

INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND INTERESTS IN WILDCOUNTRY IN AUSTRALIA

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An interview with Anthony Esposito¹

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by Heather Goodall,² 22nd January 2007

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Anthony: The paper I discussed in October focused on the fact that facing up to the 'conservation imperative' in Australia raises fundamental issues in understanding and managing Australia's land and sea-scapes and continental-scale ecological processes. While leading edge conservation science is valuable in the development of models and approaches to nature conservation and land management in Australia, we must simultaneously address the ownership and management of land. This includes recognition and respect for Aboriginal customary tenure and governance, and the rich store of ecological knowledge held by Indigenous people.

The Wilderness Society has made a national commitment to support 'Indigenous conservation strategies' through its *WildCountry* program. For *WildCountry*, the environmental problems in the Australian landscape confront all of us, but our responses also mean addressing the rights and interests of

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Indigenous traditional owners on their own terms. There are many political and ethical challenges involved in this. Positively, many answers to the problems of land management and nature protection can also flow from this engagement, and conservation can become one vehicle for delivering land justice.

After a couple of decades of social change, the fields of environmental management and conservation in Australia have been opened to Indigenous cultural rights and customary tenure, and offer a rich knowledge base for the protection and sustainable use of the environment. In parts of the country this has also led to return of homelands and rights in management, and to contemporary social and economic opportunities based on 'Caring for Country.'

Heather: Can you outline what you see as working well with the Wilderness Society's overall Wild Country program? What particularly has come out of the negotiating and alliance processes the Wilderness Society has been involved in with Indigenous people? And then in retrospect what would you reassess, what hasn't worked so well?

Anthony: Well, the broader *Wild Country* program is multi-faceted. In the broadest sense, everything the Wilderness Society does works towards *Wild Country*. So that can be seen in some of the more familiar types of campaign activities which ultimately are about achieving protection for an area. And that area will fit in with a conception of how to look after the environment along the scientific lines we are working on for *Wild Country*. It can be things like stopping threatening processes - for example, we see things like the campaign against land clearing in Queensland and the campaign for *Wild Rivers* as key planks in building up *Wild Country* as a landscape-wide protection strategy, or conservation strategy. It can work in terms of what we call landscape projects, particularly if there are multi-stakeholder alliances, like there is with Gondwana Link in the South in south west Australia. There a group is getting together: they are actually working on landscape restoration as well as protection. The various groups bring their particular strengths to bear on an overall landscape strategy in terms of conservation, restoration, protection and broadly, issues like conservation economy, which I'll come back to.

And then I think the dimension that's obviously most important to me, where my responsibilities lie, are in terms of the Indigenous lands and Indigenous peoples. And so there's a program building up around that. And it has similar characteristics. There are some campaign elements to what we're doing. So we had very successful cooperation and alignment with Carpentaria Land Council around *Wild River* issues in Queensland.

We have cooperation agreements forming. So we have one with the Chuulangun Aboriginal Corporation in central Cape York which is a further step in our evolution in terms of the engagement we have on Cape York and the campaigns and the approach we take. It has built on some of the lessons of our longer experience of working on Cape York. Things like working through the Heads of Agreement. And that's largely about policy, about political support and about on-ground support in a variety of ways. One is scientific; another is that we try and bring philanthropic forces to bear. We are trying to get practical outcomes, *in situ conservation* as we call it, with those partners. And then there'll be questions of where these alliances are working on Aboriginal lands more broadly. So currently we are running a strategy around Indigenous conservation, in terms of Indigenous Protected Areas and natural resource management which is a broad strategy we're running at the nation level as well as at state levels at the moment. And then there's the broad issue of where indigenous people fit into these other *Wild Country* projects or the overall scientific or knowledge development. We could go into a lot more detail about each of these but perhaps that's a useful introduction.

Heather: Could you talk a bit more about the degree to which the Aboriginal program might relate to the other sections of the overall Wild Country project. Is there a strategy for actually linking up those various parts of it or for fostering a flow of information through from one project area to another?

Anthony: There is. There's a few ways that this is happening. One is at the level of strategic planning. So the first thing is to make sure when we plan around Wild Country or campaigns generally that, the indigenous components, the rights components, the lands components, the civil society issues, etcetera, the

economic issues are all taken into account as we'd planned. In a sense we try and avoid what are called indigenous exceptionalism. What that means is that we are not just saying, 'Well, there's what we do..... and then over here, on the side, there's this whole special category of stuff that we do that relates to this special category of people.' Instead we basically see Indigenous rights as human rights and therefore it's about saying: 'let's get this stuff sorted out properly'. So we have five key strategic planning planks and they will apply pretty evenly in any situation. You'll get variation in terms of what you're dealing with but as principals, they apply whether you're dealing with Indigenous people or non-Indigenous people.

Then the program internally is working on capacity building issues, coordination, integration, those kinds of things. So largely it's been my role to get around all of the organisation, make sure we're all working from the same basic understanding, that these things are being built in at the strategic planning level. That's overcoming some of the past practices where if it wasn't in your face, people didn't tend to think about it. And that's probably why our work in Queensland and, in Cape York in particular, is more advanced, because there was no way to achieve an environment goal without dealing very directly with that. Whereas in other places it's been possible not to deal with it, to ignore it in some senses and there would be no consequences other than aggrieved indigenous people, but these sort of programs wouldn't be talking to them anyway, as a historical thing. So we're trying to overcome that and just make sure it's a matter of rights, it's a given thing that we deal with, that we look at it and we look at it properly.

Heather: Over the years there's been lots of individual campaigns as you've suggested, rivers, forests, starting with Terania Creek, as you've suggested, where there's been a lot of involvement with Aboriginal people. But then the campaign's over or the energy runs out for various reasons and the links which have been made aren't fostered. It sounds to me from what you are saying here like what you have been doing in Cape York processes has been picking up on something like the Wild Rivers campaign and trying to build on it and expand it. Is that the way you see it happening?

Anthony: Yes, that's true. Certainly I think we've come to realise relationships are important. They always were, of course, but now it's more than just temporary political alliances. It's a realisation that conservation is a long term strategy and a long term goal. And so, therefore, the security of relationships, the depth of the relationship is probably the key to the outcomes. It's also incredibly important when dealing with the political culture of Indigenous groups and Indigenous societies to actually build those relationships. Some of that's the protocols around respect and rights to speak for country which we take seriously. So, yes, very much it's about taking those strategic initiatives, like a campaign around *Wild Rivers* and then using that to build a shared understanding, if possible, of what we're trying to achieve and build the relationships to carry that through. And politicians being what they are and rules being what they are, to work to constantly maintain vigilance around those initiatives and those successes where they occur - to build the relationships so that people actually value them and want to keep working on them.

Heather: As a historian I'm thinking about how this process emerged. There's been an overall awareness of the importance of social justice and indigenous rights in land and in conservation for a long time - but that step of trying to go beyond an individual campaign and building it out more broadly, was that the key to developing the Wilderness Society approach? Was that the first step and it evolved from there? Or did you have the broad policy and you looked around then for places to implement it?

Anthony: I think it's something of all of that in a way. It's the way in which action, when you reflect on it, informs your thinking and your policy and that then leads to new actions that you might take. So I think it's a combination of those things. We were gathering a lot of experience and knowledge in our work in Cape York, as I say, in particular. We had Wild Country come together as an idea or a vision out of different stands of our experience across the country, some of which wouldn't have automatically considered indigenous issues or the scope of what that meant. And then having to define *Wild Country* we set about looking at how it would be implemented. And so, straight away, one of those things is if it's

continental scale and you're looking at landscape protection at that scale, you're talking, very pragmatically, that at the very least a large portion of the continent, and increasingly so, will be Aboriginal-owned and controlled. And therefore there is no way to achieve these scientifically-driven conservation goals without comprehending and adequately working with Indigenous landholders. So then it becomes a question of, given our limited resources, the kind of campaign decisions you always make, are 'What are our priorities? What can we successfully achieve, out of the whole suite of things we would ideally like to achieve? You start to hone in then on particular areas or policy issues or projects and so therefore you try to start an engagement process with whoever is relevant for that.

Heather: So you've got the emergence of a continental perspective in practical terms in the Wilderness Society, in the desire to look in a more integrated manner across the continent, despite the differences and the scale, and think about common principles that you can apply to different situations. The name Wild Country for the overall program is inspired, it's a beautiful name and it picks up on so many different things, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. But you've said on other occasions that the Carpentaria Land Council in Cape York makes the point that the concept of wilderness is ethnocentric and colonial... How did the name come to be chosen?

Anthony: I think there's probably two main strands in the thinking that shaped that name. One was that when we arrived at these ideas, there was a precedent, a reference point that we could look at and that was in North America and it's the *Wild Lands* projects. We actually have a cooperation agreement with the US *Wild Lands* project and one of the co-chairs of the *Wild Country* Science Council, Michael Soulé is very intimately involved in that project and that type of conservation initiative in the US. So we had the *Wild Lands* thing and nominally thought, 'well let's have *Wild Lands* as a central idea'. But then we started looking what we were actually going to call it. And it probably wasn't a terribly rigorous process and it certainly wasn't market researched or anything like that! But we had the fact that everyone in the Wilderness Society, naturally

enough likes the word *wild*, they can relate to it. But we're also pretty conscious of some of the recent history on use of the term 'wild' and 'wilderness' and what it infers for some people. And we very much knew that we wanted to deal with these issues around Aboriginal people and *country*, both directly and in the broader sense. So *country* is an important concept there. And as well, the vernacular use of the word *country* is one that a lot of people seem to relate to. And so, in a sense, the two came together. It was an attempt, not to deny who we were or what we were about, but redefine it a bit and open the door on that issue of looking at it from the point of view of *country*. So it came together as such.

Heather: Is your background in the Cape York campaigns and the development in those areas? Or was your previous experience in other geographic areas?

Anthony: It's both. I've had a lot to do with the Cape campaign over many years. So I have got that very direct involvement there. I ran a program in Queensland called the Native Title and Protected Areas project, which was state-wide, essentially a policy development process. Particularly in initial stages looking at protected areas like national parks with the intent of actually addressing all parks and protected areas in Queensland and the process by which native title issues would be resolved in relation to 'past acts' and it would be in place properly in relation to 'future acts'. And that had enormous implications for our work on Cape York. But it was essentially a state-wide thing that could be applied in principle anywhere. And because I was dealing with native title law and the court decisions and so on, again the principles were conceived with the view that they had general applicability around the country. My work in more recent times, particularly through taking on this national role, means I'm working in various parts of the country.

Heather: I was going to ask you about the things that had worked well in Cape York. That seems to be the most developed at the moment. Are there things that the Wilderness Society, and you yourself, have learnt from this process about building alliances around conservation issues?

Anthony: Well, it's a good question. It's probably a big question. Hopefully I've been learning stuff. Look, I think one thing has been learnt very much, because of the nature of getting outcomes in a place like Cape York and that is that it's a very political process at every level. And so we've come to a much clearer understanding and recognition of the dynamics inherent in indigenous politics and the complexity of all of all that. There's potentially a minefield, if you stumble in and you don't know what you're doing, it's a very difficult balancing act. I'll try to make it sort of more practical. You'll have a representative body or various representative bodies at, in this case, a regional level. So you'll have a land council and you'll have things like a development corporation and so on. So then there'll be this growing kind of regional apparatus that's largely being driven by various leadership groups. Now we know at the ground level there are all sorts of issues around legitimacy and representation. There are complexities around traditional governance versus contemporary governance, traditional politics versus contemporary politics, all these sorts of things. And it can result in a lot of things just slipping around: you can find you are building an agreement one day that turns out not to be solid the next. So we've had to be much more careful about how we deal with that. And try to find, I suppose, an ethically and legally defensible position so that we could be constant in the project, so we could be clear about what we were trying to achieve and that it was not an infringement on rights. And that it would bring benefits directly to Indigenous people in terms of return of land and in terms of caring for country and in terms of ensuring that there are economic opportunities that can be built off that. So I think one of the things to emerge very strongly out of our work is the concept of *conservation economy*.

We started to recognise that social conditions weren't able to support the kind of conservation outcomes we were talking about. There were serious equity issues across the board. Certainly in terms of economic enfranchisement, there were important equity issues that had to be addressed. And we recognised that principles can work with the pragmatic and strategic as well. We have strong reasons for wanting to achieve these conservation outcomes and delivering economic benefits is one way of building support.

Heather: In the Indian writing I've been looking at about conservation dilemmas, the focus on livelihoods has a higher emphasis that it does in Australian discussion. It is less often that you see a discussion in the Indian literature about cultural rights and cultural values. In the Australian debates, Haripriya Rangan has pointed out the way those two concepts are often portrayed as if they are very dramatically polarised, so you either get recognition of cultural values or recognition of economic value, but having the two together is very rare. Is your concept of conservation economy an attempt to address that dichotomy?

Anthony: Yes, very much, to put it all together. It is to try to have an integrated package, and one that will apply to non-Indigenous circumstances as well. We go to the broader issues of what do we have to change fundamentally to ensure sustainability and security in the future. But, yes, when it comes to the indigenous work it's been our key organising principle.

Heather: You called your paper about Wilderness Society approaches given at the seminar comparing joint management in India and Australia 'A Conservation Revolution'. But the conservation movement still generally has a range of differing approaches to this question about how you relate to Aboriginal people. Do you see the Wilderness Society approach as a change process that is moving through the conservation movement in Australia or do you see resistance to the idea that Aboriginal people should be consulted at an early stage rather than late in the day? How do you see that developing?

Anthony: I do see pockets of resistance. I've encountered them numerous times through that work on native title and protected areas. In fact one of the main reasons I was doing that was so that we could bring together some sort of coherent collective position around policy that we could put to the government. So there is still a variety of views of this in the conservation movement. I think it's generally been changing for the better. There are characteristics of groups which define how they respond to this. I encountered very much an age-based

difference. Older organisations with older memberships tended to be more resistant or have less of a conceptual framework to deal with what is needed in order to go on, than younger organisations and particularly younger people. That's a generalisation, but it held reasonably well.

I think there are also policy differences around the groups at the level of what conservation framework that they're using. For us *Wild Country* is a conservation framework. We see it as not entirely new, but as a new configuration of the way we think about the environment and about bringing out the latest in scientific thinking about conservation. The implication of viewing this as a conservation framework is that you can extrapolate it to the continental scale. Then you can recognise that it's seriously a change agenda and that if it's to be implemented, it will drive change and it will be radical change. Not threatening change, necessarily, and in fact it's meant to address threat rather than to induce it. But it does work at the level of social change. That always carries with it all sorts of dynamics and political problems and issues which are about whether people are inherently conservative in how they understand a situation or whether they require crisis to respond or whether they can plan a way forward and those sorts of differences. So, we're operating with that.

And I think because there are those differences between the groups around a conservation framework, there are therefore some differences about how they understand and approach the Aboriginal issues. I think that's the main issue. There are clearly differences too that people have around indigenous issues *per se*. Questions of rights or not, or even the extent to which they think about them. But there has been a great deal of effort put in over recent years by a lot of different groups to bring themselves to a point where they feel that they do have a good position on it.

Heather: There's clearly change going on and often change within the one organisation on a generational scale too. The term Wild Country has got a sense of being remote from urban life and away from intensive productivist areas. You've talked about Cape York and about the Nullabor Plain. But the Murray Darling basin is a massive area characterised by intense agricultural productivist operations, much of it under irrigation. It is shaped a great deal by urban capital and

transnational corporations. How effectively do you see the Wild Country program altogether but also the indigenous program working in those sort of areas that aren't wild in any accepted sense?

Anthony: Yeah, good question. We do see it working though. It can work quite well, I think. And Gondwana Link is an example of that. We're dealing with the big 'intact areas', the Great Western Woodland at the end of the Gondwana Link chain, so to speak. But most of that land is heavily degraded and impacted by agriculture. It starts from the forest of south west Western Australia and sweeps through the Fitz-Stirling Region around the southern coast there and up into what we call Great Western Woodland which is something in the order of eight or ten million hectares of intact woodland. Towards the north it extends beyond Kalgoorlie. There is south west of the desert country. Norseman runs through the middle of it. The Esperance-Kalgoorlie line is kind of the middle.

It's had no pastoral use. That's one of the things that makes it extraordinary. Partly because it has plants that are poisonous, so it had a kind of natural defence against pastoralists. It's got mining interests, obviously, not just Kalgoorlie but it's dotted with mining tracks and exploration sites and so on. It's had some kind of logging of timbers in early settlement and industrial days for rail lines and that kind of thing. But it is remarkable. If you look at the wilderness inventory map, it will just pop out at you as a big intact chunk. So we're concentrating on that from a Wilderness Society point of view, but we're also a key player in the whole Gondwana Link. So that means running west of that Woodlands, right over to the forested south west. There are some very nice intact parts like Fitzgerald National Park but most if it is a mosaic of degraded landscapes with degraded pockets and all that sort of thing. All of that is part of the area we are playing a role in.

But it can work in the Murray Darling context as well. *Wild Country* has two basic premises, I guess. When you look at the continent and recognise that part of it is largely degraded in terms of having been or being cleared and used for agriculture and other purposes. But a large part of it is broadly intact. Notwithstanding that there are some serious threats and degrading processes going on, it has most of its native vegetation cover intact and its rivers are flowing and those kinds of things. So, we talk about the degraded landscapes in

terms of restoration. The campaigns will tend to fit the more conventional type because the protection of remnants, whether it might be the forest campaigns in the south or whatever, is absolutely critical to an overall *Wild Country* strategy. Without those core remnants, we're not going to get the kind of optimum restoration that comes from having some intact bits of the landscape that you can rebuild on.

Restoration then becomes a significant question in those sort of landscapes. I look at the Murray Darling and I just go, 'What are we going to do, short of actually getting the farmers to change everything they do and reversing the process?' That's a bio-region that looks to me like it's on the brink.

I often draw the correlation, and it's an interesting one in some of the arguments around *wild* and *wilderness*, that when you look at a wilderness inventory map broadly, you're also looking at an Aboriginal land map. You're looking at a map in which, if the areas are not already Aboriginal lands under some form of land rights, then the Aboriginal connections are strong enough to sustain at least viable native title claims. So there's this incredibly strong correlation there. And the fact is in a lot of those areas within the Murray Darling not only has the landscape been wiped out, but the languages have been wiped out, the traditional connections have been wiped out at a material level. It's like the case of the Yorta Yorta people who still spiritually know who they are and where they come from and what's theirs but they can't support that as a claim under the current law. And that's partly to do with connection but there is very little left there that they could actually lay claim to. And so their focus on something like Barmah Forest is obvious and natural and good. But I look at that and say, 'Is this what it's reduced to?'

And for me the restoration is also cultural restoration. This is some of the work I've done a little bit of with Brendan Mackie at ANU with trying to develop what we call an approach to Indigenous environmental assessment. So we're using the term eco-cultural restoration.

Heather: That's an interesting area to expand on here. It's been picked up by Aboriginal land managers whom I've talked to over the years, who have had control over very small areas of land. They've been trying to work out what to do about restoring saltbush and native grasses. They

were actually trying to get to the practical means of achieving some restoration. These are often people who in their younger days had been stockworkers employed on the local properties and they'd planted buffel grass and other introduced grasses, so it was really a big shift in their approach to how to manage land and its within that overall framework of cultural valuing. It's been very small scale because they have never had control over large areas of land.

More recently that's changed even in NSW. There was a question raised at the symposium by David Kampers, an Aboriginal student and conservation activist who'd been studying the Mt Grenfell National Park in the arid western areas of NSW. He said he was aware of Aboriginal people in that area knowing that restoration work was needed but not finding it easy to gain the expertise they wanted to allow them to make it happen. To what degree do you see Aboriginal conservation goals being expressed in some of these heavily damaged areas?

Anthony: Well, to be honest, I don't see them. I mean I see Aboriginal people expressing them. But I don't see their conservation goals being built into the policies and the programs particularly well. I think that the Living Waters project was important. I don't know how well it's going but there was excellent work done by Lisa Strilane and Jessica Weir and Monica Morgan around the whole cultural dimension and the indigenous interest in the waters of the Murray River. And I think they nailed it very well in terms of the rights issues and the things that mattered. I'd want to be able to take that a step further and go, 'Well, how do we implement this?'

But I know how difficult that is from trying to get it into just simple things like recognition of rights inside national parks. That should be really straight forward in my view. But when you're dealing with something with a broad cultural landscape like the Murray Darling, you have multiple traditional owners and then you've got all of these powerful vested interests. You've got a tenure system that's really locked Aboriginal people out. You've got an attitude to water which is about seeing it as a commodity and assuming that there's some such thing as an 'environmental flow'. As though it's not all an environmental

flow! So I think there's a long way to go in a context like that, to get a genuine recognition of the indigenous perspective. And to start, there's a long way to go just on nature restoration and environmental restoration in terms of the connections and the processes, and an even further way to go on the eco-cultural restoration it seems to me.

Heather: Back to the Wilderness Society's Wild Country in the Murray Darling Basin, I'm thinking more about the Darling River area where I've worked longest. To what extent are you able to begin those conversations with Indigenous organisations there in terms of Wild Country, given that there's almost no recognition of their interests in the Western Division of NSW? To what extent is the expression of cultural aspirations as having a conservation dimension - is that articulated or built in?

Anthony: It's very early stages, I think, for us. It probably shouldn't be, but it is. We're working, I suppose, with two branches in this context, one is New South Wales, one is Victoria. We've got this MLDRIN (Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations) agreement which is shaping up, which we're a part of and in fact some of our other agreement work has actually informed the content of this one. And I see that as a very useful first step in creating the terms for a dialogue, to come up with some shared objectives, some shared agendas and some projects that we can start working on. And that agreement reflects the kind of broader principles that I've been talking about. So I think that that's useful. I think the Victorian side is more developed than the New South Wales side.

I'm working with New South Wales branch but we're still putting the pieces in place, really, internally. We know we have a broad objective of working in the western division of New South Wales and I've personally got some interest in what we can do around the Darling. I've looked at that and I think it's an interesting context that we should be working in. For us also it's a major resource issue: we actually don't have surplus resources at the moment that would allow us to just go out and start doing that. So we're really at the planning stage around a lot of that engagement. I think there's no *in principle* reason why we can't be doing it, or problem with doing it. We just have to start gradually

building that up until we can get some momentum and find some key allies and start to put something in place.

I think the other issue for me is how do we - or how do I - work with Aboriginal organisations to look at the legislative and policy frameworks that are governing a lot of this stuff and start thinking of some reform on that front which we may be able to more usefully do. I think we found that with Queensland. You try to build - you stitch this stuff in to conservation policy so that's inseparable - and Government can't unpack it. And it leads, at least incrementally, to some gains on that front. That's partly why we're building up through the science side, with Brendan and others at ANU, the cultural dimensions to this so the argument for protection is one of both cultural and natural conservation. But I do feel we've got a lot of work to do in that state before we can make some serious gains.

Heather: The continent wide approach here is clearly important: you're learning both from the western Australian Gondwana project and from the Queensland work, a great deal about degraded landscapes with pastoral background, a great deal that has implications for NSW. Bringing that into an interaction with NSW organisations may have important outcomes in the future. The scientific work with ANU about restoration is also interesting here. One of the challenges around the globe is how to grapple with the implications of front line scientific work and how to turn it into practical and social action. A big part of that relates to understanding, to being able to have a conversation about it that allows information to flow both ways. Given that Aboriginal people have been shut out from much of the cultural capital through segregated education and discrimination, which would have allowed them access to the scientific approaches you are working on, how are you thinking about the translation process? And while everybody has a commitment to valuing Indigenous knowledge, it seems that trying to work out what that would actually mean in practical terms on the ground is a very different matter and probably has a long way to go. So in relation to indigenous people particularly

but also more generally, how does your work approach the popular understanding of the science you are working with?

Anthony: Okay. There's probably a few ways. One has, in the first instance, has been to get the Science Council focused on it. And they've gotten incredibly excited by it. So that's encouraging, it means they're willing to keep working through this. We looked then at how to build it into the research program, our research and development program as best we can. So we have instances of this in one way or another around the country. In a general sense, for example, we have a fellow called Simon Judd, who's a biologist, a conservation scientist in WA. He's been our main, one of our main people in the Gondwana Link alliance. And what he's been doing is taking those *Wild Country* ideas, the big framework principles and translating them into what he calls a functional landscape plan for that region. And that's helping to guide the decisions that each, in a sense, autonomous group makes about what to focus on, what the restoration looks like, how to do it, those kinds of things. We're trying to build in that eco-cultural stuff as well.

Heather: How are you doing that?

Anthony: Well, in a sense, in principle, and I think, and I'm not too acquainted with the work on the ground with some of this, there's some dialogue with indigenous interests in that area. There's been talk of what was called a dreaming trail which had some kind of tourism potential around it as well, and so some economic dimensions. But it was essentially a cultural reconnection of that area - a trail that followed some important, cultural lines. And restoration would take place around that, on that site and around those trails. So I think that was one kind of practical consideration. The other was just looking within the priorities of 'if we were going to restore it, what are the cultural dimensions here? What should be restored? As a matter of priority,' those kinds of things.

We've got it in terms of the two knowledge system approach. We've got a general thing of trying to build a new ecological knowledge system of the continent. And that's going to be derived from this western conservation science - and it's leading edge. And from indigenous ecological knowledge, both

traditional and contemporary. Because there's the assumption that there was this great knowledge system and it's there in the heads of a few people and it's passing away, which is true.....

Heather: ...but it was static.

Anthony: But it was static, that's it. And in fact if we have that early knowledge as *background* and then put that together with the knowledge of the *changes* in the landscape, we have one of the most important pieces of knowledge we can actually get access to, to understand how to deal with the problems we face. Because it's that measuring of the *changes* which is as important as understanding the impact.

Heather: This seems to me to be really important, because there aren't many people talking about that historical nature of Indigenous knowledge.

Anthony: So it's good that we're thinking about it!

Heather: It seems incredibly important. I've been working on exactly that question in relation to water ... The absence of a historical dimension to understanding traditional knowledge and the devaluing of contemporary Aboriginal people's 'Indigenous knowledge' is widespread. It's a huge issue in NSW because Aboriginal people are often made to feel they don't have 'Ind traditional knowledge' because they grew up on the riverbank at Collarenebri. Whereas in fact they've been looking at the river all of their lives, using it, learning about it and watching it change..

Anthony: ...they know more about the river than most people.

Heather: They do know a great deal about it, for various reasons. They've not only lived close to it and been more vulnerable to its floods and droughts but they've relied on it for food and often for drinking water

in a way no other rural people have had to do for decades. And as well as this they've been learning about its stories and its past floods and droughts from older people in the community. So recognising the historical nature of contemporary Aboriginal people's knowledge, as well as its sustained traditional influences, is really important.

Anthony: And one example of *doing* that is some of the work we're doing in the north. There's an ARC Research Grant funded program through the ANU hub. And one of the projects is looking at the decline in mammals in northern Australia. The question is why, if the landscape is intact and the rivers are still flowing, are these species rapidly declining or bordering on extinction? It's something that was observed in Central Australia as well. There was a study done in Central Australia which was based on taking skins of now extinct or threatened species around to older traditional owners and building up a picture of numbers and vicinities and that sort of thing which they knew historically from their observations of change. This study found that there was a very strong correlation between removal of people from country, the cessation of traditional burning practices and the disappearance of these mammals. So they're replicating this now in the northern project principally through the Northern Territory but it has flow on to other areas. One dimension of this is the ground level research, doing that thing of taking stuffed examples of these mammals around and documenting the decline or change in species. Then it's working collaboratively with those knowledge holders and with those communities so they will get the products as well. So there are posters being produced at the moment which will be done in the language. All the interviews are being videoed so there will be a kind of CD/video documentary evidence of all of this which goes to the community as well. So it helps in the knowledge recording process for those groups. And, in that sense, we're also equal partners in the process of developing this new piece of knowledge about something going on in their environment. So that's the kind of practical approach at the scientific end which we're trying to take.

The work of Simon Judd and Gondwana Link is the practical end of the project work that we're trying to do. Then there's the more conceptual sort of stuff that we're trying to do around this process of Indigenous environmental

assessment. We're working on that with David Claudie who's the key traditional owner I work with at Chuula, in Cape York. He's a very interesting fellow who's got a real solid knowledge base in both systems: he's got good Indigenous ecological knowledge and knows his community's traditions. He knows all about governance, that kind of thing. But he's also been in Parks and Wildlife, he's good on academic stuff - he has been a visiting fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. He can articulate concepts for both world views, so to speak. So we're working on some of that conceptual stuff with him and hopefully others as we progress. So that we're getting that kind of synthesis of the two knowledge systems into something that's useful to us all in a contemporary sense.

This goes to one of the key points, I raised: this one of the *conservation imperative*. Traditional knowledge alone is not going to solve the problem. In Australia western conservation science has been part of the problem, so it needs to rethink. We need that revolution in conservation and that starts with the way we think about it. And, out of these, by bringing all this stuff together in a properly conceived framework that can deliver the knowledge that people need, the translation into practical action on the ground, the translation into policy at any given level. It's that kind of knowledge set we need and then we need the people who actually subscribe to it and who are advocates for it and who want to make something of it. So this is where we start building strategies and alliances and agreements around the place.