Top End Women Rangers Talking

Women Ranger’s Workshop Report

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Katherine May and Emilie Ens
Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
Australian National University
Introduction

The People on Country (PoC), Healthy Landscapes and Indigenous Economic Futures project is a five-year (2007–2012) collaborative research project working with seven Indigenous land and sea management groups located across the tropical savanna of the Top End and southern Gulf Country of the Northern Territory.

The core objective of the PoC project is to assist Aboriginal land and sea managers to build an evidence base on how their activities contribute to the health of land and sea country and to the well-being of Aboriginal people. The project also supports partner groups by building capacity through the learning of new skills and practices ‘both ways’, promoting empowering relationships and assisting in making their voices heard at the national level. The PoC project is based at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University (ANU) and is sponsored primarily by the Sidney Myer Fund, with additional support from the ANU and the Australian Research Council (ARC). This workshop was also supported by the ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) Conference Fund. For more information about the PoC project go to http://caepr.anu.edu.au/poc/index.php.

Aims of the Workshop

The aim of the workshop was to bring together women rangers from PoC partner land and sea management organisations to talk about the issues specifically related to women Ranger’s work; the positive aspects as well as some of the difficulties and challenges. The workshop aimed to give them the space to share their experiences and issues and to discuss together ways of overcoming some of the challenges and ways of enhancing the meaningful involvement of women in Indigenous land and sea management initiatives. Following this workshop the aim is to bring together the information and ideas discussed by the Rangers into a practical toolkit (written and DVD resource) for them and other women rangers groups to draw on, particularly in terms of strategies these women have used in overcoming challenges related to their work as Rangers.
The Workshop

The workshop took place on 14-16 June 2011 at Charles Darwin University (CDU) and ANU’s North Australia Research Unit (NARU) in Darwin. The workshop was facilitated by Katherine May (CAEPR) Emilie Ens (CAEPR) and Cherry Daniels (retired Yugul Mangi Ranger). Nineteen women rangers attended the workshop, representing five of the seven PoC partner groups: Manwurrk Rangers (Warddeken Land Management Limited), Djelk Rangers (Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation), Yirralka Rangers (Laynhapuy Homelands Association Inc.), Dhimurru Rangers (Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation) and Yugul Mangi Rangers (Yugul Mangi Land Sea Management Corporation). The workshop was also attended by Annette Godden from SEWPac’s Working on Country program (see below for a list of participants).

This three-day workshop was designed to be flexible to allow for input from the participants with regards to structure, content and outputs. Discussions focused on 1) What work activities they do; 2) What they like about being a Ranger; 3) What activities others want them to do; 4) What they would like to do in the future; 5) What are some of the challenges they face; and 6) What strategies have they used or could use to reduce or overcome these challenges.

Each Ranger group discussed and answered these questions and then presented to the whole group. Some of the Rangers presented their discussion by writing and telling stories about a particular work activity or how they overcame certain challenges. The Rangers also used case studies to document in more detail different aspects of their work, particularly related to what they would like to do in the future and how they plan to do it. Throughout the workshop the Rangers took it in turns to film all the discussions and presentations using a video camera. Some of the younger Rangers also interviewed individuals asking them questions about their work as a Ranger.
Key Themes

The five Indigenous land and sea management organisation represented at the workshop work in diverse areas across Arnhem Land. For example the Manwurk Rangers of Warddeken Land Management Limited (LML) are based at the small outstation of Kabulwarnamyo on the Arnhem Plateau and Yirralka Rangers are located throughout the Laynhapuy homelands in north-east Arnhem Land. Yugul Mangi, Dhimurru and Djelk Rangers are based in the larger towns of Ngukurr and Nhulunbuy and Maningrida respectively. These different settings bring with them different work priorities with diverse social and environmental factors affecting their country as well as different challenges to be overcome.

Each group explained to the others the activities they do in their specific organisations. This included, amongst others, fire management, collecting insect and weed samples for AQIS, propagating plants in nurseries, weed and feral animal management, recording ecological and cultural knowledge, marine debris management and biodiversity monitoring. Whilst there were similarities, interesting differences also emerged which led the Rangers to talking about what they would like to do in the future. For example Yirralka and Dhimurru Miyalk (women) Rangers have nurseries and propagate native plant seedlings to revegetate areas in their Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs). This is something that Djelk, Manwurk and Yugul Mangi Rangers would like to do. Each group discussed how they would go about developing their proposed activities and what it would involve. Through this the Rangers were able to learn from each others’ experiences and pass on knowledge to each other. Bush medicine and bush product enterprises were also something that a number of the groups wanted to establish. Some of these discussions also centred on wanting to do activities that are only currently carried out by male rangers, such as boat and tractor driving. So strategies were discussed for developing skills in these activities.
Each group discussed one activity that they most enjoyed and wrote and retold the story of what it involves and why they enjoy it. The activities included fire management, biodiversity surveys, sea patrols, working in nurseries propagating seedlings, and making bush products, amongst others. Discussions on why they enjoy being Rangers, centred on; being on their own country and looking after it; learning from Elders; teaching the younger ones; learning from each other; working with Balanda; financial benefits; training and learning new skills; and giving their children a better future and generally making them feel good.

When discussing the challenges the stories centred on coping with criticism and jealousy; prioritisation of male rangers; issues with Ranger coordinators; balancing childcare and work; problems of food availability; getting training and licences to do the work they want to do and the distances they have to travel to do their work, especially in the wet. Working to the priorities of funders —Balanda way—was also seen as an issue for some Rangers. Furthermore co-facilitator Cherry Daniels talked extensively about the complicated problems of feral animals and the damage they are causing to Country. The whole group then discussed at length ways that particular challenges could be reduced or overcome, with an emphasis on supporting and communicating with each other, managers and Boards and devising specific plans together.

The Next Steps

The workshop enabled the women to come together and discuss what it means to be a female Ranger, issues that are important to them and how challenges can be overcome. The discussions and stories written and recorded at the workshop will be developed in collaboration with the workshop participants, into a DVD and written toolkit for these Ranger groups and others to use.

Workshop Participants

Dhimurru Rangers - Bawali Wendy Marika, Wangawuy Grace Mununggirrtj
Djelk Rangers - Felina Campion, Selma Campion, Tara Rostron, Jodie Kelly, Dorita Djolom
Manwurrk Rangers - Lisa Miller, Jenny Nadjamerrek, Carol Pamkal, Kirsten Dooley, Georgia Vallance
Yirrkala Rangers - Bungamana Gunambarr, Gurrundul Marika, Fiona Shaw.
Yugul Mangi Rangers - Cherry Daniels (co-facilitator), Priscilla Dixon, Edna Nelson, Julie Roy.
CAEPR - Emilie Ens, Katherine May
SEWPaC - Annette Godden
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