



## Report on Grassroots Discussion on Community Conserved Areas (CCA)

### Paruku Indigenous Protected Area

#### Kimberley Region, Western Australia

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#### Introduction

*“Keep the land alive. Keep the story alive, too.”*

*Rex Johns, Walmajarri elder.*



“Paruku” is the Walmajarri language name for Lake Gregory, located on the edge of the Great Sandy and Tanami Deserts in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Paruku Indigenous Protected Area is a unique wetland in an arid environment.

The Paruku area, itself a part of the larger Tjurabalan lands, is imbued with people’s stories and lives, and is rich with vital significance. The Lakes are the terminus of a

number of major Dreaming tracks, including the Tjurabalan *tingarri* (Dreaming), which travels along Sturt Creek to the lakes and links several language groups, predominantly Jaru and Walmajarri, who hold responsibilities for specific locations. There are several creation myths relating to the lake itself.



The Paruku lakes support at least 73 species of waterbird and 175 species of aquatic invertebrates. They provide a stopover for 16 species of migrant shorebirds. During drought periods it provides a major refuge and breeding pool for waterbirds.

The lake environs are home to a number of mammal and reptile species, and are a favoured hunting and gathering ground for the traditional owners. Blackhead python and *jarambayi* (water goanna) continue to provide an important component of the contemporary diet, along with *kipara* (plains turkey), *junta* (bush onions), *karnti* (yams) and *kumpupatja* (bush tomatoes).

The Paruku IPA incorporates the communities of Mulan and Billiluna, with the main IPA office running out of Mulan Community. It exists within the same boundaries as the pastoral leases of Lake Gregory and Billiluna. The IPA works alongside the Tjurabalan Pastoral Company to minimise the impact that cattle and feral animals, particularly horses, have on the lake.



### **The Grassroots Discussion**

The meeting began with a trip to Parnkupirti Creek, on the north-eastern corner of the main lake. Eight traditional owners (six elders and two IPA Rangers) attended the meeting. The meeting lasted for approximately one hour.

The facilitator explained the purpose of the meeting, referring to the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conservation Congress in Barcelona to be held in October this year. The facilitator then explained, in plain language, the three conditions of identifying a CCA. The traditional owners agreed that the Paruku IPA met all three conditions.

## Basic Description

Bessie Doonday explained the origins of the Paruku IPA. In the late 1970s her brother, the late Rex Johns, arranged for the Walmajarri people to go back to the lake country after they were moved away in the 1950s and 1960s during the mission days. After a long and protracted campaign, in 2001 the Walmajarri people, with the assistance of the Kimberley Land Council, had their native title rights recognised. In that same year, the IPA was declared, once again initiated by Rex Johns. It was the first IPA in Western Australia.

Rex's vision was to "Keep the story alive. Keep the land alive, too." He believed the IPA could help to do this.

As Bessie commented in the discussion, "It was started for the lake." Notably, at this time, the IPA was conceived and managed by local traditional owners. Bessie explained how her daughter, Shirley, was asked by the community to be the first IPA co-ordinator. Bessie said, "Shirley got it going, little-by-little."

The IPA has now grown significantly, employing four full-time rangers and two coordinators. A second office has recently opened in the neighbouring community of Billiluna, which employs two part-time staff.

The activities of the Paruku IPA are varied, covering projects related to conservation, tourism, art and culture, language and the management of cattle and horses. There is a major focus on education, facilitating the intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge, married with scientific and contemporary land management techniques.



The term "IPA" is widely recognised and understood by the community. A discussion with a group of young children in Mulan revealed the IPA as a familiar agency, strongly related to "the lake", "rangers" and "making good changes on the land". Many school-aged teenagers, boys and girls alike, have aspirations to be rangers and work on their country after they leave school.

Decision making in the IPA is by way of a Steering Committee, which consists of sixteen senior traditional owners representing all the family groups from Mulan and Billiluna. Regular meetings are held to discuss important issues or events, and this is where directions are given to the IPA coordinator.

There are an increasing number of IPAs around Australia. Paruku IPA is bordered by the Warlu Jilajaa Jumu (Fire, Living Water and Soaks) IPA.

## **Value, effectiveness, sustainability**

Everyone at the discussion agreed that the IPA is very “strong”. Given that the purpose of the IPA is to assist the traditional owners in caring for their country, there is a genuine concern to maintain its strength, thus participation is high. There is generally a significant community presence at, and participation in, all IPA meetings and activities. Of course, with increased investment, exposure, education and formalisation of engagement protocols with outside agencies, this care and value will grow in a concomitant way.



## *Conservation of biodiversity*

Paruku IPA is guided by its Plan of Management, the main purpose of which is to maintain the ecological character of the area. At the community level, there is a strong awareness that all work to do with “caring for country” is related to the IPA. There are a number of biodiversity specialists who annually assist with conducting biodiversity survey and monitoring work on the IPA. The community people and rangers are familiar with their work. A component of the biodiversity work includes the recording of traditional oral histories and knowledge of local plants and animals and recording both scientific and Walmajarri plant and animal names. Traditionally, biodiversity is linked with a healthy and wide selection of bush foods, medicines and cultural practices.

In our talks relating to CCAs (in the lead up to discussions at the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conservation Congress), there was a general consensus that the IPA, with the help of other individuals and agencies, works with traditional owners in looking after country, which includes training young people. It also helps to preserve cultural knowledge and educate children about the land, their traditional practices and contemporary land management techniques. According to the meeting participants, these areas are where the strength of the IPA lies.



An increase in human resources is vital in order to sustain the IPA's expansion. Further, a strengthened relationship between project partners (public, private and NGO) and the Mulan and Billiluna communities would ensure that these bodies are aware of the bigger picture. This could assist at the project level, but also with budgeting, reporting and finances, as well as with the broader visioning and discovery processes. It is also imperative that a greater understanding of the logistics and realities involved in operating in such vast and remote areas be experienced by project partners.

### Threats and Needs

The meeting participants did not recognise any immediate threats to the IPA. As Wendy Wise noted, "They all right. They working strong."

They did, however, refer to the Billiluna office, stating that it needs to be "made strong". Wendy also noted that more girls should be working with the IPA. The issue of feral horses was also noted at another point in the discussion as being a large problem for the IPA.

There are a number of other factors, which may cause a threat to the IPA:

- **Pastoral Lease:** The Indigenous Protected Area occupies land currently held as two pastoral leases under the jurisdiction of the Aboriginal Lands Trust. If the pastoral management of the leases does not comply with the requirements of the Pastoral Lands Board, there is a possibility of loss of tenure when the leases come up for renewal in 2015. The implications of this for the IPA are unclear at present.
- **Tourism:** An unmanaged and unmonitored influx of tourist numbers. The main focus of the IPA with regard to tourism is minimising its impact and ensuring that any tourism activities enhance cultural and environmental values. This is being mitigated by the ongoing development and implementation of the Paruku IPA permit system, which is in the process of ongoing formalisation.
- **Feral horses:** Unmanaged horses are a threat to the environmental conditions of the IPA, and a major threat to the operation of the pastoral lease, which could have subsequent ramifications for the Paruku IPA, as noted above. In the discussion, the issue of feral horses was brought up as one of the biggest problems in the IPA. Most community members are aware that there are too many horses, recognising that they push over fences, they compete with cattle for feed and they destroy bird habitats and nesting sites.



- **Climate change:** Climate change is also a possible threat to the future of the IPA, both in ecological terms and a potential eco-tourism industry. Changes in weather pattern extremes and water levels may make the country drier and hotter, resulting in changing fire regimes and the possibility of the introduction of new feral animals or exotic weeds. In addition, with growing global demand and competition for ever-depleting, non-renewable resources, changes in oil prices may affect the numbers of visitors and project workers to the area.

The IPA has numerous “allies” on a number of different levels. Wendy Wise noted that the government was one “friend” of the IPA because “they send people and they give us money [to fund project work]”. The strength of the IPA has been assisted by the increasing investment in the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA) IPA Program, which has in turn led to increased funding being extended to the Paruku IPA in recent years. The introduction of the Commonwealth-funded ranger initiative, the *Working on Country* Program, has also provided funding for four full-time Paruku IPA Ranger positions. This aids the project work being carried out, which ensures the protection of the fragile Paruku wetland ecosystem, and points to a recognition by government that much of the work carried out on IPAs has and does often go unpaid.

Kimberley Land Council is an Aboriginal advocacy organisation and the project managers for the Paruku IPA. It assisted with the Tjurabalan native title claim in 2001, which led to the inception of the Paruku IPA. It offers broad assistance across the Kimberley network of IPAs and their Aboriginal participant communities.

State government agencies, such as the Department of Indigenous Affairs provides strategic and project support across the IPA network in the Kimberley through a Kimberley west-based Land Operations position from the Department's Land Branch. The Agency recognises IPAs as being able to foster alternative, effective conservation partnerships, which also have the potential to produce multiple social, cultural, employment and economic benefits.

Individual project workers were also mentioned in the grassroots discussion as “friends” of the IPA, which include short-term, but regular visitors to the area. This includes a large network of people who have been associated with the community in different capacities for varying lengths of time, some as long as 30 years.

More recently, the Paruku IPA Advisory Group was set up in an effort to bring in experts in the various IPA-related fields (e.g. conservation, tourism, cattle management, art and culture, language, education and



training), in consultation with state and federal government representatives and traditional owners, to assist in their respective areas and to advise on future directions for the IPA.

Further support could be obtained by a strengthened relationship with agencies such as the State Government Department of Conservation, the Pastoral Lands Board, Fire and Emergency Services, Aboriginal Lands Trust and TAFE. However, it is essential that clear engagement protocols with these agencies are drawn up and adhered to.

“Enemies” could include changing personnel in community agencies which usually work closely with the IPA program, for example, community administrators and school personnel. Some of these individuals are on short-term contracts, which may impede ongoing IPA projects. Others are unfamiliar with the benefits of the IPA and thus may not engage with the program or may even see it as a threat to their own agendas.

### **Formal recognition**

When asked about the IPA Steering Committee (which is the decision-making body on the ground), the discussion participants agreed that this was a positive and “fair” method of decision-making. However, the Steering Committee currently consists of older traditional owners. One of the main messages to come out of the discussion was that more young people need to start entering into important decision-making meetings, so that they can begin to become familiar with the way the IPA works. As Bessie commented: “Young people and old people need to work together. We need to get more young people in the Steering Committee so they can learn about all the good things.”

The IPA is a recognised part of the native title process, which gives rise to the legal expression of the Tjurabalan native title holder rights and interests. While IPAs declared under the IPA Program are recognised by the Commonwealth Government through its National Reserve System (NRS) policy, they are not currently enshrined in legislation. However, there are by-laws currently being investigated to enforce the Paruku IPA permit system. In addition, not all State government agencies fully recognise the benefits of Paruku IPA and some see the co-existence of a pastoral industry and an IPA as a conflict of interest. This is another major focus for the IPA; working with the pastoral company to minimise environmental impact of cattle around the Lake and helping to create a



viable pastoral company that suits both the Tjurabalan people and their vision for maintaining the natural environment.

## **Networking**

It was strongly agreed that links with other communities, both local and interstate, be made to improve communications and to find out how others run their IPAs. As commented by Wendy Wise: "Some people should go and have a look at other communities and see how they run their IPA. They might give them ideas...about keeping country clean." It was more appealing to visit other Aboriginal people, and when asked the question about whether to visit people overseas, there was less enthusiasm.

Jamie Brown described his experience of visiting an eco-tourist site, Lake Mungo, which shares similar features to Paruku: "It was an interesting and educational trip. It was good to learn what other people do with tourists, and how they look after their country." Jamie said that he would recommend it to other people.

## **Conclusion**

The Walmajarri people of Mulan and Billiluna have a strong connection to their land and their IPA. Throughout their history they have shown a collective strength of character to protect their land and preserve their culture, first by moving back to the Lake which is such a significant site, eventually establishing their native title rights and subsequently setting up the IPA. Because of this there is a genuine sense of ownership over the IPA that suggests that it will continue to remain strong.



While the discussion elicited positive feedback, the facilitator would recommend that for future "grassroots" discussions, careful attention be paid to the wording of the guidelines and questions, as many of these required interpretation in plain language to aid participants' understanding.

It appeared that, prior to this discussion, the traditional owners were unaware that there were communities in similar situations around the world. Their prior knowledge of the

existence of CCAs/IPAs was limited to regions only in Australia. Once this international significance was explained, the importance of having such a discussion became apparent, as Bessie Doonday commented: "This thing is very important. We should talk to all the people about this."

## **Acknowledgements**

The Australian Government Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts advised us about the CCA grass roots discussion and asked us to consider submitting a case study on the Paruku IPA. The report was written with the assistance of Wade Freeman (Paruku IPA), Jess Clements (Department of Indigenous Affairs) and Jane Blackwood (Kimberley Land Council). The grassroots discussion was facilitated, recorded and reported by Gillian Kennedy (Paruku IPA). Discussion photographs were taken by Wade Freeman. Participants in the discussion were traditional owners of Mulan and Billiluna communities: Bessie Doonday, Rhoda Wise, Wendy Wise, Shirley Yoomarie, Charmia Samuel, Daisy Kungah, Jamie Brown and Lachlan Johns.

Annex 1: **Format for the preliminary database of CCA sites being tested for UNEP/WCMC**

**Basic data**

Site Name (in local language and in English)	<i>Paruku Indigenous Protected Area</i>
Country (include State and Province)	Lake Gregory, Kimberley Region, Western Australia, Australia
Area encompassed by the CCA (specify unit of measurement).	10,000 km <sup>2</sup> (approx).
GIS Coordinates (if available)	20°10'55.54"S 127°32'11.01"E (Handover Campsite)
Whether it includes sea areas (Yes or no)	No
Whether it includes freshwater (Yes or no)	Yes
Marine (Y or N)	No
Concerned community (name and approx. number of persons)	Mulan Aboriginal Community, 120 (approx.) Billiluna Aboriginal Community, 200 (approx.)
Is the community considering itself an indigenous people? (Please note Yes or No; if yes note which people)	Yes - Walmajarri
Is the community considering itself a minority? (Please note Yes or No, if yes on the basis of what, e.g. religion, ethnicity)	Yes – ethnicity (Indigenous peoples) Aboriginal people are a large portion of the population in the Kimberley region but a very small minority of the Australian population.
Is the community permanently settled? (Please note Yes or No; if the community is mobile, does it have a customary transhumance territory? )	Yes – There is a very strong spiritual connections to the traditional lands of the Walmajarri People and living permanently on there country is central to this.
Is the community local per capita income inferior, basically the same or superior to national value? (please note how confident you are about the information)	Inferior – Little opportunity for employment outside of Paruku IPA and other community agencies. Majority of people living on basic welfare payments.
Is the CCA recognised as a protected area by governmental agencies? (Yes or no; if yes, how? If no, is it otherwise recognized?) If yes, legal document? Establishment date?	Yes – Indigenous Protected Areas in Australia are a Commonwealth government initiative since 1997. Paruku IPA was declared in 2001. It is recognised fully by the Australian Commonwealth government but only in part by the State Government in Western Australia.
Conflicts with land tenure, natural resource use?	Paruku IPA coexists with the Billiluna and Lake Gregory pastoral leases and has an agreed Plan of Management to care for country. Paruku IPA is also supported by the Tjurabalan Native Title Lands Aboriginal Corporation.
What is the main management objective (e.g. livelihood, cultural, spiritual...)	Cultural and spiritual – the lakes are part of an important Dreaming network and sites for Walmajarri people. There are strong cultural ties and responsibilities for country. Livelihood – there is broad community interest in jointly managing the area as a pastoral business and many avenues for tourist developments are also explored. Keeping Country healthy is the main management objective of the Walmajarri as healthy country produces more bush tucker (food); healthy people.

By definition, a CCA fulfils a management objective. To which IUCN management category <sup>1</sup> do you consider it would best fit (this does not imply that the management objective is consciously pursued by the concerned community, but that it is actually achieved)	Paruku IPA has two IUCN management categories; around the lakes and wetlands is classed as category 2 and the surrounding area is classified as category 6.
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***Additional qualitative information***

Main ecosystem type	Sub-tropical savannah, desert freshwater wetland system, remnant paleo-dune drainage system.
Description of biodiversity & resources (ecosystems, species, functions) conserved by the CCA	Lake Gregory a large, semi-permanent freshwater lake system of international significance in a remote desert system. Birds – large number of species and populations, meeting criteria for Ramsar listing. Native animals – Bilby (endangered), Yellow chat (threatened), red goshawk, Popular area for traditional bush foods, e.g. bush tomato, bush onion, bush potatoes, goanna, sand frogs, bustard. Popular area for traditional bush medicine.
Description of local ethnic groups and languages spoken	Walmajarri people. Languages spoken: Walmajarri, Kukatja, English, Kriol.
Broad historical context of the CCA	Walmajarri People walked out of nearby Balgo mission in 1979 to be on their own traditional country. After many years campaigning they had their Native Title declared in 2001 and the IPA declared two weeks later.
Governance structure for the CCA (who takes management decisions, how?)	Paruku IPA Steering Committee, consisting of approximately 15 elders from Mulan and Billiluna communities. The Steering Committee is responsible for most of the IPA program directions in partnership with Kimberley Land Council Land & Sea Management Unit staff. The Paruku IPA Steering Committee ultimately reports to the Tjurabalan Native Title Lands Aboriginal Corporation, the title holding body constituted after the awarding of native title determination.
Length of time the governance model has been in place	Since the IPA's inception in 2001.
Land and resource ownership in the CCA	Tjurabalan Native Title lands, Tjurabalan Pastoral Company
Type of land use in the CCA	Pastoral station, Seasonal tourism, especially for bird watching and four-wheel driving, Traditional practices and collecting bush foods.
Existence of written or oral management plans and specific rules for the use of natural	Written IPA Plan of Management, 2001. This is currently in the process of being updated.

<sup>1</sup> Please see [http://www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/wpc2003/pdfs/outputs/pascal/pascalrev\\_info3.pdf](http://www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/wpc2003/pdfs/outputs/pascal/pascalrev_info3.pdf)

resources in the CCA	
Map and zoning of the CCA (please attach if available and relevant,)	Attached.
Relevant pictures with captions (please attach if available)	
Major threats to biodiversity and/or the CCA governance system	Feral animals, especially horses
Local CCA-relevant features, stories, names, rules and practices	Features: Sub-tropical savannah, Desert, Wetlands. Stories: Numerous traditional “dreamtime” cultural stories. Names: All sites, features, plants and animal have their own traditional Walmajarri names that relate to traditional Skin (family) Groups. Traditional Walmajarri rules, laws and practices are central to most decision making processes.

***Contact individuals and organizations:***

**Paruku IPA**

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