# Interactive Conservation Perspectives: the Prospect for Aboriginal and Conservation Commission Joint Management of Island Ecosystems in the Northern Territory

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**Abstract**

Although the island ecosystems of the Northern Territory are known to be ecologically important, to date they have been little managed. The reason is that the vast majority of them are either under Aboriginal ownership or are currently being claimed under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) 1976. The conservation of the island ecosystems in the Northern Territory will therefore depend entirely on the establishment of a satisfactory working relationship between Aboriginal interests and the Conservation Commission. Cooperative management may be seen as a long term investment in future conservation for the Northern Territory. Without cooperative management there is a danger that island ecosystems may suffer irreversible environmental degradation. The successful management of island ecosystems in the Northern Territory will depend upon the continuation of a process which is evolving towards a cooperative endeavour with Aboriginal people. Developments which have occurred at Kakadu National Park, Gurig National Park (Cobourg Peninsula) and Kings Canyon provide some insights into approaches which might be adopted in the joint management of the Northern Territory's island ecosystems. All of these examples depend upon cooperative endeavour and goodwill between the Conservation Commission and the Aboriginal people. In addition, they depend upon a sharing of conservation perspectives and a mutual learning process. The practical application of this with respect to North Island will have an important bearing on the future management of the Northern Territory's island ecosystems.

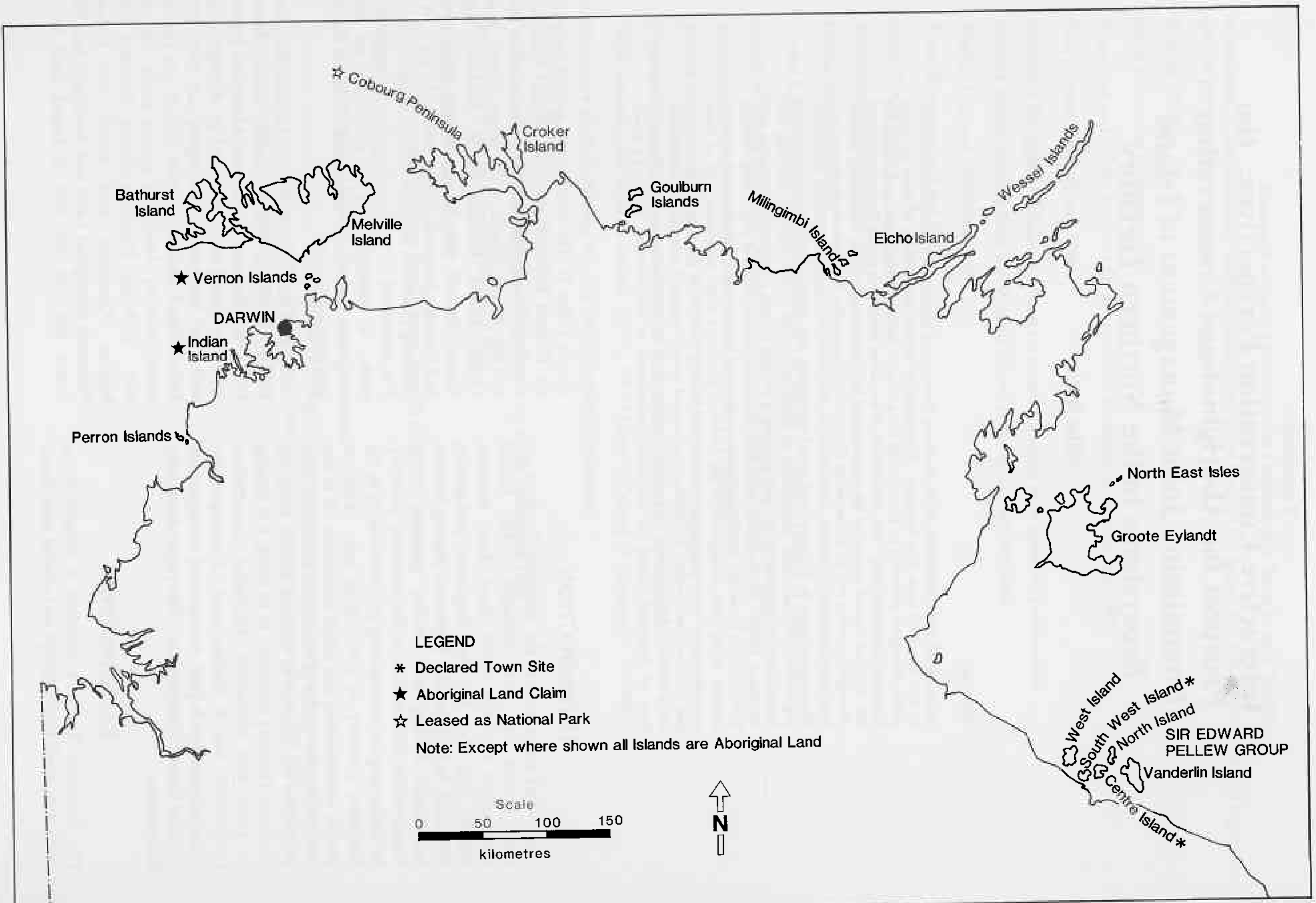
## INTRODUCTION

The island ecosystems of the Northern Territory are little known and little managed. The limited information available about them does, however, suggest that they are very important ecologically, especially as they provide important dugong habitats and turtle feeding and nesting grounds. The Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, in discharging its responsibility for conservation in the Northern Territory, is now looking more closely at marine environments and island ecosystems. It is also facing up to the reality of Aboriginal ownership of or interest in the majority of offshore islands along the Northern Territory coastline. In so doing, it is coming to grips with alternative Aboriginal conservation perspectives and is seeking ways of incorporating these perspectives in joint management arrangements or other forms of cooperation. This paper documents this process.

## BACKGROUND

The Northern Territory coastline is fringed by a number of small island groups and several quite large islands (Map 1). The small island groups include the Sir Edward Pellew Group, the Wessel Islands, the Goulburn Islands, the Vernon Islands, Indian Island, and the Perron Islands. The larger islands include Croker Island, Melville Island, Bathurst Island, Groote Eylandt with its surrounding small islands, and Cobourg Peninsula (Gurig National Park). While Cobourg Peninsula is not strictly speaking an island as it is connected to the mainland by the narrowest of necks, it features what is essentially an island ecosystem and shares management problems common with offshore islands.

Most of these islands (Groote Eylandt, the Wessel Islands, Goulburn Islands, Croker Island, Melville Island, and Bathurst Island were Aboriginal Reserves for many years) were converted to Aboriginal land under the **Aboriginal Land Rights Act (N.T. 1976).** Indian Island and the Vernon Islands are currently under claim by Aboriginal people under the same Act. Cobourg Peninsula (Gurig National Park) became Aboriginal land under the **Cobourg Peninsula Aboriginal Land and Sanctuary Act, 1981.** Under this Act, the area is leased back to the




Map 1 – N.T. ISLANDS

Conservation Commission for management as a National Park which is controlled by a Board with an Aboriginal majority. Following the outcome of the Borroloola Land Claim, the situation with respect to the Sir Edward Pellew Group of islands is complex. Two islands, Vanderlin and West Islands were successfully claimed as Aboriginal land and Commonwealth freehold title will be handed to the claimants. Two other islands, Centre Island and South West Island, have been gazetted as town sites by the Northern Territory Government with a view ultimately to provide port facilities in the area for Mt Isa mines. The remaining island, North Island, was not granted to Aboriginals, but it was recommended that the Northern Territory Government negotiate with Aboriginals concerning its future and these negotiations are proceeding at the moment.

It is clear that with the exception of Vanderlin, West and North Islands within the Sir Edward Pellew Group, nearly every other island in the Northern Territory is under Aboriginal ownership or is being claimed under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. This applies also to the parks and reserves currently managed by the Conservation Commission. Cobourg Peninsula (Gurig National Park) is under Aboriginal ownership, and the Vernon Islands Conservation Reserve and the Indian Island Forest Reserve are both currently under claim. In addition, it is likely that title to North Island within the Sir Edward Pellew Group will be vested in the Aboriginal people with some arrangement for lease back to the Conservation Commission for conservation purposes.

It is self evident that the conservation of island ecosystems in the Northern Territory will depend entirely on the establishment of a satisfactory working relationship between Aboriginal interests and the Conservation Commission. Success or failure in achieving this will have a big bearing on the ability of the Conservation Commission to discharge its responsibility for the management of the Territory's ecosystems, in this case the island ecosystems. Cooperative management may be seen as a long-term investment in future conservation for the Northern Territory. The Conservation Commission is awakening to the fact that this is where the future of conservation in the Northern Territory lies and that often it will be the case that *some* conservation is better than no conservation.

In some respects, Aboriginal ownership has contributed to the conservation of the Northern Territory's island ecosystems. For the most part, the islands have not been open to exploitation, sub-division etc., although there is a major mining development on Groote Eylandt. In some other respects, however, Aboriginal ownership has led to a deterioration of island ecosystems, but this is not well documented. In some cases, particularly where there is a feral animal population, lack of management has led to the multiplication of feral animals within the confines of an island with resulting severe destruction of vegetation and soil erosion.

## WHAT HAPPENS WITHOUT COOPERATIVE MANAGEMENT: THE CASE OF NORTH-EAST ISLAND

North East Island[1] is the largest of a small group collectively called the North East Isles (Map 1). These are small islands in the vicinity of Groote Eylandt. North East Island is 14 kilometres north-east by boat from Umbakumba Settlement. Rainfall is around 1 500 millimetres per year with significant falls occurring in the 'dry season'. It has an automatic weather station and a lighthouse.

The island is formed from ancient uplifted coral, sandstone and conglomerate rock overlay with sand. The eastern end has a high dune system covering 2 square kilometres and rising to 63 metres at the lighthouse. Slopes are steep and because of the recent erosion, exposed rock and coral is common on the windward or eastern side. Vegetation, now almost totally gone, consists of large clumps of *Spinifex longifolius* and the odd small tree and pandanus in the swale areas.

Coral, exposed by wind and water erosion, takes the form of sharp pinnacles up to 0.7 metres high. On the leeward side of the high dunes, a steep sloping face of deep sand is creeping eastwards, gradually covering mangroves, low shrub and other trees of the low lying areas.

An adjoining small area of the southern tip gives an excellent reference for the vegetation and soil status which would have existed before the degradation.

The lowlands to the east consist of approximately 3 square kilometres of low sand dunes to 20 metres elevation, covering sandstone and conglomerate rocks which are exposed at the shore line. Mangroves, casuarinas, eucalypts and rainforest species form low

1 This case study is drawn from a Report by Ian Melville, Soil Conservation Officer, Land Conservation Unit, Conservation Commission, N.T.

forest and woodland. Pandanus clumps are common in low areas which are not saline. A few permanent fresh water soaks occur within this area.

## Feral animals

Goats and deer were introduced from Umbakumba some 50 years ago. Except for spasmodic shooting, their numbers have been sufficiently maintained to destroy most of the palatable grasses and forbs.

Monitoring from 1970 onwards reveals marked changes in degradation and erosion. A black and white print taken on the headland of the weather station site in August, 1970 shows a good ground cover of *Spinifex longifolius*. Similarly prints taken in November, 1972 show a serious decline in the amount of spinifex cover and an increase in dead scrub land. At the same time, the higher dune system is showing signs of degradation on its leeward face. Photographs taken in 1983 show greater degradation of vegetation and wind erosion and a marked increase in the degradation of the high dune system.

## Commission Involvement

In April, 1985 the Senior Wildlife Ranger reported that traditional owners were expressing a desire to relocate feral animals to neighbouring islands where they would also exist in feral state. Because of the monitoring which has occurred on North East Island, following a rehabilitation project at the Bureau of Meteorology's automatic weather station, it is quite apparent that the populating of other islands with feral animals would be ecologically disastrous.

Recently a Soil Conservation Officer and Senior Wildlife Ranger visited the island to discuss the problem with the traditional owners and to determine their attitudes to destocking and rehabilitation. So far these discussions have been inconclusive, but it is apparent that to the traditional owners the feral animals are seen as a valued resource. Although, under the Soil Conservation Act, the Conservation Commission could demand the destocking of the area, this would not assist any future negotiations for the management of the Northern Territory's island ecosystems. Consequently, the Conservation Commission is faced with the need to accommodate Aboriginal aspirations while at the same time providing for proper management for conservation. In this case, the possibility might be the retention of a small herd of deer on the low lands separated from the high dunes by a deer proof fence. However, considering its degraded condition, the carrying capacity of the low lands should not exceed about 20 head in order to prevent further ecological decline. It would be necessary to maintain this level for many years to come.

It is quite clear that some form of well established cooperative management mechanism is required to protect island ecosystems similar to that of North East Island. It is from this point of view that the initiatives being taken at Cobourg Peninsula (Gurig National Park) and in other inland parks where Aboriginal people are involved, should be regarded as of critical significance for the management of the Northern Territory's island ecosystems.

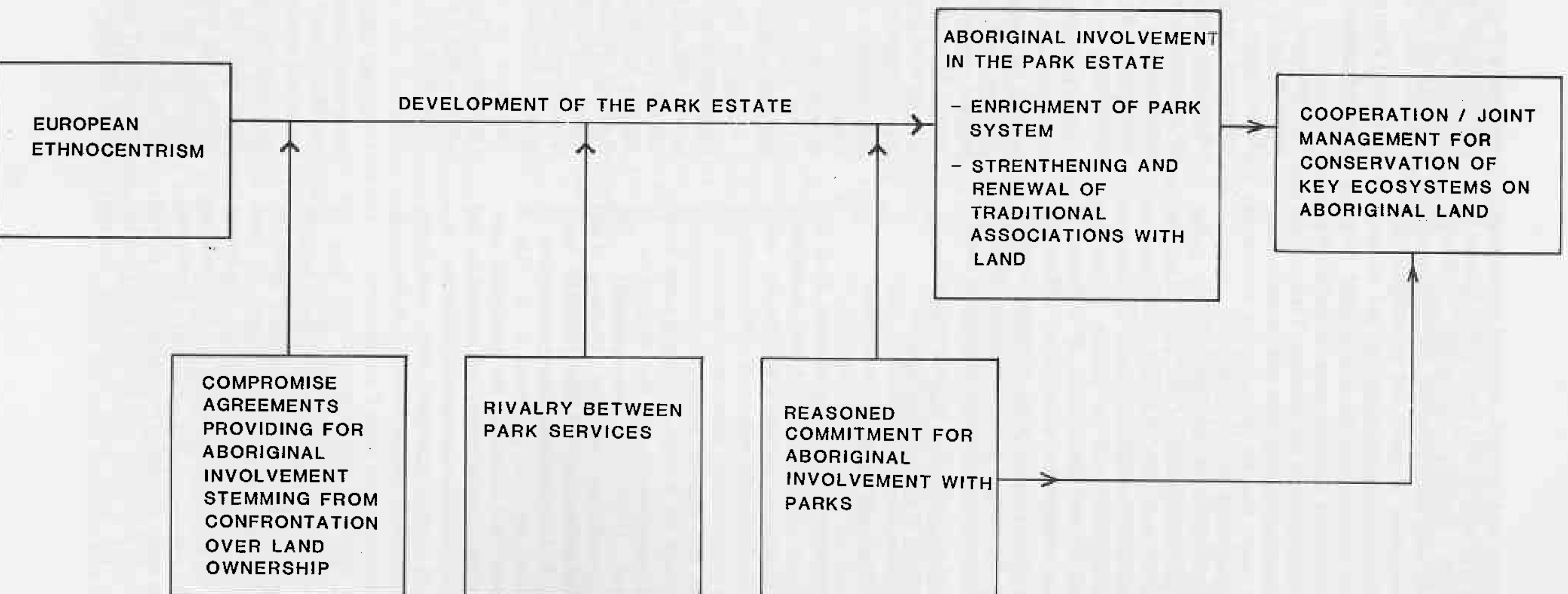
## JOINT MANAGEMENT FOR CONSERVATION IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY: THE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

The ultimately successful management of the island ecosystems in the Northern Territory will depend upon the continuation of a process which has been developing over recent years. This process is an evolutionary one beginning with strong European ethnocentrism in conservation matters and gradually leading through the establishment of a park estate which makes provision for Aboriginal involvement and for joint management, to cooperative endeavour/joint management for conservation of threatened and/or significant ecosystems on Aboriginal land (Figure 1).

Ethnocentrism is a common human trait. Dominant cultures tend to do things and see things their way. So, despite the fact that approximately one third of the Northern Territory's population is Aboriginal, management for conservation in the Northern Territory does not reflect this; it is largely a system of management which has derived from 19th century European thinking about the preservation of nature. By and large, it does not recognise traditional Aboriginal ties and responsibilities; nor does it recognise the fact that the so called beauty which has often formed the basis for an area to be conserved, is a result of many centuries of traditional habitation and management. Our parks and reserves, derived in concept largely from 19th century American experience, are regarded for the most part as areas with no room for people other than as visitors.

It is possible to recognise an evolutionary process which has occurred in recent years and which is leading away from European ethnocentrism in management for conservation in the Northern Territory, toward close involvement of Aboriginal people in that management. Although this process was initially concentrated on the development of parks and was sparked off by conflict/compromise over land ownership and has been spurred on by

Fig. 1
JOINT MANAGEMENT FOR CONSERVATION IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY
- THE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS



rivalry between park services, reasoned commitment to the idea is growing in both conservation agencies in the Northern Territory. Increasingly, deliberate attempts are being made to involve Aboriginal people in the management of parks and to recognise that their traditional ecological knowledge and resource management practices can be used to good effect. There is every hope that with some of the initiatives currently being taken in the Northern Territory, the necessary imagination and effort will be deliberately applied to ensure that the ethnocentrism inherent in existing management for conservation is overcome. The full involvement of Aboriginals in the policy planning and management of the park estate, the recognition of their skills and their involvement in other conservation management should be seen as a logical development and as making a positive contribution to the development of a system of conservation management which better reflects the population characteristics of the Northern Territory. It may also be used as a yardstick against which to measure the success or otherwise of initiatives taken.

The evolutionary process may be traced through the development of several major parks.

## Kakadu National Park

The establishment of Kakadu National Park lies somewhere at the beginning of the evolutionary process. Established in 1979, it was the first major Northern Territory park with an officially recognised Aboriginal involvement. However, despite the fact that Kakadu Park is owned freehold by the traditional owners through the Kakadu Aboriginal Land Trust, Aboriginal involvement in the first Plan of Management, (1980-1985), was minimal. The required consultation with the Northern Land Council was perfunctory, and many important issues relating to the lifestyle of the Aboriginals resident on Kakadu Park were not addressed in the Plan of Management. It is clear that the Aboriginals were seen at the time as something to be allowed for and tolerated, but there is certainly no indication of a movement to integrate Aboriginal culture and lifestyle with the Park in a positive sense or to encourage Aboriginal contributions to park management.

Despite the limitations of the first Plan of Management, on-ground dealings with the Aboriginal people have extended well beyond mere tolerance but not as far as genuine involvement in park management. There is no formal mechanism providing for joint management of the Park with the traditional owners. The Advisory Committee established under the plan of management has proved to be entirely ineffectual and largely non-operative. But there has been some involvement through employment both as rangers and as cultural advisors and through the judicious selection of staff who have established friendly informal relations on a day-to-day basis with the traditional owners.

## Cobourg Peninsula (Gurig National Park): A step further

As mentioned above, Cobourg Peninsula, linked tenuously to the mainland by a very narrow neck, shares many of the characteristics of island ecosystems. As it is also the area where the greatest efforts have been made in the attempt to development an appropriate mechanism for joint management for conservation, it may point the way for the management of the Northern Territory's island ecosystem.

The Park occupies an area of some 2 207 square kilometres and include the Cobourg Peninsula and most of the surrounding islands. A deeply indented coastline with seemingly endless curved sandy beaches provides a key attraction for visitors to the area. The interior of the peninsula is largely a wilderness of mixed eucalypt forest including in some areas dominant stands of the Kentia palm (*Gronophyllum ramsayi*), tidal swamps and lagoons fringed by paperbark forest, numerous small patches of monsoon forest/vine thicket in areas where there is a local abundance of moisture, coastal plains of grass and sedge, and dunes colonised by casuarinas.

Scattered through Cobourg Peninsula are reminders of the past history and occupation of the area. Tamarind trees around the coastline often indicate sites used for the processing of trepang (sea slug) by the Macassan traders who regularly visited Cobourg Peninsula shores during the monsoon season. The historic ruins, especially those of Victoria Settlement on the shores of Port Essington, serve as a reminder of previous futile attempts by Europeans to take over and 'develop' Cobourg Peninsula. The ruins, now surrounded by forest convey very well the sense of isolation and desperation that must have prevailed in those early days.

For the traditional owners, Cobourg Peninsula is more than a beautiful area; it is productive land which provides them with valued resources. Their traditional management practices, including burning, have over the centuries, ensured the maintenance of this productivity. For them, the Park has a variety of values. they perceive an essential intimacy between themselves and their land involving a complexity of rights, benefits, responsibilities and obligations. The land (natural environment) and may specific sites within the Gurig Park are invested with spiritual and

other significance. In addition, as the setting for their cultural development and adaptation, the Park provides for the traditional owners a range of natural resources supplying food and other material requisites.

Under the **Cobourg Peninsula Aboriginal Land and Sanctuary Act, 1981**, the land of Cobourg Peninsula is declared a sanctuary to be held in perpetuity and managed as a national park for the benefit and enjoyment of all people. the Act also acknowledges and secured for the future the right of Aboriginal people traditionally associated with the area to use and occupy the land and to participate in the management of the Park. In terms of Aboriginal involvement, Gurig National Park may be seen as a further stage in the evolutionary process. Aboriginal participation in the management of the Park is guaranteed under the Act.

The Act sets out a formal structure for Aboriginal involvement and participation in management and policy for Gurig National Park. The Park is administered by the Cobourg Peninsula Sanctuary Board. The Board consists of eight members appointed by the Minister, four of whom are traditional owners with the remaining four being members of the Conservation Commission. The Chairman, who is a traditional owner, has the casting vote. The functions of the Board are: (a) to prepare plans of management for the control and management of the Park; (b) to protect and enforce the rights of the traditional owners to use and occupy the Park; (c) to determine, in accordance with the Plan of Management, the rights of access to parts of the Park of persons who are not traditional owners; (d) to ensure adequate protection of sites on the sanctuary of spiritual or other importance in Aboriginal tradition; and (e) such other functions in or in relation to the Park as are imposed by or under the Plan of Management.

The functions of the Conservation Commission in relation to the Park include, on behalf of and subject to the directions of the Board; (a) the preparation of plans of management; and (b) the control and management of the Park. For the use of the Park, the Northern Territory Government pays to the traditional owners an annual fee of $20 000 indexed to the CPI.

This movement towards the formalisation of Aboriginal involvement in the park enterprise is framed in the Act, which came into existence as the negotiated settlement of the traditional owners' land rights claim on the Cobourg Peninsula under the federal **Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act, 1976**. So, even this progress towards the formalisation of Aboriginal involvement on Cobourg Peninsula may be seen as a political compromise stemming from confrontation over the ownership of land.

Gurig National Park also provided for increased Aboriginal involvement in the planning process. A Plan of Management for Gurig Park was prepared by the Conservation Commission after extensive consultation with the traditional owners.

The Plan of Management for Gurig National Park reflects lessons learned from the Kakadu experience. It does address questions of Aboriginal lifestyle, living areas, recreation areas, employment, training, economic opportunities, resources. Aboriginal views and concepts were incorporated throughout the planning process and are reflected throughout the Plan of Management document.

Some lessons were not learned. The document is lengthy and complex and as such is unusable by the traditional owners. Despite an effort to encourage the involvement of all the traditional owners in developing the final Plan of Management through a video explaining the recommendations of the Plan of Management in both the Iwaidja language and English, the complexity of the document defies easy understanding by the traditional owners, and it certainly does not translate easily into their own language. All that can be said about the video is that it covers the main recommendations of the Plan of Management to the point were the community should not be surprised by anything which the Plan of Management contains or by any development which occur as a result of implementation of the Plan of Management.

## Kakadu and Gurig: Launching pads for greater commitment

The basis for Aboriginal involvement in both Gurig National Park and in Kakadu National Park has been a political compromise stemming from confrontation over land ownership. This has coloured and substantially influenced models developed in those two parks and raises some questions about the level of commitment to real Aboriginal involvement. Both park agencies however give every indication that their level of commitment in this area is increasing not just as a matter of political expediency but because the experience of Kakadu and Gurig has highlighted the value of involving Aboriginal people in the planning and management of a national park and has sensitized increasing numbers of staff of those agencies to the environmental knowledge and skills which the Aboriginal people have at their disposal. Both agencies give every indication that they are prepared

to learn from the Gurig and Kakadu experiences, and expand their commitment in this area. Although the political backdrop remains, its influence is now less, and the Aboriginal presence is being increasingly seen as adding an important dimension to the concept of a park.

According to Professor Sally Weaver, from the Department of Anthropology, University of Waterloo, Canada, there is a clearly discernable trend from Kakadu to Gurig. "This trend appears to have moved from informal (Kakadu) to formal (Cobourg) mechanisms for Aboriginal participation, from advisory to authorative roles for Aboriginal owners, from a management focus to a policy and planing focus for Aboriginal input, and from the absence of formal boards to boards composed of Aboriginals and non Aboriginals with policy as well as planning functions." She goes on to point out however that, although Cobourg set the legal precedent for joint management in its Act, in practice it has not yet achieved a joint operational status. In fact, the general conclusion is that neither Kakadu nor Cobourg measure up to the yardstick of real Aboriginal participation in policy, planning or management. Although the mechanisms have been put in place, the implication that the Aboriginals have the resources to bring to the decision-making process (knowledge, skills, authority etc) and the capacity to use these resources, is not well founded.

The respective experiences of Gurig and Kakadu have heightened the sensitivity of both park services towards Aboriginal involvement in general. With not a little sense of rivalry, both services are now looking toward further endeavours in this area and both are actively pursuing new models based upon those earlier ones.

## Kings Canyon: Aboriginal involvement from the ground up

Although located in the desert region of Central Australia, the model for Aboriginal involvement being developed for the proposed Kings Canyon National Park is furthest along the evolutionary scale, and holds the most relevance for the conservation management of the Northern Territory's island ecosystems. the area set aside by the Northern Territory Government to be declared as Kings Canyon National Park encompasses 725 square kilometres of outstanding scenery, varied ecosystems with important vegetation and fauna, and fascinating cultural history. Located some 325 kilometres south-west of Alice Springs by road, the proposed park includes the western end of the George Gill Range and features the dramatic landscapes of Kings Canyon and Carmichael Crag, as well as a number of interesting gorges with lush vegetation and shady rock pools. It also extends into the surrounding sandy plains and desert dune country. The area has a very special significance for the Luritja people whose long and intimate association with the land continues into the present with the establishment of three freehold living areas within the boundaries of Kings Canyon National Park. In addition, it is an important centre for recreation and tourism, attracting local, interstate and international visitors in increasing numbers each year. These features combine to make the park a very significant addition to the Northern Territory park system.

**Planning, with and for**

For the first time in the Territory's history, Aboriginal people are being fully involved in the planning of a park from the ground up.

A Plan of Management was recently prepared jointly by the Aboriginal people with ties to the area, the Conservation Commission and the Central Land Council. These groups have been sitting down at Kings Canyon, a week at a time, discussing issues and working on the draft for the Plan of Management. The resulting document sets management objectives, address current issues, and propose appropriate measures to guide management and development. Because of the significance of the area to the Luritja people, and the establishment of living areas in conjunction with Kings Canyon National Park, it also takes into account the Aboriginal people's wishes and make provision for their involvement in park management and for the maintenance of Aboriginal values.

The presence of the Aboriginal people and their involvement in park management will give a distinct emphasis to the management of Kings Canyon National Park. It is intended that the park should provide Aboriginal people with opportunities for the protection and strengthening of cultural values and for the current expression of their culture on land with which they have been traditionally associated and for which they are regarded amongst Aboriginal communities as having certain rights and responsibilities. Within this context, and against the backdrop of management for the conservation and protection of natural, cultural and scientific values traditionally associated with national parks, the Aboriginal people have expressed their willingness to enable park visitors to have meaningful and positive contact with Aboriginal culture both in its historical dimension and its current expression, to understand more about this culture and chosen lifestyle, and to appreciate Aboriginal conservation perspectives. Within this framework, and in association with a proposed 'wilderness lodge' development, the

Aboriginals propose to run tours for visitors which will explore various aspects of the park and highlight its Aboriginal character.

There is a deliberate attempt here to recognise and incorporate the Aboriginal perspective and even to build the concept of the proposed park around the Aboriginal contribution. It is recognised that there is a need to provide tourists with a counter-balance to the rather negative impressions gained of Aboriginals living in deprived circumstances in and around Alice Springs. It is intended that visitors to the proposed park should have positive encounters with Aboriginal people and gain some appreciation of the cultural history of the region and of the tenaciousness of Aboriginal culture despite the many obstacles over the years. A major conclusion of the Northern Territory Tourism Priorities Plan prepared by the Tourist Commission was that visitors to the Northern Territory expected and looked for an encounter with Aboriginal culture but that, at the movement, this was something they did not find. Developments in this Park are aimed at the partial rectification of this.

A prime aim of management for the park is to reconcile the expressed objectives and aspirations of the Aboriginal people with the conservation objectives normally associated with a national park. A key planning tool in this regard has been a compatibility matrix in which Aboriginal aspirations and objectives are assessed against normal conservation objectives for degree of potential conflict. After much discussion in the field, Aboriginal aspirations and objectives were defined for the areas of (a) culture/Tjukurpa (Aboriginal law)/caring for the country; (b) involvement in park management/ultimate aspirations with regard to Park management; (c) income/employment/economic enterprises; (d) housing/community facilities; (e) education; (f) lifestyle; and (g) health. Each of these categories was further broken down into a number of specific objectives. Table 1 shows a sample page from the matrix. As a planning tool it is proving to be extremely useful. It clearly shows that for the most park there is no real conflict between Aboriginal aspirations and normal conservation objectives, but it does highlight those areas of potential conflict which must be addressed by the Plan of Management, and much of the discussion at Kings Canyon has been concerned with finding appropriate ways to resolve such conflict in a park context. This has led to solutions such as the development of an agreed zoning plan, and the establishment of agreements reached between the Conservation Commission and the Aboriginal people on such things as voluntary restrictions of traditional hunting to specific areas.

**Caring for the land - A common goal**

It is the common interest in caring for the land which draws the Aboriginal people and conservation interests together in the management of a national park such as Kings Canyon. The land is the single and most important aspect of Aboriginal culture. It is the key to a harmonious way of living which involves residing on, taking care of and maintaining the land. If for some reason, for example dispossession or foreign occupation, Aboriginal people cannot care for and maintain their land, all other aspects of their lifestyles fall out of kilter and eventually collapse. Aboriginals have always known this. It is now recognised as the basic premise in all arguments for the granting of land rights and right of access to land with which Aboriginals have traditional affiliations.

**The search for a management model**

During all the time spent sitting down and talking at Kings Canyon, a constantly recurring theme has been the search for an appropriate management model for the park, and this matter is still being actively pursued. There is a general commitment on the park of the Conservation Commission to the involvement of the Aboriginal people in the management of the park and the formalisation of that involvement in the Plan of Management. Present thinking is that the Plan of Management should provide for a Local Management Committee which would include in majority Aboriginal representation and would have, within a prescribed ambit, a decision-making role in relation to park management issues of specific concern to the local community. It is intended that the Local Management Committee will be fully involved in future park management planning, including future revisions of the Plan of Management. It will also be represented on interview panels for the selection and promotion of staff in the park, and have a range of other decision-making powers. The extent of Aboriginal representation on the Local Management Committee and the extent of that committee's powers are still matters for discussion. The Minister for Conservation has indicated to the Aboriginal residents of Kings Canyon that the Government would accept a Local Management Committee with an Aboriginal majority. There is a general preference for a local body tailored to local requirements, avoiding the highly structured and rather cumbersome character of the Gurig Board and placing real local decision-making power in the hands of the resident Aboriginal community.

Although these issues are as yet unresolved, the fact that an active search is going on for appropriate solutions, and that the Aboriginal people are taking part in this search, shows how far we have come along the evolutionary trail from the days when Aboriginal associations with parks were merely tolerated or worse.

TABLE 1: SAMPLE SHEET FROM COMPATABILITY MATRIX.

○ NO POTENTIAL CONFLICT
* LOW POTENTIAL CONFLICT
+ HIGH POTENTIAL CONFLICT

| ANANGU OBJECTIVES / CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES | INCOME/EMPLOYMENT/ECONOMIC ENTERPRISES CONTD/? | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | For anangu to establish a fuel depot and retail outlet in one of the living areas. | To establish an art and craft retail centre within the Park. | To provide for controlled stabling of horses in the Wunmera living area and adjustment in another area of the Park for use in a horse trail riding enterprise. | On a commercial basis, to provide bush tucker tours for visitors in the Lila living area. | On a commercial basis, to provide wild life photographic expeditions for visitors to the Ulpanyali living area. | In the long term to substantially increase the level of anangu ranger staff in the Park. |
| To preserve the natural, cultural scientific and educational values of the park. | * | * | + | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| To conserve the present distribution and diversity of native plant and animal species in the park. | * | * | + | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| To give special protection to vulnerable, endangered, uncommon and rare species of native plants and animals in the park, and also to species which are locally significant. | * | * | + | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| To rehabilitate landscapes disturbed by Man's activities, where appropriate. | * | * | + | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| To minimise the impact of commercial utilization of park resources on other park values | + | * | + | ○ | * | ○ |
| To record and preserve sites of archeological and historical importance. To control exotic plants and animals. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| To protect the park and adjacent areas from injury by fire. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| To preserve the recreational values of the area and provide for the recreational use and enjoyment of the park by the public. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| To monitor and, where necessary control the recreational use of the park. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

TABLE 1 continued

| ANANGU OBJECTIVES / CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES | INCOME/EMPLOYMENT/ECONOMIC ENTERPRISES CONTD/2 | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | For anangu to establish a fuel depot and retail outlet in one of the living areas. | To establish an art and craft retail centre within the Park. | To provide for controlled stabling of horses in the Wunmera living area and adjistment in another area of the Park for use in a horse trail-riding enterprise. | On a commercial basis, to provide bush tucker tours for visitors in the Lila living area. | On a commercial basis, to provide wild-life photographic expeditions for visitors to the Ulpanyali living area. | In the long term to substantially increase the level of anangu ranger staff in the Park. |
| To provide opportunities for solitude and adventure in a natural environment by maintaining remote areas largely free from disturbance by man. | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| To promote a better understanding of the park and its various aspects by providing appropriate interpretation and education facilities and programs. | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| To provide for the safety of visitors. | O | O | * | O | O | O |
| To offer a balanced diversity of tourist and recreational opportunities consistent with the conservation of the park's natural values. | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| To provide an appropriate framework and necessary administrative mechanism and safeguards to ensure the smooth and efficient operation of the park for the achievement of the other objectives. | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| To encourage appropriate research into the natural environment and cultural history of the park, and into past and present land uses. | O | O | O | O | O | O |

COMPATIBILITY MATRIX - ANANGU/CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

## INTERACTIVE CONSERVATION PERSPECTIVES

If it is true that the conservation of the Northern Territory's island ecosystems can only be effectively achieved through some form of co-operative management, it is equally true that much is to be gained in this respect by a sharing of conservation perspectives between the Aboriginal people and the Conservation Commission. Without over romanticising the Aboriginals conservation ideal, it is true to say that the Aboriginal conservation perspective contains lessons for the management of sensitive ecosystems such as those found on islands. Equally, proper conservation will be enhanced by an Aboriginal understanding of modern conservation techniques. A joint management arrangement provides an ideal framework within which the Conservation Commission may learn to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives in its management of island ecosystems and Aboriginal people may learn some of the benefits of modern conservation management.

Because Aboriginals have cared for this country for many centuries, it is often assumed that they are natural conservationists. This is not always a valid assumption. Aboriginals with modern technology at their disposal can be equally as destructive of their environment as other social groups. Nevertheless, it is true to say that Aboriginal culture embodies a deep commitment to caring for their country and it would be difficult to find an individual Aboriginal person without some underlaying empathy for the philosophy of conservation. Within the framework of a co-operative management arrangement these deep commitments may contribute positively towards the common endeavour.

One must, however, be prepared to accept that Aboriginal culture is not always guided by Aristotelian logic preoccupied as it is with cause and effect, and often exhibits apparent inconsistencies. So, for example, the people of Cobourg Peninsula will argue that the marine resources (turtle, dugong, crabs etc) are inexhaustible. They have an unfailing belief of never-ending abundance, and when questioned about the possibility of over-exploitation, invariably reply with "Can't finish him up". Yet, they are conscious at the same time that some of the marine resources are dwindling. They are aware, for example, that dugong are now very scarce, and blame the prawn trawlers for frightening the dugong away, but are not prepared to listen to suggestions that their hunting of the dugong may be responsible for dwindling numbers on the northern shores. They are also very responsive to arguments for conservation for their children and grandchildren. It is a clear tenet of Aboriginal culture that abundance available to one generation should be passed on to the succeeding generation. It is this argument which holds most sway in drawing Aboriginal people into co-operative management for conservation. They see that, from many points of view, the objectives of the Conservation Commission and their own objectives coincide. However, they don't always understand our concept of a national park. Often, they regard the developments that are part of a national park, for example, toilets, picnic areas, walking trails, as an unnecessary clutter and often see pastoral properties without this clutter as being closer to their concept of a conserved area than our national parks.

## NORTH ISLAND: WHERE THE FUTURE LIES?

As mentioned above, the resolution of the Borroloola Land Claim resulted in complex provisions for the Sir Edward Pellew Group of islands with the Land Commissioner recommending that the future of North Island should be the subject of negotiations between the Northern Territory Government and the Aboriginal people. These negotiations are continuing and have been protracted. They are taking place on the basis of a possible offer of freehold title to the traditional owners, but with provision for a lease-back to the Conservation Commission for conservation purposes.

Following fauna surveys conducted by the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research in 1966-67, the CSIRO recommended that North Island and other islands in the Sir Edward Pellew Group should be reserved as high security fauna sanctuaries. It was noted that North Island had never been grazed and had suffered very little burning. The adjacent mainland had been extensively burnt annually and was being grazed by cattle with resultant catastrophic effects on the native species of wildlife.

North Island has some special features. It contains small areas of stunted monsoon forest that is found in this region only on islands in the Sir Edward Pellew Group. This vegetation is the habitat of certain bird species such as the Red-crowned Pigeon (*Ptilinopus regina*) and the Emerald Dove (*Chalcophaps indica*). This vegetation and the birds that inhabit it are found nowhere else in the McArthur River region. One species of small mammal, the red-eared marsupial mouse (*Antechinus macdonnellensis*) was found on North Island and not elsewhere in the region. This is an outlying population of a Central Australian species. A substantial colony of rock-wallaby (*Petrogale brachyotis*) occurs on North Island. This species has suffered a great decline in the region during the last sixty years and it was found

only on North and Centre Islands and in one small colony on Bauhinia Downs Station.

The marine fauna is also of special interest. These islands and surrounding islets and stacks are breeding grounds for seabirds. North Island, including Paradise Bay, and small sandy islets nearby are breeding grounds for marine turtles, one of which, the flatback turtle (*Chelonia depressa*) is an endemic Australian species. Marine turtles have been heavily exploited for food in most parts of the world and the largest populations are now found in northern Australia. The dugong *Dugong dugong*) is another species that is common in the Sir Edward Pellew Islands. It as also been heavily exploited for food in the rest of its range around the northern Indian Ocean and the Southwest Pacific. the populations at the bottom of the gulf are believed to be the largest now existing. The marine turtles and the dugong are listed as endangered fauna by IUCN. As far as possible, these animals should not be disturbed, and the seagrass beds protected.

It is not surprising that the CSIRO continues to believe that these are compelling reasons supporting their original recommendation that North Island should be gazetted as a high security nature reserve, and that, should people be allowed entry to the island, no burning of vegetation be allowed, firearms and domestic animals, especially dogs and cats, be banned, and disturbance to the rock wallabies, nesting colonies of turtles, seabirds and dugongs be avoided.

Of course, all this is easier said than done. If the Aboriginal people are to be granted title with a lease-back arrangement to the Conservation Commission, then either the existing legislation will need to be changed to enable this to occur, or the area would need to be managed under a separate Act as at Cobourg Peninsula (Gurig National Park). There is general agreement that a multitude of such Acts is undesirable, and therefore the Northern Territory Government is exploring the possibility of amending **The Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act** to enable the Conservation Commission to declare a park or reserve on Aboriginal-owned land, should such an agreement be reached with the traditional owners.

It is clear that, if the interests of all parties are to be looked after, an appropriate mechanism for joint management of North Island by the Conservation Commission and the Aboriginal traditional owners needs to be put into place. The priorities of the two groups differ somewhat.

Conservation Commission priorities for management of North Island include protection from fire, exclusion of dogs, cats, cattle and other animals and plants exotic to North Island, prevention of illegal hunting, restricting of occupancy to that required in the interest of management or enjoyed as a matter of prior right, and general environmental protection precluding any major habitat disturbance.

For the Aboriginal people, North Island has other significance. The Sir Edward Pellew Group is regarded as forming part of the traditional lands of the Yanyuwa people, and for these people the islands are important cultural and religious areas. They rely on them for traditional economic pursuits. The islands also contain important sacred sites and burial areas, as well as providing the Yanyuwa with a large percentage of their traditional 'bush food' intake. Plants, fish, sea turtle and dugong are still hunted and collected regularly and this activity also provides an important social activity of the Yanyuwa. None of these resources are exploited indiscriminately. Techniques are by and large traditional, and the capture, butchering, preparation and distribution are governed by strict rules of social behaviour. On a yearly average, the Yanyuwa take approximately thirteen dugongs and a slightly higher number of sea turtles. By comparison, there are reports of up to five dugongs drowned in barramundi nets in one tidal period and others shot with high powered rifles by professional fishermen operating in the area.

In this case where there are two clear sets of values, adequate conservation of North Island will depend upon a sharing of conservation perspectives and reconciliation of those values. If the Conservation Commission can accept this challenge and achieve effective joint management of North Island, then it augurs well for the conservation of other Northern Territory islands.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion is a very simple one. Because of the Northern Territory's islands largely belong to Aboriginal people, the adequate conservation of island ecosystems is dependent upon the Northern Territory Government joining with Aboriginal people, learning together with Aboriginal people, sharing conservation perspectives, reconciling differences, and reaching agreements for the joint management of these important ecosystems.