous Area, as this is the only source of detailed Indigenous information. Although the data are now four years old, they are the most recent statistical information available. Table A1 provides a comparison between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations of the town and its surrounding region. While data for the Indigenous column are taken from the ABS Guyra Indigenous Area and for non-Indigenous column are taken from Guyra State Suburb (ABS 2007b), these are rather different areas in size and total population. The total population of Guyra State Suburb is 1,991 of whom 120 are Indigenous. This is the closest approximation for the population of the town of Guyra. The total population of the Guyra Indigenous Area is 4,229 of whom 433 are Indigenous. This area stretches approximately 100 kilometres east and west of Guyra, and approximately 50 kilometres north-south around the town.

**Table A1. Comparison of socioeconomic data for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations of Guyra 2006**

Indicators	Indigenous <sup>a</sup>	Non-Indigenous <sup>b</sup>
Population under 25 years old (%)	61.6	29.7
Median age	17	41
Adults in labour force (no.)	103	876
Adults not in labour force	119	628
Employed adults (%)	67	87.1
Unemployed adults (%)	33	5.9
Rented housing (%)	59.7	22.0
Own home (%)	17.1	45.8
Median weekly household income (\$)	542	751
Median individual weekly income (\$)	227	368

**Notes:** a. Data taken from the Guyra Indigenous Area; see note above in relation to comparability of the data.  
b. Data taken from Guyra State Suburb; see note above in relation to comparability of the data.

**Source:** ABS 2007a, 2007b.

## PART TWO: THE NYAMBAGA GREEN TEAM

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This case study is the second to examine the socioeconomic benefits generated through Aboriginal people looking after country in New South Wales as part of a three year study being undertaken between 2009 and 2011. It first provides some socioeconomic data about the Aboriginal people and the history of the Nambucca region since settler occupation. The study then examines the conditions in Nambucca which led to the formation of the first Nyambaga Green Team and outlines its subsequent development. The benefits which have flowed to the local Aboriginal people and to the Nambucca region are outlined and then some of the conditions which have enabled these benefits to be attained are briefly discussed.

The Nyambaga Green Team is believed to be the first of the 70 Green Teams now trained and operating on the north coast of New South Wales, from the Hunter region to the Queensland border. These Green Teams are small groups of Aboriginal people who undertake Aboriginal cultural heritage and environmental services contract work. The Nyambaga Green Team, like only two other Green Teams, however, is successfully operating as a business with a continuous flow of work and income which currently sustains at least four full-time workers and mentors and trains about 10 others; thus 14 Indigenous people were employed through its activities at the time this research concluded.

### BACKGROUND

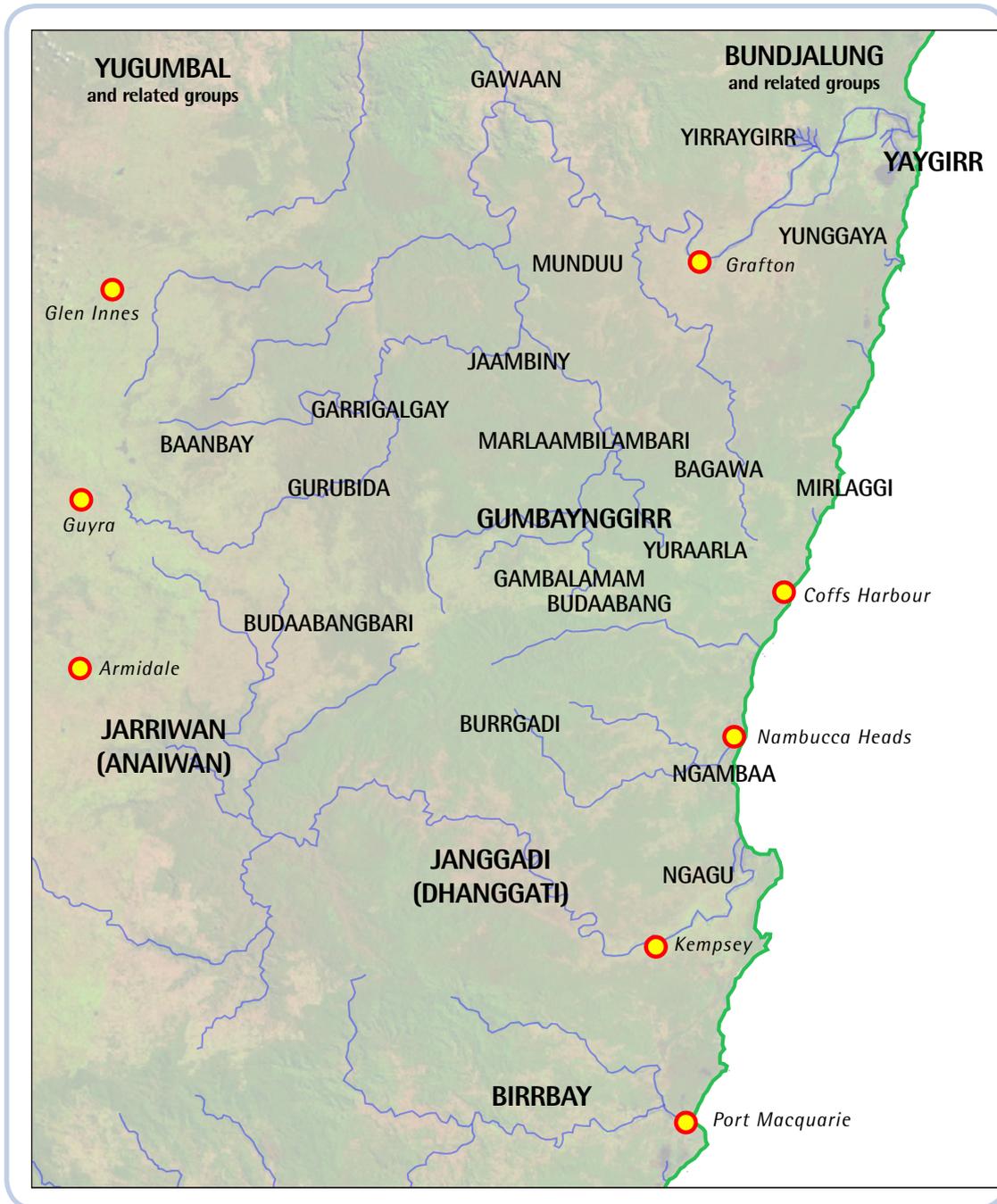
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The Nambucca region on the central coast of New South Wales is the land of the Gumbaynggirr people.<sup>16</sup> In fact, 'Nyambaga' is the Gumbaynggirr word which in English is called 'Nambucca'. Gumbaynggirr country stretches north from Nambucca Heads (Yarriapinni Mountain) to Red Rock (north of Coffs Harbour) along the coast to the Clarence River in the north, and inland west towards Armidale and Glen Innes. To the south, Gumbaynggirr country borders with the land of the Dhanggati (Dunghutti) people, to the north with the Yaegl and Banjalung and to the west with the Ainawan, Banbai and Yugumbul/Guyumbal (see Fig. 4). Within the Gumbaynggirr nation some 15 different clan groups have been recognised.

The Nyambaga Green Team works largely towards the southern and eastern part of this country, and data from the Nambucca Shire gives a sense of the contemporary situation of the Aboriginal people of the region. The Shire covers the main townships of Nambucca Heads, Macksville, Valla Beach and Bowraville as well as smaller settlements, and these are the areas in which much of the Green Team's work has been conducted.

Information from the 2006 Census (ABS 2007c) indicates that at that time, at least 1,025 people resident in the Nambucca Shire identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, some 5.7 per cent of the population. This represents a 6 per cent growth on the 2001 figures (Nambucca Shire 2007). Nambucca Heads, Bowraville and Macksville have the largest numbers of Aboriginal people in the area. This is a very young population, with 43 per cent under 15 years old and only 3 per cent aged 65 years or older. The median age of the Aboriginal population is just 17 years. In contrast, the non-Indigenous population is considerably older, having a median age of 47 (and the population of the Shire is predicted to be ageing further as younger people migrate out for employment). Unemployment rates are high in the Shire, and particularly among Aboriginal people. Some 35 per cent of Aboriginal people were unemployed in 2006 (ABS 2007c) compared to an overall unemployment rate for the Shire of 15.2 per cent (ABS 2007c). Incomes are low across the Shire, with the median individual income in 2006 at \$299 per week, and the Aboriginal median individual income lower still at \$237 per week. Most Aboriginal people (66%) in the Shire live in rented homes, with 30 per cent either owning or purchasing a home.

Fig. 4. Map of Gumbaynggirr Language Groups



Source: Adapted from Morelli (2008).

Education levels are fairly low. The 2006 Census found that 37 per cent of Aboriginal adults had completed schooling to Year 10, 12.5 per cent to Year 12, and only 7 per cent of 15–19 year olds were in full-time education. Although there is not specific health data for Aboriginal people in Nambucca Shire itself, health of Aboriginal people in the Northern Rivers region as a whole is generally poorer than the average for Aboriginal people across New South Wales. In particular, in this region, Aboriginal rates of cardiovascular disease, infectious diseases, diabetes and hospital separations relating to alcohol are higher than the Aboriginal average for other parts of the state (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2006).

### ABORIGINAL HISTORY AND COLONIAL OCCUPATION

Early contact between Gumbaynggirr people and newcomers was with a small number of escaped convicts from 1828, but the first real impact came with the arrival of the cedar-getters from 1836, and the establishment of some squatting pastoral runs in the 1840s. Many of the latter were abandoned when the Robertson Land Act of 1861 enabled free selection. There was conflict with the cedar-getters and some atrocities, while diseases such as smallpox took a toll between the 1840s and 1850s reducing the Aboriginal population. From 1860 onwards, many farmers entered the region, fenced the land, and destroyed the hunting, gathering and fishing subsistence livelihoods of the Aboriginal people. Sugar cane, corn and some dairy farming were common as well as continued exploitation of the region's forests to supply timber for construction in the growing towns and cities of Australia. Some Aboriginal employment in the pastoral industry is recorded in parts of Gumbaynggirr country along with some seasonal farming work. As noted by Davis and Marshall Jarrett (NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) 2003: 9, 22), this seasonal work, such as picking beans, peas and tomatoes, continued into the 1950s.

From the 1880s a number of Aboriginal reserves were created in the region. The first was Stuart Island Reserve near the mouth of the Nambucca River, in 1883.<sup>17</sup> Others were established at Bowraville, Nambucca Heads, Bellbrook and near Macksville (Thinee & Bradford 1998).<sup>18</sup> These were among a total of 16 reserves created between 1883 and 1908 in the Nambucca, Bellinger and Macleay valleys where Aboriginal people were required to live (Atkinson et al. 2006: 117). In 1955 the original Stuart Island Reserve, where people had lived for 72 years, was leased to a Golf Club and the residents asked to move to a new reserve in Bellwood Road towards the south western part of Nambucca. Similarly, at Bowraville people who had lived in an unofficial camp to the east of the Nambucca River were moved southwest to a new reserve created along what is now called Gumbaynggirr Road. This is owned by the LALC.

The Nambucca valley and the river's tidal estuary provided diverse food sources for Gumbaynggirr people. Accounts by contemporary elders indicate that bush food was plentiful on Stuart Island when they were young:

There was plenty of bush food when I was young. We ate oysters and had plenty of fish. There were dinner leaves, gooseberries and rolypolys. There were lillipilli trees here on the island but they cut them down. There were so many, just heaps of lillipillies at the back of the school in the old days (Davis in NSW NPWS 2003: 7).

The people collected bush potato, honey, oysters, pippies, pig's face, jarning (a sweet chewing gum), yum yums, blackberries, wild raspberries, yams, and cobra (a type of wood worm also known as jiddi) and caught porcupine; marine resources were plentiful (yabbies, perch, catfish, eels, mullet, turtles), and they also shanghaid birds, hunted wallabies, and made baskets from native cane and sold them for cash (Bonn in NPWS 2003: 10; Flanders-Edwards in NPWS 2003: 13; Jarrett in NPWS 2003: 16; Marshall Jarrett in NPWS 2003: 19, 21; Williams in NSW NPWS 2003: 29–30). Gumbaynggirr people also used bush medicines

and were extremely knowledgeable about the plants and their medicinal properties (Williams in NSW NPSW 2003: 29; Williams 2005). Some elders reportedly also had strong healing powers (Smith Cohen in NSW NPSW 2003: 4; Marshall Jarrett in NSW NPSW 2003: 18).<sup>19</sup>

Although environmental and access conditions have changed so that the availability of some of this bush tucker and bush medicine has reduced, considerable knowledge of bush tucker and bush medicine remains today among a select few of the older members of the Gumbaynggirr community.

## CONTEMPORARY LAND AND ENVIRONMENT CONTEXT

Most of land in the area in which the Nyambaga Green Team works is either privately owned and used for agriculture, or owned by the Crown and designated as national parks, state forests and reserves of various sorts. There are three National Parks and eight Nature Reserves within the Nambucca Shire (Nambucca Shire 2007), including a new joint-managed National Park. Aboriginal involvement in natural resource management in the region, however, necessarily involves Aboriginal people working on a variety of land tenures, rather than focusing only, or largely, on their own land.

Within the Nambucca Shire and the wider Gumbaynggirr region, the main mechanism for Aboriginal land ownership is through LALCs. Under the *New South Wales Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* these land councils are able to claim Crown land which is not required for an essential public purpose, and to hold it as freehold Aboriginal land. There are three land councils in the Nambucca Shire: Nambucca Heads LALC, Bowraville LALC and Unyka LALC (Unyka LALC covers Macksville and Stuart's Point, the latter within the Kempsey Shire). Nambucca Heads LALC, for example, now owns 'hundreds of hectares' of land with a total value of some \$6.3 million, and manages 30 houses. Some of the original reserves are included in the land now owned by these LALCs. However, although legally responsible for land management, the LALCs have insufficient funding to adequately manage the areas of land they may claim.

Between 1984 and 1995 the Nambucca Heads and Unyka LALCs made important land claims on an area of Crown land around the Nambucca estuary, the Warrell Creek and along the associated coastal strip known as South Beach (Hemmingsen & Marshall 2007). In 1996, these claims were rejected, but the land councils appealed to the Land and Environment Court. The result of the subsequent negotiations which settled the court action was that the land would be transferred to the two land councils as tenants in common and a lease would be established under Part 4A of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1974*, to enable the area to be leased back to the New South Wales Government to become a new jointly managed National Park. This new Gaagal Wanggaan (South Beach) National Park was declared on 23 April 2010. The Board of Management will involve a majority of Gumbaynggirr traditional owners, representatives from the two LALCs, and from the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

Native title offers an alternative avenue to asserting Aboriginal interests in land. A native title claim by a group of Gumbaynggirr traditional owners was lodged in 1998 which overlaps and extends beyond the boundaries of the new National Park. The research for this claim, including for the register of traditional owners, was conducted by the New South Wales native title representative body, NTSCORP. The Part 4A agreement above is a part of the continuing Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) negotiations which include NTSCORP (formerly NSWNTS) representing the traditional owners, the LALCs and NPWS among others. These negotiations will result in an ILUA and a consent determination. The ILUA covers the entire native title claim area, which includes South Beach, an area known as 'Gumma' and three islands in the estuary of the Nambucca River, and thus includes what is now the Gaagal Wanggaan (South Beach) National Park. The ILUA relates to Aboriginal rights to cultural and commercial use of the natural resources. It is expected to be finalised in 2011. Both the land rights claims and the native title process have intersected and the negotiations around both processes have been lengthy and complicated. However,

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**ILUA:**  
Indigenous Land  
Use Agreement

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both now indicate a small increase in opportunities for local Aboriginal engagement in land and estuarine management in the region in the future. For example, the new National Park will employ just over two full-time equivalent Aboriginal staff.

Aboriginal elders (and others) are concerned about the deterioration in the state of the local environment, and the way modern development has damaged the rivers and the soils; they worry about the overall ability of the environment to sustain biodiversity and the rich wildlife from which Aboriginal livelihoods were formerly sustained. The elder who was the driving force behind the establishment of the Green Team argues that there is an urgent need to rehabilitate the land and that this would benefit the whole community. He feels that properly cared for, the land could be replenished, with fire hazards and flooding reduced. Rivers whose banks are damaged, or where bridge building has removed large quantities of gravel, or filled the deep holes, need attention, and the right trees planted along the banks to stabilise and help protect them. Furthermore he argues for greater access to cultural sites on private land and in State forests, particularly 'increase sites' where Aboriginal rituals should be performed from time to time to foster increase of various species (for example Nwgaarr Mirreell, or kangaroo increase sites, and similar sites for turtles, stingray, eels and other species). As well he expresses concern that non-Indigenous people are placing themselves in danger through going to and desecrating powerful Aboriginal sites which are open to such access, for example a nearby massacre site where 'whitefellas' camp and have rowdy parties at weekends. He sees an urgent need for the whole community to become more educated about caring for the environment in a holistic and spiritual way, and indicated that healing rituals are needed, for example after bushfires, as well as after deaths.

#### EMPLOYMENT CONTEXT

For Aboriginal people, getting a job in Nambucca Shire is not easy. In most areas there is a surplus of workers to jobs available.

Overall, employment in the Nambucca Shire is greatest in retail, health and social care services, food and accommodation, reflecting the generally older age profile of the Shire and its tourism industry. Education and training, manufacturing, rural production, construction and public services are the other main industries. The workforce is highly gender-segregated with construction, transport and manufacturing employing predominantly male workers, and health and social care, education and training being more female-dominated. Health and social care and accommodation and food were two industries which grew significantly between 2001 and 2006, whereas rural production, construction and retail employment fell, suggesting a growth in employment opportunities for women but a reduction for men.

The local workforce is well qualified with some 54 per cent having tertiary qualifications; 21 per cent have a degree, diploma or higher qualification (Nambucca Economic Portrait n.d.). Only a handful of Aboriginal people in the Shire have such degree or diploma level qualifications, although at the time of the 2006 Census more had Cert II and above qualifications. This suggests that Aboriginal people are likely to be at a competitive disadvantage overall when seeking employment in Nambucca. As indicated above, the rate of Aboriginal unemployment is considerably higher than the non-Indigenous rate. Among the Aboriginal trainees working with the Green Team are several who have easily obtained work elsewhere (for example in north Queensland) but on returning home to Nambucca have struggled to find work.

## THE IDEA OF A 'GREEN TEAM' AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE BUSINESS MODEL

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The conception of the 'Green Team'<sup>20</sup> has a long history and has built on a number of earlier activities and prior relationships among people associated with the Nambucca Heads LALC, Wesley Uniting Aboriginal Employment Services (then operating in the Nambucca valley but since absorbed into the Wesley Uniting Employment Program at Nambucca) and the Ngurrala Aboriginal Corporation (Ngurrala).<sup>21</sup> In 1998, Ngurrala, which at that time was running a major CDEP program for the area, organised for a small group of 12 trainees to complete an Agriculture Cert II course.<sup>22</sup> The trainer (who subsequently became the Manager of the Green Team), successfully gained funding for a Bushtucker and River Restoration Project on which the trainees were employed and this was highly successful. Over two years the awards for this Project flowed. The project team were state finalists for the Rivercare 2000 awards, they won the New South Wales Tidy Towns Coast and Estuary Division prize, and they shared the National Indigenous Landcare Award along with another group. They also won Trainee of the Year and Indigenous Student of the Year awards. Within the two years of the project, the students went on and completed the Cert III course and it was clear that this initiative was highly successful.

However, as that project funding ceased, the trainer moved to the Nambucca LALC to work on other projects. There he met a Gumbaynggirr elder with whom he became friends, and one day he drew this elder's attention to an advertisement in the local newspaper. The Northern Rivers Catchment Management Board) (as it then was) was seeking contractors for a project to engage Aboriginal people in NRM. In the elder's view, the best way to do that would be to employ them. So together they put forward a proposal to the Catchment Management Board that would involve this concept of Aboriginal employment in NRM, which it accepted. The project began in June 2003. CDEP participants from Ngurrala were involved, and the project initially ran from the LALC, with support from the Wesley Uniting AES which provided tools and clothing. TAFE were involved but on a fee for service basis, to run the training. FarmBIS provided \$15,000 towards the TAFE training fee and a Protecting Our Places grant of \$38,680 provided for a coordinator and costs of bus transport to enable trainees to attend training at Coffs Harbour Higher Education Centre.<sup>23</sup> Most of the participants had been long-term unemployed. The model involved two days a week of TAFE training (covered by CDEP funds), and three days per week of working on contracts won by the newly created 'Green Team'. This was essentially a 'CDEP plus top up' model with the 'top up' being provided through the contracts the team undertook. The training program developed by Coffs Harbour Higher Education Centre in consultation with the Green Team proponents covered conservation and land management, with a focus on natural area restoration, along with cultural heritage site conservation and management. Elders have been involved with the Green Team as cultural advisers, and in some cases as managers, so that both western and Indigenous knowledge is drawn upon in the work the Green Team undertakes, particularly in relation to significant cultural heritage sites. However, Melbourne Enterprise Group Training (MEGT) Team trainees felt that the training emphasis remained predominantly on the western knowledge and more emphasis could be placed on transmission of Indigenous knowledge.

### THE EVOLUTION OF THE GREEN TEAM

The initial group of 13 Green Team trainees began in 2003 and completed their CALM Cert II and then, due to some administrative problems at the LALC at the time, the project had to move out. With nowhere to go, the Manager based the team at his home for some time, placing some strain on his family, until he was able to negotiate a new home for the Green Team. Eventually the Green Team was based at Ngurrala. This was not an easy arrangement to manage and the Green Team experienced some difficulties with the relationship and the administrative and financial arrangements until the former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) left and was replaced by the current Ngurrala CEO. Nevertheless, the trainees continued and

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**MEGT:**  
Melbourne  
Enterprise Group  
Training

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**CEO:**  
Chief Executive  
Officer

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achieved their Cert III in CALMS. A few then continued their training further to gain a Cert IV, while three completed a Diploma course. Within five years, these Aboriginal men all gained significant qualifications, and in some cases moved on to other jobs or training. Two from this original team remain employed in the Green Team in 2010.

In 2006 a second group of eight trainees began with funding support for six months from the local employment training centre, with most again achieving CALM Cert II and/or Cert III. One from this group remains in the Green Team in 2010, acting as a Team Supervisor. Four others have gone on to other jobs or now run their own business, while one is full-time caring for children and another has pulled out due to illness.<sup>24</sup>

In mid-2009 a third group of eight trainees began working and training for two years, supported by MEGT and funded by the New South Wales Government's Land Alive Program. This program is training some 30 Aboriginal people throughout New South Wales to undertake land and biodiversity management to support bio-banking by Aboriginal communities and organisations.<sup>25</sup> At Ngurrala, the new MEGT team, which has named itself Gaagal Waadjar (meaning land/country and water) is undertaking CALM Certs II and III as well as other training; they have approximately one to two days per week training (much of it on-the-job), two days per week working with and being mentored by the established Green Team, and spend up to one day per week on land management for Ngurrala itself, as an in-kind contribution in return for the administrative support which Ngurrala provides.

All the Green Team training is undertaken simultaneously with employment gained through successful tendering for natural resource management contracts in the Nambucca region. Much of the training is undertaken 'on the job' and is always tailored to the work the Green Team members are undertaking at the time. It is highly practical and relevant.

### GREEN TEAM CONTRACTS

The first significant contract which the original Team won was to create a wetland park at Macksville, which was funded by the Nambucca Heads Shire. The 'Crosswinds Wetland Park' project involved turning a 'disused, neglected block by the river' into a pleasant wetlands boardwalk with cultural signage (Hudson 2007:10). It also involved removal of weeds and rubbish, so that the area would be a pleasant tourist stop-over. The cultural signage has an educational role and provides recognition to the Gumbaynggirr custodians and their use of bush foods.

Other early projects involved managing vine weeds in the Nambucca Catchment, a contract for the North Coast Weeds Advisory Committee, and other work for the Nambucca Heads Shire Council, including revegetation of stream banks and installation of gross pollutant traps.

From that early work, the Green Team gained confidence and recognition, and has carried out a host of other contracts, some large, others small, for a diverse range of organisations. The text box opposite shows some of the more recent contracts the Green Team has undertaken, indicating the range of work and the different sources of funding. Over the years of its existence the Nyambaga Green Team has completed a total of over 200 contracts.

One of the largest projects undertaken involved a Boardwalk along a part of the estuary of Nambucca River (Fig. 5). This project, completed in 2007, resulted from a deal brokered between the Green Team and the Roads and Traffic Authority (New South Wales) and local Shire and achieved several benefits for the Aboriginal community. The elders had long mourned the environmental damage caused when the estuary was blocked by a solid causeway (known as Bellwood Causeway) built to support a road over to Stuart Island, where the Golf Club is now sited, thus preventing this part of the estuary from being flushed at each tide. The result was a section of the estuary which was enclosing filthy, polluted and putrid water, not the clean, clear tidal water they remembered in their youth.<sup>26</sup>

#### RECENT PROJECTS UNDERTAKEN BY NYAMBAGA GREEN TEAM AND THE AGENCY FOR WHICH THEY CONDUCTED THE WORK

- Valla Beach Nature Reserve bush restoration (NPWS)
- Middle Head Nature Reserve (NPWS)
- Jagun Nature Reserve (NPWS)
- Yarriabinni National Park (NPWS)
- Boardwalk construction, Nambucca River (Nambucca Heads Shire)
- Riverbank rehabilitation (NRCMA)
- Valla beach rainforest regeneration (NRCMA and NPWS)
- Valla Beach access track (a local Lions Club and Nambucca Valley Landcare group)
- Beilby's Beach: Dune stabilisation (NRCMA and Shire)
- Parks & Gardens (Nambucca Shire Council)
- Fire buffer zone (Nambucca Heads LALC)
- Mangrove rehabilitation: Rock fillets at Warrell Creek (Coastcare grant & Barefoot Raddler Beer Company)
- Tallowood school: pathways, stage area, planting and landscaping (Tallowood School)
- Aboriginal Lands Clean Up—confluence of Nambucca River and Warrell Creek and associated islands (Nambucca Heads LALC & DECCW Aboriginal Land Clean Up Program)

**Fig. 5. The Green Team begin construction of the boardwalk on the Nambucca River**



Photo: Terrence Hudson.

The Roads and Traffic Authority originally wanted to build a footpath along the road (Riverside Drive) bounding the estuary but the road corridor was too narrow to allow that, so the solution suggested was a boardwalk along the estuary below the road. However, this presented a problem as the area has considerable cultural significance, so negotiations had to be undertaken with the Aboriginal community. The eventual deal, brokered by the Green Team Manager with support from the elders, was that the boardwalk could be built on two conditions: that the causeway be opened so that the river estuarine flow could be restored, and that the Green Team Aboriginal workers be contracted to build the boardwalk.

The 2.5 metre wide boardwalk now stretches alongside and over the river estuary for several hundred metres, providing a delightful walking path, which also enables older people to access it on scooters/tricycles with ease. Cultural signage at each end, developed in consultation with local elders and painted by a local Aboriginal artist, provides a gentle educational message to the community and tourists about Aboriginal presence and care for the environment and illustrates contemporary use of the Gumbaynggirr language. For example the Nambucca Boardwalk is named 'Gulmani' which means 'shortcut' in Gumbaynggirr language.

The closure of the CDEP program at the end of June 2009 had an impact on the Green Team in the short term. As team members left for other jobs or commitments, they were not replaced, so at the end of 2009 only five members of the two previous Green Teams remained, along with the eight members of the Gaagal Waadjar.

However, in mid-2010 the Nyambaga Green Team has two large contracts and will continue to fulfil smaller ones which arise. The largest contract is with the Nambucca Heads Shire to build a two kilometre cycleway, with one of the four remaining team members becoming the Team supervisor.

A second major project in 2010 involves managing a \$100,000 Caring for our Country project which Nyambaga Green Team won in partnership with the Nambucca Valley Landcare Group. This project is largely on Aboriginal land owned by the Nambucca Heads and Unkya LALCs. Weed clearing and rehabilitation work will focus particularly on an 11 kilometre section of the Warrell Creek dune system, an area of high cultural significance, including a major midden. It involves reducing the impact of bitou bush and lantana, and enhancing the littoral rainforest (Fig. 6). The project will also involve a trial of vegetation protection and weed submission using traditional Aboriginal knowledge. The Green Team will work with non-Indigenous volunteers to improve beach access and minimise the impact of beach traffic on the dune systems. A partnership with the Nambucca Shire Council and the additional support of Coastal volunteer groups underpin this project. A senior and well-respected Aboriginal man from the community was recruited early in 2010 to supervise this team. This is the largest project to date that the Green Team has carried out on Aboriginal land.

In summary, the model developed initially drew on support from CDEP and some funding from the NRCMA to support coordination, along with considerable logistic and other business support from Ngurrala Aboriginal Corporation and training provided by the local TAFE. From this base, the Green Team was able to bid for a range of tenders and contracts relating to environmental work to provide full-time work for the trainees. This work came from the Shire, the NSW NWPS and a range of other bodies, including the LALC.

The Green Team has developed a strong reputation for high quality work. Its cultural heritage expertise as well as its real knowledge and commitment to regenerating and improving the environment, makes it a very strong contender particularly for conservation work in protected areas. It is obviously preferred for work on Aboriginal land. The Shire's commitment to local employment and reconciliation, coupled with the quality of the work the Green Team performs, also means that the Shire now relies heavily on it for its environmental activities.

**Fig. 6. Rock fillet construction for mangrove rehabilitation at Warrell Creek**



Photo: Terrence Hudson.

This business model has generated considerable interest in the Northern Rivers region, with the result that in August 2009 a Regional Partnership Agreement was finalised which establishes a Green Team Alliance and an Aboriginal corporation whose aim is to create employment for Aboriginal people in the Many Rivers Indigenous Coordination Centre region. It is doing this initially by brokering between major organisations and contractors wanting environmental rehabilitation and similar work undertaken and the various Green Teams which have now developed in the region. The idea is to be able to upscale the Green Team work and gain major commercial tenders to enable a reliable flow of better-remunerated work to be generated for the growing number of trained Aboriginal people available, as well as for future trainees.

There is also interest in the model beyond the region, in Sydney and from State governments in Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania and South Australia. The demand for information, showing round visitors, and making presentations has grown significantly.

#### **THE NYAMBAGA GREEN TEAM MODEL: BENEFITS EMERGING**

As the Nambucca Boardwalk example above illustrated, the Green Team's work can have many benefits for the Aboriginal participants and their families as well as for the wider community. This section summarises the overall benefits which are emerging from this model.

##### **Training and employment**

The Green Team was set up to provide employment for Aboriginal people in natural resource management and it has certainly achieved this. Clearly the most significant benefit to the participants in the Green Teams is the fulltime employment which participation in the Team has provided, and the associated

**Table 2. Green Team employment statistics, 2003–10**

Team	Members since 2003	Still with Green Team	Gone to other work	Other
Team one	13	2	8	3
Team two	8	1	3	4
MEGT	9	6	–	3
Other <sup>a</sup>	3	2	–	1
Total	33	11	11	11

**Note:** a. The three members in Column 1 are the newly recruited Green Team member who is supervising the Caring for Country project, and the two trainees in Column 2 who began in 2010 under the TAFE teacher's supervision.

**Source:** The author.

benefits which flow from a steady, higher income than CDEP or unemployment benefits provide. The majority of the Green Team members to date have been male, and although a small number of women have participated, this work does not seem to be attracting many females.

For the participants the benefits of earning a wage are clear. The ability to pay the rent, buy and maintain a car or a phone, purchase good food and needed whitegoods are among the obvious benefits of the income which Green Team employment provides for families, especially where a key member has been unemployed for a long period. The chance to give to others, buy family members Christmas presents, and give something back to family members who may have helped you out in the past is welcomed. However, it needs to be recognised that at present only six Green Team members are receiving more than training wages (the four original Green Team members and the supervisors of the MEGT Team and the Caring for our Country project). The remaining MEGT team members are trainees on training wages.

At the same time, participation in the Green Team has been a stepping stone to other jobs for many of the participants who were formerly unemployed (see Table 2). To date 33 people (of whom only 2 are female) have had the opportunity to participate in Green Team activity. Of these, 11 are still involved, four as the core Green Team (including one recently recruited directly into the Team) and seven in the Gaagal Waadjar group. Three former Gaagal Waadjar group members have dropped out, but one has been replaced with a new trainee. In addition two new trainees joined in with the MEGT team in early 2010 under the direct auspices of the TAFE teacher and contractor who is working with them and teaching on the job in 2010. One of those remains with the Team in mid-2010.

Of the remaining 22, 11 have gone on to other work (including one apprenticeship), three are involved in family childcare and not available for full-time work, and separate non-work-related tragedies left one badly disabled and another, sadly, died. Three of those in work are active in an Aboriginal family-owned mowing and gardening business. Thus most of those still available for work have gained or created work following their participation in the Green Team. This is a considerable achievement. The exceptions are one person who has left in 2010 due to illness, three who have left the MEGT team early, the additional trainee who left, and one Green Team member whose circumstances are unknown.

It is not simply that the Team members have employment, training and income. The nature of the work and the fact that working with the Green Team provides a culturally 'safe' and enjoyable environment is important to Team members. The participants enjoy working with relatives and friends. Most have some sort of family relationship with other team members, including through marriage. They are all 'one mob'

and they like working together; they know each other really well, and they can be themselves; while they work hard, they have some fun working together. They also like working outside and in the fresh air, rather than being indoors, and they gain satisfaction from working to help restore the environment and seeing the results of their efforts. Many of them care deeply about the state of the environment and feel positive about being able to make a contribution to cleaning-up and regeneration.

Whilst Team members enjoy working as part of an all-Aboriginal team, at the same time they like getting to know new people they meet through the work. They also enjoy getting to see the country, not just locally, but the opportunities to travel to places such as Newcastle or Sydney for meetings and presentations as part of the job, or to Armidale to install habitat boxes. They find the work provides them with a sense of satisfaction, and stops the boredom of unemployment that some may previously have experienced. They are 'keener to get out of bed', as one put it. A small number of Aboriginal Work Experience participants also choose to join the team to complete their necessary hours of community work (for example, in February 2010 there were three Work Experience participants working with the Team).

Associated with the employment has been the training and qualifications that everyone participating has gained. Since there are few Aboriginal people in the Nambucca region with tertiary qualifications, this is itself a very positive development. The Green Team has enabled 28 Aboriginal people to gain such qualifications to date and more are in process.<sup>27</sup> For those who stayed and are now the core of the Green Team, there has been particularly significant achievement and development. Two are completing Cert IV CALM and two have already completed Diplomas (another with a Diploma has a job with the Nambucca Shire), with four now undertaking a Cert IV in Training and Assessment as well. This training and development is intended to provide the basis for ongoing Aboriginal leadership of the Green Teams, enabling earlier non-Indigenous management and coordination to be partially replaced by highly skilled and experienced Aboriginal leaders. These more experienced and qualified Aboriginal people will also be available to train other Aboriginal people in the region—something they are already doing with the Gaagal Waadjar group in a mentoring role—and more formal opportunities with TAFE may also emerge. Team members certainly appreciate the diverse qualifications they gain through the Green Team work, and the range of skills they now have, for example boat handling, a host of practical carpentry and construction skills, and technical skills such as Global Positioning System (GPS) operation. Essential occupation health and safety certificates, chemical handling, chainsaw handling and other similar qualifications are among the qualifications they have gained, or renewed. In a few cases, Green Team members or trainees previously had some of these certificates, but perhaps had not had the opportunity to use their skills or keep them up-to-date, something which working in the Green Team had enabled them to do, so they now have greater experience as well as current qualifications.

One person working in the core team in late 2009 was a non-Indigenous person originally brought in as a much-needed driver, but who then trained in CALM and coordinating the fieldwork. In early 2010 he left and a new senior Aboriginal person was brought in, so that Aboriginal people now work as supervisors of the teams working on the two main projects in 2010: the Cycleway project and the projects carried out with Caring for our Country funds. Similarly, the MEGT team is supervised by two Aboriginal members. An experienced Aboriginal builder manages the Cycleway Project overall, and sees the potential for such projects to offer Aboriginal people the opportunity to develop their work habits and a range of skills likely to get them employment in the construction industry in the future.

The combination of the training and the very positive community feedback to the Team Members about the work they have been undertaking has contributed significantly to their sense of pride and achievement. It has given them confidence in themselves and their capabilities, and this shift of mindset is probably one of the most significant outcomes.<sup>28</sup> They talk about feeling more motivated generally, or feeling mentally happier and more satisfied. In turn, the Green Team achievements are shifting mindsets of non-Indigenous people in the region, an issue which will be discussed below.

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**GPS:**  
Global Positioning  
System

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### Partnership development

The business model relies on the Green Team developing and maintaining strong and mutually beneficial partnerships with a variety of local bodies (see earlier list of projects). This capacity to partner with NRM-related organisations and others in the region is one of the benefits of the Green Team work. It helps to build bridges between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, for mutual benefit and learning. It also enables Aboriginal organisations, such as the local Aboriginal land council, to employ Aboriginal workers for their essential land management tasks.

One example of such partnership is that with the NPWS in the Coffs Harbour region. Over the past five years the Green Team has done a great deal of weed control and bush regeneration work for the local NPWS, and has now won a regular tender for this type of work with them. NPWS recognises that the Team has taken on some pretty tough jobs and done them well, that they are flexible and collaborative in the way they work with the Service, and says that their reporting is good—often above and beyond what's needed. They also find that the Team works really carefully in sensitive cultural sites, because of their special significance to them as local Aboriginal people. The regional NPWS annually employs around five contractors in their entire Coffs Harbour region for this type of weed control and bush regeneration work, but all of the Nambucca work has been contracted to the Nyambaga Green Team since NPWS found out about their existence. While NPWS regularly works with Aboriginal elders in relation to cultural sites, this is a new type of relationship they now have with (generally) younger members of the Aboriginal community—which they appreciate. Thus this partnership has been beneficial for the NPWS as well as for the Green Team itself.

Likewise, the partnership with the Nambucca Heads Shire began with smallish projects, such as fencing around a dune, and rehabilitation of a gully. As these were completed satisfactorily, the Green Team started to gain larger contracts. The Team itself also brought proposals to the Shire, such as the Nambucca Boardwalk project, which the Shire had initially tendered out to another company that eventually provided a building supervisor while the Green Team did the actual work. The building supervisor was impressed with the rapid development of the Team's skills and confidence and was impressed with the quality of their work, giving them increasing responsibility as the task progressed. The Shire Engineering Services Manager commented that this was a very high quality job, and a Shire community survey revealed that it was the highest profile environmental activity in the Shire in recent years. The Shire has now engaged the Green Team in an even larger project, the development of a two kilometre cycleway involving the Green Team, MEGT Team members and Aboriginal youth undertaking a relevant TAFE course. This will be at least a six-month task. Thus the partnership between the Green Team and the Shire is expanding and benefitting Aboriginal young people beyond the Team itself. The Shire normally engages the Green Team to clean up beaches after flood events, and at times has also lent its support to other projects which the Green Team is undertaking through giving approvals and collecting the waste when weeds are being removed.

### Increased self-respect and pride in achievements

One of the strongest benefits (already alluded to) is the increased self-respect and self-esteem which Green Team members and their families experience. There is a strong sense of 'ownership' generated in the projects they undertake and a pride in the quality of the work they do, as well as the qualifications they have gained.

There is also pride in working on their own country and looking after it on behalf of the elders. Aboriginal people have been unable to have access to much of their country to look after it, but the Green Team presents some opportunities to overcome that problem. This generates community pride in caring for the land, as they make the point that Aboriginal people have been its caretakers from time immemorial. The Team members enjoy learning from the elders in relation to cultural sites, which many of them may not

have been very aware of or knowledgeable about until now. The use of Gumbaynggirr language for names and signage is also valued and promoted. People feel valued and listened to when their views and ideas are taken up at work, and as mutual respect builds within the team.

The Nyambaga Green Team is also an extremely positive development in an Aboriginal community which is confronted with persistent and complex social problems, the effects of ongoing trauma, and occasional contemporary tragedies. As Ngurralla Aboriginal Corporation CEO said,

The Green Team group is a little beacon in the darkness. As people latch onto the light it becomes brighter.

There is certainly a sense that the Green Team is leading the way in showing what Aboriginal people are capable of in the Shire and the wider region, and overturning stereotypes and prejudice which may have hindered or limited Aboriginal development in the past. Community members comment on the hard work and the quality of the work the Team is doing. The fact that this Team is now viewed by environmental agencies as one of the highest quality professional environmental contractors in the region is a big achievement. As one person said, the Green Team members provide a 'lift' to the community as a whole, and engender pride within the Aboriginal community about what 'the boys' are doing. They model successful working lives, which also have flow-on benefits for their families and communities, particularly the children. The children take pride in what their relative has done, and particularly in relation to high profile projects which benefit the whole community. Thus although the primary benefits flow to individual team members, there are direct and indirect flow-on benefits across the community.

### Education and youth

There are educational benefits for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. The Green Team has worked with a number of schools and pre-schools, planting trees and doing other related environmental or landscaping work in which they often involve the children. NAIDOC week also provides opportunities for environmental activities, such as tree planting, which the Green Team leads with children. This enables the young Aboriginal children to see their relatives working, or other children to see Aboriginal people working and it gives them an opportunity for positive interaction and learning.

The Green Team has also provided work experience opportunities for Aboriginal high school students and in 2008–09 mentored two young men from a local youth at risk program known as the 'LADS program' run by a local Youth Centre.<sup>29</sup> As mentioned earlier, one of these young men has joined the new Cycleway team in 2010 and another is working with the team under a TAFE teacher's supervision.

For Aboriginal children and youth, the fact that Green Team relatives are themselves studying also provides a positive model, with the children seeing them doing 'homework' from time to time. The intergenerational valuing of study and achievement is important and is thought likely to have an effect for the longer term. As well, the children are learning about bush tucker and plants from their relatives, so both Aboriginal and western knowledge is being encouraged and fostered.

### Culture and language use

Being able to access land provides Aboriginal people with the opportunity to look after their country and their significant cultural sites; it helps maintain cultural knowledge and stories which might otherwise not be passed on. Rehabilitation of sites and improved access to them through Green Team work also enables elders to visit those sites occasionally, which they value highly.

In the Nambucca region, the Gumbaynggirr language is undergoing a significant revival due largely to the work of the Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative which is teaching Gumbaynggirr language in 15 regional schools.<sup>30</sup> The Green Team's work is enriching and reinforcing this, as it works with

Muurrbay and develops what may be called the 'language of the land'. Although early ideas about the Green Team members doing language classes did not turn out to be practical, the Team members consult closely with Muurrbay on cultural matters, and use Gumbaynggirr naming and language whenever the opportunity arises—for example, in the Jagun Reserve project for NPWS all the trails have been named with Gumbaynggirr names. The signage on many projects also educates the whole community about Gumbaynggirr people and their relationship to and use of the environment, as well as their language.

Furthermore, when the Green Team works with elders they are gaining a great deal of cultural education, as elders are passing on Aboriginal ecological and cultural knowledge. This includes knowledge about bush foods and medicines as well as about the land and waters as sentient things, and the stories attached to particular places. This is particularly appreciated by older people who were taken away and did not have the opportunity for this sort of Aboriginal learning, as well as younger ones who simply have not had the chance until now to get out to sites and learn about them. Team members really appreciated the opportunity to work around sites of particular cultural significance. Care is taken with gender issues in this regard with men-only and women-only sites being cared for by people of the appropriate gender.<sup>31</sup> Cultural heritage management is an important part of the training courses undertaken by members. This includes cultural surveys, site identification, understanding customary burials and what to do if they find a burial site, site recording using GPS and/or Personal Digital Assistant technology.<sup>32</sup> Team members clear weeds and help regenerate bush food and bush medicine plants, particularly in those cases where only a few such plants remain in the area.

However, some Green Team members feel that more attention to cultural protocols and greater opportunities for sharing of Indigenous knowledge should be included in the program, particularly as there are only a small number of older knowledge holders now, and it is important that opportunities are created for that knowledge to be shared on country.<sup>33</sup> They feel that greater weight is currently given to western knowledge than to Indigenous knowledge in the training activities. One of the constraints seems to be the pressure on the Team to complete contracts, so time for Indigenous knowledge transmission is limited. Thus while the Team members are learning how to be contemporary caretakers for the whole environment using both Aboriginal and western forms of knowledge, a greater focus seems to be on western knowledge and certification.

Nevertheless, several Team members report that their own concern about looking after the environment has increased. Many feel a deeper connection to the land now—they are connected through the stories that their fathers (or mothers) have handed down. These stories are still held by family and clan groups, but the opportunity to get onto the land is enabling some of them to be passed on. However, some negotiation is required where specific clans are responsible for and hold the knowledge about particular areas where the Team is working.

### Health

It is difficult to assess the health benefits broadly, but what is clear is that for particular individuals who are participants in the Green Team, there have been health improvements—such as significant weight loss and greater physical fitness for individuals.<sup>34</sup> There is also a reduction in alcohol consumption, smoking (no core Green Team member smokes) and a general improvement in Team members' sense of mental well being and motivation. The fact that there is an absolute ban on working under the influence of alcohol or other drugs for obvious health and safety reasons provides a strong incentive for abstinence or moderation. Participants risk losing pay if unfit for work.

### Benefits for the wider community

Clearly the benefits of the Green Team's work are also enjoyed by the wider community, especially the environmental and infrastructure improvements that they have generated. Fishermen, for example, have appreciated the clean up of the islands and the estuary area. Older and disabled people have appreciated the practicality of the big Nambucca boardwalk, especially the width which allows access with ease to enjoy the river environment. Interestingly this boardwalk, unlike much other community infrastructure, has not been subject to vandalism or graffiti; it looks good, and some of the Team believe it makes people feel good.

This may relate to the impact which the Team's work efforts are having on community attitudes towards Aboriginal people. When local people see the Team doing hard, dirty, and sometimes dangerous work with such vigour and determination they are likely to have to reassess common stereotypes of Aboriginal failure or laziness. Anecdotal evidence indicates that community members are impressed and they are appreciating the work the Team is undertaking. The high quality of their work has also contributed to positive assessments by various environmental organisations and professionals. Occasionally, various conservation volunteers—for example the Valla Bush group—work alongside the Team. This builds relationships as individuals get to know each other as people. From a capacity development perspective, such changing mindsets in the non-Aboriginal community are likely to generate further positive change and contribute to reconciliation; similarly this experience also positively affects Aboriginal people themselves.

### Model for other teams

This Nambucca initiative has clearly sparked the emergence of a number of other similar teams in Gumbaynggirr country and in the wider Northern Rivers region. Within the immediate vicinity, Coffs Harbour has a Blue Team based at the LALC, while at Dorrigo there is a Green Team, a younger group doing much the same work. Thus the types of benefits the Nyambaga Green Team are gaining are not confined to that group but are being promoted in other communities. An audit of Green Teams in the Many Rivers region indicates that some 70 teams existed in 2008, although few have sustained ongoing work and some have not survived at all after the closure of CDEP.<sup>35</sup>

## SUCCESS FACTORS AND CURRENT CHALLENGES

The success of this initiative has clearly derived from the support of a number of organisations and the drive and determination of the various individuals who saw the possibilities and worked tirelessly to make it work.

### The institutional support

The current host organisation, Ngurrula Aboriginal Corporation, has assisted the Green Team from the outset—although the relationship has not always been without problems from the Green Team's perspective. Nevertheless, Ngurrula provided a vehicle and equipment until the Team obtained its own. Ngurrula has provided financial and administrative support, and auspices tenders and funding applications; it provides essential insurances, workers' compensation and other similar coverage, and it provides its office space for the manager and others, a training room, as well as grounds and sheds as a base for storage. Initially it provided CDEP participants. At that time it also worked with Hunter Valley Group Training to provide training opportunities and to build on the two days/week CDEP work to make up full-time traineeship positions; today it uses its role as a Jobs Services Australia organisation and as a host organisation for MEGT to recruit and fund trainees.<sup>36</sup> Ngurrula's support and its new relationship with MEGT is fundamental to the maintenance of the Nyambaga Green Team. However, it has to do this on a business basis so Green Team contracts have to cover the full costs of these support services to Ngurrula.

Having strong management and organisational support, and capacity to prepare detailed tender documents and manage and report on major contracts is essential to maintaining a flow of project work under this business model. The Nyambaga Green Team has been especially fortunate in having the leadership of a highly experienced NRM manager who can undertake the higher level tasks of contract negotiation and tendering, although the senior Green Team members are now doing a great deal of the reporting themselves. His departure to the Green Team Alliance in 2010 presented some challenges, although he remains supportive in his new role with the Green Team Alliance.

The early and continuing support of the NRCMA is also vital as this support has partially funded the wages of the Manager, who brought in other funding. This support has reflected major changes in the CMA employment of Aboriginal people. Some years ago the CMA employed nine part-time Aboriginal support officers, but this number has now reduced to three. The CMA's limited investment in Aboriginal funding has changed to support for three Green Teams of which Nyambaga is one. Each gets approximately \$30,000 per year.

The other critical organisation has been the North Coast Institute of TAFE. TAFE operates on a fee for service basis so initially the Australian Apprenticeship Centre (through Hunter Valley Group Training) provided training funds. Now the costs of the training are covered by MEGT through the Australian Traineeship Program, where Green Team training is classified as 'new entry' for the Cert II and Cert III levels. There is a problem of accessing training funds now for training above these levels, which may create difficulties for the Green Team's development of future supervisors. Currently the Productivity Places Program provides funding for Cert IV but this program is due to end in 2010.<sup>37</sup>

The training model closely combines classroom and practical experience. TAFE staff emphasise the importance of the on-the-job training and supervision which the Green Team trainees gain; TAFE itself does not have the capacity to manage projects, but the partnership with Ngurralla and the management and supervision of the trainees within the Green Team itself enables them to gain essential hands-on learning. To date, around 30 per cent of the learning has been classroom-based and 70 per cent is on-the-job. Where necessary, TAFE also supplies extra tutorial support, and the new MEGT group requested some basic computer training before they began the TAFE course and that has been useful.

The TAFE staff emphasise the importance of designing a course that meets the trainees' needs, being flexible and adaptable in the way the courses are presented, sequencing and selecting course units to tie in with the particular work that the Green Team might be undertaking so that the learning is immediately relevant, teaching on the job and/or going out to the field to monitor and reinforce learning from time to time; allowing extended timeframes if necessary and ensuring that the students achieve a high standard of competence—that is, keeping expectations high. Much of the work is group work, which enables the trainees to help each other, particularly any who have learning/literacy difficulties, and as much as possible takes place on the job. The current TAFE teacher is working with the teams as well as the Aboriginal trainees whom he took on under the auspice of his own business. The new recruits had already completed some modules of the Cert II in CALM while with the LADS and it was expected that they would complete their Cert II in 2010, gaining work experience with the Green Team projects (although one has dropped out).

As many of the difficulties facing Aboriginal trainees stem from their community and family circumstances, one TAFE staff member emphasised that the overall personal support that the Green Team and Ngurralla give them is critical to them completing their programs. It is also critical that they understand not only what they have to do, but why—having an understanding of the reasons things are being done in a particular way is essential and this needs to be very well communicated to the trainees. The TAFE teacher who worked with the early Teams emphasised how observant she found them and how quickly they learned details about different plants—an essential skill where weeds and native plants may be in close proximity and even look very similar.

### Managing as a commercial business

Not all Green Teams are as successful as Nyambaga. One of the reasons for its success is clearly the Team's ability to keep winning project contracts which provide the practical environmental work to complement the TAFE training. Such contracts cover the ongoing wages of the core team who are no longer eligible for full-time trainee wages. Their reputation for high quality work, often going beyond expectations, and their strong project management and reporting skills are obviously important in this regard. The fact that throughout the process of training and work, the management has always set high standards and expectations for the Teams—and that they have risen to this challenge has led to their success. The development of the Green Team Alliance initiative is clearly intended to help other Teams generate and undertake a similar flow of work.

Clearly, the Cycleway Project which the Nyambaga Green Team is completing in early 2010 is not strictly a natural resource management project; rather it is a construction project with some environmental considerations. Whilst winning this contract has provided the Team with a strong flow of work, it does suggest that there has not been enough environmental management work available to sustain the full team and the group in training. The team is developing a range of construction skills (such as carpentry and concrete laying) which can be used for environmental management work, but which will also have broader application. Whilst some team members enjoy the variety and breadth of the work such a contract offers, others prefer the environmental work which helps restore the land to better health.

The departure of the two non-Indigenous staff who have been working with the Green Team for many years (one since its inception) presents a new challenge to this team, in terms of its management and future contract bidding. Whilst the former manager, now with the Green Team Alliance, is still available to provide occasional support, and the Ngurrala Aboriginal Corporation itself has taken on more of the financial management responsibility than before, there remains a question mark over whether any of the current Aboriginal team members wishes to step forward into an overall management role.<sup>38</sup> Since what they love about the work is being outside and working on the land, the idea of working in the Green Team office and taking on the responsibility of overall management of what is effectively a commercial business may not be very appealing. Furthermore, there has been no specific training (other than a certain amount of on-the-job training) to assist team members to take on a business management role, as the training has largely been focused on conservation and land management and related tasks. There may also be cultural and family considerations in terms of who is seen as suitably senior to take on such a role. For the time being, the TAFE teacher has also stepped into a management role to ensure essential contract management work is completed and reported upon in a timely way.

### Acknowledging Aboriginal social realities

Moving people who have been unemployed for a long time into work is not straightforward. It requires the right sort of firm support and encouragement. The particular situation of Aboriginal people, still experiencing the intergenerational impacts of colonial dispossession and other past policies, requires even greater sensitivity and support. Unfortunately, the sad realities of Aboriginal community and family life can sometimes overwhelm even the most capable people. The Green Team has experienced its own tragedies, with the death of one member in a road accident and the disablement of another in a fishing accident. Team members were also affected by the violent death of a local young Aboriginal man in early 2009. These dreadful incidents overlay the day to day challenges of a community which suffers from intergenerational grief and trauma, child separation, and a history of racial exclusion, and which still experiences its share of common problems around low incomes, poor health, alcohol and drug abuse, family or community conflict and violence, and social marginalisation. Success can be fragile, and vulnerable to the impact of community and family events on individual's lives. This reality inevitably impinges at times on the Green

Team. Work and training has to be managed with this in mind and with a high level of personal support to team members and trainees when they need it. Flexibility and understanding of these issues is essential to enable team members to successfully juggle their work and training with other things happening in their lives and their community.

### Sustaining environmental outcomes

One issue is the extent to which areas cleaned up and restored by the Green Team will remain in good environmental health years afterwards. While the Green Team always returns to sites some weeks after they have been cleared of weeds, to take out any new growth, one early Green Team member mentioned that at least one site they had cleaned up earlier was now all growing back. Sustaining the environmental gains may depend on continuing resourcing to maintain places in good condition once they have been cleaned and revegetated. This is beyond the control of the Green Team itself, of course.

### Future possibilities

Environmental work is seen by the CEO at Ngurrala as the biggest emerging market in the area, along with aged care, tourism and hospitality. Possibilities which will emerge in the region involve land and revegetation work associated with highway upgrades, mine rehabilitation work (especially in the adjacent Hunter region), biobanking, work in forestry and the recently announced co-managed National Park, which is likely to offer some employment and contract work to Indigenous people. However the Green Team is very wary about taking work which is on other Aboriginal people's country, and prefers not to do so, limiting the area in which it seeks work opportunities.

There is also a possibility of expanding niche businesses associated with environmental conservation and climate change mitigation. For example, Ngurrala already has a small business building and installing species-specific habitat nesting boxes for a variety of birds, bees, possums, and so on. These can be sold to local landowners to replace lost hollows as land clearing, burning and logging reduce critical habitats for native wildlife. Another possibility lies in developing small windmills to generate electricity, which trained Indigenous people could install. The possibilities go beyond what might be considered traditional NRM work, to jobs in the new green economy which contribute to a more sustainable future. Other possibilities for employment might relate to the region's waterways and fisheries and research related to the new National Park. However, apart from the National Park, there is no real mechanism at present for exploring and planning for such possibilities, particularly planning with individual trainees for their futures.

One constraint facing some of the team members in gaining future work may be the lack of a driver licence. At present only the two Green Team supervisors have a driver licence, yet NRM work is frequently in diverse locations and may require driving qualifications. These supervisors are highly committed to enabling the team members to work by driving a considerable distance to collect those who live well outside Nambucca very early in the morning and driving them home in the evening.<sup>39</sup> This may be an area to work on for the future. Of course holding the driving licence without a vehicle may be of little use, but receiving reasonable wages over a sustained period increases the likelihood of purchasing a car.

## CONCLUSION

The Nyambaga Green Team has achieved a great deal, operating as a commercial cultural and natural resources management business for some seven years. Of its total 33 members and trainees, over the years 22 are either still in training or employed by the Green Team or in other work. It has developed strong relationships with key organisations such as the local Shire, various NRM organisations and the LALC who contract it to carry out work. Interestingly, it has broadened its role to include infrastructure as well as wholly NRM work in order to sustain itself. The maintenance of these relationships and the continued

ability to perform the tasks to a high standard, to bid for tenders and to report in a timely way is critical to its continued success. Until June 2009 CDEP participants underpinned the Green Team's operation, and although there are now some seven trainees working with the team on a special training program, new arrangements will need to be developed when they complete their course in mid 2011. The future of this venture is now less secure than it was while CDEP was operating.

There have been numerous social benefits emerge for the team members and the wider Aboriginal community, and these relate strongly to three aspects; the employment itself, with the associated income and training benefits; the pride and self-confidence that the experience has generated among Aboriginal people and some signs of changing attitudes by the non-Indigenous community towards them; and the more cultural aspects of being able to reconnect with and care for country. The latter area however could be strengthened further, particularly to provide for more opportunities to transfer Indigenous knowledge on country; however, the tension between allowing more time and opportunities to do this and the completion of contracts is a difficult one for the Team to juggle.

It is worth observing that in terms of decision-making about cultural and natural resource management (CNRM), the high level decisions about natural resources management in the area are still being made largely by non-Indigenous officers of the various organisations whose contracts the team wins. The Team's CNRM decision-making is at the operational level as they carry out contracts. The new joint-managed National Park will provide the first significant opportunity in the area for Aboriginal people to have major decision making authority about natural resource management. The Green Team is however independent of that joint management body of traditional owners and will act as a contractor for it.

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**CNRM:**  
cultural and  
natural resource  
management

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## PART THREE: REFLECTIONS ON THE CASE STUDIES

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The two case studies documented here illustrate how Aboriginal people in two locations in New South Wales, one on the Tablelands, the other in a coastal region, are each contributing to land and marine management and conservation goals, and achieving a range of social benefits for their communities. In this section I reflect on some of the commonalities and differences between these two stories, the conditions and factors which have enabled both of them to succeed to date, and discuss some of the challenges they face.

It is important to note that in each case there are specific contexts which have contributed to the outcomes, and these will not all be replicated elsewhere. Local histories, particular individuals, and specific circumstances can play a large part in the development of these types of local initiative. However, by understanding the necessary institutional and policy factors at play which can foster and support local initiative and leadership, the chance for similar local activities to develop elsewhere can be realised.

### SOME COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

In both cases the Aboriginal people had rich histories of pre-colonial occupation of their lands and subsistence lifestyles based on the diverse sources of wild foods and other natural resources available. In Nambucca in particular, the use of many wild resources is well within living memory and continues today where those stocks have not been too depleted by contemporary coastal development. Both peoples had experiences of being relocated and forced into missions, often located on the fringes of urban areas, with a common experience of historical exclusion from their land which contemporary involvement in cultural and natural resource management goes some way to redressing. The acquisition of land by the Banbai people, after a long struggle, has been a very significant achievement for them.

In both areas, Aboriginal people were commonly unemployed or on CDEP, in small towns whose overall populations were relatively low in socioeconomic status compared to other parts of New South Wales. In both cases, in such environments, local Aboriginal people usually found getting a job difficult, although it should be recognised that some Green Team members in each place had worked elsewhere previously. Gaining employment has been an important driver of both initiatives, although at Banbai, gaining the land was extremely important and has itself enabled significant employment due to the funding that Banbai BE was able to attract as a result of owning the land. At Nambucca, regaining land or having native title recognised has been the preserve of other organisations such as the LALCs and a traditional owners' group. Although the Green Team is a separate initiative now based with an Aboriginal employment organisation, the relationships between the local Aboriginal landholders and the skills and capacities the Green Team has developed are becoming locally apparent. Opportunities for the Green Team to work on Aboriginal land are being taken up, and these are likely to expand slightly in the future with the recent declaration of the new joint-managed National Park. The employment initiatives began in Banbai's case with a focus on cultural heritage management; in the case of Nyambaga the initial focus was natural resource management and environmental conservation, through engagement with the local CMA. Both groups now focus on the natural and cultural environments with a strong emphasis on conservation. In Banbai's case, most of their land is being managed as part of the National Reserve System as a protected area. Nyambaga Green Team carries out a lot of its contracts on national parks and reserves, although it also works on non-reserve lands as well.

Both groups are trying to develop a sustainable business using the assets and capacities they have. In Banbai's case the Commonwealth Government's IPA program provides some relatively secure funding to underpin their initiatives, and they build on this with additional grant and earned income. In Nyambaga's case, a much smaller amount of annual funding from the local CMA provides some foundation, but far

more effort is required at this site by the Green Team to keep winning new work contracts from a variety of sources to sustain the enterprise. Both groups used to draw on the CDEP program and add 'top up' to provide funding for salaries, but that program ceased in New South Wales in June 2009. Now, other Commonwealth programs provide some salary support through the Working on Country program (at Wattleridge) and the Caring for our Country Program (at Nambucca). The latter program however, does not always provide for project employment for more than 12-18 months, whereas the Working on Country funding is over four years, providing some stability of employment for that period.

The critical difference is that Banbai has its own land, and is now also managing land on behalf of the Guyra Land Council, so it manages two IPAs, and has the benefit of the significant DEWHA funding which these IPAs attract. Conditions in New South Wales with limited Aboriginal landholdings and relatively few successful native title claims to date, mean that access to certain Commonwealth funds associated primarily with Aboriginal land is severely constrained in this state, confined largely to the four current IPAs. Nyambaga Green Team has no land of its own, and hence does not qualify for the type of funding available through the IPA program or the WOC program. It therefore has to operate as a commercially viable business based on the skills and capacities it can bring to available work in the local area. It is in fact competing with non-Indigenous NRM contractors and has to be able to win most contracts on a competitive price and the quality of work. Its work on Aboriginal land is an exception to this, as clearly Aboriginal workers are preferred by the Aboriginal landholders, although price remains a consideration. However, there is another consideration not shared with non-Indigenous competitors, which is that the Nyambaga Green Team, all of whom are Gumbayngirr people associated with the Nambucca valley, are only seeking work on their own part of Gumbayngirr 'country'. They are not seeking work in areas which are considered the responsibility of other tribal groups; this is a quite limited cultural geographic boundary for work. This is a significant contrast with the extensive land areas over which Northern Territory Ranger groups operate.

At both sites numerous benefits have been identified. Most significantly, the Aboriginal people at each location have had the opportunity to reconnect with land from which they have been excluded, or largely excluded, over many decades. This access to land (most evidently where the land is Aboriginal-owned) provides important opportunities for cultural regeneration and transmission, appropriate management of cultural landscapes and specific sites of significance, and fosters knowledge sharing between elders and younger members of the community. It also helps to retain and recover Indigenous ecological and cultural knowledge. This may be easier to achieve where land and the activities are fully Aboriginal controlled, than where Aboriginal people are working to non-Indigenous agendas and contracts.

The environmental benefits are specific to each site, but include weed eradication, feral animal control, fire management, threatened species protection, riverbank and coastal zone rehabilitation and restoration, wetlands improvement, and land and water clean ups. Infrastructure to protect fragile ecosystems and cultural heritage sites has also been built. However, in both cases there are factors over which they have no control which may limit the benefits: in Banbai's case, they cannot control pests from external sources (such as the gambusia fish), and in the case of Nyambaga Green Team benefits may not be sustained in the long term as the Aboriginal people may not control decisions about where work is undertaken.

The employment which this work has provided for Aboriginal people is significant. From these two small initiatives a total of around 75 Aboriginal people, most of whom were formerly unemployed, have gained employment over a number of years. Most of these remain in employment or are undertaking further study today, and virtually all of them have gained, or are currently gaining, useful qualifications between Cert II and Cert IV and Diploma levels. Importantly, this is the kind of work which these participants enjoy, in a context in which they feel comfortable. They like working with other Aboriginal people, who are usually members of a wide family network, in a positive atmosphere, where they can be themselves and

have the flexibility which they need to deal with cultural and family business as required. Importantly, they also value the opportunities for training and gaining qualifications which both places provide, and the chance for personal development, travel, and meeting new people which this work offers. However, it is noticeable that the vast majority of the participants at both sites to date have been male. In each location, only one woman is currently full-time engaged in the actual work on the land. At Banbai BE three other women are employed in the office, one as CEO, the other two in finance and administrative duties. This work is highly gendered at present and it would be valuable to explore how more women might be involved in NRM work in the future, including through greater attention to those aspects of NRM in which women have shown particular interest (such as craft work based on natural resources).

An important benefit in both locations has been the sense of pride and self-esteem which has developed among the participants; they are proud of the work they have done and have gained confidence through the practical application of the skills they have developed. Achieving qualifications is also a source of greater self-confidence. Young people at risk have been involved at both locations, enabling them to stay at school or gain qualifications and work experience. In a related development, in both case studies Aboriginal people involved in land and marine management feel that attitudes towards them on the part of the wider Australian community are being positively affected by what they see. These initiatives show other Australians that Aboriginal people do not conform to common stereotypes, but rather, given the right opportunities, demonstrate high quality work which brings benefits to the wider community. Furthermore, both initiatives have led to increased capacity for Aboriginal people and their organisations to partner with non-Indigenous organisations, including all levels of government, conservation organisations, Catchment Management bodies, educational institutions (particularly TAFE), and other specific organisations in each location. In essence these programs are making a tangible contribution to reconciliation.

Other social benefits are evident in both locations: Aboriginal involvement with local schools and pre-schools; use of Indigenous languages in signage; health improvements for particular individuals, notably better physical health, reduced weight, smoking, and alcohol consumption, and improved sense of well-being; and in Guyra particularly, transformed social behaviours and reduced crime.

#### FACTORS AND CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

As indicated above, each location is unique, and the role of particular individuals who have given leadership in each place cannot be underestimated. Specific friendships between Aboriginal people and non-Indigenous people have been important at the initial phase of both these initiatives, and at Nyambaga the role of the highly skilled non-Indigenous manager has clearly been extremely important in managing both the social relationships and business sides of the work. His departure poses considerable challenges for the Green Team. However, a number of other factors and conditions have enabled these initiatives to succeed and it is to these that I now turn.

A rather obvious point, but one which is nevertheless extremely important, is that both groups are working on land which is their traditional country. Although only Banbai BE has the title to the land on which one of their two IPAs has been declared, both groups work on land and waters which they and other neighbouring Aboriginal groups recognise as their country. It is also interesting that in both cases the scale of the activity is relatively small and local. This may facilitate group cohesion and commitment.

Obviously for Banbai people the ability to purchase land with the support of the Indigenous Land Corporation, and to have it declared as an IPA has been fundamental. Its categorisation as an IUCN Category VI Protected Area, allowing sustainable use, enables the Banbai BE to use a portion of the land for development of low key eco-tourism, a native plant nursery, and cattle agistment. This provides a source of income to the Banbai organisation, which it hopes will increase in the future. Equally, the vehicles and equipment purchased for management of the IPA also serve for these and other small contract jobs

which Banbai BE undertakes in the locality. They are slowly working towards sources of income other than government programs, although the funding through Commonwealth programs is essential at this stage, and will be for many years to come.

At Nambucca the well established relationships with the NRCMA, the local Nambucca Shire, the NSW NPWS and the Nambucca Heads LALC are essential to the Green Team's success. The personal relationships which formed and maintain these relationships are critically important. These are the fundamental sources of contracts, although other opportunities are also sought with NGOs and private landholders. Currently, the New South Wales Government's Land Alive Program is also underpinning the MEGT group in training. Other than this, there is little Aboriginal-specific funding which contributes to this work, except that which is offered under employment programs which the host organisation for the Green Team, Ngurrala Aboriginal Corporation, can access for training, and the DECCW Aboriginal Lands Clean Up program which contributed to their work on Aboriginal land. All other funding is normal expenditure of the relevant authorities on contractors. The value here is that by spending the funds on local Aboriginal people, the local social pay-off is greater than it otherwise might have been since benefits have flowed to a low socioeconomic group with a high propensity to consume and spend locally and hence to keep the NRM funding circulating in the local economy. However, compared to the Banbai organisations' situation, the Nyambaga Green Team has much less security of employment. It is arguable that more Indigenous-specific funding could underpin these sorts of initiatives which are clearly contributing to the achievement of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Indigenous Reform targets.

The support of TAFE in New South Wales has been very important in both locations, and each group has been fortunate in having one or more TAFE teachers available who are skilled and experienced in working with Aboriginal people and who are providing on-the-job and on-country training as far as possible. This is a model of training which works well for Aboriginal people. Funding arrangements for TAFE to make its expertise available seems to be complex, but importantly, mechanisms have been found at both sites. Without such appropriate TAFE support the qualifications and training which people appreciate so much would not be available.

At both locations the need for considerable holistic support for long term unemployed Aboriginal people and youth entering or re-entering the workforce was emphasised. Managers and team leaders have to be highly supportive in helping Aboriginal workers develop a work ethic, gain confidence, manage or resolve other problems in their lives, and generally settle into the organisation with its rules and culture. Clear boundaries and expectations are set by both organisations, but a great deal of support is offered to those workers, from often complex family circumstances, who are genuinely trying to meet them.<sup>40</sup> This takes time and specific skills, which need to be recognised.

A further commonality is that both the Banbai BE and the Nyambaga Green Team have been built on Aboriginal family networks and have been able to call on and utilise the skills of supportive non-Indigenous people either at the Board level (Banbai) or in the management (Nyambaga). This may indicate that family based organisations work for Aboriginal people and that, at this time, Indigenous people need some strategic support to develop and maintain the governance and management systems which are necessary for viable business enterprises. As more Indigenous people gain higher levels of education and greater experience in organisational governance and management, this will not continue to be necessary, but both organisations have clearly benefitted from such sensitive and supportive help in their development.

## SOME POLICY REFLECTIONS

This early case study work in New South Wales suggests some issues for policy makers.

Firstly, achieving benefits for Aboriginal people involves a close relationship between cultural and natural resources management and conservation agencies, education authorities (particularly the TAFE system), and employment policy and programs—especially those concerned with school to work transition and programs designed to assist long term unemployed people into work. All these have to work together to gain the most from available resources and opportunities. At present, it is Aboriginal people on the ground who have to make these things come together, rather than a concerted government coordination strategy. It can be difficult to juggle the various funding arrangements and employment schemes to enable these things to happen in a coherent way for the people involved. This point is made by May (2010: 9) who notes that for 'effective future development of Indigenous land and sea management, government support needs to go beyond the environment-focused ambit of DEWHA.' She emphasises that 'despite the declared whole-of-government approach to Indigenous affairs', support for Indigenous CNRM from 'other government departments is severely lacking' (May 2010: 9). In New South Wales, there is not a total lack of support from other state departments; the issue is that the coordination of all the necessary arrangements has to be done by the Aboriginal organisations themselves, and this can be complex.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, there has to be capacity for partnership development and maintenance in each of the partners; at this point, this seems very dependent on the commitment, skills and qualities of particular individuals, both in the Aboriginal organisations and the agencies with whom they partner.

In relation to Commonwealth Government programs, the loss of CDEP was felt by both groups as it provided a strong underpinning for their work, and incubated both. In fact the loss of CDEP raises major questions about the ability of other groups to build similar businesses in the future in the absence of such a subsidy for essential equipment, vehicles, and office support. Already, some existing teams on the north coast have reportedly lost capacity due to the closure of CDEPs which supported or hosted them.<sup>42</sup>

Secondly, there are clearly health and education pay-offs. There is clearly a need for more health-specific research in New South Wales, but from these two case studies it is clear that working on country may well have an impact on the three major contributors to the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health. Tobacco, obesity and physical inactivity are the leading risk factors driving the indigenous health gap. Together, they account for an estimated 45 per cent of the total health gap (COAG Reform Council 2010: xiv; Healey 2009). Certainly working on country provides for physical activity and there are specific examples in these case studies of improvement in health and wellbeing. How widespread these benefits are, and what level of activity is required to reap a health dividend has not been explored by this research but may be worth exploring in the future. There is a strong case for health departments and agencies becoming more involved in promoting and then monitoring the benefits of this type of activity.

In terms of education, the two case studies demonstrate very clearly that opportunities to work on country provide a strong motivation for relevant learning. People with limited educational qualifications are gaining considerable skills and qualifications in land management and related areas, and educational outcomes are being improved. Support from educational authorities concerned to close the educational gap is well warranted. However, there remains a risk that trained people will be unable to gain employment in the future unless greater opportunities for employment in NRM are extended to Aboriginal people.

### Aboriginal development model

Rather than viewing this work as simply NRM or conservation activity, it could be equally viewed as Aboriginal development. This type of work is building on Aboriginal assets. It exemplifies the principles of

asset-based community development (Mathie & Cunningham 2002) and more specifically, the concept of development with culture and identity:

Development with culture and identity is characterized by a holistic approach that seeks to build on collective rights, security and greater control and self governance of lands, territories and resources. It builds on tradition with respect for ancestors, but also looks forward (Economic and Social Council 2010: 7).

This holistic concept emphasises the importance of Indigenous social, cultural, political and spiritual systems and the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the earth. The asset-based approach is in contrast to many programs ostensibly designed to improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal people which assume a deficit view of them. These two CNRM activities succeed because they build on the existing strengths, capacities, cultural knowledge and responsibilities and family networks within communities. Both enterprises respond to the communities' own aspirations to have the opportunity to carry out their cultural responsibilities and to look after their country, or to regain land. They reach towards the ideal of development with culture and identity.

Successful programs of this type need local Aboriginal leadership and governance. These initiatives have both been driven by Indigenous people working together with non-Indigenous support. More support is needed on the ground to help other Indigenous people who want to take advantage of potential opportunities but do not have the capacities or the networks with non-Indigenous agencies to do so at this time. Policy makers should consider how they could support facilitation by third parties to strengthen local Aboriginal groups and assist them to develop and articulate their own vision for working on their country, develop the necessary governance arrangements to take them forward, and explore with the relevant public and private landholders how their vision could be progressed. May (2010: 8-9) makes the point that 'Indigenous land and sea management groups do not stand alone'; they are supported by organisations which themselves need to be supported, in terms of 'management and infrastructure costs, community planning, governance support, and education and training'. In a sense the Green Teams Alliance initiative in the Many Rivers region is just such an attempt, though it has a vast area to cover and is probably unable to give all the support required with the resources at its disposal.

Some Aboriginal people may try to engage in NRM but may be met with indifference by local representatives of NRM agencies. In such cases strong leadership, policy support and incentives should be used to encourage and/or require such engagement as a contribution to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

Finally, there would be value in providing opportunities for Aboriginal CNRM groups to share their experiences and learning with each other across regions and across the State through conferences, workshops, and other exchanges. Ideally a State-wide network of Aboriginal people working on country could facilitate such learning and might drive the promotion of relevant research, training and mentoring support and work towards a more sustainable approach to the funding of such initiatives in New South Wales. Although the context in New South Wales is very different to that in northern Australia, the North Australia Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) was originally established to help develop a 'long term, comprehensive and sustainable approach to supporting Indigenous land and sea management,' rather than the short time frames and agendas of non-Indigenous agencies affecting their capacity to look after country.<sup>43</sup> NAILSMA seeks 'greater interaction with commercial and philanthropic sectors' which might enable them to develop a more effective relationship between Indigenous land and sea managers and governments. Just as NAILSMA is driving an Indigenous land and sea management agenda in northern Australia, a New South Wales state-wide (or even southern Australia) initiative to promote and support land and sea managers could help advance this agenda in New South Wales. However, such an initiative would have to come from New South Wales Aboriginal people themselves.

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**NAILSMA:**  
North Australia  
Land and Sea  
Management  
Alliance

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## NOTES

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1. Although ABS statistics also include Torres Strait Islander people, there are no known Torres Strait Islander people in Guyra.
2. Relevant census data is provided in Appendix A. The data used in this section is all taken from the 2006 Census which is the most recent data available, and may therefore be somewhat out of date in 2010.
3. CDEP has since been abolished in most parts of New South Wales, including the Guyra region. It is also four years since the 2006 Census so, apart from CDEP changes, these figures may not reflect the current situation accurately.
4. There are various spellings of the name Ainawan (e.g. Ainiwan, Anaiwan). The spelling used here is the one the author has found most commonly in the area.
5. This wetland was the largest in New England before it was drained, and was important to the development of Guyra at its current site. It has been very severely disturbed over the years, but it is now managed by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and has been designated a wetland of international significance (Brock, Smith & Jarman 1999).
6. Keen (2004) documented the environments, resources and technologies of seven Indigenous groups across Australia prior to white settlement, showing how they sustained livelihoods from diverse environments; in the zone he calls the 'Aboriginal grain belt' groups used seed collection, storage and grinding technology.
7. Aboriginal Reserve no. 76430 (11 acres) operated from 11 December 1953 to 19 April 1968  
Aboriginal Reserve no. 83884 (between Stevenson and Sandon Streets) (just over 1 acre) operated from 29 June 1962 (Thinee & Bradford 1998).
8. The Commonwealth's *Native Title Act 1993* generated some fear on the part of landowners about its implications for them.
9. The Indigenous Land Corporation was formed in 1995 by the Keating Government to purchase land for Indigenous groups whom the newly-established *Native Title Act 1993* was less likely to assist, because of the widespread extinguishment of native title in many parts of Australia.
10. The land had previously been used for some ecotourism and goat production, and there has been some mining of quartz and gold in the south and some fossicking for gems on the southern bank of the Sara River which runs along the northern side of the property.
11. IUCN Category VI protected areas 'conserve ecosystems and habitats, together with associated cultural values and traditional natural resource management systems. They are generally large, with most of the area in a natural condition, where a proportion is under sustainable natural resource management and where low-level non-industrial use of natural resources compatible with nature conservation is seen as one of the main aims of the area' (IUCN 2009).
12. This figure is calculated by applying the figures on employment status for the Guyra Indigenous Area to the smaller number of Indigenous people in the Guyra (State Suburb) figures for the total number of Indigenous people in 2006. Of 120 Aboriginal people in Guyra, 72 (60%) are probably under 25 years of age, and 52 (43.4%) are estimated at 15 or over and may be in the labour force.
13. People on CDEP were allowed to supplement their CDEP hours with additional work hours paid for by their employing organisation, enabling part-time CDEP jobs to be increased to fulltime work, and to provide additional income. This additional income was known as 'top up'.

14. There are drops in assaults (both related to or not related to domestic violence), break and enter dwellings or other property, and stealing from cars and dwellings. The only major categories in which no clear downward trend is evident relate to malicious damage to property, stealing from retail stores and sexual assault (although the numbers in the latter two cases are so low as to be difficult to determine a trend at all) (Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2005).
15. This also reflected the rules of CDEP, which restricted the incomes CDEP workers' partners could earn. Such restrictions no longer apply.
16. The spelling of Gumbaynggirr, like many of the other language and tribal group names in the region, varies considerably, but the spelling used throughout this study is that used by the Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Cultural Cooperative based in Nambucca Heads.
17. As noted by Marshall Jarratt (NSW NPSW 2003: 18), Stuart Island was formerly known as Girr-Girr Julgaa but was renamed by the colonial authorities.
18. Thinee & Bradford (1998) record two reserves near Macksville: Allgomera (started 1904) and Eungau (1905–20); two at Bellwood (1951–69); four at Bowraville at various dates between 1908 and 1931; and one at Bellingen (1891–54).
19. Places associated with wild resource use by Gumaynggirr people around Corindi Beach, north of Coffs Harbour in the past and present are documented in English (2002).
20. The name 'Green Team' was suggested by the current CEO of Ngurrala.
21. Ngurrala is an Aboriginal initiative of the Nambucca valley, which began operating in 1996 on a 2.5 hectare property central to Bowraville, Macksville and Nambucca Heads. It aims to provide employment and accredited training to Aboriginal people of the Nambucca Shire and surrounds.
22. In 2000 some 109 people were participating in the CDEP program at Macksville run by Ngurrala (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2006: 11).
23. The bus was charged for and provided by Ngurrala Aboriginal Corporation.
24. One former member only left recently and his current circumstances are unknown.
25. The NSW Biodiversity Banking and Offsets Scheme (or 'BioBanking') aims to help address loss of biodiversity values, including threatened species. It is a market-based scheme that enables 'biodiversity credits' to be generated by landowners who commit to enhance and protect biodiversity values on their land through a biobanking agreement. These credits can then be sold to developers who may need to offset biodiversity values that are being lost. This sale generates funds for the landowner's management of the biobanking site (DECCW 2010).
26. The significance of Stuart Island to Gumbaynggirr people is described in Somerville and Perkins (2010), especially pp. 165–87. On p. 176 there is reference to the elders' campaign to unblock the causeway.
27. This includes seven of the current MEGT Team who already have the CALM Cert II in 2009.
28. On the broad issue of shifting mindsets for capacity development, see Hunt 2005.
29. See <<http://www.headspace.org.au/midnorthcoast/news-and-events/article/?news=150>> (accessed 19 February 2010).
30. Muurrbay's stated aims are: 'to support Aboriginal people, particularly Gumbaynggirr, in the revival and maintenance of their language and culture, and so strengthen their sense of identity, self esteem and links to country' (Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative 2010).

31. The departure of the only female MEGT Team member may now present some problems for the Green Team's capacity to care for women's sites.
32. These technologies enable accurate recording of sites and associated notes electronically.
33. For example, it was suggested that team members who are not Gumbayngirr people (but perhaps have married into a Gumbayngirr family) should be smoked by an elder before they go into certain locations. However the team has no member qualified to do that.
34. For example, one team member joined a gym to enhance his fitness for work, eventually also inspiring other relatives (including one with diabetes) to join him.
35. Information provided by Green Teams Alliance.
36. MEGT employ trainees and places them with companies for the term of the traineeship. The MEGT takes responsibility for the recruitment process in consultation with Ngurrala, and payroll, entitlement payments, human resources, industrial relations issues and so on throughout the traineeship period.
37. See: <<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Skills/ProductivityPlaces/Pages/default.aspx>>. The Productivity Places program is a joint Federal and State program to meet skill shortages in identified industries or regions.
38. One former team member who is now with the Shire Council indicated that he would have been interested in developing into such a role, but there had not been an opportunity earlier, and now he has a permanent job.
39. One supervisor leaves home at 5.00 am each day to collect some Team members, while the other takes them home after work in the afternoon.
40. The same point about the 'major rehabilitative role .... amounting to intensive personal case management which underwrites the continuing viability of work projects' was noted in a study of the Redfern CDEP (Smith 1995: 15). Smith noted (1995: 15) that 'The extent of the economic, health, educational and other difficulties confronted by participants are not underestimated by the RAC, but they may well be underestimated by external funding bodies'.
41. At Eden on the New South Wales south coast an important Indigenous initiative, supported by and involving a number of authorities and departments, has been the development of a Land and Sea Country Plan. This attempts to identify the range of opportunities for Aboriginal engagement on country which are potentially available and, as a first step, seeks coordination and commitment from those departments to achieve some stability and continuity of employment for an emerging Aboriginal ranger group. Such an initiative may provide a model for the sort of coordination which could assist local Green Teams.
42. This point was made by Terrence Hudson and Ron Naden, Green Teams Alliance, when I met with them in June 2010.
43. NAILSMA is an unincorporated bioregional forum for Indigenous land and sea managers across North Australia. It aims to support practical Indigenous land and sea management using strategic approaches to care for country with an emphasis on practical management by Traditional Owners across the whole of the North Australia' (NAILSMA 2006). NAILSMA is an initiative of four major land councils across Northern Australia.

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