

# LIVING ON COUNTRY

---

*Transforming Cultures eJournal*,  
Vol. 3 No 1, February 2008  
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC>

## Yvonne Stewart

Interviewed by Heather Goodall.<sup>1</sup>

### Biography:

Yvonne Stewart is the Chairperson of the Joint Management Committee of the Arakwal National Park, Byron Bay. This is not a 'co-managed national park' on the model currently arising from a handback of a National Park to Aboriginal owners with mandatory lease-back to the NSW National Parks Service. Instead, this is a Jointly Managed area arising from a long process of negotiation to achieve an Indigenous Land Use Agreement [ILUA] under the Commonwealth Native Title Act. The Park is jointly managed by the Arakwal Aboriginal Corporation and by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. In October 2006, Yvonne talked about the positive and the negative sides of the community's experience of the joint management of the Arakwal National Park. In this interview, conducted soon after in November 2006, Yvonne discussed these issues further but began by explaining the Park's position which is within her community's broader concern for their country.

**Yvonne Stewart:** Of course the initial thing for Arakwal was to have the land handed back to them. So we could live back on there, manage it, and look after the cultural side - the significance. To be able to use 'country' again.

Our family actually had two camp sites, traditionally, before colonisation or settlement, in the area that became national park. And our people did live there right into the 1950s. They were born there *on country*, on the edge of Tallow Creek which is a creek that goes up through there. And then it was back in the 1950s when sand mining came through. Sand miners burnt down those camps. The mining came straight through the middle of there and our people had

---

<sup>1</sup> Heather Goodall has worked in collaboration with Indigenous people in NSW and in Central Australia on political, social and environmental history. Her research in each area has followed the ways in which Indigenous people's interests in active land relationships have been expressed in campaigns for land rights and in various land management outcomes, from common land to Aboriginal land rights and native title and to protected areas and national parks.

to move up the sand dune area a bit further. We can't say that too openly, but that's what our Elders believe. So probably why it wasn't used for any development was because there were leases going out on a lot of it for sand mining. It's been sand mined disturbed.

And our people were moved. When my grandmother passed away when my mother was probably only about four years old. When the settlement started coming into Byron Bay, a lot of the community members got moved down to a mission on Cabbage Tree Island. The whitefellas didn't feel that it was good to bring up children in the bush, in a shed and on country.

But there were Elders there, the sisters, who were only young girls but they grew up very quickly. The older sisters stayed there and lived there. They continually maintained the connection. They actually had a lease on it. My grandfather and grandmother had a lease on a bit of the land that was there, with old Mr Kipperwight he was the old real estate fella then. Our family members were still able to maintain it, but the younger babies were taken down to the mission. So the continuation still stayed there.

So it's always been a long standing place for our people, right up until the 1950s.

*Heather Goodall: Was this a place that Kooris used to use to camp on or fish from when you were a kid? Did people come back and spend holidays there?*

**Yvonne:** Yeah I remember as a kid, we would camp there all the time. We would be there two, three, four times a week. We were certainly out there every weekend. We'd all come back and gather the whole family and use the lake, the creek. Use the beach fishing and there were birds and plenty of goanna and echidna and snake, you name it. As well as, you know, we adapted to modern day food. But just camping and living and cooking up on the side of the beach and the creek was just an ongoing thing.

*Heather: And did that mean you would have heard a lot of stories while you were all doing those things?*

**Yvonne:** Oh yes, it was just wonderful when all the uncles came! And the aunties and family came and all the kids! So that continuation was there, although it whittled as time went on, as more and more restrictions came onto our people and we finally lost our old grandfather at 99. After that, my aunty and her family still stayed around but they ended up living in cars and probably running from the authorities and things like that. Because again, white fellas still didn't think it was an appropriate way of living in those days.

But those old people got on very well with some of the white people. They were very considerate to those white fellas and helped them out in their settlement and food gathering sources too.

*Heather: So your families would have been involved with white fellas all the time there, working for them?*

**Yvonne:** Certainly. My grandfather worked with all the sawyers and timber cutters. The first settlers coming in. And then the cane cutting and the banana planting – both him and my great grandfather and my uncles certainly worked all around. There's a bit of historical memories of that from both the early oral and written material. As well as that, there's still old white fellas here today that can tell you about old Grandpop working for them and living around that way. The interaction was going on, you know.

*Heather: So not just in the long distant past but all the way through, the community was living on country and involved in this new settler economy, all at the same time?*

**Yvonne:** Yes, I think that's why our people actually were able to show that surviving line here because of the interaction that our grandparents did have, you know. My grandmother had a garden and she supplied that to the local households as well. And then just up the road is her parents' grave and her parents' parents before, are all buried just up in what's now the resort. That used to be all *country* too, but now its a private resort.

## Encroachment

*Heather:* Do you think it was because of the sand mining that the land hadn't been developed so far?

**Yvonne:** Well we're not really sure why it was left vacant Crown land. There's not much sand dune there now because they basically eroded all those through the sand mining days. We have some nice little bits of sand dune areas around the old camp site at the moment. But we lost a lot of that through the sand mining. And they were building everywhere else, and there's probably method behind the madness of the Department of Land, you know, keeping it for the right time. But there were certainly a lot of encroachments onto it through development and the development pressures have really come on in Byron Bay in the last 10 years. And since the Native Title Claim, nobody can use that until those issues are sorted out either through an Indigenous Land Use Agreement, through a negotiation, or a management arrangement. It has actually stopped the State Government or the Crown Land's Department from disposing of it.

So I think it just all just sort of happened. We are very thankful for that. But unbelievably there's still a lot of bush tucker around there.

*Heather:* So that would have been what you wanted to protect: the camp site and the bush tucker?

**Yvonne:** Certainly. And we wanted to open it up again. What was important about that land, that's now the National Park, *for us* was that it was actually like having the back door again. It was the back yard onto the beach, which was the shopping centre of our people really. The Elders wanted to be able to go back and live *ON* country. So that was always a main part of our Native Title claim, that was a main part of the Indigenous Land Use Agreement, that we actually got the old camp site back, handed back freehold, through the creation of the Arakwal National Park.

So the government might have wanted something. *But we wanted something too.* And what we wanted was freehold land so our people could build a base, to have the old home sites back, to have the Elders living back *on*

*country*, and to have the family be able to continue to live on country in Byron Bay. You can't live here now, it's too expensive. So that was really important for the Elders – and for all of us. It was to be able to be walking with the Elders on country. To be recreating or re-establishing and educating the younger ones on old pathways. Where the bush tucker foods were. Learning what's there. And what's not there now.

## Why A Native Title Claim?

**Yvonne:** It was in 1992 when the four Arakwal sisters lodged a Native Title claim after the Eddie Mabo claim, on certain lands in and around Byron Bay. That was the first recognition in Australian courts of our pre-existing and continuing rights to our land. It was from that Native Title claim that the notification of the claim got put out there and the government came back and there was talk about the creation of a national park. It ended up leading up into the era of one of Bob Carr's election promises to create so many national parks across New South Wales. So it took like seven years of negotiation, mediation, notification, registration, the creation of the Cape Byron Consultative Committee which involved a range of various interested people from environmentalists to local government, from Telstra to Country Energy to individual community members, whereby that committee worked over those years leading up to 2001, to the creation of the Arakwal National Park which would be a joint managed park.

Now at the time, the Elders and the claimants, other family members to the claim, began talks with the State Government on the creation of a national park. We asked the question: 'Well what would that mean?' We knew what national parks were, but we had no idea what it might mean in creating a national park and how were we going to be involved in that.

So I guess those negotiations leading up to a national park was around seven and a half years. All the options were put forward about what sort of model a national park might have for us. We had to look at all the issues that were surrounding the area. I mean of course the initial thing for Arakwal was to have the land handed back to them. So we could live back on there, manage it, and look after the cultural side --- the significance. To be able to use 'country' again. But through all the talks and everything, listening to various land owners,

listening to the community, listening to the Aboriginal needs, we came up with a 'joint managed' park whereby we felt that was the best way of preserving and protecting *country*.

The options that were there at the time were to be able to *use* country: to go back and use country. I guess the option to *live on it* wasn't there, but employment and training was the other option. So that's how we got around to joint management.

Now the Arakwal National Park was set up under what we call an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) under the Native Title Act. So it's a different sort of a 'joint managed' process than other areas. You'll see Lenore Fraser, the coordinator of co-management of all national parks at NSW DECC has all the different various models. We all agreed that it should be a national park for preservation and protection number one. To keep the authenticity of our landscape and our special places well, because it hosts a whole range of cultural significances to the local Aboriginal people of Byron Bay, and the wider Bundjalung people.

*Heather:* You were saying that you thought the National Park would give you that best protection for country. What did you see as the benefits for you out of it?

**Yvonne:** Well employment and training were at the top of our list for our people because there were no employment and training opportunities. Very little in Byron Bay. Preservation of country was the other. I mean, we had to be realistic and say: 'Okay, if we were to have this land handed back to us, how were we going to manage it?' You know, we had to consider all the land use issues that were associated with that bit of land. Public access and use. Fire issues. Being able to go back on country and teach young ones about the importance of the area. So cultural renewal for our own people was going to be there. And pretty much the overall of all of that was that the State Government and National Parks and Wildlife Service had the money and the resources to enable us to do all of those things.

So, you know, we were trying to work it out financially – how were we going to manage the place? How were we going to restore it to its natural state? How were we going to manage the public? All those things. And that's pretty much why we went for a national park.

But we would have that great partnership. So we would have law and order on one side: we would have both the Aboriginal Law and beside it we would have State government law. And at the same time, we would work together in managing and restoring but at the same time, allowing people to still use the area.

*Heather: You were saying people would still be able to use the area, but you'd have the right to protect it?*

**Yvonne:** Yeah well that's right. Of course, we just wanted to leave it in its pristine state, but how were we going to let the public know that? Saying to them 'Excuse me, this is private land'. People were using that land to cross to the beach because it's right on the ocean. And there were feral animals in there, and there were flora and fauna issues. There were cultural site issues. There were pathway issues. We wanted to save it from development so much, and we just thought that was the best way for us to look after this bit of land if we were successful in mediating with the government to have an outcome that would suit both us and the community in general.

## **What Happened Next?**

**Yvonne:** When we created the Arakwal National Park, we had to do a plan of management, and a part of that plan of management, the first thing that we wanted to put into that plan of management was the cultural values that we had with the land. So a separate cultural value assessment plan was done where we walked and we had to call them back to country. So we went back and sat for the day and walked and talked, and we invited all the mob to walk with the Elders. And the Elders showed them where things are, their pathways, where tucker was, where they got tucker. What was there. What's not there now. What they'd

like to see back there. And so that was very important: how to do revegetation of those special plants where they're not existing any more, but where they were. Protecting those plants where they still were. And so we had to think about maintaining the tracks. We have to upgrade this track because aunty can't get down there and walk any more. So what are the other alternative we're going to implement so we can wheelchair them down there, or drive them down there.

So it was about the Elders teaching the younger ones and all of us again. We were following them around with cameras, and it was about us doing our own recording, because they didn't want to tell white fellas some things.

It was about getting a Botanist in, Tim Lowe which is a well known Botanist. He came in and worked with the ladies in regard to mapping and identifying and recording, you know, plants of significance. And along with that, we brought our younger ones. And it was through that Plan of Management now, we're going to be able to hand that down the lineage line for them. We've done it like this. 'Now you guys, you girls, this is your bible.' And it's all through the Plan of Management. I don't know if you've taken much notice of national parks' plan of management, you know, they're pretty brief. You get a couple of paragraphs of Aboriginal history. Well, through *our* Plan of Management, we've been able to have quotes in there about how the Elders used country, and what they want for country. How we will accommodate visitors. How we will restore the land. Basically it's not going to be a recreational park. It's going to be a low-keyed park where people can stroll through. We'll have some interpretation education opportunities and things like that. It's not for everybody.

*Heather:* So it's yours isn't it, so it's up to you to decide?

**Yvonne:** Yeah. So the Plan of Management actually highlighted the significance. So the significances were all recorded and explained by the Elders. And I guess we just put it into the format that it needed to suit National Parks. We sort of did things very differently. We write things very different. We wanted plain English that everybody can appreciate and understand.

There's still a lot of cultural significant stuff that's not in it which we don't want people to know about.

*Heather: And you've got a safe place to hold that?*

**Yvonne:** Yeah. Well we hold a lot of the recordings. We aim - Any cultural stuff that comes out of the past, oral history or anything that's recorded by the Elders or the Sisters, or sites or anything, we hold all that information. We have the copyright. And we make sure that we do that. And that information cannot be used unless it comes back through the Elders or through the Arakwal Corporation.

*Heather: So one of the strengths of the Joint Management situation under the ILUA has been that you've achieved an important position of power through this structure?*

**Yvonne:** It's just been unbelievable. I guess we do live in a great place. Through the Native Title process, through the creation of the joint management of Arakwal National Park, we've been able to build relationships with the wider community. We've been able to share an understanding of what this country meant to us and what it still does mean to us. And as well as take into consideration that we are from here. Being local here, when there is a public outcry about something being done, you know, we work together to find a solution.

So the Indigenous Land Use Agreement came through in 2001, but we actually had an agreement with the National Parks before that. And that was more about a co-management arrangement, or a good understanding. We had dumped other previous agreements before hand. In 1997 we created the State Recreational Area which is the Cape Byron Lighthouse Reserve Area. And in 1998 we did an agreement with the Byron Shire Council which saw an Aboriginal Consultative Committee set up to look at development issues and cultural issues.

So you could say we've been working a little bit of the ball before the creation of the national park, and we were all meeting-ed out, and we still are. But we knew that we couldn't probably get all the land back. Under Native Title, you have things like extinguishment. So if the cow or the banana tree was

planted there, that extinguished our rights. So an Indigenous Land Use Agreement opens up the door for mediation, or negotiation. And the sky's the limit with that because basically it's like an understanding of each other's rights. You sit down and you start asking: 'How can we do this together?' And 'How can you respect our way and we respect your way?'

*Heather: In that process of coming to these agreements, you said that you had that goal also of getting a piece of the land freeholded so that the Elders could live there. Now was that piece of freehold achieved?*

**Yvonne:** The piece of freehold land was achieved, but to date we've not been able to put any housing on it. We've done the agreements but we were never given any resources to go with it.

So the Elders are actually screaming out: 'We want our little bit of land back, our little house site back!' We want some houses on it and we tried to tell them that there was no money or resources coming to build it yet. But they actually thought that that was going to happen. I think that was probably the saddest part of the agreement, that the Elders assumed that the government would build their houses for them. We sort of knew it wouldn't, but we thought we could push that. And we still do! We are still pushing that today because we are sure they'll turn around.

*Heather: So is it possible then to camp on that piece of freehold? Can people do temporary camps on it even if they don't have a house?*

**Yvonne:** We haven't tried it, but we're looking very seriously at it because this whole process in 2001 has brought about a massive boomerang movement. It's brought people home. People are *working* on country but we just don't have any housing. So you're forever getting in trouble by the Department of Housing because you've got family members staying with you because they've got to work in the park, and they've got nowhere else to live, and they can't afford \$400 a week rent. So I've got one cousin who's living right at the north end of the whole shire, paying \$380 a week, and has got four children.

*Heather:* So that's a real issue about --- this is the livelihood part of the outcomes of the land isn't it? You've got the employment and the training, but you've got issues around housing?

**Yvonne:** Yes. So we've brought them home but we've got nowhere for them to live. And it is quite frustrating. And you know, we are all living on top of each other really.

**Heather:** And I suppose the idea of the Elders living back on that freehold patch at the edge of the national park was to be able to have permanent access to the water and that lifestyle?

**Yvonne:** Yes, certainly. Just for them to be back in their environment. We've had a restoration program through the Federal Department of Environmental and Conservation's Environmental Trust Program, where we got everybody to go back and we cleaned up the land, because it was very weed-infested. And over all those years, from 1978 to 2001, it was also being used as a rubbish tip and there was primitive camping from other people. So there was a massive big clean up and that enabled us to go back and have a look at the land and clean it up. It was another educational way of the Elders being able to share their stories with us younger ones on what was life like really living in the camp. We're trying to recreate that.

The other bit of land we got back was at the bottom of the lighthouse for the cultural centre. We are using it as a keeping place and also as a corporation place where we can establish the economical business part of the project.

So our home life was important, but we wanted to be an economical, self sufficient organisation living in Byron Bay without handouts. That was our objective for the future. Again, so far we've only been able to clean up the land. We've got no money or resources.

*Heather:* Do you see that as an important start?

**Yvonne:** Well we've done a business plan, and we've done corporate plans for both blocks of land, and for our future aim. And trying to be independent about it too. But we haven't been able to secure the big funding to do that yet.

## Some Problems and Solution Strategies

*Heather: What have been the problems that you've found so far with this Joint Management arrangement? Maybe there's some that you have been able to solve, and some that you haven't?*

**Yvonne:** Well the list is long and it's exhausting. And it never seems to end. We're actually doing Stage Two of the Native Title at the moment which we are hoping for an authorisation, registration, and for it to be finalised by April 2007. We're tired out.

I think that the perceptions of the Elders in the community are questions about what the whole process has really been about. I think for the Elders, they just wanted the land back. They wanted to go back and live on it. They didn't want to actually get into all of this – but the masses of paper work; understanding the legislation of your local government; your Native Title services; National Parks and Wildlife services – all the legislation that comes with that; and then layers and layers of meetings and paper work that it encompasses. And yet our Elders have sat through it since '92 until today. Unfortunately the loss of two Elders - two of the four sisters through this process – has dampened us and hit us hard over the last 12 months.

One of the big difficulties we have faced has been dealing with community perceptions - the fear. Its like what's happening over in Western Australia at the moment, with a hysteria whipped up that Aboriginal people were going to claim all of Perth and somehow take it away. The fear from the community that Aboriginal people are taking over. You know what they say: 'They're taking all our land' and 'They won't let us do this and they won't let us do that'. We find we are constantly being attacked and accused of all that, so it's the white community's perceptions as well as the issues within the Aboriginal community.

But for the Elders, they thought they were just going to do this little deal and they didn't realise it was going to be so complicated, and so long just to get a process in place. And I said to them:

'It's really no different to the days before you had any rights. The white fellas want something. You know, if you want something, the white fellas want

something too. And we have to come to a medium about it. And so it's about give and take.'

The split community has been a really, really hard one. And that comes back to, you know, a split community perception as well. Dealing with other Aboriginal groups that don't like Native Title. Those that don't fit into Native Title limits about traditional owners. So you have problems with your own people. You have people as part of the Native Title claim, saying that anybody can become a party to that if they believe they have an interest in that. They don't have to have a descent or connection to it. But they may have an interest in something about that bit of land or whatever you're talking about, or whatever you're trying to negotiate or mediate. And that causes conflict. So conflict and splitting. So one minute, you know, it could be a good family group that you've grown up and lived with all your life, and then all of a sudden you're not speaking. And that's been the biggest downfall I think of Native Title, the constant targeting of ??

*Heather: That's a very similar story to places I know a bit better in Western New South Wales. It's really hard on communities to have this set of definitions they have to fit into.*

**Yvonne:** I know. Look, it hasn't been too bad here because we are a little group out here. But we do associate with the rest of Bundjalung. And there's been a lot of strong feeling by Bundjalung Elders to support their sisters, being elderly, in this claim. It's been a bit different since us few younger ones, like myself, have come onboard, because people don't hold back on their tongue that way. So we just keep trying to make sure that our Elders are the proper decision makers within our community. And they do have the say. You know, we will put all of our great beautiful ideas up about a cultural centre or whatever else. They're not really interested.

Then we have a lot of young ones not interested. They're not interested in getting into the political scramble. They're not interested in working in the National Parks. They just want to see the Elders live back on country, you know. And so if I haven't been able to make it happen, I'm targeted as doing the best

thing. Yet, number one I've got no money, and number two, I can't build a house. So I often think, what about coming on board and helping lobbying for some funding, and running the housing program?

So some of the community's lack of interest in getting into the day-to-day politics of running an organisation and following rules is one of our problems. They're very supportive of the process, but they don't want to get engaged. So you find that you're really overloaded with a lot of stuff.

*Heather: So burnout is a problem?*

**Yvonne:** Yes. That and the expectations of government and the wider community. They just expect to be involved, so there's still a lot of that. There's always those strings attached to a lot of stuff. You know, your law versus our law, like we want to hunt and gather. Well the legislation says you can't. So that's ?? But we have been given those rights in reality, but the government will still try and go against that. New laws have come in where Aboriginal people are able to have a fish and gather pippies in a marine park. But the white fellas aren't. So there's resentment about that, you know, there's stereotyping and basic racism. And it's not our fault that the legislation allows us to do that ?? to one group, and not another group. But the government are coming around to us, after all of these 200 years plus, and recognising that Aboriginal people really do need to have an association, and still need to continue to use and eat their food resources. It's part of their diet.

*Heather: It's a real challenge isn't it, because on the one hand you fight and struggle for those rights and recognitions, and then when you finally get a little bit of it, you end up being under attack from the local white community.*

**Yvonne:** Yeah. We get targeted. So they're things that we just need to stand firm with and there's a few of us that do really *really* stand firm. And we're lucky we live in a community where there a lot of whitefellas with alternative lifestyles that really do stand by us and for what we believe in. That has helped us in our community. It's just so unfortunate that in some places, and I'm sure you know,

there's a lot of the white community that don't, just don't even talk to the Aboriginal community around them. But we had a group called The Women for Wik which was formed during that Wik Debate. They've now changed their name to Women for Reconciliation, on the grounds that we try to reconcile with each other. And every turn of their head, you know, they're constantly out there trying to educate non-Aboriginal people about the injustices and what should be. So that's really good.

*Heather: It means you've got a bit of back up?*

**Yvonne:** Yeah, it has. And it's something that I think I tried to emphasis in my talk down there at UTS, was that you have to get to know your local community. Invite them to your days. Go to their days. I try and tell Aboriginal people, go and join in. If your dad was in the army, go and march in ANZAC. You know, go and visit the local library.

*Heather: It seems important to be recognised for the part people have played --- Because Aboriginal people - especially up in that area- have been such an important part of both world war overseas soldiers. There were quite a few Aboriginal families all along the coast up there that contributed to all of those efforts as part of the wider community, quite apart from all the work you all did in the local economy. So there's a really important basis for being recognised.*

**Yvonne:** So when we have NAIDOC [National Aborigines and Islanders Day] we have it in the main centre of town and we invite everybody. Everybody's welcome. And everyone can see it. It's about identifying what the colours of the Aboriginals stand for. It's about coming along and joining in and seeing that --- And also joining in on the other things that happen around here. We go and join in on those things, and do 'Welcome to Country' and things like that. So, you know, it's about breaking down those barriers within your community. That's been a big part of what we've all had to do. And the communities have to do, you know.

*Heather:* You've just been talking about learning about the local white community and getting to know them. But you mentioned down in Sydney that you were worried about the pressures of tourism which would probably involve a lot of outsiders coming in from down in Sydney or Brisbane or somewhere like that?

**Yvonne:** Certainly. I mean Byron Bay is just so multi-cultural at the moment! It's spot-a-local these days. We still have an association and friendship with all of our old local people that we went to school with. A lot of them are very happy that we stand up and stand up for country in general.

One example is that we have come up against really, really tough times where in one of our management roles of the National Park, we've had to implement pay parking. It's the stereotyping around that, that get targeted for. 'Oh', people say, 'the money's going to the black fellas'. But it isn't. It's going back into the Reserve, to maintain the facilities to enable everybody to be able to use them. And you know there was a big public outcry about that. We ended up coming to an arrangement where we get the locals at a lower fee. Okay, what classifies a local? It ended up being anybody who lives in the Shire, so you're actually bringing on board everybody really who lives in the Shire. It's about getting the tourists to pay for the pressures they are causing on our community. You know, it's the tourist impact on our beaches. In our parking areas. On our waste recycling areas. On our water. And so it's about getting them to pay a little bit more.

So that was easy for all of us to understand when that was put that way. It was a bit hard at first, and you see it every day. But it was also important for the local community to be aware that we don't want people to have to pay to go to the beach either, but it's not paying to go to the beach. It's paying so they can come off the beach and have fresh water to shower with and have a drink of water. And so there's barbeque facilities there and so these visitors should pay. You pay in Bondi. You pay down in Sydney. You pay everywhere else. And we want to ensure that our visitors are giving something back to our community to maintain the facilities that we have here.

*Heather: The same problem about parking fees happens everywhere in the state, and there's always the same grumbles going on. So in a situation that you're in, it's the Aboriginal people that get attacked over it.*

**Yvonne:** Well, straight out blatant racism comes into it because we are all joint managers of those facilities, those reserves. And because they see Aboriginal people working there. But we have to say, 'Well yeah, that's part of the budget, sorry'. And the best thing about our reserves here is that we have been able to maintain keeping the funds that we raise IN our reserve and IN our national park, the money comes back into our area. It doesn't go into the big bucket in Sydney or Canberra, not like local government.

## Dilemmas

**Yvonne:** Now there are some real unsolved problems for us. One of them is to tell or not to tell. When we are looking after cultural sites and places, we have to think about what to tell visitors and what not to tell? Because people up here, and people in general, like tourists, will utilise and misuse information. It's about misuse of information really. You know, for too long we've had non-Aboriginal people writing what they want to write. A lot of what's happening around Bundjalung country at the moment is renewal of Bundjalung mapping and stories and things like that. And we have many sites and stories around that we don't talk about, and we're not prepared for people to visit, or we're not prepared to share with. It's about handing it down to our own.

*Heather: Do you feel you've got enough control over that issue?*

**Yvonne:** No. We are concerned because in the past we have had people accessing registered site areas and then using it to their own advantage, either in their properties or in tourism. So, especially within Arakwal National Park and the Cape Byron Lighthouses, we've been able, through both our plans of management, to stop wrong and inappropriate cultural interpretations in and around the areas that we're involved in managing. And we've also been able to

pass that to local government for them to say the same thing, which is that unless you contract a local person, it's out of bounds basically.

To tell or not to tell also is when you're going through a Native Title process, you're really sworn to secrecy. There's not only the knowledge you might want to keep secret because it belongs to the Aboriginal community. But it's like you're sworn to government secrecy as well. You could be negotiating something about a place that was always of interest to the Byron Bay community and then when the Byron Bay community finally gets hold of that and misuses that information to cause a stir. Sometimes that can be in your favour. You're better off putting it out there. But if the government swears you to secrecy then it's just bomb shelled out in the community and then you get the backlash!

*Heather: So there's questions about the power that you actually have to control not just retaining information, but how you release it as well?*

**Yvonne:** And about how it's interpreted. We wish we had more resources to be able to interpret. That's the idea of building the cultural centre which we've really tried to put out to the community, that this is what we want to build. And this is why we want to build it. Not just for tourism. But for our own local community to be able to access. Like our local schools. We do school education programs and we want our schools to come and then be a centre that not only looks at Aboriginal culture but has a look at the environment as well. So they can come and get the environmental experience, because at Byron Bay we don't have a lot of activity outside the commercial activities that are happening. It would be important to be able to come and get that information about what life was like before Byron, and what life is now.

## Managing for Cultural Values

*Heather You were talking earlier about that Botanist coming when you were doing your plan of management. It sounds like it was very much under your control that scientist coming, which might have made it more helpful to*

*talk with him. Is that an issue about who controls the scientists and the consultants?*

**Yvonne:** Yes it is. We've had to work with various people like fire people, botanists, planners, geologists, you name it. All have worked very well with our Elders and our people in sharing at both sides of the importance of what the land means to us. And it's also from the scientists' background of telling us, helping us understand what we might not know, us younger ones. And working out with us how we utilise that in the future.

*Heather: Do you think it's easier to talk to those scientific people if you're the ones in control of the park, rather than having somebody come and tell you what you should do or you shouldn't do?*

**Yvonne:** Certainly. Because our whole park is, you know, managed around the cultural values of the park basically. Around our cultural values, cultural existence, cultural knowledge. And that control is left with the community --- And we have a great area manager and a great regional manager with the Parks Service, which will always respect that and put that out to anybody who's coming in to do any research work, scientific work within the park, or contractors, whatever.

*Heather: So would you see environmental conservation as part of the cultural values?*

**Yvonne:** We practiced conservation of our country for, you know, through eternity. And it wasn't us that messed it up. So it's about getting back to those practices, about letting the environment *be* the environment. But clean it up where it needs to be cleaned up. Restore it where it needs to be restored. Protect it where it needs to be protected.

*Heather: You were saying you had young people there employed in the marine conservation area, or learning and training. Do you want to tell us about that?*

**Yvonne:** Back in 2002, on the day that we celebrated the anniversary of the one year of the Arakwal National Park, the Minister for the Department of Primary Industries came up here and declared a marine park. Everyone was just shocked and stunned, and it's fortunate enough for Arakwal that when we put the Native Title claim on the land, we put it on the water too, because we're coastal people. Not ever thinking that, you know, one day we might need to deal with it. No one was talking about water rights at the time, not in the National Parks and certainly not the State Government.

We as Aboriginal people had been constantly lobbying for our water rights, and especially our indigenous fishing rights, over many years. But it wasn't until then that it opened up the doors for a whole new negotiation process, because as we know, marine parks lock you out – out of certain zoning areas. And we really needed to take a great stance in the creation of a marine park --- We have sites in the water as part of our Dreaming stories and just, so much of who we are, is in the water. And to be told that you're not probably going to be able to go and fish there or get pippies there or anything! It was quite a shock!

So what happened, marine parks are partners with national parks, in the Department of Environment and Conservation. So they come under the same banner. But they just came in and started working this marine park, so there was a lot of confusion where we felt:

'hey, hang on a minute! We've got an agreement here. Why have you moved into our depot. You don't respect our rights here. You don't respect anything we're doing!'

So what ended up happening was our guys, being water people, were watching what needed to be done in maintaining the marine park. And so they started getting engaged in diving, getting diving certificates, understanding the maintenance. You know, they were field officers for the national park, so they saw the openings in the marine park. And today we have two scientific divers and two coming up into scientific dives. We have all up five divers. So they've been getting their basic boating licence and boat safety licences, getting their dive tickets and going up the ladder into scientific diving. It's just been fantastic for a lot of our guys. So our guys are able to go out there now and do the maintenance of moorings. Go out there and you know, either drive the boat or

assist with any strandings of turtles or whales. We're the first point of call for any whale strandings or deaths. And they've been going up the rivers and the creeks which are really important to us and cleaning them up. And especially because they are on the water and showing the wider public that we are here now cleaning up our own rivers that you've polluted. They are trying to educate the community. It's just been a fantastic achievement. We actually have the first Aboriginal dive team in a marine park in New South Wales.

*Heather:* That's such an amazement achievement.

**Yvonne:** And this all just happened since 2001. And Wally got asked to go to Sydney with Marine Parks the other day to talk to some people. There were so many presentations. So now we go around and we actually go and do presentations to other Aboriginal communities that are encompassing a marine park in their area, or a national park, or a co-managed park. Because we've finalised all of our management stuff, and we've got some guys trained. We're actually trying to take a step forward to showing other groups that you can work with the government. There are employment training opportunities there. We could probably sit around fighting, for example, the Department of Primary Industry for the rest of our lives about our indigenous fishing rights, but they're not going to let you do it. So what other things can we do? You say the waters are important to you, well why not help maintain and look after them again!

So it's very hard. And just from the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, Marine Parks have brought out a new legislation that Aboriginal people can go and access fish and food from the ocean in whatever zoning in a marine park. So we've won a bit of a battle. It doesn't win the battle for the commercial operators or the professional operators that are fishing guys. But one step at a time! Being still able to access your water foods, and live this healthy lifestyle both physically and food wise. And I've just been appointed to the Marine Parks Authority! So it's changing, you know. Government is changing.

## Reflections

*Heather: Yvonne, you've been talking about the way communities have been raising issues and pointing out where they can, what things can go wrong with joint management arrangements. But you've also been showing there are some real benefits that it brings to communities that are able to control decisions about some of their land.*

**Yvonne:** And that all sounds very great I guess. And yet, you know, the bottom line is horrible. There must be some other nicer word. But the horrible thing is, it's a shame that it's split communities, and some communities don't have the same opportunities as what we've had, and what we've got. And that's been probably the hardest thing to deal with. I think you can fight the government. But when you have to argue with your own people, that's hard. And trying to work towards self sufficiency is a great objective of ours. And we know there's that many changes to Aboriginal services. Just recently ATSIC's gone. There's changes to the Native Title amendments as we speak. There's changes to the Aboriginal Land Council Act as we speak and the Aboriginal Corporations Act. It's like we're going through a whole new assimilation process. So trying to get people to see the importance of working and training so they can be looking after their country and having an association is probably our biggest objective. And you know, we're not going to do it all right all the time, but ---

*Heather: But you're obviously doing lots of things right. There's clearly been a lot of victories in that community which is down to the community, rather than government. And you've been able to negotiate in a really impressive way there.*

**Yvonne:** Yeah. We just had a big group of over 30 people come from Dubbo and Moree, for a week, to have a talk and take a look at the park and see how things are happening. We've had a lot of visits from the various areas and we've been out to visit a lot of places just on what we're doing. I think it's about trying to change, to get over the government fear because it's not that bad.

So it's about those things. I'm a great supporter of Noel Pearson. I think he speaks his mind and says people need to get up and take control of their lives again.

I think for me personally, the saddest thing for me has being the detachment from my wider family. You don't have time to go and just be *you* anymore. You know, I've gone into this whole new world, where I'm sitting on an EPA Board, or the Cultural Heritage Board, or whatever. I *miss* my family. I wonder where it all will stop. But that's why it's important to have the country.

Just had a while ago, we had a big meeting and they all said to me, "Yvonne, when are we going to have a *back-to-country*, you know? Are we going to have a big *back-to-country* Christmas? Can we all come back? We haven't seen each other for ages. Everyone's so busy. No one's got no time for anyone any more, and you know. We're not talking any more." So we've planned that already, and I thought, yep fantastic, you know.

But every now and then I think, because I do do all of this and I do speak out, that everybody comes to me to fix it. I've got to fix it or I've got to make it happen. And that's a lot of pressure.

*Heather: A lot of the things that you're saying are exactly what Isabel Flick said when I worked on that book with her about her life in western New South Wales. Its that combination of feeling the responsibility to keep struggling to make things better but also the pressure of the expectations that's a hard thing to carry. But the back-to-country idea is a terrific use of this place isn't it. That's you've won back.*

**Yvonne:** Yeah, and to be able to go back and be there. Like before the agreements, we felt like it was taken away from us. We didn't feel comfortable. We thought we'd get into trouble if we walked through there, or go over there, or go and sit there, or go and light a fire there. Those issues have been cleaned up now so easily. We can go and do those things. We haven't got to, but it is allowable for cultural camps, and it's a case of sharing. We haven't got there yet. You know, like I said, education, interpreting education and cultural issues and stuff, you know, there's lots that really slow.

*Heather:* But if you've got an idea of where you want to go with that, will it be something you can work towards?

**Yvonne:** Yes – but it's just about trying to secure funding for people to get a job. And hopefully one day having the houses and trying to get extra other housing is really important to us. Otherwise it will all just fall over.

*Heather:* You've got to have some sort of base for people to really feel like they're back living in country, in a way that nobody's frightened about losing their hold on the land again.

**Yvonne:** Before 2001, we never had one of our mob working on country or in country. Me and my brother and my uncle worked in the meat works when that was established. But since 2001 we had no-one. Now we have 15 of our Aboriginal guys and girls working in and around there. They are working IN the national parks and reserves, *looking after the country* in some way. And it's been through the creation of the national park and all of our guys working in there, now they know what to look after.