

# Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Plan

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The Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Plan is an innovative conservation project based in the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia. The project is owned by the Wunambal Gaambera Native Title holders, the Indigenous Traditional Owners. It involves partnerships with both the private and public conservation sectors. Indigenous world views and cultural perspectives are paramount in the project, and Indigenous governance structures and protocols are supported and promoted. Indigenous knowledge and Western science are respected and integrated, and cultural, social and economic aspirations are incorporated with conservation outcomes.

## Wunambal Gaambera Country and conservation significance

Wunambal Gaambera Country encompasses approximately 2.5 million hectares in the North Kimberley Region of north-west Western Australia. It includes 900,000 hectares of varying landscapes and 1.6 million hectares of seascapes, including islands. The statutory tenure of the area includes Aboriginal reserves, conservation reserves, mining reserves, leasehold and Crown lands.

The region is nationally and internationally recognised for its outstanding conservation values, both natural and cultural. It forms part of three of the World Wide Fund for Nature's Global 200 Priority Ecoregions for conservation (WWF 2010), is one of Australia's National Biodiversity Hotspots and is covered by the West Kimberley National Heritage Listing. There are considerable numbers of threatened, endemic, migratory and marine species in the region (DSEWPC 2012). It is a significant tourism destination with a range of attractions, encompassing spectacular scenery like Punamii-Uunpuu (Mitchell Falls) and extensive rock art galleries. It also supports an increasing expedition cruise industry (Scherrer et al. 2011).

Most importantly it is the ancestral lands and seas of the Wunambal Gaambera people who, with their neighbours, make up the Wanjina Wunggurr cultural bloc. Wunambal Gaambera people call their ancestral lands and seas their 'Uunguu', their living home, as they have for many thousands of years. Today there are over 600 Wunambal Gaambera people who reside in a number of settlements in the region, and the Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation (WGAC) is the formal governance body responsible to them for the management of their Uunguu (Moorcroft et al. 2012).



Wunambal Gaambera Country – the gorge downstream of Punamii-Uunpuu (Mitchell Falls). ©Photo: Annette Huzicka

## The healthy country concept

'Country' is an Aboriginal English word that encapsulates the way Indigenous Australians understand and relate to their ancestral estate (see Rose 2002). Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners believe that if their country is healthy, then they will be healthy. This belief, commonly held by Indigenous Australians, is also recognised by Western science (see Burgess et al. 2005; Hunt et al. 2009). With impending Native Title determination under Australia's *Native Title Act 1993*, and a growing momentum of ideas for their country from external interests, the Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners wanted to develop a strategic framework that recognised their responsibility to manage the cultural and natural values of their country today and into the future. They wanted a framework that would help them:

- Articulate in modern contexts the principal values of healthy country and how to maintain those values
- Manage and look after *lalai* (creation) places in the ways of Wanjina Wunggurr cultural responsibilities and values
- Enjoy, live on, gain sustenance and manage Wunambal Gaambera Country land and sea as one country
- Raise their capacity to meet their cultural responsibilities and manage country on their own terms (Vigilante and Mangolomara 2007).

## The Healthy Country Plan

In 2006, Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners, through the WGAC, invited Bush Heritage Australia (BHA), an Australian not-for-profit conservation non-government organisation (NGO), to be a key partner to help them develop and implement the Healthy Country Plan. The partnership, which is supported by written agreements, is in two stages: (1) a two-year planning stage to develop the plan and (2) a 10-year stage to help implement the plan. The first stage was completed in early 2011 and the second stage is now in effect. As well as BHA other key partners are the Kimberley Land Council (KLC), the regional Traditional Owner representative body, and the Australian Government's Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) and Working on Country programs.



Figure 1. A page from one of the pictorial reports showing members of the working group visiting country as part of considering the draft plan. Source: WGAC (2009)

The Healthy Country Plan was developed using The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Action Planning (CAP) tool. The CAP process uses an adaptive approach whereby the results of regular monitoring of specified indicators inform a continuing planning cycle. Plans are amended and updated as required so that work stays on track to achieving an agreed vision. Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners were supportive of using CAP as they recognised that the use of an international conservation planning tool with an extensive support network and a strong ecological base would be beneficial. However, they also wanted to ensure that Wanjina Wunggurr law and culture remained paramount and was afforded the highest priority in the process and the resulting plan. When the Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Plan was developed, there were very few Australian examples of CAP being used in a cultural landscape and cross-cultural context. The partners adapted the conservation planning approach so that:

- Wunambal Gaambera governance structures and protocols are supported and promoted
- Wunambal Gaambera world-views and cultural perspectives are paramount
- Wunambal Gaambera social, cultural and economic aspirations are incorporated with conservation outcomes
- Wunambal Gaambera Indigenous knowledge and Western science are respected and integrated.

## The planning process

Importantly, the planning process involved members of Native Title claimant families, rather than people from residential communities (see Davies 2003). It included a series of participatory workshops: two large on-country workshops with members of Native Title claimant family groups to develop the vision and identify conservation targets; one smaller group workshop to develop objectives and strategies; one large workshop with members of Native Title claimant family groups to further work on strategies and actions; a travelling workshop and field trip to consider the first draft; and an approval meeting with members of Native Title claimant family groups. Regular feedback was given to participants between workshops in the form of pictorial reports (Figure 1), as well as at the commencement of each workshop. An unhurried and culturally respectful approach proved to be important, confirming an important characteristic of engagements with Indigenous people (Horstman and Wightman 2001). Healthy country partners BHA and the KLC assisted with the process, including facilitating the workshops, recording the process and preparing the pictorial reports, and providing ecological knowledge.

To support the workshops, a number of concurrent activities were also scheduled, such as turtle and dugong surveys with the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA); recording of traditional ecological knowledge (a project supported by WWF-Australia); and fire management operations in preparation for carbon abatement opportunities. These activities, although not strictly part of the planning process, resulted in Traditional Owners spending more time on country, assessing country, and passing on knowledge. All this helped to inform the workshops. It also helped build trusting working relationships with the *aalmara* (non-Indigenous) scientists and partner organisations, a critical factor in the success of the project.

Wunambal Gaambera governance structures and protocols were promoted throughout the process and included: acknowledging elders' roles and customary responsibilities in decision-making for specific cultural sites and *graa* (family estates); respecting gender and in-law avoidance relationships by convening men's and women's discussion groups; holding workshops and associated activities on-country, reinforcing the Indigenous view that 'to speak for country you need to be on country'; and maintaining flexible timelines to respect cultural obligations such as 'sorry time' (funeral and grieving periods).

## The planning concepts

Conservation planning concepts based on ecological systems were adapted to include cultural perspectives and aspirations defined by Traditional Owners. By incorporating these cultural perspectives and aspirations, an Indigenous world view is respected and promoted, and the long-term cultural, social and economic health of Wunambal Gaambera people is supported. Such Indigenous perspectives and goals are often ignored or misinterpreted in environmental management processes (Lane and Corbett 2005). Examples of how the conservation planning concepts were adapted are detailed below.

The project area is defined by culture, not by bioregion or a catchment. The whole of Wunambal Gaambera Country, both land and sea, is the project area, with the process and the plan being 'tenure-blind', representing the cultural landscape of the Wanjina Wunggurr Uunguu Native Title claim. Language names and words for places, plants and animals are also used. These adaptations not only recognise and promote Indigenous views of landscapes and seascapes; they also assist with intergenerational transfer of knowledge. The use of such concepts and words additionally serve to describe and interpret Wunambal Gaambera culture and law when there are no adequate English words to do the same.

Conservation targets include tangible and intangible cultural targets as well as ecosystems, species assemblages and threatened species. Tangible cultural targets include important foods that Traditional Owners continue to hunt, collect and consume, such as bush plants, *mangguru* and *balguja* (marine turtles and dugong), *aamba* (kangaroos and wallabies) and other meat foods, as well as rock art and cultural places on islands. Intangible cultural targets such as ways of doing things include 'right way fire' (burning according to customary responsibilities – at the right time, at the right place and by the right people) and *Wanjina Wunggurr* itself (Figure 2).

Key parts of target Target		Landscape/ seascape health	Cultural health	Biophysical condition	Size	Overall Health
Wanjina Wunggurr Law – our culture	1	Good	Poor	–	–	Fair
Right way fire	2	Fair	Fair	Fair	Fair	Fair
Aamba and other meat foods	3	Good	Fair	Good	Good	Good
Wulo	4	Good	Fair	Good	Good	Good
Yawal	5	Very good	Fair	Good	Good	Good
Bush plants	6	Good	Fair	Good	Good	Good
Rock art	7	Good	Poor	Fair	–	Poor
Cultural places on islands	8	Good	Poor	Fair	–	Poor
Fish and other seafoods	9	Good	Fair	Good	Good	Good
Mangguru and balguja	10	Good	Fair	Good	Good	Good
<b>Overall Health of Wunambal Gaambera Country:</b>						Fair

Figure 2. Matrix from the plan showing the conservation targets, their health (viability) and the overall health of Wunambal Gaambera Country at the time of plan development. The ratings for the key attributes of landscape/seascape health, cultural health, biophysical condition and size, are based on Traditional Owners' knowledge and Western science and range from Very good (dark green), requiring minimal work under the plan, to Poor (red), warning that if no work is done soon then the target may never be healthy again. Source: WGAC (2010).

The objectives and strategies of the plan reflect Traditional Owners' cultural perspectives and aspirations, as well those of Western science and conservation. Financial and capacity-building objectives are supported by specific strategies of maintaining and building partnerships, establishing an endowment fund, and training and career development to create Wunambal Gaambera people's wealth and capacity to deliver sustainable healthy country management. Threats to achieving healthy country include weeds and feral animals, as well as threats to culture, such as loss of traditional knowledge and tourists not being respectful.

Indicators for assessing viability (health) include ecological indicators as well as social and cultural indicators. Examples of the latter include the availability of certain bush foods and the amount of fat on parts of preferred food animals like *mangguru* (marine turtles) and *aamba* (kangaroos and wallabies). Indicators relating to customary responsibilities – as to who is making decisions about country and who is doing the burning – support Indigenous governance structures. Monitoring of indicators include subjective and objective measurements. Quantitative measures like the number of hectares burnt, water quality and species distribution sit alongside qualitative measures of the taste of certain traditional foods, and elders' views on the amount of traditional knowledge being maintained and passed on (WGAC 2010).

### Achievements of the plan

Following Native Title determination in 2011 the project entered the 10-year implementation stage of the plan with the key partners committing to financial, technological, facilitation and ecological support. A healthy country manager has been appointed to oversee the implementation of the plan. Unguu rangers are undertaking training and carrying out on-ground conservation programs such as weed and feral animal control, and cultural site recording as well as fulfilling customary responsibilities of 'right way fire' and maintenance of cultural sites. Stage 1 of the Unguu IPA was declared on 7 December 2010 and stages 2 and 3, including marine areas, are to follow. The Unguu Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, with both cultural and natural heritage specialists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, is in operation. As part of the monitoring program, biodiversity and social benchmarking for carbon abatement through 'right way fire' has commenced (see Fitzsimons et al. 2012). The Unguu Visitor Pass System is in development by WGAC, to provide the basis for Traditional Owner consent for access to and management of Wanjina Wunggurr cultural assets and exclusive possession – determined country, and on which to build authentic visitor experience products. Other Traditional Owner groups in the region are interested in being involved in the system.



Uunguu rangers carry out on-ground Western conservation activities as well as fulfil customary responsibilities for healthy country. ©Photo: WGAC

### Challenges and impediments

The remoteness and tropical weather of the region is a significant challenge to the success of the Healthy Country Plan. Organising any activity is logistically difficult and very costly. Maintaining and building partnerships is in itself resource intensive. Another challenge is the continuing need to respond to ideas for Wunambal Gaambera Country from external interests. These ideas, from both the public and private sector, may present real opportunities for Traditional Owners and be consistent with the Healthy Country Plan, such as nature-culture tourism, or they may pose a risk or impediment to achieving healthy country, for instance bauxite mining.

### Implications and opportunities

The implications of the plan and the planning process have been broader than expected. The plan, and the process, is seen as a benchmark by the Australian Government's IPA Program for developing IPA plans into the future. Other Kimberley Traditional Owner groups have adopted a similar approach for the management of their traditional lands and seas. The Nature Conservancy also views the plan, and the process, as a model and now not only supports a number of Traditional Owner groups across northern Australia to develop plans for their IPA projects, but is training Indigenous rangers, ranger coordinators and Traditional Owners in healthy country planning processes. Collaboration with the healthy country partners has allowed Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners access to an expanding conservation and Indigenous land and sea management network, and an opportunity to articulate their vision to a wider audience. The plan has provided leverage for Wunambal Gaambera people, through the WGAC, to negotiate and develop other partnerships to assist them with their vision of healthy country.



Controlled burning of part of Wunambal Gaambera Country in preparation for carbon abatement opportunities. ©Photo: Peter Morris

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## Biography

Heather Moorcroft is a conservation planner specialising in working with Indigenous Australians. She has worked with both the public and private conservation sector for approximately 25 years, as an employee of national and state conservation agencies and as an independent consultant. Heather was the planning consultant for the Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Plan, which sparked her interest in further exploring the intercultural spaces between Western science and Indigenous world views. She is currently undertaking a PhD with the Australian Centre for Cultural Environmental Research at the University of Wollongong looking at engagements between the private conservation sector and Indigenous Australians.