



# Wunambal Gaambara Healthy Country Plan Mid Term Evaluation: External Perspectives

Dutton | Nautilus Impact Investing LLC | November 20, 2015

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Disclaimer**

This report was prepared by Nautilus Impact Investing LLC as part of a series of reports prepared for the mid-term review of the Wunambal Gaambera healthy Country Plan. The report should be read and used in conjunction with those other reports. Distribution and use of this report is subject to the approval of Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation.

## **Citation**

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## **Executive Summary**

In June, 2015 Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation (WGAC) and Bush Heritage Australia (BHA) invited Ian Dutton from Nautilus Impact Investing to participate in a mid-term evaluation of the Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Plan. The Healthy Country Plan was adopted in 2010 by the WGAC and sets into motion the process for realization of the Wunambal Gaambera Uunguu (the living country) Vision.

The mid-term evaluation was designed to coincide with the annual meeting of the Uunguu Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (UMEC). Ian was invited to participate in the UMEC meeting as an external reviewer to provide an independent perspective on progress with the Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Plan.

This report focuses on the results of both interviews of stakeholders in the plan and observations made by the reviewer; it is one of several reports that comprises the record and recommendations of the 2015 UMEC meeting and, as such, should be read in conjunction with those reports.

My overall assessment of the HCP process is that something quite remarkable on a global scale is happening on Wunambal Gaambera country. Indigenous people returning to their country have begun to reconnect and invigorate culture and ecological health. That such change is becoming evident in such a short time frame is encouraging and surprising – this type of social change and the attendant ecological changes being documented at each UMEC meeting normally takes much longer.

This perception of positive change is also shared by stakeholders in the WGHCP. From local to national levels, partners with the WGHCP process are supportive and encouraged by the early results and by the processes being employed in implementing the WGHCP.

However, as with many projects implemented in remote regions, there is a pressing need to more proactively and effectively communicate the results of work being done by WGAC and its partners. This recommendation is particularly important as the federal government undertakes reviews of the IPA and Ranger programs in the lead up to decisions about renewal of funding. The report notes several additional areas related to systems and staffing where some further attention by WGAC and BHA could accelerate positive change and build robust community capacity over the longer term.

*We are in a relationship with the land and the conditions of any other relationship apply... Aboriginal wisdom is the most under-utilized intellectual and emotional resource this country has (Winton, 2015).*

## Context

In June, 2015 Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation and Bush Heritage Australia (BHA) invited Ian Dutton to join the core team to undertake a mid-term evaluation of the Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Plan. The evaluation framework is presented in the table below.

FOCUS PARTICIPANT	PROCESS		PLAN <b>(Is the HCP working? Are colours changing?)</b>
	Does the HCP follow good OS process?	Community process?	
TRADITIONAL OWNERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Link to 'HCP Self Assessment'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TO evaluation</li> <li>Beau, Hmalan and WG researchers to design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TO review</li> <li>Ask about assets / threats</li> <li>Stories / significant change</li> <li>Result support / question priority</li> </ul>
STAKEHOLDERS / EXPERTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Independent CAP Coach / Peer Review</li> <li>HCP Self Assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beau, Hmalan and WG researchers to design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collate monitoring data</li> <li>HCP Manager analyse</li> <li>Seek peer review of results</li> </ul>
WHAT DO WE DO WITH THE RESULTS?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improvements to HCP</li> <li>Inform next 5yr process / UMEC</li> <li>Communicate process improvements to OS / HCP community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify areas that need improvement</li> <li>Process adaptation</li> <li>Communicate results</li> <li>Strengthen local participation in UMEC</li> <li>Direct next 5yr process / UMEC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Report to WGAC</li> <li>Report to wider WG community</li> <li>Revisit Viability / Threat Table</li> <li>Adapt Result chains</li> <li>Report to investors (current)</li> <li>Present to investors (prospective)</li> </ul>

The evaluation was undertaken to assess progress in implementing the Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Plan (Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, 2010), a systematic adaptive management framework to realize the 2020 Wunambal Gaambera Uunguu Vision. The plan was developed using the Conservation Action Planning (CAP) method initially developed by The Nature Conservancy and subsequently broadened to become the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation developed by the Conservation Measures Partnership (<http://www.conservationmeasures.org/>).

## Evaluation Methodology

The core evaluation team comprised representatives from Conservation Management Australia, Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation/Bush Heritage Australia, Charles Darwin University and Nautilus Impact Investing (IMD). Ian Dutton's primary role was to contribute to the "process" elements of the evaluation, with a particular focus on external stakeholder perspectives. Between July and September, the core evaluation team met by phone twice to clarify roles and responsibilities, discuss evaluation logistics and share background materials.

The timing for the evaluation process was designed to coincide with the annual meeting of the Uunguu Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, an advisory committee to the Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation. The UMEC meets each year with WGAC Directors and Rangers; the 2015 Meeting was scheduled to be held on country in October 2015.

Ian Dutton set up interviews with nine key informants prior to the UMEC meeting and with one subsequent to the meeting:

- Norm McKenzie (UMEC member and W.A. DPAW)
- David Hinchley (TNC Northern Australia program)
- Jane Dewing (Dept. PM&C)
- Gerard O'Neill (BHA)
- Marcus Ashford (Dept. PM&C)
- Rod Kennett (UMEC Member and AITSIAS)
- Pip Walsh (ex BHA and UMEC member, now independent consultant)
- Ari Gorring (KLC)
- Daniel Holyoake (KLC)
- Kim Doohan (independent cultural heritage expert and UMEC member)

Each interview was designed to (a) elicit an understanding of the informant's relationship with the WGHCP, (b) develop insights into their perspectives on, and engagement with the planning process and (c) seek their feedback on the results from initial plan

implementation and monitoring efforts to date. Each informant was asked a short number of common questions, but each interview was tailored to the specific interests and knowledge of each respondent.

### **Feedback on the WGHCP from Interviewees**

Consistent with increasing national interest in the effectiveness of the Working on Country and Indigenous Protected Area programs generally (Pew Charitable Trusts & Synergies Economic Consulting, 2015), the WGHCP process has attracted a lot of attention from a broad range of governmental and nongovernmental interests. Several interviewees noted that because of the high profile of the planning process and the early adoption of CAP as the planning framework (which set a standard for subsequent plans), WGHCP has attracted more interest than many other IPA plans.

Most interviewees were very complimentary about the work that has been done to date, recognizing that the WGAC has placed community interests at the center of the planning process and balanced cultural and ecological interests well. Some interviewees did, however, also observe that because there were “no clear guidelines” for healthy country planning, it is hard to assess how well WGHCP was performing relative to regional and national peers. There was consequently many comments about how WGHCP is an evolving experiment in a new form of land and water governance. Interviewees who had been less directly engaged in the process expressed strong interest in hearing more about what WGHCP stakeholders are learning about plan performance and adaptation.

#### ***What is Working Well?***

Overall, informants were enthusiastic about the approach and direction of the WGHCP process. There was evident admiration for the quality of the planning process which was described by several as “the gold standard” for Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) management planning, particularly the high level of community engagement in the process. Equally notable, there was positive support for the broad partnership between a national non-government organization, government agencies and regional organizations such as the Kimberley Land Council and the way they collectively engage their community. While it was clear that many of these players are new to working with each other and there are still uncertainties to address, there is generally a positive spirit of commitment to achieve positive outcomes for the Wunambal Gaambera people.

Observations about what is working well that were made by interviewees included:

- WGHCP is a “sophisticated” and “inspiring” plan – several interviewees noted that it sets the standard for IPA planning in Australia.

- “*Others are looking at WG HCP as the standard and what they are doing will have an impact at the national level*”
- Dual emphasis on cultural and ecological targets is relatively new and needed.
  - “*WG HCP has created a fresh new way of linking measures of indigenous health with measures of ecosystem health*”
- Existence of, and emphasis on, monitoring (and evaluation) is both uncommon and powerful – role of UMEC as an internal review mechanism is appreciated.
  - “*You can see the positive impact this process is having at the community level and you can check the evidence trail for those impacts*”
- Bush Heritage Australia has played a key and catalytic partnership role in the WG HCP process to date and is recognized as being a key resource for the community.
  - “*Tom has been instrumental in helping WGAC directors, TOs and KLC rangers to move effectively from planning to implementation*”
- Wunambal Gaambera community engagement has been strong and positive despite the complexities and uncertainties associated with their commitment.
  - “*WG has stuck with the plan even though its pretty alien*”
- Emphasis on partnerships has been key to plan adoption and progress to date with implementation – the plan needs many players at the table.
  - “*WG HCP team has done it the right way*” (engaging many stakeholders in the WGHCP process and the IPA implementation work)
  - “*We need to compromise a little if we want to find ways to do things together and WG HCP team has been prepared to find that common ground with partners*”

## **What Could be Improved?**

The top four areas for improvement (mentioned by three or more interviewees) included:

- Communications with others – there was frequent reference to the challenges of keeping stakeholders informed about progress with plan implementation. Some of these challenges relate to the lack of a website where information updates are posted; other relate to the lack of follow up on the more extensive communication process that was employed during the planning process. Some interviewees also

observed that maintaining communications within UMEC was challenging between meetings.

- “*underdone, disjointed and ineffective*” - were some of the adjectives used to describe communications challenges; there was strong support for finding ways to share information about the WGHCP plan and implementation experience more broadly.
- More (sustained/predictable/diverse) funding – several interviewees noted the uncertainty of future federal government funding for IPAs and the national ranger program. This uncertainty, combined with limited alternative sources of funding to support the WGHCP was considered by some interviewees to limit the ability of the community to move forward on all plan objectives and will undermine the ability of WGAC to develop community capacity over the longer term.
  - “*there are a lot of funding challenges ahead and we should begin thinking about these with more urgency as they will affect to implementation of the plan more and more*”
- More focused (or narrower set of) priorities for action, including monitoring efforts – several interviewees were concerned that the plan and range of activities to be undertaken by the WGHCP team was too ambitious. They felt that they could not assess whether or not the plan was working because they did not know enough about progress on specific actions. This view reflects the communications challenges noted above, but also underscores a fundamental lack of understanding of the way the WGHCP works. A couple of respondents were unaware, for example, of the key role played by UMEC in advising WGAC on plan implementation and helping build community capacity.
  - “*The plan tries to do too much and they need to prioritize resources better*”
- Working relationship with WA State Government – several interviewees noted that while the relationship with the federal government has been strong throughout the process, the WA state government has been sporadically engaged and that various state-led processes such as the Kimberley Science & Conservation Strategy are now operating asynchronously with the WGHCP. That lack of harmonization of state interest and policies is considered by many to undermine the work of the Wunambal Gaambera community leading to inefficient use of resources and creating uncertainty around key land and sea use decision-making (e.g. in relation to the marine parks being proposed for areas of the Kimberley coast).

- “yes there are challenges – the State has been difficult at every step of the way, but they must be bought into the process especially at the regional scale.
- *this relationship must be addressed as it is fundamental to how effective the plan will be in the long term”*

Additional areas for improvement raised by interviewees included:

- Data integration and sharing with other groups – is there scope for a more regional approach to data management especially given that we want to understand the aggregate impact of IPAs and their relationship with other conservation strategies?
- Better documentation is needed of the social outcomes of IPAs<sup>1</sup> – the current Healthy Country Plan measures are too focused on biological measures; by providing more regular assessment of the social conditions of the community, especially those members who are now living back on country, it would help make a stronger case for long term support of IPAs as a social development model.
- Business planning – needs to be better woven into the HCP process, although integrating CAP/OS and business planning is, in itself, a challenge.
- Capacity building – interviewees questioned whether WG is taking the time to establish adequate long term capacity within the WG community – e.g. are youth adequately engaged?
- Traditional knowledge – one respondent questioned whether traditional knowledge is being adequately used to inform actions – although acknowledging that the planning process had been respectful and effective in engaging traditional owners, they had not seen enough evidence to date to suggest that traditional knowledge was underpinning plan implementation.
- There is a lack of clarity about who is in charge of various activities - the many different activities undertaken under the plan involve many groups and two interviewees suggested that it would help to have a better sense at UMEC meetings and in reports who is responsible for them.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that these interviews pre-dated the release of a new report by Pew Charitable Trusts and Synergies Economic Consulting (2015) on social and economic impacts of indigenous land and sea management: [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/thecountryneedsitspeople/pages/118/attachments/original/1447123572/Working\\_for\\_Our\\_Country\\_report.pdf?1447123572](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/thecountryneedsitspeople/pages/118/attachments/original/1447123572/Working_for_Our_Country_report.pdf?1447123572)

- Inadequate focus on role of women in HCP – one interviewee wished more could have been done to address women’s roles earlier in process and believes that investing more in women in leadership will be worthwhile.
- Cultural knowledge – there is a pressing need to complete cultural knowledge compendium to the plants and animals knowledge compendium (Karadada, 2011) and to do that quickly so as to not lose further elder knowledge.
- Miradi has limited ability to provide management intelligence and share progress on indicators – we need to find better ways to capture and share data from that framework.

### **Independent Observations**

In addition to consulting key informants, and contributing to the workshop discussions, I was also asked to provide an independent assessment of the WGHCP Process. I am in an unusual position to do this for two reasons. Firstly, given my experience with The Nature Conservancy developing the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation as part of the initial Conservation Measures Partnership, and leading the TNC Global Measures and Audit team, I had a solid technical understanding of the methods underpinning the WGHCP and a wide range of experience with evaluations of comparable projects. Secondly, because of my limited engagement in, and knowledge of, Australian conservation projects since 2009 but ongoing engagement in indigenous knowledge and stewardship programs globally, I was able to bring a global perspective to the work.

My overall assessment of the HCP process is that something quite remarkable on a global scale is happening on Wunambal Gaambera country. Indigenous people returning to their country have begun to reconnect and invigorate culture and ecological health. That such change is becoming evident in such a short time frame is encouraging and surprising – this type of change normally takes much longer. I left the UMEC workshop wondering what more we could do to help support the Wunambal Gaambera community with that transformation and committed to sharing my experience and observations of the WGHCP with other indigenous land and water stewards globally.

For more specific comments on aspects of the evaluation process, I elected to apply a plus/delta framework for my personal observations – these should be read in conjunction with the other workshop outputs as much of my feedback was captured during those discussions.

**Plus** (things that are working well and should be continued or strengthened):

- UMEC – the existence of UMEC and the way it works to engage traditional owners, rangers and managers in annual reflection on plan progress is impressive

and unusual. Very few conservation plans, in my experience, create a process to look in the rear vision mirror the way that UMEC does; even fewer engage the broader community of key plan stakeholders in the way that UMEC does. It was notable that during the 3 days of on-site workshop meetings, there was active participation by the people doing the work and others who were key communication and decision-making agents within the Wunambal Gaambera community. Could the process be improved? Could the community be more engaged? Could communication be more effective? Yes, yes and yes, but this novel approach of bringing together a combination of knowledgeable and connected experts with local “on country” experts is a very effective forum to build capacity, learn from experience and adapt plans as needed. From a purely process perspective, the work of UMEC is one of the strongest features of the Wunambal Gaambera HCP. While these meetings are not inexpensive, I consider that the investment pays off many times over in terms of improved stakeholder engagement, knowledge transfer/capacity building and more effective (and likely efficient) implementation of the HCP. The default (or alternative) option would be to place more responsibility in the hands of the implementing team and/or Directors and while they would no doubt do their best, their efforts would lack the benefit of independent scrutiny and enrichment of decades of experience that UMEC members bring to the table. In summary, keeping UMEC meeting and being open to the advice UMEC offers is perhaps the single most important process investment that Wunambal Gaambera Directors can make.

- Ranger Engagement – it was pleasing to be able to hear first-hand from the rangers who undertake much of the day-to-day implementation of the WGHCP and who clearly are developing new skills and confidence in their many assignments. The rangers are the key agents of change on country, performing a wide range of stewardship, education and managerial tasks. It was heartening to see their pride in the work being done, desire to continuously learn and willingness to remain open to new approaches. The way UMEC provides feedback to rangers and traditional owners meets obvious training needs and further encourages reflection and learning. The recently released Working for our Country Report (Pew Charitable Trusts & Synergies Economic Consulting, 2015) describes a very broad but high impact set of impacts from the national ranger program that may provide a useful framework for further assessment of what WG rangers are achieving. It was clear from my interactions with the WG rangers that not only do they have a reinvigorated sense of pride in culture and place, but they are also developing a land and water stewardship skill set that is critical to the attainment of the Uunguu Vision.
- Engagement of the WG Aboriginal Corporation General Manager throughout the UMEC meeting. It is often difficult to adequately engage senior managers in a

meeting like a UMEC workshop and yet it is critically important to both their understanding of the work of UMEC and to the uptake of actions arising from the meeting. Kudos to Bevan Stott for actively engaging in UMEC meetings – keep attending and keep playing the key role of advocating for the interests of the traditional owners and WGAC Directors so that scientists and managers understand the management context for recommendations.

- Momentum – Newton's first principle - an object in motion tends to remain in motion, and an object at rest tends to remain at rest – has much relevance to the land and water stewardship approach being developed under the WGHCP. During the course of the workshop it was evident that many stakeholders were looking for signs of movement in target condition or threat status. Some of the most in-depth discussions occurred during review of trends in target condition.

#### Qualitative Rating of Trends in Targets (and Confidence of Ratings)

TARGET	TREND	CONFIDENCE
1 WW Law & Culture	↗	2
2 Right way fire	↗	3
3 Aambla	↗	2
4 Wulo	↗	2
5 Mawal	—	1
6 Bush Plants	? ↗ 3 - 1?	2 (1)
7 Rock Art	↗	2
8 Cultural Places Isab	↗	3
9 Fish	4 - 5?	2 (1)
10 Manguro/ Balgoia	↗ 4 -	2

This is typical of many early stage investment projects. However, it is often hard to discern movement over short time scales, especially where a range of externalities may affect individual measures of target condition faster than the conservation strategy intervention (e.g. an El Nino event). The ability to detect change (positive or negative) and therefore build momentum (or make the case for change of strategy) is critical to long term program success. That the change in “right way fire” was so evident after just a few short years had a discernable and positive impact on the WGHCP team. The exercise of rating trends in other

targets (see table above) was equally important building understanding and buy in; I recommend continuing the broad trend dialogue as a standing agenda item at each UMEC meeting.

- Documentation of Field Activities - one of the process elements most referenced during the meeting was the emphasis on documentation of field work – the long term value of reports and photographs from field activities is often under-recognized. While there is still an inadequate system for organizing and accessing that knowledge over the long haul, these reports are fundamental building blocks of a knowledge system that will ultimately be a key part of the intellectual assets of the Wunambal Gaambera community and a valuable font of knowledge for other land and sea stewards in Northern Australia. There is value (as was recommended at the meeting) in investing in a more systematic and accessible data collection system, but obviously work needs to be done up front to ensure that the intellectual property of the WGAC is protected.
- Adaptive Management – as is noted elsewhere in the evaluation discussions, it was pleasing to see that WGHCP stakeholders are prepared to refine and adjust strategies – the amalgamation of targets, revision of threat rankings and build out of results chains are all indicators that not only is the plan being actively “test driven and fine-tuned”, but that information gained truly is guiding decision-making, increasing the confidence of stakeholders in the plan.
- Workshop Structure and Facilitation – although UMEC did propose some timely changes to the way future UMEC meetings will be conducted, it is appropriate to acknowledge that the meeting was designed to accommodate diverse participant interests and responded to changing need as the meeting evolved. It is particularly important that WG community members who participate in UMEC workshops (sometimes wearing sometime multiple hats) have the opportunity to shape the meeting – kudos to the facilitator for being attentive to that need, making space when needed for a change in agenda and for encouraging further innovation in future meetings.

#### **Delta (things that could be improved):**

- Expanding Technical Assistance/Succession Planning – as was observed by key informants, I was struck by the important role performed by Bush Heritage Australia, particularly through the work of Tom Vigilante in providing technical support to WGAC for many facets of plan implementation and ranger training. Tom clearly has a diverse skill set, a passion for his work and a tremendous working relationship with the Wunambal Gaambera community. However, as

with anyone who works in the field away from home and who has only limited support resources, there is a need to consider position sustainability and broaden the base of support services so that Tom is not overstretched. Ideally, and with a view to longer term succession planning, that process should involve both a deepening of local capacity and a broadening of support for this position (at the WGAC level). The deepening of local capacity could also accelerate the development of leadership skills among the ranger team. This process is underway, but there is not a clear development plan for the more senior ranger staff. Such a plan is beyond the remit of BHA or even WG Directors – there would need to be close coordination with the Kimberley Land Council and much depends on the future of Federal support for the ranger program. Broadening the technical capabilities of the team is a simpler matter, but one that potentially involves bringing extra resources to the table and providing Tom with some relief to pursue higher value added tasks. This could be accomplished at relatively low marginal cost (e.g. by use of interns/volunteers or research assistants during summer months). This need is something that BHA may wish to evaluate further as it refines strategy working in partnership with WGAC Directors as it relates to how BHA resources similar field partnerships. This is also something that WGAC needs to evaluate further as it develops long term workforce plans.

- Tracking Resource Support for the Plan Implementation – although we did not specifically address questions of efficiency in other areas of the UMEC meeting and I recognize that resource allocation is the responsibility of the WG Directors, it was hard to evaluate “value for money” or recommend “cost-effective” new strategies in the absence of more information about HCP implementation resources. The disconnect between planning and budgeting is a perennial problem for most land and water stewards – even the best long-established global conservation programs have typically incomplete data about the full costs of specific strategies. However, some sense of level of effort/investment is key to understanding the potential return on that investment. UMEC has requested that some additional data be provided in future on proposed investments in specific WGHC strategies and can likely play a valuable advisory role to WG Directors on both “value for money” and potential sources of supplemental funding for specific projects. For now, I’d recommend that WG Directors track investments in strategies of priority interest and request UMEC advice where appropriate on the potential cost-effectiveness of specific projects.
- Workshop Scope – there are plans to adjust aspects of future UMEC meetings, and these are well founded. One point to note, however, is that while this meeting was complicated by the mid-term evaluation, even less packed meetings still face a time crunch – three days is not very long for annual UMEC meetings. For that reason and given the costs of bringing UMEC members face-to-face, I would

encourage both (a) careful framing of future meeting agendas to maximize the value of discussion time (as per the recommendations made during the meeting) and (b) exploration of options for video or teleconference meetings between annual meetings on select topics. While local broadband connectivity is limited, and there is lesser value in video meetings generally, they may be helpful in enabling UMEC members to better prepare topics for the in person discussion and for enabling rangers to provide UMEC members with timely reports/updates from the field.

- Digital File Sharing – there is a rich and fast growing library of information associated with the WGHCP. WG Community and UMEC members have different digital filing systems and it was unclear to me who is the keeper of the digital record of the WGHCP. It could be timely to establish a controlled access cloud library similar to the Dropbox folder established by the mid-term evaluation team.
- Cross program learning – I was struck by the tremendous amount of knowledge that WG stakeholders have to offer indigenous and rural communities throughout Australia as a result of their five years' experience implementing the WGHCP. I was also struck by how many other indigenous and rural communities globally are also testing new approaches to land and water stewardship that would be of benefit to the WG community. Various UMEC members suggested options for cross program learning and exchanges within and beyond the Kimberley region. It could be helpful for UMEC members to track and communicate opportunities for cross program learning that are particularly relevant to the WGHCP on an ongoing basis – perhaps through an electronic bulletin board or similar.

## Conclusion

*If we've learned anything about living in this country, it's that we depend on its health for our sustenance. (Winton, 2015)*

Wunambal Gaambera country is a key cultural and ecological stronghold within the Kimberley region. The persistence of the Kimberley region as an important global biodiversity conservation region owes much to tens of thousands of indigenous land and water stewardship. That it has taken more than 200 years to recognize the critical role that indigenous people play in conservation reflects the legacy of misdirected colonial governance systems, a lack of respect for traditional culture and a lack of understanding of the long-term benefits of indigenous stewardship.

The WGHCP and plan implementation process is a very positive step in healing a culture that has been denied stewardship rights for too long, and in ensuring that the many values

that healthy country brings to Australians at large (e.g. reduced carbon emissions) persist. Yes, there are always things to work on and improve – such is the nature of complex cultural and ecological systems. But the big picture is that this first five years of healthy country planning is bringing hope to the Wunambal Gaambera people and positively impacting the lands and waters they depend on.

With further investment in the WGHC, including (a) maintaining an ongoing willingness (and capacity through UMEC) to evaluate and adapt the plan, (b) expansion of partnerships with other regional, state and federal land and water stewardship organizations, and (c) developing community capacity for stewardship the future for the Wunambal Gaambera Uunguu is bright.

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