Practical Indigenous Wisdom: A Track in the Conference "Sustainability Rhetoric: Facts and Fictions"

Indigenous Knowledge and Educating Managers for Sustainable Organisations

Robyn Heckenberg

Above: Millewa Billa, the Murray River

R. Heckenberg (✉)
Monash Indigenous Centre (MIC), Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
e-mail: robyn.heckenberg@monash.edu

A. Habisch, R. Schmidpeter (eds.), *Cultural Roots of Sustainable Management*,
CSR, Sustainability, Ethics & Governance, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-28287-9_4

1 Global Vision and Indigenous Knowledge; not the Repetition of the Earlier Draft

This paper is written from the point of view of a Wiradjuri academic, community worker and researcher in the field of primary research. As a researcher I have learnt a great deal from my Elders and the communities in which I seek to support the Indigenous voice. The Wiradjuri people mentioned in this article is a tribal-language group in New South Wales, with connections to several inland rivers. The project I am discussing concerns the Southern Wiradjuri whose main water source is the Murray River, which rises in the Australian Alps. The term Indigenous and Aboriginal are interchangeable for the reader.

Consultation with Aboriginal community by an Indigenous Australian about Indigenous issues sounds like common sense, "phronesis" or practical wisdom in action; but it is a model that is still fairly new. Once the governance climate in Australia was only about white middle class petty-bureaucrats with their leadership styles, Anglo centric and unpliable. The prognosis and diagnosis for community development issues were based on western value systems which challenged Aboriginal value systems and ways of doing, more than providing workable solutions for the community it was intending to support. The model was a deficit one, and Aboriginal people were seen as a problem. Once you bring Aboriginal people themselves into the conversation, not only the decision-making structure changes, but also the way those decisions are supported by the community people themselves. Tradition, connection to Country and cultural maintenance are all of prime concern to Aboriginal people. "White fellas" could never really have articulated this for themselves, without either white-washing or romanticising the "noble savage". Global vision has shifted, followed by local government expectations as well.

> Convinced that control by Indigenous peoples over developments affecting them and their lands, territories and resources will enable them to maintain and strengthen their institutions, cultures and traditions, and to promote their development in accordance with their aspirations and needs,
>
> Recognizing that respect for Indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment
>
> —UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (2007)

2 Cultural Sustainability

Indigenous wisdom is practical by nature, cerebral by conception and spiritual by way of protection and connection. Indigenous wisdom is tied to the land, bush and rivers (Heckenberg 2010a, b). The philosophies that underpin the mode of enquiry my research works with, chooses these paradigms of understanding. For over a decade this way of looking at my community work has created some fascinating

results and useful outcomes. Here I discuss my experiences working with an organisation that endorses inclusion of these Aboriginal perspectives. In cultural planning this lends a mode of community feedback through the process of using explicitly Aboriginal research, and as such, is a positive move forward for our communities in terms of cultural sustainability.

The view of this paper is optimistic; besides, whilst cynicism creeps so easily into daily life, it is fundamental, I think in primary research to project optimism; cheerfulness and optimism are just as much tools for success as an investigative mind, or analytical thinking when it comes to interviewing people, or, "talking to the mob". As part of research methods, a body of primary research has been completed which reflects the voice of the community with practical outcomes. In this way the community consultations and the reporting back to the community through a feedback process from council can stimulate the use of topical Indigenous notions of community development which advise local government policy. This example gives me an opportunity to discuss how Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous "ways of doing" and "ways of being" inform research methodology where there is a synergy of Indigenous wisdom and culturally useful-cultural planning.

There is a basic premise in Indigenous research, and that has to do with *protocols and beneficence*. The people of the Indigenous community with whom we communicate are to be given respect, and the outcomes of any research with this philosophy needs to be of value to that community. Otherwise the research is traction-less and has no use what-so-ever. A major outcome of this study is to find out what the desires and aspirations *are* of the Aboriginal communities within the footprint of local government for whom I am doing this study. This informs future direction. This context contains the environmental vantage point of association to the river, in terms of way of life and known histories. The community consultations I did recently along the Murray River in New South Wales with contributions from people from Hume Weir to Wonga Wetlands, identify the desires of the local Aboriginal community around contexts which relate to opportunity and positive futures in cultural practice; and the particular connection to places in country (Tilley 1994). The other aspect of the research narrative concentrated on determining the histories, both community and individual, around the river story.

3 Community

The Murray River is an "artery" (interview 2013) which runs through three states of Australia and rises in the high country of the Great Dividing Range. It is ancient country shared by many Aboriginal language groups (Weir 2009). The upper Murray through Albury and until Corowa is Wiradjuri Country. Wiradjuri Country itself is extensive, and the Old People talked about Wiradjuri territory going many miles south of the river in Traditional times. However, the river is a contemporary state border and, as well, has become a contentious focus for some Aboriginal river

communities. The tensions between the Indigenous community, and the mainstream dominant society, however, have at times caused an implosion of emotions within our communities and then lateral violence can be an outcome. This means that the Aboriginal community turns in on itself. The local city council, with the best of intentions, has some very agreeable and respected workers who want to see positive community change and the development of initiatives that source the talents and knowledge of the community and that have the power to break the cycle of negativity.

Walking into the local city council chambers of the local government body of this study, you cannot but be overwhelmed by the "city fathers" gallery. There are a score of men with beards and stern expressions representing the leaders gone and still coming, the occasional female face, but no one even vaguely representing diversity or otherness. Here there is nothing unusual; perhaps this is one reason why, however, there is room for optimism. Our Elders' persistent labours historically, worked within these kinds of dominant paradigms.

4 History

Left: Wongamar Wiradjuri Senior Elder who forged early relationships with local government and mentored leaders

The quest which they sought was about racial harmony and forging pathways for those who would come after them. They portrayed the practical wisdom which they themselves had learnt from their Old Ones. The history of the growing engagement and communication between community and local government was initiated by our senior Elders, one Elder in particular mentored younger ones by bringing us along to meetings with our civic leaders; one time I went with him to talk to the Mayor about some of the Elders' ideas on recognition. Not long after, highly visible *Welcome to Wiradjuri Country* signage greeted visitors to Wiradjuri Country as they entered the city, which informed them that Aboriginal people belonged to this part of the land. At the same time there were staunch "whitefellas" for ever advocates for social change and equity.

The Reconciliation process became a concentration of Black and white efforts and created a formula by which all could meet together and discuss ways of creating this better world. This is still optimistic, as most of this generation of Aboriginal leaders were Godly people, missioned by God (Biaimee) rather than just themselves. Later Wiradjuri Elder Yalmambirra and myself, completed the delivery of cross-cultural awareness training to all local government employees and aldermen. The training was very gendered, because the men warmed more to Yalmambirra, than they did to me, as a woman. However, this was not a negative as they identified and related well as males together and barriers were broken down. An Aboriginal Liaison Officer was employed to identify and participate in local community development. Along with this was an improved strategy for Indigenous employment within the organisation generally, and within supportive and sustainable structures. One vision that Elders and community, who were sensitive to the importance of cultural learning, wished to have realized, was a focus for employment and cultural practice that could be created around young fellas being able to work in the environment, working in Country, Wiradjuri Country. The vision would be the creation of a trail along *Milewa Billa*, The Wagirra Trail. The making of the trail has provided training, employment and creative endeavour all while working in Country in the riparian environment of the Murray River.

In an earlier series of consultations, with my report called *Indigenous Cultural Sustainability* (Heckenberg 2010c), this river community identified the importance of work around "caring for Country" as one of their priorities. The Wagirra Trail has created a reliable place pedagogy encompassing concepts of cultural sustainability, caring for country, stories of individual and community history along the river, and a conduit for cultural activity. The actual scope of community vision, including what kind of cultural activity was perceived to be most feasible by the community is the bones of my most recent study which determines the river as a creative place; an artscape. As Public art design this has created a peer and mentor supported sculptural project that highlights communality and cultural values incorporating kinship, connectedness to the land and river, and Aboriginal community artists' keenness to maintain cultural values and ways of doing. At the same time the continuation of projects around growing the trail as a tourist destination and area of ecological interest, invests in community vision and hard work. All the while, the team of Aboriginal workers on the trail and the artists of the trail are occupied in a cultural learning experience, as well as practical knowledge. Experiences such as making a canoe are part of the work life of the trail, for example.

5 Cultural Relevance

Terri Janke (2009) is an Aboriginal lawyer who works in the Intellectual Property Rights area of Australian law, and in *Writing up Indigenous Research: authorship, copyright and Indigenous knowledge systems* she asserts: "Researchers of Indigenous knowledge should consider the cultural legacy that they will leave to future

Indigenous generations" (Janke 2009, p. 18). This is a pertinent issue for everyone in this recent study. Cultural knowledge being handed on to the next generation of young ones is a motivator for Elders determined to do what they can to make sure this happens. Further to this Janke affirms:

> This is not just a practice for remote areas where traditional structures are intact but it also includes 'linking traditional connections that have been severely disrupted by colonial intervention and government policies and what are now literally overlaid by the urban and regional sprawl of the modern nation (Janke 2009, p. 18).

During the organisation's own documentation on strategic planning, the section called 'Our Issues' (no date, p. 38), identified that the needs of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to be substantial. The kinds of social issues that Indigenous Australians face are considerably connected to feelings of marginalisation and disaffection from the still ongoing effects of colonisation (remember the civic father's gallery). In a sense this is why cultural activities—and the significant healing outcomes and positive self-identity that come through cultural work—are even more important than you might think. Major issues for greater support of community aspirations are around unemployment, developing and maintaining positive mental attitude, racism, mental health issues-depression, suicide and schizophrenia. The council considered however the need for "improved awareness and appreciation of Indigenous culture by the local community" (p. 38) as one way to improve outcomes. Inspirational cultural practices in the form of public art are seen by the Aboriginal community to be a way to instil a more positive aspect of Aboriginal-and Wiradjuri identity and achievement-within the mainstream community. The kind of Public Art which is going along the Wagirra Trail, for example, can educate the larger general community to gain greater awareness of Aboriginal people's rich heritage, which deserves positive interest and respect. More importantly, however, as identified by the community, is the fact that the maintenance of cultural values; the ability to be part of cultural activities and dialogues in country; and the mentoring of the youth, all contribute to overcoming social disadvantage by improving self-identity and community worth.

6 United Nations Support

As well as this, there are a number of UN documents that support the ideals of Indigenous peoples' participation in their cultural maintenance and economic development. These link to cultural activities, and just as importantly the continuing association with the land (Country). These UN Covenants are significant in terms of dialogues between community and organisation policy. It is important that bureaucrats working in local government, as well as elected government representatives such as aldermen, have an awareness of the instruments that encourage Aboriginal cultural values being supported in policy for positive social change. For example The *International Covenant on Civic and Political Rights* states:

Part 1, Article 1.1: All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

Part 111, Article 27: In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language. *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001):

From Article 2: Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace. Thus defined, cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. *Indissociable* from a democratic framework, cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life.

From Article 3: Cultural diversity widens the range of options open to everyone; it is one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence.

From Article 7... .heritage in all its forms must be preserved, enhanced and handed on to future generations as a record of human experience and aspirations. From the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* there are very clear statements which indicate the profundity of looking after the land the bush and the rivers and what that means.

In Article 29 this is stated as: Indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources. States shall establish and implement assistance programmes for Indigenous peoples for such conservation and protection, without discrimination.

Further the document states (mentioned here in the introduction), *Convinced* that control by Indigenous peoples over developments affecting them and their lands, territories and resources will enable them to maintain and strengthen their institutions, cultures and traditions, and to promote their development in accordance with their aspirations and needs, *recognizing* that respect for Indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment.

Article 8 determines that:

1. Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture.
2. States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress forms of dispossession, undermining rights, discrimination (abbreviated).

An important element for this study, which backs up the future initiatives of council is:

Article 31.1. Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. Indigenous people also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.

Article 31.2. In conjunction with Indigenous peoples, States shall take effective measures to recognize and protect the exercise of these rights. The whole of the document concerning the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is a good guide on what kind of elements can be brought into local government policy in fair dealings with Indigenous Australians. Article 21, for example, draws special attention to nations regarding the specific needs of elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities. Fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts are also listed in this Article. Probably one more Article should be mentioned in this discussion, Article 21.2 indicates the usefulness of government to recognise the special needs of Indigenous persons, but also to take effective measures for social and economic improvement.

Article 21.2. recommends that "States" (as in government) shall take effective measures and, where appropriate, special measures to ensure continuing improvement of their economic and social conditions. Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of Indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities.

The council has its own Reconciliation Statement (2005) which effectively captures many of these United Nations goals. Most explicitly though, is the active moves this particular local government has made regarding gaining culturally appropriate community consultations to find out what it is the "special needs group" wants.

As the level of commitment to social change expands by incorporating Indigenous aspirations in strategic planning and projects that reflect this impetus, Indigenous knowledge has been incorporated into the way that local councils "do business" and the way they consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This is not necessarily only based on an egalitarian impetus or indeed the positive non-Indigenous Australians that work in the sector, but also because government is tied to these outcomes in line with United Nations agendas, and the substantial lobbying that community and Traditional Owner Elders are willing to put into improving social impacts.

This research project reflects an Indigenous knowledge base and "way of doing", including Indigenous history, cultural heritage, sense of place and connection to Country. Incorporating Indigenous knowledge not only enhances community prospects and viability but also enhances more sustainable management styles for local

government in communicating effectively with the community and managing improvements for our Aboriginal communities' futures.

7 Research Methodology and Respect, Reciprocity, and Responsibility

The mode of this research essentially works on a best Practice model, as determined, not only by my training through Elders, but also from frameworks that have been determined by academics and people "working on the ground" with Aboriginal Communities. The research guidelines of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC 2006) have become fundamental as frameworks within which to research. Locally every state of Australia has an Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) which have been working since the 1970s alongside government, and their research guidelines are probably the most familiar with mums and dads, as the AECG is made up of local parents, teachers and community members. The Reconciliation Action Plan informs decisions, and all inform a respectful methodology regarding this project. Since this research has a distinct regard for cultural histories and community narrative, the work of Linda Tuhwai Smith (1999) informs the research by way of her critique of the place of Indigenous histories and identities. This all ties back to cultural knowledge and cultural intellectual property as well. In 'Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects' Smith (1999) frames project outcomes in themes such as Claiming, Returning, Indigenizing, Revitalising and active themes like Writing and Restoring. This eventful framing certainly allows a conceptual context for the Methodology of this present project and its outcomes.

Karen Martin (2008) coined the term "relatedness" to express the integrated nature of the Aboriginal worldview. When inside this Aboriginal world view a researcher is awake to a way of looking at the world where kinship and law are the basis of everything within the physical and metaphysical world being related to each other. This means that research is holistic in approach and all things relate to each other in conversation as well as world view. Reciprocity or giving back is part of this value system, community people are suspicious of those who do not understand this cultural practice: research needs to be of benefit and have outcomes that the community can see equate to responsible use of dialogue. All things are connected.

8 Community Personality and Methods

Some of the main points which I have had to regard in this research, which is very much designed around the local personality of this community, is that each community may have different priorities and aspirations to another. All communities however, as stated earlier expect Respect, Responsibility and Reciprocity. The research needs also to have a benefit (AIATSIS 2012).

Consider that Aboriginal people have strong connection to their own tribal territories, the stories and knowledges of their own particular cultural practices, even when they are not located in their own country. Also consider that at the same time there are Traditional Owners whose families have ancient ties to contemporary land marks within the same geographical region of study. Hence one begins to recognise the complexities of successful community engagement and research. Here follows a list of main points for responsible communication with community, there follows an explanation. However reflect on each of these points to think about these concerns at first in your own way. In this particular context with Wiradjuri and non-Wiradjuri persons, the main points for careful and responsible research and community consultation are:

- Responsibility to the creatures of the land and rivers large and small, recognising that the environment is connected to the people through ancestral story and kinship. Wongamar, one of our Senior Elders said: *Look after the land the bush and the rivers and the land the bush and the rivers will look after you*
- Culturally safe behaviour.
- Being Respectful on an individual level.
- Listen to people carefully and ask is it okay to write something down.
- Consult and be advised by Elders of the Community.
- Realize that Aboriginal Australia is diverse.
- Respect of all people.
- Respect the Traditional Owners, the Wiradjuri people and the Elders of Wiradjuri.
- Be conscious of people's cultural traditions and customs.
- Be conscious of people's spiritual and cultural views.
- Respect another person's cultural values.
- This includes respecting other people's totems and inherited beliefs.
- Be mindful that spiritual and cultural beliefs are part of a person's intellectual property.
- Mindful of research being sharing the history of the river.
- Respect the land, the bush and the river.
- Be inclusive of family.
- Everyone is entitled to an opinion.
- Any work will need to be useful for the community's aspirations.
- Reciprocity is part of sharing in research.
- The research project should have respect for cultural heritage.
- Enjoying one's Cultural Heritage is part of Human Rights.

- Outcomes are to maintain and protect culture and be useful for the community engaged in the investigation, whatever the topic.
- The community has a voice in decision-making that effects them.
- That the community can express its own plans for a cultural future (supported by Albury City Community plan).

9 Further Reflection of These Points as Text

The main elements of working with Aboriginal community in terms of listening to the community voice, relies on behaving in culturally safe ways in relating to people. In other words having respect for someone's point of view and life-styles, and behaving in a way that does not threaten or cause discomfort. Aboriginal people have particular and significant ways of expressing not only cultural knowledge, but also spiritual values and beliefs, these need to be respected, as well. Given that Aboriginal Australia is diverse, beliefs and spiritual story is diverse as well. The research worker in community engagement has a specific job to listen and record, not to interpret or put one's own judgement or bias on the ideas of the informant. The same can be said with work chiefly focused on community development or sustainability outcomes: listen to the ideas carefully and maintain as much of the original voice as is possible. This method ensures a more authentic outcome for the community as they have been listened to and acted upon. An assertion made in this paper is also, that the source of an Aboriginal person's ideas need to be valued as Intellectual Property, and therefore should be given that value regarding care and protection. When engaging with the Aboriginal community, the added awareness for the worker/researcher is to acknowledge the significance of Indigenous cultural heritage material, which may be the next generation of knowledge keeping that has been handed down many generations. If there is the time and impetus, therefore, it is best to have the broadest brush possible in seeking opinion and data. In terms of cultural heritage, those who live now have the memory and knowledge of those who came before. As well as having respect and responsibility to community members with whom you may work, the other critical factor is that conversations and events within your practice, necessitate Reciprocity behaviours. Reciprocity means that relationships are two way. The Aboriginal participants and the community will want to see the benefit of their engagement. Respect, Responsibility and Reciprocity are best practice as the shift from Western models to socially inclusive models have taken shape. The overarching aspect of Aboriginal people's character is the significance of the connection to the land, and this is reflected in the Elder's affirmation: *Look after the land the bush and the rivers, and the land the bush and the rivers will look after you*. In this description, the title researcher could be just as easily translated to community liaison, and community development worker, as the role in this study is about finding the best solution to guide the future in community interaction with local government.

10 Practical Wisdom

This paper discusses some of the important kinds of understandings of Indigenous knowledge that organisations, such as local councils and their decision-making arm, need to acquire and understand to keep pace with the needs of Indigenous populations within their footprint. Organisations need to realise there is no one size fits all solution, and that each community has its own value systems, geographically significant places, and set of cultural priorities. The aspects which all communities have in common is the colonial history; dispossession of country; attempted cultural genocide; and lack of opportunity for equal education until the 1970s; along with inherent feelings of marginalisation. I began by talking about optimism, though. This is where our Elders have put us in the present. Our communities talk now about aspirations, cultural reinvigoration, the continuing importance of place, the love for country and the river, good education, how the country can teach us (as it always has done) and opportunity for the future. My research captures this narrative of community: hope and success. The past is our history and the concrete that binds us, the present is our gift to develop constructive ways to heal from the negative and take our sense of history (colonial story, traditional story, story of country) to the future for our next generation; we need to maintain all that has come before and use the wisdom from our Old People to construct solutions of good measure that are sustainable for the future, this is practical wisdom.

References

Albury City Council (2005) Reconciliation statement. Albury City Council, Albury

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) (2012) Guidelines for research in Australian indigenous studies. AIATSIS, Canberra. Available at http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/ethics/GERAIS.html

Hanuska J, Stanton M (no date) AlburyCity community plan. AlburyCity Council, Albury

Heckenberg RF (2010a) Custodianship of country: native title rights and spiritual connection. In: Hawaii international conference on arts and the humanities, University of Louisville, Louisville, 13–16 Jan 2010

Heckenberg R (2010b) Holding heart: aboriginal breathing space in research epistemology. Int J Interdiscip Soc Sci 5(9):107–118

Heckenberg R (2010c) Indigenous cultural sustainability. Albury City Council and Monash University OCLC, Churchill

Janke T (2009) Writing up indigenous research: authorship, copyright and Indigenous knowledge systems. Terri Janke and Company, Sydney

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (2006) Keeping research on track: a guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander about health research ethics. NHMRC, Australian Government, Canberra. Available from http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines/publications/e65

Martin K (2008) Please knock before you enter aboriginal regulation of outsider and the implications for researchers. Post Pressed, Mt Gravatt

Smith L (1999) Decolonising methodologies. University of Otago Press, Dunedin

Tilley C (1994) A phenomenology of landscape: places, paths and monuments. Berg Publishers, Oxford
UN General Assembly (1948) Universal declaration of human rights. 10 Dec 1948, 217 A (III)
UN General Assembly (1966) International covenant on civil and political rights. United Nations, Treaty series, vol 999. 16 Dec 1966
UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2001) UNESCO universal declaration on cultural diversity. 2 Nov 2001
UN General Assembly (2007) United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples: resolution/adopted by the general assembly. 2 Oct 2007, A/RES/61/295
Weir JK (2009) Murray River country: an ecological dialogue with traditional owners. Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra