

Ngad Bininj dja nganabbarru



Us Aboriginal people and buffalo—in the Djelk IPA

By Jon Altman

In May last year I was flying low in a skilfully-piloted helicopter over the Tomkinson River wetlands in western Arnhem Land, locally known by the big name Bulkay. While I had visited Bulkay on many occasions this was my first chopper flyover since 2009. This area, historically renowned as a seasonally rich meeting place for large gatherings of Aboriginal people, had herds of buffalo visible from the air in greater numbers than I had ever seen before; the environmental damage experienced on bone-jarring drives over the pugged floodplains during the dry seasons was clearly visible, as were numerous wallows and deep channels.

It struck me that this was not a good look within the Djelk Indigenous Protected Area (IPA), declared for its natural and cultural values of global significance. This event got me thinking seri-

ously about the relationship between Kuninjku people, who are owners and managers of Bulkay, and wild buffalo as they co-inhabit an area declared for its conservation values while allowing sustainable use of natural resources.

The rapid growth of the IPA program over the past two decades is one of the positives in both Indigenous and environmental policies. The program was established by the Howard Government in 1997 as a vehicle to support Indigenous land management and to increase the size of the National Reserve System, Australia's terrestrial network of protected areas.

The program's aim is to enhance the conservation estate's comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness. Success has seen its continuation and expansion; in total IPAs now cover 668,000 km², nearly 10 per cent of the continental land mass; and in total IPAs cover 43 per cent of conservation lands. Soon, with more declarations anticipated, Indig-

enous Australians will be the majority owners of Australia's conservation lands.

Indigenous land owners commit to conserve declared lands in exchange for funds from the government to deliver environmental services. Like much else in the fraught relationship between Indigenous people and the Australian state, this is not an exchange based either on equality between partners or social justice.

It is an example of a Hobson's choice, a situation where there is an appearance that one can make a free and informed choice, but where in fact one does not have a real choice—at least if maintaining the cultural and environmental values of one's ancestral lands is a priority. And this is a priority for Indigenous land owners many who have struggled for a long time to get legal recognition over their lands.

Indigenous peoples are crucially important in the management in perpetuity of vast IPA lands to maintain

biological diversity according to one of six internationally recognised land management categories defined by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

But this admirable project is also potentially unstable. On one hand, IPAs need to be managed in a way that is consistent with national and international conservation guidelines. On the other, when Indigenous land owners voluntarily declare their intent to do this, it is inevitably in a manner that must recognise their primary native title rights and interests in all their local and regional variations.

Sometimes these obligations clash. This is especially the case in IPAs declared in accord with IUCN Category VI, protected areas that aim to conserve ecosystems and habitats together with associated cultural values and traditional natural resource management systems. In such protected areas, that are usually spatially large, low-level non-industrial use

of natural resources compatible with nature conservation is a major aim. These are protected areas that allow sustainable use of natural resources, but at times there are tensions between Indigenous and environmental prerogatives.

I want to demonstrate some of these tensions with research that I have undertaken over the past 36 years with Kuninjku people in Arnhem Land who hunt buffalo in what is now the Djelk IPA.

Djelk was declared in September 2009 as Australia's 33rd IPA covering more than 6,700 km² of the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Land Trust in the Maningrida region.

The IPA covers an area of tropical savanna from the Arafura coast to the Arnhem Land Plateau and includes some major river systems and biodiversity rich wetlands like Bulkay.

The Djelk IPA has some of the most biodiverse and structurally intact landscapes in Australia, in part because

it has been reserved for exclusive Aboriginal use since colonisation in the early 20th century; it has not been subjected to prolonged or intensive commercial agriculture or industry, with mining limited to the Ranger Uranium mine well to the west and the Gove bauxite mine well to the east.

But this IPA still faces many threats from changed fire regimes, the spread of exotic weeds, and introduced animals such as buffalo, pigs and cats, as well as marine pollution, loss of endemic species and climate change.

A community project, the Djelk rangers, was established in 1993 as a pig control program, with Gurrmoni man Dean Yibarbuk as the founding father. During the 1990s, the rangers became the natural and cultural resource management arm of the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation. They were funded under the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme and the Natural Heritage Trust.

Initially there was regional ambivalence to the embrace of the IPA program and environmental management according to externally-stipulated criteria. And there was the practical political challenge of negotiating with more than 100 regional land-owning groups to commit their lands to a conservation commons, while ensuring that each maintained control of what happened on their estates. The political complexity of this process saw the consultation phase extend over seven years.

I first worked in this region as an academic researcher in 1979 when I resided at Mumeke outstation and a number of seasonal camps with Kuninjku people.

Bulkay was not overrun by buffalo when I first camped there at a seasonal camp called Mankodbe Kayo—‘the place where the bush potato rests’. There were no buffalo, pigs or cane toads on these resource-rich wetlands where people gathered annually to feast on seasonal surpluses of aquatic birdlife, barramundi and catfish, goannas and wallabies.

We drank fresh water from the clear billabongs and waded in creeks relatively free of estuarine crocodiles to fish with spears and conical fish traps for barramundi.

When I flew low over Bulkay in a light plane for the first time in May 1980 there were no buffalo to be seen, no wallows, pug marks or criss-crossing trails etched in the landscape.

In 1981, in an early act of advocacy for Kuninjku people, I defended their right to harvest buffalo, concerned that the Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Campaign (BTEC) proposal to eradicate wild buffalo and cattle in the Top End might extend into Arnhem Land. I argued to the Feral Animals Committee Buffalo Working Party that owing to the economic significance of the buffalo in the contemporary outstation economy, an eradication program would be unacceptable to outstation residents who would need to be heavily compensated. In any event BTEC did not extend into Arnhem Land.

During the 1990s the numbers of buffalo and pigs increased rapidly, something that people living on country were well aware of, and wel-

comed as a ready source of meat. In the late 1990s the Djelk rangers increasingly collaborated with western scientists looking to develop herd management plans to minimise the ecological impacts of buffalo and pigs. As an element of these collaborations there were some aerial counts of buffalo, with a figure between 4,000 and 6,000 estimated for the region.

In 2002 and 2003 I worked with a number of Bininj and Balanda biologists who camped with Kuninjku in various locations to monitor wildlife utilisation as part of a project to assess sustainable use.

With the benefit of hindsight, the alarm bells about buffalo (and pigs) should have sounded loudly back then, but people were camping happily on the flood plains and evidence of environmental degradation and species decline was limited. The greatest concern focused on the recent arrival of the deadly cane toad, the ‘rubbish frog’ as Kuninjku people call it, and the devastating impact the invasion had on goanna populations.

A decade later things had changed dramatically,

although as in the boiled frog parable, as things happened slowly slowly, no-one seemed to have noticed or reacted as they might have.

Not long after I flew over Bulkay last year, the NT Department of Land Resource Management published a report conservatively estimating nearly 100,000 buffalo in Arnhem Land. The survey estimated that there were 20,000 buffalo in the Djelk IPA, at a density in some wetlands, like Bulkay, of more than 40 per sq km—these were the herds that I had seen from the chopper.

The experts seem to be in agreement that since the last comprehensive aerial survey in 1998 the buffalo population has quadrupled and that it could be growing at an annual rate of 15–20 per cent that will inevitably plateau.

In February this year I was invited along with my colleague, linguist Murray Garde, to participate in two Healthy Country Planning meetings as an element of regional consultations to develop a management plan for the 2015–2025 period. We were invited to help facilitate two meetings with Kuninjku land owners because of our long associations with these

people and Murray’s linguistic skills invaluable for clear communications.

Kuninjku people clearly and unequivocally recognised the environmental problems and biodiversity threats posed by the buffalo population explosion. Buffalo have become very visible in the landscape and they were identified as destructive not just of the wetlands, but also of fresh water supplies. As Balang noted, ‘When buffalo go into our drinking water, it makes the water dangerous and we cannot drink it anymore. Buffalo have different toilet! They make the billabong yellow and they put sickness in the water’.

Buffalo were also damaging rock art sites, riparian vegetation, a long list of edible plants and animals and sacred sites. As a Kuninjku ranger remarked, ‘When travelling in the chopper around Mankorlod I have seen a lot of buffalo track. At Kolbbe which is a really sacred site, lot of buffalo there in that swamp. We can’t see the red lilies there anymore. Long time, pigs eat them, buffaloes wreck them’.

ABOVE LEFT: Celebrating a successful hunt near Mumeke, 1980.

BELOW: Butchering a buffalo, Bulkay 2002.

“When buffalo go into our drinking water, it makes the water dangerous and we cannot drink it anymore.”



At the same time Kuninjkku have become increasingly dependent on buffalo, and to a lesser extent on pig, as a source of meat. Indeed over the past 15 years buffalo meat has almost become a staple, Kuninjkku people like eating buffalo and value it highly.

In 1981 I estimated that 25 per cent of bush protein came from buffalo and that the community at Mumeka exploited about one buffalo a month. Today this percentage might be as high as 75 per cent. This is partly linked to mega-abundance and ease in killing if one has a rifle or shotgun.

Given that swamp buffalo are estimated to weigh 300–550 kgs each, the regional herd represents 8.5 million kgs of buffalo. With an estimated dressing percentage (amount of useful meat) at just over 50 per cent per animal, this represents a massive ‘protein capital’ of over 4 million kgs of meat. Given the way that this mega fauna is generously shared when successfully hunted, buffalo also represent a massive stock of ‘social capital’.

Kuninjkku are unsure how this population explosion came about. One theory is that the relative absence of Bininj in the landscape has allowed the nganabbarru, their name for buffalo, to become the dominant species: Bulanj noted, ‘We have been in Maningrida and these things have arrived while we have been away.’

When Balang stated, ‘Before at Bulkay Bininj were camping all the time, but not now’, his son-in-law responded, half-jokingly, ‘The buffaloes are now the land owners.’ For various reasons, including rapid growth in dangerous crocodile numbers, people no longer camp seasonally at Bulkay. Buffalo outnumber outstation residents by 40 to one.

Others attribute the population explosion to growing difficulties in accessing guns and vehicles, owing to enhanced policing and stricter controls over both after the Port Arthur massacre in 1996, and then the Northern Territory Emergency Response Intervention from

2007 that has seen an escalated and increasingly vigilant police presence. What is clear is that the absence of Bininj in the landscape has been correlated with rising numbers of buffalo.

When it comes to what to do about this population explosion Kuninjkku land owners are uncertain, bearing in mind that our discussions were largely framed by the IPA planning process and a recognition that something needed to be done urgently as the population was estimated to be increasing by 4,000 per annum, despite site-specific ground culling by Djelk rangers.

Balang was adamant ‘Pigs and buffalo, kill them. Well three, and crocodiles’. But he also noted affectionately ‘I like the buffalo’; indeed when I visited him in 2014 he had one called Wamud (the same subsection term as his father) as a pet living in his yard in Maningrida.

When confronted with the prospect of aerial shooting of buffalo to waste people were decidedly uncomfortable, despite assurances that meat would be shared with land owners and that some could be stored for local consumption in a chilling facility at the ranger shed.

The upshot of the meetings was permission to cull 5,000 buffalo in the Djelk IPA, but in the wet season when the carcasses would rot away quickly so that Bininj would not be confronted by all the wasted meat and rotten stench on the flood plains.

I too, as someone who had hunted buffalo with Kuninjkku in the past, found myself deeply saddened by the prospect of buffalo being shot to waste. I was reminded of the earlier writing of anthropologist Basil Sansom about ‘the Holocaust of the buffalo’ at Wagait and his evocative reference to ‘helicopter gunships’ manned by professional platform shooters who were Vietnam veterans.

The recently completed Djelk Healthy Country Plan ranks buffalo as the fourth highest of 12 identified threats to healthy country. Goals have been set to ensure no increase in buffalo

numbers, hence the decision to cull 5,000; and then to reduce the population to 10,000 in five years and to 5,000 by 2025, back where it was in the late 20th century.

But even this modest aspiration has proven difficult to operationalise owing to complex cross-cutting political machinations in relation to buffalo. Aerial culling is very expensive and as noted people dependent for livelihood on buffalo meat are reluctant to condone waste.

‘we need the buffalo to eat, but we also want to look after our country.’

And so there have been emerging proposals from the NT Government and even Bawinanga senior management to turn buffalo to profit with excited talk of a new live export trade to Vietnam, perhaps the conservation threat posed by buffalo could be dealt with profitably via commercial contracting? And then there is all the talk from Canberra about ‘Developing the North’.

Experts I have consulted believe that like so many previous development proposals dreamt up for this region by technocrats in offices, live buffalo export from the Djelk IPA is not commercially viable owing to remoteness and poor road links.

And it is not politically viable because it is counter to the wishes of Traditional Owners who control use

of their land and resources and recognise that it will be Balanda contractors from outside who will profit.

The Djelk plans to cull were thwarted by counter proposals for live export and only 2400 buffalo were killed in the last wet season, a number that will see population increase not stabilisation.

And there are wider tensions that indicate that an Arnhem Land strategy is needed to manage buffalo because of their high mobility. There are some who see potential for wild husbandry of buffalo for live export, but I suspect that this is not what IUCN Category VI protected areas are about.

Rangers working in the contiguous Djelk and Warddeken know that even as they cull there is in-migration of buffalo from elsewhere, especially from the south from a live export operation near Bulman. Commercial operators face profit-motivated moral hazard: why export any females, the reproductive means to regenerate stock and future profits? And so numbers multiply and migrate elsewhere.

Rangers have been bestowed with ‘ranger power’, not only are they on wages unlike most of their countrymen, but they also have access to working vehicles, high powered rifles and training as marksmen, including in aerial platform shooting. All this empowers them, but also lumbers them with more responsibility to deliver meat to their families and kin. And such privileging can also disgruntle those living at Maningrida and outstations without guns and vehicles. These tensions between being a ranger and being a Kuninjkku, being a conservationist and a hunter are palpable, but poorly recognised by employers and funders.

Responding to a discussion we had in February 2015 about the competing tensions in aspiring to live on ancestral lands and the counter-pressures to reside in Maningrida, a close friend Balang captures this lyrically in Kuninjkku. As translated by Murray Garde, Balang

describes a situation that would be a ‘contradiction’ in English, but for which there is no word in Kuninjkku. Effectively he says ‘we want to live out on our country but then we want to come back in to Maningrida and then we want to go back out again, but what can we do, we are tied up’. To be ‘tying up ourselves’ can be translated as ‘we are frustrated’.

A contradiction is clearly evident in relation to Ngad Bining dja nganabbarru—Us Aboriginal people and buffalo—living in the Djelk IPA: ‘we need the buffalo to eat, but we also want to look after our country’. This is a contradiction that frustrates many.

The means to address this contradiction will require a sophisticated and carefully negotiated regional strategy and adequate resourcing to manage buffalo, to allow rangers to work with land owners, to assist people to return to live and hunt on their country, to shoot buffalo and utilise meat, to balance the pressures for conservation with the maintenance of a highly valued source of protein that wandered into Arnhem Land in the late 1820s, well before the Balandas.

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