

## Chapter 5.

### **Pursuing autonomy and Traditional Owners' aspiration: Management of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area and Mungo National Park**

**Gary Pappin**

Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area Three Traditional Tribal Groups Elders Council

***Abstract.** This paper addresses the efforts of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area Three Traditional Tribal Groups Elders Council and Aboriginal Corporation in furthering the cultural heritage management, World Heritage management and economic aspirations of its members. The discussion addresses both the achievements that have occurred and the challenges faced by the Traditional Owners today.*

First, I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of this country.

I'm Gary Pappin. I'm a Mutthi Mutthi man. The Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area is part of my Country and also the Country of the Parrkindji people and the Ngiyampaa people.

Before I start there is a statement I would like to make, which I know doesn't concern a lot of people but nevertheless it needs to be made so you understand the complexity of issues in the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area:

Currently, out home, there is division among the mobs and a split about the future governance and the future direction of the Elders Council and the incorporated body takes with other agencies within the World Heritage Area. Currently, measures are being put in place to engage an independent mediator to address the Three Traditional Tribal Groups members' issues and relationship with the National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales. At this forum today I will not discuss any internal issues whatsoever. What I am talking about today is my views as a Mutthi Mutthi person involved in those processes.

The Willandra Lakes became a national park in 1979 and was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1980. The reasons it become a national park was the discovery of 'Mungo Lady' and 'Mungo Man' in the late 1970s. The current structure in the World Heritage Area is the Three Traditional Tribal Group Elders Council and Aboriginal Corporation made up of the Parrkindji people, the Ngiyampaa people and the Mutthi Mutthi people. The governing committee for the World Heritage Area is what we call the 'CMC' (Community Management Council) and the scientific structure in place is known as 'TSAC' (Technical Scientific Advisory Committee) as per the World Heritage Convention and the Burra Charter within Australia or the Asia Pacific Region. The Elders Council's aspiration is the devolvement and construction of an educational research and information centre, as well as a keeping place to house our ancestral remains that are located in various museums across the nation; and of course those remains are continually coming up out of the ground within the World Heritage Area.

Another main concern and aspiration is the issue of our self governance. We set up an Elders Council incorporated body three years ago which has been running along quite well. It is our aspiration to have the incorporated body become self reliant and to be independent economically and sustainably for our future generations.

We also have been looking at and developing eco- and cultural tourism within the World Heritage Area. We have just recently have been celebrating twenty-five years of the World Heritage Area and a lot of our people are concerned that it has been exploited outrageously by various groups within the region. None of my people, nor members of the other two tribal groups who have cultural connections to that Country have been able to become financially viable in our own Country. Keep in mind that the listing of the World Heritage Area and the national park is based on our culture and heritage that lies on the ground. So technically you are a talking about my people, you are talking about Warren Clark's people up there – he's a Pooncarrie/Ngiyampaa man – but still today we are still struggling to meet the aspirations of taking our place in society along side everyone else in the twenty-first century. We are still trying and striving to do that.

The achievements to date so far are not all bad. We have had a successful running of two archaeological field schools (conducted by Dave Johnson), in partnership with The Australian National University (ANU). The ANU field school is for first-, second- and third-year students who come out and spend seven days on Country with members of the three different tribal groups. So they get the cultural perspective, the cultural connections people have to that Country, as well as looking at how we address and deal with the fact that ancestral remains are coming to the surface on a daily basis and of course the continuing future management of that issue.

We have just recently entered into a partnership with La Trobe University, ANU, Melbourne University and Bond University in an ARC-linkage project, which provides funding for the next three years. That project currently employs two members – a Ngiyampaa woman and a Mutthi Mutthi man – full-time over the three years, during which time they will be completing diplomas in cultural heritage and land management.

One of the questions that can be asked of many Aboriginal peoples around Australia is how many of those peoples live in their own traditional Country and see many others making money out of their Country and cultural heritage? How many of those communities have their own land base from which they can operate and on which they can fulfil their aspirations and their obligations to their future generations? Very few! I guess one of the great milestones for us and one which we have been working in conjunction with everybody else in the World Heritage Area for such a long time, is that, I am glad to say, we are one of those very few. We have land handed over to us about two years ago that belongs to the Elders Council incorporated body on behalf of the three tribal groups. This hand-over of Joulni in full title is yet to take place, but we will strive to use that land base for the aspirations that the current generations have and, more importantly, for those generations that are yet to come. The thing we are hoping to achieve regarding infrastructure, self-management, self-sustainability, and eco- and cultural tourism is that the buck stops with us. So that our future generations don't have to reinvent the wheel and sit at meetings and end up with grey hairs like I have!

With our property we also have partnerships with the Catchment Management Authority and we are looking at designated conservation zones, excluding stock, kangaroos, rabbits etc. We are looking at re-establishing native vegetation for medicine, medicinal purposes and bush foods, as well as the reintroduction of native species that have been extinct in the region for a considerable amount of time.

We also have partnerships with the National Museum of Australia, which is training members of our groups in curatorial positions. When the keeping place is built, we will have fully trained young people from our mobs who will be in a position to manage and look after our cultural material, whether in the form of ancestral remains, rock, stone artefacts, videos etc.

The challenge that we face, that a lot of mobs around the country face, is that it always comes down to the dollar figures. So we are looking at obtaining funding from the Commonwealth government to support our own independent administration, our own office and resources to go with that, so we can manage our cultural heritage in the World Heritage Area.

Priority number one is to ensure that our future generations retain their connection to Country regardless of what happens. Priority number two is to manage and look after our cultural heritage on the ground in a culturally appropriate manner in any way we can do that.

Then we have the issues of when we go into partnership with archaeologists or others. Our mobs might want to do some research and we have the issues of having to go to the National Park and Wildlife Service to get a permit or a licence to do research. Why is it that when the traditional people of their own Country, who want to do research or manage culture in their own Country that is going to benefit the people themselves and the broader scientific community, have to go and seek permission from a government agency who retains a legal right – superimposed on us – to tell us what we can and can't do in our own Country? I reckon 'Stuff that!'. So we have some major issues with that piece of legislation. And the paternal/mission management views of the agencies and some of their staff.

We are seeking funding through awareness raising, going to government, business corporations and philanthropists to assist us in meeting some of our aspirations and building our keeping place. One of the main things that has been desperately lacking in the Willandra Lakes since its inception, or since the involvement of the Elders Council at least, is a code of ethics. A code of ethics would explain how those tribal groups work together, but importantly a code of ethics would be about how other agencies interact, work or interact in partnership with the traditional owners in the World Heritage Area. This would involve setting up an Ethics Committee that would be able to assist and help us in making executive decisions on future research and other activities that may take place in the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area. The Ethics Committee would set out what the mobs expect from researchers and keep them accountable.

Gary J Pappin  
Member, Executive Committee  
Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area Three Traditional Tribal Groups Elders Council  
<garyjpappin47@hotmail.com>

**Note**

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