HAZARD NOTE

REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES WELCOME TWO-WAY TRAINING

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The *Northern Australian bushfire and natural hazard training project* is part of the Understanding and enhancing resilience research cluster. It draws on current assets, such as skills and capacities, to increase confidence, competence and resilience through training programs in remote northern Australia.

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SUMMARY

This unique project has developed a pilot program for natural hazards training in Indigenous northern Australia. With national significance, the project has highlighted the need for greater awareness of the profound cultural differences between bureaucracies and Indigenous people, and the desire by communities to have non-Indigenous emergency management training that builds on Indigenous knowledge and delivery of hazard management practices.

▲ **Above:** THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUDING THE WHOLE COMMUNITY IN TRAINING HAS BEEN A KEY FINDING FROM THIS PROJECT. PHOTO: BEV SITHOLE.

This includes respecting and observing cultural arrangements, such as following local structures for decision making and the inclusion of family in the training, as well as the inclusion of the understanding and practices of Indigenous people. It suggests that dialogue about those differences can lead to better outcomes for resilience development.

CONTEXT

Although Australia's National Strategy for Disaster Resilience seeks equity in the delivery of fire and emergency management across the nation, remote communities in northern Australia are at a severe disadvantage when it comes to managing natural hazards. Inadequate infrastructure unsuited to wet season conditions, combined with remoteness, isolates communities for up to six months per year. Additionally, socioeconomic measures show that remote community inhabitants are in the lowest tiers of Australian health, education and income. Y*et all* remote communities are expected to contribute to the 'shared responsibility' for disaster risk reduction. In Australia's far north, however, many communities have never had an effective dialogue with government agencies. This has led to profound misunderstandings on both sides about capacities and responsibilities.

BACKGROUND

This project responds to concerns expressed by Indigenous people in some remote Northern Territory communities about the inadequacy of fire and emergency management training in northern Australia. Following informal conversations initiated by Indigenous people, the researchers have consulted community members in three Arnhem Land communities: Ramingining in Central Arnhem Land; and Maningrida and Manmoyi, both in West Arnhem Land. The objective was to document the issues and develop training that meets their requirements and aspirations. For many Indigenous participants, it was the first time they had been consulted by a non-Indigenous person about Indigenous understanding of natural hazards, resilience, leadership and decision making.

The project, which began in July 2015 and is now in its utilisation phase, is one of several CRC projects that investigate how to strengthen community resilience in northern Australia. It focuses on understanding the risk and vulnerability of remote, mostly Indigenous, communities and takes into account their existing and emerging capacities. A key component has been to scope community members' understanding of their risk profile and resilience. Remarkably, this research found that many of the participants had never heard of 'natural hazards management'.

Arnhem Land

DARWIN▲

Maningrida ▲

▲ Ramingining

▲ Manmoyi

▲ **Above:** LOCATION OF PARTICIPATING ARNHEM LAND COMMUNITIES.

▲ **Above:** INTERVIEWS WERE CONDUCTED WITH DUE ATTENTION TO LOCAL CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES.
PHOTO: BEV SITHOLE.

NEED TO KNOW

ARPNet (Aboriginal Research Practitioners Network): a coordinated Indigenous team which has been trained in Participatory Action Research. Members are contracted to conduct research, evaluation and planning activities using qualitative and quantitative research methods. For each project, ARPNet members work with the lead researcher to clarify the research objective and frame the approach. ARPNet research is then conducted in the participants' first language, with due attention to local cultural sensitivities.

Balanda: white people; term derived from "Hollander".

Nor did they understand the term 'resilience' in this context, that is, the ability of individuals and communities to adapt to environmental changes and to continue a fulfilling existence on country.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY

The three remote Arnhem Land communities were selected because:

1. They were located near emerging fire and land management projects
2. They were impacted by two cyclones (*Nathan* and *Lam*) in early 2015
3. Community members had strongly advocated for training.

The initial research strategy was to adopt a qualitative approach to determine what local people felt was needed in training. This proved to be a quite specific and limited scope. The strategy subsequently evolved and broadened as the researchers worked with the project's participants. It started with interviews that were unstructured conversations about fire and emergency management and the training that people required to access emerging opportunities in greenhouse emissions abatement and commercial land management in the region. The researchers then held a series of workshops to investigate land management practice and knowledge, which culminated in two workshops targeting leadership and decision making. The workshops were facilitated by practitioners from the ARPNet program (Aboriginal Research Practitioners Network), a coordinated team of Indigenous people who have been trained in participatory action research (see Need to Know box, this page). They used the languages of the community members, as well as English, to generate a deeper understanding of the issues.

The use of ARPNet dramatically improved the project's progress by generating excitement among participants, including people who would usually rarely attend meetings with balanda (white people). Conducting research in participants' first language, with recognition of and deference to Aboriginal cultural settings, indicated

FIGURE 1. LEADERSHIP AND DECISION MAKING MATRIX FOR INDIGENOUS BININJ (PEOPLE) OF CENTRAL/WEST ARNHEM LAND

BININJ FIRE, LAND AND EMERGENCY LEADERSHIP AND DECISION MAKING MATRIX
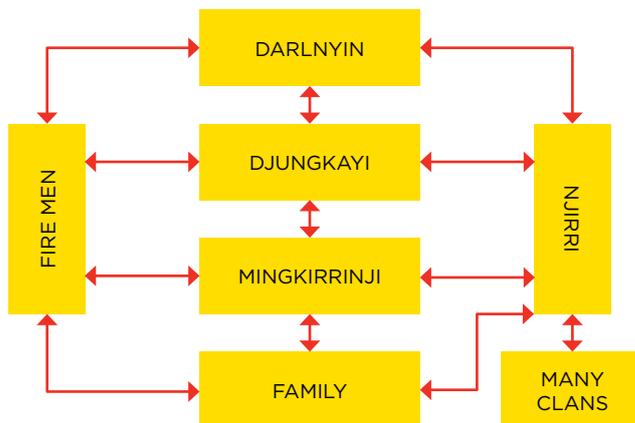
▲ **Above:** Figure 1 shows a model decision making matrix for Bininj, the generic name for people in Central and West Arnhem Land. Bininj covers various language groups that are similar to tribes. For Bininj, individuals are required to fulfil a complex series of interactions in specific roles attending the decision making process. The Darlnyin is 'the big boss', but must refer to both the 'Djungkayi', (title referring to the manager by matrilineal descent, and the 'Mingkirrinji', (the title for owner by patrilineal descent) and also the wider family when taking a decision. If the decision relates to fire then the 'fire men' – senior men with totemic affiliations and deep practical knowledge of fire – are critical players. The 'Njirri' is like an auditor and ensures that proper protocols are observed. Unlike western auditors, however, the Njirri may also affect punishment for breaches of protocol. All this is observed by the Clans, who will object loudly if significant breaches of dreaming law occur.

An equivalent, although not identical, non-hierarchical system might be expected to function in all of Indigenous Australia.

Both the Bininj and the researchers aspire to having this matrix function as part of the fire plans for remote communities in Central and West Arnhem Land.

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to participants that the researchers were committed to addressing each community's training needs. In particular it emerged that the limited scope of the research was, in fact, itself constrained by the preconceptions of the research team and that there was a much deeper set of lessons in the research findings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This project has identified lessons for all interactions between emergency management agencies and Aboriginal people. The researchers found that effective training should respect the local Indigenous culture by working within the non-hierarchical, decision-making matrix of each community. Figure 1 shows the matrix for the Central and West Arnhem Land communities that participated in the research. (Note: their term for 'people' is Bininj). In this system, no individual has the authority to make a decision regarding land or hazard management; input from key members across the matrix, which might include different language groups, is usually sought. A key insight is that Indigenous people believe that only a person born of the country should be able to make decisions about country.

With regard to the training itself, the Indigenous participants wanted to continue the existing training, with its focus on safety and non-Aboriginal conceptions of fire and response. However, they also expressly required that training include their own understandings of fire and practices and use their own 'professors' – senior community members with ceremonial and practical qualifications in fire and land management. The training should integrate with their existing wisdom to build a wider, intersecting understanding of their role in fire and emergency management.

Indigenous participants preferred to have training conducted on their community lands ('on country'), rather than in towns or cities, and use a mix of interactive techniques to operationalise knowledge. The training structure would ideally combine action, discussion and review in their language, led by elders as well as with balanda. It should

be part of a cyclic training program spread over days (a week would be best). Where technology is used (for example, GPS, GIS), it should be introduced and reviewed in ways that allow individuals to become comfortable with their use. For example, familiarising themselves with the technology during breaks or in the evening over a family discussion.

The training should target those people, such as local rangers, who will conduct the on-ground work, and training must also be provided to their extended family or clan (parents, grandparents, children and cousins). The inclusion of this latter group is

▲ **Above:** RESEARCH IN ACTION.
PHOTO: BEV SITHOLE.

vital. It builds a pyramid of comprehension of the training and fosters a discussion that bridges 'new' knowledge and existing traditional frameworks. It also establishes a broader, deeper understanding in the general community that will support the rangers in times of stress or conflict.

The inclusion of this extended learning group in the training also supports the maintenance of traditional leadership and decision making frameworks (see Figure 1). Proper decision making about land and natural hazards in remote Indigenous communities relies on a complex governance structure that balances matrilineal and patrilineal hereditary ownership and authority with multiple threads of totemic and practical knowledge (of fire, for example). Introducing 'new' knowledge to selected trainees would destabilise community understanding and lead to conflict and sub-standard decisions. Inviting the wider clan group to training ensures that

a community can develop its own version of 'shared responsibility' without damaging social aspects of their resilience.

HOW IS THE RESEARCH BEING USED?

The project's findings are being applied to refine both the content and style of the delivery of training for Indigenous people in communities in Central and Western Arnhem Land. This training is tailored to the respective communities and would need to be adjusted to suit other regions, after preliminary discussions with local people.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

At the time of publication the project has just completed a second training pilot and detailed feedback is being sought from participants. When finalised, this important refinement of the program will be incorporated into a compendium resource for use by remote north Australian communities.

FURTHER READING

Gould J, Sithole B, Campbell A, James G and Sutton S, (2014) Building community resilience to natural hazards in Northern Australia, Research proceedings at the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC & AFAC Conference, Wellington, New Zealand

Sithole B, (2012) *The ARPNet Dilly Bag: A Practical Field Guide to Participatory and Other Research Tools for Use by Aboriginal Research Practitioners in Australia*. ARPNet at RIEL, Charles Darwin University

Sithole B, Hunter-xenie H, Yibarbuk D, Daniels C, Daniels G, Campion O, Narmarnyilk S, Narorroga E, Dann O, Dirdi K, Nayilibibj G, Phillips E, Daniels K, Daniels G, Turner H, Daniels CA, Daniels T, Thomas P, Thomas D, Rami T and Brown C, (2017). Living with Widdijith – protocols for building community resilience. pp. 268-88 in *Disaster Resilience: An Integrated Approach* (2nd Ed.), Paton D and Johnston D eds. Springfield Illinois: Charles C Thomas