

Working towards governance and co-management systems that integrate Traditional Owner aspirations for caring for land and sea country – a case study from Australia

Melanie Zurba

University of Manitoba, Natural Resources Institute (Email: umzurba2@cc.umanitoba.ca)

Introduction

Protected area management in Australia, as in Canada and elsewhere, has begun to focus on community-based management strategies. In response, governments and communities, including Indigenous groups, face the challenges of co-management and the integration of diverse perspectives. In historical terms, the idea of co-management of resources and protected areas with Indigenous communities is fairly new (since the 1970s), and there is no prescriptive format for co-management arrangements (Armitage, Berkes, and Doubleday 2007). Coastal co-management has been particularly challenging, as the boundaries and jurisdictions are not always clear, and coastal resources are viewed differently by mainstream and Indigenous cultures. Regardless of the ambiguities found within such arrangements, it is still possible to investigate them by looking at certain key attributes that would build the foundation for truly reciprocal co-management relationships. Sandtröm (2009) identifies power sharing, participation and process as the features which are integral to identifying co-management. In addition to these elements, Berkes (2009) draws attention to the importance of institution building, practical problem-solving, trust and social capital building. These are all features that should be identifiable within the linkages between partners at different levels, which have been regarded as the pillars of co-management (Berkes 2002).

In this sense, an effective co-management arrangement framework should provide the space in which the aspirations of multiple parties can be explored and understood. The governance structure of such an arrangement needs to be designed in a certain way if the perspectives of the groups are to be expressed and mutually appreciated. Here I concentrate on documenting the perceptions and values of the Indigenous Traditional Owners of the territory with regard to coastal resources, both marine and terrestrial. The first objective of the research was to investigate and map the institutional framework of multi-party governance affecting a collective group of Traditional Owners and country (refers to both land and sea). The second objective was to explore the perspectives of the various parties to co-management including these Traditional Owners.

Methods and Study Area

The project used an immersive approach in which I became an active member of an Indigenous organization, which enabled me to participate directly as an observer in forums and processes, and allowed me the opportunity to build relationships with key people in the organization. Open channels for communication, clear intentions for the research relationship, and demonstrations of reciprocity were critical components to the successful outcomes of the work. To investigate the objectives I used semi-structured interviews and participant observation. This was done with an eye for ‘lessons learned’ in regards to past management relationships and processes, and a focus on aspirations for future directions for land and sea governance frameworks and on-the-ground/sea management. I also used a ‘*What does caring for country mean to you*’ focus group and participatory painting workshop to explore the meanings of the environment and resources, and aspirations for country for the Traditional Owners. This process was an empowering experience for Traditional Owners, because they could produce a visual representation of their perspectives on the past, present and future of activities, in addition to expressing their perspectives verbally.

The Girringun Aboriginal Corporation (GAC) is an organization representing nine (six saltwater, nine inland) Traditional Owner groups in Northern Queensland, Australia. The GAC has been progressively moving through regional co-management arrangements and learning within the shared space which is co-management, and thus provides an ideal case for looking at such systems. They have been engaged in various Natural Resources and Protected Areas management processes and were the first Indigenous organization in Australia to receive accreditation from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) for a Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreement (TUMRA), which extends over a portion of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park/World Heritage Area. This agreement is essentially a permitting system which enables Traditional Owners to manage green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) and dugong (*Dugong dugon*) hunting, with the government’s authority supporting customary law. The TUMRA along with a Girringun Indigenous Ranger Unit are two of the key ingredients in Girringun’s holistic vision for land and sea management. This is a vision set to be further realized through the development and implementation of an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) which will enter the National Reserve System, and is declared by the Traditional Owners with the support of the National Government. The Girringun IPA will include both terrestrial Girringun country and the TUMRA area thus making it the first IPA to have significant proportions of both land and sea.

Results

The structure and relationships between parties involved in Girringun land and sea management were conceptually mapped, illustrating the parties, the linkages, directionality of the relationships, and levels of authority as well as support (Figure 1). There were three main protected areas governance and management arrangements on Girringun country. The first is the Indigenous ranger unit established in partnership between the GAC and the Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM). This unit is expanding and will be guided by a multi-party steering committee. However, the newly expanded ranger unit will have day-to-day management activities guided by the GAC. The TUMRA is the second arrangement, and includes the GBRMPA which accredits and offers varying levels of support to the agreement throughout its phases, and DERM which works with the GAC on the on-the-ground management aspects of the arrangement. The third arrangement is one that is to encompass both land and sea country. The establishment of an IPA on Girringun country involves support by the Department of Education, Water, and Heritage (DEWHA), however in practice it is a multi-party governance arrangement which is declared by Girringun Traditional Owners. Both the TUMRA and the IPA are lead by steering committees which are responsible for the governance of the programs.

Government agency perspectives in regards to management arrangements were diverse; however, they shared a common desire to continue working with the GAC towards regional arrangements that were perceived to not only benefit Traditional Owners but to fulfill the mandates of the protected areas arrangements. Governments recognized that by supporting the GAC vision to be a regional management body (Figure 2) they would be receiving increased on-the-ground management directed by an organization that has proven to be effective through past arrangements. Traditional Owner perspectives for caring for country were unified towards strategies which are inclusive of social and cultural wellbeing. In this sense the Girringun cultural land/seascapes was described as something which includes the cultural elements of everyday life such as access to traditional foods and material culture, as well as access and protection of story places and sacred places. This was represented in both interviews and the focus group and participatory painting workshop, in which Traditional Owners expressed themselves through art (Figure 3).

Discussion and Conclusions

Through the existing governance arrangement in Girringun country, the GAC is empowered to represent the values and aspirations of Traditional Owners. This is because of the way that the organization is structured with all decisions going through a board of Traditional Owners which are elected by the nine groups. Based on this organizational structure, the GAC is required to be adaptive to

the feedback received from the board as well as the feedback from agency partnerships making the GAC an organization that is in constant motion. This creates a cycle of checks and balances working towards favourable outcomes for partners and Traditional Owners (Figure 1). The Giringun case is therefore a good example of a grass-roots regional organization which is bridging mainstream and Indigenous aspirations for protected areas management, in turn translating into favourable on-the-ground outcomes and a working management for multi-party governance and co-management systems. The existing foundation established by the Indigenous ranger program and the TUMRA created the potential for multi-party governance systems such as the IPA, which enable two-way interactions and negotiation, instead of top-down management. These arrangements provide a platform to create 'learning communities', or partnerships that are based on shared interests, and 'learning-by-doing' (Kilpatrick et al. 2003). The Giringun case demonstrates the importance of regional arrangements which take into account locally responsible management bodies.

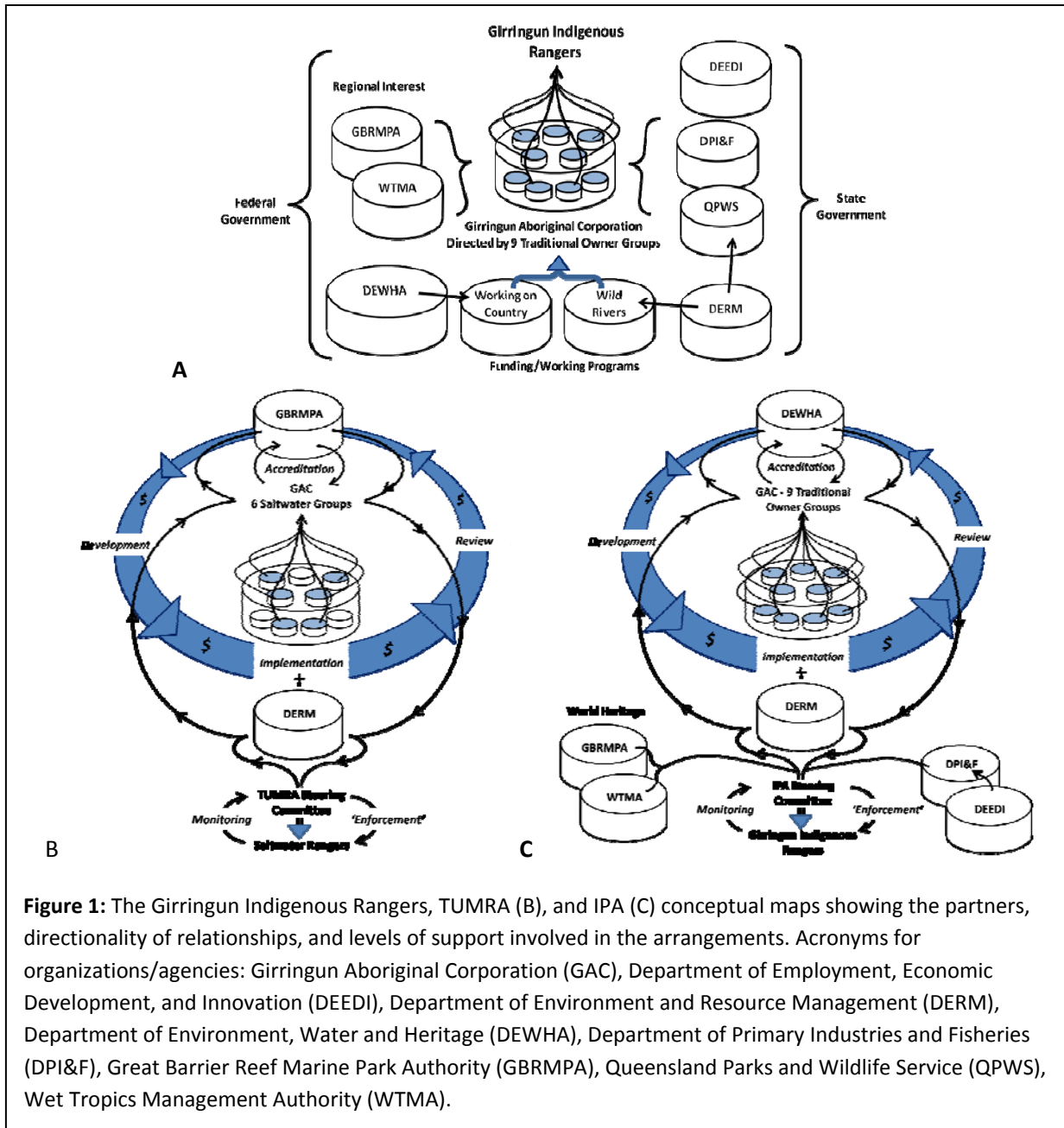
By understanding the perspectives in regards to protected areas management the characteristics such as reciprocity and power sharing could then be considered in relation to the governance structures and management relationships. Perspectives were varied amongst parties regarding co-management. However, both the GAC and the government agencies recognized that adaptability and the commitment to consider new forms of governance are essential to the development of effective regional on-the-ground management. This in turn revealed potential and existing channels for integrating Traditional Owner values and aspirations into on-the-ground management of land and sea country. Flexibility of arrangements and trust-building were necessary for the values and aspirations of Traditional Owner to be integrated into governance and management systems by the GAC. Central to Traditional Owners' perspective was the importance of working through processes that empowered Traditional Owners to be involved in on-the-ground management. Traditional Owners focused on the inseparability of people, culture and country, with the pervasive understanding that in order to 'heal country' people need to be 'on country'.

Acknowledgement

I would first like to thank the Traditional Owners for welcoming me to country and participating in this study. I would also like to acknowledge Fikret Berkes, Helen Ross and Phillip Rist for their guidance and encouragement. The project was supported by the Rigby Trust, the Canada Research Chair in Community-Based Resource Management, and the Australian Geographic Society.

References

- Armitage, D., Berkes, F. and N. Doubleday, editors. 2007. Adaptive Co-Management. University of British Columbia Press. Vancouver, Canada.
- Berkes, F. 2002. Cross-scale institutional linkages: perspectives from the bottom up. In: Ostrom, E., Dietz, T., Dolsak, N., Stern, P. C., Stonich, S., Weber, E. U. (Eds.). The Drama of the Commons. National Academy Press, Washington, DC. pp. 293-321.
- Berkes, F. 2009. Evolution of co-management: Role of knowledge generation, bridging organizations and social learning. *Journal of Environmental Management (Article in Press)*:1-11.
- Kilpatrick, S., Barrett, M., and T. Jones. 2003. Defining learning communities. CRLRA Discussion Paper Series ISSN 1440-480X. Center for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, Launceston, TAS.
- Sandström, C. 2009. Institutional dimensions of co-management: Participation, power and process. *Society and Natural Resources* 22(3):230-244.



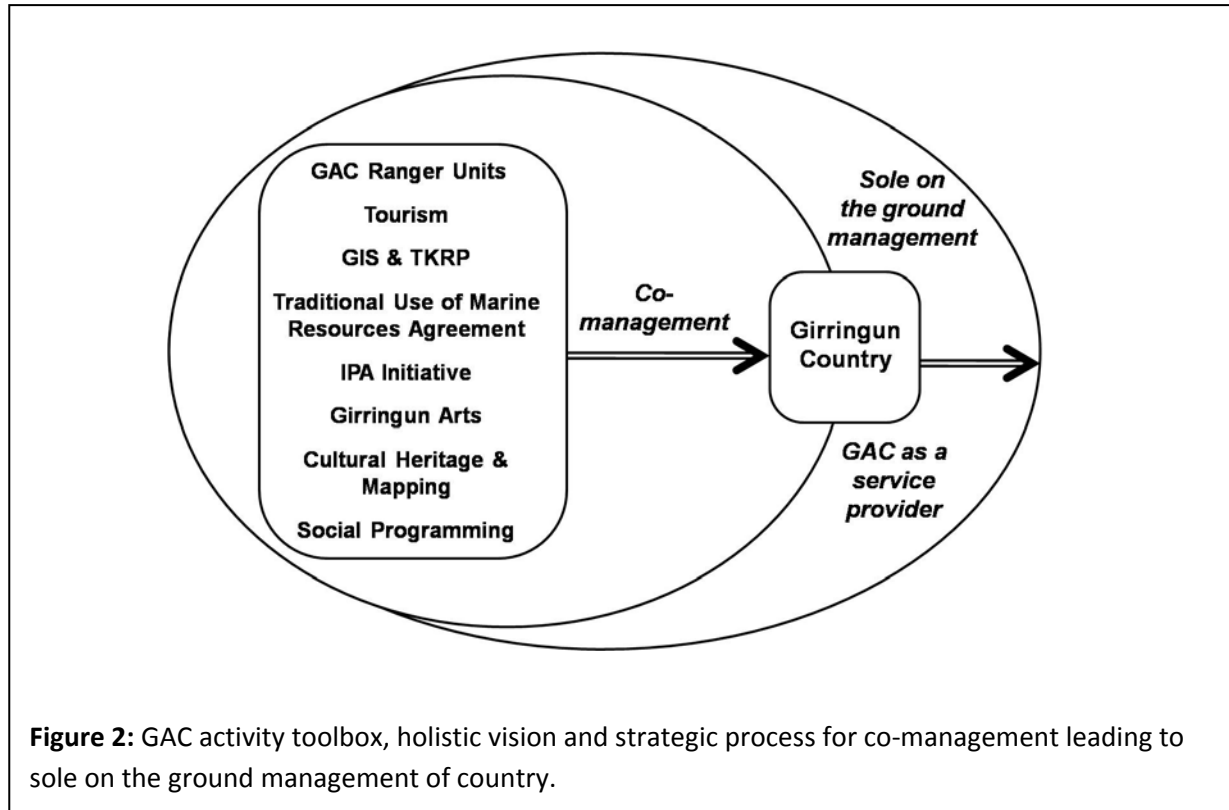


Figure 2: GAC activity toolbox, holistic vision and strategic process for co-management leading to sole on the ground management of country.

