National parks and joint management

Yorta Yorta Elder Dr Wayne Atkinson, *Senior Fellow in the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Melbourne, reports on the proposed joint management of new red gum parks.*

'The holistic relationship between land, water and cultural heritage is the guiding vision.'

THE VICTORIAN Government's positive response to VEAC's recommendations for joint management agreements for red gum national parks along the Murray is a welcome attempt to incorporate thousands of years of Indigenous ownership and care for country into future park management. It offers a pathway to fair and just outcomes through negotiating acceptable agreements between the Yorta Yorta and the State.

However, the terms and conditions of such agreements are still unclear. To evaluate these developments and analyse what can be delivered to the Yorta Yorta Nations Aboriginal Corporation (YYNAC) we need to examine the concept of joint management, and discuss how the Victorian Government's response can work in practice for the Yorta Yorta as the Traditional Owners.

Holistic view

This article is guided by the Yorta Yorta world view and their vision for future land management outcomes. It is grounded in the Indigenous view of seeing the land and its encompassing features as one holistic entity.

When we speak of forests in the Yorta Yorta context, it is equally important to talk of the forest-wetlands that are the life source of Yorta Yorta cultural identity and existence. Indeed it is true to say that the Yorta Yorta are 'river people' and that the river is the embodiment of the Great Spirit ancestor Biami who created Dhungulla (the Murray River).

The holistic relationship between land, water and cultural heritage is the guiding vision being used to negotiate future land management agreements.

Canoe tree, Barmah-Millewa Forest

Joint Management agreements

I take 'Joint Management Agreements' to refer to arrangements where the management of a national park is shared between government representatives and Traditional Owners, under a handback/leaseback arrangement that empowers Traditional Owners to have ownership and control over their land and a majority say on the management structures.

In planning future Joint Management arrangements, policy makers need to be aware that although Kakadu and other parks offer acceptable management models, these are evolving processes that can be improved.

Further, there is no generic model or blueprint for successful Joint Management. Each agreement needs to be negotiated within the context of the needs and aspirations of each local community. The annual payment of rent for the lease of the land and the allocation of government resources for administering and managing national parks are other essential components of successful Joint Management structures.

The Yorta Yorta wish to ensure that whatever model is adapted to local needs and aspirations must be the best for present and future generations, while allowing for the nature of Joint Management Agreements to improve over time.

Benefits of joint management

Joint management balances the land interests of Traditional Owners and the State. It involves modifying National Park legislation to accommodate Indigenous ownership, management and cultural practices, including ceremonies and hunting. This in turn gives Traditional Owners empowerment and a source of income, as the State leases the land back for a park.

Joint Management also helps in the care of a park, as it allows for formalised input from the traditional owners. Other benefits are the provision of jobs for the local community in all levels of park management and education, and in technical and on-ground support.

In the red gum parks there will be opportunities for Traditional Owners to teach park visitors about their rich culture and history, providing a sustainable income for the region through tourism, and also promoting better cross-cultural understanding. The reconstruction of the Dharnya Centre, and the use of other education facilities like the Yorta Yorta Training Centre in Barmah for cultural education, live-in learning and training, are benefits that will flow to all users of the parks.

The tourism industry and Indigenous heritage

Studies into how the tourism industry allocates its resources to Indigenous and European heritage reveal major imbalances.

Tourism employs some 160,000 people in Victoria and is predicted to be worth $18 billion

Dr Wayne Atkinson with students at mound site, Barmah Forest, 2004

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by 2016. It is also an important economic base for the Murray-Goulburn region, with up to 5 million people visiting annually. Overnight and day trip visitors to the region spent an estimated $868 million dollars in the region in 2005.

Recent studies of Grampians-Gariwerd, Wilsons Promontory and Port Campbell national parks have highlighted the economic benefits of parks.

While the tourist economy has been empowering the Murray's colonial European heritage, Yorta Yorta history and cultural antiquity in the region have had to take a back seat. A more equitable share of the burgeoning tourist economy will help generate an economic base for Traditional Owners, help close the existing socio-economic gap, and complement the funds required for park management.

Formal recognition of Yorta Yorta Nations

Joint management enables the YYNAC to reassume the role that their ancestors successfully played in caring for country. It also enables the Yorta Yorta to have a say in the best ways of improving the health of the forest-wetlands, and enables younger generations to strengthen their identity and connections.

The failure of the Native Title process to deliver land justice was a key factor in the Yorta Yorta choosing to pursue their due entitlements through the political process and the VEAC investigation. This valiant struggle has been a central part of the campaign to achieve some land justice for the Yorta Yorta.

The final outcome of VEAC's recommendation on joint management depends on the recent 'Settlement Framework Agreement' package accepted by Cabinet in June 2009, which provides options for the 'ownership and joint management of Crown Land'.

With some degree of optimism, it has been said that the land justice reform package accepted by Cabinet is 'an historic step forward' for Aboriginal land justice and self- determination in Victoria. Hopefully it will provide a mechanism for the Yorta Yorta to negotiate directly with the State Government on a Framework Agreement that will include:

- ownership and joint management of Crown Land
- annual rental payment for leaseback of Indigenous lands
- provision of resources for management of Crown Land
- access to natural resources
- control of Aboriginal cultural heritage
- economic development
- rights to participate in decisions about activities on Crown land
- right of Traditional Owners to negotiate directly with government.

Conclusion

The Victorian Government's response to VEAC's key Indigenous recommendations goes part way to addressing land justice and inequality. It can go much further, however, by making the return of Crown lands to the Yorta Yorta under Joint Management agreements a priority in its current legislative program.

Recognition of ownership and handback/leaseback would be 'fair and just' measures that would help to remedy past and present injustices and the inequality gap that still exists.

Matching the rhetoric with the political actions required to deliver real outcomes for the YYNAC, and avoiding constructing other 'limitations' on the enjoyment of fundamental human rights, are the challenges that face the Government.