

## “Saltwater People Working Together”

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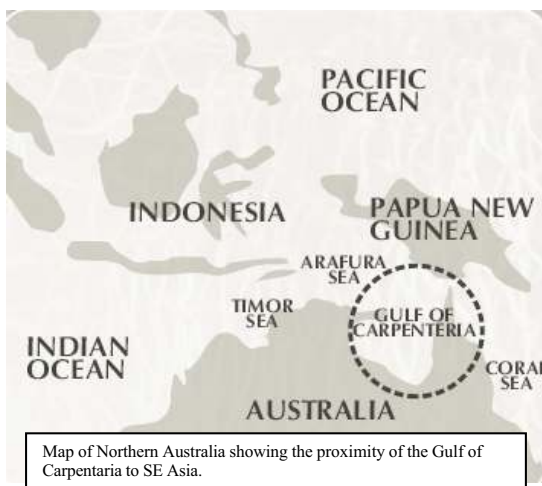
Carpentaria Ghost Nets Programme

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### Introduction



Northern Australia is under attack by a new threat called ghost nets. These are fishing nets that have been accidentally lost, abandoned or deliberately discarded. This is due to Australia's proximity to intensive fishing operations in neighbouring regions, (see map left) the difficulties in surveillance and enforcement of existing fish management arrangements with these neighbours and the particular configuration of prevailing winds and currents.

***“The Ghost Net Project is for people from (Indigenous) communities all around the Gulf of Carpentaria to find ways to work together to get rid of marine debris in their sea country.” Djawa Yunupingu, director of Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation***

In the Gulf of Carpentaria Indigenous Sea Rangers noted that many turtles were being captured in ghost nets that were washing up on the beaches. As much of this coastline is the breeding and foraging ground for 6 culturally and ecologically important species of marine turtle there was a real concern that so many were getting trapped and dying.

The Rangers collaborated with other non-government organisations forming the Carpentaria Ghost Nets Programme (CGNP) and calling themselves “the saltwater people”; a name which recognises the shared concerns & custodianship for marine wildlife. There is nothing more important to Aboriginal people than country. For the Kaureg People in the Torres Straits turtle is extremely important culturally. When a young man “grows his first beard” his transcendence from boyhood to manhood is signified by his having to catch his first turtle to provide food for his family. With the growing decline in turtle stocks there is huge concern amongst these people that this culturally significant ceremony is being lost. The dire consequences if this happens are that the adolescents will no longer understand their responsibilities to society\*. (\*anecdote provided by Elizah Wasaga, Chairman of the Kaiwalagal Aboriginal Corporation)

### Objectives:

The project is managed by the Northern Gulf Resource Management Group (NGRMG) who received \$A2M over a three year period from the Natural Heritage Trust. It operates within 5 NRM regions: Torres Straits, Western Cape York, Northern & Southern Gulfs & Northern Territory.

The aim of the project is three fold:

- To clean up the coastline in the Gulf of Carpentaria of existing nets to stop them re-entering the ocean,

- To collect useful information about these nets to assist negotiations by various parties in stopping fishing nets becoming Ghost Nets, &
- Capacity building of Indigenous Rangers to continue work on ghost nets beyond the life of this project.

### Methodology:

The Carpentaria Ghost Nets Programme encourages & promotes the benefits of cooperation: "saltwater people working together". In February this year there was a cleanup on a beach north of the community of Mapoon, Cape York which involved four traditionally clashing groups (Nanum Wunghim, Namaletta, Old Mapoon & Angkamuthi) working together for the very first time. Contrary to individual expectations they worked well together with the experienced rangers training the novices. This was captured on film which will be aired on the ABC August 6th.

One of these 'trainees' admitted that he had just been released from gaol where he had been serving a two year term and, since he had been involved in the ghost net work, had found a purpose in life. Why? Because, on that one day, they found seven Hawksbill Turtles in the nets. Five of which, lucky enough to still be alive, were rescued.



Jane Dermer, NT Project Officer, helping Gumurr Marthakal Rangers with their work plan

The main reason for the projects' success amongst the rangers is its flexibility. It allows for the high variation in:

- the education standards of the rangers,
- the resources that the communities & ranger groups possess or have access to, and
- the type of country that they have to work in.

Each ranger group is mentored to design their own work plans which are done in a variety of ways from using butchers paper to entering their information direct into the computer template provided. This is an important part of the project as individuals learn that

good project planning & organisation equates to successful outcomes.

Specifically they learn

- **Scheduling:** their work plans to suit the best times of year. eg the Hammond Island Rangers have good road access to their clean up zones so schedule weekly cleanups where the Yirralka Laynhapuy Rangers have hugely isolated regions that requires a barge to transport people & equipment.
- **Allocation of Resources:** determining who is going to be involved, what gear they will need and most importantly where to find it if they don't have such equipment. For the above example the barge is chartered as the Yirralka Laynhapuy Rangers do not possess a vessel of any kind.
- **Delegation:** making sure that individuals have responsibility for different duties such as the recording of information, photography, numbering the samples, driving the vehicles etc.

Other skills that individuals learn are simple data entry (which includes literacy where needed), how to use a GPS, measuring and mapping. The project encourages individuals to self assess and improve their skills; continually raising the bar by providing a range of training from one-on-one numeracy & literacy to TAFE courses in GIS mapping.

These are valuable skills as they can be transferred to other 'caring for country' projects such as coastal surveillance of illegal fishing operations.

### **Scale and broader impacts of the project.**

In the remote locations in which most of the ranger groups work, mainstream economic opportunities are very limited and NRM work is one of the very few real occupations offering prospects. The rangers do not see NRM work in the same light as “a job” for not only is it a part of their culture & duty of care for country but also it is outside work with flexible hours thus not impacting on their other social and cultural obligations such as attending funerals. Becoming a ‘ranger’ though, has for many individuals, been the bridge between the destructive cycle of unemployment & the reliance on ‘sit-down’ money, welfare & royalties, and their full time employment in the wider community. In March we lost two of our most experienced senior rangers to mainstream work in their communities.

The program has given the participating rangers a sense of status in their communities & self worth. So proud of their work many of the rangers voluntarily speak regularly about it at their local schools for they see it as important that the kids aspire to a future beyond “working for CDEP”. At Numbulwar the local school teacher was so impressed by the commitment of the rangers that he developed a programme using ghost net data collection as an educational tool to demonstrate why it is important to learn:

- **Maths:** reading rulers & callipers,
- **Geography:** where the nets come from as indicated by the Net Kit (attachment x),
- **Science:** information about turtle and other species caught in the nets, and
- **Literacy:** entering data & writing the reports.

Even though this is a small school it has had a resounding success locally lessening truancy levels and has also indirectly led to an artwork exchange program between these children and those in a school in Melbourne.

These school initiatives have also helped to increase the transfer of traditional knowledge to the younger generation, for when the kids at the Numbulwar School work in the field with the elders, an opportunity is created for the elders to transfer their traditional knowledge with the result that the kids get the best of both worlds.

In August 2006 the CGNP, looking to find other economic outcomes for the communities through this ghost net issue, promoted a competition, *Design for a Sea Change*, to find uses for the nets that could be made within the communities. We had many useful (& not so useful) ideas presented and received huge input from the wider Australian & even International community. The winning idea utilised the net as a base for weaving a guitar strap. It is a simple idea that we have workshopped with the Yirrkala Women’s Resource Centre in Arnhem Land & the Arts Centres on both Hammond & Thursday Islands. The women are very excited about this new skill. The finished products will be marketed through their existing Art Centres as well as through a Sydney based organisation called *Trashbags*, who have offered their assistance.

Other entries in the competition included using pieces of the debris imbedded in mud bricks to help stabilise housing from mud bricks in cyclones and earthquakes. The Marthakal community on Elcho Island, north Arnhem Land, have decided to trial this novel idea. Already they have determined, in their initial scoping study, that the soil is suitable and the price of building a mud brick house is one fifth of building a regular 3-bedroom house.

### **The Decision Making Process**

The CGNP is an alliance of the 18 participating Indigenous Ranger organisations or communities and 5 non government organisations who make up the body of the Steering Committee. We also have an advisory committee consisting of our government partners who do not get a vote.

The reason that many Indigenous programs fail is there is conflict and non adherence to the outcomes of the decisions that are made as those decisions have been imposed on the

communities from outside their communities, usually government & far removed from the reality of the situation. The key to the success of the CGNP is that it is driven from the bottom up, by the traditional owners themselves. They own the programme.

Early in the project there was a serious decision to be made on how to divide the allocated funding between the different groups, bearing in mind their differences. Culturally, the decision would be for an equal distribution of all resources. Physically, the groups have varying capacities to perform ghost net work, with extremes like the Dhimurru mob who are well resourced with people, vehicles and administrative support while at Injinoo there is only a father & son team fuelled only by passion & perseverance, making equal distribution unfair. Environmentally, the problem is located in specific 'hot spots', with some areas accumulating more nets than others as well as some areas experiencing a higher mortality rate in turtles due to the 'hot spots' being on turtle nesting sites making equal distribution also unfair. So, the decision as to how to divide the funding was very complex.

We workshopped this important issue by likening the two extremes of funding allocation to vegemite (even spread) and mustard (hot spot). The resulting decision, which has worked extremely well, is that the distribution is spread more like crunchy peanut butter, that is, an even spread with some extra lumpy bits here and there and developed a tool to guide us.

An other important issue that has been workshopped is, who owns the data and information that is collected by the rangers? A set of protocols were developed by the group that respects the ownership and control of information held by Indigenous communities, organizations and individuals, and the recognised use of such information for achieving regional and wider reaching outcomes. The outcome is a detailed set of policies and procedures for the ownership, management and use of data, information & images that are the property of Indigenous people. It is also portrayed pictorially for those people with little or no command of the English language.

#### **How partnerships were formed and utilised and stakeholders engaged in achieving our results.**

The Indigenous partners were engaged through extensive community consultation. We were more successful than most in engaging them because we first talked direct with Traditional Owners, not their peak bodies, who we knew had documented any issues with ghost nets and then followed the clan trail building trust and alliances. Gaining trust was a slow and sometimes convoluted process but the most important step in the engagement process.

The project supplies top up of wages for the work performed on ghost nets. As it is aware that this is highly inadequate to address real economic outputs in the communities it has created partnerships between Shire Councils, other NRM projects and the employment agencies to effectively provide for the employment of rangers in full time work. In the Torres Straits an agreement was made between the Torres Straits Regional Authority, Seagrass Unit of the Qld Department of Primary Industries & Fisheries and the CGNP to create a whole ranger programme for the Kaiwalagal Aboriginal Corporation on Horn Island & Hammond Island Council.

The Non-government agencies were recruited according the needs of both parties in achieving the outcomes of the project as well as their own agendas. Each one has a specific role to play e.g.:

The North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) is working closely with many of the same groups in managing turtle and dugong hunting. As ghost nets is a key threat to both of these species many of our areas of operation overlap so we assist each other on many levels such as combining resources and knowledge eg sending a contingent of ten rangers to the Coast to Coast Conference in Victoria last year; employment of rangers; creation of a school education kit and several training initiatives.



Sometimes partnerships are formed to address single issues such as how to deal with large floating nets. In November 2006 an extremely large Taiwanese Gill net (estimated at 6 tonne) was found off the coast of Arnhem Land. The removal of this net was a massive cooperative effort, using the resources from Customs, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority, Dhimurru Rangers, NT Parks & Wildlife and 2 x local charter vessels. It took five very long hours to get this net from the waters edge to the landfill.

#### **Significant achievements and results of the project.**

Even though the work is physically demanding numbers of Indigenous community or ranger organisations participating in the program has grown from seven in 2005 to eighteen today. Of that 18, seven of them have never performed any form of “caring for country” work in the past and have enthusiastically elected to become involved in ghost nets work. Four of the original groups are also now working directly with scientists on turtle research to improve our knowledge of the impact of ghost nets on them.

In the past 18 months the Rangers (approximately 90 in total) participating in the project have removed from the accessible parts of the coastline (equivalent distance as Adelaide to Perth) >2,500 pieces of net with an average size of 28.3 metres. This equates to approximately 64,400 metres or 65 tonnes; enough net to cross Sydney Harbour over 120 times.

#### **Things that worked well:**

Negotiating external funding from the Indigenous Land Corporation for 4WD vehicles for 6 of the most needy ranger groups has helped not only our own profile but also motivated the rangers to continue with the programme and look for other Caring for Country projects that they can do. One of the aspects of this deal that made it special was that it created new boundaries concerning how their (ILC) funding can now work with cross regional projects not just individual Ranger Organisations.

The spin-offs into other small projects from this one such as the Numbulwar schools Projects and weaving workshops has helped involve the whole of the communities into this issue, not just the paid rangers.

Of course the winning of a couple of awards has helped the projects profile with funding bodies, which I am sure was the reason why we managed to get the ILC funding for the vehicles.

The Steering committee meetings have worked extremely well with over 90% attendance rate at all meetings to date which is a total of 7. The reason for their success is that they are:

1. Very interactive, lots of workshops and opportunities for the rangers to showcase their own work.
2. We always build in a field trip so it is not all work.
3. We try different locations around the gulf (where possible) so that other rangers, not just the nominated representatives, get a chance to attend meetings and all ranger groups get a chance to play host.
4. We set ground rules at the first meeting and have stuck to our guns so everyone knows that if they play up they are not allowed to come back.

**Things that haven't worked so well:**

Overcoming traditional prejudices within communities, especially the ones who suffered under the relocation policies of the past, have been huge obstacles to getting involvement in some regions.

Past history of other projects that have gone bad, ie not finished or not acquitted infiltrating into attitudes of mostly regional & state bodies slowing down negotiations.

Lack of resources in most communities have made removal of very large nets frustrating thus often needing the assistance of external resources which is reliant on availability and cost.

**Conclusions:**

We never make promises we cannot keep.

Being an independent NGO has helped us to negotiate partnerships where needed without being hamstrung by departmental policies and procedures. It also means we can act quickly when needed.

The bottoms up approach to decision making has kept everyone not only engaged, but feeling proud of their achievements.

The time taken in the beginning to build a solid foundation of trust has made the subsequent engagement of new ranger groups to the programme very easy. They come to us.

The Project Officers on the ground, working one-on one with individuals and groups, is the key to true involvement. These people are truly the backbone of the project as it is the trust & respect they engender that makes or breaks the project.

Not having a one size fits all approach has enabled us to include the communities that have been very disadvantaged through isolation, education or lack of resources. Often these groups, who have been marginalised in the past, are the most passionate about Caring for Country and thankful for the opportunity to be able to do something.

The project is extremely visual which has helped sell it to the wider community.

Finally, but not the least by any count, our branding, done very early in the project, has helped overcome local jealousies and disputes highlighting the things we **all** have in common i.e. we are all "Saltwater People"