

## ARTICLES

### **Factoring Aboriginal Environmental Values in Major Planning Projects**

Ken Macintyre and Dr Barbara Dobson,<sup>1</sup>

*'We're not against development... Why can't you mob listen to us and meet us half way. You can have your development and we can keep our bushland and keep the rivers clean for your children and ours. What we are against is cutting down **all** the vegetation, dirtying up the rivers and groundwater and planting all those trees that don't belong here [exotics]. Why can't people have bushland for their garden? Why do you need so many lawns? All those fertilisers end up in the rivers and creeks and pollute them. You don't have to water native trees and plants like you do lawns. Why do you have to cut down the trees which grow so well in the area and plant others that take a long time to grow? Why do you have to show off your house, why not hide it in the bush?'*

#### **Introduction**

This paper focuses on the concept of 'co-activism', or what we shall call the 'co-active approach' to planning and development, which factors indigenous perceptions of the environment in major project planning. The paper looks at the conflict which so often arises between Aboriginal people and government departments, developers and mining companies over heritage and environmental issues. It is our contention that many of these conflicts can be averted by: (i) an understanding of how Aboriginal people perceive the environment, and, (ii) the involvement of Aboriginal people in all stages of the planning process. We urge developers and planners to listen to what Aboriginal people are saying, and, where possible, try to incorporate their ideas on environmental management, concept planning and design.

In this paper indigenous perceptions of the environment will be considered from the perspective of Aboriginal people in the Western Desert who still practise aspects of traditional religion and economy, and also from the perspective of urban Aboriginal people, in particular the Nyungars who live in Perth and the southwest region of Western Australia.

At first glance, this paper might seem like an over-simplified one-sided discussion which criticises development and extols the virtues of Aboriginal culture. On the contrary, what this paper intends to do is to show an alternative approach to planning and development which includes indigenous input and respects it as an important part of the overall planning process.

Another criticism that could be directed at this paper is that it deals in generalities in relation to Aboriginal perceptions, views and concerns. We acknowledge this point and highlight the fact that Aboriginal people are not a homogenous entity but are individuals who have their own individual opinions, perspective's and interests. However, there is a commonality in their perceptions, and a strong identification with the land, culture and tradition, both past and present.

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<sup>1</sup> Consulting anthropologists, Macintyre Dobson and Associates Pty Ltd.

## ABORIGINAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

*'Without the land we have no Law and no culture'.*

*'All our stories and Law are from the land and they are still in the land.'*

*'Our history is written in this land.'*

*'The memories are all here [in the land]. It makes me feel that there is nothing forgotten.'*

Aboriginal religion is intricately involved with a specific area of land. Traditionally, all land and life forms were believed to have been created by giant mythological beings, (including large kangaroos, emus, eagles, snakes, dingoes and monitor lizards), who had human personalities and who roamed the country performing miraculous and heroic deeds.

These mythological Beings did not die but became metamorphosed into features of the landscape and their spiritual essence is believed to be retained within these natural features. Although there was a common underlying pattern to the movements and deeds of these Creational Beings throughout the continent, there were regional variations which to a large degree corresponded to climatic, geographic and environmental differences.

The Dreaming was not simply a time of creation but also a time when society became structured: rules, norms and laws were created to protect humans from each other and from the forces of the supernatural world. The Dreaming gave meaning to everyday existence by providing an explanation to life and the surrounding land and seascape. Aboriginal populations were linked to supernatural Beings who were believed to possess creational energies and the power to regenerate natural species. It was these Beings who were seen to be responsible for creating the totemic and mythological landscape. The legends and deeds of these creative Mythical Beings form the substance of traditional Aboriginal patterns of life and are immortalised in prominent hills, rocky outcrops, breakaways, claypans, water sources and even some forms of vegetation.

The tracks of these mythological beings formed a complicated network of links in the ceremonial and religious life of traditional Aboriginal people. These mythological tracks were associated with songlines and formed important communication and in some cases trade links between different Aboriginal groups. Each group had their own specific sites which formed part of an integrated song and each group was responsible for performing the ceremonies and protecting their sites. These songlines were oral maps of large tracts of country and served to inform the initiated of the Laws relating to the song, and the location of water sources, and dangerous places to avoid. Fragments of these songs are known today by certain senior Lawmen.

Today Aboriginal people, not only in the few areas where traditional religion is still practised, but also in the urban context, still retain and value many of their traditional spiritual and economic beliefs. It is not unusual for contemporary Aboriginal people to collect traditional foods and medicines in season. In the case of the Martu people of the Western desert hunting and gathering is still very much a part of everyday life.

Even though a significant part of the mythological understanding of the landscape has disappeared in varying degrees throughout Australia, many of the older Aboriginal people have an intrinsic knowledge of the physical environment relating to food, medicine, water sources and indigenous land management. We should therefore not dismiss Aboriginal environmental knowledge as being inferior to that of our own Western-based scientific tradition. Environmental science is a very new discipline compared to 50,000 years of Aboriginal culture.

## Water

*'Rivers are the highways and byways of our culture.'*

*'It's like a big snake [Swan River] with all its children going into it.'*

*'It's our life. If the water dries up, our food dies and we die.'*

*'If you cut down too many trees, the trees will die because the wetlands will flood and will not go through their natural cycle.'*

*'If they take out too much water, all them rock'oles and shoaks will dry up and all the trees will die from too much shalt. There'll be nothing left here in twenty year time.'*

One of the most commonly recurring areas of conflict in applied anthropology in Australia in relation to mining and development is water. Whether the problem has to do with the perceived, actual or potential contamination of water, the overuse of underground water, blocked access to water, building construction or sewerage installations in close proximity to rivers and lakes, or the mythological significance attached to water sources, the issue of water is a highly contentious one.

In traditional times the location of water determined the movement of Aboriginal people around their country. Water sources (rivers, creeks, soaks and rockholes) were believed to have been created in the Dreaming or *Tjukurrpa* (Western Desert language) by the mythological Ancestral Beings that shaped the land and created all life forms. These water sources were ritually cleaned and maintained by the custodians responsible for that land to ensure the survival of humans and other species.

Rivers, lakes, wetlands, springs, underground water sources, and in some cases claypans, were believed to have been created by large snakes (pythons or carpet snakes) known as *tjila*, *kunian* or *wanambi* (Western Desert language) or *wagyl* (or *waugal* Nyungar term). The surrounding bushland formed part of these mythological tracks. Bushland was considered important in maintaining a hydrological and ecological balance within the surrounding river and wetland systems. Aboriginal people believed that the water level was controlled by the seasons, thus creating a harmony and balance between aquatic life forms and other animals, including humans who frequented the area.

Underground streams were believed to be the link between the wetlands through which the mythological snake travelled. These mythological tracks above and below ground represented attempts to explain in pre-scientific terms the complexity and direction of water flow within and between regions. In the Western Desert these 'water charts' were represented in song and diagrammatically on ceremonial boards. Likewise, there is a belief among some Nyungar Elders that the chain of lakes and wetlands stretching from Yanchep to Rockingham is connected by a series of underground channels and that these channels represent the track of the Wagyl. Some Nyungar Elders also believe that all underground and above ground water eventually flows into the sea.

Today there is a widespread belief among Aboriginal people (including Nyungar and Western Desert groups) that water sources especially rivers and groundwater supplies are under threat from contamination as a result of mining, industrial waste, pesticides, chemical fertilisers and sewerage spills. The belief is that if these rivers and underground streams are contaminated, that the water snake will abandon these areas and the water sources will dry up or become 'poisoned'.

There is a high degree of concern among Aboriginal people in the Goldfields and the Western Desert region that the vast quantities of groundwater required for the mining industry, domestic consumption and industrial usage will deplete the subsurface water sources causing adverse environmental consequences and eventually turning the area into a lifeless desert. Some Nyungars are likewise concerned that with the increased usage of underground water in the Perth Metropolitan area, especially from areas around the Gnangara Water Mound, that this will substantially reduce the water table ultimately causing the wetlands which they regard as significant heritage places to dry up and native fauna to die.

These are widely held concerns which generate a high degree of anxiety in Aboriginal people, even in cases where the water sources concerned do not directly affect them.

Some of the more contemporary views and fears expressed by Aboriginal people on the management of rivers, wetlands and underground water supplies are indistinguishable from those subscribed to by conservationists and members of the Green movement. It is impossible to determine the extent to which Aboriginal people have been directly or indirectly influenced by the Green movement. However, what is clear is that an Aboriginal indigenous viewpoint has been consolidated and in fact re-affirmed by some Green perspective's.

### **The Land is our Heritage**

*'I can't understand you whitefellas. My father and I cleared this land and now you want my grandson to replant the trees again. Why couldn't you leave the blinking trees where they were in the first place?'*

*'The land is our heritage''*

*'I don't want to stop development but when a Nyungar person sees the environment changing so rapidly it's like part of themselves being destroyed. You see, the land is like a living memory to us, it holds within it our creation, history and tradition. That is what gives us our spiritual link to the land.'*

*'We have very little left. You keep coming, you whitefellas, with your bulldozers.'*

*'Why do you keep devouring the natural bushland? We can't keep giving away our heritage. That's who we are. What are you going to give us in return?'*

Land has always been considered by Aboriginal people to have an intrinsic spiritual meaning especially that land which they regard as their 'own country'. One cannot extricate Aboriginal heritage from the surrounding natural environment as Aboriginal cultural heritage and history is written in the landscape. To destroy that landscape is tantamount to destroying their cultural heritage and history.

The reaction of urban Nyungars when they see large tracts of land cleared for development, especially if they have a deep attachment to that land, is a mixture of shock, anger, powerlessness and grief. Many of the places in the Perth Metropolitan area which to the casual observer seem to be areas of virgin bushland were in fact once camping grounds, hunting grounds, recreational grounds and food and medicine collecting areas, in some cases up until the late 1950's. In fact some of the fashionable suburbs, such as Claremont, Swanbourne, Peppermint Grove and Applecross were once the camping grounds of Nyungars. However, most of these bushland areas have disappeared. The few old camping places that still remain in many cases are still visited for nostalgic, recreational, educational, food and medicine collecting purposes.

Although such places are perhaps not culturally or environmentally unique in the eyes of the Western observer, they nonetheless have a regional significance to Nyungar people who identify

with that locality through historical, spiritual and genealogical ties. These places provide a homeland link to the past and an important sense of regional identity.

*'We can identify and feel close to the natural bush but when you keep on destroying that bush, we lose who we are, not that we want to live in it [the bush] but it reminds us of our past, the old people and our culture.'*

It is understandable why Aboriginal people become visibly upset when natural bushland is clearfelled, and why they react so strongly to developers who show no sensitivity to indigenous cultural beliefs. For example, there are large tracts of natural bushland along the north coastal strip of the Swan Coastal Plain which have been stripped of vegetation without any consultation with Aboriginal people. It would seem that the developers of these projects are either ignorant of, or have a good knowledge of, how the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA)* works. No developer is required by law to conduct an Aboriginal heritage survey and if per chance he disturbs an Aboriginal site, he can plead ignorance and get away with it without any penalties. On the other hand, if a site is destroyed knowingly, a minimal fine will be incurred. We are not aware of any fines or penalties that have been enforced over the past ten years for the disturbance of Aboriginal sites.

By not consulting with Nyungars, or consulting only at a token level after land clearance has already commenced, Aboriginal people are incensed yet powerless to express their concerns about the destruction of what they perceive as being their heritage. Much of this powerlessness stems from the fact that a dichotomy has been established by government policies and laws which try, (unsuccessfully in our opinion), to extricate Aboriginal heritage, (specific topographic and/or cultural aspects), from the broader physical environment.

When the anthropologist asks an Aboriginal consultant what are the boundaries of a particular site - which the anthropologist is bound to do by law in order to protect the site - the answer is sometimes 'the whole area is a site.' The Aboriginal consultant may gesture with his hands to indicate that the whole survey area is a site. The anthropologist then finds himself (or herself) in a dilemma in that he (she) has to ask the Aboriginal consultant to define a boundary around the site which will protect the site under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA)*. At this point the Aboriginal consultant looks perplexed and says to the anthropologist 'I've already told you that it's all a site.' If the anthropologist simply records what the Aboriginal person says 'that the whole area is significant' the proponent will invariably employ another anthropologist to redefine and reduce the boundaries to a sustainable level.

Specific cultural information must be given by the Aboriginal consultant to justify that the area is in fact a site or potential site. The status of the site is later assessed by a committee of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, (known as the Aboriginal Cultural Materials Committee), who in most cases do not come from the area concerned.

**They're still going to be the winner no matter what we say.**

*'We'll end up losin'. You can't beat the government.'*

*'All those white people do is talk at us. Most of the time we don't understand a word they are sayin'. They don't talk with us, they talk over us.'*

On most projects where large scale development and land clearance is proposed, local Aboriginal people generally feel that such development is a *fait accompli* and that the major decisions have already been made. Often the consultation process is viewed as nothing more than tokenism or the fulfilment of a proponent's decision to consult with Aboriginal people in accordance with the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA)*.

In such instances Aboriginal people feel that whatever they say will make no difference. This view was substantiated in numerous Aboriginal communities throughout the State, where it was pointed out that developers, mining companies and white people in general never listen to Aboriginal people. Feelings of resignation are typified by the following comments made by Western Desert Aboriginal people in relation to a controversial development proposed for their area.

*'What can we do about it [the development]? Nobody listens to us. What good is your report going to be? They already know what we think. It won't make any difference.'*

*'If this were whitefellas bein' asked the questions, politicians and minin' mob would listen to them. But nobody ever listens to what Martu are saying. We have to listen to that minin' mob, what they say an' what they want, but they never listen to us, what we say an' what we want. Are they goin' to listen to us this time?'*

*'It doesn't matter what we say, they always do what they like.'*

*'We are being pushed off the land.'*

**'We're the last ones to be told.'**

*'How can we trust this bloke? He never answers a question straight. He talks down to us like the Native Welfare'*

*'Would you believe that body?'*

*'We don't believe 'em, the're just doin' their job to get the project goin.'*

Aboriginal perceptions of themselves as being the last group to be consulted is reinforced time and again by developers and government departments who bring to on-site meetings colourful laminated plans, and sometimes three dimensional models, of the proposed development. The usual reaction to this is an angry outburst by Aboriginal people who complain that they are the last to be consulted and one of their first questions will be 'Were there any other Aboriginal people involved in the design or planning process?' If the answer is no, which it invariably is, the meeting soon sours and disintegrates with people walking away and the developer left holding his expensive glossy plan.

When developers or proponents do make an attempt to consult with Aboriginal people, either on Native Title or heritage issues, an understanding of Aboriginal history, culture and contemporary perceptions together with clear, precise speaking skills and an ability to listen are essential. Trying to deceive Aboriginal people is not for amateurs. Aboriginal people can see through you, especially if you are trying to pull the wool over their eyes.

Historically, Aboriginal people have developed a keen sense of reading white people's body language and judging their character. Proponents who explain to the group the purpose of their project and talk about the benefits that may accrue to Aboriginal people as a result of the project proceeding are not always believed, especially when the proponent dresses like a bureaucrat, (which reminds the older Aboriginal people of a Native Welfare Officer), and his body language is inconsistent with what he is saying. The planner is usually non-plussed when he finds that his positive spiel, which he has rehearsed prior to the meeting, has generated nothing more than mistrust and antagonism between himself and the group.

### **'We don't want bangles and beads'**

*'That's just a trinket. We don't want trinkets or bangles and beads from you whitefellas. Those days are past.'*

*'You don't take our history and culture seriously.'*

If a proponent is prepared to offer Aboriginal people some form of cultural recognition within the scope of his Project, the proponent must think seriously about the kind of proposal he is prepared to make and how this will enhance Aboriginal heritage and culture. If there is more than one Aboriginal interest group involved, the issue of equity must be resolved to avert potential conflict between Aboriginal groups and the proponent.

The proponent must be wary that the proposal is substantial enough not to be seen as a token gesture or a trivialisation of Aboriginal culture. A token gesture will only insult the Aboriginal group and cause them to become hostile and even to walk out of the meeting.

There are innumerable scenarios where proponents' attitudes towards Aboriginal people and their inability to communicate cross-culturally have resulted in conflict over heritage and environmental issues.

It is our experience that many proponents and planners lack the capacity and competency to listen to Aboriginal people. Usually they have a preconceived notion of how a particular development will proceed and their plans offer little flexibility for the incorporation of Aboriginal ideas, owing to the late stage of involvement of Aboriginal people in the overall planning and decision-making process.

### **The co-active approach**

The success of the coactive approach relies on Aboriginal consultation at the earliest possible stage of the planning process. Co-activism is a concept of resolving conflict before it happens by mutually respecting the positive contributions that Aboriginal people can make to future development.

Ideally the co-active process begins with an on-site meeting where the proponent and the seniormost designer or planner puts forward his ideas and invites Aboriginal comment. Both parties enter into an agreement which enables the Aboriginal group to conduct their own environmental study from an indigenous perspective together with an ethnographic and archaeological survey in accordance with the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA)*. Included in this agreement is an undertaking by the proponent that he will seriously consider Aboriginal ideas on ways of minimising the impact of the Project on the natural environment.

In our experience, Aboriginal people are capable of offering suggestions that may not only improve upon the original design concept but they have lateral ideas which sometimes even engineers and planners have not yet considered. The proponent needs to show a flexibility and willingness to take on board Aboriginal ideas on how the natural environment and heritage features can successfully be incorporated into the project in such a way that they become a positive feature, focus of interest and means of preserving Aboriginal culture and history.

Plans are drawn up incorporating aspects of Aboriginal interest and design and a further meeting is held to discuss the Project. Throughout the planning and construction process Aboriginal people are invited to view the development and to discuss any issues that may arise. When

Aboriginal people are included in the decision-making and development process as *respected parties* a relationship of trust will enable the development to proceed with their endorsement.

Usually the first criticism that is directed towards us when we suggest the 'co-active approach' in all aspects of community development is 'who is going to pay for this?' It amazes us how government and private organisations think nothing of spending thousands of dollars on environmental consultants, anthropologists, archaeologists, hydrologists, engineers, architects and yet balk at the idea of spending money to consult with Aboriginal people who may not only have lodged a Native Title Claim over the area subject to development but may in many cases have an intimate knowledge of this land, its management and natural resources.

The costs associated with avoiding Aboriginal involvement until the final stages of project approval in our experience far outweighs the costs of involving Aboriginal people from an early stage. Litigation or an injunction placed on an important project can cost the proponent millions of dollars not only in delays but in potential compensation.

### **Conclusion**

The co-active approach is not a token gesture towards indigenous involvement in major project planning, but rather it is a process of working together with Aboriginal people and respecting and incorporating their views on heritage, design and environmental impact. We believe that in Native Title terms this is an integral part of the consultation process which recognises Aboriginal people's culture, history and expertise.

Most importantly, the co-active approach acknowledges that Aboriginal culture and tradition is inseparable from the land. When land and its natural features are destroyed, a large part of Aboriginal history and culture is destroyed.

The reality is that not only are Aboriginal people losing their physical space but they are losing the physical manifestations of their history, culture and identity - and they have no voice. Who can they appeal to?

This is why it is imperative that developers and proponents, (including mining companies and government environmental agencies), are urged to adopt a co-active or similar approach in all developments before any major land clearing or ground disturbance takes place. In the past, and even today, Aboriginal involvement on projects was seen as an impediment factor. This can only change with a change of attitude not at the grass-roots level but rather at the senior managerial levels of both government and private organisations.