

# Indigenous people, rivers and water in north Australia: perspectives on an emerging research agenda

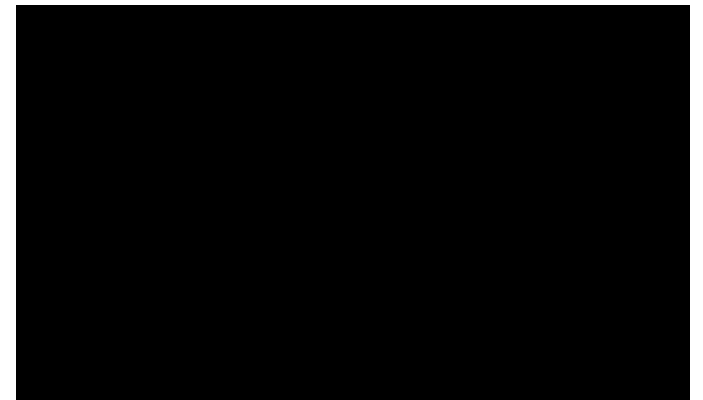
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Sue Jackson, CSIRO

Jon Altman, ANU

Joe Morrison, NAILSMA

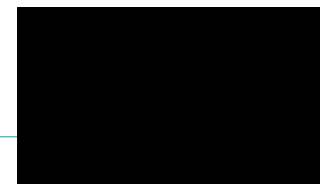
Michael Douglas, CDU



# Overview

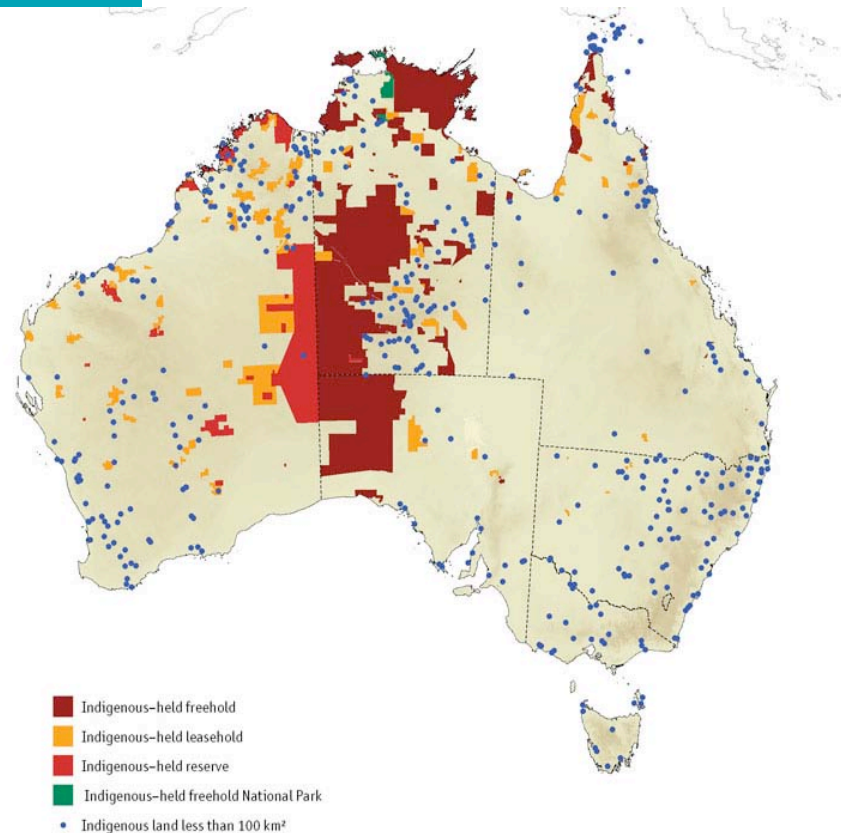
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- Context and background
- Knowledge gaps
- Developing research agendas
  - TRaCK program
  - NAILSMA's Indigenous Water Policy Group



# Context and background

- Substantial and growing land base
  - ~20% of total land area of Australia
  - 50% of NT
  - 85% of NT coast

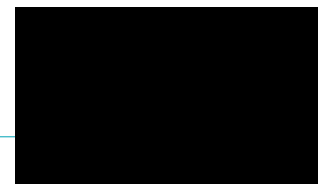


Indigenous land tenure 2002  
Source: CAEPR, ANU

# Context and background – *con't*

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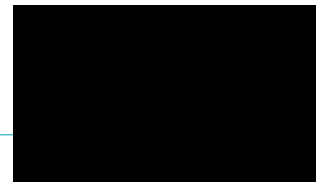
- Relatively significant Aboriginal populations
  - sparsely populated with growing urban centres
  - complex social catchments



# Context and background – *con't*

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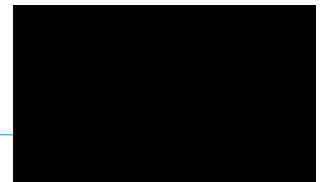
- Particular set of interests arising from:
  - distinct cultural perspective on the environment
  - native title and customary law
  - historical legacy and economic status
- Strong case for Aboriginal involvement in management



# Context and background – *con't*

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- Water framework undergoing change
  - increased regulation, control
  - new approaches to water management
  - Indigenous interests initially overlooked



# NAILSMA Tropical Rivers scoping study (2006)

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- Concern about many environmental changes and social impacts:
  - changes to landscapes and water quality – erosion, sedimentation, salt water intrusion, weeds, feral animals
  - resource pressures – close to communities, over-harvesting e.g. fish.
  - ability to regulate multiple uses/impacts on customary estates e.g. visitor access
  - reduced access from changes in land use/tenure e.g. Ord
  - major changes viewed negatively e.g. dams, water extraction
  - unaware of water reforms

# River research and management priorities

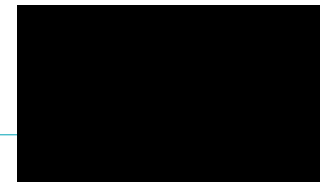
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- Baseline information - assessment of existing resource base, values and potential threats
- Socio-economic assessments of benefits/costs of development scenarios
- Models for recognising, valuing and resourcing stewardship arrangements
- Institutions for sustainable use of aquatic resources
- Action research to build capacity & address immediate problems
- Models for equitable Indigenous participation in water policy and water allocation planning

# New initiatives to meet research needs -2007

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- TRaCK – multidisciplinary research program
- NAILSMA's Indigenous Water Policy Group



# TRaCK

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- Indigenous values and aspirations - focus in themes 1, 2 & 6
  - Scenario development
  - Capacity building for water planning
  - Social, cultural and economic values
  - Enterprise development



# NAILSMA's Indigenous Water Policy Group

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- Widespread lack of awareness of NWI
- Initially LWA funded, now NWC
- Funding to establish a water policy group (and water facilitator's network)
- Membership drawn from north Australian Indigenous representative bodies (e.g. Land Councils)
- Aims to improve the capacity of Indigenous organisations to influence water policy

# NAILSMA's Indigenous Water Policy Group

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- Policy groups' role:
  - Oversee development of research program (CSIRO & CAEPR)
  - Produce communication materials
  - Generate and endorse policy documents

To be supported by an advisory group of State water managers and representatives of TRaCK & NWC

# Both initiatives focus on:

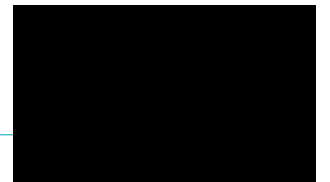
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- Assessing Indigenous values and relationship to river flow
- Indigenous participation in water policy and water planning – knowledge and capacity building
- Water governance – resource management institutions (local Indigenous and State introduced)

# Key research questions?

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- Understanding Indigenous connections to rivers and water:
  - What methods can be used to assess Indigenous values and incorporate them in WAP?
  - Can we relate Indigenous values or uses to flow regime and quantify an allocation?
  - What role can IEK play in understanding river systems and in better management?



# Key research questions? *con't*

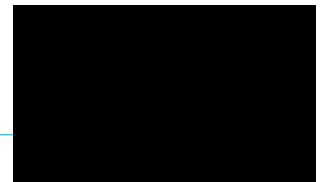
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- Customary water management and market-based systems
  - How do Indigenous people see their water rights and what rules do they have for using and managing water?
  - How does current law define and protect Indigenous water rights?
  - How do these compare internationally?
  - How feasible are water trading systems given north Australian circumstances?
  - What impacts might they have on Indigenous institutions and socio-economic outcomes?

# Key research questions? - *con't*

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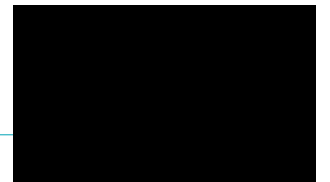
- How can we improve Indigenous participation in water planning?
  - Impediments to participation
  - Overcoming capacity problems (inc within agencies)
- What are the barriers and opportunities for water-based economic activity? e.g. commercial rights to water



# Progress and outcomes

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- TRaCK –
  - work in the Daly and Fitzroy well underway, Mitchell to follow
  - Enterprise development scoping
- NAILSMA
  - Literature reviews
  - Case study reports
  - Government engagement



# Conclusions

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- Rivers and wetlands are key areas of contemporary interest – low knowledge base
- Need to overcome divisions between research, management and policy – Indigenous capacity to 'care for country' is top priority
- Need methods for collaboration across knowledge systems.

# For more information

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- NAILSMA – [www.nailsma.org.au](http://www.nailsma.org.au)
- TRaCK – [www.track.gov.au](http://www.track.gov.au)
- CSIRO – [www.terc.csiro.au](http://www.terc.csiro.au)
- CAEPR – [www.anu.edu.au/caepr](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr)

