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Building Collaborative Partnerships: A Key to Increasing Indigenous Victorian Peoples' Access to Country

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This article reports on a qualitative research study undertaken with Indigenous government employees to explore ways in which Indigenous communities can access programs involving caring for 'Country' (knowledge, responsibility and inherent right to protect the traditional natural landscape) on their traditional land and, in so doing, improve their health. Factors that optimise such nature-based projects are the capacity of their intention to build relationships, consultation, transparency, consistency, education and training between Indigenous communities, government and the general public. Government agencies need to develop strategies where partnership and collaboration are effective with Indigenous communities and within the agencies themselves, in order to resolve controversial issues surrounding access to Country.

Introduction

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1993, p. 2) highlighted that 'Indigenous peoples have been deprived of human rights and fundamental freedoms ... thus preventing them from exercising their right to development in accordance with their own needs and interests.' For Indigenous health² and human rights to be balanced, key policies should focus on sustained cooperative partnerships at both national and local levels (Alma-Ata 1978; McKendrick 2000; VACCHO 2005; Pellekaan & Clague 2006). Kickbush (1997) emphasised that health equality is not so much

- 1 The term Country is a place (traditional boundaries) that gives and receives life (North Central Catchment Management Authority, 2006). Indigenous people talk about Country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to Country, visit Country, worry about Country, feel sorry for Country and long for Country (Australian Heritage Committee, 2007).
- 2 The Indigenous model of health is complex with many definitions worldwide, but all are common in that they espouse a holistic approach involving spiritual, intellectual, physical and emotional elements (Committee on Indigenous Health, 2002).

hampered in progress by a lack of money, but rather by insufficient governance. The processes of education of the dominant culture, and co-operation of both cultures working together, are also needed (Brown 2001).

This would require building trust, social cohesion and reciprocity, which are considered pivotal elements of social capital that empower the individual and lead to material and social benefits (Baum & Ziersch 2003; Altschuler et al. 2004). However, the very concept of social capital may lead to the exclusion of people who do not fit into the group (Portes 1998; Pope 2003). Hunter (2004, p. 6) emphasised this in terms of Indigenous people being excluded from 'mainstream Australia', and being 'different from other poor Australians, in terms of the nature and extent of the destitution they experience'.

Other social influences such as unemployment, low academic achievement, material standard of living insecurity and job insecurity, evident in Indigenous communities in Australia, play a major role in the poor health of individuals (Kawachi 1997; Marmot 1999; Steering Committee for Review of Government Service Provisions 2007). Behrendt (2003) noted that this could be overturned with acknowledgment of the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, through recognising past injustices, through the granting of autonomy and decision making powers, and also through property rights, compensation and recognition of cultural practices. Literature identifies the centrality that Country plays in Indigenous culture, having physical, spiritual, cultural and emotional bonds (Hudson-Rodd 1998; Brown 2001; Scougall 2002; Richmond et al. 2005). Burgess & colleagues (2005) found that in the Northern Territory, Indigenous natural resources management has social capital, health and wellbeing benefits.

Shell middens, rock art and grinding grooves provide evidence of the interconnection with nature that the Aboriginal people of Australia have had for hundreds of generations (Yalmambirra 2005). For many Indigenous Australians, the damage and loss of traditional landscapes has constituted a 'diminution of self esteem' (Kirmayer 2000, p. 15). It is critical to identify those people who have this cultural knowledge of the land and who have the authority to speak about it, thereby limiting this loss of culture (Horstman & Wightman 2001; Department of Sustainability and Environment 2004). Local Indigenous knowledge contained in environmental narratives is an important land management tool, as it describes a deep connection with the land (Robertson et al. 2000).

To capture this connection government policies have recently attempted to engage Indigenous communities in the decision making process. Examples are the Kakadu and Uluru National Parks, where there is direct engagement with the local Indigenous communities (Lancashire 1999). However, Barrera-Bassols & Zinck (2003) noted that Indigenous ecological knowledge is vulnerable to the negative effects of globalisation. Researchers have noted that, until Indigenous customary ecological management is recognised, optimal economic development cannot be reached (Altman 2004).

This study focuses on Indigenous natural resource (land management) policies and government action in Victoria, but also looks at the benefits of caring for 'Country'. Recent, key policy documents in this field are:

- Indigenous Partnership Strategy and Action Plan (Parks Victoria 2005): This includes the protection and surveying of traditional places, building cross-cultural awareness, and increasing Indigenous recruitment in the management of parklands.
- Indigenous Partnership Framework 2007-2010 (Department of Sustainability and Environment 2007): focuses on building stronger partnerships, access to caring for Country and recognition of Indigenous knowledge.
- Aboriginal Heritage Bill (Aboriginal Affairs Victoria 2007): concentrates on the protection of cultural heritage sites, and developing a Traditional Owner committee that looks after cultural heritage.

Such policies have shaped the way the government deals with Indigenous communities in Victoria in term of natural resource management. The project upon which this paper is based examined how Indigenous staff, who are directly involved in implementing policies, view such procedures.

Case study one: previous study

This case study is based on data collected through study for a postgraduate degree at The University of Melbourne, which

focused on three Indigenous Traditional Custodian³ groups and their relationship to caring for 'Country' in terms of their health and wellbeing (Kingsley 2007). This study collected data on the future aspirations of these groups in relation to obtaining greater access in caring for 'Country', which would in turn increase self determination, pride and identity. The main aspirations included:

- Recognition of the culture and history of Indigenous Australia, for example through increased signage and information around Victoria.
- Opening the door for youth who were currently disenfranchised, by offering training pathways, mentoring, and opportunities to learn culture and see Indigenous role models presenting possibilities of filling available positions.
- Building bridges between non-Indigenous and Indigenous youth, by giving school students the opportunity to work in the natural environment, and by enabling them to learn traditional Indigenous and western scientific knowledge from scientists, teachers and Traditional Custodians.
- Maintaining and protecting the natural native environment, by mixing scientific and traditional land management techniques where local people become involved in caring for parklands.
- Training and employment of Indigenous people by government agencies, in order to enable them to have a lifetime career in the protection of parklands, driven by what the communities want to achieve.

Case study two: current study

Two Victorian government organisations, Parks Victoria (PV) and the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) were focused on, in order to identify what actions needed to be undertaken within these organisations in regard to the above aspirations. By focusing on Indigenous government employees, this study explored what effective policies were being produced by government institutions to increase access to 'Country', and what will be required in the future.

Emphasis was placed on political institutions because, as Putnam (2000) identified, the greater the trust built and the greater the civic engagement, the greater the social capital and, consequently, the improved health status. This was highlighted by Putnam's (2000) research identifying that in America, a decrease of trust in political and religious institutions meant that there was a decrease in reciprocity within the country. He proposed that these systems needed to be strengthened, to build increased social cohesion and confidence in government systems.

3 **Traditional Custodians:** a person(s) or group who by right of tradition, have inherited a custodial role of caring for Country through bloodline connections (Phillips 2008).

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Both PV and the DSE are Victorian State Government agencies. PV acts as the caretaker and recreational manager of parklands throughout Victoria (PV 2007). PV was established in 1996, and prides itself on its commitment to conservation and environmental management, its slogan being 'healthy parks, healthy people' (PV 2007). DSE 'is Victoria's leading government agency responsible for promoting and managing the sustainability of the natural and built environments' (DSE 2007). DSE employs nearly triple the number of staff (2,700) of PV, having wider responsibilities including sustainable water and forestry management, governance of parklands, services of biodiversity, and policy frameworks that protect the environment (DSE, 2008).

Methodology

Data was gathered through a two-hour long focus group, two interviews, and one email correspondence with selected Indigenous government employees working in Melbourne, Australia. The focus group method is a qualitative tool that delves into 'perceptions, interpretation, and beliefs of a selected population (in this case the

Indigenous policy makers and government employees) to gain an understanding of a particular issue from the perspective of group participants' (Khan & Manderson 1992, cited in Rice & Ezzy 1999). In the focus group, participants were asked to articulate questions which gave 'rise synergistically to insight and solutions that would not come about without them', and to 'validate other qualitative techniques' (Baum 2002, p. 173). Focus groups also "'give a voice" to marginalised groups ... enabling others to "listen" to people who may have little chance to express an opinion', such as Indigenous government employees in the environmental arena whose policies have been given little priority over other matters in Victoria (Rice & Ezzy 1999, p. 74).

Of the six key participants involved in the focus group, three were female. Three contributors were from Parks Victoria, two were from The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and one was from The University of Melbourne. This allowed feedback to come from individuals from different government bodies who are directly involved with parklands in Victoria. The individuals from Parks Victoria and the DSE who could not attend the focus group meeting



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were given the option of emailing responses to specific questions, as well as the opportunity to meet face-to-face and discuss some of the responses. Two Parks Victoria Indigenous employees chose to meet separately with the researcher, to discuss issues mentioned in the focus group, and one DSE participant responded to questions via email.

The focus group was guided by an interview schedule/guide of questions. The questions used in both the focus group and the correspondence focused on a number of different issues that had emerged from the previous postgraduate research (Kingsley 2007). This research was approved by the University of Melbourne Ethics Committee, and also by an Indigenous reference group set up for this study, consisting of Traditional Owners, Indigenous government employees and leading academics from three Victorian Aboriginal Traditional Custodian groups. The questions covered the issue of what strategies were in place in these departments, to tackle issues including traditional boundary conflicts, different value systems between Indigenous people and government agencies, lack of access to and destruction of 'Country', lack of recognition of Traditional

Owners, lack of education and employment opportunities, the consultation process, and how to develop sustainable projects in these communities.

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes that stood alone in the data (Browne 2004). In this case, both open coding and axial coding were applied in order to improve the quality of the study. These terms refer to categorising topics into properties, and were used to develop the headings in the results section (Creswell 1998). A code page was developed and interviews were coded accordingly, with all being given a description. Findings from this study provide a limited picture of this complex topic, as a result of the study's qualitative nature, its sample size and the fact that data was gathered from single interviews. However, the following results aim to give a voice to Indigenous members of these government organisations by using their personal experiences and opinions, allowing study issues to be extracted. The individuals have authorised this extract to be published, and have been involved in the editing/co-authoring of this manuscript.



Results

Frameworks say we should work together but I think it's about telling our staff [Government] we need to work with communities [Indigenous] rather than telling communities how they need to work with us (Parks Victoria staff member).

Land: boundaries and access

The first factor identified by the participants, when focusing on the barriers in accessing traditional Indigenous 'Country', was the new Victorian Cultural Heritage Legislation. A DSE respondent considered that the legislation would 'assist groups to work out their traditional boundaries', because 'before you had a lot of non-Traditional Owners having a say over cultural heritage, and with the new policy it is more aligned with Traditional Custodians contributing their knowledge'. Informants acknowledged that the policy encouraged Traditional Custodians to become a registered party, and to therefore be recognised until boundary issues could be resolved. A DSE participant believed this meant that 'we could work more with those Traditional Owners groups where they have not agreed on boundaries, to add some degree of process' (DSE informant). This could occur by 'allowing for a better mediation process to bring groups together' (PV staff member). However, a DSE participant noted, 'if we keep on going into mediation because of differences of opinion on boundary issues then it will just drag on'. A PV informant perceived that by 'building capacity ... through means such as time out bush and increasing self-determination to learn more about our culture would maybe increase influence to resolve these issues and find out accurate details about boundaries'.

Access to flora and fauna for cultural purposes (such as hunting or basket weaving) was another pressing issue for participants associated with legislative restrictions. A PV participant reflected, 'some mobs in Victoria's only access to their homeland is now a park... so if they have these restrictions they have to practise culture illegally, it's the only option they have'. Another PV informant stated that management plans provided some access, for example to women's places and spiritual ceremonies, but that 'if someone said we want to use this part of the park for Aboriginal people's purposes they could, only there is a process for doing it which is so cumbersome that no one is going to'. There are exceptions to this rule, for example a DSE employee noted that 'Native Title has provided the Wotjobaluk people with the rights to hunt, fish, gather and camp with recognition of their Country acknowledged' (Note: since this meeting, the Gunditjmarra have received Native Title).

Some participants mentioned that Native Title 'broke some ground' that would 'hopefully be available to other Traditional Custodians in Victoria'. A DSE contributor suggested that although 'Native Title is not perfect ... if it is left up to groups to work it out themselves, that might seem like the best process but some groups are in different places. Some have got strong negotiators, whilst others don't even

know one another. You may be able to have an interim period while other groups get their capacity to be able to represent themselves'. This DSE employee mentioned that one strategy of dealing with this issue is that 'Native Title Services and the Department of Justice which have separately been collecting information on groups. They have a lot of information to substantiate what the different Traditional Owner groups in Victoria are ... it's hard to know how to bring that in because some people who say they are from an area maybe are not'.

Another approach as described by a DSE employee, highlighting the need to provide 'better education for communities in relation to Native Title and what it can realistically achieve. The Victorian state government spent some three million dollars on Native Title last year – who benefited? There would be less interest in Native Title if the meagre benefits were pointed out and then we could get back to the business of improving Indigenous communities'. Government employees, no matter what their perspectives on this policy, noted a sentiment that the 'lack of defined Native Title has not stopped any communities from working with us... any work that is taken out of park managed land has to include the consultation process'.

Building governments' capability to deal with Indigenous communities needs

Participants typically described some government processes as flawed, and not in touch with Indigenous communities in Victoria. This was epitomised by one person from Parks Victoria's commenting that 'there are people in our department that need to write policies that are going to have effects on a state-wide level but they know nothing about the people and the land they are writing about'. Some participants went further, suggesting that at times Indigenous communities were specifically excluded by individuals in government agencies because they had different 'values'. One Parks Victoria employee commented that 'some Community Elders who have excellent land management skills can't articulate their traditional knowledge in a scientific sense, [therefore] are not given any credence'. Another frustration mentioned by a DSE informant was that the 'government are out of touch with developments happening, so there has to be consistency because I have seen too many big budget reports being provided with little impact on the ground and being shelved. For change to occur there has to be community ownership of such projects'.

Government employees interviewed were frustrated that agencies were ineffective in collaborating on projects. One DSE informant commented, 'we need to consult each other ... the community get fed up with different agencies wanting the same information and wanting to meet them separately'. Another participant noted, 'we have tried to encourage other agencies to work together, like a reference group ... but there has been resistance. I know at PV and DSE we have had Indigenous staff and therefore a better understanding than other agencies that don't have this relationship'. However, contributors acknowledged that even in their organisations

they lacked consultation skills with other agencies, noting that they did not know or work with the individuals who formulated the Cultural Heritage Legislation, but that if they had, 'that is going to have a much greater impact on what happens on the ground'.

Some successes in developing partnerships were identified by PV and DSE staff, with workshops having been held with Indigenous groups in the Alps in 2005 and the Otways in 2006. One DSE participant reflected on these events, saying, 'it didn't matter whether you were from an agency or a mob ... it was: this is our issue and because of that we are jointly founding information kits for groups to explain where they come from and what their history is; it would be distributed across parks throughout the state. But one thing you cannot stop when working with other agencies is there is always going to be different power plays, personalities, egos'. Informants said this process of building partnerships would be enhanced by a 'transparent process', 'inclusive approach', and 'consistent and persistent' strategies for agencies to deal with Indigenous issues. A Parks Victoria staff member stated, 'I have to deal with two Aboriginal groups that don't recognize each other but I am consistent in saying we are dealing with both of you'. Another informant ironically described the opposite situation having occurred in the DSE, mentioning their 'Native Title group which has no Indigenous staff employed in it, the reason being it would certainly conflict with their association to their community... [because it] continually pushes the Traditional Owners primacy over community'.

The Indigenous Government employees involved in this focus group believed that the only way to improve partnerships with Indigenous communities and individuals was by building stronger relationships. Strategies to build these relationships, a PV informant identified, needed to 'be honest and tell Indigenous communities that their feedback may or may not be used', be 'responsible for investments into communities to move forward in health and environment issues', and 'find the right people to help with the mediation and make it easy for them to be involved in the process'. Attempts to tackle these issues have been made through the PV (2005) and DSE (2007) Indigenous action plans. The issue surrounding relationship-building in parklands in Victoria between park staff and Indigenous communities was that it was 'all happening informally, there are no policies around it. Strategies should be put forward to formalise those partnerships in areas we [government] manage'. One example of this was identified by a PV staff member who noted that the 'informal programs internally in PV like Johns Kicking Dirt are about getting managers and staff, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, together to go for a walk and talk and learn'. The success of such a program led to a DVD being developed. A way of bridging this gap from informal to formal programs would, for example, be to have 'more decision makers on land more accessible at the grass roots level ... instead of communities going through forty different organisations' (DSE informant).

The most common way of government agencies building their capacity to understand Indigenous communities' needs was through cross-cultural training. One participant suggested that with cross-cultural training, 'staff will walk away understanding Indigenous aspirations better' because 'the biggest division is that government people have gone out without understanding the community'. A DSE informant mentioned that there are 'other ways of building this relationship ... we just haven't put as much focus on working partnerships and there haven't been many agency staff going to work with mobs and sharing skills'. Other methods to improve this relationship that individuals mentioned were through acknowledgment of Traditional Owners, dual naming, and considering Traditional Custodians' views when developing policies. However, there are difficulties mentioned by a PV staff member, including that 'Traditional Owners have their own personal and work life too so they are limited in time'. Two positive strategies were outlined to deal with some of these issues. Firstly, if someone is consulting in land management practice, they 'should be encouraged to take a group of interested Indigenous students along', and secondly, we should be 'looking for the value sets that we do have that are similar and that would make it easier to build an alliance towards the same goals, and then the differences will not be hard to deal with'.

Both PV and DSE staff noted that there had been a massive increase in Indigenous employees in these departments, but that this was not reflected in an increased presence in the management of parklands. One reason for this may be lack of experience, and lack of qualification. One DSE participant commented, 'we would be pushing it up hill to get exemptions for senior management roles and, let's face it, an Indigenous person has no experience, and has no hope of competing against someone who has been in parks for fifteen years and has a masters degree'. A PV informant gave a positive spin to this, maintaining that 'probably four Indigenous staff may get senior management positions ... but that will be over time. If you are going to say by 2008 we are going to have six Indigenous senior managers, then you are going to be forcing people to take roles that they aren't ready for'. Participants stated that Indigenous communities must be aware that senior managers 'represent the whole Victorian community and if you put Indigenous over everything else you are going to get fired ... what you can do is ensure that Indigenous people are respected and involved'. Concern was expressed that, 'with specific Indigenous people in senior management roles, that person would be in a difficult position: they would have their own community at them, and others would say 'you are favouring them' so it would be good to see an Indigenous person in that role, but it's better to have a neutral person there at the moment'.

Indigenous partnership strategies developed in PV (2005) and DSE (2007) are focused on building trust through increased consultation, which would allow communities to have a voice in policy changes. However, Indigenous people 'must realise that if we consult too much over the top of everyone else we will get hammered by other

people. People already have cried discrimination because we only advertise for Indigenous people for certain jobs ... that may increase animosity towards Aboriginal people'. Participants highlighted that with the increased consultation and opportunity, more emphasis should be placed on training and education so that individuals within communities can become specialists in their field.

Increasing the capacity of Indigenous communities

Indigenous people were excluded from natural resource management but now there is a co-operative arrangement (Parks Victoria Staff member)

Indigenous PV staff are being trained to improve their land management skills. One participant noted the reason for this is that a 'majority of the time we can't access the applicants with the same qualifications as mainstream PV staff, but then we provide them with the necessary skills to work in roles and they are mentored by senior Indigenous staff. All government agencies are starting to develop these Indigenous employment strategies with recruitment and targets'. DSE staff noted that they were 'heading towards more employment opportunities in natural resource management, looking at opportunities in park management, eco-tourism, bio-prospecting ... determining protocols for working together'.

Parks Victoria and Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (AAV) also offered opportunities to learn about cultural heritage, with 'communities nominating volunteers to be trained in a certificate of conservation and land management; however, most Indigenous individuals still learn it when they're in parks anyway, because some staff work with AAV to do a survey, so it is happening informally'. One DSE informant critically acknowledged that 'government strategies have not picked up on career paths and opportunities ... some of our staff are happy just to be a ranger; other people have higher expectations', and need to get formal qualifications through scholarships or cadetships.

Both PV and DSE staff described the building up of governance and decision-making processes in communities as critical to 'building sustainable groups which lead to longer lasting projects'. A DSE participant mentioned 'education: that's where efforts will be justified as far as trying to overcome disadvantage by making those pathways'. Informants agreed that this could only occur with education and consultation with the Indigenous and broader communities working together to build environmentally sustainable projects. A PV participant reflected, 'all kids aren't getting enough environmental education at schools and that's why they don't value it. Environmental knowledge should be included in school, and more Indigenous influences in it'. Another contributor noted: 'Indigenous inclusion in our education program is going to take time ... if more environmental education is provided that has some relevance'. A PV staff member acknowledged that the only flaw in this issue is 'if you are talking about school curriculum, teachers are scared to teach about Indigenous issues because what they have been shown in the

past is factually incorrect, so they don't have access to resources to help them include it. If there were opportunities for Traditional Custodians to be trained to come in then that would be sensational to develop employment opportunities, but again it only stretches Elders' abilities one step wider'.

Participants stressed the importance of developing long lasting consultation processes, so that knowledge could be shared with the wider community. An example of this working well was when 'the Gunditjmarra spoke to neighbouring stakeholders (local residents) and now the whole community is supportive of the Lake Condah Restoration project'. Therefore, 'education, cultural awareness, working with stakeholders is the way to break barriers because many rural people are afraid of cultural heritage because in many cases they think Indigenous people can take their land'. One DSE participant explained, however, that 'with consultation you have to have some sort of outcome ... consultation to tick the boxes is a waste of time. Communities should be given enough time to be consulted and give informed decisions'. Informants explained that to develop projects using this approach, additional funding would be needed. One PV participant expressed the view that increased funding would be difficult, 'because you are competing against ... things that the public see as more important'. That is why this PV contributor stated, 'we need to put good cases up to show why government needs to increase funding' and 'not push people away from working with us'. He stated: 'I want to work with non-Indigenous people. I don't want to push my issues on them and hammer it down their throats about what happened 170 years ago'.

Issues surrounding control of projects, caring for 'Country' and consultation

Some participants identified that when Indigenous communities wanted full control of projects involving management of parklands, this could lead to negative consequences. A PV informant referred to this, saying, 'land management has evolved now that we do manage it differently ... unfortunately a lot of the traditional land management practices are no longer relevant as we have four million people living in Victoria'. This participant went further, noting, 'you can't have Aboriginal people having control of things they don't have expertise in. There might be certain aspects of projects that they will have a higher level of say and involvement in like interpretation. Aboriginal people have to be more specific in what they want to control'. A PV staff member emphasised that this was important because 'we have certain responsibilities to the tax payers and with that, certain responsibilities [require] qualified people'. This is transferable to other sectors/industries where there need to be quality services.

Most informants recommended that Indigenous communities should not want exclusive use of parklands, but should rather build partnerships where they share it with local communities, with rights to practise their cultures. One PV participant emphasised that if Indigenous people are going to be involved in 'land management

they don't have the right to veto. I see the importance of Aboriginal people caring for "Country" but the landscape in Victoria has changed and we manage land differently so if they want to be more involved in caring for 'Country' they have to be more in line with modern management techniques'. Another concern mentioned by participants was that royalties should not go to a few, but to the majority of Individuals, to build the 'Indigenous community's capacity as a whole in a number of different disciplines, not just park management'.

Contributors noted that the issues outlined above are reasons why understanding the appropriate consultation process is critical. Informants mentioned more 'planning time', 'feedback', 'being open minded to what community wants' and being 'aware [of] cultural protocols' as necessary for the process to work. One DSE participant noted, 'in our department, Indigenous consultation gives communities no time and when we say we are engaging and collaborating, [it] just means we are going to inform Indigenous communities'. The extent of consultation that PV undertook was limited: 'we wouldn't ring every single person and tell them about the project. We would go through the CEO in most instances who sits with the board of Elders and they represent families'. One informant suggested that the consultation process would be easier with a group called the Victorian Traditional Owners Land Justice Group, an umbrella body which was in the developmental stage but which was set up to give guidance to agencies as to what projects communities wanted, and how to achieve them.

Discussion

This postgraduate research project hypothesised that with the increased participation of Indigenous communities in the natural environment, the status of social capital, health and wellbeing would improve, but there are many factors that need to be considered so that the initiatives undertaken are long-lasting, meaningful, and also work with the broader Victorian public.

This research highlighted the need for the establishment of partnerships, collaboration and a co-operative approach between and within government agencies, Indigenous community and the public, supporting the Declaration of Alma Alta (1978). Examples of how to strengthen these partnerships given in this study included involving Indigenous youth in projects, dual naming of significant landmarks, acknowledgment of Traditional Custodians, and the sharing of values. This highlights the multi-layered approach to Indigenous affairs highlighted in research by McKendrick (2000) and Pellekaan and Clague (2006), who indicated that healing can only occur when policies focus on maintaining co-operative partnerships at a national and local level. In keeping with the views of Kickbush (1997), who noted that progress was not hampered by lack of money, but rather insufficient governance, informants noted that they should tackle improving the capacity of Traditional Owner groups in their decision-making processes. This applied to resolving boundary issues and

access to flora and fauna in parklands for cultural purposes, with contributors noting that building Indigenous communities' capacity was of great importance to this process. Indigenous Government employees still viewed Native Title, to a degree, as successful in resolving access to 'Country' issues, but saw flaws in the process because of legislation.

Significantly, this study identified that environmental management education for Indigenous communities was important, but it was critical that government agencies and the public gain knowledge in this and in Indigenous culture. Brown (2001) highlighted this, noting that a partnership would be achieved with education of the dominant culture and with both cultures working together. However, as one informant mentioned, this was complex, as non-Indigenous teachers did not feel comfortable teaching Indigenous culture, because of their lack of knowledge.

Informants mentioned that increased training, employment and consultation opportunities for Indigenous communities was essential, as highlighted in the PV Indigenous Partnership Strategy (2005) and the DSE action plan (2007). Bartley and Ferrie (1999) noted that with an increase in employment, academic achievement and job security, health would improve. However, informants mentioned that there needed to be lines drawn as to how many opportunities are available for Indigenous groups compared with opportunities for other stakeholders, since this can create animosity. Participants also highlighted that these processes could be improved by better consultation, by allowing for more time and feedback, and by abiding by cultural protocols. As the DSE strategy (2004) noted, understanding these protocols was critical to identifying the right people to consult with in Indigenous communities. Another issue mentioned was the need for increased transparency, recognition of culture and consistency, with Indigenous communities and government working together, and with agencies consulting each other in order to minimise duplication.

The key point mentioned throughout this study was that by building stronger relationships between Indigenous communities and government organizations, there would be enhanced trust in projects and strategies. This related to building social capital, in that by increasing social networks, trust and social cohesion, there would be greater material and social support – for example the capacity to run Indigenous-controlled land management projects (Putnam 2000; Baum 2003). As Lutschini (2005) pointed out, by improving community cohesion, equality in Indigenous health can be improved. This also reflects on Putnam's (2000) sentiment that by greater involvement in civic environmentalism, democracy and trust could be achieved within political institutions and groups. As Indigenous Australians have had their human rights progressively eroded in the past, the building of sustainable friendships, social networks and relationships may alleviate this trend through forging a partnership, thereby increasing access to 'Country' in Victoria. However, if this situation of degraded human rights is to be reversed, caring

for 'Country' will be only one element in the process of improving Indigenous self-determination.

It would be beneficial for further assessment to be undertaken in order to understand how government-run projects and strategies can build stronger trust, partnerships and relationships within Indigenous communities. This would strengthen this research; allowing policy makers to be more progressive when developing Indigenous projects that involve the management of Traditional lands. Policy makers need to look laterally at how to develop better Indigenous programs, and to develop programs anew from the ground up. This would lead to enhancement of Indigenous aspirations that involve increased recognition of Indigenous culture, giving opportunities to youth, maintaining the natural landscape, and training and employing Indigenous staff in government agencies.

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