Geoforum 85 (2017) 197–205

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Butchulla perspectives on dingo displacement and agency at K'gari-Fraser Island, Australia

J. Carter[a,*], A. Wardell-Johnson[b], C. Archer-Lean[a]

[a] Faculty of Arts, Business and Law, University of the Sunshine Coast, Maroochydore Dc, QLD 4558, Australia
[b] Faculty of Humanities, Curtin University, Bentley, Perth, Western Australia 6102, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Dingo
Territory
Native title
World heritage
Colonising
Indigeneity

ABSTRACT

There is a complex geography to Aboriginal-dingo-settler-dog relationships in Australia. This paper examines aspects of that geography in a world heritage area, heavily contested by multiple stakeholders for whom the dingo has come to represent resource and identity, as well as a powerful symbol of nature. The Butchulla people were recently recognised in Australian law as holding native title to world-heritage listed K'gari-Fraser Island, a decision that confers recognition and consultation rights; however, genuine ownership and control of the island is denied through a lack of joint management of the island. This paper reviews evidence from some Butchulla people who declare their ongoing dispossession through various discourses and actions that attempt to circumvent extinguishment of their title to territory. They implied that dingoes have equally endured dispossession and extinguishment of territory through common colonial discourses that subjugate the 'other', albeit Butchulla people and dingoes have different forms of resistance and agency. Butchulla people in our study parallel their treatment under colonial structures of governance with those of the dingo in that both have endured limited freedom of movement and expressions of sovereignty. We argue some Butchulla people liken notions of dingo agency and resistance with their own attempts to assert sovereignty and responses to displacement. Aligning with the dingo (and broader discourses and politics that surround the dingo) may afford Butchulla people a greater entitlement to be a major voice in dingo 'management' specifically, and management of the island more broadly, than their native title resolution confers.

1. Introduction

1.1. Dingo-Aboriginal-dog-settler geographies

The Australian dingo, (*Canis dingo)*, or 'native dog' as it is colloquially known, has a long history of visitation and proximal residency around the campgrounds of Aboriginal Australians (Gunn et al., 2010; Probyn-Rapsey, 2015). Dingoes are hypothesised to descend from the Indian and Arabian wolf and may have cohabited with humans prior to arriving in Australia some 3500 years ago (Trigger et al., 2008). Smith and Litchfield (2009) argue that this pre-arrival cohabitation encouraged their shadowing of Australian Aboriginal peoples and subsequent dispersal throughout the Australian mainland.

The dingo's various roles in Aboriginal society are contested, but include guard dog, hunting dog, companion animal, emotional comfort, campsite cleaner, object of bartering, competitor for prey species, food or clothing source, status symbol, kin, and supernatural hybrid between human and nonhuman (Meggitt, 1965; Meehan et al., 1999; Cahir and Clark, 2013; Gunn et al., 2010; Hamilton, 1972; Hayden, 1975; Kolig, 1973; Long, 1974; Smith and Litchfield, 2009; Smith, 2015). Meggitt (1965) argues the relationship was one of intermittent mutual exploitation, which at times resembled quasi-domestication, that is, behavioural change through repeated training of individuals rather than domestication of a species. Smith (2015, p. 98) suggests there may have been advantages to Aboriginal Australians in being 'closely – but not too closely – associated' with dingoes. Although most dingoes leave Aboriginal campgrounds on sexual maturity, some were kept as breeders and many were 'owned' and 'named', receiving particular privileges (Cahir and Clark, 2013; Smith, 2015).

Both the dingo and the European domestic dog (*Canis familiaris*) were important to most Aboriginal Australians after colonisation. Meehan et al. (1999) documented separate conceptions of dingoes and dogs by Anbarra people, noting an increasing preference for the dog. In contrast, Aboriginal people from the southern Kimberley region refer to the dingo by the broader term for a dog (Kolig, 1978). In that region it maintains a liminal standing – guarding against threats to humans, but also posing a danger itself, realized in the occasional human death. Cahir and Clark (2013) suggest that the introduction of the rifle for

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: jcarter@usc.edu.au (J. Carter), A.Wardell-Johnson@outlook.com (A. Wardell-Johnson), carcher@usc.edu.au (C. Archer-Lean).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.08.001
Received 11 October 2016; Received in revised form 29 July 2017; Accepted 1 August 2017
Available online 05 August 2017
0016-7185/

hunting may be implicated in Aboriginal peoples' preference for the domestic dog in some places. Elsewhere there was (and is) control of dingoes, but also breeding between dingoes and the domestic dog, which may have been deliberate (Smith and Litchfield, 2009).

Hamilton (1972) notes that Jankuntjara (aka Yankunytjatjara) people classified all domestic dogs one way, whether dingo or European, and classified wild dogs another way, whether dingo or European. Similarly, Cahir and Clark (2013) note that the Dharuk word for domestic dogs was also used for dingoes, with contemporary usage of the term dingo reserved for wild (native or domestic) dog. These canid taxonomies reflect a distinction between wild and edible versus owned and inedible, supporting Hamilton's (1972) argument that there is a continuum between pre-contact dogs (dingoes) tamed as pets and the European dog. This problematising of the ontology of Indigeneity by Aboriginal people is quite common, as shown by perceptions of Aboriginal people from some places that buffalo and cattle are problematic, but regarded elsewhere as part of their 'culture' or as a 'bush' food (Trigger, 2008).

Meggitt (1965) and Hayden (1975) argue that prey species present in different environments influence dingo-human interactions, whilst Smith (2015) suggests the complex nature of Aboriginal-dingo interaction varied with language group. At a bodily scale, some burial arrangements for dingoes by Jawoyn people and elsewhere were similar to human burials, depicting particularly close individual human-dingo bonds (Cahir and Clark, 2013; Gunn et al., 2010). Noting the dingo's independence, Rose (1992, p. 176) argues that some Aboriginal people's views are that the dingo 'follows his own law', asserting its sovereignty and agency.

1.2. Dingo-human politics

Multiple representations of the dingo have been constructed in settler Australia – as a scientific curiosity, subject of conservation, pet, symbol of 'grief, longing and loneliness', symbol of Australian identity and belonging, and pest and predator of sheep and other non-humans (Trigger et al., 2008; Archer-Lean et al., 2015; Stuart 2014, p. 126). Cahir and Clark (2013) document settler practices of poisoning and shooting the dogs that accompanied Boonwurrung people in an attempt to deter their practices and movements across the newly claimed territories, and to protect introduced sheep and poultry. Early settler reports suggest some Aboriginal peoples may have resisted settlement by setting their dogs to attack livestock, disrupting the ongoing agricultural and economic expansion.

The hybridisation of the dingo with other wild canids is criticized as compromising dingo 'purity'; a colonizing discourse that Probyn-Rapsey (2015) likens to settler Australians' obsession with Aboriginal authenticity and purity, which denounced race-mixing (Probyn-Rapsey, 2015, p. 57). This 'othering' of Aboriginal people was used by settlers to distance themselves from Aboriginal people, whilst at the same time to appropriate Aboriginal (land and) cultural artefacts that defined their new, separate settler-identity; in the same way the 'pure' dingo performs a 'nativising' function for settler-identity that the hybrid dingo/dog does not (Paine, 2000). Authenticity of Aboriginality in itself is required under settler legislation to validate Aboriginal people's rights to land and environmental interests (Carter and Hollinsworth, 2009).

Instone (2004, p. 137) argues that dingo politics in society, policy and science has marked "uneasy relations between Indigenous and settler Australians … between native and non-native, vermin and endangered, wild and domestic, wilderness and civilisation, black and white". Trigger et al. (2008: 1274), however, argue there is a 'complex politics of nativeness' over who and what belongs in a post-settler nation that disrupts any Indigenous/exotic dualism. They note the dingo has been classified as exotic and introduced by some Aboriginal people, but others disregard the significance of its recent arrival. Whilst some environmentalists (such as some biologists) may be concerned for the dingo's pure-bred status, and there is a settler assertion of the dingo as the 'Australian native dog', other settlers may eat and destroy native species (Trigger et al., 2008). Government-sanctioned programs for dingo destruction included the erection of continent-scale fences to exclude dingoes from pastoral lands, and a bounty system for dingo scalps on which many Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) people relied for income (Smith, 2015), further disrupting Indigenous/exotic dualisms.

The complex interplay between human-nonhuman and Indigenous-exotic dualisms also incorporates current efforts to integrate Indigenous and Western knowledges at a rhetorical level; however, these efforts often continue to binarise and homogenise both knowledge forms while frequently denigrating or trivialising Indigenous knowledges (Stephenson and Moller, 2009; Bohensky et al., 2013). In contrast, Stuart (2014, p.127) privileged local Aboriginal knowledge by employing an Oenpelli man's knowledge of the dingo howl to validate scientists' interpretations as a reversal to the dominant validations usually exercised by scientists.

This complex dingo-human politics warrants examination in light of the colonial dispossession of Aboriginal peoples, particularly in settled parts of Australia (Cahir and Clark, 2013), and given contemporary debates over the dingo. There are concerns for the future of the dingo in Australia due to human activities such as shooting, baiting, cross-breeding with domestic/wild dogs, and tourist visitation to national parks (Probyn-Rapsey, 2015; Thompson et al., 2003). Environmental politics presupposes specific human-nonhuman relationships underpin different cultures of nature with 'their nativeness or alienness refracting different normative senses of cultural ecology' (Matless, 2000: 137). Nonhumans are also enrolled in the complex interplays between cultures of nature. Elder et al. (1998, p. 73) argue that nonhumans reproduce cultural difference where political conflict threatens the dominant 'white' structures that 'seek to maintain their positions of material and political power'. They call for a 'wild practice' in the studies of race, place and animality (1998:74) in which 'heterogeneous others use their marginality as a position from which to pursue a radically open, anarchic, and inclusive politics'.

Drawing on a focus group conversation and three interviews with Butchulla people from K'gari-Fraser Island, Australia, we critically reflect on the dominant societal discourses and practices within the institutional settings of world heritage national park. We adopt a settler colonial studies approach that foregrounds the enduring nature of settler colonialism; as Wolfe (2006: 388) says "invasion is a structure not an event". While Wolfe's thesis on the 'logic of elimination' of the native is too totalizing (Rowse, 2014), the heuristic value of the settler colonial lens remains critical (Veracini, 2014) to help illuminate the enduring structural impact of colonialism, and Indigenous agency and responses to the governing logics.

Firstly we present the study area at world heritage listed K-gari Fraser Island. The first author conducted ethnographic research with several Butchulla people between 2005 and 2008, in which the donor requested 'protocols of engagement'; however, the Butchulla people in that study preferred to talk about their interests in K'gari-Fraser Island (Carter, 2010). She re-initiated relationships with several Butchulla people in 2014 after one person invited her to the native title decision reading on Kgari-Fraser Island, furthering the ethnographic approach. In 2015 she attended a meeting of the Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation Registered Native Title Body Corporate (RNTBC) to introduce operations staff from her university (as the university leases a facility on the island) and potential PhD students. She also discussed this research on dingoes which was designed to document stakeholder responses to the state-government dingo safe strategy. All authors were involved in seeking Butchulla perspectives about the dingo-safe strategy, and their perspectives on dingo management. Several subsequent phone conversations were held with representatives of the RNTBC, after which the secretary sent an invitation to members to attend a focus group in early 2016, run by the authors. Six people were present.

In addition, one unstructured interview was held with a person during a telephone conversation to initiate the focus group, and another