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People On Country

Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation

Traditional Owners and Area of Operation

Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation is based in Ngukurr and work on behalf of traditional owners of the Alawa, Wandarrang, Ritharrngu/Wagilag, Ngandi, Nunggubuyu, Marra, Ngalakgan, Rembarng and Binbinga peoples whose country is situated in south east Arnhem Land.

The area of operation is approximately 20,000 km² and includes the Roper River and sea country as far north as Wuyagiba to Limmen Bight in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria. The rangers also work inland as far as Womona.

Landscape Description

The country managed by the Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation falls within the Gulf Fall and Uplands bioregion (See NRETA 2005). This bioregion is the second largest in the Northern Territory stretching from the Arnhem Land Plateau into western Queensland. It covers some 111,783 km² of land with some 36% of the bioregion owned by Aboriginal people under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (ALRA).

The majority of the Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation's work in this bioregion occurs in the Roper basin. The major rivers in the Roper Basin include the Roper, Phelps, Wilton, Waterhouse and Hodgson rivers. The Roper River flows from sandstone escarpment country through well defined valleys and sloping coastal alluvial plains into the Gulf of Carpentaria at Port Roper in the Limmen Bight.



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Burning country.

The Roper and the Waterhouse rivers are permanently flowing and retain their Dry season flow from springs associated with groundwater aquifers that cover large areas of the basin. The mouth of the Roper has extensive littoral environment of samphire flats and alluvial sand flats. The lower catchments and floodplains of the Limmen, Towns and Roper rivers and Limmen Bight and islands are recognised as a biodiversity site of national significance. The floodplains and coast are also recognised as wetlands of national importance. They are the second largest area of saline coastal flats in the NT providing habitat to important migratory wading birds in the Dry season. The surrounding waters support significant populations of dugong, and marine turtles. It is also an area of important sea grass habitat (NRETA 2005:135).

The most extensive vegetation in the Gulf Fall and Uplands bioregion is woodland dominated by Darwin Stringybark (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*) and Variable-barked bloodwood

(*Corymbia dichromophloia*) with Spinifex understorey and woodland dominated by Northern box (*Eucalyptus tectifica*) with tussock grass understorey (NRETA 2005:88). The Roper River is unusual for the dense stands of Mataranka palm (*Livistona rigida*) along the upper reaches, as well as the extensive salt marsh, saline flats and coastal grasslands at the mouth. Patches of monsoon rainforest and vine thicket are found along the rivers, around springs, and on stony slopes protected from fire (NLC 2004).

Ecological threats to this region include weeds, feral animals, wildfires and unregulated use. 'Weeds of National Significance' in Yugul Mangi's area of management include Mimosa (*Mimosa pigra*), Prickly acacia (*Acacia nilotica*) and Parkinsonia (*Parkinsonia aculeate*).

There are significant populations of feral animals in this region. Donkeys, horses, buffalo and pigs are the major species of feral animals. These species contribute to land degradation which is manifested in an increase and dominance of weed species such as Sicklepod (*Senna obtusifolia*, *Senna hirsuta* and *Senna tora*), Sida (*Sida cordifolia*) and Hyptis (*Hyptis suaveolens*), and a decline in native species. The feral animals also cause a decline in water quality and the integrity of riparian habitats, threatening both the natural and cultural environment.

In recent times very little has been done to survey the flora and fauna of Aboriginal lands in this area. The status of many species remains unknown. There are at least 24 flora species listed as 'data deficient' (NLC 2004).

Water quality on Aboriginal lands in the management area of Yugul Mangi is generally described as good. Activities of highest impact on water quality are road building increasing silt loads, and trampling and wallowing by feral animals in billabongs and riparian margins of waterways (NLC 2004).

In relation to sea country the Limmen Bight area in general is subject to very high commercial mud-crabbing pressure, although at there is little information available about the local scale ecosystem impacts of this or its impact on Aboriginal customary harvest in the area. Traditional owners have indicated a need to develop a management system for inshore fisheries such as mud crab to enable better spatial management of local impacts and guard against over-fishing at a local scale. There is also concern about the effects of marine debris (such as ghost nets) on marine resources such as turtle and dugong (NLC 2004).

Land and Sea Management History

The Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation was established in 2008 to strengthen Aboriginal governance of the land and sea management over the nine clan estates. It grew out of earlier land and sea management activity focussed around the Ngukurr community.

Local interest in formalised land management developed in the late 1990s, when a group of landowners worked with the Indigenous Land Management Facilitator (Joe Morrison). They worked to control a Mimosa (a Weed of National Significance) outbreak on the Phelp floodplain and undertake early controlled burning.

In 2002, women from Ngukurr, after attending the Northern Land Council's Aboriginal Women's Land and Sea Management Conference at Gunlom, made a decision to establish a women's ranger group (the Yugul Mangi Women Rangers, funded under the Community Employment and Development Program (CDEP)) to work on land management issues in and around Ngukurr. The group focussed on eradicating big headed ants in Ngukurr, language and culture camps, river patrols and weed and fire management.

A local group of men who worked with the first Landcare group and continued to work occasionally with the women's ranger group became officially engaged in the caring for country CDEP program in 2007.

Currently, there are ten rangers and one coordinator position (job-shared) working for the Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation. Recently, the Yugul Mangi Rangers secured funding from the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts' (DEWHA) Working on Country (WOC) program. This means that now seven of the ten rangers will receive a fulltime salary with employment conditions that have not been available to Aboriginal land and sea managers in the past under CDEP such as superannuation and holiday pay.



Butchering a feral bullocky (bull).

Land and Sea Management Activity

Since the program's inception in the late 1990s it has grown swiftly, with land and sea management activity focussed over a vast area of land and sea country. Management of a vast area of country with limited resources and limited access places much pressure on the rangers. Current land and sea management activity of the Yugul Mangi rangers is focussed on the following.

>> Fire management

Fire, being one of the primary Aboriginal land and conservation management tools, is a major focus of the Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation's work. While many of southern Arnhem Land's traditional owners live in Ngukurr and other communities they do not have the ability (lack of access to vehicles, financial resources etc) to access their country to undertake seasonal fire management activity. This means that the rangers must undertake this activity for, rather than in association with, traditional owners in many areas of the country being managed.

The Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation works regionally on fire management and is a part of the wider Central Arnhem Land Fire Abatement (CALFA) program. Here, they work with other traditional owners living in Numbulwar, Bulman, Ramingining and Maningrida. The CALFA program is contiguous with the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement (WALFA) program focussed on the Arnhem Land plateau (See Warddeken Land Management at <<http://caepr.anu.edu.au/Warddeken-Land-Management-Limited.php>>).

The Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation works closely, with and is supported by, Bushfires NT. Their area of operation is included the Arnhem Region of Bushfires NT (see <<http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/natres/bushfires/about.html>>).

Rangers, along with traditional owners undertake annual fire management planning and are involved in on-ground burning, foot-walk burning and aerial controlled burning (ACB). Several rangers have their bombardier (aerial burning) tickets so they can undertake prescribed control burning from helicopters in very remote areas.

>> Weed management

Weed management is another component of the land management work. The major weeds that threaten country in southern Arnhem land include Mimosa (*Mimosa pigra*) and Parkinsonia (*Parkinsonia aculeata*).

Weeds can have serious impacts upon the lives of Aboriginal people. Weeds such as Mimosa have the potential to form large, dense monocultures that out-compete and displace wetland fauna and flora, which in turn can limit Aboriginal cultural activities and economic uses of land. For example, in Mimosa-infested wetlands native fauna and flora is no longer available for harvest, which means Aboriginal people become reliant on other food sources—often expensive store-bought products of a lesser quality, such as bully-beef. The loss of access to healthy country food can impact on community health.

Not only are weeds a threat to the lives of Aboriginal people but also Australian agriculture. The cost of weeds to Australian farmers is \$4 billion per year in lost production and control costs. If Aboriginal people did not actively work to eradicate weeds introduced to their country, but let them spread, the costs to the Australian farming community could be far greater than current cost of \$4 billion per year.

>> Sea country

Several of the traditional owner clans involved in the Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation are saltwater people. One of their primary aims is to keep saltwater culture strong and saltwater country and its resources healthy. Sea country management is a growing area of work for the Yugul Mangi rangers. Much of the current activity of the sea country work is focussed on problems introduced by outsiders, such as ghost nets. Ghost nets are fishing nets that have been lost accidentally, deliberately discarded, or simply abandoned at sea. They travel on the currents and tides of the oceans continually fishing as they are pushed along in the currents. They are particularly bad in the Gulf of Carpentaria as here the currents are circular and move in a clockwise direction around the Gulf. As they move unattended in the currents, they fish indiscriminately, catching fish, turtles, dugongs, and crocodiles. Some of these species have high spiritual and cultural values as well as being highly prized food of salt water people.

Rangers are involved in collecting the nets that are drifting or have been washed up on the beaches. Some of the nets are over a kilometre in length. The rangers GPS where the nets were found and then identify each net to establish its country of origin. While this work is important it takes up much of the rangers' time and resources which they would rather be spending on other saltwater activities that they see as 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 occurring on their sea country. Some of the rangers have their coxswains tickets and also operate the ranger boat in the Wet season to provide essential services to the wider community.

>> Fee for service with Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service

Fee for service work is a growing component of many caring for country projects in the Top End of the Northern Territory. Fee for service work recognises and values the ecological and geographic knowledge of Aboriginal people. The Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation works closely with Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) in monitoring threats to Australia's biodiversity and primary agricultural industries. Here, rangers are involved in monitoring debris from illegal foreign fishing vessels, mosquitoes, ants, weeds and taking blood samples from feral animals to monitor for diseases.

Through this work the rangers record via Global Positioning Systems (GPS) where they collect their samples. They send this data long with samples to AQIS so that AQIS scientists can investigate further. The Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation charges a fee for this work. These funds go back into the land and sea management program.

>> Feral animals

Feral animals are another pest that have been introduced to Aboriginal lands that traditional owners now struggle to deal with. The feral animals that infest south east Arnhem Land include: horses; pigs; buffaloes; cats; cane toads; and big headed ants.

Feral animals cause much damage to country especially around wetlands, which are important food gathering areas. Here, pigs, horses and buffaloes trample the earth around the wetlands killing the turtles that hibernate in the mud. With their hooves they pound the mud so that it resembles pock-marked concrete in which little survives. In some areas the horses have also eaten all the water-lilies in the billabongs, which impacts on the habitat of fish species. These impacts mean that traditional owners again lose access to important food resources, such as turtles, fish, and water lilies.

Because of the impacts of cane toads the goanna is not as abundant as it once was. This is another food resource that traditional owners have lost.

Feral animals and the diseases they may carry pose a threat to neighbouring pastoral enterprises as well as agriculture across Australia. Management of feral animals on Aboriginal lands is not only important for Aboriginal people but wider Australia. Significant resources are required to assist Aboriginal people with this introduced and swiftly growing problem.

In the 2008 Dry season, the Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation undertook a first step in controlling horse populations in their region when they undertook a two week pet meat project working with locally licensed operators. The operators trained the rangers in all skills needed to harvest pet meat from the wild. The Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation is now looking into establishing an independent ongoing pet meat enterprise. The biggest difficulty they face here is securing funding for a refrigerated unit.

>> Enterprise development

There has been much discussion amongst the rangers and between the Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation and neighbouring Aboriginal land and sea management groups about developing enterprises on country. Rangers want to increase their funding base and broaden employment opportunities. For this reason planning and trials are occurring in relation to enterprises based on the following: carbon abatement; crocodile egg collection; harvest of long-necked turtles, water lilies; sugar bag and pet-meating.

>> Management of sites of significance

There are many sites of significance across the country that the Yugul Mangi rangers operate. These include sacred sites, art sites and historic sites. Many of these sites are being damaged by wildfires, weeds and feral animals, water seepage or unwelcome visitors. Recently the Yugul Mangi rangers have been working with NT Parks and Wildlife to manage an important rock art site that contains many human remains. The site is known as Walgundu Yurlurrinji and is slowly being damaged from the effects mentioned above. Bones are also disappearing and it is thought that they are being 'souvenired' by trespassers. The rangers, along with senior traditional owners

of the site, have developed a management plan to ensure the site is looked after properly. Following the site visit to Walgundu Yurlurrinji the rangers made a visit to Kakadu National Park to learn new management techniques for managing rock art sites. The rangers are looking to apply their knowledge to other sites of significance. Traditional owners hope that the work to protect Wargundu will continue through the development of a collaborative project with NT Parks and Wildlife to develop management plans for significant sites throughout the St Vidgeon area.

Governance Arrangements

In the early stages of development the ranger group used the Yugul Mangi Community Council to support its activity and manage its finances. Initially, this arrangement provided some benefits but as the profile, capacity and work programme of the group grew and the number of small short-term grants increased this arrangement became problematic.

Difficulties arose with the high turn over of community council management. For example, the revolving door of community council chief executive officers, with little understanding of the customary Aboriginal governance underpinning the land and sea management programme, meant that tensions grew when a new CEO would seek to usurp decision-making from traditional owners by controlling assets, held on behalf of the land and sea management group by the community council, and directing what he or she thought the Yugul Mangi rangers should or should not be doing in regard to land and sea management activity. These actions pulled the ownership of the land and sea management programme away from traditional land owners and created tension.

Traditional owners modelled the governance of the land and sea management program on Aboriginal decision making processes, which must accommodate Aboriginal law if it is to continue to negotiate terms of access for land management activities on Aboriginal land. Local government and council structures have been unable or unwilling to accommodate this mode of operation. Furthermore, they do not have, as a primary interest, the success of the land and sea management program as it is not considered a core council service.

This situation in mid 2008 is still unfolding as the Yugul Mangi Community Government Council is absorbed into the new Roper Gulf Shire Council.

In a bid to ensure that land and sea management remained under the authority of Aboriginal traditional owners, senior rangers began discussions with senior traditional owners about an appropriate governance structure. What grew out of these discussions was the Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation. It is an organisation that is still emerging but seeks to ensure Aboriginal customary law remains at the forefront of land and sea management activity across the clan estates. To this end a 'board of directors' has been established with representative members of each of the clan groups belonging to the Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Management Corporation. This 'board of directors' will guide land and sea management planning ensuring that decision making follows Aboriginal customary law. It aims to further empower Aboriginal decision making and strengthen the land and sea management program.

The corporation is now a legal entity and has begun negotiating the transfer of all ranger assets and funding agreements from the shire council to the corporation. The Northern Land Council will continue to play a role in administering ranger projects in the region as they will employ the rangers under WOC program.

Sources

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Robin, C. J, Smyth, D. and Whitehead P., 2006. *Managing for Country. Decision-Making Guidelines for Joint Management of Feral Animals in Kakadu National Park*, Report to the Board of Management for Kakadu National Park, Department of Environment and Heritage, Jabiru, NT.

Publications

Yugul Mangi Rangers Land and Sea Management 2008 Activity Report, available at <<http://caepr.anu.edu.au/others/governance/Other-1200056400.php>>. This publication from the Yugul Mangi rangers reports on their activities during 2008, including fire management and weed control, with lots of photographs documenting work on country. [22 pp., 5.9 Meg PDF file, 12 January 2008].

Freshwater billabong monitoring and protection from feral animals by Emilie Ens, available at <http://anu.edu/caepr/country/doc/Yugul_Mangi_fencing.pdf>. This report details a project by Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Rangers to fence off areas of three billabongs around Ngukurr in order to protect these areas from feral animal damage, and to demonstrate the damage that feral animals have on country by comparing the health of fenced off areas to non-fenced areas. [15 pages, 11 Meg PDF file, [2 February 2010]