

Gracevale, a Case Study on Caring for Country and Rediscovery of Culture and Language by the Iningai People in Central West Queensland

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Abstract

Much Indigenous culture has been lost as a result of colonisation, and the current Iningai generation do not speak their language and know little of their history. The Yumbanku Aboriginal Cultural Heritage and Tourism Development Aboriginal Corporation (YACHATDAC) based in Barcaldine has been formed by key members of the Traditional custodian families of the Iningai lands in Central West Queensland. The board is composed of 80% Aboriginal and 20% non-Aboriginal members. Gracevale is an 8870 ha property in Central West Queensland owned by YACHATDAC. It will become a sustainable place of education and centre of excellence based on consensus around resolution of reconciliation and teaching, and an important example of Indigenous management in the conservation and extension of culture and best-practice land management in the arid zone of Australia under a changing climate. YACHATDAC is working to rediscover language and the cultural significance of local rock art and ceremonial sites; developing sustainable land-use practices using traditional methods, along with science and technology, to restore degraded land, natural springs and waterways; enhance above- and below-ground biodiversity; and create native fauna reserves. Income streams to support sustainable management of the system are being developed. They include: responsible grazing practice; cultural and eco-tourism; a seed bank and commercialisation of native seeds and plants; and use of Gracevale as a living sustainable laboratory for the development and dissemination of knowledge about natural ecosystem functions and processes and the monetisation of ecosystem services.

Keywords: Indigenous culture, education, land restoration, income streams, cultural and eco-tourism

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Introduction

The Iningai people were one of the largest Aboriginal tribes in Central West Queensland. Their territory includes 50,500 square kilometres: west of the dividing range to Longreach, and north to Aramac and Muttaborra. Language, knowledge, song, spirit, ceremonial practice and Country are inseparable for Aboriginal Australians, and they believe that culture must be held for future generations and that Indigenous cultural knowledge

should be respected alongside Western knowledge and education.

Much Indigenous culture has been lost as a result of colonisation, and the current Iningai generation do not speak the language and know little of their history. The Yumbanku Aboriginal Cultural Heritage and Tourism Development Aboriginal Corporation (YACHATDAC), based in Barcaldine, has been formed by key members of the Traditional custodian families of the Iningai

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lands in Central West Queensland. The board is composed of 80% Aboriginal and 20% non-Aboriginal members. Starting with Gracevale, YACHATDAC has begun to restore their traditional Country while at the same time preserving and strengthening culture.

Gracevale

In 2019, ownership of Gracevale Station was returned to members of the Iningai people through YACHATDAC. Gracevale Station, with an area of 8870 hectares, is located 120 km north of Barcaldine in Central West Queensland. The site is contained within the Desert Uplands (DEU) bioregion and is characterised by upland landforms dominated by sandstone ranges and deep, infertile sandplains. Gracevale is positioned on the eastern

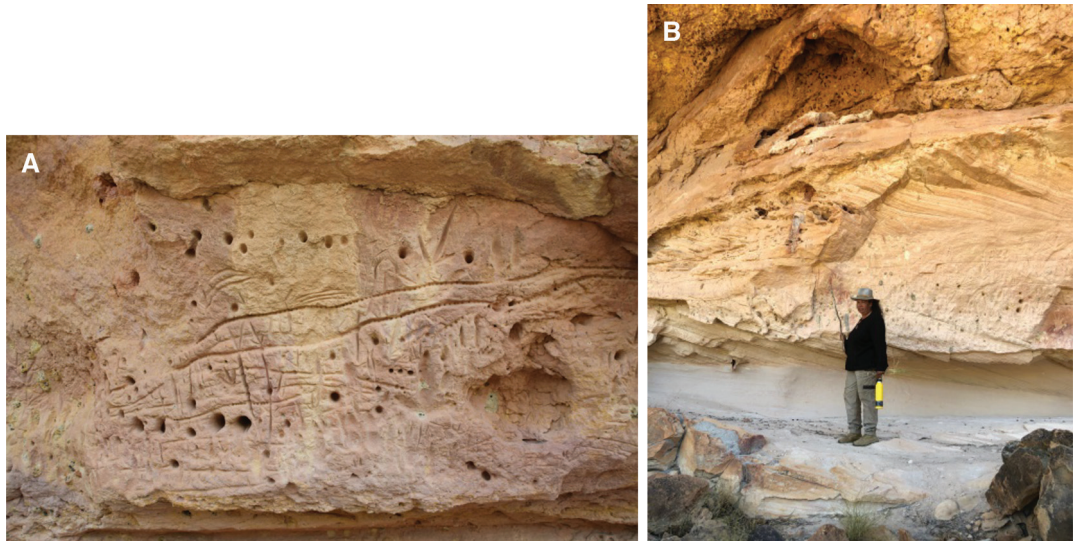
margins of the Great Artesian Basin (GAB) and is an important recharge area for the aquifers of the GAB. The semiarid climate with variable rainfall is generally vegetated with open eucalypt and acacia woodlands, and an understory of spinifex, natural grasses or acacia (Figure 1).

Historically, Gracevale has been used for cattle grazing. Much of the pre-existing vegetation has been cleared to facilitate pasture growth. Introduced grasses, invasive weeds and pest species such as cane toads, feral cats and wild pigs, along with overgrazing by stock, tree clearing and fire, have altered the natural ecology of the area. Seven culturally significant artesian springs have been modified for water extraction for homestead and stock use. Two of these springs are now dry, and waterways have been eroded.

Figure 1. A natural spring, one of seven that YACHATDAC is restoring (top left); trees dead due to drought (top right); caterpillars feeding on new foliage following rain (bottom left); and spinifex flowering after rain (bottom right).



Figure 2. (A) Ancient rock art. Is this a *Pliosaurus* in the desert? This is one of the questions being studied by archaeologists. (B) Suzanne Thompson at a unique site that describes the Seven Sisters songlines, among the most significant of the creation tracks that crisscross Australia.



Gracevale incorporates a unique set of caves on the edge of the Aramac Range, containing rare examples of traditional Aboriginal rock art that have not been studied (Figure 2). Within 10 km of Gracevale, an escarpment with a labyrinth of weathered caves and blowholes was the site of the massacre of forty Aborigines in 1869 by Government Troopers. To date, the cultural heritage and history of the Iningai people has not been formally recorded or studied. The restoration and preservation of Gracevale Station and the local area is the first major project undertaken by YACHATDAC.

Managing for Sustainability

The property is to be managed so that it becomes environmentally and economically sustainable, and this will be achieved through multiple income streams including: cattle grazing; cultural and eco-tourism; development of a seed bank and commercialisation of native seeds and plants; and use of Gracevale as a living laboratory for the development and dissemination of knowledge about natural ecosystem functions and processes, sustainable management and the monetisation of ecosystems services. YACHATDAC will partner with the Land Regeneration Group (<https://www.landregeneration->

group.com/) to implement a project approved for funding under the Restore Program. Activities will support the goals of caring for Country while increasing carbon sequestration above and below ground. The Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC) supported YACHATDAC in securing a Land Restoration Fund agreement that provides revenue of \$725,000 over five years.

These endeavours call for a multi-dimensional, integrated research approach with three key elements:

1. Understanding spiritual connection to land.
2. Caring for Country.
3. Economic development.

Research Approach and Priorities

YACHATDAC has formed a strong collaborative network and seeks partners and funding to assist in the following priority areas.

Understanding Spiritual Connection to Land – Conserve and Understand the Rock Art of Gracevale

Example activities and research ideas include:

- Develop a database to collate oral/written histories and archaeology results.
- Survey and record rock art, surface artefacts

and natural springs for the region; add to a database.

- Excavate key places; determine a minimum age for the engravings and paintings; and explore ancient activity areas/pathways/Dreaming trackways.
- Prepare a management plan to conserve and manage the rock art for the benefit of future generations:
 - (a) Use the oral history and archaeological information, regional patterns (e.g. activity areas/pathways) and conservation issues.
 - (b) Detail how best to manage sites, cultural tourism initiatives and promotion through a website, schools, conferences and academic publications.
 - (c) Develop traditional songlines described in the rock art with assistance from an Indigenous astronomer.

Caring for Country – Restoration of a Landscape Degraded by Sheep and Cattle Production

Example activities and research ideas include:

- **Soil.** Landscape restoration initiatives will take a ground-up approach starting with soil improvement. Design best-practice grazing management to help to build organic carbon and soil quality. Restoring soil health will help mitigate the effects of climate change; increasing organic matter in soil enhances its ability to hold water; improving soil structure allows more rainfall to infiltrate into the ground, better sustains grass and crops during droughts, and helps reduce flooding downstream.
- **Water.** Restore the waterways and springs as close as possible to their original state and therefore improve biodiversity, correct salinity and create landscapes more resilient to drought, floods and bushfires.
- **Reforestation.** Reforest and recover the landscape using appropriate shrub and tree species, and thus contribute to carbon sequestration and improve biodiversity.
- **Biodiversity.** Develop diverse and complex vegetation systems to help create habitat and corridors for endangered wildlife and nationally listed threatened species.

- **Climate change.** Predict how a changing climate will impact on water, reforestation, soil and biodiversity in order to design best-practice land management; develop a carbon-neutral beef production enterprise.
- **Natural capital market.** Seek to gain benefit from carbon sequestration in soil, vegetation and biodiversity conservation, engaging carbon project developers to assist in becoming market ready to tap into the environmental services market.
- **Society.** Facilitate evidence-based discussion of fundamental natural processes and functions, including through sponsoring citizen science, to assist land managers in making improved decisions and to enable monitoring of the leading performance indicators.

Economic Development – Benefits of Landscape Restoration for Landholders, Community and the Nation

Example activities/research ideas include:

- **Cultural tourism.** Engage with archaeologists to describe the cultural sites on Gracevale and use this as an evidence base for conservation and tourism development.
- **Economic development of native foods.** Engage scientists and commercial companies to select, grow and multiply native species with high commercial potential.
- **Natural learning laboratory for education and storytelling.** Develop Gracevale as a centre of excellence for training and learning, with a focus on sustainable land management practice and local cultural history to support Reconciliation and Consensus building activities.
- **Planning tool.** Using the research outputs from land restoration, develop a planning tool for the roll-out of future landscape restoration projects. The tool could measure and demonstrate:
 - (a) a return on investment for landholders;
 - (b) the value of ecosystem services provided for greater community; and
 - (c) the value of natural capital restored/created for Australia.

Summary

YACHATDAC has made remarkable progress and achieved all goals set by funders in record time. An excellent strategic plan has been developed for Gracevale, with support from The University of Queensland. YACHATDAC plans to become a Centre of Excellence for training and knowledge sharing and has already established infrastructure that allows hosting of training camps at Gracevale. Strong research networks have been developed,

providing an opportunity for the development of holistic solutions for land regeneration that can be used widely through Australia.

YACHATDAC calls for people interested in contributing to the development of Gracevale and engaging in the development of collaborative research projects. There is also a strong need for wages to support jobs needed to continue to develop the property as an Indigenous owned and managed cultural, training, research and tourism hub.

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Author Profiles

Sharon Brown is an award-winning scientist with over 20 years' experience working in close collaboration with researchers, businesses and landholders to reverse land degradation in Australia and South East Asia. She is a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Agriculture and Food Science, University of Queensland, Head of Research and Project Development for YACHATDAC, and Director of Research and Development with the Land Regeneration Group.

Suzanne Thompson is Managing Director at YACHATDAC (Yambangku Aboriginal Cultural Heritage and Tourism Development Aboriginal Corporation), and Chair of Native Foods and Botanicals, She has a strong and varied background in management and as a cultural educator, community development practitioner, youth development traditional performer, artist, business owner, trainer/facilitator, conference MC and events coordinator.