

Caring for Ngarrindjeri Country: Collaborative Research, Community Development and Social Justice

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Ngarrindjeri Vision for Country

Our Lands, Our Waters, Our People, All Living Things are connected. We implore people to respect our Ruwe (Country) as it was created in the Kaldowinyeri (the Creation). We long for sparkling, clean waters, healthy land and people and all living things. We long for the Yarlular-Ruwe (Sea Country) of our ancestors. Our vision is all people Caring, Sharing, Knowing and Respecting the lands, the waters and all living things.¹

We ask non-Indigenous people to respect and understand our traditions, our rights and our responsibilities according to Ngarrindjeri laws and to realise that what affects us, will eventually affect them.²

On 23 March 2007 at Goolwa near the mouth of the Murray River in South Australia, the Ngarrindjeri Nation launched the *Ngarrindjeri Nation Yarlular-Ruwe Plan: Caring for Ngarrindjeri Sea Country and Culture* (the 'NNYR Plan'). The NNYR Plan is the first Indigenous nation plan developed in South Australia and marks a major change in the way that the Ngarrindjeri leadership proposes to do business with non-Indigenous interests on Ngarrindjeri country. The NNYR Plan provides a strong statement of Ngarrindjeri rights, identity, authority and responsibility, but it is also a conciliatory document charting a vision for future, just collaborations between Ngarrindjeri and non-Indigenous institutions, governments, business and individuals.

Ngarrindjeri leaders selected Goolwa for the launch of the NNYR Plan because of its deep significance to Ngarrindjeri people and because it was the site of the first Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan ('KNY') Agreement.³ After the desecration of a Ngarrindjeri burial close to the Kumarangk (Hindmarsh Island) Bridge – called the 'genocide bridge' by Ngarrindjeri elders – the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee ('NHC'), Ngarrindjeri Native Title Management Committee ('NNTMC') and the Ngarrindjeri Tendi ('NT') were able to negotiate a new partnership that recognised Ngarrindjeri as traditional owners of the lands and waters and included the first apology for wrongs done to Ngarrindjeri people since 1836.⁴ Formal KNY agreements have become the foundational strategy adopted by Ngarrindjeri leaders to initiate new relationships with non-Indigenous governments, groups and institutions.

It has been argued elsewhere that research and teaching relationships between Indigenous people and universities need to be long-term, negotiated and supportive of Indigenous community development.⁵ The recent dismantling of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission ('ATSIC') and various other Indigenous programs means that universities are even more important as partner organisations for capacity building, knowledge development and knowledge exchange for Indigenous communities seeking social transformation. The community service that universities

can provide in this arena is significant.

The collaborative partnership that is being built between the Ngarrindjeri Nation and Flinders University is centred on research, teaching and community development, and derives from specific projects and long-term relationships.⁶ For example, two of the authors of this paper, Steve Hemming and David Rigney, are from Flinders University and both contributed to the development of the NNYR Plan as part of their commitment to developing a long-term, collaborative relationship between the Ngarrindjeri Nation and the University. Prior to working at Flinders University, Hemming was a curator in the South Australian Museum's Anthropology Division where he worked with members of the Ngarrindjeri Nation on joint projects such as the *Ngurunderi Exhibition* and the *Ngarrindjeri Sites and Social History Project*.⁷ Since then, working with Ngarrindjeri leaders, George Trevor, Tom Trevor and Matt Rigney, he has continued to develop collaborative research projects dealing with Ngarrindjeri history, archaeology and cultural heritage.

In recent years Flinders University researchers have been invited to use Hack's Point (Warnung) as a site for community-based research and teaching.⁸ A ground-breaking 'Indigenous Archaeology in Australia Field School' was held at Hack's Point in September 2006 in which university-based academics, working collaboratively with community elders and heritage officers, co-developed and delivered the course materials. Uniquely, the Field School was combined with the first re-burials of repatriated Ngarrindjeri elders. The feedback from all involved in the Field School has been overwhelmingly positive, with students agreeing that the topic had an unexpected impact on their understanding of Indigenous heritage and communities.

Ngarrindjeri leaders argue that listening, understanding, respecting, trusting, inclusiveness and perseverance are key elements required for a firm foundation on which positive partnerships can be built.

One important recommendation contained in the NNYR Plan is for the establishment of a Ngarrindjeri Caring for Country Centre and associated research institute.⁹ This would provide the Ngarrindjeri Nation with the beginnings of the infrastructure necessary for achieving full participation in all aspects of society and the economy by facilitating more equitable partnerships with government, research organisations and other non-Indigenous interests. This is essential for socially just, collaborative research programs.

It is hoped that a KNY agreement, setting the framework for research, teaching and collaborative projects, will soon be developed between Flinders University and the Ngarrindjeri Nation. A first step has been the negotiation of a partnership research agreement between Flinders University, the Ngarrindjeri Nation, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation ('CSIRO') and Charles Sturt University. This agreement contains recognition of traditional ownership and new protections for Ngarrindjeri cultural and intellectual property. This approach moves away from the ingrained dominating colonial practices that Indigenous people have been forced to endure by those who believe that they know what is best and those who use Indigenous people as a stepping stone for their own gain. The recently launched NNYR Plan¹⁰ is explicit in setting out a new policy for research on Ngarrindjeri country that requires Ngarrindjeri people:

- be fully informed about past and present research on Ngarrindjeri country;
- have mandatory access to outcomes and benefits of research occurring on our country;
- approve and participate in any research that occurs on our country;
- be full and equal research partners;
- be equitably resourced to participate in research;
- protect Ngarrindjeri intellectual and cultural property rights;
- conduct our own culturally appropriate research that is vitally significant to our country and culture;
- set the terms of reference for the priorities and programs of institutions conducting research on Ngarrindjeri country; and
- develop a Ngarrindjeri Nation Research Centre linked to the Ngarrindjeri Caring for Country Centre.

This policy provides a clear set of principles that are designed to transform research from a colonialist, exploitative and unjust practice into a beneficial process for Indigenous people.

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¹ Ngarrindjeri Tendi, Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee and Ngarrindjeri Native Title Committee, *Ngarrindjeri Nation Yarlular-Ruwe Plan: Caring for Ngarrindjeri Sea Country and Culture* (2006) 5.

² Ibid 13.

³ See Steven John Hemming and Tom Trevorow, 'Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan: Archaeology, Colonialism and Re-claiming the Future,' in Claire Smith and H Martin Wobst (eds), *Indigenous Archaeologies: Decolonising Theory and Practice* (2005) 243-261.

⁴ See Tom Trevorow and Steven John Hemming, 'Conversation: Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan – Listen to Ngarrindjeri People Talking' in Gus Worby and Lester-Irabinna Rigney (eds), *Sharing Spaces: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Responses to Story, Country and Rights* (2006) 295-304.

⁵ Daryle Rigney and Gus Worby, 'Towards an Indigenous Research Charter' in Claire Smith and H Martin Wobst (eds), *Indigenous Archaeologies: Decolonising Theory and Practice* (2005) 369-91.

⁶ See, eg, Steven John Hemming, 'In the Tracks of Ngurunderi: The South Australian Museum's Ngurunderi Exhibition and Cultural Tourism' 2 (1994) *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 38-46; Steven John Hemming, 'River Murray Histories: Oral History, Archeology and Museum Collections' in Emma Greenwood, Klaus Neumann and Andrew Sartori (eds), *Work in Flux*, Melbourne University History Conference Series 1, (1995) 102-110; Steven John Hemming and Tom Trevorow, 'Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan: Archaeology, Colonialism and Re-claiming the Future,' in Claire Smith and H Martin Wobst (eds), *Indigenous Archaeologies: Decolonising Theory and Practice* (2005) 243-261; Steven John Hemming, Tom Trevorow and Matt Rigney, 'Ngarrindjeri Culture' in M Goodwin and S Bennett (eds), *The Murray Mouth: Exploring the Implications of Closure or Restricted Flow*. Department of Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation, Adelaide, (2002) 13-19; Daryle Rigney and Gus Worby, 'Towards an Indigenous Research Charter' in Claire Smith and H Martin Wobst (eds), *Indigenous Archaeologies: Decolonising Theory and Practice* (2005); Lynley A Wallis, Steven John Hemming and C Wilson, *The Warnung (Hack's Point) Old People's Places Project: A Collaborative Approach to Archaeological Survey, Research and Management Planning* Confidential report prepared for the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee ('NHC'), Ngarrindjeri Native Title Management Committee ('NNTMC') and Ngarrindjeri Tendi ('NT') (2006); Lynley A Wallis, K Domett and K Niland, *The Hack's Point Burial Project; Recording, Understanding and Protecting an Old People's Place at the Kurangk, South Australia*. Unpublished report for the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee ('NHC'),

Ngarrindjeri Native Title Management Committee ('NNTMC') and Ngarrindjeri Tendi ('NT') (2007).

⁷ Steven John Hemming, 'In the Tracks of Ngurunderi: The South Australian Museum's Ngurunderi Exhibition and Cultural Tourism' 2 (1994) *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 38-46.

⁸ Lynley A Wallis, Steven John Hemming and C Wilson, *The Warnung (Hack's Point) Old People's Places Project: A Collaborative Approach to Archaeological Survey, Research and Management Planning* Confidential report prepared for the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee ('NHC'), Ngarrindjeri Native Title Management Committee ('NNTMC') and Ngarrindjeri Tendi ('NT') (2006); Lynley A Wallis, K Domett and K Niland, *The Hack's Point Burial Project; Recording, Understanding and Protecting an Old People's Place at the Kurangk, South Australia*. Unpublished report for the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee ('NHC'), Ngarrindjeri Native Title Management Committee ('NNTMC') and Ngarrindjeri Tendi ('NT') (2007).

⁹ Ngarrindjeri Nation, *Ngarrindjeri Nation Yarlumar-Ruwe Plan: Caring for Ngarrindjeri Sea Country and Culture* (2006) 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 32.