

## Pukarrikarta-jangka muwarr – Stories about caring for Karajarri country

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*I am a Karajarri woman from Bidyadanga community in Western Australia. As a researcher at the Nulungu Research Institute, located at the Yawuru buru (Broome) campus, of the University of Notre Dame Australia, I am often required to bring together traditional knowledge and Western rationalist approaches to knowledge generation in my research endeavours. This article reflects on my cultural background, knowledge, traditional language and beliefs. It locates these important elements of my life in contemporary modern Australia, and challenges the prevailing colonial frameworks that continue to undermine the legitimate use of our knowledge to manage our homelands. Using my Karajarri family to illustrate, this article explains the importance of caring for country and describes the belief systems that establish and maintain our cultural obligations to country. The importance and connectedness of language to country is highlighted, and the significance and value of country is demonstrated through our spiritual understandings and cultural practices.*

I am a Karajarri woman. Karajarri-kura ngurra, traditional Karajarri country, is located south of the township of Broome in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. It encompasses the contrasting environments of the south Kimberley coast and the adjacent Great Sandy Desert. Karajarri ngarrungu, the Karajarri people, are Aboriginal people who are locally identified by others, as Karajarri. Our collective name Karajarri literally means ‘west-facing/being’ or ‘west-oriented’ (Bagshaw, 2003, p. 29). Karajarri country is surrounded by Yawuru (north), Nyikina (north east), Mangala (west) and Nyangumarta (south). Karajarri people consider their neighbours as both relatives and ‘countrymen’.

In the kinship system of Karajarri people, we have four skin groups which are Panaka, Parrjarri, Karimpa and Purungu. My skin is Panaka and it comes to me from my mother’s mother. The Karajarri-kura muwarr (Karajarri language) includes three closely related regional dialects. The Naja dialect is traditionally associated with the coastal region. The Nangu dialect is associated with the central region of Karajarri-kura ngurra while Nawurtu dialect is associated with the eastern hinterland. Karajarri-kura muwarr was inscribed on my

country by the travelling Pukarrikarta (creation) beings.

I speak Nangu Karajarri and strongly follow my traditional culture. I learnt many things from my old people during my childhood and subsequently, throughout my life. These lessons and skills that were taught to me are still a strong part of my life today. My father and mother were the main inspiration in my life. They taught me about my skin groups and the cultural protocols that are associated with them. The language we speak is a living language and is used throughout the West Kimberley and Pilbara regions of Western Australia. The three dialects of Karajarri-kura muwarr are related to each other and the words and sounds are spoken in a similar manner. My language is intricately connected to my people and country.

### **The First Word from Kimberley Traditional Owners**

In the past, Aboriginal people of the Kimberley region fought for their land as European invasion and settlement occurred. Kimberley traditional owners felt the impact of this ‘take over’ and reacted to it by fighting for their rights. Government has not listened to Aboriginal people about the

values accorded to country and what it means to Aboriginal people. Country includes land, sea, rivers, waterholes and all living things. Kimberley people have fought for recognition as traditional owners of their country and campaigned to be included in decisions about how country should be managed based on their common law rights, existing kinship systems and their knowledge of how the land works. Traditional owners wanted to establish and build a new foundation to look after and protect country into the future. They thought about a project that aimed to show why caring for country activities must be based on the principle of ‘right people, right country and the right way’.

Many people in the Kimberley region have talked about caring for their country for many generations. Old people talked about it in their communities, in meetings, around campfires, with families, and with other traditional owners. These conversations were about making commitments to take care of country and to make sure that it is respected – ‘keeping it alive’ and healthy. Country is very important to Aboriginal people. It enables us to express strong values through our connections to country, language, and law and culture.

The Kimberley Aboriginal Caring for Country Plan (the ‘Plan’) began in 2004 when people from the region came together to talk about a big plan for sustainable land management and conservation. This meeting was held at Bungarun (the old Leprosarium) near Derby in the West Kimberley. Traditional owners and their families travelled long distances to present their views and their concerns about managing country. Kimberley Aboriginal people had a vision of owning and managing country, keeping language strong, and keeping knowledge of country alive. Aboriginal people said that healthy country is a priority for our people and our future generations.

People sat and talked about the Plan during this meeting at Bungarun. At night, people prepared themselves for the big event –

traditional singing and dancing known as *pirntirri* (corroboree). The painted designs on people’s bodies are very spectacular and have different meanings attributed to them. When performing *pirntirri*, Aboriginal people engage artefacts to represent the cultural story for each dance from the communities gathered together. For example, the Karajarri *pirntirri* comes from dreaming places in Karajarri country and from Yatangal, which means birthplace country.

When people sing in language, it awakens the ancestors and brings the country to life. In the surroundings at Bungarun, we could hear our ancestors, our natural spiritual choir, joining in with us. We believe this is the presence of our elders who passed away a long time ago. This occasion is important. It is about family reunion, storytelling, sharing knowledge, planning and interacting with other countrymen from the Kimberley region. Traditional owners and community members wanted to voice their opinion for a big plan to care for country. Singing the songs from the country brought the Plan to life.

### **How the Kimberley Aboriginal Caring for Country Plan Started**

At the Bungarun meeting, the Kimberley Aboriginal Reference Group (KARG) was formed to provide a forum for Kimberley Aboriginal people to voice their opinions about looking after country and to take a positive step towards influencing planning for country. KARG is comprised of representatives from the four key regional Aboriginal representative organisations: the Kimberley Land Council, the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre, and the Kimberley Aboriginal Pastoralists Incorporated. KARG’s priorities were to have governments recognise Aboriginal cultural values and to get them to listen to traditional owners, so that they could understand the impacts of *kartiya* (non-Aboriginal) use and development of country and to recognise how important country is to traditional owners and all Aboriginal people.

Traditional owners explained how country is considered a valuable cultural resource. Aboriginal people relate to country differently from non-Aboriginal people because they come from many language and cultural groups and from many different parts of the Kimberley region. As a result of the discussions at the meeting, four landscape types were identified in the Kimberley region – Saltwater country, Desert country, River (Freshwater) country and Rangeland (or Cattle) country. These landscapes were identified by traditional owners to inform the management of Kimberley ecological systems by governments. This landscape distinction also sought to make Natural Resource Management (NRM) programmes and projects more aligned with the priorities of Aboriginal people and to deliver to them mutually beneficial outcomes. Traditional owners viewed NRM as an opportunity to manage natural resources and the environment by promoting new ways of involving Aboriginal people and knowledge in government planning processes that aim to look after country.

People wanted the Plan to be a top priority. They wanted their voices to be heard because their aspiration was to see their own people working on country. From 2004 to 2008, KARG kept thinking about the Plan and how it was going to work; they dwelt on this idea for a long time. Then in 2007, an Aboriginal chapter was introduced into the overall Kimberley Natural Resource Management (KNRM) plan. Many Aboriginal people felt that just adding a chapter was not the best way to incorporate culture and knowledge. Later KARG became aware that funding was available through the Australian government and this provided the opportunity to set things down properly by developing the Plan.

### **Community Consultation**

In December 2008, the KARG Steering Committee had meetings with the Nulungu Centre for Indigenous Studies (Nulungu), located on the Yawuru buru (Broome)

campus of the University of Notre Dame Australia, to develop the Plan. Nulungu encourages the pursuit of research excellence through the valuing of community-based Aboriginal knowledge and within culturally appropriate community protocols. The Plan commenced with the development of a Discussion Paper that identified key caring for country issues, what the Plan intended to do, and why it was important to traditional owners. Nulungu researchers also asked traditional owners and community people many important questions about country and its management. A comprehensive literature review was undertaken to identify previous research and documents relating to caring for country.

Nulungu developed a community consultation model based on cultural blocs which is the concept of ‘right people for right country’. This model reflected the existing cultural and social organisation of traditional owners within their respective homelands from across the Kimberley region. Cultural blocs also reflect the way traditional owners organise themselves to make decisions and when planning is required over large areas of the region outside of the respective homelands of traditional owner groups.

This way of operating was reinforced by the outcomes of successive Native Title determinations in the region by the Federal Court of Australia and the subsequent establishment of Registered Native Title Bodies Corporate (RNTBC) to hold and manage the legal rights and interests of traditional owners following their determination of Native Title.

Having completed this ground work, Nulungu researchers moved to talking with, and gathering information from, 414 Aboriginal people across the Kimberley. Consultation with key regional stakeholders and government departments and agencies also occurred. Nulungu researchers asked people to identify their values for country; their future goals and aspirations; the threats and pressures on country; and their key

priorities for cultural and natural resource management. The activities people are currently involved in and what they wanted to see happen in the future were also explored (Griffiths & Kinnane, 2011).

### **What People Said**

#### *What is Caring for Country?*

Kimberley Aboriginal people consider that country should be protected. For example, this means keeping the land healthy, caring for it in a proper way, and recognising the cultural connection between traditional owners and their country. Kimberley traditional owners will always meet their obligations and responsibilities to care for their country in accordance with Pukarrikarta-jangka (law and culture). Kimberley traditional owners wish to see that respect for cultural governance and social organisation is recognised as something important to them. They would like to see caring for country activities organised and undertaken properly on country. For example, senior traditional owners and community members should make decisions for country and they would like to see 'real jobs' (rather than subsidised jobs through Community Development Employment Projects) happening on country so our people can earn 'real wages' that properly reflect their efforts and expertise.

#### *Respecting the Country and People*

According to traditional Kimberley protocols, it is customary to welcome people to country. This is a traditional practice of special significance. For example, Karajarri traditional owners have many ways to welcome strangers to country. Alternatively, when a Karajarri person visits different places on Karajarri country, they will talk to their spiritual ancestors to identify who they are, explain who is accompanying them, and why they have brought them. This is to show respect for Karajarri country and the features that comprise that country such as the environment around you; the fishing spots, hills, waterholes and the sacred sites and areas of special cultural significance.

While traditional owners often welcome visitors, there are certain places in country to which access is restricted. It is dangerous to enter sacred traditional ceremonial grounds. Some places can only be visited by men or by women respectively. In some waterways, creeks, waterholes or beaches, it is inappropriate to swim or fish for cultural reasons. Acknowledgement and respect for these protocols is very important. To ensure visitors do not get hurt and places are not damaged, advice from senior traditional elders or someone who knows the particular details of these special places is required. Language also plays a significant role in respecting country. If you are talking to an Aboriginal person, it must be recognised that they may speak differently to Kartiya people; English may be a second, third or fourth language. Respect for these people is demonstrated through acknowledgment of kinship relationships, families, language, and land.

#### *Respecting Language*

The Kimberley is one of the most linguistically diverse areas in Australia (Figure 1). There are 30 recognised languages in the region and a number of dialects (Kimberley Language Resource Centre [KLRC], 2011a; 2011b). Language is central to the cultural activities of traditional owners and many Aboriginal people with connections to their traditional homelands. Language protocols are very important in many ways and provide guidance in relation to how people work within communities, how people work with other organisations, how people work with schools, and how people work with linguists and other consultants.

Cultural knowledge on country is based on language, the meanings derived from language, and communication of these meanings. This enables traditional owners to identify and share the names of plants and animals and to tell stories for certain place. Language explains relationships between living things, Pukarrikarta spiritual (creation)



Figure 1. Kimberley Language Groups (Source: KLRC, 2011b. Reproduced with permission).

beings, and their interaction with the land and natural environment. Traditional owners recognise knowledge is transmitted through language and binds places, people, and kinship systems that form the foundation for social organisation together. Language should be the first and most important consideration for people when caring for their country. Without language, there are no true meanings.

*The Importance of Being on Country*

Our elders were wise people and had a comprehensive knowledge of the richness and value of every aspect of country. They were clever men and women who understood the structural foundation of Pukarikarta-jangka by keeping language, law, important stories and culture strong.

Being on country is about understanding

your 'Rai', the child spirit from the place where parents first dream of a baby. The Rai becomes the central identity of a person. As a person grows and matures, the Rai grows to become a protector and custodian of the place it originated from. The Rai connection can come in the form of an animal such as fish, lizard or in a plant form belonging to that country. When a person passes away, the Rai returns to its dreaming place and becomes a child spirit once again and awaits an opportunity for another spiritual rebirth. This demonstrates how people, their Dreaming place, language, kinship systems, law and culture are all connected with country.

Being on country also means that young people learn about their culture in the right way, from the right people, in the right places. Our future generations must keep on talking about and practising law, culture and language, using the stories of our ancestors in a culturally appropriate or 'proper way'. For example, elders teach young people about using the stars to navigate and sing the important Pukarrikarta songs regarding spiritual beings and their associated creation stories. This suggests that Aboriginal people have had knowledge of astronomy for a long time and are recognised as astronomers and scientists within their own culture and country. Elders always understood the extent of seasonal variations and know the relationship between different flowering plants and the proliferation of native animals. For example, in parrkana (cold season) the salmon are running and fat to eat. In laja (the hot season and build-up before the rain), goanna and other lizards and snakes begin to wake up from hibernation. This is the best time for stingray (Yu, 1999). Young people learn cultural knowledge including the right names of country, to help understand the places they are required to look after, and how they should care for the land and the things in the country from what our old people told us.

#### *Access to Country*

Having the ability to access country is very important to all Kimberley traditional

owners. Some of our people experience difficulties trying to access certain areas in their Traditional homelands. For example, sometimes station managers keep gates locked on pastoral leases. Some people don't have the necessary resources such as a vehicle to take young people out to experience life on country and talk about or demonstrate caring for country practices. Traditional owners feel barriers to accessing country must change for future generations because people suffer physical, mental and emotional stress when they do not have access to their country and their 'ngarlu' is 'no good'. Being on country strengthens an individual's ngarlu. Ngarlu is a Karajarri term for defining the place of the inner spirit. This place in our stomach is the centre of our emotions and wellbeing (Roe, 2010).

Many traditional owners worry about people who have no cultural or legal rights to be on country accessing places or locations without permission. Occasionally, these people gain access to important and significant sites on country without the permission and supervision of traditional owners from that place. In response, traditional owners want to manage country properly which includes managing access to country through the issuing and enforcement of permits, by developing places where visitors can go, and establishing Aboriginal Men and Women's Ranger programs. Ranger programs are an example of the right people looking after the right country, and vesting cultural authority in traditional owners.

#### *Moving Back to Country*

Some Aboriginal people have moved away from their Traditional homelands to towns or cities to access better economic, social and educational opportunities. However, many Aboriginal people often have a strong desire to return and live in their own homelands because this connects them closely with their families, their country, law and culture, and provides opportunities to learn, listen and speak language. Moving back to

country is a very important way of maintaining the strong identity of Aboriginal people and to appreciate that country is a beautiful and sustaining place. That is why people often return to their homelands in an effort to understand who they are and where they belong. Old people have pioneered the development of family-based outstation communities so they can be closer to their country, meet their obligations and responsibilities to country, and make sure that young people grow up knowing their country and their relationship to it, their family, and their countrymen.

*Right People, Right Country, Right Way*

'Right people for right country' is a term used to describe the principle by which any activities on country need to be decided upon and approved by traditional owners who have the right to speak for that country (Griffiths & Kinnane, 2011). It then follows from this principle that the oversight of the management of country must be undertaken by traditional owners within their traditional boundaries or horizons. This can also occur in association with neighbouring traditional owner groups. Native Title determinations have reinforced this approach and embedded it in the common law of Australia. To undertake this responsibility, support needs to be afforded to the traditional owners. This will enable the right people to establish and maintain caring for country activities in the right way.

*Cultural Blocs*

In the context of caring for country, Kimberley traditional owners organise themselves into 'cultural blocs' when certain decisions are required (Figure 2). This bloc is "a cultural sphere of influence related through language, laws and belief systems to country that usually encompasses several language or traditional owner groups sharing common cultural features" Griffiths & Kinnane, 2011, p. iii). Traditional owners organise in this way to discuss and consider issues of regional or sub-regional importance. For example,

these issues include the progression of Native Title applications, negotiation of agreements that have local and regional significance and impacts, and to discuss the protection of cultural and natural heritage values. Sitting together, traditional owners can speak for extensive tracts of country that are related through law and culture.

Cultural blocs do not equate with the four landscape types of Saltwater, Freshwater, Desert and Rangelands that were developed as part of the KNRM approach to managing the Kimberley region. The distinct nature of these landscapes affect how people relate to different types of country but not how law and culture informs the specific rules and practices for country. When traditional owners choose to meet within their cultural blocs, all the right people, for the right country, and with the right knowledge about country are together as one and the best solutions or decisions are reached. A significant outcome of this approach is that traditional owners are refining superimposed colonial boundaries within the Kimberley to align more closely with their cultural governance structures. This ensures that people are in control of their destinies and do not compromise their country or themselves when important decisions are required.

**What Kimberley Traditional Owners Want**  
*Priorities – What people said was most important to them*

Kimberley traditional owners are very clear about the position they occupy as the custodians and managers of country for future generations. In the work undertaken by Nulungu, they outlined a distinct relationship between law and culture, language and country. The concept of 'Healthy Country, Healthy People' emerged as their top priority. In accordance with culture, Traditional owners say if you look after country, the Country looks after you. Conversely, if you do not look after country then people become sick.

In terms of the general priorities and actions that traditional owners want as an outcome from the Kimberley Aboriginal Caring

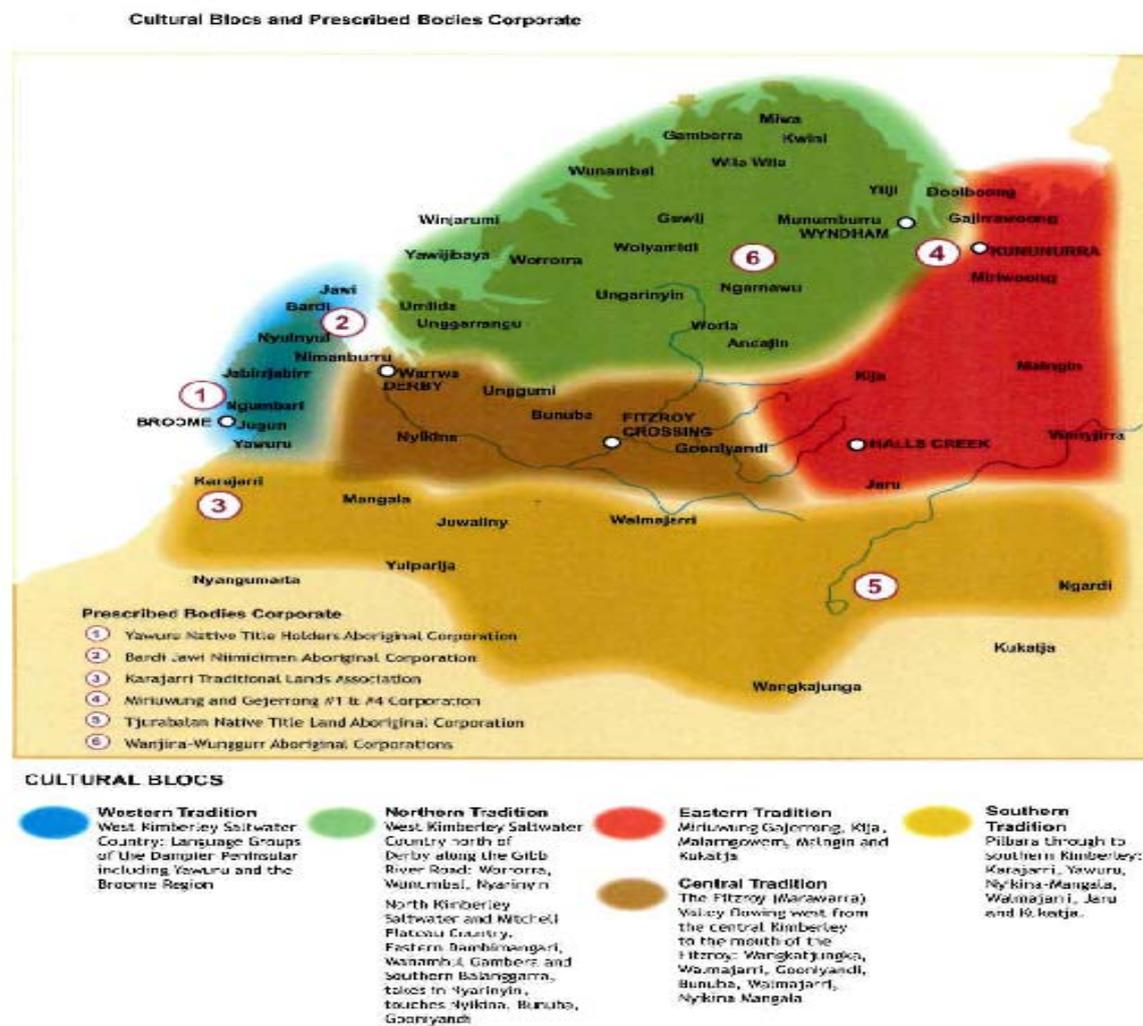


Figure 2. Cultural Blocs and Native Title Prescribed Body Corporates (Source: Griffiths & Kinnane, 2011. Reproduced with permission).

for Country Plan, the following were identified as important:

- Enable Aboriginal people to get access to country;
- Protect important cultural sites and monitor significant areas including islands and sea Country (e.g., reef locations);
- Respect for cultural protocols by doing business the right way, with the right people for the right country;
- Ensure cultural knowledge is passed on from old people to younger people;
- Plan for Caring for Country projects at a regional level;
- Plan projects through RNTBCs;
- Provide opportunities for paid jobs, skills development and training for Aboriginal people;
- Secure adequate resources for Caring for Country projects;
- Resource and support for a regional Caring for Country governance structures;

- Protection of Aboriginal knowledge and intellectual property;
- Maintenance and development of strong partnerships;
- Provide opportunities for language transmission through Caring for Country projects;
- Manage and use of fire the proper way;
- Ensure the health of water sources on country;
- Monitor water quality in rivers, and other jila (i.e., waterholes);
- Monitor plants, animals and habitats, particularly for threatened species and species of cultural significance (e.g., turtle and dugong, vine thickets and seagrass beds);
- Eradicate or reduce weeds to protect threatened species or ecological communities;
- Reduce and control feral animals such as camels, pigs, cats, foxes, horses and cattle;
- Reduce the threats from introduced weeds and pests (e.g., noxious weed called Noogoora burr);
- Direct visitors to the right people for the right country, ensure they are accompanied by the right people;
- Control visitor access to culturally and environmentally sensitive areas and monitor visitor numbers and the impacts on country;
- Ensure that rubbish is removed so it does not threaten the health of country including (e.g., marine areas and on beaches).

Traditional owners want to see these things happen in the future. Nulungu found that most of the priorities were being addressed in positive ways through existing or proposed projects. The challenge is to take these great ideas and turn them into reality.

#### **Last Word**

I am a Karajarri traditional owner. Currently, I do not live in my country but I visit when I can. I work as a researcher in the Nulungu Centre for Indigenous Studies at the Yawuru buru (Broome) campus of The

University of Notre Dame Australia. As a traditional owner and researcher, I have extensive experience living and working with elders and community members from the different cultural groups across the Kimberley. Most of these people are my family and people I know very well. During the consultation phase of the Kimberley Aboriginal Caring for Country Plan, I talked with many people and they told me their views and aspirations for the future. During this research, I had to work wearing 'two hats' – one as a traditional owner and the other as an academic researcher. I found that this project inspired me to continue working with my people, to listen to and respect all traditional owners in the Kimberley region. Above all, I learnt to understand the authority contained within my community, my country and my culture.

This is the 'Last Word' of my countrymen. They have aspirations and future plans for looking after country. The majority of people said that management planning in the Kimberley requires proper agreements amongst stakeholders and the resources to implement the plans of the traditional owners. This will enable traditional owners to balance the varying demands placed on them and to establish a regional body that guides and manages caring for country initiatives and can make proper decisions for people across the Kimberley region. People in the Kimberley recognise that the strength of the Plan is drawn from local knowledge. Given the threats and pressures on the country, and recognition that the future of the Kimberley region is being impacted on by global pressures for natural resources, Kimberley traditional owners are aware that the pressures of human growth and consumption are increasing and feel this cannot continue unmanaged without harm to cultural and natural resources. A recommendation of the Kimberley Aboriginal Caring for Country Plan is the maintenance and growth of Aboriginal Ranger Programmes across the

Kimberley to manage the country and to ensure special places are protected and valued so that our culture remains strong and vibrant. This is our responsibility to the generations that will follow us into the future.

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## Glossary

Aboriginal Elders	The moral and spiritual leaders of various communities; they are care givers they are also teachers who pass on cultural knowledge. They are role models to the younger generations.
Caring for Country	A term used in the Kimberley to describe the protection and management of cultural and natural resources. Caring for Country is associated with cultural responsibilities and rights (Griffiths & Kinnane, 2011).
CDEP	Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), an employment programme for Aboriginal people subsidised by the Australian Government.
Country	Country includes land, waters (both fresh and salt), and the air which lies above and below the ground or out of sight. The term ‘country’ encompasses the physical, spiritual and cultural meaning of landscape. People are a natural resource and are considered to be part of country. The use of a capital ‘C’ gives the place its respect and significance, a proper name, a proper noun (Griffiths & Kinnane, 2011).
Countrymen	A colloquial, gender-neutral term describing an Aboriginal person from their Traditional Owner community or a neighbouring Traditional Owner community. Countrymen is a word taken from the Kriol language used in the Kimberley region.
Cultural Blocs	A Cultural sphere of influence related through language, laws and belief systems; a sub-regional grouping usually encompassing several language groups sharing similar cultures (Griffiths & Kinnane, 2011).
Indigenous / Aboriginal	When referring to Indigenous people in the Kimberley, people prefer the term Aboriginal rather than being referred to as Indigenous.
Jila	Water holes, natural springs on country.
Karajarri Language	Karajarri is an Aboriginal Language spoken in Karajarri country and primarily in Bidyadanga Aboriginal Community located near Broome, Western Australia. There are three dialects. The dialect I speak is “Nangu” ( na + ngu ) and is presented in this article. The other dialects are called Naja and Nawurtu. Each of the three words – Nangu, Naja and Nawurtu mean ‘this’ (McKelson & Dodd, 2007).
Kartiya	A term of reference to describe anyone who is non-Aboriginal.

Kriol	Is the Aboriginal Creole language which is spoken widely across the north of Australia; in parts of the Kimberley, the Northern Territory and Queensland (Berry & Hudson, 1997).
Language	Refers to Traditional Aboriginal languages spoken in Kimberley region of Western Australia.
Law	Aboriginal Law is handed down from ancestral beings since time immemorial. Many different creation beings existed in the Kimberley creating specific laws and rules that have been handed down through oral tradition, ceremony, ritual, practice and observance (Griffiths & Kinanne, 2011).
Laja	Hot season.
Muwarr	Talking by engaging in conversation. Muwarr is a language word. Ngana Nyuntuku Muwarr? Translates as 'What is your language? My language is Nangu Karajarri.
Ngarlu	Ngarlu is a Karajarri term for defining the place of the inner spirit. This place in our stomach area of the human body is the centre of our emotions and wellbeing (Roe 2010).
Ngurra	Land/country, where you are from.
Parrkana	Cold season.
Pirntirri	Corroboree. A traditional Aboriginal dance.
Pukarikarta	Is the way Karajarri People explain life and creation from their world view and covers the connections with spiritual beings. Sometimes in Karajarri language we describe these stories to explain a "vision".
Rai	The spirit that comes from where the parents first dream before a baby is born. The Rai becomes central to an Aboriginal person's identity. The spirit Rai becomes the protector and custodian of the place that it originated from, especially from that dreaming place.
RNTBC	Registered Native Title Body Corporate.
Right People, Right Country, Right Way	A term used to describe the principle by which any activities on country need to be decided upon and approved by Traditional Owners who have the rights and cultural authority to speak for country. Sometimes termed 'proper way' (Griffiths & Kinnane, 2011).

Skin Group	Purungu, Panaka, Parrjarri, Karimpa are skin groups in the areas covered by Bidyadanga, Port Hedland and Broome. Traditionally orientated groups of Karajarri people divide their communities as their ancestors did into four groups. All the members of the group are related to one another by blood ties or by the very fact that they belong to the group (McKelson & Dodd, 2007).
The First Word	Meaning 'First' or 'Earliest Known'. The beginning of an Aboriginal person's journey in life.
Yatungal	Spirit child, from Karajarri country and is connected to the Rai.