People On Country

Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation

Traditional Owners and Area of Operation

The Yolngu are the traditional owners of north east Arnhem Land. Their estates cover the land and sea. Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation (Dhimurru) is a community-based natural and cultural resource management agency established in 1992 by the Yolngu traditional owners of land and sea estates in the Gove Peninsula region of North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Dhimurru’s role is to undertake natural and cultural resource management to ensure the protection and sustainable use of Yolngu land and sea country within and adjacent to the Dhimurru Indigenous Protected Area (IPA). The Dhimurru IPA comprises 1,010 km$^2$ of land, a 300 km coastline, and includes 90 km$^2$ of adjacent marine estate.

Landscape Description

The country managed by Dhimurru, in association with traditional owners living on country, falls within the Arnhem Coast bioregion. The Arnhem Coast bioregion is 33,022 km$^2$, of which some 98.8 per cent is Aboriginal freehold land held under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (ALRA).

The Arnhem Coast bioregion comprises a coastal strip extending from just east of the Cobourg Peninsula to just north of the mouth of the Rose River in southeastern Arnhem Land. It also includes the many off-shore islands dotted along the coastline. Coastal vegetation includes well developed heathlands, mangroves and saline flats, with some floodplain and wetland areas – the most significant being the extensive paperbark forest and sedgelands of the Arafura Wetlands. Inland from the coast, the dominant vegetation type is eucalypt stringybark (*Eucalyptus tetrodonta*), with smaller areas of monsoon rainforest and eucalypt woodlands (NRETA 2005). The coastline and islands are also significant marine turtle breeding habitats as well as...
significant seabird breeding, feeding and roosting habitats.

Wildfire is a less significant issue in this area than some others across the Northern Territory. Indicators of inappropriate fire regimes such as retreating vine forest and extensive stands of dead Cypress pine are generally absent from this region. This is because the Dry season is moderated by the maritime winds and occasional showers. Also, in many areas of north east Arnhem Land, Indigenous fire management has been maintained by Yolngu who continue to live on their clan lands at small decentralised homeland communities as part of the homeland movement.

Activities of highest impact on water quality in this region stem from the significant mining activity.

Most of the weed species identified in the area are present around the Nhulunbuy township. As part of the arrangements under the Weeds Management Act 2001 (NT) a sub-regional weeds committee has been established for eastern Arnhem Land (Miwatj Weeds Committee). Its membership includes Dhimurru, The Northern Land Council (NLC), Rio Tinto Alcan Gove, the NT Transport Group, and the Shire Council. It is expected that this committee will provide the appropriate forum for dealing with weeds issues so that the relatively weed-free Aboriginal lands surrounding the township remain so (NLC 2004).

The natural heritage values of the Dhimurru IPA are outstanding. Compared with most areas of Australia, northeast Arnhem Land generally is notable for the intactness of plant and animal communities. Important natural values include:

- high plant diversity;
- intact faunal assemblages including representatives of some species unrecorded from protected areas elsewhere in the NT;
- unique representativeness, with the Arnhem Coast biogeographic region having a high priority for conservation planning;
- the Quaternary dune system, a dominant feature of Manydjarrarrnga-Nanydjaka, is the largest example of this geological feature on the NT mainland; and
- significant feeding habitat and nesting sites for sea birds and for several threatened species of marine turtles are represented in the IPA.

Garma Festival: Visitors are led on a walk through Yolngu country.
Land and Sea Management History

The relatively intact natural values of the Dhimurru IPA testify to the effectiveness of millennia of sustainable Yolngu management and use without the effects of external pressures for commercial development. Since time immemorial, Yolngu have managed the natural and cultural resources of their land and sea country. They have achieved a balance that has ensured long term, sustainable resource use for the economic and social well-being of the landowners.

The Yolngu were at the forefront of establishing land rights in the Northern Territory and have long fought to have their ownership of their sea country acknowledged under Australian law.

In more recent times, Yolngu lands have been impacted by the activities of the increasing number of miners and their families who had settled in the township of Nhulunbuy since the early 1970s. The permanent presence of a large non-Yolngu population, particularly in the township of Nhulunbuy, required a new response by Yolngu. In 1992, after extensive consultations, Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation was formally incorporated under the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976 (Comm).

Dhimurru, in consultation with the Northern Land Council (NLC), set up and manages an access permit system that enables Nhulunbuy residents and tourists to visit designated areas for recreation. Fees raised through sale of access permits help meet the costs of managing the recreation areas, with additional funds contributed by a suite of government and non-government organisations, including Rio Tinto Alcan Gove, owners of the Gove bauxite mine and alumina refinery.

Throughout the 1990s the NT Government sought to enter into a joint management arrangement with traditional owners to establish a national park on Cape Arnhem. However, traditional owners wanted to retain sole management of their lands and repeatedly declined to enter into a joint management arrangement. When the concept of IPAs was developed from 1996, Dhimurru facilitated consultations with each of the clan groups to consider whether this form of protected area would be acceptable to them. A decision was reached to establish the Dhimurru IPA, a management plan (see <http://www.dhimurru.com.au/>) was developed, and the IPA was formally declared in 2000.
4. People On Country


In 2007 Dhimurru was successful in gaining funding under the first round of the Commonwealth Government’s Working on Country (WoC) program (see <http://www.environment.gov.au/indigenous/workingoncountry/index.html>). The Dhimurru WoC involves employment of five Indigenous Rangers and recently expanded to nine with the launch of a Womens (Miyalk) Ranger group, providing a range of essential environmental services in the region. Among these are addressing threats to the endangered Gove Crow Butterfly; research into and management of the yellow crazy ant; participating in marine turtle rescue, recovery and collaborative research; identifying new weed infestations and treating existing infestations; undertaking heritage surveys; conducting fauna and flora surveys; threat abatement planning; and mapping sea grass beds.

Importantly, the Dhimurru IPA offers the opportunity to promote reconciliation and cultural understanding through the interpretation of Yolngu beliefs and values for visitors.

One of Dhimurru’s major recent achievements has been the establishment of a women’s ranger program, and the integration of the knowledge, skills and understandings of Yolngu women beyond the committee and Wäa Wata u (traditional owners) and into Dhimurru’s operations. In Yolngu culture, both women and men have important roles in caring for country.

Yolngu traditional owners deeply value the opportunity to live on their country in homeland settlements. People on country, living on outstations or homelands has been shown to improve people’s health and it can be demonstrated that living on homelands also improves the environmental health of the land and its resources. Dhimurru aims to support rangers to live at homelands and to manage country from remote bases.
Land and Sea Management Activities

>> Protection Of Yolngu Cultural Values

Yolngu values are the primary focus of the IPA. The ongoing success of the IPA management effort is dependent upon the effective protection of these values.

In general these values arise from the Yolngu cultural view that the landscape and seascape are:

• the physical elements that unite people with the ancestral past and with the present spiritual and natural world;
• the source of social connectedness and responsibility; and
• the source of much sustenance and shelter.

Yolngu welcome visitors to their country but they insist on the protection of its spiritual and natural values and the right to manage it (DAC 2000). Dhimurru has recently released its Natural and Cultural Heritage Management Plan to supplement the IPA Management Plan 2008 to 2015.

>> Managing visitors and access

Management of access to recreation areas was a strong motivation for the establishment of Dhimurru. Uncontrolled vehicular access to sites in the past resulted in damage to dune and littoral areas and a proliferation of tracks.

Dhimurru’s management effort has concentrated on the demarcation of preferred tracks and campsites, closure of subsidiary and visitor defined tracks and campsites and the hardening of problem areas such as dune crossings through the placement of log and chain corduroys. Some track closures have been implemented for cultural reasons (DAC 2000).

The management of visitors (primarily Nhulunbuy residents but also national and international tourists) is a key task. The management arrangements based on a permitting system that has been successfully established for the recreation areas will remain in force for the life of the IPA. These arrangements have a high level of broader community acceptance and support. The system implemented by Dhimurru is seen by many other Indigenous land and sea management groups as a successful model some wish to explore.

Rangers cut a marine turtle free of a ghost net.
>> Rehabilitation of impacted recreation areas

Rehabilitation of damage from historical uncontrolled access to sites is an ongoing management focus for the IPA. Management intervention is relatively simple and generally consists of track or site closure and in some cases planting of damaged areas with locally occurring species.

Dune tracks and beachfront campsites demonstrate good potential for self-regeneration once access is controlled. Some tracks in open woodland have suffered serious runoff concentration and gully erosion. Many of these sites required the installation of barriers and other works to facilitate natural stabilisation processes (DAC 2000).

>> Wildlife protection and research

Dhimurru uses a ‘both ways’ approach, which refers to ways of working where both Yolngu and western intellectual traditions and practices contribute to policy formulation, governance and practice. This effective collaboration is best demonstrated in wildlife research projects such as turtle recovery and ghost net removal, crazy ant management, marine debris removal, bandicoot surveys, crocodile management, and management of the Gove crow butterfly. Over the next seven years Dhimurru aim to extend wildlife and habitat surveys, mapping, and monitoring, further explore and develop ‘both ways’ approaches to management, manage and protect vulnerable species and habitats and encourage cooperative partnerships in research and management practice (DAC et al. 2008).

>> Sea country


Further, the recent decision of the High Court of Australia, in the Blue Mud Bay case, where the majority (5 to 2) held that Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory includes rights to exclude commercial and recreational fishing from the intertidal zone (between mean high tide and mean low tide marks) lying over Aboriginal-owned land. This legal recognition of Yolngu rights has extended Dhimurru’s management jurisdiction and permit areas, which now extend to the low tide mark.

Dhimurru Rangers engaged in fire training.
The Dhimurru sea country program aims to develop:

- well trained, well resourced sea rangers
- capacity to meet, maintain, promote, and foster Yolngu cultural rights, responsibilities and interests in sea country
- sustainable working arrangements in marine management including monitoring, research, surveillance, and enforcement with respect to illegal fishing, and
- capability to manage impacts on the marine environment from mining, aquaculture and other development activities.

In developing a robust model for sea country management the Dhimurru Sea Country Team is active in participating in collaborative research, management and monitoring work. It is Dhimurru’s intention to ensure that our land and sea management programs work together to manage Yolngu country. The Dhimurru Sea Country Plan and IPA Plan of Management complement each other and share the same vision and values (DAC et al. 2008).

>> Ghost nets

As part of its sea country work Dhimurru is dealing with the problems of ghost nets and other marine debris. Ghost nets are fishing nets that have been lost accidentally, deliberately discarded, or simply abandoned at sea. Ghost nets travel on the currents and tides of the oceans continuing to destroy marine species as they are pushed along in the currents. They are particularly destructive in the Gulf of Carpentaria, as the currents here are circular and move in a clockwise direction around the Gulf. As they move unattended in the currents, ghost nets ensnare and kill fish, turtles, dugongs, and crocodiles. Some of these species have high spiritual and cultural values as well as being a highly prized food for salt water people.

Rangers are involved in collecting the discarded nets that are drifting or have been washed up on the beaches. Some of the nets are over a kilometre in length. The rangers globally position where the nets were found and then identify each to establish its country of origin. While this work is important, it takes up much of the rangers’ time and resources which could be spent on other saltwater activities that are equally important such as monitoring sea grass beds or turtle nesting sites and managing sites of cultural significance, as well as, keeping an eye out for illegal fishing activity.
**Fire management**

As noted above, wildfire is a less significant issue in this area than some others across the Northern Territory. Dhimurru encourages ongoing Yolngu fire management practices by the owners and managers of clan estates. Unless there are special circumstances, Dhimurru does not carry out fire management in the IPA.

**Weed control**

Weed infestations occur in some recreation areas. Infestations were initially more widespread at sites in the Northern Beaches area. Invasive species include perennial mission grass, hyptis, mossman river grass and coffee bush. Opportunistic physical removal and spraying has been carried out over the last decade and the progress of infestations continues to be monitored.

**Feral animals identification and removal**

Feral animals are not a major management issue at present. Vertebrate pest species that are present in the IPA include cats, buffalo, pigs and cattle, generally in small numbers and localised populations. Opportunistic removal of pest species is undertaken in consultation with Yolngu landowners. The small herds of feral cattle are regarded by Yolngu as a food resource and are harvested as required. They are currently assessed as having only a moderate environmental impact.

**Staff training**

Training and staff development are critical to Dhimurru’s continued success. Dhimurru recognise the importance of both Yolngu and western intellectual traditions to their work. Knowledge and skills from the Yolngu world are combined with those from mainstream environmental resource management practice in the work of Dhimurru. This is a unique and developing role and Dhimurru requires support and flexibility from the primary education and training providers of Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) and Charles Darwin University (CDU) to continue to expand and explore this role.

**People on Country Work with Dhimurru**

CAEPR staff are helping Dhimurru to improve their data collection and reporting system. This work will help Dhimurru document the array of environmental and cultural conservation activities they carry out. Working with Dhimurru, PoC staff will develop this information estimate the cost of providing these services, and identify needs and institutional barriers to assist Dhimurru’s expand their land and sea management capacity.

Preliminary results of this work show the deep interconnections between Dhimurru’s people management, environmental conservation, heritage protection, and cultural and education activities. By working with CAEPR though the PoC project Dhimurru aims to demonstrate the importance of the Yolngu holistic approach in land and sea management.
Governance Arrangements

Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation is an incorporated association established by Yolngu under the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976* (Cth). Dhimurru’s Board is comprised of ten elected Directors. Traditional Yolngu owners (Wäŋa Wataŋu Yolngu) set the management requirements and access arrangements for the Dhimurru IPA. The Dhimurru Board is responsible for formal decision making on behalf of Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation. The Dhimurru Board receives advice on programs and collaborative assistance from an Advisory Group made up of members from Dhimurru, NLC, NT Parks and Wildlife Commission, the Commonwealth Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, and others by invitation. Dhimurru staff implement the plan of management and refer issues to the Board and Wäŋa Wataŋu Yolngu for direction.

The Managing Director, Senior Cultural Adviser, and the Executive Officer play key roles in Dhimurru’s management.

The Managing Director has overall responsibility for: enacting committee decisions and for keeping Dhimurru on track; managing Yolngu staff; representing Dhimurru and Yolngu interests; and maintaining Yolngu control of joint management arrangements.

The Senior Cultural Advisor is responsible for: maintaining liaison with landowners and committee members; ensuring that correct traditional owners and managers are consulted regarding actions; ensuring staff and partners follow Yolngu protocols advising on Yolngu priorities when considering proposals; and assisting in representing Yolngu interests.

The Executive Officer is responsible for: securing and acquitting funds and other resources; managing contracts; ensuring clear communication with non-Aboriginal partners and contributors; assisting in representing the organisation; advising on political and strategic direction; advising on policy and management structures; and coordinating office operations.

The guiding principles of Dhimurru are a commitment to:

- the conservation and enhancement of the natural and cultural values of the region while ensuring future management reflects the aspirations of Yolngu landowners;
- a representative, Yolngu-controlled, sustainable and collective form of land and sea management, which seeks to devise strategies from a mutual investigation of Ngapaki (European) and Yolngu systems of knowledge; and
- the continued development of positive interactions with the non-Aboriginal world and the sponsoring of co-operative, respectful, educative and mutually beneficial relationships.
Sources


Dhimurru 2008. IPA Plan of Management 2008 to 2015. Prepared by Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation Wearne Advisers and Sam Muller, Nhulunbuy NT.


Dhimurru 2009. *Dhimurru Indigenous Protected Area Cultural Heritage Management Plan 2009 to 2015*, prepared for Dhimurru by Daryl Guse (Earth Sea Heritage Surveys) and with revisions from Dhimurru Staff.
