"It's about getting the right people back on the right country!": Cultural difference and structural inequality in a northern Australian joint managed National Park

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Abstract

In recent decades, there has been a shift both globally and within Australia towards community engagement in protected area management. In Australia, this has manifested in Aboriginal participation and decision-making in a range of protected areas. One form this takes is the joint management of already-existing national parks that have been transferred to Aboriginal ownership. In this article, I investigate ethnographically the tensions that emerge in the day-to-day running of a national park in northern Australia which, relatively speaking, is still in the early stages of joint management. Different cultural conceptions of space, boundaries and how work ought to be organized come to the forefront in ways that are underwritten by the material conditions of the park. These conceptions are significant because, for Aboriginal traditional owners, having "the right people" working on "the right country" is a key aspiration related to environmental management, cultural protocol, and economic sovereignty. Funding arrangements and the organization of the work program ensure that the Queensland State government continues to be the more powerful co-managing institution, with the result that some Aboriginal aspirations and concerns are treated as less urgent and less legitimate than others.

Keywords: joint management, National Parks, protected areas, intercultural, Indigenous-settler relations

Résumé

Au cours des dernières décennies, on a assisté à une évolution vers l'engagement des communautés dans la gestion des zones protégées. En Australie, cela s'est traduit par la participation et la prise de décision des indigènes dans une série de zones protégées. L'une des formes de cette participation est la gestion conjointe des parcs nationaux existants qui ont été transférés aux Aborigènes. Dans cet article, j'étudie les tensions qui apparaissent dans la gestion quotidienne d'un parc national du nord de l'Australie qui en est encore aux premiers stades de la gestion conjointe. Différentes conceptions culturelles de l'espace, des limites et de l'organisation du travail sont mises en évidence, et ce, en raison des conditions matérielles du parc. Ces conceptions sont importantes car, pour les propriétaires traditionnels aborigènes, le fait que « les bonnes personnes » travaillent dans « le bon pays » est une aspiration essentielle liée à la gestion de l'environnement, au protocole culturel et à la souveraineté économique. Les accords de financement et l'organisation du programme de travail garantissent que le gouvernement de l'État du Queensland reste l'institution de cogestion la plus puissante, ce qui a pour conséquence que certaines aspirations et préoccupations aborigènes sont traitées comme moins urgentes et moins légitimes que d'autres.

Mots-clés: gestion conjointe, parcs nationaux, zones protégées, interculturel, Relations entre autochtones et colons

Resumen

En las últimas décadas se ha producido un cambio hacia la participación de las comunidades en la gestión de las áreas protegidas. En Australia, esto se ha manifestado en la participación y la toma de decisiones

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de los aborígenes en una serie de áreas protegidas. Una de las formas que adopta es la gestión conjunta de parques nacionales ya existentes que han pasado a ser propiedad de los aborígenes. En este artículo investigo las tensiones que surgen en el funcionamiento cotidiano de un parque nacional del norte de Australia que aún se encuentra en las primeras fases de la gestión conjunta. Diferentes concepciones culturales del espacio, los límites y la forma en que debe organizarse el trabajo pasan a un primer plano en formas que están suscritas por las condiciones materiales del parque. Estas concepciones son significativas porque, para los propietarios tradicionales aborígenes, tener a «las personas adecuadas» trabajando en «el país adecuado» es una aspiración clave relacionada con la gestión medioambiental, el protocolo cultural y la soberanía económica. Los acuerdos de financiación y la organización del programa de trabajo garantizan que el gobierno del Estado de Queensland siga siendo la institución de cogestión más poderosa, con el resultado de que algunas aspiraciones y preocupaciones aborígenes se tratan como menos urgentes y menos legítimas que otras.

Palabras clave: gestión conjunta, Parques Nacionales, áreas protegidas, interculturalidad, relaciones entre indígenas y colonos

1. Introduction

In mid-2018, during northern Australia's pleasantly hot dry season, I accompanied two Aboriginal rangers as they attended to their tasks in a jointly managed National Park in Cape York Peninsula, far north Queensland. We drove along the dusty and bumpy dirt tracks of the vast and geographically remote park, checking campgrounds. As we moved through the landscape, the two rangers I was with pointed out various things: old cattle yards, and particular plants. At one point, the elder of the two rangers, Brianna, slowed down the car to gesture at a tree. She took care to make sure I noticed the correct tree – one with textured bark like crocodile skin and bright yellow flowers – and she told me the tree's name in English and in Guugu Yimithirr, the language spoken further east, on the coast. She explained the significance of this and other trees to me; some plants indicate that water is nearby, some have utility as medicine plants, and others act as seasonal indicators, their flowers letting you know a particular fish is growing fat and ready to be harvested. Brianna said that she did not know the tree's name in her grandfather's language, the language of this place. Part of the reasons she wanted to work in the park, she explained, was to get to know her grandfather's country.

In recent decades, there has been a shift globally and within Australia towards community engagement in protected area management. In Australia, this has manifested in Aboriginal participation and decision-making in several protected areas, including national parks and nature conservancies. Following the passage of State and Territory-based land rights legislation, including the federal *Native Title Act 1993*, significant land areas have been transferred back to Aboriginal ownership. Much of this land is in remote parts of Australia and is environmentally valuable (Altman, 2003; Altman, Buchanan, & Larsen, 2007; Altman & Whitehead, 2003). Indeed, in Australia, over 40% of the national reserve system, or 7.5% of Australia's protected areas, is now managed as Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) (Collins & Thompson, 2020; Lee & Tran, 2016). As a result of these land tenure changes, alongside Aboriginal activists wanting economic and cultural sovereignty, there is growing investment in Aboriginal land management (Moorcroft & Adams, 2014). One form this takes is the joint management of already-existing national parks that have been transferred to Aboriginal ownership.

Joint management represents an opportunity for Aboriginal people to manage and care for their homelands while simultaneously achieving some economic sovereignty. However, the transition from State management to formal power-sharing arrangements through the joint management project is complicated. This article is a fine-grained ethnographic account of some of the 'teething issues' inherent in this transition phase in a national park in the Cape York Peninsula, far north Queensland, Australia, that is jointly managed by the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (hereafter Queensland Parks) and an Aboriginal corporation representing the traditional owners. Through an intercultural study of Aboriginal traditional owners, Queensland Parks operational (on-park) rangers, and Queensland Parks senior management (off-park) staff, this article argues that cultural differences, particularly relationships to land and work, are continually produced through intercultural encounters that are shaped and underpinned in key ways by the material conditions and bureaucratic structure of Queensland Parks. That is, joint management is a site of intercultural mediation that is produced on unequal terms. Structural issues, alongside important cultural differences related to how the park's space is conceptualized, contribute to legitimizing some aspirations for joint management and delegitimizing others.

2. "Fortress conservation" to joint management: National Parks in Cape York Peninsula from the 1970s to the present day

Australia has a long history of national parks, with the country's first declared in New South Wales in 1879 (Moorcroft, 2016). Until relatively recently, national parks and most protected areas in Australia have followed the preservationist Yellowstone model of conservation, elsewhere called 'fortress conservation' (Brockington, 2002), resulting in protected areas that exclude local people and constrain their access to resources (Moorcroft, 2016). Yellowstone in the U.S. was the first national park, and its gazettal necessitated the removal of the Indigenous Shoshone, Lakota, Crow, Blackfoot, Flathead, Bannok, and Nez Perce Peoples from their land (MacDonald, 2018; Nabokov & Loendorf, 2004). Since its inception, national parks around the world have instigated disputes between conservationists and indigenous peoples while simultaneously extending the reach and power of settler-colonialism (Carroll, 2014; Jacoby, 2014; Kurnick, 2019; Spence, 1999). This practice of dispossessing Indigenous peoples to conserve landscapes is evident across the world in a variety of contexts (Doolittle, 2005; Tsing, 2005; West, 2006; West, Igoe, & Brockington, 2006). As Collins *et al*. (2021) point out, neoliberal conservation emerges from and is intimately entwined with the project of colonization.

The creation of North Queensland's early national parks relied on the narrative of protecting nature from the polluting influence of humans, but it was also driven by the former Queensland Government's explicit resistance to Aboriginal land ownership. In the 1970s, the Queensland state government began designating tracts of land in Cape York as national parks. The creation of one of the earliest of these parks – Oyala Thumotang National Park, formerly Archer Bend National Park – occurred with the specific purpose of blocking the sale of a sizeable tract of land held as a pastoral lease to an Aboriginal traditional owner, Wik Mungkan man John Koowarta (Bennet & Sheehan, 2021; Department of Environment and Science, 2021). The contested creation of this early national park marked the beginning of tensions between Aboriginal people and the environmental movement in far north Queensland, tensions which came to national prominence during the Daintree road dispute (Anderson, 1989) and the 'Wild Rivers' controversy (Neale, 2017; Slater, 2013). As Slater (2013) and Holmes (2011a, 2011b) have pointed out, Cape York is often characterized as a site of Green versus Black politics. The history of Queensland Parks in the region has contributed to this sense of animosity.

In recent years, national parks in Australia have emerged as an important site for Aboriginal land claims under the National *Native Title Act* which was legislated in 1993, alongside state- and territory-based land rights legislation. In Queensland, the relevant legislation for Aboriginal land claims is the *Aboriginal Land Act 1991*, which legislates a form of inalienable freehold called Aboriginal freehold. More recently, the Queensland government established the Cape York Land Tenure Resolution Implementation Group (CYTRIG), which facilitated the resolution of multiple native title claims and implemented the transfer of around 1.3 million hectares of conservation land in Cape York to Aboriginal title (Holmes, 2011a, p. 64). Alongside the CYTRIG was the passing of the *Cape York Peninsula Heritage Act 2007*, designed to address the concerns of all stakeholders. Additionally, the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* was amended in 2007 to create a new land tenure type called National Park (Cape York Peninsula Aboriginal Land) (NP(CYPAL)) (Holmes, 2011a, p. 64). Parks that have been transferred into CYPAL have Aboriginal freehold as the underlying tenure, however these parcels of land must still be gazetted and managed as a conservation park (Cope, 2020; Queensland Government, 2022).

As well as emerging through the native title and land rights process in Australia, joint management in Cape York is, simultaneously, a part of the global trend towards community-engagement in protected area management (Brosius, 2004; Langton, Rhea, & Palmer, 2005; Moorcroft & Adams, 2014; Nadasdy, 2005; Youdelis, *et al*., 2021). Increased global attention on Indigenous rights discourses and the passage of international protocols and conventions, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), have fostered the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the management of their ancestral homelands. Community-based conservation has emerged to both improve conservation outcomes and provide community development to Indigenous communities around the world (Langton *et al*., 2005, p. 34). Across Aboriginal Australia, the notion of 'caring for country' has been a through line in land rights and land management endeavors (Altman, 2012; Kingsley *et al*., 2009; Langton, 2002; Pleshet, 2018). The phrase functions as a kind of shorthand to describe the obligations and reciprocities that characterize Aboriginal relationships to land. 'Caring for country' is simultaneously an ethic, an ontology, a philosophy, and a complex of material practices (Graham, 1999; Graham & Maloney, 2019; Watson, 2009, 2018). The concept of caring for

country is invoked in support of 'land back' initiatives, lending discursive weight to the argument that Aboriginal traditional owners are the people best placed to work on and with the land (Pleshet, 2018). Importantly, as Moorcroft and Adams (2014) have pointed out, while Australia may be considered an international leader in Indigenous engagement in conservation, these developments are the result of Indigenous work, struggle, and agitation. Joint management has existed in Australia's Northern Territory since the 1970s with Kakadu National Park (Haynes, 2009; Hill, 2010), however the first joint managed park in Cape York was declared only in 2008. As such, joint management is still a new concept in the region, and many of the difficulties that emerge when different knowledge systems and land management practices intersect are present here. It is important to note, however, that even more established joint management arrangements are still beset by entrenched tensions related to structural power imbalances, intercultural conflicts, and the limitations placed on Aboriginal traditional owners' ability to make decisions (see, for example, Haynes, 2009, 2013). Emerging out of the land rights movement and struggle for recognition (Coulthard, 2014), joint management remains a site of contestation and negotiation, as Indigenous groups struggle to enact care for land within a highly bureaucratized system of environmental governance (Carroll, 2015; Nadasdy, 2003).

There has been significant attention devoted in the literature to the complexities and limitations involved in seeking to incorporate Indigenous peoples' environmental knowledges, sometimes called Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK) or Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), into land management and conservation projects (see, for example, Ellis, 2005; Hunn, *et al*., 2003; Nadasdy, 1999, 2005; Youdelis, 2016). In his highly influential article, Nadasdy (1999) argued that to render 'integrating' Indigenous knowledges into conservation practices as a merely technical problem, or issue of translation, is to ignore the power dynamics and political dimensions which shape interactions between Indigenous groups and bureaucratic land management organizations. These tensions around power and authority emerge in a wide range of environmental management contexts, for instance when Aboriginal knowledges around burning practices are incorporated into fire management (Fache & Moizo, 2015; Perry, Wikmunea, et al., 2018; Petty, de Koninck, & Orlove, 2015). In this article, I am less focused on the incorporation of Indigenous knowledges into conservation and land management, and instead seek to examine how power and politics within co-management work to render Indigenous cultural values and aspirations for management unrealistic, unfeasible, or unimportant.

3. Methods and methodology

This article is based on approximately 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2020, with the substantive period being in 2018 and 2019.[2] The ethnographic fieldwork involved long-term participant observation in a large remote area park, located in southeast Cape York Peninsula, several hours drive from the nearest town (Figure 1). To protect the privacy of my participants, I have omitted the name of the park, the Aboriginal language groups and clan groups, and the names of individuals. Comprised of a mixture of ecosystems, including savannas, lightly forested sections, and sensitive wetlands giving way to estuaries near the coast, the park is a site of high environmental and cultural values. The park is co-managed by Queensland Parks and an Aboriginal corporation, which represents the two language groups, eight clan groups, and close to 70 family groups who are Aboriginal traditional owners for the land on which the park is located.

During my fieldwork, I engaged in a broad range of work and leisure activities with operational rangers employed by both Queensland Parks and the Aboriginal corporation. These activities included attending team meetings, fixing fences, planting trees, checking campground permits, cleaning bathrooms, spraying weeds, laying bait for pest management, water quality monitoring, fire-management, painting and installing signs, going fishing, climate change monitoring, engaging with tourists, and office work. On occasion, I also travelled home with some of the Aboriginal rangers to their communities to spend time with their extended families. I also undertook in-depth semi-structured interviews with Aboriginal traditional owners, Queensland Parks operational rangers, and Queensland Parks senior management staff who were based in the nearby towns of Cooktown and Cairns.

[2] The research project was approved by The University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee before I commenced field research, and it adheres to the relevant protocols and guidelines for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other human participants.

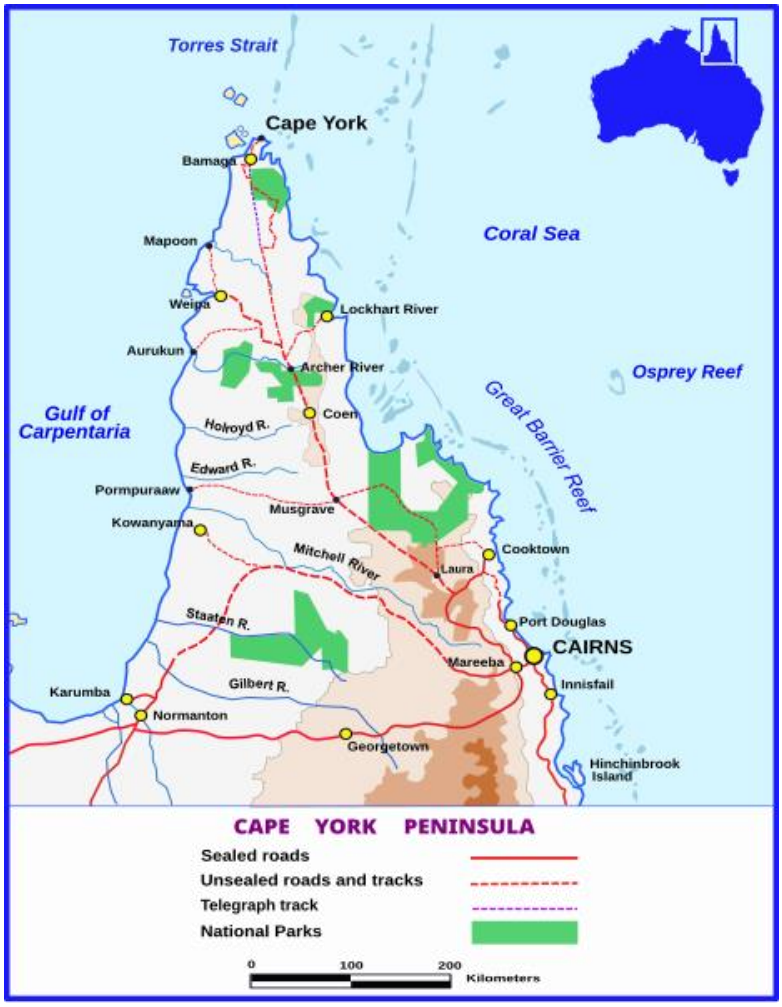

Figure 1: Far North Queensland, Australia. Source: WikiMedia Commons, CC-BY

A guiding principle was a commitment to undertaking an intercultural inquiry, and attending to the practices, values, and perspectives of the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people who engaged in the research equally. Much of the literature on co-management has been firmly focused on the experiences of Indigenous and local peoples, with the bureaucratic institutions taking part in co-management broadly glossed over as a manifestation of the State and of State power (van Holstein & Head, 2018). As Neale and Vincent have noted, scholars working at the interface of indigeneity and environmentalism have often presented people like the non-Indigenous Park rangers I discussed as "agents of institutional forces, cleansed of their personal and interpersonal details" (2016, p. 13). While much valuable work has been produced through this approach, it misses some of the nuance and complexity that can be achieved through intercultural ethnographic field research. As such, I am informed by Merlan's (1998) intercultural, ethnographic, and conceptual approach to capture and theorize the situation of "difference-yet-relatedness" of Indigenous-settler relations in Australia, with a focus on everyday interpersonal interactions (Hinkson & Smith, 2005, p. 157).

4. Meaningful places and significant misunderstandings

Shortly before I began my fieldwork, a senior Queensland Parks ranger dismantled some old cattle yards located on the northern ranger base. This ranger sought to remove the disused and damaged yards to make way for the construction of new ranger houses – part of a plan to increase the size of the workforce in the park. Having sought permission from a higher-ranking Queensland Parks manager, the ranger went ahead with the work during the annual wet season when only the Queensland Parks rangers were working

in the park. However, the question of dismantling the yards was never raised with the entirety of the Aboriginal corporation's board of directors who represent the traditional owners of the park. When the traditional owners learned that the yards had been dismantled, there was outrage and pain. The incident predated my fieldwork, but it rippled through my time in Cape York and was repeatedly discussed with me by a variety of people, including Aboriginal traditional owners, rangers, and other land management workers in the region. Many of the present-day board members and rangers working for the Aboriginal corporation are descended from people who had worked on the cattle station that preceded the gazetting of the national park. Many Aboriginal people in Cape York and across much of Australia, continue to have a strong identification with cattle ranching and place a high value on the maintenance of this kind of cultural heritage.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Reardon-Smith, 2023), a significant number of Aboriginal people in Cape York were employed in the pastoral industry throughout the 20th century. Many older Aboriginal people continue to consider grazing to be a legitimate use of land, and a 'proper' Aboriginal pursuit (Smith, 2003b). While the pastoral industry was undeniably unequal, with many Aboriginal workers receiving little or no pay, engagement in stock work did allow some Aboriginal people to continue to live on their areas of traditional connection and fulfil their obligations to the land (Gill & Paterson, 2007; May, 1994; Ottosson, 2012; Smith, 2003a, 2003b; Strang, 1997). In addition, pastoral work enabled stockworkers to escape some of the Queensland government's restrictions on the freedom, movement, and autonomy of Aboriginal people at this time.[3] For these reasons, alongside a genuine pride in horsemanship and other stockwork skills, many Aboriginal people continue to place a high value on cattle work and the material culture from this time that their forebears helped build.

Given the emotional entanglement that Aboriginal people in Cape York have with the cattle industry, and the material traces of the labor of their family members, it is unsurprising that the yards being pulled down provoked such a response from traditional owners. Daniel, the senior ranger for the Aboriginal corporation, described to me the impact of the incident during an interview:

> When you go and, like, pulling down cattle yards without consulting the right people, that really broke me in half. I didn't even want to go back to work there because my grandfather built that yard. And there was no consultation with the higher-level seat in Queensland Parks, didn't come bring that down to our joint management meetings and negotiate here, what can we do… We just found it all pulled out in a pile… So, I don't know where these fellas got that kind of idea from, but that's disrespecting our culture. Because there's a lot of story in that old cattle yard. Lot of story.

The cattle yard incident highlighted a disjunct between how Queensland Parks and Aboriginal traditional owners think about cultural heritage, significant sites, and the intercultural histories of the region. Although Indigenous material culture often does not receive the same level of heritage protection as sites important to settlers do (Armstrong, *et al*., 2023), in this case, these cattle yards were not protected because the Queensland Parks rangers responsible for dismantling them did not recognize them as Indigenous. This is important because these ideas around what is and is not valued and what does or does not count as Indigenous cultural heritage inform whether or not specific decisions are made in consultation and negotiation with traditional owners. This incident, among others, contributed to a belief among some Aboriginal traditional owners that certain Queensland Parks staff lacked the cultural awareness needed to work effectively in a joint management context and that these staff members failed to comprehend the depth and complexity of Aboriginal relationships with the land. One young Aboriginal ranger summarized this disjuncture to me, saying, "[the ranger's] point of view is that it's not a cattle station anymore. We know that… it's a national park. But, you know, it's history."

The responses of Aboriginal traditional owners to the destruction of the cattle yards demonstrate the many forms of attachment they have to the park. It is a place that traditional owners understand through multiple routes in multiple registers. For the rangers and board members who claim a traditional connection to the park, engagement with the land occurs with an awareness of deep and recent histories.

[3] In particular, the relevant piece of legislation was the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* 1897. For detail about the measures of this Act, see Castle & Hagan (1997), Huggins, (1995), Huggonson, (1990) and Smith, (2008).

Particular sites are meaningful to traditional owners because they are 'story places.' This term is commonly used by Aboriginal people in Cape York to denote spiritually significant places because they are understood as being formed through the activities of ancestral beings – elsewhere glossed over as Dreamings (Myers, 1986; Stanner, 1953). Other places are meaningful because they are sites of ancestors' resistance to European invasion, such as Pack Saddle Lagoon, where the police used to camp, and once, as the story goes, the ancestors of present-day rangers threw the police saddles and bridles into the lagoon in the night so that the police could not ride in the morning. The cattle yards and old homesteads which still stand in the park are meaningful because they contain material traces of the labor of forebears. Other places hold more specific and recent memories, such as sites that were visited and mapped during the land claim in recent decades, which led to the recognition of Native Title over the park.

For many of the Aboriginal rangers, the desire to work in the park is entwined with these layers of history, stories, and memories, evoking a deep sense of connection to place and to their human and more-than-human ancestors. The importance of ancestral connection to the land for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been described in detail in the literature (see, for example, Graham, 1999; Merlan, 1998; Munn, 1970; Myers, 1986; Povinelli, 2016; Watson, 2018). These scholars describe a mutually constitutive and inalienable link between land, ancestral forces, and Aboriginal people. The nexus of land, plant and animal species, and ancestral spirits that dwell in the land is widely referred to by Aboriginal people as 'country,' a notion that is related to land but evokes a broader set of relations. Physical and practical engagement with the land, too, is highly significant for Aboriginal traditional owners in Cape York. The kind of "mutually embodied obligation" that Povinelli (2016, p. 79) has described between Aboriginal people and the land can be understood as a significant driver for Aboriginal people's concern to 'care for country.' Ranger work, occurring either in a national park or on a different form of Aboriginal land tenure, is widely understood by contemporary Aboriginal people as a tangible way to 'care for country' and fulfil obligations towards custodianship of land.

As may be expected, this differs significantly from how non-Aboriginal rangers relate to the park and their employment. Within Queensland Parks, operational rangers are not necessarily required to have qualifications in conservation and land management, and many rangers instead have practical skills in fields like mechanics or fencing. Given the remoteness of the park and the need to be self-sufficient, such skills are highly prized in this context. Invariably, the rangers I worked with described the enjoyment of what they referred to as "the lifestyle" of living and working in remote Australia as part of their motivation for engaging in ranger work. "Lifestyle" here functions as a shorthand to encompass a set of values and practices, such as the enjoyment of living in a sparsely populated area, having significant autonomy in their work, the enjoyment of physical labor, and the ability to regularly engage in pleasurable recreational activities like fishing. Some rangers described to me an interest in conservation and land management that "grew" once they began working in Queensland Parks.

For non-Aboriginal Queensland Parks rangers, their attachment to the park emphasizes a broader relationship to, and enjoyment of, remote Australia in general. As a Cairns-based senior ranger told me, "People come to work on the Cape because they like the vastness, they like the isolation. They're people off the country that work on the country." Non-Aboriginal rangers also rarely expressed a desire to work at a specific park. The aspects that make the park desirable are shared by many of the parks in Cape York, and thus, depending on work opportunities, these parks are relatively interchangeable. The rangers' relationships to land echo Strang's findings among Cape York pastoralists who, she suggests, experience the land as a "generalized theatre for activity" (1997, p. 215). The attachment is to a way of life and the work itself rather than specific land areas. Indeed, during the 14-month block of fieldwork I undertook in 2018 and 2019, three rangers transferred to different parks in Cape York because of opportunities for higher-ranking positions.

For Aboriginal rangers, specificity when it comes to land is highly significant. Being able to work on one's own country is highly valued and is more differentiated than just gaining employment in the park. Different tracts of land in the park are areas of traditional connection for different groups, with two distinct language groups and eight different clan groups possessing ownership over sections of the park. For many Aboriginal rangers and traditional owners on the board of the corporation, employing rangers from these language and clan groups to work on their own country is a priority. However, this priority is not necessarily shared to a significant extent by many of the Queensland Parks staff on the park. The reasons for this are complex, ranging from individual values and conceptions of how work should be

carried out, to funding constraints and institutional arrangements. I turn to these structural issues in the next section.

5. Structural challenges: Funding constraints, the Parks Activity Agreement and institutional separation

Since the park transitioned to joint management, the Aboriginal corporation representing the traditional owners of the park has received funding from several sources to conduct work in the park. This funding is relatively secure, although it is contingent upon federal government spending priorities. In addition, the corporation can access additional funds from the park's revenue, although there are some limitations and contingencies to this access. During the time I was conducting fieldwork, the corporation had secured enough funding to employ five full-time rangers for only six to eight months a year. As such, these rangers were employed for the duration of the dry season only, when the park is open to tourists, which in Cape York tends to begin around May and end in November or December. In the year prior to my research, the corporation had secured more funding and was able to employ seven rangers. While the Aboriginal corporation rangers and staff were unclear on why exactly their funding had been reduced, the senior operational Queensland Parks staff were able to – in part – explain this and why further funding cuts may be forthcoming.

A senior Queensland Parks ranger explained to me that the Aboriginal corporation funding was administered under the Parks Activity Agreement (PAA), which in practice means that the Aboriginal corporation funding is contingent upon their rangers delivering certain outcomes on particular projects. These projects tend to be focused on tasks like invasive species control and constructing, maintaining, and repairing fences. If the Aboriginal corporation fails to deliver on the projects they are responsible for during a particular (calendar) year, their funding will be reduced the following year. This senior Queensland Parks ranger told me that it is the responsibility of Queensland Parks to create the framework for the program, but it is the responsibility of the Aboriginal corporation's staff to ensure that the work is completed. This situation is complicated by the reality of staffing on the ground in the park. When I asked if it was a failure to deliver on these projects that had resulted in budget cuts to the Aboriginal corporation, the Queensland Parks ranger confirmed that this was the case. It was a situation, he said, that was "no one's fault" but was related to a paucity of staff.

Within the park, rangers employed by the Aboriginal corporation work alongside rangers employed by the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. Theoretically, these teams should work and be administered relatively separately, with each organization employing a senior ranger or ranger-in-charge to facilitate and supervise the work of the operational staff. However, in large part due to the funding constraints and a complex set of factors that contributed to the park being, as one Queensland Parks ranger put it to me, "skinny on staff," this system was not in place during the period in which I conducted fieldwork in the park. As such, the rangers worked more or less as one large team which was organized, supervised, and managed by the Queensland Parks ranger-in-charge. This situation shone a spotlight on issues related to working across an institutional divide. Importantly, during the year in which the Aboriginal corporation did not complete the projects required by the PAA, there were sufficient Aboriginal corporation rangers employed on the park, with staffing issues primarily related to a lack of Queensland Parks rangers, particularly in more entry-level roles. As such, the Aboriginal corporation's failure to deliver on the PAA projects is related to their work program being subsumed into a broader Queensland Parks work program, in which completing the PAA projects was perhaps not the highest priority. This instance reveals divergent priorities around which tasks and activities ought to be the focus for on-park rangers, and contributed to a sense among Aboriginal corporation rangers that joint management is not "working" in its current iteration.

6. "It's about getting the right people back on the right country!"

Many of the Aboriginal rangers who work for the park (employed by either the Aboriginal corporation or by Queensland Parks) would prefer to work only on their areas of traditional connection, a desire that conflicts with how non-Indigenous Queensland Parks rangers conceive of the space of the park and the role of rangers. For the Aboriginal rangers, this is related to their cultural obligations and desire to follow Aboriginal protocols. One Aboriginal ranger, Louisa, explained her position to me as we drove through the park together one morning, hurtling down the unsealed dirt road. She said that she

prefers not to work in other people's places. While things like driving around during the day and sticking to the tracks are admissible, there are certain things that she would not do in a different clan group's country. She said that she would not sleep in someone else's country in the park, and would avoid breaking anything, like branches or termite mounds. That kind of respect for the land, she said, is actually respect for the "old people;" the ancestral spirits who populate the land. The correct way to go into someone else's country, Louisa explained to me, is to put the sweat of a traditional owner on your body, so that you do not have the smell of a stranger. Louisa expressed that she would prefer if there were people from every clan group working in the park; in that case, it would be safer to go to different areas because you could always make sure that you visited with someone appropriate who could put their sweat on you. As she told me during an interview,

> They should have more [traditional owners] out here, like I said. Have different types of clans here for that sort of purpose. Like, if these guys have a drive here, or they go out in the chopper, over this area, that area. I reckon you should take a traditional owner for that area. Like I said, there are places that are really bad. Like, things do show up, will show up to you, if you go into another person's area. Like sacred sites. Don't get me wrong, there was a couple of non-Indigenous out here last year, or the year before. They went into… someone else's area, taking photos and stuff like that. And they said they seen a ghost, like spirits. So, things like that, they can follow you for a long time and never leave. So that's what we're trying to put out to the parks, you know, and tell them. But they don't listen.

Louisa's perspective was shared by other Aboriginal corporation rangers that I worked with, along with the traditional owners who comprise the board of directors for the corporation. There was a sense among many of these people that the aspiration to have traditional owners working in their own areas was not taken seriously by some Queensland Parks staff. Aboriginal corporation ranger Brianna expressed the significance of this to me, saying, "don't they understand that [joint management] is about getting the right people back on the right country!"

From the perspective of the Queensland Parks off-park management staff, the desire to have traditional owners from each clan group working on their own country is a valid aspiration, albeit one that is functionally difficult to implement given the funding constraints. As Sandra, a senior Queensland Parks ranger for the entire region, told me,

> Obviously we come up with work program with traditional owners, but there's just not enough money to do everything they want to do… we try and share the workload between the clan groups but sometimes that's hard. And then, it's also dealing with a high turnover of ranger staff because the money's not there to employ, you know, five rangers from every clan group.

Many of the non-Aboriginal operational Queensland Parks staff (the on-park rangers), however, tended to respond to traditional owner concerns about having "the right people back on the right country" dismissively. Certain Queensland Parks rangers asserted to me that these views were espoused only by "troublemakers." For some of these rangers, such a division of labor made little sense given that staff were employed to work on the park as a whole. On one occasion, I witnessed a verbal altercation between a Queensland Parks ranger who had recently visited a particular lake to install motion sensor cameras and an Aboriginal corporation ranger who was a traditional owner of that particular site. The Aboriginal corporation ranger expressed her perspective that the park ranger should have taken her with him while visiting this site, a perspective that the Queensland Parks ranger vehemently disagreed with. This Queensland Parks ranger asserted that he did not believe he should have to "get permission just to do [his] job!" In the wake of the conversation, the Queensland Parks ranger told me that he was "sick of the politics" and that he found the Aboriginal rangers difficult to work with because "they want everything to go their way all the time." He also asserted that some of the Aboriginal corporation rangers were increasingly "racist to whitefellas."

Joint management reveals some of the differences between the two main categories of Queensland Parks staff: on-park operational rangers and off-park management staff. As well as being conservation-

oriented, off-park management employees can be understood as what Bosk (2007) calls, a "bureaucratic worker" because of their prioritization of protocol, procedures, and the institutional mandates of Queensland Parks. However, on-park operational rangers come to joint management – and the park itself – with a different set of values, practices, and priorities that do not necessarily align with the institutional identity of Queensland Parks. As is the case in other bureaucratic contexts (Bosk, 2007), the systems put in place by the institution are translated unevenly on the ground. There is a disconnect between general intentions and particular local outcomes, and in a context like a remote-area park, the enforcement of new systems or forms of work is complicated by the park's geographical distance from centralized management.

It is illuminating to compare the intentions of Queensland Parks' operational rangers with studies of public servants in other cross-cultural settings. For instance, the health professionals that Lea (2007) and Kowal (2015) worked with were tertiary-educated professionals who sought to "help" Aboriginal people by improving health outcomes and (hoping to be) facilitating community-led self-determination. In joint-managed parks, though, Queensland Parks rangers are instead thrust into a forced kind of intimacy with their Aboriginal co-workers because of the joint management structure, which predate many rangers' employment. While Lea found that the health service employing her research participants encouraged a certain type of worker who is "excessively keen to create a connection" (2007, p. 186), a different "institutional embodiment" flows from Queensland Parks. Queensland Parks' mandate is, first and foremost, to conserve protected land, with joint management being a relatively new legal and practical reality with which Queensland Parks staff must grapple. Queensland Parks operational rangers then, perhaps unsurprisingly, are practically oriented people who generally approach joint management pragmatically with a gritted-teeth realism.

Effective joint management – and, more broadly, decolonizing conservation – must involve taking seriously and prioritizing Indigenous knowledge and worldviews (*M'sit No'kmaq et al*., 2021). However, Indigenous environmental knowledge is "marginal and supplementary" in contrast to Western scientific environmental management (Sandlos, 2014, p. 136). Further, as Gambon and Bottazi (2021) have noted, attempts to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into environmental management tend to only focus on forms of knowledge that are recognized as having a utilitarian value in sustainable resource use that can be easily recognized by Western science. While Queensland Parks have incorporated traditional owner perspectives into land management practices like fire regimes and pest control, there seems to be less prioritization of Aboriginal rangers' concerns around cultural protocols that are less explicitly linked to scientific land management. For instance, many of the Aboriginal traditional owners of the park expressed that they would feel more comfortable if non-Aboriginal Queensland Parks staff and other visitors (such as myself) were "smoked" with Cooktown Ironwood leaves in order to protect non-traditional owners from ancestral spirits who may be disturbed by visitors. However, such a protocol was not a priority for many of the operational Queensland Parks staff, who tended to dismiss these concerns as superstition and unnecessary.

The dismissal of these concerns, alongside the lack of impetus to recognize Aboriginal desires to see traditional owners working only on their own country, demonstrates a fundamental disjuncture in how non-Aboriginal Queensland Parks operational rangers and Aboriginal traditional owners conceive of the purpose and priorities of joint management, and how they conceive of space and place more broadly. This is not just a matter of cultural difference, though. Importantly, the ways in which traditional owner concerns are dismissed as irrelevant – even in a situation of formalized joint management – reveals how power functions in the park to legitimize particular forms of working with and relating to the land while delegitimizing others.

7. Discussion: The point and the practice

For Aboriginal traditional owners, joint management has a multiplicity of purposes that can be summarized by Brianna's phrase: "getting the right people back on the right country." In this, Brianna is gesturing at the importance of having the appropriate owners and custodians for particular sites working on the tracts of land they are responsible for. Louisa's comments during our interview indicated that this is important for the cultural safety of all people who visit and spend time in the park, not just for Aboriginal traditional owners. However, "getting the right people back on the right country" is also a political statement about ownership, sovereignty, and authority. Furthermore, it is a statement that

encompasses the aspiration and desire to see a bigger workforce comprised of traditional owners, with employment opportunities spread equitably across the language and clan groups who have ownership over the park. Of course, Aboriginal traditional owners of the park remain a diverse group with a diversity of opinions, and while some individuals are primarily concerned with employment opportunities, others are focused on cultural safety and the observance of traditional responsibilities.

Similarly, during interviews most Queensland Parks staff echoed similar sentiments regarding what they understood the "point" of joint management to be, though different textures are evident in different individual's responses. The most senior ranger that I interviewed, Stuart, generally seemed to speak on behalf of the State Government, indicating little about his personal concerns or experiences. Stuart told me that,

> The joint management program was developed to get the traditional owners of their land back on country and back protecting it in some form or other of how they used to do it before Europeans came on the scene. So, ideally, I think from our perspective – the State Government's perspective and joint management's perspective – we want the traditional owners out on country… There's a whole bunch of other things about capacity building to manage that, providing the support to have… rangers as employees… So, there's a tremendous amount that goes on behind the scenes for that to happen.

Another senior ranger, Sandra, with more of a hands-on role, although still working in a region-wide capacity, indicated that the current iteration of joint management is a kind of transition phase. As she told me during an interview,

> I think the ultimate goal is to have traditional owner managed National Parks. That's the reason, I think, why we're all doing this. And I guess my role is to try and support that from a Queensland Parks and Wildlife point of view… [and to] also try and support traditional owner aspirations at the same time – which are for sole management, effectively.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most senior operational ranger I worked with, Trent, had a perspective that was more grounded in the day-to-day realities and concerns of the joint management program as it exists in the park in which he works. As he said to me,

> Yeah, I do believe [the Queensland Government] want[s] to get [traditional owners] back on country. Yes, it is also to create employment, to a degree. It should also be to show their culture, which is not happening here at the moment but we're trying to get that rolling… It's just challenging. Very challenging.

What is clear from these statements is that Queensland Parks staff from a variety of levels of seniority and responsibility conceive of joint management as a project that is profoundly unfinished and in flux; a project that is in an ongoing state of becoming, and something which is an "emergent cultural form" (Tsing, 2005, p. 3). This is a potentially productive sentiment, as it neither forecloses the possibility of change nor the chance to realize traditional owner aspirations for sole management, as Sandra indicated. In many ways, the responses of these staff members challenge much of the literature on joint management, which emphasizes a top-down government approach to conservation and control, which is often at the expense of traditional owner aspirations.

However, on the ground, in this specific park, the situation remains one in which power, authority and day-to-day management decisions continue to be held by the Queensland Government through the proxy of Queensland Parks. Despite the acknowledgement and sympathy of Queensland Parks staff towards traditional owner aspirations to have the "right people" on the "right country," the material conditions of the park mean that, in practice, this aspiration is not treated as a priority. To some extent, this disjunct emerges from different cultural understandings of the space of the park. That is, on the one hand, the park can be considered as a bounded, gazetted tract of land held under a specific form of government-recognized land tenure; on the other hand, the park can be understood as a relatively

superficial form of tenure imposed over traditional land divisions. Another important factor contributing to this disjunct is a hierarchical differentiation in the institutional culture of Queensland Parks employees, with management and operational staff having very different experiences and perspectives around joint management.

However, cultural alterity and differing environmental values are only a part of the story. What is significant here is that the management structures continue to locate power within Queensland Parks. This is evident in two key, interrelated ways: funding allocations and the organization of the work program. At the time of my research, Queensland Parks maintained control of organizing the work program and determining the schedule of work. Due to the conditions imposed by the PAA, this had flow-on effects on how many rangers were able to be employed by the Aboriginal corporation, which in turn impacts whether it is possible to achieve clan group representation in the park.

Because Queensland Parks has the responsibility of allocating funding and organizing the work program, it is arguable that Aboriginal traditional owners are being absorbed into a pre-existing land management structure which is yet to undergo any kind of radical transformation. This is despite the good intentions of many senior Parks staff, who have expressed their own aspirations to support joint management and eventually see the park transition to a situation in which Aboriginal traditional owners have sole management.

As Howitt and Suchet-Pearson (2006) have pointed out, when the "ontological building blocks" of joint management remain rooted in Western scientific environmental management, there is limited scope to transform how land is cared for. As I have written about elsewhere (Reardon-Smith, 2024), there have been steps within some joint managed Parks in Cape York to transform how management plans are formulated, with the goal of capturing Traditional Owner aspirations. However, whether this will shift the way that Parks are managed remains to be seen. A Western ontological framework premises things like development, conservation, and management as neutral and value-free, obscuring the cultural and ideological basis of these ideas (Escobar, 2019; Langton, 2002). As I have detailed, in the current iteration of joint management only some of the aspirations, priorities, and concerns of Aboriginal traditional owners are considered to be legitimate, and those aspirations that are less legible to Queensland Parks are generally considered as less urgent. This indicates that Queensland Parks – as an institution, and as an aggregate of individuals – continues to conceive of the park first and foremost as a series of protected bioregions, rather than as a cultural landscape. Queensland Parks are supported in this position by the requirements of the CYPAL land tenure which, despite having an underlying land tenure of Aboriginal freehold, requires that the land area be reserved for conservation.

8. Conclusion

While in Australia, and internationally, there have been positive shifts towards the co-management of protected areas, these remain sites of contestation and conflict as political ecologists have shown (Collins, *et al*. 2021). In this northern Australian joint-managed park, tensions emerge in the daily running of the park between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal State government-employed rangers. These tensions are related to cultural differences and alterity around how different groups of people conceptualize the space and boundaries of the park. These conceptions matter because, as demonstrated, having "the right people" working on "the right country" is a key aspiration for Aboriginal traditional owners, an aspiration that is simultaneously about environmental management, cultural protocol, and economic sovereignty.

By paying attention to the funding structure and working arrangements of the park, it is possible to see how these cultural differences are underwritten by the material conditions of the park. This contributes to a situation in which some ways of working and relating to land are legitimized, while others are delegitimized. Aboriginal aspirations are recognized and supported when they are considered tangible and valid by Queensland Parks, and concerns that are more cultural in nature tend to be considered as less urgent at best, and as unfeasible at worst. In addition, attending ethnographically to the daily interactions between on-park rangers highlighted some of the disjunct between the position of Queensland Parks as an institution and how this position is interpreted unevenly on the ground. Generally characterized as beset by 'teething issues' rather than indicating entrenched problems, a sentiment echoed by senior management staff was that this phase of joint management could be considered a stepping stone towards sole management by Aboriginal traditional owners. As such, I consider joint management to be a project in flux, albeit one in which power imbalances continue to be significant and consequential.

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