Caring for Country:
An Indigenous Propitious Niche in 21st Century Australia
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Abstract:
Former AIATSIS Principle Dr Peter Ucko, in a workshop presentation in the late 1970s, described how minority or marginalised people occupy specialised, propitious employment niches as a mechanism to establish social and economic footholds within dominant societies. This paper reflects on the exponential growth of Indigenous people’s engagement in caring for land and sea country through ranger employment, protected area management and research partnerships over the last 30 years. By tracking the cultural, economic and political origins and development of the caring for country movement, the paper shows how these activities constitute a ‘propitious niche’ for Indigenous people within 21st century Australian society, while also contributing to the re-emergence of ‘country’ as an appropriate geographical and cultural scale for contemporary management of Australia’s land and sea environments.

Understanding the characteristics of caring for country, including its foundations in Indigenous culture and its contributions to national policy objectives, can contribute to new ways of thinking about Indigenous employment and other gap-closing imperatives, by nurturing other potential propitious niches as pathways to broader employment and economic opportunities.

The history of caring for country programs are reviewed to demonstrate that they emerged in response to Indigenous-driven initiatives and connection to country, which in turn explains the popularity and success of Indigenous ranger employment. Caring for country programs demonstrate what can be achieved when governments and other investors provide support to momentum already developed by Indigenous communities, organisations and individuals. In the context of Closing the Gap, a review of caring for country programs enables consideration of which factors may contribute to, or mitigate against, particular employment niches being propitious for Indigenous people, such as culture, identity, ancestry, education, remoteness and competition. Propitious niches can provide opportunity pathways for Indigenous people, though the options for each individual should be canvassed and encouraged much more broadly and not limited to the predetermined employment roles suggested by the concept of a propitious niche.

What is a propitious niche?
“Propitious” simply means “presenting favourable circumstances”, and “niche” in this context means “an employment position particularly well suited to the person who occupies it”. I first heard the term “propitious niche” used in the context of Indigenous employment at what these days would be called a Closing the Gap forum in the late 1970s, chaired by Senator Neville Bonner, Australia’s first Indigenous senator. Dr Peter Ucko, the then Principle of The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, gave a presentation on Aboriginal employment pathways. He noted that marginalised groups in the United States of America had exploited propitious niches as entry points into the wider economy and suggested that such an approach may also be appropriate in Australia. Dr Ucko gave the examples of:
• Native Americans (usually Iroquois) who who gained employment as skyscraper construction workers, specialising in riding the massive steel girders as they were swung into place at great heights;
• Irish immigrants who occupied the ranks of the New York Police Force in great numbers;
• African Americans who found employment in the military at a time when poor education and discrimination excluded them from many other occupations.

Reflecting on the employment roles Indigenous people were taking on in 1980, Dr Ucko suggested that teaching, sport, art and the law may be equivalent propitious niches in Australia. To which we could add music, health, academia and other employment fields today.

Some of the characteristics of a particular employment niche that makes it propitious for a minority or marginalised group are outlined below.

Utilises inherent skills or knowledge
Members of the marginalised group can enter the employment niche without undergoing formal training, utilising their existing skills and knowledge, such as the ability to work at heights in the case of Native American skyscraper construction workers or language and cultural knowledge in the case Aboriginal health workers.

Valued by marginalised group and wider society
For a niche to be occupied by members of a marginalised group it needs to be attractive in some way to that group – financially or in other ways, such as status value within the group, e.g. the status and security for African Americans joining the military. And for the niche to be sustained it must have value for the wider society which, in the American examples, values skyscraper construction workers, police officers and the military.

Minimal competition from wider society
A niche that involves minimal or no competition from the rest of society will be propitious for marginalised groups with a history of exclusion from many employment roles. Competition can be minimised by a requirement for inherent skill, such as the skyscraper construction workers, cultural solidarity and a willingness to take on poorly paid positions in the case of the Irish police recruits in New York, or simply low demand in the case of recruitment to the military.

Entry point into wider employment opportunities
The most propitious niches are those that provide an entry point for marginalised groups into wider employment roles, e.g. from teacher aide to qualified teacher, from health worker to nurse, paramedic or doctor etc.
What is Caring for Country?

Caring for Country embraces a wide range of environmental, cultural and natural resource management activities. Some of these activities are undertaken informally as part of daily life of Indigenous people, but increasingly the term Caring for Country is used to describe more formal activities undertaken by Indigenous land and sea management agencies and ranger groups.

The Caring for Country movement began in the late 1970s and early 1980s as opportunities for re-engagement in land management accompanied successful Aboriginal land rights claims\(^1\). For the first decade of this movement there was little or no specific support for Caring for Country activities undertaken by Indigenous people independently of government agencies. At that time, governments exercised a monopoly on environmental and natural resource management through their national park, primary industry, marine park and fisheries agencies. There was the beginning of Indigenous employment within those agencies, but community-based Caring for Country activities usually occurred through general Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP) rather than targeted, government-funded Caring for Country initiatives.

Nevertheless, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community councils and other Indigenous organisations, initially in Queensland (beginning on Palm Island in 1983), then in the Northern Territory and later in every Australian jurisdiction, began to establish independent land and sea management agencies and Indigenous ranger groups. Lack of government support was both a strength and a weakness for these early Caring for Country initiatives. For some of the pioneer agencies, such as the Kowanyama Aboriginal Land and Natural Resource Management Office on Western Cape York Peninsula, lack of government support became a catalyst for building a diverse range of funding, research and support partnerships nationally and internationally that continue today. For others, such as the Palm Island Ranger Service (the first Australian Indigenous ranger group to have its own ranger base and patrol vessel), lack of government support contributed to its demise.

Today there are well over 100 Indigenous ranger groups or land and sea management agencies around Australia, some of which manage the more than 60 Indigenous Protected Areas that have been declared by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people since the late 1990s. These groups employ several thousand Indigenous rangers and other Caring for Country workers, more than 600 of which are funded directly by the Commonwealth Government’s Working on Country Program. This is an industry and employment niche that has experienced exponential growth in the last 30 years and continues to expand today.

Caring for Country as a propitious niche

Some of the characteristics of Caring for country as a propitious niche are outlined below.

**Connection to country**

Traditional connection to country, and the rights and responsibilities associated with that connection, form the basis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s Caring for Country roles. That connection is present whether or not individuals, particularly younger Indigenous people, have profound cultural knowledge.

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**Cultural skills and cultural knowledge**

Traditional land and sea management practices and the cultural knowledge that underpins those practices are key attributes that many Indigenous people bring to Caring for Country activities. They are often used together with Western scientific techniques to form what is referred to as two-way management of country.

**Highly valued by Indigenous communities**

Caring for Country activities are generally highly regarded within Indigenous communities. These activities are seen as practical expressions of traditional cultural responsibilities and Indigenous rangers are viewed as role models for younger community members.

**Highly valued by wider society**

The wider Australian society, represented by government agencies, conservation NGOs, tourism bodies etc. are increasingly showing recognition, through funding and other ways, of the significant contribution made by Indigenous ranger groups to the management of regional and national environmental assets.

**Absence of competition from wider society**

Because Caring for Country activities are so heavily grounded in Indigenous culture, almost all the roles can only be undertaken by Indigenous people (usually Traditional Owners of the country in which the activities take place), thereby almost eliminating competition from the wider society.

**Potential for subsequent employment opportunities**

Because the jobs of Indigenous rangers involve a wide variety of work roles and training, government agencies, research institutions and the private sector are often keen to provide employment opportunities for Indigenous rangers wishing to move into other fields, such as national parks, fisheries management, research, community liaison etc. In many locations around Australia, many former Indigenous rangers have taken only senior administrative and governance roles in their communities.

**Propitious Niche Case Study**

The following example from a remote area of northern Australia demonstrates the propitiousness of the Caring for Country employment niche in comparison with the two other major local employment options. The table below shows the levels of Indigenous employment in each of the available niches:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indigenous-owned resort</th>
<th>Mine</th>
<th>Indigenous land and sea management group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous employment</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the example above, the resort was established using the Traditional Owners’ own investment capital specifically to provide training and employment opportunities for local Indigenous people. While it has achieved high occupancy rate and financial viability it has not achieved its intended goal of Indigenous training and employment. It is staffed by a combination of hospitality professionals, young international travellers on working holiday visas, and temporary work visa-holders from Asia. Local Indigenous people have resolutely refused to take up training and employment opportunities at the resort.
The mine, owned by an Australian-based multi-national corporation with a strong commitment to Indigenous employment, has struggled to attract and retain local Indigenous staff. Those local Indigenous people that are employed in the mine are almost all employed in land management and rehabilitation work (a form of Caring for Country) rather than mining operations. The small number of Indigenous people employed in mining operations are mostly fly-in-fly-out workers from other locations in Australia.

The vast majority (85%) of the ranger position, however, are held by local Indigenous people, and many more would be willing to accept ranger work if further funding was available. The remaining 15% of positions in the Indigenous land and sea management group (the land manager and coordinators) are held by non-Indigenous people. This is a common phenomenon among many Indigenous rangers groups across Australia and it raises interesting questions about why the coordinating roles do not appear to be as propitious for Indigenous people at the present time. Is there something inherent about these roles that makes them more propitious for non-Indigenous people, or alternatively, is there something inherent about Indigenous people’s cultures, interests or priorities on remote communities that makes it difficult or unattractive for them to take on these roles?

Benefits of Caring for Country

Tangible benefits of Caring for Country activities include those outlined below.

**Employment**

Increasingly, Caring for Country programs are providing meaningful, full time jobs with genuine career prospects for those Indigenous people aspiring to stable, long term employment. Many Indigenous ranger groups also provide part-time or casual employment for particular projects or seasonally, which suits some Indigenous people with balancing their work roles with various cultural or social responsibilities.

**Education and Training**

All Indigenous ranger groups engage in regular education and training activities, which include practical skills and accreditation, transfer of traditional knowledge and scientific research methods. These education and training activities are directly linked with employment roles, which encourages more enthusiastic participation than might be the case if the training took place without the immediate prospect of employment. Some Indigenous rangers also engage in formal TAFE or university level studies in natural and cultural resource management.

**Enhanced self esteem, health and wellbeing**

There is increasing evidence that participation in Caring for Country activities delivers multiple social, health and general wellbeing benefits to Indigenous rangers and others in Indigenous communities. A study\(^2\) in remote communities in the Northern Territory concluded that participants in land management activities were significantly less likely to have diabetes, renal disease or hypertension. The same study also found that there was a net financial benefit to the community from the land management activities, taking into account the land management costs expended and the health costs saved.

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**Contribution to biodiversity conservation**
Demonstrating direct links between specific land and sea management activities and biodiversity conservation outcomes is always problematic in a short time frame. However, there is evidence that the substantial and increasing activities to control weeds and feral animals, rid the coastal waters of northern Australia of ghost nets (drifting abandoned fishing nets), introduce dugong and turtle sustainable hunting plans, re-introduce traditional burning practices etc. are indeed delivering biodiversity conservation dividends.

**Contribution to cultural maintenance**
For most Caring for Country practitioners, all land and sea management activities contribute to strengthening local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. In addition, Indigenous ranger groups specifically support traditional knowledge recording, ceremonies, cultural mapping and opportunities for old and young people to maintain contact with country.

**Education**
Many Indigenous ranger groups have developed formal or informal junior ranger programs that engage local school children and their families in land and sea management, cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, language maintenance and research activities. The Commonwealth Government is currently investing in several pilot “Learning on Country” programs in remote communities to provide curriculum and teacher support to maximize the learning outcomes from these partnerships between Indigenous rangers and school.

**Reconciliation and partnership building**
Because most Indigenous ranger groups have developed a two-way approach to managing country, their activities provide ongoing opportunities for partnership building with government agencies and research organisations, as well as collaborative relationships with other Indigenous Caring for Country organisations. This practical experience with successful partnerships can benefit other partnership building and reconciliation activities within communities.

**Caring for Country vs “Green Welfare” ?**
While Caring for Country initiatives can be beneficial in a variety of ways for individuals and communities as summarised above, these initiatives have been labelled by some commentators as “Green Welfare” – implying that these activities are not part of the “real” economy and that Indigenous rangers positions are not “real” jobs.

Certainly there are occasions when these initiatives can take on some of the characteristics of welfare. As in any work environment, this can occur if there is poor leadership or coordination, if people are allocated meaningless tasks, if there is no training or inadequate training, if there are low expectations, if there is excessive idle time or if the recruitment process is inadequate. When these situations occur, however, they are most likely to result from problems of governance, coordination and supervision, rather than inherent features of Caring for Country.
Policy Implications

The most straightforward policy implication is to maintain and grow support for well coordinated, community-based Caring for Country initiatives. They respond to genuine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interest and enthusiasm for looking after country, they deliver biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage outcomes that benefit Australian society at large and they are delivering Indigenous employment outcomes that many other employment options, even when they are available, do not.

Another implication for policy-makers is to identify and support other initiatives that show the characteristics of a propitious niche, and that build on momentum already developed by Indigenous organisations or communities. Which raises some interesting questions about why some employment niches are propitious for Indigenous people and others are not. Some reasons have been outlined above, but it is likely that the basis for propitiousness of niches is more complicated than indicated here. Further analysis of this phenomenon will broaden our understanding of the underlying causes of the so-called “Gap” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment, economic, education, health and other social outcomes. We can all point to many contributing factors, such as colonisation, discrimination, education, housing etc., but are there messages to be decoded in the characteristics of propitious niches that can unscramble the interplay of personality, culture, identity, ancestry, history and opportunity that determines whether individuals succumb to or transcend the Gap?

Another policy implication is to learn from the caring for country story of the last 30 years to better understand how policy innovation and development actually works. Who are the policy entrepreneurs\(^3\), how can they be better supported, and what are the drivers and barriers that lead to policy success or failure? One way this can be done is to view policy innovation and development as a process of “cultural selection” in which policy ideas originate, take hold, mutate, become refined, compete and ultimately thrive if they deliver some competitive advantage to the people and society involved – an evolutionary process that is analogous to biological “natural selection”.

An example of cultural selection is the re-emergence of Country (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional land and sea estates) as an appropriate geographic and cultural scale by which to govern and manage Australia’s environments and natural resources. This ancient scale became blanketed by many other jurisdictional, ecological and administrative scales from the time of British colonisation until relatively recently. Through land rights and native title legislation, claims and determinations, and more recently through tenure-blind, country-based approaches to planning, Country is proving once more to be a selectively advantage concept that is out-competing, or at least coexisting with, the introduced governance and management scales that have dominated the Australian landscape and seascape for the last two centuries. The evolution of Indigenous Protected Areas from a management framework based on contemporary Indigenous tenure to a management framework based on Country\(^4\)


(including multi-tenure and integrated land and sea Indigenous Protected Areas\textsuperscript{5}) is the most recent example of this culturally selective process at work.

The concept of cultural selection\textsuperscript{7}, possibly because of its analogous association with natural selection and incorrectly implied connection with discredited ideas of Social Darwinism, is currently not a commonly adopted prism through which to view contemporary Australian society and the disparities that occur within it. But with the magnitude of social and wellbeing challenges inherent within the concept of the “Gap”, we must surely be open to whatever paradigm or prism sheds new light on understanding and addressing these challenges. The time may even come when we are ready to view ourselves and our society through the lens of the emerging discipline of bio-cultural selection\textsuperscript{8} that seeks to more fully recognise the interconnectedness of our biological and cultural selves – an interconnectedness that resonates with Indigenous holistic views of people, culture and nature.

Finally, I would like to emphasise that while the concept of the propitious niche can be helpful in understanding and supporting Indigenous employment, every effort should also be made to assist any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to pursue any education, training or employment goal. Propitious niches can facilitate employment pathways for those who struggle to compete, or have no interest in competing, in the broader employment marketplace; they should not be viewed as constraining, pre-determined destinations for all Indigenous people in remote communities or anywhere else.


