

Outback Livelihoods: continuing conundrums

Rolf Gerritsen,

Tropical Savannas CRC and Charles Darwin University, Alice Springs

Correspondence, email: Rolf.Gerritsen@cdu.edu.au

Introduction: The Outback Livelihoods Project

This project was to be a precursor to more sustained socio-economic research contingent upon the Tropical Savannas CRC being refunded for a further five years. It was a cobbled together exercise involving four separate sub-projects:

1. A CSIRO-led exercise looking at constructing and applying Bayesian belief systems in regional economic development;
2. A PhD student investigating the conflict of ideas behind western and Aboriginal notions of “work” and the paradoxes that entails (this is presented at this Forum by Eva McRae-Williams);
3. A study of economic multipliers, an exercise of direct and important relevance to regional economic development (represented in this Forum by Natalie Stoekle and Owen Stanley); and
4. An investigation of the possibility of establishing an Aboriginal natural resource management enterprise, using the market based instrument of carbon credit trading (by myself).

This talk is about the fourth sub-project. It describes the sub-project and then goes on to outline conundrums created by the “institutional” implications for the future of remote Aboriginal communities in northern (and central) Australia that arose out of the project and the resulting requirements for further research.

Establishing a southeast Arnhemland carbon credits enterprise

This exercise was initiated in 2005 (while I was still a bureaucrat in the NT Government) and designed over a period of two years (2006/2007) dry season fieldwork. I have had an intermittent association with the Ngukurr community for nearly 30 years and am on close terms with some of the most senior males in the community. So the fieldwork was not constrained by a lack of trust but focused upon educating people on the possibilities of a carbon trading business.

The data upon which the SE Arnhemland carbon credit enterprise was predicated was supplied by Felicity Watt, of the NT Bushfires Council, and used the same satellite monitoring system pioneered by the West Arnhemland Fire Abatement Project. The WALFA project is essentially a regulatory grant program. What I wanted to design was a market based instrument approach, which is less dependent upon governmental regulatory interventions and relies upon the incentive structure of the market.

Data for fire patterns in SE Arnhemland was collected for five years. Vegetation patterns were incorporated into the data to provide a bank of potential carbon savings (by increasing early dry season fires and decreasing late dry season fires). The difference in fire intensity between early

and late fires, creates this potential carbon saving and hence the tradeable credit. Depending upon the price obtained for each tonne of verifiable carbon saved, there is a potential annual income stream of between \$400,000 and about \$1 million available to this “business”.

Therefore a southeast Arnhemland carbon credit trading corporation is sustainable and economically viable, in the strict capitalist sense. But it is unlikely to happen, at least soon.

I now seek to explain why a sustainable, equitable and participatory carbon credits enterprise is not viable under contemporary institutional frameworks and hence why dramatic reforms in the institutional framework enveloping remote Aboriginal communities is required.

Firstly, the difficulty of implementing this carbon trading scheme is not because of Aboriginal incapacity. The Aboriginal people of SE Arnhemland know how to burn the country correctly. Incipient conflicts between various groups and the potential for overlapping claims to country (caused in part by intermarriage between groups and the increase in accessing rights to country through matrilineal descent lines) can be resolved with patient consultation over an extended period. Also there are plenty of people in the community who could oversight the “business” elements of the enterprise. The problems with implementing the change in living arrangements involved in this proposal reside mainly with the structures and operation of government (and arguably these effects are worse than they were 20 years ago).

So I would claim that the difficulties with implementing this proposal lies squarely with the methods and processes of governments.

The governmental factors inhibiting Aboriginal people living on country

There are basically two sets of issues here:

A centralising spatial bias:

Essentially this is about systems of incentives that have evolved over the past 20 years and which discourage Aboriginal people from living in small family or clan groups on country and force/encourage them to live on large multi-group communities.

For example:

- The centralization of (very inadequate) education opportunities that discourages families with children from living on outstations/homelands; and
- The central bias of many programs and infrastructure (eg sporting and other facilities)

Even progressive governmental programs - in particular those associated with NRM or Aboriginal Land Management - ignore or devalue Aboriginal cultural interests in country and so are of limited social sustainability. That is they assist Aboriginal people to look after country but not necessarily to live on that country. So the Aboriginal people remain dependent upon government for the funding to carry out their conservation and land management activities. That dependence is a fragile framework for the future.

The incapacity of government

This is an equally serious charge against governments of all persuasions. It has several interconnected elements which I will outline but do not have the time to elaborate upon:

- The New Public Management (NPM) and the incentive structures created by programme budgeting versus effective fused service delivery (imposed “coordination”, via a central or lead agency, will not solve this).
- Related to the effects of NPM, the absence of long term and programmatically consistent funding (programs come and go with bewildering rapidity and inevitable ineffectiveness).
- Credentialism vs para-professionalism which limits service delivery options (this particularly affects medical services) and means inadequate levels of services are inevitable (eg the shortage of doctors in remote Aboriginal Australia).
- The change in whitefella socio-economic expectations This creates high staff turnover, which is inimical both to Aboriginal modes of operating with whitefellas and means that government service agencies have little historical memory or policy continuity. It means high transaction costs for whitefella staff.
- Inadequate resources; a particular NT problem though endemic even in Commonwealth programs (eg Wadeye COAG trial). Programs such as Land and Sea Rangers, IPA conservation programs, etc. – to say nothing of education and health (eg the inadequate medicare based funding in the NT) are all under-funded relative to need.

Arising out of the research I conducted in this Outback Livelihoods sub-project I have now begun an investigation of the means to rectify the systems of perverse incentives created by the relationship between government and remote Aboriginal communities: in effect, to try and provide an answer to the paradoxes that bedevil these “continuing conundrums”. The solutions I will propose will have to await another forum.