Healthy country, healthy people: An Australian Aboriginal organisation's adaptive governance to enhance its social–ecological system

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ABSTRACT

Scholars and environmental managers of complex social–ecological systems (SESs) have called for new institutional models to facilitate adaptive governance. This paper explores one adaptive governance approach as used by Girringun Aboriginal Corporation, an association of Australian Aboriginal groups in north-eastern Australia. Girringun uses this approach to translate customary obligations into sophisticated management actions that address the complex social, economic, land and sea management challenges encountered on its members' country. Its decision-making is informed by philosophies of 'caring for country' and 'healthy country, healthy people'. Girringun's strategies articulate cultural, social and livelihood development aspirations into environmental management, education and visual art projects and activities. Governance emphasises strong and visionary leadership, reconciliation, and strategic partnerships developed to expand its role as SES managers in co-operation with non-Aboriginal organisations. Girringun's innovative structure and creative strategies provide insight into adaptive governance of cross-cultural SES, where differing aspirations and institutional arrangements can be melded towards creative management opportunities.

1. Introduction

The useful concept of 'social–ecological' systems (Gunderson et al., 1995; Berkes and Folke, 1998; Gunderson and Holling, 2002; Westley et al., 2002; Berkes et al., 2003) resonates with the Australian Aboriginal way of recognising the physical, social and spiritual interdependency of 'people' and 'country', the interdependence of cultural and natural values. Aboriginal cosmologies do not separate social and biophysical worlds, nor the spiritual from the material. This connection is widely documented in geographical and anthropological literature by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians (for example: Rose, 1996; Langton, 1996, 1998, 2003; Baker, 1999; Young, 1999). Rose (1996:7) explains that to Aboriginal Australians "country... is a nourishing terrain. Country is a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with". For coastal peoples, 'country' includes land and sea: the marine is not seen as a separate domain, although inland and coastal peoples may distinguish themselves as 'freshwater' and 'saltwater' peoples. Aboriginal kinship systems relate people to tracts of 'country', as well as to one another. The popular Aboriginal phrase 'healthy country, healthy people' encapsulates the view that when the environment is in good condition, its people are also in good physical and spiritual health (cf Parlee et al., 2005). Seeing degraded environments, and feeling responsible (realistically or not) for their decline, depletes Aboriginal people spiritually. In many ways, the holistic Aboriginal worldview goes well beyond the current academic conceptualisation of a social–ecological system, with its inclusion of spiritual influences, the complexity of types of people–environment relationship recognised, and the intense spiritual as well as practical nature of the bond. The mutually supportive people–country relationship highlighted in our title is an emergent property of such systems.

Ownership and management of their land and sea 'country' is based on an ethos of responsibility. 'Ownership' translates to rights of resource use rather than landed property rights, accompanied by strong cultural imperatives towards stewardship. This includes ensuring perpetuation of species for future seasons and generations. Aboriginal groups use the term 'caring for country' to signify their management acts. These acts simultaneously enable them to look after country, to practice their culture and to share their knowledge with younger generations. 'Caring for country' includes customary and cultural resource management: hunting and

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gathering for bush food, medicine and firewood; maintenance and protection of sacred sites; as well as camping and recreation; natural resource management: fire management; cleaning of natural waters; as well as the development of commercial economic activities: cultural ecotourism, bush harvest of plant foods and medicines for sale, horticulture (see Baker et al., 2001; Walsh and Mitchell, 2002; Davies et al., 2010). Thus resource use, conservation or enhancement of the resource, and visiting country are conceptually intertwined.

Aboriginal governance is similarly holistic. Country is held as shared property, not as an individual right, although certain Aboriginal individuals or families may have specific rights to or responsibilities for certain parts of 'country' (for example sacred sites, or animal species). Aboriginal people identify with specific tribal or language groups. These groups each own and manage specific estates. Estate sizes vary with natural resource abundance, with arid estates needing to be larger than well-watered ones in order to provide Aboriginal people with year-round food resources (Peterson, 1976). In Northeast Australia, where resources are abundant, these estates are relatively small. For example, 72 Aboriginal language groups hold the coastline that coincides with the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area that stretches for 2000 km along the east coast of Australia (GBRMPA, 2010a).

Decision-making, by the older and most knowledgeable Traditional Owners (individuals who have direct lineage to, knowledge of and thus 'traditional ownership', of the related estate or 'country'), is consensual, and bounded within well understood parameters of traditional law. In contemporary times this law continues to be informed by Traditional Ecological Knowledge, demonstrating extraordinary understanding of ecosystem behaviour (Walsh, 1990) and accompanying practices to foster favoured foods. Apart from some gendered responsibilities, there are no 'silos' of management expertise such as western societies have (health, education and environmental management) or role differentiation (clergy, lawmakers) as some traditional societies have. While Aboriginal customary discourses emphasise the maintenance of continuities in management of country and people, rather than adaptiveness, uncertainty of food and water supply was and remains a feature of the highly variable climates. In the past, Aboriginal people accommodated this through both sophisticated knowledge of ecological behaviour (cognitive management), and social rules promoting sharing of resources and hosting of others during their times of scarcity. Thus the society was organised around adaptation for survival within a highly variable set of ecological systems.

Adaptive governance (Folke et al., 2005; Olsson et al., 2006, 2007; Hahn et al., 2006) is recognised as a key to managing social–ecological systems (SESs) effectively, towards resilience in desired states or transformation to more desirable states (Walker and Salt, 2006; Cork, 2010). This governance expands adaptive management of ecosystems to structures and processes for decision making and power sharing (Lebel et al., 2006) that enable such management (Dietz et al., 2003). Such governance connects individuals, organisations, institutions and agencies at multiple organisational levels (Folke et al., 2005; Olsson et al., 2007; Hoole and Berkes, 2010) through structures that promote collective action and social co-ordination.

Advocates, researchers and practitioners suggest adaptive governance processes are encouraged by a suite of social characteristics, including network development, organisational and social learning and visionary leadership (Cash et al., 2003; Folke et al., 2005; Keen et al., 2005; Davidson-Hunt, 2006; Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007a,b; Weber and Khademian, 2008). Networks across and between multiple organisational levels are essential for the sharing of management power and responsibility among user groups, and communities of interest (including government and non-government organisations) (Folke et al., 2005). Networks also facilitate

knowledge sharing and translation between social groups with different world views (Cash et al., 2003) and thus provide for learning opportunities (Weber and Khademian, 2008) as well as improved capacity for knowledge co-production (Maclean and Cullen, 2009) and adaptive learning (Davidson-Hunt, 2006).

Organisational learning is promoted as essential to the adaptive management of SES. A learning organisation promotes adaptive expertise – the capacity of individuals to learn effectively from their experience. This practice develops knowledge and skills necessary for individuals and organisations to deal with the uncertainty inherent to the management of SES (Folke et al., 2005). Social learning (Keen et al., 2005; Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007a,b) is coupled with organisational and individual learning. It entails individuals, groups and organisations learning how to collaborate with others, to understand their roles within different spheres of influence and at different scales, and to understand their capacities to act within any given SES (Pahl-Wostl, 2009). Supportive social conditions to maximise social learning include: action competence (knowledge of the particular skills and learning needed to facilitate action); good social capital (relationship building based on trust, reciprocity and shared norms); and access to information (extended knowledge and communication networks) (Fien and Skoin, 2002); and the co-evolution of cooperation and specific social norms (Levin, 2006).

Visionary leadership is fundamental for adaptive governance. Key individuals promote network development between and across institutions and organisations, encourage knowledge sharing, build trust, and help transform organisations through organisational and social learning (Folke et al., 2005). Some scholars advocate that bridging organisations link actors and organisations across different scales of interest, practise these characteristics and also provide the location for these characteristics to thrive (Folke et al., 2005; Hahn et al., 2006; Berkes, 2009).

While Aboriginal people maintain strong values and principles towards managing their country, and (albeit disrupted) cultural knowledge and governance systems, in many parts of Australia their formal rights to manage their country are limited. The majority of Aboriginal groups remain dispossessed of all or much of their land, although areas of land have been returned to some groups through property purchases, conditional native title rights and land rights legislation. Despite some promising co-management and Aboriginal land management options (Ross et al., 2009), the majority of Aboriginal language groups lack formal, recognised avenues for sole or shared management of their customary lands. Even where the general public is consulted about environmental management, Aboriginal people are frequently marginalised within such discussions or participate on disadvantaged terms (Young et al., 1991; Orchard et al., 2003; Lane and Hibbard, 2005). Management of country is difficult to link to social development under the fragmented dominant paradigm of national, state and territory governance. Thus Aboriginal groups are highly constrained in their efforts to fulfil their cultural responsibilities towards their country, and practise their customary governance in environmental and social management across their land and sea country.

Despite these challenges, many self-organised Aboriginal groups are gaining recognition from their government counterparts, for their environmental governance and management efforts. The Federal government 'Indigenous Australians caring for country' program (Australian Government, 2011) is testament to this. These self-organising groups assert their connection to country and aspirations for social development through a range of initiatives. In particular, they engage with the environmental governance landscape as "a means of resolving resource conflicts, enhancing indigenous capacity to regain and manage custodial lands, and developing community autonomy" (Lane and Hibbard, 2005:72).