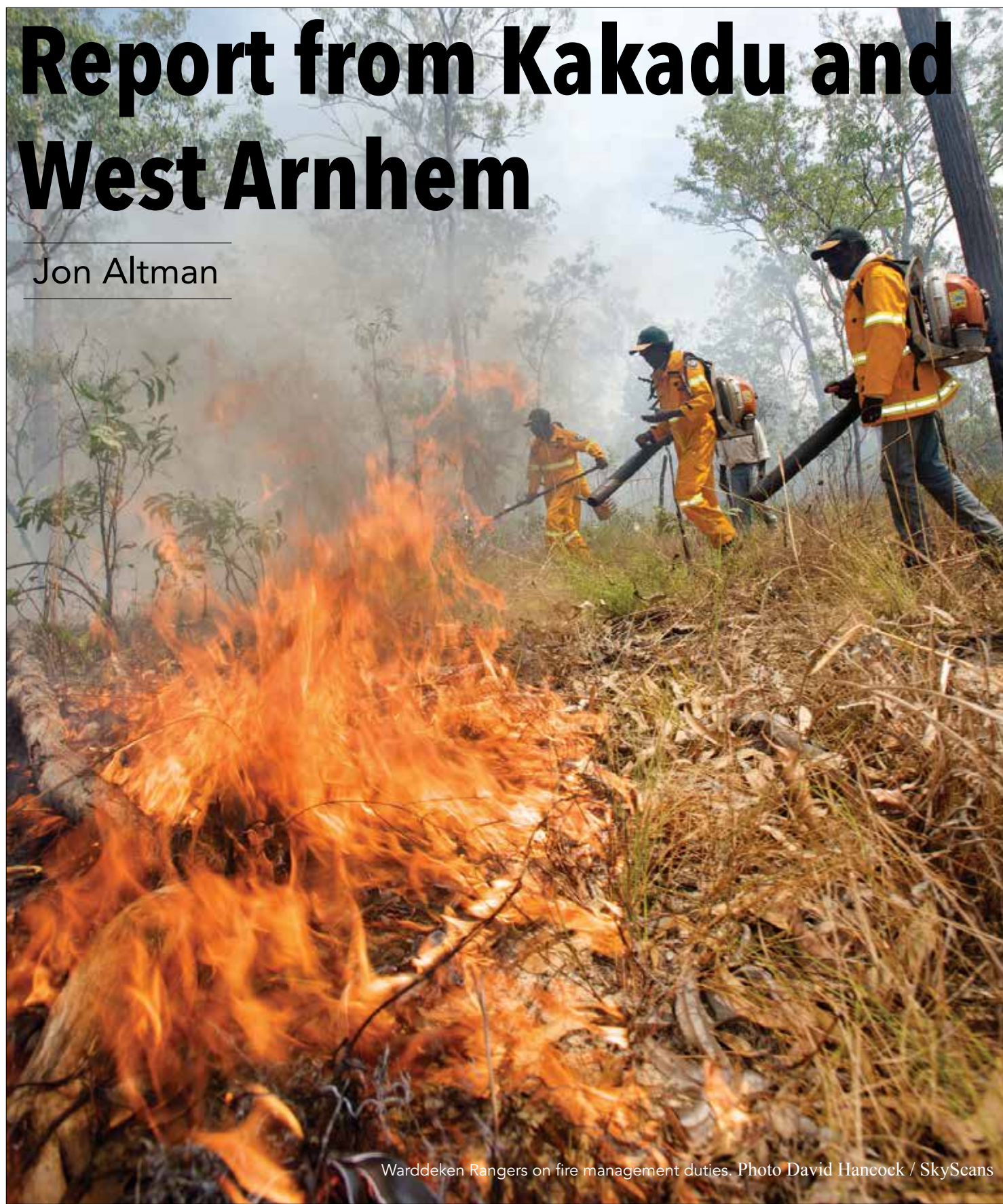


Report from Kakadu and West Arnhem

Jon Altman



Warddeken Rangers on fire management duties. Photo David Hancock / SkyScans

As we flew over western Arnhem Land in a light plane from Jabiru to Kabulwarnamyo outstation and ranger station I could see a massive fire line on the horizon.

It was the early dry season regionally called yekkeh when Aboriginal traditional owners of this region working for Warddeken Land Management Limited were out in choppers, vehicles and on foot lighting fires.

Today this work is undertaken in collaboration with Balanda (non-Aboriginal) colleagues utilising western technology – in the rugged Arnhem Land Escarpment, the stone country, Warddewardde, helicopters and ‘raindance’ aerial incendiary devices are critically important.

This early dry season burning is beneficial for biodiversity conservation and carbon abatement in the contemporary knowledge systems of Bininj (Aboriginal people), and western scientists.

It also constitutes an assertion of Aboriginal political jurisdiction – authority over the management and use of the lands and resources now Aboriginal-owned under

Land Rights law passed in 1976.

In this part of Arnhem Land, the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement (WALFA) project, a collaboration among five Indigenous ranger groups, reduces carbon dioxide equivalent emissions by 100,000 to 200,000 tonnes per annum. The abatement produced by the ranger groups is calculated using sophisticated remote sensing techniques and is sold today under two agreements: one made in 2006 in the Western Arnhem Land Fire Management (WALMA) Agreement with ConocoPhillips; the other from a competitive auction bid under the Abbott Government’s Emissions Reduction Fund regulatory umbrella. The agreements are for 17 and 10 years respectively.

The significant funds earned annually are all rolled back into generating employment for Aboriginal rangers and paying for helicopter charters and other equipment to care for the environmental and cultural values of the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area.

This is an example of the workings of Aboriginal territorial and property rights alongside legitimate intercultural

governance: the right to burn accords with Bininj notions of appropriate resource management and simultaneously generates a regional development pathway and national and global benefits in efforts to Cool the Planet.

My colleague and companion on this flight was the American anthropologist, Associate Professor Paul Nadasdy, who was on his first ever brief visit to Australia (with his family) after a year’s residence in nearby Indonesia.

At the instigation of the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation, with co-sponsorship from the Northern Land Council, he came to the Top End for a visit to share some of his learnings from long-term research with Canadian First Nations, and also to glean a comparative perspective on what was happening in Aboriginal/state relations - here particularly on Aboriginal-owned lands and national parks.

Paul is based at Cornell University in the USA and has worked for more than two decades in the Canadian north. His ethnographic fieldwork has focused on the Southwest Yukon where he has lived and worked



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with members of the demographically tiny Kluane First Nation, mainly residing in a village Burwash Landing with a population of fewer than 100.

The precursor to this visit was my recommendation of Paul’s highly-regarded *Hunters and Bureaucrats: Power, Knowledge, and Aboriginal-State Relations* in the Southwest Yukon to the CEO of the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation.

The book is an exploration of the comprehensive land settlement agreements or modern Treaties between the Canadian state and Yukon First Nations in the early 21st century.

Based on research with hunters of the Kluane First Nation and cognisant of their beliefs and practices regarding human-animal-land relations, it explores the inevitable tensions that arise in resource management when there are incompatibilities between Kluane and western concepts of ‘knowledge’ and ‘property’ in relation to the co-management of wildlife.

Paul’s analysis looks to properly account for the complicated, actually existing relations between First Nations and the state. This clearly has parallels with the extraordinarily complex relations between Aboriginal people and the Australian state in the joint management of World Heritage listed Kakadu National Park. Burwash Landing lies on the border of Kluane National Park, also part of a World Heritage site.

My role was to facilitate Paul’s visit to Kakadu and West Arnhem, allowing him to absorb as much as possible in four days and engage in a number of information exchanges with our hosts, the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation Board and staff in Jabiru, and staff of the NLC in Darwin, as well as with managers and staff of Kakadu National Park in Jabiru and academics at Charles Darwin University.

An ambitious itinerary was arranged along a vehicular and aerial transect from Darwin to Kabulwarnamyo deep in West Arnhem. It included visits to rock art sites, Yellow Waters billabong and cultural centres in Kakadu National Park; a visit to the Ranger Uranium Mine site and Jabiru township; a visit to Kabulwarnamyo; and to Gunbalanya focusing on the Injalak Art Centre.

These were all places and institutions with which I have worked at various times and in various capacities over the past 40 years since the passage of Land Rights law. Travelling with an expert visitor from overseas challenges one’s perspectives and generates fresh questions and new insights about what is happening here. Here is just a snippet from each day.

On Day 1 we stayed at Cooina, owned by the local Gagudju Association and Indigenous Business Australia, but managed by the multinational Accor Group and mainly staffed by backpackers from all over the world. It was only when we took the two-hour boat tour on the world-renowned Yellow Waters guided by an Aboriginal man with local connections and visited the Warradjan Cultural Centre that we got a sense that this was actually an Aboriginal place.

The latest Kakadu National Park Management Plan 2016–2026 vision seeks to ensure that the cultural and natural values of this World Heritage national park are protected and that Bininj/Mungguy (Aboriginal) culture is respected.

It is also envisioned that Bininj/Mungguy gain sustainable social and economic outcomes from the park. The long struggle to find an active livelihood role for the Aboriginal people who live in, and own, the Park is very much ongoing nearly 40 years after its establishment in 1978.

On Day 2 we worked intensely with the Mirarr traditional owners of the Ranger Uranium Mine project area and staff of the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation. Much of our discussion focussed on the big picture challenges the Mirarr faced as the Ranger Uranium Mine moved to closure in 2021, and their ongoing efforts to secure a sustainable livelihoods for future generations through innovative education and a perpetual trust fund.

Mine closure will mean not only that compensation funds paid in a benefit-sharing agreement would cease, but also that the environmental task of rehabilitating the massive mine site on Mirarr land would require completion within five years. Information provided by the mining company Energy Resources of Australia (ERA) at a new public relations office in Jabiru states that since 2012 more than \$405 million has been spent on rehabilitation and water management activities. Will this be enough to restore Mirarr land to its environmental condition before a deep open cut mine pit was excavated for decades?

Inevitably our discussions also focused on the future of Jabiru that is clearly in a state of decline, particularly as its population has reduced with ERA increasingly operating a fly-in-fly-out operation as activity at Ranger winds down.

If the future of the township is mainly as a tourism and service hub how will its commercial enterprises – some already closed down – be sustained, especially as the popularity of Kakadu as a tourist destination seems to have peaked?

Far more so than stated in the Management Plan, Mirarr and others land owners want to see Kakadu as a distinct Aboriginal park; but having nominal political authority as a majority on the Board of Management does not readily translate into effective control over what happens in the park.

This was highlighted by a recent decision by park management to cull 2000 wild water buffalo in the south of the Park, a decision that the Mirarr and others we spoke to abhorred because almost all the buffalo were shot to waste, good meat was left to rot. This form of culling is a management option that could not be contemplated in the Yukon.

On Day 3 we flew to Kabulwarnamyo. We were able to directly observe the work of the Warddeken rangers from the air and to see their impressive ranger station and homeland once we had landed and driven the four kilometres from the bush airstrip

to the isolated community. This is a place that I had visited on a number of occasions as a director of Karrkad-Kanjdi Limited, a company committed to assist cultural and natural resource management work in West Arnhem.

Only re-established as a residential place in the 21st century, Kabulwarnamyo is not much smaller than Burwash Landing in the Yukon, but has fewer facilities with the Australian government reluctant to provide equitable services provision to Aboriginal citizens living on their remote country, even if they are undertaking important work in the national interest.

This is clearly demonstrated by the recently-established Nawarddeken Academy, a small bicultural community school supported with philanthropic funds raised by Karrkad-Kanjdi Ltd to provide educational opportunity on country for the school-aged children living at this remote community. The entire school was away at a Dalabon language camp when we visited.

On Day 4 we did two notable things.

First, we met with Kakadu National Park management and staff and returned in our discussion to the issue of buffalo culling. From the park's perspective there is no question that the estimated 12,000 wild buffalo in the park (alongside the numerous

incompatibilities recounted in Paul's work on 'Hunters and Bureaucrats' in the Yukon. With ultimate authority currently vested with the Minister, national priorities will inevitably trump local ones.

Next we travelled to Gunbalanya and the Injalak Arts Centre to meet staff and artists working together in this vibrant cultural enterprise. The sheer, overwhelming presence of Aboriginal people here makes it clear it is an Aboriginal place. Its governance is an all Bininj Board, its management is Balanda, artists are very visible in situ actively engaging with visitors. It is a thriving arts and culture business, and was our last stop before heading back to Darwin.

Day 5 was Paul's last before he returned to Indonesia; we did two things.

First, we discussed with NLC staff the nature of modern Treaty-making in Canada that has evolved from a series of legal decisions since the early 1970s with rights guaranteed under section 35 of the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982. This includes the inherent right of self-government. Would constitutional recognition in Australia encompass such possibility for Indigenous forms of domestic sovereignty?

Second, Paul gave a seminar at Charles Darwin University presenting a chapter from a manuscript he has completed, 'The

consent of all traditional owners obtained after extensive consultations, ALFA is now engaging in the abatement of carbon (sometimes referred to as 'carbon farming') across a massive 70,000 square kilometres of Arnhem Land. On top of the 100,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents contracted from the WALFA project to ConocoPhillips, an additional 190,000 tonnes per annum for the next 10 years have been purchased by the federal Emissions Reduction Fund.

This is not the occasion to discuss the exciting potential and early governance achievements of ALFA in any detail.

But as I headed back to Melbourne, where there is talk of Treaties with the First Nations of Victoria, I thought anew about the relationship between territoriality, property rights and political jurisdiction and its productive deployment in the Yukon, although many challenges clearly remain.

In north Australia, the overall project of appropriate sustained Indigenous development has stalled despite unimagined expansion in Aboriginal territory. I have been around for far too long to believe that enhanced self-governance and property rights alone will be the silver bullets to the massive development challenges Aboriginal people face in remote and difficult circumstances.



Mirarr traditional owners with Paul Nadasdy and Jon Altman at the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation offices. From left: Stewart Gangali, Paul Nadasdy, Jon Altman, Annie Ngalmirama (chairwoman of GAC), Ruth Gamarruwu, Martia (18 months), Melanie Elgregbud and Valerie Balmoore.

feral pigs, horses and donkeys) should be culled, but what if the traditional owners feel differently?

This raises important questions about jurisdiction and authority. The park staff we met were empathetic to the notion of Aboriginal control; a high proportion is Aboriginal, a smaller proportion, perhaps a quarter, is local.

But their boss, the park manager, is an outsider and directly accountable to the federal Minister for the Environment and Canberra, not to the Aboriginal majority Board of Management or the Northern Land Council with its statutory role representing traditional owner interests.

There is clearly a significant structural tension here reminiscent of the

Cultural Entailments of Sovereignty: First Nation State Formation in the Yukon'. In this seminar he outlined how the resolution of First Nation comprehensive claims transformed human-environmental relations in the Yukon; modern treaties are powerful engines for social and economic changes but require various forms of inevitable bureaucratisation.

On Day 6, I met with the CEO of Arnhem Land Fire Abatement (NT) Ltd a new Aboriginal company with which I am collaborating in research and advocacy. ALFA currently represents an alliance of six ranger groups working across Arnhem Land that is growing the WALFA model described above.

Assisted by the key statutory role of the NLC to ensure the free, prior and informed

But given the clear failure to improve circumstances over the last decade using a heavy-handed and top down approach, perhaps the incoming Turnbull government might be willing to consider more productive approaches - be they home-grown forms of emerging self-governance like the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation, Warddeken Land Management Limited, ALFA (NT) Ltd or Injalak Arts, or be they from elsewhere, like the productive mix of territoriality, alongside political authority, vested through modern treaties with the First Nations of the Yukon in northern Canada.