



Stories to learn from

DR ANNE POELINA, A FELLOW OF THE PETER CULLEN WATER & ENVIRONMENT TRUST (2011), TALKS ABOUT WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO SHARE STORIES SO ABORIGINAL EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE CAN BE INCLUDED IN LAND AND WATER MANAGEMENT DECISIONS.

I am a Yimardoowarra marnin, Nyikina woman of the Lower Fitzroy River in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. I am passionate about learning from the experience and knowledge of Aboriginal people living within the cultural and environmental landscapes of different parts of Australia; how traditional ecological knowledge can contribute to planning and development.

Above: Nyikina Kimberley Traditional Owners Dr Anne Poelina and Senior Elder Lucy Marshall. Photo Kirsty Cockburn 2011. Below: Fitzroy River floodplain. Photo Magali McDuffie 2011.



There is a current Australian story of vast potential resource projects which are placing some regions under overwhelming social, cultural and environmental pressure. Assessing the management of land and water inevitably raises questions of governance, and the implementation of science for impact studies on the practical development of unique locations. We know that despite the attractive presentations on mining companies' websites, mining often leads people to lose connection to their land and social ties. To understand how to keep these connections, we need to share stories, such as from the Lake Eyre Basin and regions such as the Super Canning Basin (Western Australia), so we can find meaning and opportunities to ensure the well-being of both humanity and nature, in the face of, or as partners in, development.

Australia's regions are at a critical point where some of the proposed resource developments present a real threat to land, water and food security, as well as to our unique Australian way of life. Many people who live in regions targeted for development are not anti-*development*; rather they are anti-*unethical* development—and they are particularly at odds with the notion of *development at all cost*.

Without financial and/or legal support there is currently limited opportunity for people in these areas to discuss the ‘facts’ about the impacts of resource extraction, processing and transporting methods.

As Australians we witness the loss of prime agricultural and grazing lands in southern and eastern regions. We question why we have not created international niche markets around our food security. We see individuals and companies who are not addressing due diligence requirements, and are failing to achieve community consent and social licence. We see short-, medium- and long-term financial losses, such as from stalled projects or disrupted production, because of legal challenges, local community, and native title opposition.

Listening to, and including, Aboriginal views

I believe that when responsibility and accountability in relation to economic development are shifted from the Commonwealth to state and territory governments, the result is unfairness and disadvantage to regional people and environments.

It can be different. Peoples in remote areas of Australia, such as the Lake Eyre Basin region and the north-west of Western Australia, are looking for a cooperative way to develop Australia’s multiple economies, using the wide body of information and world views that is available. The inclusion of Aboriginal views is required to provide genuine participation in the process. We believe we have an important role to play, based on the following points.

- Aboriginal people believe land, water and people are intrinsically entwined.
- Traditional knowledge is ancient wisdom generated over thousands of years of lived experiences and understanding about integrated land and water and natural resource management.
- Aboriginal people are custodians of the biodiversity of these regions.
- Aboriginal people can bring much to the science–policy dialogue about these remote areas where modern science is still in its infancy.
- The breadth of traditional ecological knowledge is grounded in holism, and the balance between social, human, cultural, environmental and economic values and assets.

- Aboriginal people want to be part of a cooperative paradigm in land-use discussions and decision making.
- Co-existence and co-management rely on policy makers and practitioners acknowledging cultural diversity and the inclusion of knowledge systems from local, national and international practice to inform better Australian practice.

It is important for decision makers engaged in land, water and environmental resource management to recognise they can bring representatives of Aboriginal people into the dialogue.

In the past, the best way to do this was to focus on catchment and basin management as an effective strategy for planning and managing, and for acknowledging diverse interests. The challenge was to develop a regional focus and to be inclusive, placing equal value on the representation of all members. Many groups using this approach

Senior Elder Jeanie Warbi caring for her grandfather’s special waterhole in the spring country that is covered with paperbark. Her family has been caring for this area from the beginning of time.
Photo Ian Perdrisat.



found that, over time and with multiple forms of information management, decision-making principles and actions shifted from conflict to a cooperative way of doing business. Making a commitment to building trust and a cooperative spirit encouraged greater dialogue and a collective sense of managing land, water and environmental assets—from a regional point of view, rather than a state or Commonwealth operational framework.

Challenges and opportunities

I believe we now face new challenges: for example, how will governments of all persuasions and at all levels act ethically towards all Australians and the environment? How can we enmesh good science with traditional ecological knowledge, to work towards evidence-based ethical sustainable development?

If we are to turn these challenges into opportunities, we need to support operational engagement frameworks at the level of regional governance. We need to build baseline data for ecosystem services by tapping into understandings of the landscape, cultural assets, and water resources held by Aboriginal people, scientists and others in regional communities. Baseline data will provide benchmarks for valuing environmental, social, cultural and economic relationships, and their role in land and water quality and sustainability. Using this approach, regional people will have the opportunity to reveal the impacts of each resource development project, and the cumulative effect of all of the industries proposed.

This requires cooperation. Governments, communities, leaders, individuals, industries and corporations can and must act together, to restore the balance that is essential for continued existence. I believe that by taking the time to listen and share stories we can find meaning and opportunities to ensure the well-being of people, land, water and biodiversity for a sustainable future.

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The Peter Cullen Trust works to strengthen bridges between science, policy and stakeholders in water-system management

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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