

"CARING FOR COUNTRY" THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ART: AN EMERGING METHOD FOR EXPLORING REGIONAL VALUES AND ASPIRATIONS

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Introduction

There is an ever growing trend towards community-based natural resources and environmental management (NREM) and the inclusion of diverse groups has led to the need to explore new forms of communication across scales in order to engaging community participants in expressing values and aspirations. Participatory art is an emergent method in NREM was explored with Traditional Owner groups involved in policy development through the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation (GAC). The GAC's main partnerships with government include the Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreement, the Girringun Indigenous Ranger Unit, and the development of the Girringun Region Indigenous Protected Area.

Methods

The participatory art workshop began with a moderated focus group exploring the theme 'What does caring for country mean to you?' This involved the thematic exploration of subthemes relating to values and aspirations for resources and country (land and sea). Following the initial explorative focus group Traditional Owners decided to work collaboratively and decided through consensus the background setting for their painting. Artists then had access to the canvas for a period of six consecutive weeks where they could work individually or with other artists. The workshop involved fourteen participants in total from the Djiru, Girramay, Jirral, Nywaigi, and Warrgamay Traditional Owner groups. Works were discussed with participants during or following their creation so that they could describe their individual expressions.

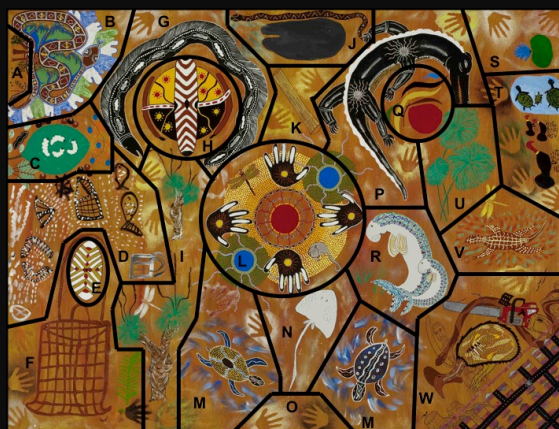
Results

Themes emerging from the 'Caring for country' focus group and workshop included (Table) those related to culture, wellbeing, environment, politics holism, which was central to the discussions. Artistic works depicted features of the natural environment, spiritual and modern symbols, material culture, foods, dreamtime and modern stories, and visual representations of political and spiritual messages. Connections between the features were also painted and explained. Visions were expressed from both traditional and contemporary positions and revolved around the future of people and the associated impacts to country. The common thread and unanimous message of the work was that people need to interact with country in order to care for country.

Identifier	Traditional owner descriptions and interpretations
A Pond apple & CSIRO	Pond apple is an invasive species and the participant felt that it was very important to learn how to manage the species like pond apple, which is responsible for choking up wetlands.
B Warrgamay country	The participant chose to paint his country from both a spiritual and environmental perspective. The Girimore (snake) is a dreamtime creature which carved out the features of the land. The fine lines and background work are the geographic features found on Warrgamay country such as Gorgul (rivers) running through Wabu (rainforest). The blue waves represent Warrangun (ocean) and the green waves represent the freshwater, which are both important features of Warrgamay country.
C 'Bush tucker'	Jumbun (means witchetty grubs in Girramay), Mudragun (quandong - blue fruit), Nyuga (wild tamarind - orange fruit), Midun (black bean), and Moigin (wild cherry - brown/red fruit) are important bush foods both for people and for native animals, which are important as resources and as beings.
D Camping story	Camping and being on country is very important to the Girramay artist who painted this work, as it is with many of the Girramay and other Traditional Owners Features: Joun (dilly bag), Boomerang, Bungul (fish), Midja (shelter), Bigin (rainforest shield), and Buni (fire)
E Bigin	The Bigin (rainforest shield) is an important piece of material culture. Rainforest shields are harvested from native trees with minimal damage in a fashion that the tree can heal and keep growing.
F Joun and Boygor	The Joun (dilly bag) is a piece of material culture which has been created by the traditional rainforest people of Queensland for thousands of years. It is made of Boygor (lawyer cane) the plants also featured in this plate. Baskets were traditionally used for holding seeds and berries, which needed to be leached of their poisons in running river water. They were also used for carrying foods, material, or a baby by placing the strap over the head and carrying the weight between the shoulders. Jouns today are mainly crafted for sale to museums or private collectors.
G Jubun	Jubun (eel) is a traditional "bush-tucker" (wild food). Traditional Owners believe that it is especially important for elders because it has special oils, which cure sicknesses that exist in old people
H Girringun Aboriginal Corporation logo	The Girringun Aboriginal Corporation is responsible for liaising with the broader community to make sure that caring for country by Traditional Owners is possible.
I Jagabarra	Jagabarra (Xanthorrhoea or 'Black-boy') is an important plant for health because when burned it works for keeping potentially disease-carrying insects away.
J Split-rock story place	The participant painted her story place to represent what caring for country means. The story of Split-rock comes from the dreamtime in which a Girimore (snake) breaks its teeth on a rock, which is a visible feature of the landscape. Story places represent a spiritual connection to country in that these are the places from where peoples spirits come and where they return when they pass on.
K Wungarr	The Wungarr (eel trap) is a piece of material culture in that it was traditionally used for the acquisition of food but is now mainly a craft, which is sold to museum and private collectors.
L Generations on country Features: Midin (possum)	"The centre piece speaks of the environment and how the land used to be in days gone by and now because of development, tree clearing for agriculture purposes, chemical and fertilizer run offs into streams and ocean and how these things to name a few have had a very negative impact on our environment. Some species of flora and fauna are bordering on extinction. We as a nation of peoples need to help in the healing process of our environments and what best practices we could adopt to bring an equal balance back into the water both rainforests and healthy ecosystems, pristine waterways. We as Aboriginal people live in harmony with nature and to see such devastation is so painful to watch. Not only does this affect us as a human race but it has a bigger impact on the wildlife that inhabit the rainforests and waterways"
M Budigull	Budigull (sea turtles) are important animals in spirituality and traditional ways. They are involved in the dreamtime and are a special food used in ceremonies.
N Yodar	Yodar (stingray) are important animals in spirituality and traditional ways. They are involved in the dreamtime and are a special food used in ceremonies.
O Mulla	The Mulla (hands) across the canvas represent Mulla on country and how in order to heal country people need to be on country, interacting and learning with it. Idinilla (dragonfly) also featured in a similar fashion signify healthy country.
P Mayjala	Mayjala (saltwater crocodile) are important animals in spirituality and traditional ways. They are involved in the dreamtime and are a special food used in ceremonies.
Q 'Caring for country' logo	The logo comes from the national Caring for Country conference hosted by the GAC in 2007. This was an important opportunity for Girringun to share its values and aspirations.
R Bullungull	Bullungull (dugong) mother and calf. Bullungull are important animals in spirituality and traditional ways. They are involved in the dreamtime and are a special food used in ceremonies.
S Water lily (language name uncertain)	Water lily was eaten as a traditional food and is the language name for one of the children in the community.
T Bungadoo & Gajardy	Bungadoo (freshwater turtle) and Gajardy (scrub turkey) are important traditional foods.
U Mulgilbay	Mulgilbay (lucala palm) are an important cultural plant because their leaves were used to thatch Midja's (traditional shelters).
V Gugarra	Participant sees Gugarra (goanna) everywhere on country and would like to continue seeing them into the future.
W Home for Gunday	"This speaks about the tree clearing for development and how this affects the cassowary (Gunday) conservation area on tribal lands. It is getting to the point that in the future there will be no rainforest left for this endangered animal to inhabit"



"This art form helps us as Traditional Owners to promote recognition of the connections to country we have and also protecting our cultural values associated with the land and sea and everything in it" – Caring for country workshop participant



Caring for country – collaborative acrylic on canvas divided into plates based on contributions from different Traditional Owner artists including: Leonard Andy, Theresa Beeron, Glyniss Geesu, Christine George, Gwen Hodges, Evelyn Ivey, Penny Ivey, Dena Leo, Emily Murray, John Murray, Ninney Murray, Phylcia Murray, Sally Murray, and Troy Whelan.

Discussion and Conclusions

Traditional Owners participants expressed the need to acknowledge the interconnections between attributes. For Traditional Owners there was no divide between culture and the relationship with country, with caring for country and cultural preservation being virtually impossible in isolation from one another. Traditional Owners felt that their engagement, especially involving young people in land and sea management was important for the future of country and of people.

Participatory methods such as the one used in this research are regarded as processes capable of breaking down some of the walls between the researcher and the community participants. Much of this is because such methods are aimed at being empowering processes where the participants define many of the attributes of the conversation (Pink 2007). Using creative participatory methods such as artistic workshops also brings the potential to engage participants that may be otherwise marginalized or disregarded because of a lack of desire or capacity to participate in policy forums. Creative workshops also have the capacity for reflexivity amongst participants and between the researcher and participants (Finley 2003).

In addition to being able to explore ideas for caring for country, Traditional Owners saw value in the continuation of their message through the artwork to the broader community and other Indigenous communities experiencing similar situations in regards to the management of land and sea.

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