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Home Country

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YARRA BILLABONG KEW II (1975)
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HOME COUNTRY

In northern Australia, a new generation helps to heal their homelands.

Standing atop the red cliffs of Fish River Gorge in Australia's Northern Territory, it's difficult not to indulge in a fantasy of nature primordial. More than 100 feet below, fish are clearly visible in the crystalline water. Flocks of squawking white cockatoos soar through the riverine forest, and wallabies dart in and out of view.

Beyond that, woodlands as far as the eye can see—and no sign of people.

It's a common enough illusion in northern Australia. Although Australia roughly matches the continental United States in size, its population would fill only the New York City metropolitan area. Most Australians live on the island continent's coastal perimeter. Far from the cities, the fancy opera house, and the famous barrier reefs lies a vast, seemingly empty red center.

For many people, northern Australia is where blokes wrestle crocodiles, dingoes snatch babies, and drag queens drive pink buses across the desert to strains of *La Traviata*.

At least that's the impression from the movies.

But the reality is far richer and more complex.

When European settlers came to northern Australia in the late 1800s, they saw a lush frontier of grasslands and savannas ripe for ranching. They began pushing out seminomadic Aboriginal communities that had been living there for tens of thousands of years. Today, huge ranches, or stations as they are called here, make up much of the region.

Northern Australia hasn't thrived under that scheme, nor have many of the stations. The harsh climate fluctuates between a monsoonal rainy season of dense, green growth and "the dry," a stretch of bone-dry weather that leaves vegetation withered and susceptible to wildfire. For many years, fires have been burning with increasing intensity, sometimes incinerating the land on such a massive scale that they inhibit the regrowth of native plants. Populations of native mammals found nowhere else—notably several small marsupials, such as bandicoots—are plummeting.

The Nature Conservancy has launched an ambitious project to halt the downward spiral. In 2010, it brought together the Australian government's National Reserve System, the Indigenous Lands Corporation, and the Pew Environment Group to buy one of northern Australia's huge ranches—the 700-square-mile Fish River Station—for \$13 million. Fish River is a former cattle operation, its lands a microcosm of the region as a whole.

The property supports an astounding array of wildlife but has been damaged by severe wildfires in recent years. In addition, more than 8,000 head of cattle, buffalo, and other livestock have gone feral and are competing with the native animals for scarce resources in the dry season.

To fix things, the partners have come up with a plan that turns conventional thinking on its head.

"The solution to Fish River's woes isn't getting people off the land," says Geoff Lipsett-Moore, who directs the Conservancy's northern Australia activities. "The solution is to get traditional owners back on country."

A LAND SHAPED BY PEOPLE

New human genome studies suggest that Aboriginal people first colonized Australia's North some 50,000 years ago, about 24,000 years before modern humans reached Europe and other parts of Asia. Over millennia, the actions of these people came to shape and drive much of Australia's ecology.



BURNT LANDSCAPE, UPWEY NO. 1 (1968)

© Fred Williams

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Historically, Aboriginal communities moved camp with the changing weather and availability of foods, or "bush tucker." And along the way they set fires. The reasons were many: to create paths, to clear campsites, to control insects, to flush game from the bush. During the achingly hot days of the dry season, when most of the grasses had dried and withered and food was hard to find, they burned to attract game for hunting.

"Burning was for kangaroos," says David Bowman, a fire ecologist and one of the foremost experts on northern Australia's fire regimes. Aboriginal people would burn "to get the 'green pick,' which are very nutritious shoots that come up from freshly burned grass."

Even at the height of the dry season, the fires were well-controlled and kept small in scope. The Aboriginal communities burned so frequently



ULURU
© Mark Godfrey
for The Nature Conservancy

and in so many small patches that the grasslands developed into a mosaic of fuel and firebreaks. A fire couldn't burn out of control across the landscape because it would run out of fuel when it reached a blackened patch from another recent burn. In this way, trees were scorched but not destroyed; grasses were rejuvenated rather than killed. Patchwork burning by hundreds of Aboriginal clans over tens of thousands of years shaped entire habitats across much of the continent.

"You often hear that nature does best when left alone," says Michael Looker, who directs the Conservancy's Australia program. "But in Australia, people and their fires were the dominant ecological force for thousands of years. Nature here needs people."

A case in point is the increasingly rare and brilliantly colored Gouldian finch, which occasionally can be spotted at Fish River Station. The seed eater depends on grasses, such as native spinifex, that

can require two years or more to set seed. Patchwork burning ensures that in each season, somewhere within the bird's range, seeds are available.

When European cattlemen appeared on the scene, their focus was to clear, establish, and preserve large, open grasslands for grazing. At first, Aboriginal employees of cattle stations maintained the mosaic of small burns to help feed the livestock. But as generations passed, the traditional style of fire management fell out of widespread use. Grass fields once separated by burned patches were allowed to grow as uniform stands of fuel.

The result was a "much more flammable landscape than what the Aborigines had created," says Bowman. "So that's really the nub of the fire management problem in northern Australia—to get that fine-grained mosaic of burning back," he says. "And the way you do that is to get people back on country, burning."

At Fish River Station, the Conservancy and its partners are doing just that. But rather than launch a restoration fire regime on their own, they're aiming for a more sustainable solution: they're giving Fish River Station back to the Aboriginal clans from whom it was taken.

“NO ABORIGINAL PERSON IS HOMELESS”

After the evictions that began in the late 1800s and continued through the first half of the 20th century, it wasn't until the 1970s that Aboriginal people began getting their country back. In 1976, the Aboriginal Land Rights Act codified a process by which indigenous communities could regain their homelands in the Northern Territory by providing evidence of historical occupation.

By the late 1990s, the land rights movement, which had focused on efforts to gain permanent tenure on former homelands, had broadened to include traditional land management—or what is now known as “Caring for Country.”

Today, at least 40 percent of northern Australia's land is in Aboriginal hands, and more transfers are in the pipeline.

It can be hard for outsiders to fully understand Aboriginal people's desire to reunite with their country. “We don't own the land; we belong to it,” explains elder Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, a retired educator who lives in the Daly River community on Fish River Station's northern border. “No Aboriginal person is homeless; each has a homeland.”

“I was born upstream under a tree, and when I go back there, I still can feel that I'm there as a child. Imagine that. When I'm talking about a homeland, that's what I mean. You're still part of that place. And you feel it deep down.”

When given the chance to reinstate their traditional practices, Aboriginal communities have proven to be vastly capable land managers. Studies of Caring for Country projects found that ecological health measurably improves in areas managed using Aboriginal methods, thanks largely to

the reintroduction of small-scale fires. (The studies found that the physical and psychological health of the participants improves as well.)

“What I'm saying to the people in Australia is not to wait for us to catch up, but walk with us ... and help us.”

If more Aboriginal communities took over management of their homelands, the Conservancy's Looker believes they could restore the ecological balance in parts of northern Australia. Get enough people back on country with the right tools and reliable funding, and the fuel loads could be brought under control across huge swaths of territory, benefiting communities, cattle stations, and nature as a whole.

“There is an unprecedented opportunity now,” says Looker. “We can imagine 125 million acres of Australian land going into indigenous conservation management in the coming decade.

That would be more land than the Conservancy protected in its first 60 years around the world.”

But there's a finite window in which to make that happen. Some in Australia are looking to intensify farming and ranching in the north, especially if a changing climate makes other regions less arable. Government funding for Indigenous Protected Areas and other community programs is limited.

Meanwhile, the clock is ticking. With so much traditional knowledge held by a decreasing number of Aboriginal elders, there is an urgent need to get people back on country and sharing their expertise with a new generation.

The key to success at Fish River and places like it, says Looker, will be to marry Aboriginal traditions with modern-day science and sustainable funding sources. Indigenous communities do not wish to simply return to the subsistence existence that dominated before 1880. They are looking for ways to make a livelihood in the modern world while taking care

of their lands and maintaining their culture. And they need assistance tackling ecological challenges that their forebears never dealt with.

Ungunmerr-Baumann agrees, “What I’m saying to the people in Australia is not to wait for us to catch up, but walk with us ... and help us.”

A NEW WAY IN ARNHEM LAND

Over the past decade, the Conservancy has worked with government and Aboriginal partners on a variety of conservation efforts but perhaps nowhere more successfully than in the Northern Territory’s Arnhem Land.

Arnhem Land lies northeast of Fish River and east of Kakadu National Park, where local Aboriginal communities have reintroduced traditional fire patterns across a large area. Arnhem Land is also where the Conservancy and its partners in 2009 supported the Warddeken and Djelk people as they established two official indigenous protected areas—together covering an area more than twice the size of

Yellowstone National Park. Indigenous protected areas are lands or seas where Aboriginal communities have entered into an agreement with the Australian government to promote biodiversity and conserve cultural resources. The Conservancy helped set up a trust fund for staffing and management of Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area. It is now helping land managers use the Conservancy’s own planning process to fine-tune their conservation strategies.

Today, Aboriginal rangers set prescribed fires, control feral animals, and conduct biological surveys. Aboriginal-owned ecotourism businesses have sprung up. Ask a kid here what he wants to be when he grows up, and he’s as likely to say “park ranger” as “footy star” (referring to Australian professional football.)

Warddeken and Djelk have served as models of traditional land management, with one catch: They rely heavily on government funds. That’s not a sustainable option in the long run.



REMEMBERING THE HEAT
Anna Patricia Keller

However, scientists working with local people at the protected areas have uncovered a potential new source of financing: carbon. Five years ago the North Australia Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance, a Conservancy partner, began measuring the effect of burns in Warddeken and Djelk. The findings showed that traditional fire management greatly reduced the amount of carbon pollution being released into the atmosphere.

The significance of those findings

became clear in November 2011, when Australia passed a carbon tax. Companies are lining up to offset their own carbon emissions by paying for activities that reduce emissions elsewhere, says Joe Morrison, the Alliance’s chief executive officer. If these businesses pay Aboriginal communities for land management that captures carbon, “it sets the stage for indigenous people both here and elsewhere in the world to tap their land resources for sustainable economic return. And it shows that extractive industry is not the

only way ... that we can have more than one way.”

TRANSFORMATION BEGINS

What sets Fish River Station apart from previous conservation programs in Australia is the precedent it creates: for the first time, a nongovernmental organization has helped purchase land for conservation with the express purpose of returning it to Aboriginal ownership.

Equally important, the Conservancy and its partners are positioning Fish River to be financially self-sustaining by taking full advantage of the new carbon market and by fostering opportunities to develop homegrown businesses.

The Indigenous Land Corporation is now laying the groundwork for the transfer of Fish River Station to the four Aboriginal clans that will eventually own the land: the Labarganyan, Wagiman, Malak Malak, and Kamu.

Meanwhile, the partners will establish a trust fund to sustain the conservation work by the Aboriginal communities. “Our top conservation goals for the next

three years,” says the Conservancy’s Lipsett-Moore, “are to get the fire regime right, get the ferals under control, and gather the baseline data so we can measure our progress accurately.”

So far, some 800 head of feral livestock have been removed from the station (contributing to one creative cottage industry already: Feral buffalo are being processed for meat by a local Aboriginal-owned company and then sold to the resort at Uluru, or Ayers Rock, which itself is newly under Aboriginal management). Meanwhile, local rangers have already started restoration work.

“I remember coming out here when I was about eight or 10 years old with our tribal elders,” says local resident John Daly, who after spending years behind a desk in Darwin as head of the Northern Land Council chose to work as a ranger with the Fish River project as it got started. A large part of the job for the seasoned rangers is to act as a mentor to the younger hires from local communities, he says. “So now we’re getting young people on board out here and sharing the

things we learned from our elders. We’re getting people back on country, working on country, living on country.”

The Conservancy has equipped the rangers with tools such as CyberTracker—hand-held global positioning devices that help rangers record their activities and historical fire data. The information allows them to track progress and coordinate multiple groups working across the vast landscape. The technology was specifically designed to capture indigenous knowledge.

These days, barefoot, gray-bearded elders are riding shotgun in helicopters to help identify sacred sites and describe past burning patterns. The elders are also teaching the young rangers by collecting and preparing bush tucker and sharing stories around the campfire.

From his office on the other side of the continent, the Conservancy’s Michael Looker is exploring ways to advance the Fish River model. He would like to see the trust funds he is helping launch for Warddeken, Djelk, and Fish River

become standard policy for new areas managed by Aboriginal communities. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to have a single umbrella of sustainable public-private funding instead of having dozens of individual trust funds?” he asks.

He’s also talking up possibilities for the next project as other properties become available and the carbon market matures.

Back in the Daly River community, Ungunmerr-Baumann says she feels cautiously optimistic about the changes under way at Fish River. “I’ve seen the young fellas who have been employed at Fish River to remove feral animals, burn, control weeds, and such. They come back after a few weeks looking beautiful, like they’ve been fulfilled and like they’re at peace with themselves. They connect with the land and the spirit of their ancestors and feel that they belong there as well.”

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