

## Caring for culture and country

A pocket of land in East Arnhem Land lights up with performances, energy and insights that is the 2008 Garma Festival of Traditional Culture. **JASON M<sup>c</sup>INTOSH** explores the vibrant debate that takes place at the Festival's Key Forum, coordinated by Charles Darwin University.

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Courtesy Yothu  
Yindi Foundation

He is an eminent, tough and highly respected Maori Treaty negotiator and today Sir Tipene O'Regan is face-to-face with academics, business leaders, policy-makers, Indigenous leaders and practitioners from across Australia and the globe.

Gusts of wind blow from the Arafura Sea, carrying his address to hundreds of people packed in and around the open shelter. As keynote speaker, his words set the pace at the Key Forum of Australia's most significant Indigenous festival, Garma.

Sir Tipene's words, humble and succinct, draw a picture of future indigenous engagement led by a vibrant and empowered collective.

"Until we take control and own our own dreams, we will always be dependent on others to tell us what our dreams should be," he says. "We must make new structures to maintain the cultural treasures that we have inherited."

More than 400 people are here to explore the theme Indigenous Culture: Caring for culture and country and to better understand the sacred link which indigenous peoples share with their lands.



This is the fourth consecutive Key Forum co-ordinated by CDU. The event is a major feature of Garma and directs attention to a specific topic of critical relevance to Indigenous Australians.

As Sir Tipene reflects upon his experiences in New Zealand, speakers from many walks of life and lands soon follow, contributing hearty debate to one of the nation's leading cross-cultural forums.

The addresses override the degrading stereotypes of Indigenous people as a resigned and simple race, exposing their robust determination, cultural vibrancy and struggles engaging with the wider society.

The cross-section of speakers ranges from lobbyists defending native rights in the Australian courts to Indigenous sea rangers speaking first hand of their roles as protectors of Australia's coastline. Diversity is a central theme of this forum.

Representing the Anishinaabe people of North America, Renee Gurneau spoke of the decolonisation process where indigenous people re-learned and reclaimed "everything that they are" and called for greater solidarity and information-sharing between the two continents.

The eldest sister of prominent Aboriginal leaders Galarrwuy and Mandawuy Yunupingu, Gulumbu Yunupingu, exudes pride as she welcomes the crowd on behalf of the Yolngu people.

For the next three days, words, some emotive and others reserved, are exchanged across forums and workshops.

From day one, three key issues begin to emerge: The ownership of Indigenous lands and the opportunities they provide; the role of community and government in partnering to develop opportunities, yet the questionable ability of government to recognise traditional structures and viewpoints, and draw Indigenous people into the discussions about the future; and the growing linkage between science-based and traditional ecological knowledge and the opportunity to do more to provide Indigenous livelihoods.

Chief Executive of the Northern Land Council, Kim Hill says that without land "Indigenous people would be wandering the streets" and speaks of more than 60 sea ranger positions created in the Top End.

CEO of the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance, Joe Morrison highlights the different approaches taken by Indigenous and other people in driving ecological outcomes.

He urges a greater role for Indigenous people in the discourse, where funerals, ceremonies and other important community events, which maintain culture, need to be acknowledged in land management policy.

"Traditional ecological knowledge must underpin policy and represent Indigenous interests." He says government has failed to recognise and incorporate traditional ecological and cultural knowledge within policy.



A research fellow from The University of Queensland, Sean Kerins highlights government programs that force Traditional Owners to apply for funding through a maze of programs for what is often unsecured, short-term funding.

"Long-term planning is impossible to do with that," he says.

Leader of the local Madarrpa clan, Djambawa Marawili speaks of his people's difficulty in explaining the significance of their culture as they battle through the legal system as part of the Blue Mud Bay case. "By talking, or describing the significance of the bay through patents and designs, no one (in government) got it, so we documented it in a book then we were singing and dancing but government people still didn't understand," he says.

Indigenous Protection Area Manager and member of the Rirratjingu clan, Wanyupi Marika expresses his happiness at the momentous win and says the announcement gives local people more power to manage their lands. "I want to see information used in management, not sitting in a lawyer's cupboard," he says, calling on Customs, police and government to help rangers manage their waters and involve his people in commercial enterprises.

His views are supported by a Research Fellow at The Australian National University, Frances Morphy who says government has to see management of areas such as East Arnhem Land in the wider context of what the future might hold for homeland communities.

“For without them, the base for young people to learn Yolngu culture and for people to protect the coastlines is uncertain,” she says.

The link between health and culture is made on a number of fronts, echoing last year’s theme of tackling the crisis of Indigenous health.

Ophthalmologist and associate with The Fred Hollows Foundation, Professor Hugh Taylor discusses a program to eliminate the eye disease trachoma which affects many Indigenous Australians.

“We need to build on traditional culture to build emphasis to keep their faces clean and I’m confident, through antibiotics and education, we can beat this,” he says.

Researcher at CDU’s Menzies School of Health Research and general practitioner, Dr Paul Burgess explores the strong correlations between the health of Indigenous people and their relationship with culture.

“Indigenous people define landscape as a much more dynamic and sentient entity,” he says. “Caring for country was, to me, a positive health promotion activity.”

He speaks of research identifying robust elements of caring for country which shows that people who are engaged in more traditional practices are significantly healthier across many markers including weight, blood pressure, diabetes, and cholesterol.

Dr Burgess also cites ceremonies reinigorating health of landscapes and people, giving strength to body and spirit.

Taking up the fight for better health among her people, local role model and self-described strong woman, Djapirri Mununggirritj speaks about the struggles of her people. The Yolngu community leader from the Gumatj clan is unreserved in her passion for change: “When are fellow Australians going to sit by the fire and share and listen to our knowledge?”

“Australia, stand with us and see us as one, and teach us your ways to establishing our economies and closing the gap.”

She says the federal intervention has transformed her community: “Yirkalla has become a quiet community now, and the old people who take their children hunting are now getting a good night’s sleep.”

Aboriginal education consultant from western New South Wales, Tyson Yunkaporta explores Aboriginal ways of knowing and examines Indigenous knowledge as a living entity rather than the stereotypical art on the wall within non-Indigenous frameworks.

Business leader Micko O’Byrne urges a radical shift in industry and government to tackle Indigenous unemployment. The role of the government-subsidised employment scheme is hotly debated.

Addressing the closing plenary, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma makes a number of recommendations, including:

- Developing a national Indigenous representative body that gives a representative voice in the political and media arenas
- Encouraging government to follow rhetoric about partnerships and relating to people with solid investment and authentic commitment
- Increase and develop programs that maintain and enhance the relationship Indigenous people share with their culture and lands.

Commissioner Calma drew parallels between the urgency required in the improvement of Indigenous outcomes with that of the Australian Government investing millions of dollars in the late 1970s to create world class athletes.

“We’ve seen benefits where we invest into an initiative where there is a clean vision, target and a need to engage people to do it and this applies to the challenges laid out at Garma,” he says.

