

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S CONNECTION WITH *KWATYE* (WATER) IN THE GREAT ARTESIAN BASIN

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Abstract

Indigenous people have always maintained a connection with water. Water is embodied in our blood, it is part of the holistic approach to the land that is well beyond any western perspective.

With early European settlement, dramatic changes to the mound springs within the Great Artesian Basin (GAB) and the eco-system have occurred. The western priority for water as an essential and valuable economic base for pastoral and other industries, interrupted and often destroyed the Indigenous holistic and integrated perspective to this resource.

However, after significant damage to the mound springs and their associated ecosystems, scientists and land managers are now recognising and using Indigenous skills and knowledge to manage and conserve this valuable resource. There is now an acceptance that by combining western and Indigenous skills and knowledge is a better way to effectively manage the valuable resource of water within the GAB and the dependant ecosystems such as mound springs.

This paper recognises the different values and priorities for water within the GAB for Indigenous and non-indigenous people and how it must now be managed to allow for wise use to achieve a better outcome for future generations.

Key Words: Indigenous culture: Traditional land management practices: Co-operative parks and wildlife management.

Introduction

Witjira National Park is located on the western edge of the Simpson Desert in the far north of South Australia and covers some 7770 square kilometres. The area contains 70-mound springs, including Dalhousie Springs, one of the largest mound springs complexes in Australia. The discharge from the Dalhousie mound springs complex accounts for as much as 80-90% of

spring discharges in the South Australian portion of this Basin. It is also an important habitat for many migratory birds.

The responsibility to care for this country belongs to my people, the Indigenous Southern Arrente people and the Irrwanyere Aboriginal Corporation. We have cared for this country for a long, long time, much longer than non-indigenous people and well before 1985

when the area was declared a National Park.

Located within this area are many mound springs, which are central to our *Tjukurpa*. There is really no interpretation in English of '*Tjukurpa*'. However, it is important to accept that *Tjukurpa* is not just a story, nor a myth, for *Tjukurpa* is more than just our 'dreaming', as it contains our spiritual connection, our law, our culture, our heritage and the stories associated with the land. It is the reason for how and why things such as water, fire and the landscape exist. The *Tjukurpa* of this area is not restricted to Witjira because it flows through the country of many other Indigenous groups throughout Australia who are associated with the mound springs within the Great Artesian Basin.

Before I go on, it is important for people to understand that my ability to write and speak on these issues has only been granted to me by my elders. It is only with their permission and authority that I provide this information on my spiritual connection with '*kwatye*' – an Arrente word for water within the Great Artesian Basin.

This unique watercourse is now called the Great Artesian Basin by non-indigenous people, but in my language, the main springs, Dalhousie Springs is known collectively as '*irrwanyere*' or '*the healing springs*.' Well before my elders time, it provided more than just a source of water for Indigenous people. For it was and remains a travel path, which connects many Indigenous groups within the trail of the GAB and is our *Tjukurpa*.

Such concepts are difficult for many non-indigenous people to understand, as is the fact that we have a holistic approach to water. For this water is a source of healing when we are sick, and it provides us with many spiritual and cultural

interests. For it is our lifeblood which we need to survive. It allows us to continue our ceremonies which incorporate our rich and unique culture that is still strong today. For it is these sources of water that provide an adequate and valuable food source rich in fish and other foods for my people. As one of the traditional elders of this country Mr Bingy Lowe says:

*“We are in the middle of kwatye
(water) it is all around us, we have to
look after this place”*

Through my elders, I and privileged others have been given the responsibility to care for this country and this is a task that has proven difficult since the settlement of non-indigenous people to this land.

Expeditions by Stuart between 1858-1862 saw the first arrival of Europeans to the area. The first visits to the Dalhousie mound springs by non-indigenous people occurred in 1870 whilst surveying the overland telegraph route linking Adelaide to Darwin.¹ You can understand why Europeans were 'surprised' to see such a large pool of water with reeds of up to 18 feet high in this dry arid area.

The first large pool seen by Europeans was originally named by them as "Edith Springs" after the wife of the then Governor General of South Australia. The name was soon changed at her request to be named "Dalhousie" in respect of her father the Marquis of Dalhousie who lived some 20,000 kilometres from the springs. Great enthusiasm followed with pastoralism and other ventures bringing many people into these arid lands. With the coming of

¹ Cohen, B 1989 European History. In W. Zeidler and W.F. Ponder (eds.) 1989 Natural History of Dalhousie Springs, Adelaide, South Australian Museum.

these people came a dramatic change of the fragile environment that existed within the area.

It was only a few years later around 1872 that a pastoral lease was taken up over the Dalhousie area. It remained as such until some 100 years later until it was gazetted as a National Park. It was within these 100 years that the damage to the land was extended well beyond the mound springs to produce further changes to the land and natural resources. These changes would ultimately effect our once self reliant, healthy lifestyle and our relationship to the land which was of vital importance to the survival of my people.

Because of the fencing to keep cattle and sheep in and the impact of stock and introduced species to many water sources, Aboriginal people were not able to travel and access sites that were of high cultural significance. Many sites, including extensive archaeological sites were destroyed by stock or by infrastructure such as stockyards that were built near water sources. Associated with this impact and developments came the inability to tell the stories and perform the ceremonies associated with the *Tjukurpa* of these sites. The inability to perform such duties brought on sickness to my people who were responsible to care for these sites. As many of the springs were damaged we no longer could seek from them the once powerful healing qualities of 'kwatye' from important mound springs like we used to.

With the pastoral industry came the destruction of many bush tucker plants and animals. This lack of bush food made my people travel further away to get food that was once abundant around the mound springs and waterholes that now had become stock watering points. The once high levels of water within the

mound springs also dropped further and further. It was no wonder, as we saw the pastoralists allowing bores to flow freely from this valuable water source and taking large amounts of water from the springs to grow lucerne for their stock.

The Europeans also bought with them Government ration stations. With these ration stations came a change to my people's once healthy diet of fish, fruit, nuts and seeds to flour, sugar and tea. My people who once were able to access abundant sources of food within the area were now reliant on these Government rations.

Their ability to travel between reliable water sources had also diminished because stock and introduced animals had now destroyed many of our once permanent water sources. The valuable water resources that my people had always relied on to continue their stories and ceremonies were all too often now not available for my people to visit, destroyed or dried up.

My people could see that our country had changed in such a short time and these changes impacted on their lifestyle so dramatically. They could see the damage that the non-indigenous people were doing. But the people causing the damage would not listen to us, they could not and did not see the changes that they had made to the land, the plants and animals like we did. They did not have the expertise nor the knowledge of the land like my people had and continue to have for thousands of years. For their priorities were different than ours, for they did not respect the land; they thought that the water, the plants and the animals would last forever. They thought because we could not read and write in English and conform to their 'religion' and their value system that we as Indigenous people had nothing to offer. Our ability

and skills to 'read' and 'listen' to the landscape were irrelevant.

Ironically it was a drought in the late 1920's that ultimately saw many of the pastoralists leave such 'inhospitable country' and move west and south of the mound springs to seek favourable water sources for their stock. But in this short period of time, the Europeans had caused so much damage not only to the land but also to our culture.

With the drought and the leaving of the Europeans came the opportunity for my people to come back and help restore the land that was very 'sick'. Although many Aboriginal people came back to the mound springs and surrounding areas, many were now reliant on ration stations instead of 'bush tucker' and had moved to Communities north and south of the mound springs at Finnis Springs, Charlotte Waters, Bloods Creek and Finke.

However, those Aboriginal people who stayed at the springs and surrounding areas were now able to return and utilise their traditional land management practices. They were able to control burn on their country and perform the *Tjukurpa*. By burning the country it returned many species of bush tucker, although many of the wildlife that were once abundant were now gone. Where there was once plenty of emus, kangaroos, bush turkeys, ducks, mussels, stick nest rats, bandicoots and fish, now there are many new animals like the donkey, horse, camel, fox and rabbit. Now there are many more animals that are competing for the same food that is no longer plentiful.

Even the springs that once provided fish and mussels could not provide for my people. The edge of the springs that once had many bush foods was replaced with foreign grasses and weeds. The once clear springs that was a source of

healing for my people was now dirty from stock and feral animals drinking from the springs.

Despite all these inherited problems, we were glad to once again be the caretakers of the land- of the springs and the surrounding areas. Although much of our *Tjukurpa* sites had been destroyed, we wanted to protect what was left and protect the '*kwatye*' not only for us but for all the animals and plants.

But the country was so damaged and the fragile environment around the mound springs destroyed so we looked at how we could repair our country. We recognised that there were now many problems that we as Indigenous people had not previously encountered.

We noticed that there were significant changes in the vegetation from the impact of the pastoralists. There was an increase in salinity both in and around the springs. Certain animals that were once in abundance in and around the springs are gone. Many bush tucker plants that once provided food for my people are gone. The once substantial water flow of the springs is now slower and water levels a lot lower. Even though we know there are many endemic fish, mollusc and even spider species unique to the mound springs and dependant on *kwatye* and many migratory birds that also visit for *kwatye*, - my elders have told me that there were more before non-indigenous people came to this land.

We acknowledged that only by combining our traditional land management skills and western scientific methods that together we could provide the most effective method of management of our country.

So we negotiated the co-operative management structure with National Parks where we have a Board of

management with a majority of Irrwanyere people on it. As a result a 99-year lease over the park has been granted to Irrwanyere, though the park remains the property of the South Australian Government. The lease means Irrwanyere members can once again live on, use and manage the park in accordance with the plan of management and subject to other leases. The South Australian National Parks and Wildlife also employ me as a ranger at Witjira. Through the process of co-operative management my people believe that this is the only way that we can help restore some of the sites, plants and animals that are so important to my people. We need to restore the country to its healthy state and protect the land from further damage.

Conclusion

As we try to restore our country, even today non-indigenous people continue to destroy sites. We have asked tourists to respect the springs as we as Indigenous people continue to do so. We realise that some non-indigenous people want to swim in these waters and therefore to protect the other springs we have allowed access by tourists to the main springs only.

But despite the obvious damage that has been done by non-indigenous people in the past, tourists continue to use shampoos and washing powder in the springs and destroy this fragile

ecosystem. We ask you to appreciate our holistic approach to the country and try to see how we as Aboriginal people see the land- as part of us which is to be respected, for future generations. We ask you to work with the land and not against it. See the mound springs beyond 'surprising' large waterholes in the desert that can be exploited. We ask you to understand, to 'read' and 'listen' to the land like we do no matter what language you speak or write whether it be Arrrente or English, the damage to the land is evident.

It is also imperative that non-indigenous people learn the meaning of the word 'protection'. For together we must care for the land and protect not only what *you* think is important as the pastoralists once did, but to think how important the land is to everything in it- to the many plants and animals that have the right to live as we do here and protect our *Tjukurpa*. Once you think about these things as an Indigenous person does, and learn to respect the land and the *kwatye*, maybe then you begin to understand the concept and importance of our *Tjukurpa*.

References

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Author Biography



Dean Ah Chee (pictured in the middle with elders Mr Harry Taylor left and Mr Bingy Lowe right) is a lawman from the lower southern Arrente, Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara, clans who has cultural obligations and responsibilities to take care for his country.

Dean has been vested this responsibility from other traditional law men from the area, with his traditional responsibility and boundaries extending throughout Witjira National Park, and areas adjacent to the mound springs which cover the three states of SA, NT, and QLD.

Dean's connection with the land incorporates spiritual, ecological and cultural aspects extending well beyond any western perspective. Together his traditional knowledge and skills complimented with western land management practices ensure effective cooperative management of his land.

Dean currently lives within the Witjira National Park as a Senior Ranger with National Parks and Wildlife South Australia (NPWSA) working with traditional elders Bingy Lowe and Harry Taylor and is one of the Native Title claimants of the Eringa claim which incorporates Witjira National Park.

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