

ABORIGINAL CULTURAL VALUES OF

THE NATIVE VEGETATION OF NEW SOUTH WALES

**A background paper of the
Native Vegetation Advisory
Council of New South Wales**

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Background paper number 5



The role of the Native Vegetation Advisory Council

The Native Vegetation Advisory Council was established in 1998 by the *Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997* to take a pro-active role in advising the NSW Government on native vegetation issues throughout the State. The Council's role is to foster relationships between community groups, landholders and government agencies; develop initiatives in native vegetation management; promote the benefits of native vegetation; provide direction and leadership in native vegetation management; and create incentives and coordinate funding opportunities for native vegetation conservation. The membership of the Native Vegetation Advisory Council represents a wide range of interests and includes rural representatives, conservation groups, Aboriginal representatives and government agencies.

One of the key tasks of the Native Vegetation Advisory Council is to advise the Minister for Land and Water

Conservation on a Native Vegetation Conservation Strategy for NSW. This paper is one of a series of background papers to be published by the Native Vegetation Advisory Council. These seek to stimulate discussion regarding native vegetation conservation and management and, in particular, inform the development of the Native Vegetation Conservation Strategy for NSW.

Disclaimer

The information and expressions of Aboriginal spiritual/cultural values contained within this report cannot be used to inhibit or extinguish Aboriginal claims to land under the *New South Wales Lands Rights Act 1984* or the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cwlth).

The information contained in this document in the form of expressions of cultural value has been compiled to provide indications as to the extent of Aboriginal cultural values of native vegetation. As such, the content should not be taken to represent a complete account of Aboriginal cultural values. The authors of this report stress from the outset that there is an urgent need to consult with *all* Aboriginal communities in NSW regarding the cultural values they place on native vegetation.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aboriginal cultural values of native vegetation stem from the strong relationship Aboriginal people have with the environment and its natural resources. Once the only people occupying this continent, Aboriginal people used natural resources according to their lore to maintain systems and species. Thus the health of the land and the maintenance of biodiversity was and remains linked to the wellbeing of Aboriginal people, both physically and spiritually.

Aboriginal people value native vegetation as a source of sustenance and medicine as well as having spiritual meaning and, in recent times, as educational, employment and recreational sites. Aboriginal environmental knowledge associated with native vegetation is another important cultural value. In this regard, Aboriginal access to native vegetation is important for native vegetation conservation since Aboriginal knowledge has a recognised potential to inform the conservation of biodiversity.

To be able to move through one's country and use the natural resources of that land according to traditional practice remains important to Aboriginal people. Reconnection with traditional lands, or 'country', and associated natural resources is an important part of present day Aboriginal culture and identity.

If Aboriginal people are to be involved in native vegetation conservation they must be assured that their cultural values will be protected and that previous obstacles regarding consultation, representation, intellectual property and access will be overcome. Acknowledgment of Aboriginal cultural diversity and respect for traditional owners are fundamental to achieving Aboriginal participation. Aboriginal rights to access traditional lands and make use of biodiversity are important in maintaining Aboriginal environmental knowledge and continual connection to spirituality and culture.

For Aboriginal environmental knowledge to contribute to native vegetation conservation it must be treated as intellectual property. Elders and knowledge holders need to be able to control access and use as a fundamental aspect of the cultural protocols associated with such knowledge.

Aboriginal rights in biodiversity have been expressed at the international level through the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity signed by over 180 nations, including Australia. Domestically these rights are articulated through the National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity, and the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

INTRODUCTION

The ways in which Aboriginal people in NSW value native vegetation stem from the strong relationship they have with the environment and its natural resources. This relationship was seriously eroded by the forced dispossession of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands and associated environments. Nonetheless, Aboriginal culture has survived. Knowledge has been handed down to be able to accurately describe many of the traditional and ongoing cultural values of native vegetation.

Aboriginal people's continued interests in biodiversity have become politicised as Aboriginal people assert their rights to use and manage the biodiversity of NSW. These inherent rights have been expressed at the international level through the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity signed

by over 180 nations, including Australia. Articles 8(j) and 10(c) of the Convention specifically address Indigenous rights in relation to the overall conservation, sustainable use and equitable sharing of the benefits of biodiversity.

The recognition of Indigenous resources rights at the international level flows mainly from an acknowledgment of the role that Indigenous peoples have played in shaping the nature of biodiversity. The natural environment of Australia is quite clearly an Indigenous cultural landscape and not a wilderness.¹⁻⁶ Implicit in this acknowledgment is that Aboriginal environmental knowledge has a central role to play in the development of strategies to conserve and use all forms of biodiversity, including native vegetation, in sustainable ways.

ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

2.1 Aboriginal cultural diversity

Fundamental to any understanding of the range of Aboriginal values in native vegetation is an appreciation of the cultural diversity of Aboriginal peoples, since different groupings attached varying meanings to different aspects of their natural environment.

At the time of the British invasion in 1788, all lands in Australia were part of the territory of particular linguistic groups or tribes⁷ and some 600 dialects belonging to more than 270 different languages were spoken throughout the continent. Written in 1974, Tindale's work *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*⁸ highlights the diversity of Aboriginal peoples within NSW and their cultural links to territory.

Notwithstanding the effects of invasion, Aboriginal cultural diversity remains throughout NSW. As such Aboriginal people continue to assert a diversity of cultural rights and responsibilities.

2.2 Aboriginal people and biodiversity

Aboriginal people were once the only people who occupied the land and utilised the natural resources of NSW. The use of natural resources was governed by laws that acted to maintain systems and species. The health of the land and the maintenance of biodiversity was and remains linked to the wellbeing of Aboriginal people, both physically and spiritually.

2.2.1 Before the European invasion

The biodiversity of NSW, including native vegetation, is inextricably connected with Aboriginal cultural practices. It was shaped over thousands of years by Aboriginal peoples, while their culture was, in turn, influenced by the natural environment and its resources.

The Aboriginal worldview ('Dreaming') provided the basis for Aboriginal common law (customary law) which prescribed the relationship between the

people and the environment (country). Aboriginal law, like Aboriginal relationships with country, may be described as 'holistic'. In governing every aspect of life, the law defined the physical and spiritual relationships between people and country, including natural resources. As such, Aboriginal law embodied a form of natural resource management that ensured a balanced use of resources. This type of management was characterised not only by its sustainable outcomes, but also by spiritual, familial and totemic aspects which also gave affect to law and management. Such management is often referred to as 'caring for country'. This also includes water and its biodiversity.

2.2.2 The impact of invasion

British invasion of Aboriginal territories in NSW in 1788 initiated a process of massive reduction of biodiversity which was driven by land clearance and interruption of Aboriginal spiritual and physical relationships with country.

Land clearing for agriculture and buildings and the introduction of exotic species removed or altered habitat vital to both the native plants and animals and to the Aboriginal people. These alien activities had a great impact on the Aboriginal psyche. Aboriginal people found it hard to understand why the 'white man' would destroy an environment imbued with the creative forces and living entities that were part of their fabric of existence.

In parallel with the destruction of the natural environment was the decimation of Aboriginal people and culture. Not only did Aboriginal people suffer widespread death from introduced diseases and massacres by the Europeans, but they were also forcibly dispossessed of their land and resources without treaty. Official government policies and the unofficial actions of colonisers removed Aboriginal people from their land and thus ended or restricted traditional environmental management practices that had sustained the environment for millennia.

The results of these policies and activities were many and various. Most dramatically, the physical and spiritual health of Aboriginal people was severely affected. On another level, the state of the natural environment deteriorated rapidly under the combined impact of European colonisation and farming and absence of traditional management practices.

2.2.3 Today

Central to the concern of Aboriginal people today to be self determining and regain control of their own destiny is the maintenance of their culture and language, a crucial component of which is reconnection with traditional lands and their natural resources. Aboriginal involvement in the use and management of biodiversity is fundamental to the

maintenance of Aboriginal culture and identity. To be able to move through one's land and use the natural resources of that land according to traditional practice is still important to many Aboriginal people, some of whom are fighting for their claims in courts under native title and other legislation prompted by the successful Mabo case.

Thus effective environmental management requires the consideration not only of the unique contribution Aboriginal people could make to restoration of natural landscapes across the country, but also of the perspectives and requirements of Aboriginal people. Social justice and human rights issues that negatively impact on the potential of Aboriginal involvement in environmental management need to be addressed as part of the process.⁹

ABORIGINAL VALUES OF NATIVE VEGETATION

3.1 Cultural values of native vegetation

The Aboriginal cultural landscape is not only characterised by physical aspects of Aboriginal management. Aboriginal cultural landscapes comprise one's country in which are included sites, stories, preferred hunting and gathering places, the spirits of the land, and the natural resources. Central to the concept is the connectivity among all aspects. Attempting to describe a single component of the cultural landscape is problematic since the values of all aspects of the cultural landscape are connected with and enhance one another.

Country

When referring to Aboriginal cultural landscapes the term 'country' is often used. The following explanations¹⁰ of this term and its use provide some insight into how Aboriginal people perceive their cultural landscape.

'People talk about country ... they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place ... Rather, country is a living entity ... with a consciousness, and a will toward life.'¹⁰

'Country is multi-dimensional – it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings, underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air. There is sea country and land country; in some areas people talk about sky country.'¹⁰

The cultural importance that Aboriginal people attach to native vegetation includes spiritual, medicinal and economic values which flow from the long-term interaction between Aboriginal people and their natural environment. Thus discussions about the uses of native plants and

their economic and social values are incomplete without reference to the Aboriginal values and heritage that have motivated and sustained Aboriginal people since creation.

3.2 Spiritual and ceremonial values

The core of Aboriginal spiritual belief is oneness with the land and everything that lives on it.¹¹ A deep understanding of and connection with the natural living landscape are fundamental to contemporary Aboriginal culture.¹² Significant sites provide a link to traditional life and belief and represent an integral part of Aboriginal spirituality, while also facilitating the control and continuation of identity and culture. Responsibilities for the proper care for country, particularly sites or landscapes of significance, are a continuing part of Aboriginal spirituality.

Ancestral spirits represent real entities that still exist today. They shaped the land and gave it life, meaning, seasons, laws of nature and people. These laws of nature are reflected in Aboriginal society through religious beliefs and totemic ancestry.¹² Aboriginal stories provide the history of important places and the origins of natural landscapes, including how the stars, the mountains, the waterholes, the minerals and the plants and animals were created. As imparted through the media of story, song and sacred objects, the stories are also maps of a clan's country.

Aboriginal mythology

'... natural mythological sites are the spiritual, visual and physical cultural landscape created by our ancestral people. Associated with this cultural landscape are the legends of our ancestors' lives, their travels, the laws and lores belonging to a particular piece of land and those who live in or move with that land. These places are the foundations of Aboriginal cultural beliefs and religion and are still revered today.'¹²

Aboriginal spirituality and country

Aboriginal spirituality cannot be separated from country.¹³ Each and all of one's country, spirits, laws, language, stories, songs and people impart Aboriginal spirituality. The following quotes exemplify some of these aspects, in particular the links between people and their country.

'Aboriginal culture interconnects all aspects of a person's spiritual and cultural life, place in the kinship network, spiritual beliefs, role in ceremonies and rituals and daily activities, with his or her country.'¹²

'Aboriginal people are situated within their own country emotionally, psychologically and metaphysically. When the country is well, people are likely to be well too,...'¹⁰

Forests and other native vegetation types are important repositories and protectors of sites of Aboriginal significance. The uncleared landscape is highly valued by Aboriginal people because it provides a link to the traditional landscape.^{14,15,16} One Aboriginal man was quoted by Cane¹⁷ as describing the forest as a 'blanket which protects our sites'. Roberts¹⁸ goes further by saying that the forests are the protectors of the sites and their maintenance is essential to the sites' effectiveness.¹⁹

The ceremonial significance of many places has been well-recorded. For example, Janet Donovan was born in Taree, and grew up there as a young girl. She remembers ceremonies that took place in the Kaparra grounds in the forest, west of Purfleet reserve, just behind the reserve:

'When I was a young girl, the men would go off into the bush out the back of the reserve, they

would dance and sing, we knew they were, they went out the back to perform the ceremonies. The Kaparra grounds out the back is where all the boys and men would go to perform their own ceremonies.'¹⁹

The spiritual value and significance of native vegetation is well illustrated by the following story included in the accounts of Grace Roberts and other Bundjalung elders compiled by Alice Becker.²⁰ A woman elder still living in her Bundjalung homelands described an initiation ceremony performed in the early 1820s on her great grandfather who was the chosen Mytha of the tribe. At this time Bundjalung people would have long known about the invasion of lands in the south but still had control over their territories and natural resources.

Bundjalung initiation

'A spirit from the time of the Dreaming had chosen a tree for this ceremony. Spears were thrown into its bark until the red sap flowed. The Mytha placed his fingers into the red sticky sap then placed it upon his tongue. Incisions forming a pattern cut into his flesh has this same red sap of the tree rubbed into them, thus anointed he was led away by the men of the tribe to a chosen place in the forest to celebrate with a corroboree of initiation.

'Women are forbidden near this place, it is a sacred place for men. No women ever dared to look upon such a place. They have their own ceremony to celebrate the occasion and their own bora ring in which to dance.

'That tree now old and gnarled, having survived the elements and the coming of the white man, stands as sacred to the people of the Bundjalung as Westminster Abbey is to the English, who in 1821 crowned a king of their own; George IV of England.'²⁰

Another example of the importance of the spiritual and ceremonial values that Aboriginal people attach to the land is the struggle of the traditional owners of what are now Mutawintji National Park, Historic Site and Nature Reserve to gain control over their country in these protected areas. In September 1983 they blockaded the entrance to the Mootwingee Historic Site to highlight their continued efforts to gain recognition of their ownership of their country, and specifically to halt physical and spiritual desecration of sacred places. Their continued efforts culminated in Mutawintji protected area lands being returned to Aboriginal ownership with lease negotiations now complete. Importantly, care and control over their country and sacred places also includes the opportunity to undertake cultural practices such as hunting and gathering.²¹

3.3 Bush foods and medicines

Aboriginal people have long derived important social, cultural and economic benefits from hunting, fishing and food gathering.²² Bush resources also have considerable health and

nutritional benefits for Aboriginal people,^{23,24} who have extensive knowledge about bush foods and medicines. Heron^{25,26} described 28 plant foods, 19 plant medicines, and 2 fibre plants, as well as animal species including 18 fish, 5 shellfish, 11 bird, 12 marsupial and 4 reptile species used for food in the Clarence Valley.

The ongoing use of bush medicine in addition to western medicines is evidenced in most Aboriginal communities in NSW. Aboriginal people often supply these medicines to people who are sick in hospital, even though in some instances they have to collect these plants from protected areas such as National Parks. Aboriginal people on the central coast continue to collect bush food and medicines and derive health and nutritional benefits as well as spiritual revival¹⁹ in their regular visits to coastal forests, upland forests and rainforests, especially near the rivers or beaches.¹⁹

The Saltwater area and creek just south of the Manning River is a traditional camping ground that is very important to many Aboriginal people in Taree, including elder Bert Marr. The littoral rainforest of the area is rich in plant, animal and landscape resources and full of sites of significance,

Forest resources

Biripi Elder Bert Marr has spoken about the forest resources in the Biripi area:

'This is our hunting ground, all our food was out that way, we go and get our yams, and "bullai", witchetty grubs, and you know, "guppals" and that ... We used to eat a lot of yams in those days. Go and get wild yams, all sorts of yams you could eat, you know and granny would take us out every Sunday through the bush walking. She was a tribal elder and, you know, take us on our walkabout and learn us, about our culture, how to survive off the bush and mother earth. Then the following week again she'd take us to the river and creeks and that, and we'd get our cobras out of the logs, you know, "numerra", I call it "numerra" in my language, cobra, and they would come out as thick as your finger out of the logs and they're beautiful, wood oysters, and we eat them ... These fellows here, we never starve, because we live off the shell food, we live of "bullai", witchetty grubs, "guppals", the same grub, we'd get out of the trees, gum trees and wattle trees ...

'We have lots of different figs we could eat, o many. Geebung, a lot of geebung down there, we can eat them. There's so many geebung you can eat, if you know what to eat. See I'm a teacher of culture, how to survive. Take poison out of poison things and treat it, and you could eat it after I do it. I've been taught all this by our lovely teacher, old tribal man teacher ... Apples, we get white apples, red apples, yellow ones, all different sorts of apples, and then we get the black apple. Black apple, oh he's lovely, the black apple ...'.¹⁹

and is used for traditional purposes as well as recreation and contemporary Aboriginal education.¹⁹ Medicines from the forests are still used or remembered by many Aboriginal people. Elder Bert Marr said: 'I'm a doctor ... See we had our clinics to go to, we had our doctor trees to go to ... I take warts off your skin, I heal you of sugar diabetes, of bleeding ulcers. My medicine, I go to my mother earth ... I go to my doctor trees and get sap out of the trees. Bug cuts, open cuts, I do it when they come here, I fix 'em up'.¹⁹

3.4 Other uses of native vegetation

Native vegetation is valued for many traditional uses including for fibres, tan-bark, implements such as spears, shields, boomerangs and coolamons, and as raw materials for artwork.

In some areas fishing nets are still tanned with plant barks which include black wattle, ironbark, which produces a strong stiff tan finish, and honeysuckle, which is said to be the best net tanner, making nets supple and strong with good colour.¹⁹ Other plants used for baskets, rope or string making include leaves of mat rush and flax lily, stems of cane, inner bark of 'black wattle', and several types of 'kurrajong'.¹⁹

Artefacts still made from forest products include lightweight spears, floating for fishing made from stems of several types of 'kurrajongs', and heavier spears from ironbark. Boomerangs, woomeras and carvings are made from red cedar, ironbark, and 'cherry' while shields are made from fig tree wood, and paddles for boats are made from the stinging tree.¹⁹

Such examples as given above show how Aboriginal people continue to use native vegetation in many ways which vary widely between and within communities.

3.5 Educational, employment and recreational values

Native vegetation also has other values for Aboriginal people apart from those closely connected to significant sites and traditional uses. Some of these values are related to land, training, employment, teaching and recreation. For example, many Aboriginal communities in NSW are now looking for forest land and cultural sites to use as educational and holiday places.¹⁹ The following examples provide an indication of the diverse range of Aboriginal cultural values of native vegetation as well as the continuing Aboriginal reality of connection to country.

Yarrowarra Aboriginal Corporation

Members of Yarrowarra Aboriginal Corporation and the local Aboriginal people at Corindi Beach, north of Coffs Harbour, have long-standing relationships with the coastal forests and woodlands in their area. The Corporation gained permission from the local Reserve Trust to use the forest in the Corindi Beach Public Reserve for cultural education purposes. The Community Development Employment Program workers have constructed a pathway, and a guided tour has been established. After the trail was opened for tours, a local newspaper reported: 'Currently there are about fifteen plant sites marked along the track and an explanation of the traditional use of each plant is enhanced by the opportunity to sample the leafs [sic], roots, berries and nuts. Not all the plants are food sources, however, and what better plant than the soap tree to introduce school children to the wonders of traditional Aboriginal life.'²⁷

The Yarrowarra Aboriginal Corporation runs a training and conference centre, accommodation, arts and craft centre, and a joinery. The joinery received a contract to make wooden signs for Urunga State Forests. The artists obtained a licence to collect materials such as fibres for baskets and bags and resin from local State Forests.¹⁹

Shirley Macnamara, artist

Shirley Macnamara, a contemporary Aboriginal artist, makes use of the spinifex grass in her sculptures and her story illustrates cultural values associated with this plant. Shirley Macnamara 'searched for years to find a medium that would allow her to conceive art that had a symbolic resonance with nature. She eventually chose spinifex grass, a fibre which has historic and practical heritage for Indigenous Australians. " Spinifex is not considered to be a plant of economic value today but its use is traditional in Aboriginal culture. I grew up with spinifex and have strong memories of the resinous smell emitted in family bush shelters and from the comfortable mattresses made by my grandmother. In my current use of spinifex, I have a sense of developing a contemporary material culture heritage as an interpretation of past traditions." Macnamara says she intends to reference traditional containers previously common in her local area such as the coolamon, used to transport foods. " Through spending time with older family members, I will research a variety of vessel forms which may prove inspirational in my work, as well as developing innovative and imaginative shapes in response my creative instincts." ' Macnamara sees her sculptured carriers as 'essences of the earth', providing a spiritual link with the land.²⁸

3.6 Aboriginal environmental knowledge

There is increasing recognition that the use and application of traditional knowledge provide effective contributions to strategies for the conservation of biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources.²⁹ Aboriginal families and elders with this knowledge represent local environmental expertise with a wealth of information relevant to management and conservation of local native vegetation and regional ecosystems.

Over millennia, Aboriginal people have managed their natural environment in different ways. For example, the dominance of 'fire loving' eucalypt and acacia species in the Australian landscape is the most cited and obvious example of the impact Aboriginal people have had on native vegetation. The dominance of these species is directly related to the use of fire by Aboriginal people. Fire was used for a number of reasons including as an aid in hunting, and to maintain preferred floristic attributes in the landscape that supplied food and medicine. There are many other examples of Aboriginal management of the landscape, ranging from construction of fish traps from stone (for example inland at Brewarrina and on the coast at Arrawarra and Point Plomer)³⁰ to replanting of parts of yams to ensure future availability.

There is increasing recognition that Aboriginal environmental knowledge can and has improved conservation outcomes for biodiversity,^{31,32,6} as well as generating substantial financial returns from its commercial exploitation.³³

The economic value of Aboriginal environmental knowledge, particularly in the area of medicines and foods, can be evidenced in the growth of bioproducts industries in the areas of pharmaceuticals, agribusiness and herbal medicines. In this arena, Aboriginal people have not been accorded a fair share in the economic benefits derived from the commercial exploitation of their traditional knowledge.

Aboriginal environmental knowledge and non-Aboriginal science-based ecological disciplines are based on different worldviews and methods of understanding. Both are specialised. Just as science-based disciplines have specialist terms or language to describe observation and fact, so too does Aboriginal environmental knowledge. Thus the loss of Aboriginal languages includes the loss of a degree of Aboriginal environmental knowledge. Maintaining cultural practice within the landscape provides for the continuation of Aboriginal language and thus of environmental knowledge.

3.7 Difficulties of identifying Aboriginal cultural/spiritual values

The identification of Aboriginal values of native vegetation is problematic in a non-Aboriginal context. Attempts to describe Aboriginal cultural values through classification inevitably fail to convey the full extent of the Aboriginal reality. While a holistic description provides greater accuracy, it is often at odds with non-Aboriginal perceptions. This is reflected in the difficulty of non-Aboriginal political and managerial structures to come to terms with Aboriginal values and perspectives. These difficulties are due to:

- the holistic world view maintained by Aboriginal people where all values are linked and inter-related;
- the personal nature and complexity of Aboriginal values placed on particular plants and places;
- the history of culturally insensitive consultation that has occurred with Aboriginal traditional knowledge holders¹⁹; and
- a cynicism in the Aboriginal community about further sharing knowledge without adequate safeguards to protect intellectual property rights.

Underpinning the protocol of Aboriginal knowledge systems is a respect for and obligation to recognise the source of knowledge and to maintain it. The failure of many non-Aboriginal people to do this has deeply offended Aboriginal people, leaving many reluctant to share knowledge about their culture and values.³⁴ Increasing the involvement of Aboriginal people in biodiversity management may help to build the trust and respect lacking in past relationships between Aboriginal people and non-indigenous people.

RELEVANT POLICY ISSUES

The development of policies and strategies relating to Aboriginal peoples and biodiversity at the international and national levels have their origins in internationally accepted human rights instruments and standards which acknowledge Indigenous rights to cultural practice and maintenance.

4.1 The international arena

4.1.1 The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity

The Australian Government has ratified the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and therefore is obliged to meet overall aims of conservation, sustainable use and equitable sharing of the benefits of biodiversity. This convention also addresses the rights of Indigenous people in biodiversity, including native vegetation, through Articles 8(j) and 10(c).

Article 8(j) states that each Contracting Party shall;

‘Subject to its national legislation, respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of Indigenous communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilisation of such knowledge, innovations and practices;’

Article 10(c) states that each Contracting Party shall

‘protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation or sustainable use requirements.’³⁵

4.1.2 Maatatua Declaration

This declaration was developed by the International Conference on the Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples convened by the Indigenous peoples of Mataatua in the Bay of Plenty region in New Zealand in 1993. Participants from the Pacific, South America, Europe, Asia and North America contributed to the development of this very powerful assertion of Indigenous rights to culture, environment and intellectual property.³⁶ The Maatatua Declaration indicates the ethics and protocols which should be considered by individuals or organisations accessing Indigenous cultural and intellectual property.³⁶ This is one instrument and all information within it needs to be considered by the traditional owners of NSW, before adoption.

4.2 National

4.2.1 National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia’s Biological Diversity

The National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia’s Biological Diversity was developed to meet Australia’s obligations as a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Based on this acknowledgment the National Strategy has as an objective to:

‘Recognise and ensure the continuity of the contribution of the ethno-biological knowledge of Australia’s Indigenous peoples to the conservation of Australia’s biological diversity.’³⁷

The Strategy also recognises the importance of harvesting of Indigenous plant and animal species to the well being, identity, cultural heritage and economy of Aboriginal peoples.

National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity

In relation to Indigenous Australians the National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity states:

As a consequence of their long history in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have developed a special knowledge of biological diversity and have a particular interest in the conservation status of Indigenous species and environments.

Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law and cosmology establishes intimate connections between people, land and other species, with ritual, custodial and management responsibilities for the land and other species being passed down through generations.

These traditional approaches and outlooks persist in many parts of Australia; in other areas, despite the historical undermining of Indigenous structures, contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures maintain a lively interest in, practical knowledge of, and concern for the well being of the land and natural systems.

Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may be willing to share some of their cultural knowledge, aspects of that knowledge may be privileged and may not be available to the public domain.

Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander management practices have proved important for the maintenance of biological diversity and their integration into current management programs should be pursued where appropriate.

The maintenance of biological diversity on lands and waters over which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have title or in which they have an interest is a cornerstone of the well being, identity, cultural heritage and economy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.³⁷

4.2.2 Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act

To complement the National Strategy, the Commonwealth enacted a piece of legislation entitled the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. This legislation is aimed at

the protection of the environment and the conservation of biodiversity, and through its objectives it explicitly acknowledges the role of Aboriginal peoples in this process.

- (1) The objects of this Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 are:
- (d) to promote a cooperative approach to the protection and management of the environment involving governments, the community, landholders and Indigenous peoples; and
 - (e) to assist in the cooperative implementation of Australia's international environmental responsibilities; and
 - (f) to recognise the role of Indigenous people in the conservation and ecologically sustainable use of Australia's biodiversity; and
 - (g) to promote the use of Indigenous peoples' knowledge of biodiversity with the involvement of, and in cooperation with, the owners of the knowledge.
- (2) In order to achieve its objects, the Act:
- (g) promotes a partnership approach to environmental protection and biodiversity conservation through:
 - (iii) recognising and promoting Indigenous peoples' role in, and knowledge of, the conservation and ecologically sustainable use of biodiversity;

4.2.3 Julayinbul Statement

The Julayinbul Statement was an outcome of a conference on Aboriginal Intellectual and Cultural Property rights held in the Kuku Yalanji Aboriginal land in the Daintree, Far North Queensland 1993. This conference was organised by the Rainforest Aboriginal Network and sponsored by the Wet Tropics Management Authority to discuss strategies for joint management which recognises Aboriginal rights in biodiversity.³⁸

4.3 NSW

4.3.1 NPWS and Aboriginal heritage management

The NSW *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* provides for the protection of Aboriginal places and relics. Under Section 90 it is an offence to knowingly destroy, deface or damage a relic or Aboriginal place in NSW without the consent of the Director-General of NPWS. Since the Act's introduction ultimate management and protection of Aboriginal heritage has been at the discretion of the Director-General of the NPWS.

Previous assumptions by the NPWS of Aboriginal rights and responsibilities regarding sites and

Aboriginal cultural heritage in general has offended many Aboriginal people. Aboriginal concerns have been voiced to NPWS through many and repeated representations over the years, and include the following:

- assessment of Aboriginal significance is not possible through the methods of science;
- the term 'significance' has been incorrectly applied by scientific authorities to determine the importance of sites in terms of their management which may include consent for destruction;¹²
- the significance of Aboriginal sites and places is being determined from a scientific viewpoint based on the western worldview and culture that has no spiritual ties and/or little understanding of Aboriginal religion;¹² and
- Aboriginal representatives have also argued for the removal of the word 'knowingly' from Section 90 of the Act; in reference to the damaging of sites, ignorance is not seen as a justifiable excuse for the destruction of Aboriginal heritage.

The 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody³⁹ made recommendations which linked the social and spiritual health of Aboriginal peoples to their traditional role in managing Australia's natural environment. In particular, Recommendation 315 made specific reference to the need for joint management of national parks, greater Aboriginal involvement in all spheres of park management, and recognition of Aboriginal control of Aboriginal culture. It should also be noted that since the first jointly managed national parks emerged in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal communities in all states and territories have continued calls to have their rights to protected areas on their country recognised.

Emerging responses to Aboriginal concerns include formal recognition and greater Aboriginal involvement in NPWS management of Aboriginal cultural heritage, and legislative amendments providing for Aboriginal ownership and joint management of protected areas.

The NPWS is now incorporating heritage or cultural assessment as part of Aboriginal site and place management. Increased recognition of Aboriginal community involvement in cultural heritage management is reflected in the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Standards and Guidelines Kit.⁴⁰ Included are 'Guidelines for Aboriginal Consultants' to aid cultural assessment reporting by Aboriginal people. The new standards provide an officially recognised role for Aboriginal people in the assessment of their cultural heritage. 'The NPWS affirms that where assessments of Aboriginal heritage take place in relation to proposed land developments, the assessment of cultural value is at least as important as the assessment of scientific/archaeological value.'⁴⁰ An opportunity now exists to address the inequity and philosophical bias which has resulted in archaeology being the 'officially recognised' discipline on Aboriginal cultural heritage in NSW despite its basis in concepts specific to western culture and reported from a non-Aboriginal perspective.⁴¹

In 1997 the NSW Parliament passed the *National Parks & Wildlife (Aboriginal Ownership)*

Amendment Act 1996. The Act provides for the return of nominated protected areas to Aboriginal ownership and the establishment of joint management arrangements. For a protected area to be subject to joint management it must be listed under Schedule 14 of the Act. Of the areas included to date, Mutawintji National Park, Historic Site and Nature Reserve comprise the first Aboriginal-owned protected area in NSW. The other areas are Mungo National Park, Jervis Bay National Park, Mount Grenfell Historic Site and Mount Yarrowyck and Coturaundee Nature Reserves. Notwithstanding remaining Aboriginal concerns regarding the Act, it represents a response by the NSW Government to the Royal Commission recommendations and to continued calls of Aboriginal people.

4.3.2 Native vegetation conservation in NSW

The proposed Native Vegetation Conservation Strategy is part of the NSW government response to the principles of ecological sustainable development and biodiversity conservation. These developments represent a growing acknowledgment of the need to adopt a holistic and integrated approach to environmental management.

Regional vegetation committees have been established under the *Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997* and are responsible for the preparation of regional vegetation management plans. These plans together with the Native Vegetation Conservation Strategy constitute a major part of floristic biodiversity management and conservation in NSW. (Information and discussion on the current experience of Aboriginal representation on regional vegetation committees is included in Appendix A.)

In order to meet the principles of ecologically sustainable development, and the Commonwealth government's international obligations,⁴² the Native Vegetation Conservation Strategy must address Aboriginal perspectives and requirements, recognising that these may vary throughout NSW.

RELEVANT RESEARCH ISSUES

Research into Aboriginal rights in biodiversity have a human rights component. Reference to self determination in the research context includes the right of Aboriginal people to control and protect their intellectual and cultural property as well as to be involved in research based on their prior informed consent.

5.1 History of recent research

Early commentary on Aboriginal people by anthropologists, archaeologists and historians concentrated on reconstructing pre-invasion social organisation and material culture.⁴³⁻⁴⁸ More recent investigations⁴⁹⁻⁵⁵ have focussed on interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.⁵⁶

Up until the early 1980s, the relationships between Aboriginal people and native vegetation, and the conservation issues associated with these relationships, were not widely recognised or acknowledged. In most of the early research, forests and their cultural values to Aboriginal people are only generally mentioned.⁵⁷⁻⁶³

In the last 20 years, however, there have been shifts towards the presentation of Aboriginal perspectives as reflected in the increasing number of Aboriginal site interpretations and histories that are written or co-authored by Aboriginal people.^{19,25,26,64-73}

5.2 Trends in research on Aboriginal values

Recent anthropological research on Aboriginal cultural heritage and management has clearly identified that all land is significant to Aboriginal people,¹² as virtually all land within NSW is associated with Aboriginal cultural heritage. The significance of native vegetation to Aboriginal people has also been recognised as a tangible link to and part of their cultural heritage and fundamental in protecting and maintaining the integrity of significant Aboriginal sites.^{12,19,64,74}

All Aboriginal sites are significant because they are proof of occupancy by the traditional owners and constitute an inheritance for their descendants. Aboriginal sites and places are also significant in that they are part of living Aboriginal cultures. The significance of sites and places varies and is based on the associated cultural aspects which determine the cultural protocols that are associated with, and are a part of, the sites themselves. The degree to which these sites are considered significant is entirely the realm of the elders who are the holders of this knowledge as it has been handed down through Aboriginal 'common' law.

Researchers are increasingly hesitant to base their work on assumptions of what constitutes Aboriginal values, perceptions or significance. It is emerging practice for Aboriginal communities to be consulted regarding research into Aboriginal values.^{75,76}

5.3 Research ethics for working with Aboriginal knowledge and people

In recent times protocols and principles have been adopted in Australia and around the world in response to the growing recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples in natural resource management, research, and exploitation. At the international level the International Society of Ethnobiology has developed a guide for scientists and other researchers, listing 14 principles to be observed in order to develop ethical practices and methodologies for studies which involve the use or incorporation of Indigenous environmental knowledge.

In Australia, the Australian Science, Technology and Engineering Council⁷⁶ developed a set of guidelines for ethical research practices in protected areas which included principles relevant to Aboriginal people, including that research should:

- respect Aboriginal values and customary obligations;

- benefit and empower traditional owners of the areas in question;
- respect the right of self determination;
- acknowledge Aboriginal associations with and rights to traditional environments (land/seas) including the natural and cultural resources therein;
- protect Aboriginal rights to own and control their knowledge and intellectual property; and
- protect Aboriginal rights to receive the full protection afforded them by relevant international instruments ratified by the Australian Government.

5.4 Restricted Aboriginal cultural knowledge

Exchange of information in Aboriginal cultures differs from that which occurs in non-Aboriginal society. Non-Aboriginal forums often promote a free exchange of information while Aboriginal law and cultural protocols provide a framework which sets out who can and cannot 'speak for country' or the community. Such protocols are respected as part of Aboriginal culture and law: breaching them is a serious matter and can result in negative impacts such as illness.

Thus within Aboriginal cultures and society not everyone is privy to all cultural information. Very few Aboriginal people feel they are in a position to speak or make binding decisions on behalf of their communities without consulting them. Representatives may have to abstain from endorsing or commenting on a decision until they have consulted appropriate people in their communities, usually elders, who are responsible for particular knowledge and places on their land. The right to speak for your land covers all aspects of traditional knowledge that are not available to the general public, including expressions of Aboriginal cultural values and knowledge of native vegetation. Factors which determine one's right to access or 'hold' knowledge include age, gender and family lineage. For example, physical access to a particular site or place may have gender restrictions, while gender, age and family lineage may also restrict entitlement to speak about a site.

In some cases, information may be held by only a few elders and cannot be divulged. Indeed, some elders affirm that some Aboriginal knowledge cannot be written down while some that has been documented may be viewed only by Aboriginal descendants who have associations and inherited rights to that cultural knowledge.¹²

OPTIONS FOR ACTION

6.1 Maintenance of Cultural practices

Aboriginal people are striving to maintain and revitalise cultural practices, a right articulated in numerous international declarations. Central to this goal is Aboriginal reconnection with cultural landscapes and use of the associated natural resources, including native vegetation.

If regional vegetation management plans are to take account of all stakeholders, they must incorporate appropriate strategies that support the maintenance of Aboriginal cultural practices. This means that Aboriginal people must have access to their country and the resources and the opportunity to play a significant role in their management. Access to land and use of resources will provide a basis for the survival of Aboriginal knowledge, including language. Natural resource management structures should assist Aboriginal people in capacity building projects that maintain and revitalise culture.

6.2 Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual property rights

'In terms of biodiversity, totemic identification with certain species, the use of various floral and faunal species to provide materials for food, artefacts, medicines and decoration, and the detailed preparation of certain toxic species to render them edible, all indicate the development of bodies of knowledge about plants and animals... These examples indicate the development and exercise of Indigenous intellectual and cultural property rights.'³³

The potential of Aboriginal environmental knowledge to inform the Native Vegetation Conservation Strategy on issues of conservation and sustainable use is significant. This potential depends on the capacity of mechanisms for Aboriginal involvement which meet the expectations of Aboriginal communities.

The recognition of traditional knowledge as Aboriginal intellectual property and the need for its

protection from unauthorised use is essential. All too readily this consideration has been ignored for example, the commercial use of the ti-tree (*Melaleuca alternifolia*) for medicinal remedies, and the macadamia nut for food, occurred without the acknowledgment of, nor an equitable share of the benefits for, the Aboriginal sources of this knowledge.

Access to or use of Aboriginal intellectual property requires prior informed consent and adherence to cultural protocols see Section 5.4.

6.3 Participation, consultation and representation

In the absence of total control by Aboriginal people over their traditional resources there is an absolute minimum requirement that they be able to participate in all facets of the use and management of native vegetation. That is Aboriginal people should be represented on all state-wide, regional and local advisory committees involved with native vegetation. How this representation is to be determined is up to Aboriginal communities and it must reflect diversity.

Current Aboriginal representation in governmental resource management structures is not indicative of the diversity of Aboriginal people in NSW. This situation is compounded by two factors: absence of any substantive support mechanisms or structures that allow for more effective representation and the fragmented approach to natural resource management in NSW.

To be successful, the Native Vegetation Conservation Strategy needs the involvement of Aboriginal people in a process of consultation and representation that reflects Aboriginal people's unique relationship with country.

It is important for Aboriginal involvement to be driven by Aboriginal people in a way that reflects the holistic nature of Aboriginal culture and values in relation to all natural resources not just native vegetation alone. This will necessitate determining an agreed way for Aboriginal people to be involved and represented in native vegetation conservation and management to the satisfaction of Aboriginal people.

Consultation is also fundamental to the assessment and consideration of the cultural values assigned to native vegetation of NSW. Traditional owners, however, are not always represented on local or regional Aboriginal land councils or other indigenous organisations. Although recent times have seen legislation changes and some recognition of Aboriginal rights, this has been accompanied by a misrepresentation and misuse of cultural information shared by elders.

Even when consultation with Aboriginal people occurs, too often the outcomes are not acted on, thus rendering the entire process ineffective and discouraging to those who have participated. This also has a negative impact on any future Aboriginal consultation, participation and representation associated with natural resource management.

Another major consideration is time. Consultation involving all communities is required to adequately determine Aboriginal cultural values native vegetation. A realistic time frame for Aboriginal consultation needs to be adopted by regional vegetation committees and embedded in the Native Vegetation Conservation Strategy process.

Consultation would best be driven by the Department of Land and Water Conservation since it has the statutory responsibility for developing and implementing native vegetation conservation and management. To address the diversity of Aboriginal people, the Department of Land and Water Conservation must liaise with: the National Parks and Wildlife Service, particularly the Aboriginal Heritage Division; regional and local Aboriginal Land Councils; Native Title claimants; and other Aboriginal organisations, particularly elders' groups.

Potential problems in consultation

- Not all Aboriginal stakeholders who maintain cultural associations with country to be included under regional vegetation management planning have access to the consultation process and plan formulation.
- Not all Aboriginal families and descendants who maintain cultural knowledge, values and responsibilities, are aware of the proposed Native Vegetation Conservation Strategy, how it relates to their interests, and the opportunities that exist to influence the outcomes of the process.
- Surveys of Aboriginal values, sites and heritage completed by government departments in the past in the name of protecting Aboriginal places have resulted in the misuse of oral information and misrepresentation of sites by non-Aboriginal people.¹²
- The intellectual and cultural property rights of Aboriginal peoples of NSW are not legally recognised or protected.
- Government staff are not necessarily aware of cultural protocols or Aboriginal history, and without intention could easily offend Aboriginal people, or otherwise draw the wrong conclusion after attempts to communicate with Aboriginal people.
- Elders are held in high regard in Aboriginal communities. It is inappropriate and disrespectful to approach an elder without being introduced formally.¹²
- With the changing political climate of reconciliation and attempts by various government departments to assess Aboriginal values and heritage the time and energy of Aboriginal elders is being requested by many different non-Aboriginal organisations.
- The living and health conditions of many Aboriginal people of NSW is very poor, and this greatly affects their ability to participate in activities that are not directly related to their own or their families' day-to-day survival.
- It is not culturally appropriate or culturally safe for all Regional Vegetation Committee members to be actively involved in consultation with Aboriginal elders and groups concerning cultural values and heritage.

6.4 Capacity building

The ability of Aboriginal people to participate and play a significant role in the development and implementation of management strategies is seriously hampered by lack of experience, skills and resources. For example, a general lack of understanding by Aboriginal people about the responsible agencies and their systems for managing native vegetation prevents full and effective participation.

What is required is awareness raising activities in Aboriginal communities about the Native Vegetation strategy and how they can participate. Training is required for all Aboriginal representatives on advisory committees so that they can play more meaningful roles. Communities also need access to information associated with all facets of the Native Vegetation strategy in order to be able to contribute more broadly. This could be achieved by the establishment of a clearing house mechanism.

Aboriginal communities also need resources to be able to meet on a regular basis to reach common positions on native vegetation issues and then articulate these in advisory mechanisms.

Expert cultural knowledge maintained by elders should be provided with the same financial assistance given to other experts involved in the Native Vegetation Conservation Strategy.

The Department of Land and Water Conservation and the National Parks and Wildlife Service must urgently address the issue of resourcing to help build the capacity of Aboriginal communities to play a more effective role in the strategy.

6.5 Economic disadvantage and benefit sharing

Aboriginal people continue to be the most economically disadvantaged group in NSW while the government and corporations continue to make profits from the commercial exploitation of native vegetation. Aboriginal people never ceded their rights to any natural resources of NSW and therefore have a right to share in the benefits arising from their commercial exploitation.

Mechanisms need to be developed to ensure that Aboriginal people have an equitable share in the benefits derived from the exploitation of native vegetation. These benefits might be financial or they may well be the creation of other opportunities for Aboriginal people. Only when Aboriginal people begin to derive a direct benefit from what are their traditional resources will economic disadvantage be reduced.

6.7 Aboriginal Advisory Mechanisms

The establishment and resourcing of regional Aboriginal biodiversity committees would provide a mechanism for Aboriginal people to deliver a comprehensive input into initiatives such as the native vegetation strategy.

Such regional bodies would provide an opportunity for Aboriginal people to drive their involvement in management of natural resources. Given the input of a range of non-Aboriginal stakeholders through their respective support networks, the development of such an advisory committee would improve the capacity of Aboriginal involvement and representation.

Another advantage of such an approach is the potential to reduce what to many Aboriginal people is duplication of effort. From an Aboriginal perspective many issues of concern regarding natural resource management are similar whether they be specific to native vegetation, land or water, or forestry or fisheries. Each of these components of natural resources is connected within Aboriginal culture.

The concept of regional Aboriginal biodiversity committees is not without precedent, Aboriginal people in the Namoi River area have formed the Namoi Aboriginal Resource Committee with assistance from the Department of Land and Water Conservation (see Appendix A). While not without its problems (such as the issue of Aboriginal cultural diversity within the Namoi Valley) this model has potential. The capacity for Aboriginal biodiversity committees to interact with current management structures should not be underestimated.

Such committees could also provide the source of Aboriginal representation on a whole range of specific governmental natural resource committees including those established for the Native vegetation strategy.

6.8 Awareness and education

It is important to recognise that the spiritual and cultural connection with country exhibited by Aboriginal people is not understood by non-indigenous stakeholders. This lack of awareness, in turn restricts the ability of non-indigenous people to contribute more effectively on natural resource management forums such as regional vegetation management committees so diminishes the capacity for Aboriginal participation in such forums. It also contributes to the challenging position of being an Aboriginal representative.

As a consequence, all members of government agencies, including those committees involved in

native vegetation at the state and regional level, should be provided with cross-cultural training. This is also essential for current Aboriginal representation to be able to function within a more equitable and informed forum.

It is also critical that Aboriginal people are informed of how native vegetation management and conservation is to occur, and who is responsible for the various aspects of implementation. The role of the Department of Water Conservation needs to be articulated, as do the roles and relationships of other departments involved. Explanation of the management structure is also necessary so that Aboriginal communities are aware of who is responsible for what, and who is available for contact in their area. Only then will they be in a position to determine the degree of their involvement and contribution to the process of developing a native vegetation conservation strategy for NSW.

APPENDIX A

Current experience of Aboriginal representatives on Regional Vegetation Committees

1. Richmond Vegetation Committee

The Richmond Regional Vegetation Committee (RRVC) was formed under the Native Vegetation Conservation Act after April 1998 when the Minister for Land and Water Conservation gazetted the local government areas of Lismore, Ballina, Kyogle, Casino and Richmond River as a vegetation region in the Richmond.

The Aboriginal representatives on the RRVC are Uncle Ron Heron and Bill Walker of the Bundjalung Nation. Ron and Bill were nominated by the NSW Aboriginal Land Council to sit on the RRVC and gain experience working with government institutions on Aboriginal cultural heritage assessment and management. Ron Heron's anthropological and archaeological reports encompass the most recent trends in studies concerning Aboriginal heritage, and as such are frequently referenced in this background paper. Through his work Ron is widely respected within both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities of the north coast of NSW. A respected Bundjalung man, Bill Walker has also been an advocate of his cultural heritage through work with NSW NPWS.

Although the issues raised by Ron and Bill through their current experience with the RRVC concern communities of the Bundjalung Nation within the RRVC area, the potential problems and solutions identified through their experience would be applicable to many regions of NSW.

The RRVC has formed an Aboriginal Liaison Task Group including Ron and Bill. At the first meeting of the RRVC Aboriginal Liaison Task Group it was resolved that the group's objectives include:

- maximising Aboriginal involvement in the development of the Richmond RVMP,

And that the RRVMP should:

- recognise and promote the significance of native vegetation to Aboriginal communities within the Richmond Vegetation Region.

Also, the following potential problems/solutions were noted:

- Anthropological assessment at the regional scale is very limited, and what constitutes anthropological significance has undergone changes in thinking to recognise the cultural values identified by Aboriginal communities today;
- Consultation process must be driven and advised by Bundjalung people;
- There are many communities within the Bundjalung Nation that maintain traditional interests in 'country' that falls within the RVMP's boundaries. This diversity needs to be taken into account;
- There must be education prior to consultation (what is the whole process about, how will it affect local Goori people, what say can they have);
- Elders, Land Councils, Native Title groups and local communities must all be involved in the consultation process.

2. Walgett Regional Planning Committee

The formation of the Regional Vegetation Committee for the Walgett region was preceded by the formation of the Namoi Aboriginal Resource Committee (NARC), which was formed through community meetings facilitated by the DLWC. Meetings were held in three sections of the Namoi

valley: upper, middle and lower. Out of these meetings the NARC formed, comprising four representatives from each section of the valley.

The DLWC provided some financial and technical support for the NARC for the first 12 months. The NARC saw its functions as being very diverse, with a focus on natural resource management, and as having a primary role in providing a consultative group in each region that truly represented the local Aboriginal community, including traditionally affiliated people, and those who live out of their traditional country.

One of the issues identified by Aboriginal representatives in the formation of the NARC and the Walgett Regional Vegetation Committee was that one Aboriginal community, whether

traditionally affiliated or contemporary, could not speak for another group. This was not a major issue in the Barwon Region as most of the area falls on traditional Gamaroi land, but it was a major concern for the far west region of NSW where an estimated 11 different Aboriginal nations are to be represented by just 2 Aboriginal representatives on the Native Vegetation Committee.

It was also found that the lack of understanding and knowledge of Aboriginal history and cultural issues related to natural resource management makes it hard for Aboriginal representatives on the Regional Vegetation Committee to get their message through. Cross-cultural awareness courses and training for all RVC members is recommended to address this.

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