

Narnu-Yuwa ki-Wundanyukawu [Law for the Sea Turtle]: delivering wide ranging ecological, social and economic outcomes from threatened species monitoring

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Introduction

In 2004 a group of researchers in collaboration with li-Anthawirriyarra Sea Ranger Unit (SRU) undertook a small scale research and monitoring project on West Island (Sir Edward Pellew Group) in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria, Northern Territory, Australia. Targeting flatback turtles (*Natator depressus*) at peak nesting times (end of September beginning of October) this two week “turtle camp” has since become a fixed annual feature on the li-Anthawirriyarra calendar. Significantly, over this time, the event has grown in size and scope beyond all expectation and now encompasses a number of social and economic dimensions not foreseen at project inception.

A brief background to the project, the key players involved and overall scientific objectives are included below. This outline is juxtaposed against perceptions of project value as expressed by Yanyuwa and Mara Traditional Owners before some discussion of present and future challenges ensues. The discussion suggests that “turtle camp” represents a valuable model for equitable and effective collaborative research that may be applied on Indigenous estates in the southwest Gulf, across northern Australia, and potentially more broadly.

The annual camp takes place in the Yanyuwa heartland, bordering Mara lands to the northwest. The ultimate success of the venture must be attributed to the enthusiasm and support of Aboriginal Traditional Owners, who approached the project with open minds, and to the SRU which continues to grow in capacity and commitment. The Traditional Owners, SRU, researchers, NT Government and WWF Australia worked together to source funding for a project to achieve specific Wundanyuka [sea turtle] outcomes but were

also active in exploring other potential benefits through an annual community camp. The professional dedication of all project partners in considering alternative cultural perspectives and working constructively towards a truly integrated and equitable monitoring and management regime for Wundanyuka ensured project longevity. Over years, these attitudes have given rise to strong and enduring relationships of mutual trust and respect. As a result, the Yanyuwa and Mara families have fully embraced the event and turtle camp today will see upwards of 70 to 80 men, women and children camped on the beach to support and share in the experience.

Initial Project Objectives

The Borrooloola region has had a long association with science and collaborative efforts for conservation. From the rescue of stranded animals in the aftermath of Cyclone Kathy in 1984, to ongoing dugong surveys and tracking, seagrass and turtle monitoring – particularly during a period of increasing sick turtles during the early/mid 2000s – Yanyuwa traditional owners and the SRU have been actively involved in all manner of habitat and species conservation initiatives. Along the way a number of positive and productive working relationships have been formed with a diverse range of environmental agencies, including Charles Darwin University (CDU) the world Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) and NT Parks and Wildlife. These relationships formed the basis for the flatback monitoring programme that commenced in 2004.

This project, initially funded through Commonwealth funding, aimed to establish monitoring of nightly nesting for flatback turtles at West Island, Sir Edward Pellew. Other scientific data was also collected such as sand temperatures, hatching success, and some movement data via satellite transmitters.

Additional project aims were to form long-term collaboration between scientists, Traditional Owners and Rangers. Since that time a two week census has been held every year to monitor nesting abundance of nesting flatback turtles at West Island. Data collected over this time returns an average of nine nesting turtles per night and high hatching success rates. In addition, the ongoing research programme has provided invaluable training opportunities for the SRU. Rangers have learned scientific techniques and methods in the field of turtle monitoring which also have application across a wider range of environmental conservation activities.

Additional Benefits

Not least of these positive outcomes is the platform that turtle camp provides for education and engagement with the wider community. The intergenerational transfer of scientific and cultural knowledge and understanding plays a vital role in the camp's overall success and takes on many forms allowing the Yanyuwa-Mara families and researchers to engage proactively with each other and younger generations in a two way learning process. Informative talks, the publication of posters and the screening of animations depicting Dreamings or Ancestral Beings, represent just a few of the outputs and tools facilitated and produced over years in conjunction with the annual camp. The overall importance of these outcomes is best articulated in the following synopsis of Yanyuwa-Mara family perceptions around *narnu-Yuwa ki-Wundanyukawu*. Key ingredients for success appear to include: a modicum of cultural sensitivity and awareness, strong community ownership and engagement, and perhaps most importantly of all, the formation of enduring relationships built on mutual respect and trust.

A Yanyuwa Perspective on *Narnu-Yuwa ki-Wundanyukawu*

When we first began this project it was mostly science based research and some people were a bit worried about what we were doing with Wundanyuka (sea turtles). However, because we care about all the things living on our land and in our seas, we saw the value in this monitoring work. Although we have our own ways of looking after things and this was acknowledged by people we worked with, we also found that our ways and scientific ways could work together to help make sure the turtles were looked after properly.

Looking after country in this way is one of the roles we entrust to our Ranger Unit.

li-Anthawirriyarra means people of the sea, "saltwater people", and our Rangers work under our guidance both independently of and in cooperation with other trusted researchers and organisations to make sure that this happens.

But this is only one of the many things we expect of our Rangers. We firmly believe that country needs people and people need country for both to stay healthy. This is what we have seen happening at Maabayj on West Island. From just a few families attending the camp at the inception we now sometimes see as many as 70 to 80 men, women and children camping on the beach and working with the rangers and researchers. Some of the kids have never been to their country or have only visited occasionally. They don't fully know what their country means or what their responsibilities are. Turtle camp gives us another opportunity to teach them *narnu Yuwa* (the Law) and for them to learn who they truly are and to feel good about themselves. These are just some of the positive social outcomes.

Over the past six or so years, more and more families are attending turtle camp. We now see the proper *ngimirringki* (owners for father's country) and *jungkayi* (custodians for mother's country) sitting and talking on the beach together over times past and times to come. This is good for the kids because they have a chance to learn their traditions and how they fit in with their kin and country. This is also good for older people who have spent their lives travelling across their land and sea. For example, some of our *bardi bardi* (older women) have composed three new songs for the islands over the past two years at turtle camp. Sadly, fewer and fewer songs have been made over the past years but turtle camp shows us that our culture is still strong and we still have a strong future. All we need to do is put things back in context and the context is country. When we think and work this way, we find our culture reenergised and this gives us confidence into the future.

It is interesting to notice that the more we work together (science and Yanyuwa-Mara way) the more and more people become interested in what we are doing. For the past three years we have had kids from the Community Education Centre (CEC) come out to turtle camp for a couple of days to share in the research work and the overall experience. They will be coming again in 2014. In addition, our Rangers give presentations at the CEC during the year and we also have a growing junior ranger programme we call *li-Jawina li-Anthawirriyarra* or little saltwater people still

learning. The CEC is planning to integrate turtle camp and the junior rangers more into the school curriculum. In addition, it has been a welcome surprise to find that many other non-Aboriginal Borroloola community members have embraced turtle camp and the whole ranger program. These too are also positive social outcomes.

Over the years we have watched as our kids transform out on the island. They become interested, engaged and respectful. They follow the old people, the Rangers and the researchers around asking questions. Some have been at turtle camp since it started and they are still fascinated and sometimes under your feet as you go about your work. They are our future owners and custodians and as we build on this and other work we know that some of them will also be our future Rangers.

We never take our work for granted but sometimes we forget how special and unique the turtle camp experience is. A lot of what we are doing now is with a view to building future financial independence and we are currently trialling the inclusion of paying guests to a portion of the turtle camp to financially support the continuity of the annual event. Since 2012 we have been overwhelmed by the interest and the positive feedback. After the 2012 trial, we have sought and been successful in obtaining funds from the Community Benefits Trust from McArthur River Mines and the Commonwealth Government's Indigenous Protected Area program to buy and install permanent luxury eco tents. The guests now experience the bush and the turtle camp and also enjoy good accommodation, toilets and showers as well as three square meals a day. We take them on boat tours and the bardi bardi hold song sessions during the day and teach them to dance at night. We also have scientific talks from the researchers and watch DVDs about the Dreamings that run across our country. After the dancing in the evening, we take our visitors down the beach to show them our research work and to let them observe from a safe distance the Wirndiwirndi (flatbacks) laying eggs.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, it appears that the success of this collaborative project ultimately resides in a shared concern for the health of

country and all the things in and on it. The relationships underpinning and sustaining all aspects of turtle camp are forged around this common cause. Given the valuable outcomes emerging out of this concern however, this brief overview represents but a starting point for a more detailed analysis of what has worked and what has not over the course of 10 years monitoring work at Maabayj, West Island. That analysis in itself will represent yet another collaborative exercise involving the Yanyuwa-Mara families, li-Anthawirriyarra Sea Ranger Unit and all the other key researchers and partners that have contributed to the success of this undertaking. Future published research in this regard promises insights into how that success might be replicated elsewhere and that is the intention of all parties involved. In the meantime, the relationships and concerns for country spoken of throughout this brief summary are best articulated in the words of a senior Yanyuwa woman with a brief introduction as follows:

One of our bardi bardi spoke these words late at night on the beach. She was walking alongside a Wirndiwirndi (flatback) who was returning to the water after nesting. We think they sum up how many Yanyuwa people feel about kin and kindred species. Wundanyuka are special to us. They have given us many things in the past and now provide opportunities for the present and the future.

Bawuji nya-ngatha nya-nganji

(you have finished my kinsman)

Wingkayarra yalayka ja-wukuku

(go now quickly, my senior mother's mother)

Janda-yanynymanjiyinku

(the sea laps the shore for you)

Kurda! Ka-warrka kurdandu bara...

(Oh you dear one! You have crawled so hard)

...Marnaji ngarna wambu barra yinda wingkayarra kajikaji

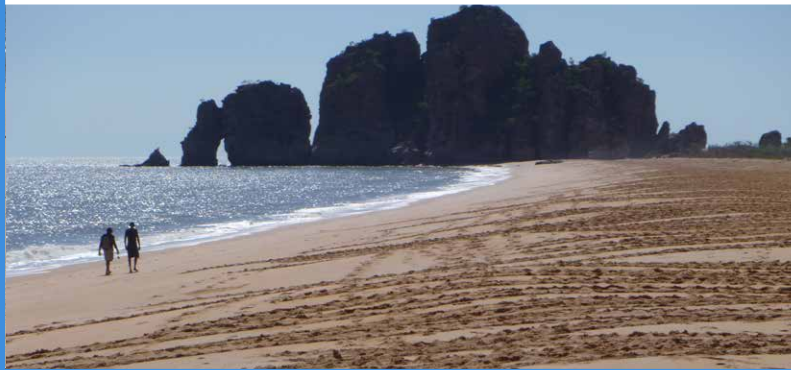
(I will remain here and you will quickly go)

Bawujiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!

(Farewell)

(Roddy Harvey with translation by Associate Professor John Bradley.)

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