Traditional Owners and Area of Operation

North east Arnhem Land belongs to a number of groups of people collectively known as Yolngu.

The Yirralka rangers in association with traditional owners manage both land and sea in the Laynhapuy Indigenous Protected Area (IPA), which covers 6,900 sq. km, extending south from the Gove Peninsula to Blue Mud Bay. The IPA is home to about 800 people living in communities on 18 homelands.

Landscape Snapshot

The Laynhapuy IPA falls within the 33,022 sq km Arnhem Coast bioregion, of which some 98.8 per cent is Aboriginal freehold land held under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act (ALRA) 1976.

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 Swamp. 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 in some others across the Northern Territory (NT) for a number of reasons. The area gets occasional showers from the east throughout the drier months which moderates the drying of grass. Also, unlike other wildfire prone areas of the NT, there is an absence of annual sorghum grasses, and importantly people have continued to live on their country and to maintain customary burning practices. Indicators of inappropriate fire regimes and wildfires such as retreating vine forest and extensive stands of dead Cypress pine are generally absent from this region.

Buffalo are the most significant feral animal issue in some areas of the Laynhapuy Homelands, particularly in the southern sections were there are large wetlands. Here saltwater intrusion—caused by buffaloes creating swim channels between saline and freshwater bodies—has resulted in the die-off of many salt sensitive plants. At Balma, rangers believe that increased sedimentation loads due to buffalo activity may be resulting in the smothering of important shellfish beds along the coastline. The harvest of shellfish (particularly oysters) along the coast between the Koolatong and the Maidjunga Rivers was notably poor during 2004 (NLC 2004).

Feral pigs are also causing severe damage in some areas, especially around Gurrumuru and moving east towards Dhalinybuy and around Yilpara. Anecdotal reports suggest that feral pigs are expanding their range, moving southward through the area. It appears they only crossed the Koolatong River around 1999–2000. Cane toads are now well established throughout the region. A number of infestations of crazy ants (*Anoplolepis gracilipes*) also occurred in the area (NLC 2004).

Water quality on Aboriginal lands in the management area of Laynhapuy Homelands is generally described as good. Activities of highest impact on water quality are trampling and wallowing by feral animals in billabongs and riparian margins of waterways (NLC 2004).

Because the area was never used for the pastoral industry, there is little evidence of invasive pasture grasses such as gamba grass (*Andropogon gayanus*), perennial mission grass (*Pennisetum polystachion*) and water weeds such as aquatic para grass (*Urochloa mutica*) and hymenachne (*Hymenachne amplexicaulis*) in the Laynhapuy Homelands. However, annual mission grass (*Pennisetum pedicellatum*) is present on some homelands and poses a significant threat.

Illegal and unwanted fishing are also a major concern to traditional owners and the Yirralka Rangers. Some of the remote islands and coastline in this region are subject to unregulated recreational and commercial fishing. The distances involved often mean offenders are long gone by the time enforcement officers eventually arrive.
There is often no local capacity to deal with such incursions on the spot. Current funding efforts are focusing on developing local Indigenous capacity by providing the necessary equipment, training and powers for existing community land and sea management rangers to address these growing problems.

As for most areas along the coast of the Northern Territory there is little research on the local scale impacts of inshore fisheries such as mud crab, trepang and barramundi fishing on local food fisheries.

Land and Sea Management History

Traditional owners of the Laynhapuy Homelands have long been active in land and sea management. The Yolngu were at the forefront of politically advocating for land rights in the Northern Territory and have long fought to have their ownership of their sea country acknowledged under Australian law. This continuing struggle is recognised in the recent decision of the High Court of Australia, in the Blue Mud Bay case, where the majority (five to two) held that Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory includes exclusive rights regarding commercial and recreational fishing in the tidal waters (from the mean high tide to the mean low tide marks) overlying Aboriginal land.

The homeland movement, a Yolngu initiative, began in north east Arnhem Land in 1972. This saw many Yolngu families move back to their country, where they could take charge of their lives and country. Yolngu built many of the first houses on the homelands using local timber and labour under supervision of qualified builders.

The establishment of Yirralka land and sea management represents the Laynhapuy Homelands Association Incorporated’s (LHAI) ongoing commitment to supporting traditional owners in cultural and natural resource management in its area of operation. The Yirralka ranger program includes both the Dirramu (men’s) and Miyalk (women’s) groups. Within this caring for country program there are currently 34 men and women formally participating in the program as rangers. Of these, 24 men have paid positions funded under the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA) Working on Country (WoC) program, and 10 women rangers are funded by the Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC). The ILC also fund the coordinator positions for both the Dirramu and Miyalk programs. The WoC and ILC funding ensures full-time wages along with employment conditions that have not been available to Aboriginal land and sea mangers (rangers) in the past under Community Development and Employment Program (CDEP).
Operational costs to compliment the wages from WoC are being sought from grant funding and fee for service work as well as the Healthy People Healthy Country Bilateral schedule.

The Yirralka land and sea management program is unique when compared to many other caring for country programs across the Northern Territory in that the outstations within the homelands are permanently occupied.

**Land and Sea Management Activity**

**>> Sea Country**

Sea country work currently includes monitoring and reporting of fishing vessels to NT Fisheries and undertaking illegal foreign fishing vessel patrols for AQIS. Other activities include monitoring turtle and dugong habitats and the removal of marine debris and ghost nets from coastal waters and beaches.

**>> Fee for service work**

The Yirralka rangers are involved in a number of fee for service activities for AQIS. These include monitoring ants and mosquitoes, weeds and illegal foreign fishing activities.

**>> Feral animals**

The management of feral animal populations across the homelands is a major and ongoing activity for the Yirralka rangers. They are currently involved in aerial and ground shooting programs for buffalo in conjunction with a commercial safari operation in partnership with some traditional owners from the homelands, and trapping and shooting pigs which are causing extensive damage to country. Work is also being undertaken in developing feral animal monitoring programs, including the construction of exclusion fences for monitoring and educational purposes.

**>> Fire**

The Yirralka rangers are involved with traditional owners undertaking customary hunting fires (*Worrk*), as well as ecological burning and fuel reduction burning around communities.

**>> Ecological knowledge**

The Yirralka rangers recently held a series of workshops in the IPA to talk and learn about customary burning practices and have completed some follow up burning on a floodplain north of Dhalinybuy. They continue to collect and record information about Yolngu place names for inclusion within their Geographic Information System (GIS) and to collect associated stories. Eventually they aim to produce their own maps of the region with the correct and relevant place names. The rangers are also
undertaking to incorporate the Yolngu seasonal calendar within their work programs. These are some of the ways they intend to make Yolngu ecological knowledge the foundation on which they continue to build and formalize their land and sea management program.

**>> Linkages with schools**
The Yirralka land and sea management program offers work experience to school pupils and students are often invited to participate in suitable ranger activities. The Yirralka women rangers are currently joint-training with Vocational Education and Training (VET) secondary students in the Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management. It is hoped that both the secondary students and the rangers will benefit from the reciprocal learning relationships that could develop.

**>> The Mulka project**
The Mulka project tells Yolngu stories of culture and country. It is a multi media archive and production facility employing and empowering Yolngu people of north east Arnhem Land. The aim of the Mulka project is for Yolngu people to document their culture and tell their own stories through digital media. The Mulka project is supported by the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka art centre and museum in Yirrkala.

**Governance**
LHAI is an incorporated body under the *Northern Territory Associations Act*. It is a strong Indigenous governance organisation and is the host organisation for the Yirralka Land and Sea Management Group.

The foundation of governance within LHAI is that representative Wäŋa-watang (senior traditional owners) speak for their country and give permission for management activities on their land. It is the most critical aspect of LHAI activities to which they have demonstrated long-term commitment.

LHAI’s establishment in 1985 demonstrated the aspiration of Yolngu to determine their own future and to run and control their own affairs according the laws of the Yolngu people. Their aim was to develop self-sufficient sustainable homelands for the benefit of themselves and future generations.

Importantly, the structure of LHAI was developed by Yolngu to ensure that non-Indigenous staff members working within the organisation worked in advisory roles to help, support, train and provide services, rather than being able to exercise power and control over direction of the Association. This was done to enable Yolngu leaders,
through traditional decision-making structures, to take control and be responsible for the lives of their own people.

Within LHAI's area there are now 18 homelands, 15 airstrips, 92 houses with a population of approximately 800 residents. LHAI actively supports people on country by providing essential services by way of a resource centre which administers a range of services such as

- CDEP
- Health services
- Housing management
- Aged care
- Training
- Mechanical workshop, and
- The evolving cultural and natural resource management (caring for country) program.

In addition to the resource centre functions LHAI also operates other businesses such as Balamumu Munggurru Pty Ltd (Laynha Aviation).

The Yirralka land and sea management program is an important development in the work of LHAI in response to traditional owners’ desire to formally manage their land and sea country and to actively deal with threats to cultural and environmental values.