

# Healthy Country Healthy People

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Healthy Country: Healthy People is a research project of the Institute of Advanced studies, Charles Darwin University. It aims to inform policy regarding sustainable Aboriginal futures in northern Australia by exploring the relationship between landscape health and Aboriginal health. The project involves Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal stakeholders and a trans-disciplinary research team and is funded by Land and Water Australia, the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies and the National Health and Medical Research Council.

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**Welcome** to the third newsletter from the Healthy Country Healthy People project - now in its final year.

This project originated in response to concerns of Aboriginal people and explicitly highlights the issue of the nexus between country and people. In spite of the inevitable challenges this brings to existing research approaches in both Aboriginal health and ecology, the project has progressed steadily and is now approaching the final stages of data analysis and synthesis of results.



Leila Nimbada gathering bush orchids

An outcome of the Healthy Country Healthy People project will be some evidence to help inform what is becoming an increasingly politicised debate. For example Amanda

Vanstone's recent reference to 'cultural museums' precipitated much discussion about the viability and role of small outstations. However, as Nicholas Rothwell commented in a recent *Weekend Australian*, a voice that has been largely missing is that of the people who the subject of such discussions are. One component of this project is to hear and document the views of Aboriginal people about themselves and their country and related issues of concern. This newsletter presents some preliminary results from Amy Jo Vickery who spent several months in Maningrida last year addressing this aspect of the project.

Amy Jo initially came to Maningrida to assist Dr Paul Burgess with the health assessments and went on to gather more qualitative information about Aboriginal people's views about being on country. Many local residents of Maningrida and nearby outstations shared some of stories, their aim being to help non Aboriginal people understand the relationship between Aboriginal people and Aboriginal lands. Some of the themes which have emerged thus far have been:

- The high level of detailed and complex knowledge about country, the strong desire of older people to pass on stories to the young people so that knowledge is not lost and a sense of urgency about doing this.
- The view that country and people need each other. People feel better in themselves when they are on country and the country is 'not happy' when its traditional owners are away.
- The repeated observation that people are invariably happy to get back on country, even for brief visits.
- The main motivations for getting out bush were:
  - wanting to gather bush tucker for themselves and their family
  - wanting to get away from humbug in town
  - to teach young people
- However there were many barriers to doing this including:
  - no transport – many people live a considerable distance from their country
  - family problems
  - frequent funeral business
  - health worries.

Amy Jo has been invited back to do further work in 2006. This has been made possible by an additional small grant from AIATSIS. Her work will be complemented by further qualitative work

to be conducted by field ecologist Aaron Petty later this year.

### **Brief update from the landscape ecology team**

Aaron is currently involved with generating a fire history from satellite imagery of the region, as well as analysing the results from last year's field program. He hopes to have some results to share soon.



**Buffalo near Ji-bena**

### **Brief update from the health team**

Data collection for this part of the project is nearing completion. The health module has contributed significantly to health gains in this community through early detection and treatment for communicable and non-communicable disease. Higher rates of chronic disease than expected were detected and will provide an important outcome in the analysis of the asserted human health benefits arising from continued interaction with country.