

## Conservation as development in Northern Australia: from policies to ethnography

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# Conservation as development in Northern Australia: from policies to ethnography

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## Introduction

- 1 Since the mid-1990s, “ranger” jobs, groups and programs have been established in many indigenous communities of Northern Australia.
- 2 “Rangers” form a new category of Aboriginal social actors who are employed and paid to deliver environmental services through their activities that are generally described as “natural (and cultural) resource management”.
- 3 Their role is presented as based on the formalisation and professionalisation of “traditional” responsibilities towards the land and the sea referred to as “caring for country”.
- 4 Since their creation, ranger jobs, groups and programs have become a major focus of economic policies for indigenous people in Northern Australia and beyond.
- 5 These policies can be described, using Paige West’s expression (West 2006 : xii), as “conservation-as-development” policies since they assume that environmental conservation can induce economic development for indigenous peoples, especially in remote areas.
- 6 Researchers with a background in the social or environmental sciences have contributed to developing and articulating these policies, that are presented as the result of a bottom-up approach. Through their influence, they have brought the Australian State into adopting these policies. In the last few years, the federal government’s *Working on Country* program which is part of the national environmental *Caring for Our Country* initiative has indeed funded a few hundreds of ranger jobs.

However, the consequences of this State funding for ranger groups and programs are ambivalent.

- 7 This paper will sum up what the implementation of “conservation-as-development” policies in Aboriginal Australia is expected to produce. The point of view of researchers aiming to support what they consider a community-based “caring for country movement” and that of the State and its objectives differ, even if both parties seem to aspire to sustainable environments and new economies in Aboriginal Australia.
- 8 I will further contrast these expectations with the impacts of a specific ranger group and its activities in a community of south-east Arnhem Land. My ethnography has revealed that “conservation-as-development” policies imply the bureaucratisation of the local people’s relationships with their country; create differences, rivalries and conflicts within the ranger group and within the community; and is dependent on the ongoing intervention of outside bodies and non-indigenous people.

## From policies...

- 9 The literature dealing with ranger jobs, groups and programs in Northern Australia argues that these jobs, groups and programs can improve the management and the sustainability of ecosystems and biodiversity in the “indigenous eState”, as well as create jobs and opportunities for economic development for Aboriginal communities.
- 10 For instance, Seán Kerins (2012 : 36) who has a long experience of working with indigenous rangers in the Top End considers rangers as “*being at the cutting-edge of cultural and natural resource management and Indigenous development*”. Rangering is also often presented as a viable “alternate development” option for Aboriginal Australia.
- 11 Researchers generally highlight the many “benefits” produced by, or expected from indigenous “natural resource management” initiatives. In particular, they stress the positive outcomes in the domains of environment, employment, the socio-economic and educational situation, as well as conditions of health and well-being.
- 12 The Stated aims of the federal government’s *Working on Country* program introduced in 2007 are also oriented towards natural resource management and indigenous economic development.
- 13 This program is expected, I quote, “*to protect and manage Australia’s environmental and heritage values by providing paid employment for Indigenous people to undertake environmental work on country*” (May 2010 : 7). It is presented as one of the key Indigenous-specific initiatives that support the national *Indigenous Economic Development Strategy 2011-2018* (Australian Government 2011 : 8). At first, *Working on Country* was well received by the researchers who were lobbying the Australian and Northern Territory governments to increase and consolidate their investments in indigenous “natural resource management” (cf. Kerins 2012 : 39). For instance, this program was described as:

[a] formal recognition of the important role that Indigenous rangers play in managing country (Morrison 2007 : 256)

by Morrison, and by Altman and others as:

a symbolic and practical breakthrough in recognising, respecting, and recurrently resourcing innovative community-based resource management efforts on the Indigenous eState (Altman *et al.* 2007 : 44)

- 14 However, the links of the *Working on Country* program with the federal government's recent Indigenous policy agenda is now being pointed out and criticised. It is indeed linked to the Northern Territory Emergency Response usually called the Intervention, launched in 2007 by the Howard government and that was continued by the following governments. It is also part of the *Closing the Gap* framework aiming to close the statistical difference on life conditions between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Both are presented by researchers as seeking to mainstream indigenous people's aspirations, representations, social relations, practices and economies (cf. Altman 2010 : 277, Kerins 2012).
- 15 The researchers who were willing to support and to empower indigenous rangers by securing more State funding on their behalf, and in particular proper wages, progressively realised the conditions and constraints associated to *Working on Country* and other State-funded programs. For example, a "risk [that] indigenous people's values and world views will be incrementally captured and reshaped by State processes" rather than respected in their own right was pointed out by Kerins (2012 : 43).
- 16 Thus, what "conservation-as-development" policies adopted by the Australian State are expected to produce both reflects and opposes the ambitions of the researchers who have contributed to the development and to the governmental reappropriation of these policies.
- 17 The State reinterpreted the researchers' conservation-as-development discourse according to its own arguable priorities.
- 18 My fieldwork in a community of south-east Arnhem Land in 2009 and 2010 has led me to consider the existence of a gap between the expectations embedded in the conservation-as-development policies – mainly in terms of sustainable environments and new economies in Aboriginal Australia – and what the implementation of these policies produced at the local scale.

### ... to ethnography

- 19 The Yugul Mangi Rangers with whom I worked are described as one of the many "community-based Indigenous land and sea management [...] groups" currently engaged in "cultural and natural resource management activities" in northern Australia (Altman *et al.* 2011 : 1).
- 20 This group was established in 2002 in a community of Arnhem Land called Ngukurr which developed itself in the seventies from an Anglican mission created in 1908. In the context of the contemporary Indigenous policy agenda, Ngukurr counting about 1500 inhabitants has become a "Northern Territory Growth Town": one of the largest Northern Territory Aboriginal communities on which State funding is focused in priority.
- 21 This ranger group was first created by and for women only. Yet, it followed the steps of a group of local men who had undertaken a landcare project in this community in the nineties. These men occasionally worked with the women rangers until 2007, when they officially joined the Yugul Mangi Ranger group. Then, in April 2008, this group became an incorporated body through the establishment of the Yugul Mangi Land and

Sea Management Aboriginal Corporation whose official principal aim is, I quote: « to assist Traditional Owners to care for their land and sea country ».

- 22 During my fieldwork, the core of this group was composed of 8 rangers, 4 males or 4 females, and up to 4 additional local persons worked occasionally with the team.
- 23 The Yugul Mangi Rangers' main activities in a large area around Ngukurr included: fire management, weed management, feral animal control, coastline and river management, participation in collaborative ecological research, and wildlife enterprise development.
- 24 A major focus of my study has been to analyse the social interactions within the ranger group, between the ranger group and the Ngukurr community, and between indigenous rangers and non-indigenous people involved in their activities.

## Bureaucratisation

- 25 This ethnography reveals that in Ngukurr, indigenous “natural resource management” is inherently a bureaucratic enterprise.
- 26 A first evidence of this is that the Yugul Mangi Ranger group is composed of people having different statuses: rangers, senior rangers and a coordinator.
- 27 These statuses require and imply interchangeability of the individuals who occupy each status, a differentiation of skills, and a hierarchy of the work space – three elements that can be considered testifying of a bureaucratic organization of work.
- 28 Bureaucratisation can indeed be described in this case study, as suggested by Nadasdy (2003 : 7, 2005 : 225) who worked in a Canadian context and followed Weber, as a process of “rationalisation” of procedures and authority with regards to how indigenous people deal with the land.
- 29 According to one of the rangers, this structure was more or less imposed on the group by the Northern Land Council that had played an essential role in the creation and development of ranger jobs, groups and programs in the Top End of the Northern Territory since the mid-1990s.
- 30 Further, the establishment of the Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Aboriginal Corporation was supposed to provide the ranger group with a culturally appropriate “governance structure” promoting local empowerment (POCRT 2010a : 7). However, according to Philip Batty's analysis of the creation of « *Aboriginal corporations* » as part of the self-determination policy, the Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Aboriginal Corporation can be considered a product and an instrument of the Australian State. Batty (2005) argues that this kind of organization represents a major governmental technology reflecting a contradiction of the self-determination policy: the State was willing to restore Aboriginal people's self-determination power by building an Aboriginal bureaucracy modelled on and linked to the State bureaucracy (cf. Nadasdy 2003, 2005). The Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Aboriginal Corporation is part of this Aboriginal bureaucracy.
- 31 This corporation was supposed to ensure that the rangers' activities would be controlled by a board of leaders and traditional owners representing the seven language group historically associated with the Ngukurr community and region. In fact, the involvement of its board in the rangers' activities was very limited in 2009 and 2010. Some of the board members were complaining that there were very few board

meetings and that they could never go into the bush with the rangers. Some of them were not even sure if they still were board members or not. The Chairman of the board himself interpreted his role only as being a formality and considered the rangers as, I quote, « *a new system introduced by the government* » (05/08/2009).

- 32 None of the board members really knew about, understood or controlled the rangers' activities. Thus, the board didn't provide any feedback to the inhabitants of the community that they represented; and these inhabitants didn't know much about "their" rangers' work.
- 33 When the Yugul Mangi Rangers secured funding from the *Working on Country* program in 2008, a few months after the establishment of the Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Aboriginal Corporation, the Northern Land Council was put in charge of the management of this funding on their behalf: the rangers paid through this program became the Land Council's employees, and the bureaucratic organisation of their work was even reinforced. Above all, it was expected by the Land Council that rangers would follow some strict and externally imposed time management patterns and rules, such as the opposition between work and leave, leave being for recreational, personal or ceremonial reasons; work weeks of 38 hours, 9-to-5 work days and one-hour lunch breaks; as well as the planning of activities annually or several weeks up front.

### Creation of differences, rivalries and conflicts

- 34 This bureaucratisation process of "caring for country" responsibilities is based on the *de facto* transfer of these responsibilities to a professional and specialist body: the Yugul Mangi Rangers.
- 35 In other words, it is based on an opposition within the Ngukurr community between the rangers who constitute a minority monopolising the financial and technical means available to look after country, and community members who couldn't and still can't satisfy their responsibilities towards their country.
- 36 It is the rangers – and only the rangers – that outside bodies provide with funding, assets and assistance so that they can be involved in indigenous "natural resource management". It is also the rangers who are contacted in priority by outside bodies and non-indigenous people about any issue or initiative related to the environment of the Ngukurr region.
- 37 The Yugul Mangi Rangers thus benefit from a certain power of local representation, information management, decision-making, negotiation, and resource control concerning the entire region. This distinguishes them from other inhabitants of Ngukurr. Actors take advantage of this situation of power.
- 38 The rangers' uniform is a noticeable sign of the distinction as well as of the bureaucratic systems to which they belong. The rangers are supposed to « assist Traditional Owners to care for their land and sea country ». But, they generally undertake their activities without the involvement of the concerned traditional owners, who don't know much about their work.
- 39 For some inhabitants of Ngukurr, the transfer of "caring for country" responsibilities to the Yugul Mangi Rangers was a necessary and positive move, since nobody lives in the outstations and homelands of the Ngukurr region anymore. However, other community members see this transfer of authority as being imposed on the local

population and as alienating. Some people would rather prefer to be enabled to personally care for the territories and sites for which they have “traditional” rights and responsibilities or at least be involved in their management.

- 40 Traditional owners don’t necessarily support the rangers’ activities. Within the community, the legitimacy of this new category of actors caring for country on behalf of its custodians is sometimes questioned, resulting in latent or even explicit conflicts.
- 41 For instance, in 2009 and 2010, some people were blaming the rangers for not asking permission before going to and working on their country or for “trespassing”. Some people also accused the rangers who had culled or hunted feral animals on their country of having killed these animals “for fun”. And one traditional owner didn’t want the rangers to work on his country in the context of one of their projects if they couldn’t provide him with substantial royalties.
- 42 The relationships within the ranger group are of equal complexity to that of the relationship between the ranger group and the community.
- 43 Rivalries were frequent in this group, mainly between male rangers and female rangers. They culminated in 2010 when the women felt the men were increasingly excluding them from the activities of the ranger group and were using them as, I quote, “slaves”. They started considering a breaking point: quit their jobs or break the ranger group into two autonomous entities, one for females and one for males.
- 44 There also were rivalries and tensions within the ranger group about other issues, such as the access to the status of senior ranger or coordinator. The ways in which some projects had to be and were carried out created disagreements among the rangers too.

### Ongoing exogenous intervention

- 45 The implementation of conservation-as-development policies in Ngukurr is tied to the establishment of a new category of local actors: the rangers; and also to the creation of a new category of non-indigenous persons involved in local affairs. These were agents supposed to assist the Yugul Mangi Rangers in managing, conserving and sustainably exploiting the environment in the Ngukurr region.
- 46 None of the rangers’ projects was carried out without exogenous involvement: each of their projects was dependent on the punctual or ongoing participation of one or more non-indigenous persons who generally played a major role in the projects. The rangers’ work plan and program were therefore usually organised according to the visits solicited by these persons. During the latter’s absence, in fact, the rangers didn’t work that often on these particular projects.
- 47 Non-indigenous persons were generally involved in all stages and all aspects of the rangers’ projects: the initial idea and the definition of the project; the planning, organization, implementation and monitoring of its activities; the practices, representations, knowledge and skills on which these activities were based.
- 48 These non-indigenous people’s involvement in the Yugul Mangi Rangers’ projects contrasted with and contributed to explain the exclusion of local Aboriginal people from these projects.
- 49 I argue that this ongoing exogenous involvement in the rangers’ projects is an inherent (rather than incidental) part of the “ranger” system.

## Conclusion

- 50 The Yugul Mangi Rangers are not representative of all ranger groups of Northern Australia, since each of them has its specificities. However, this particular group should not be considered as an exception either. It is based on the same bottom-up approach and the same model as the other ranger groups of Northern Australia, and its projects are comparable to other groups' projects and are usually labelled identically. Concerning its composition, funding and outcomes, this group rather seems to belong to the average figure.
- 51 Despite my uni-sited but long-term fieldwork in Ngukurr – a practice that does not seem to be frequent in the domain of studying indigenous “natural resource management” – I believe my conclusions are more generic and are applicable to other situations.
- 52 Processes of bureaucratisation, of the reshaping of social interactions, and of non-indigenous involvement in the field of indigenous land and sea management should be systematically explored, so as to enlighten the implementation of conservation-as-development policies in Aboriginal Australia in a more critical perspective.
- 53 It seems indeed necessary to further engage with the emerging research that goes beyond the quite homogeneous discourse promoting ranger jobs, groups and programs as a way of empowering indigenous people while improving the ecological management and sustainability of the “indigenous eState”, so as to offer a nuanced view of what indigenous “natural resource management” is or could be.
- 54 I also believe that it is necessary to interrogate the scientific advocacy of “caring for country” initiatives, since these initiatives potentially encourage the issues of bureaucratisation, cleavages and dependence on non-indigenous intervention I have touched upon in this paper. It is here necessary to question our scientific responsibility.
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