



FINDINGS

Ongoing dispersal shapes intercultural collaboration with women caring for **sentient** and **gendered** Country.

Women Caring for Country on the Frontier

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In the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria, Waanyi and Garawa women have been at the forefront of establishing caring for Country programs on their lands. However, until recently they have seen relatively few employment opportunities to participate in these programs as rangers. This BNHCRC PhD project has provided an opportunity to work with the Waanyi-Garawa and Garawa rangers to support women in their struggle to care for Waanyi and Garawa Countries, and to develop a case study of intercultural collaboration within settler colonial Australia.

Introduction

Indigenous caring for Country programs are the leading employers of women within Australia's environmental management sector. However, gender is still left largely unconsidered in the planning and evaluation of intercultural caring for Country projects, and there is little critical consideration within settler policy discourse for the societal circumstances in which Indigenous women choose to participate in these partnerships*. This research therefore explores the question: *how does settler colonialism shape intercultural collaboration with women caring for Country in the Waanyi and Garawa case study?*

Methods

This is a participatory action research project, where Waanyi and Garawa women participated in the research as rangers, and I participated in their ranger programs as a research student based out of Robinson River community and Borroloola from 2015-2018. I have reflexively analyzed this experience, as well as unstructured interviews and group discussions, within a critical theoretical framework drawing on settler colonial and feminist studies. Under the guidance of women I have worked with, my thesis is narrated explicitly from my own perspective as a white researcher. Here I have positioned myself as a co-subject, already implicated in both settler colonialism and intercultural collaboration from the onset of the project.

Results

Key findings of this research include:

- Waanyi and Garawa Country continues to be sentient, gendered, and reciprocal to its peoples
- Waanyi and Garawa men and women understand damage to their Country as a

direct result of their ongoing dispersal into surrounding townships and the subversion of their customary governance institutions

- Here women have different historical and contemporary experiences of dispersal to men, and hope to heal their Country by renewing its connection to its people as sovereign experts of their own Country
- Intercultural collaborations with Waanyi and Garawa women have the potential to undermine this aspiration by perpetuating settler colonial gender relations
- At the same time, Waanyi and Garawa men and women purposefully use intercultural collaborative action to decolonize these power structures situated within settler institutions and support women caring for Country.

Discussion

Recent BNHCRC funded research posits that it is useful to consider collaborations between settler institutions and Indigenous peoples as decolonizing experiments**. The number of Indigenous women employed in caring for Country programs and working in partnership with settler institutions is in Australia is steadily growing***. This case study provides insights into impediments and opportunities for decolonizing these intercultural collaborations.

*Davies, Walker, Maru, 2018. Warlpiri experiences highlight challenges and opportunities for gender equity in Indigenous conservation management in arid Australia. *Journal of Arid Environments*, 149: 40-52

**Neale, Carter, Nelson, Bourke, 2019. Walking together: a decolonising experiment in bushfire management on Dja Dja Wurrung country. *Cultural Geographies*, 26(3): 341-359

***"Strong Women on Country: The Success of Women Caring for Country as Indigenous Rangers and on Indigenous Protected Areas", 2018. Country Needs People, PEW Charitable trust: https://www.countryneedspeople.org.au/strong_women_on_country



Image above: Ms. T. Green, Kathleen O'Keefe, Katherine van Wezel, Iris Hogan, Margaret Cutta, Katie Seccin, Maxine Wallace, and Clareece Coolwell planning fieldwork, courtesy of Harry MacDermott, Kaligan, May 2016



Image above: Joy and Katie Seccin burning their Country for the first time as part of their caring for Country program on the Ganalanga-Mindibirrina IPA, May 2017



Image above: Waanyi and Garawa custodians, rangers, and their collaborators discussed the dissemination of this research at their biannual Ganalanga-Mindibirrina IPA meeting, Wongalingi, May 2018