

Dany Adone, Thomas Batchelor

Interview with Glenn James on Indigenous Engagement in Fire Management

Dany Adone: It's a pleasure to have Mr. Glenn James with us today. Mr. James works in the Northern Territory with Indigenous Rangers and is involved in fire management programmes. Could you tell us about your work?

Glenn James: Thank you and thanks for the invitation to speak with you. It's a pleasure to share some of the experience that I've had in the Northern Territory and across the north of Australia. By way of introduction, I spent about 10 years in the Tanami Desert or on the edge of it, living and working in an Aboriginal community called 'Yuendumu'. I then came to Darwin and worked for one of the Northern Territory's four Aboriginal land councils, the Northern Land Council. I spent nearly a decade working across the Top End of the Northern Territory with the Land Council before joining an Indigenous organization called the 'North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance', which is a mouthful, but basically, it is an organization whose land management and enterprise development foci crosses jurisdictional boundaries across the north of Australia, aiming for some gravitas for Indigenous voices in land management in particular. I spent almost a decade working there.

I've since, in the last several years started a (very) small consulting company doing project management, sacred site surveying, cross-cultural facilitation and various other bits and pieces. So that's kind of me in a nutshell, three lots of 10-year stints. I don't know why, but that's just how it seems to have happened.

I have a particular interest in the emissions management space - the carbon space in relation to Indigenous land management. I have also recently spent quite a bit of time working with Indigenous community members and emergency management agencies to improve social, cultural and economic outcomes in that natural hazard management interface. This is an important focus for relationship and partnership development across much of Australia, though significantly challenged by 'business as usual' structures and practices. I'm trying to keep tabs on all these things - they are very different fields but connected by fairly common themes in Australia's colonial history and treatment of Indigenous people, both challenges and opportunities. That's pretty much where I'm at, at the moment.

Thomas Batchelor: How has your work engaged in lifting Indigenous voices for change?

Glenn James: I always see myself as a facilitator, really, and I see my role as a facilitator as understanding that often murky intercultural zone where utterances and meaning become uncertain, and helping to find spaces and pathways for trust

and clearer communication. So, in my case, I really try to bring my thirty-odd year history (working with Indigenous Australians in the desert, in the Top End, Western Australia and North Queensland) to bear on projects that are of interest to traditional Aboriginal landowners. I think I have something to offer, in a sense, to give back and so I've engaged in quite a few different sorts of projects in the last number of years that have really been geared towards, as you say, giving voice to, facilitating space for or helping empower Indigenous people who have a particular agenda or interest that I may be able to assist with, such as those I mentioned, in the carbon space, enterprise, emergency management.

My interest in carbon was not carbon per se. It was to help people understand that entering into an emissions reduction or carbon economy by getting back out on the Country and reinvesting in traditional-style burning also means that they're necessarily engaging in a business-type economy, involving ostensibly Anglocentric type business structures, notions of economic success, and a range of partners (researchers, funders, community organisations) ... a kind of transcendental shift from being customary landowners caring for their Country to landowners caring for their Country and earning/managing a commercial income. It's really important to be able to promote confidence in Indigenous proponents of this kind of enterprise that they can put their values first, reaffirming their own strengths and then using that to try and negotiate a pathway into being effective actors in the economic sphere. So, the carbon space has been one. Another has been, as I mentioned, the emergency management arena, where remote community people have a great deal to offer in the preparation, management and reconstruction phases of natural hazards events, but they are almost invariably left out of the equation.

Emergency management as a sector tends to ignore the values and the assets that Indigenous communities have to participate in and effectively collaborate in preparation for and in response to natural hazards. So the conversation that we're trying to grow here is one where emergency management agencies start to recognize the value of decentralizing some of their responsibilities to remote Indigenous communities by speaking with them directly about the sorts of assets that they have to offer, including local knowledge and cultural networks of communication and language, for example. These are some of the ingredients needed to build effective partnerships, to improve the effectiveness altogether of emergency management in the face of natural hazards. There are a few really quite successful projects across north Australia that we collectively now are wanting to help develop further and share the experience of other remote community groups and state/territory agencies alike, to learn from.

Dany Adone: It is not really the academic community here, it's people doing work like you, consulting and also those who've been working in these institutions, how can they contribute in the process?

Glenn James: Yeah, it's an interesting one because there's still a strong tendency within the academic and research world (the ethnocentric structures, administrations and practitioners) to be paternalistic. And this is one of the key challenges for us as supporters, partners, interested thinkers, to first of all, recognize

the insult and cycles of dependency that are most often an outcome of such approaches, and then find pathways with our Indigenous partners to avoid these rather abstract 'western' practices of 'needing to understand and document', 'wanting to fix', 'playing by the rules', overlaying systems of governance, and failing to be self-reflexive. We should not just be doing things for people or just doing research for example on them. So, research is a classic example, where we need to develop systemic approaches to be doing things with Indigenous community members that are of value to them (directly and indirectly) – that they want, and that's the key. We tend by nature – unless we develop our own faculties of self-critique – I think, to be Anglocentric in our approaches to working with Indigenous communities. We find ourselves, as I often do, in that murky intercultural zone between Indigenous values (the way that they articulate them, their interests and aspirations) and government (or other organisations) KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) and policy prescriptions, thinking that we know better than those we cannot really understand. We can contribute more or better to promoting Indigenous voices by engaging in a healthy critique of our (state) presumptuousness and learn to listen and respect their voices, other ways of seeing, other modes of living and other life spaces.

We (people like me who have the privilege to work in Indigenous Australia) should try to grow long-term relationships with mutual trust such that we can find ways to develop a nuanced understanding of white-fella society through that murky intercultural zone. It's really quite critical. There's a generation of Indigenous people growing up who are getting better and better at that all the time but the rate at which governments and others are imposing their own agendas on top of communities in the name of welfare, in the name of 'their development' and in the name of opening up Indigenous land to enterprise and all that sort of thing, is incredibly complex and there need to be facilitators, wherever they stem from, who can play a role to assist navigate that cultural interface – to help interpret both ways.

Another thing I think is important is to recognise there is not just one Indigenous Community. The stereotype 'Community' has justifiably been unpicked by many over the last few decades but somehow a demeaning sense of it hangs on in the functioning of the relationship between State and Aboriginal society. We can't really get too deep into it here but each community (town, village, homeland etc.) is unique, with its own geography, history, linguistic and cultural peculiarities, leadership, land tenure, access to resources and on and on. We cannot assume to approach different towns with one approach, one generic set of goals or process.

There are however some important commonalities that you can draw on to help you as an agent, an academic, a researcher, facilitator, to help you develop a model or a framework for approaching communities in general. So, some of those commonalities include a general state of economic underprivilege compared to the mainstream, the imposition of many layers of government and other agency-conceived governance arrangements, complicating if not suffocating local/traditional-style authority and practice, a deep sense of identity and connection to land lore and culture.

Regardless of the critical need to respect common challenges in unique circumstances every agency and service provider, whether it's the police, the school, the health department, the local sporting group, State Emergency Services group, local council etc., operates with their own agendas, rules, administration and so on, quite separately from each other and from local tradition. And I don't mean that necessarily in a negative way, I just mean they have their own way of acting out their own purposes, their own protocols. Collectively, these are like layers of blankets, if you like, smothering local Indigenous authority structures and suffocating initiative and action to (re)construct community authority with cultural integrity and purpose. Local authority is difficult to (re)build in these culturally complex diasporas, and increasingly so with the pressure and 'busy-ness' from all these service provider agendas.

That's one reason why it's critical to be able to see the unique qualities of each community to help unpack some of those layers of external service provider authority so that you might have a sense of acknowledgement and respect for the local authority structure underneath, which is most likely not perfectly intact or functioning well under the 'warm blanket' of colonial governance, but that's what I think we ought to be trying to do, is to say okay, we recognize there is something underneath here where our local leaders are really trying to reclaim some Indigenous authority within the community that's being suppressed by what is effectively the legacy of the colonial process by external governance.

So, that's the difference between some common characteristics and recognizing unique qualities we need to work within. Recognising commonalities gives us a capacity to develop scalable strategies and approaches for partnership building for example (to make way for locals to put land, lore and people at the centre of community governance). Respect for uniqueness demands that we co-develop approaches with certain groups of people we want to work with in order to suit their needs.

Dany Adone: Could you please tell us something about the emergency management/disaster preparedness?

Glenn James: Yes, so in the emergency management space, there has been a tendency for national state and territory governments of the day to operate in an almost militaristic way. It's a kind of efficiency thing and it's pretty effective at the level of life and property protection. This has been born out, especially in recent years with massive and often recurring bush fires, floods and cyclones every year. Communities that I have worked with, that have suffered significant natural hazards speak highly of and gratefully for government emergency management agency responses. They have however found it very difficult to recover/develop their social, economic and emotional capital, and emergency management agencies are not geared up to be able to assist them very well to do this. Part of this is engagement at a cross-cultural level. The agency epithet 'build back better' is difficult to do if you don't know what that looks like in terms of things like cultural strength, health of family and Country, relative autonomy, prosperity etc. from a local perspective.

Government perception of Indigenous values, and their subsequent agency response in the last little while has seen a big push to try and incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems in emergency management practice – traditional-style landscape burning is a core example. Agencies are challenged to broaden their knowledge and skillset in relation to social capital with Indigenous people. They recognized that a reintroduction of fire for example, into the northern landscape has reduced wildfires by some extraordinary percentage – something in the order of thirty per cent overall and much higher in some specific areas. I can't give you a reliable figure on it, but it's indicative and I can tell you that in the north of Australia (from North Queensland, through the Northern Territory to the Kimberley in northern Western Australia), up to about ten to fifteen years ago, about seventy per cent of the land area burned each year ... it's enormous. It's a much higher percentage of land area that burns than in the south – though in the southern states of Australia, the destructive capacity is greater because of much greater population densities, denser forests, much more infrastructure, and all that. Much of this has been driven by engagement in the carbon economy.

So, the reintroduction of traditional-style burning has reduced that dramatically. So much so that the conservative emergency management agencies recognize some level of value of traditional knowledge, even though I think, on the whole, they don't really know what that means in practicality. It's an interesting thing ... can you cherry-pick and separate out bits of traditional knowledge that you think are useful (like patchwork burning in the early dry season) and then apply them in other places? It has been expressed to me in various ways that traditional knowledge is embedded completely in local lore, culture and society, such that if you try to take something of it to use elsewhere you separate it from the system of knowledge, the local place, language and people that give it meaning and make it work.

There are too many complex ideas wrapped up in this to talk through here. It is clear that Indigenous Australians (particularly those who still have access to their Country) have technologies and cultural responses to natural hazards. Think about intimate knowledge of Country, familial responsibility and custodial relationships with the Country itself, metaphysical beliefs and practices that guide behaviour, historical knowledge of changing weather and impacts, networks of connected kin across vast landscapes, nuanced local languages that reach everyone, and so on.

The sort of anthropomorphism in the relationship between people and their Country is a very powerful driving force, not only for caring for Country, but for receiving sucker from it. And that has led to many different kinds of what we might now see as management responses, that can assist in the emergency management space. Language is no small part of that, which is also a fascinating and a large topic of conversation.

So, the governments of the day are now grappling a little bit with how to engage with traditional knowledge in emergency management such that they might partner with reliable efficacy with Indigenous communities and move away a little bit from the highly autocratic and almost militarist *modus operandi*

that has been the norm. I think the model is changing, but it's a slow process, not only of finding avenues for Indigenous voices in this space ... and they have been there unlistened to for a long time, but also a process of changing the culture and practice within EM agencies. It's a very interesting, sometimes frustrating, time to be working around this interface.

Dany Adone: Thank you very much, Glenn.