

MEDIA RELEASE



DATE: 25 MAY 2010
ATTENTION: CHIEFS OF STAFF, NEWS DIRECTORS

Aboriginal elders share river stories with young people & researchers

Scientists are working with Aboriginal people in the Kimberley to better understand how the rivers and wetlands of the Fitzroy catchment have changed during people's lifetimes.

The 'River Change' project, funded by the Tropical Rivers and Coastal Knowledge (TRaCK) research hub, shares Aboriginal knowledge about changes to the Fitzroy River and its tributaries with western scientists by filming interviews with senior people talking about their country.

Australia's vast and often inaccessible northern tropical rivers have not been studied to the same extent as southern rivers and so there are many scientific questions about the rivers that are still unanswered.

TRaCK researchers studying how these rivers work recognised the special role Indigenous knowledge has to play in better understanding and managing these rivers. Indigenous people worked closely with scientists by providing vital information on the history of river flow, bank erosion, the distribution of plant and animal species and sediment movement.

Coordinating the 'River Change' project is Yiriman, a community-based youth diversionary program in Fitzroy Crossing. Governed by elders from four Kimberley language groups, Yiriman is helping to build the oral history interviewing and videoing skills of young local people through the project.

Nine senior Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Walmajarri and Ngarinyin traditional owners living in the Fitzroy catchment shared their insights about changes they have seen in fish populations, stream-bank vegetation, erosion, water quality and river flows over the years.

"Yiriman engages young adults connected through family in meaningful roles in research projects and other activities so that they know they are acknowledged and valued," says Yiriman Coordinator Michelle Coles.

"Through such projects they are learning and practising traditional knowledge. Through immersion they learn new skills about workplace culture, using technology and multimedia, while being exposed to a broader understanding of science, environment, policy and economy.

"The education is multidimensional - building life-skills and demonstrating the inter-relationship of their culture and the social world."

Yiriman was set up eight years ago by elders from the Nyikina, Mangala, Walmajarri and Karajarri language groups to support young Kimberley Aboriginal people in activities that keep traditional culture and knowledge strong. The activities usually take place during trips back to people's traditional country.

Yiriman cultural adviser and Walmajarri traditional owner, Annette Kogolo, says: "Our organisation brings old people together with their young women and men to educate them through the telling of stories and passing on of skills. This way culture is handed down to the next generation who will then pass it onto their children.

“With the ‘River Change’ work, we visited places all over the Fitzroy catchment. Younger people got to spend time with their elders, who shared their knowledge of the river places, waterholes, plants, animals, fish, everything, showing them their country, talking about how to look after country. That’s how Yiriman works.”

The DVD of the interviews is currently being edited and is expected to be available to researchers and others by the end of June.

The ‘River Change’ project outcomes will be presented at the Commonwealth Environment Research Facilities (CERF) conference at Old Parliament House in Canberra this week (24-26 May).

TRaCK was established in 2007 as a research hub under the Commonwealth Environment Research Facilities Program to provide the science and knowledge that governments, communities and industries need for the sustainable use and management of Australia’s tropical rivers.

TRaCK receives major funding for its research through the Australian Government’s Commonwealth Environment Research Facilities initiative; the Australian Government’s Raising National Water Standards Program; Land and Water Australia; the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation and the Queensland Government’s Smart State Innovation Fund.

For more information, see the website www.track.gov.au

Media Interview Opportunity

What: ‘River Change’ project that is filming and interviewing Kimberley elders about river country to assist scientists with better understanding Australia’s northern tropical rivers. Project outcomes being presented to CERF conference.

Who: Annette Kogolo (Walmajarri traditional owner), Arnold Wilson (Ngarinyin traditional owner and one of the young Yiriman interviewers), Michelle Coles (Coordinator of Yiriman) and Associate Professor Michael Douglas (TRaCK research director) will be available for interview

When: 10.30am, Tuesday, 25 May 2010

Where: Front steps of Old Parliament House, Canberra

Photos and Video Footage

Photos and video footage of young people interviewing elders on river country in the Kimberley are available for media use. To obtain a copy of visuals, please contact Jenni Metcalfe on 0408 551 866.

For media assistance

To arrange interviews contact Jenni Metcalfe on 0408 551 866