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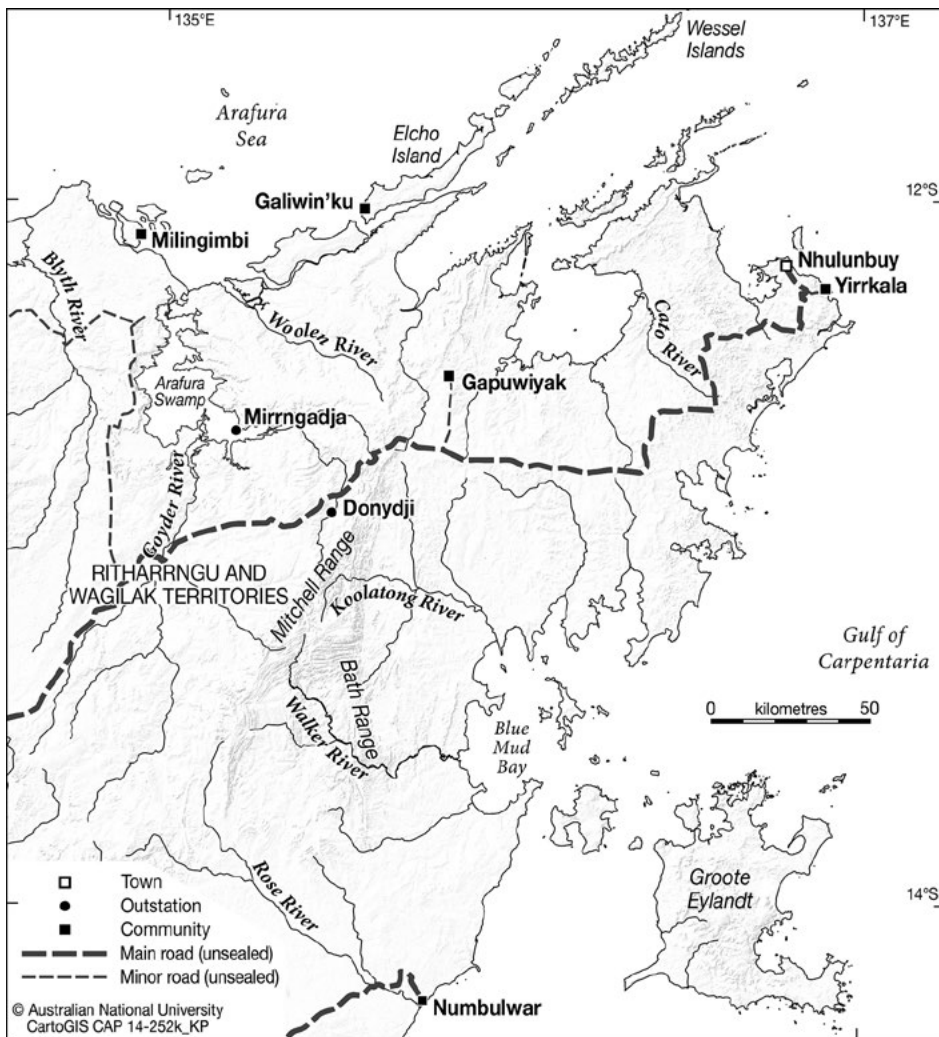
A history of Donydji outstation, north-east Arnhem Land

Neville White

The first official exploration of Yolngu country was by David Lindsay, who, in 1883, travelled the western edge of Wagilak land, following the Goyder River into the Arafura Swamp, where he first encountered Yolngu people and in large numbers. Soon after, in 1885, the Florida cattle station was established when a herd of cattle driven from Queensland arrived (Berndt and Berndt 1954). This was a short-lived but violent frontier, with memories of conflict and atrocities persisting today. Soon after the closure of Florida, a Methodist Overseas Mission was founded, in 1923, on Milingimbi Island, off the north-western coast of north-east Arnhem Land (Berndt and Berndt 1954). This mission settlement attracted Yolngu people from a wide area, many of whom settled on the mission. Others, like the families who set up the Donydji outstation, visited periodically for supplies such as tobacco and sugar—commodities that were also occasionally obtained from the Mainoru cattle station and Roper River Mission Station to the south. These journeys often took many months.

During World War II, Milingimbi came under air attack by the Japanese, and the Reverend Harold Shepherdson moved to a new Methodist mission site on Elcho Island, a little to the east. Shepherdson later transported, in his own single-engine plane, some food supplies and clothes to the newly created Mirrngadja outstation, using an airstrip he had helped construct in 1959 (Shepherdson 1981). In 1969, the Reverend started Lake Evella (now known as Gapuwiyak) as an outpost of the Elcho Island Mission, so as to engage with

Yolngu people further inland and to mill native cypress pine growing in the vicinity (Shepherdson 1981). Shortly before Lake Evella was set up, a mining survey party constructed a rough road connecting Katherine, south-west of Arnhem Land, to the Gove Peninsula, in the north-east. This track has become the Central Arnhem Highway, which is about 5 km further north than the original road that ran through Donydji. The construction of the bauxite mining town of Nhulunbuy began in the late 1960s, followed soon after by an alumina refinery. This has become the main service centre for all of north-east Arnhem Land and further afield, attracting Yolngu people from the entire region, who come for health and other services, such as banking, the purchase of food and other provisions, as well as motor vehicles and spare parts.



Map 16.1 Doyndji outstation in north-east Arnhem Land.

Source: Karina Pelling, CartoGIS, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific

In outlining here the origin and history of Donydji (now Gurrumala) outstation, I suggest that it was not established as a move away from the larger centres in rejection of the settlement lifestyle, although I think it has become such. Rather, the aim was to protect the area from outside interference by mining companies as well as the utilitarian desire to stay near the airstrip (constructed by a mining survey team) so as to obtain food, materials and, it was hoped, health services. Strong emotional attachment to this place was just as important: the two senior Ritharrngu brothers who chose to establish the permanent camp at Donydji had never left their land. Three years ago, I recall two elderly Djarrwak women living at Balma, to the east, telling me that these old men never left their country during the Yolngu 'wartime': 'They were strong and stayed. That's what we think about them.'¹



Figure 16.1 View of the Donydji (Gurrumala) Homeland community, taken in 2012. Most of the buildings were constructed by Vietnam veteran volunteers, working with community members using charitable funds provided through the Rotary Club of Melbourne.

Photo: Neville White

¹ This is probably a reference to the conflict taking place in north-east Arnhem Land during the 1930s, both with outsiders and internally (see Berndt and Berndt 1954).

The young generation, however, sees living in the homelands as an assertion of self-determination—a need to show the outside world that they care for their country and choose to live on it. In fact, some young people—men and women—see it as an act of defiance in the face of increasing pressure from governments, miners, tourism interests and others to have them give up their homeland and move into the government-defined ‘hub centres’ with the promise of better servicing and social control through police surveillance.

Since 1974, I have spent about two months every year living in Donydji, conducting research and working with the residents as an advocate and in community development. Starting in 2003, this has been as project leader of the Mittjiwu Djaaka (Caring for Our Community) Project funded by philanthropy with support from volunteers, especially Vietnam veterans with whom I served as an infantry conscript. The story I tell here, then, is based on a long-standing relationship with the Yolngu in and around Donydji.

Donydji outstation takes its name from a very important Ritharrngu sacred site nearby. The wider area, called Gurrumala, was (and is) seen to be a ‘company’ area under the custodial jurisdiction of three Ritharrngu clans with ceremonial connections to different species of paperbark trees growing along the river close to where the outstation is located. Before 1968, the Ritharrngu and Wagilak families now resident at Donydji were, to a considerable degree, nomadic, largely dependent on traditional wild food resources. Much of their time was spent exploiting the area between Donydji and Mirrngadja to the north, although their economic range also covered the country of Ritharrngu and Wagilak clans with whom they had strong marriage relationships, and extended over about 4,000 sq km. These people were among the few remaining Aborigines living in, and off, the bush, although they had substantial contact with mission stations in the region.

In 1967, several of the people who later took up residence in Donydji were engaged occasionally in walking from the long-standing Mirrngadja outstation to a mining camp that had been set up on the Donydji River at Gadahirri, a little downstream from where the outstation is now. In return for their efforts, they received sugar and tobacco, according to some of those who were involved.²

In 1968, a bush airstrip was constructed near its present location by the mining survey team with the assistance of some of the Yolngu. About this time, geologists damaged a sacred site by removing a core from one of the granite boulders that form the Djawk constellation, which both represents and embodies the Ritharrngu clans. These events prompted the establishment of a permanent camp at Donydji: the airstrip added to the resource base by providing access to tools,

2 Nicolas Peterson, while carrying out fieldwork at Mirrngatja, confirmed these reports.

food and occasionally medical care, while the damaged sacred site emphasised to the Aborigines the need to guard their land. Since then, the outstation has functioned as a permanent base camp, with households moving in and out in response to the availability of resources, and to social tension. In recounting to me the history of the outstation, Yolngu placed far greater emphasis on site protection than on the acquisition of Western goods that Nic Peterson, working at Mirrngatja, saw as the imperative.

During 1975, the community was swelled by a number of families and single men from the Malabarritjarray (also known as Madarrpa) Ritharrngu clan, who travelled up from Roper River. These people came to try to resolve the responsibility and subsequent compensation for the damage to the Djawk. Not then having a working knowledge of Wagilak, I had to rely on my friend Yilarama to explain some elements of the meetings and ceremonies. His English was not good at that time and my Wagilak was much worse. It seems that the Birdingal and Gulungurr clansmen were held responsible for allowing the mining company to drill into the stone. I still do not know what, if any, material compensation was paid to the Madarrpa Ritharrngu and other custodial clans. I did record, however, that the same groups came together soon after for a *Marradjiri* ceremony, which was taken west into Rembarrnga stone country.³ It was only in recent years that these stone country and eastern Ritharrngu clan members returned to Donydji to reside for short periods, to participate in ceremonies or join in negotiations over mining exploration (all rejected), roadworks and other development proposals. In late 2013, representatives of these groups and other custodians gathered in Donydji to consider the gas pipeline proposed by Rio Tinto for its alumina plant in Nhulunbuy.

During the 2013 pipeline negotiations, there was strong disagreement between men from the southern clans—who anticipated a financial windfall but who, it was made clear, had never been carers for the country in dispute—and those opposed to economic development of this kind. After sometimes heated and dramatic discussions over two days, and unlike the earlier applications, approval was finally given for a pipeline to be constructed across Ritharrngu and Wagilak estates in the vicinity of the outstation. However, not long after this meeting, the plans were shelved by Rio Tinto.

³ Six months after this ceremony, an elderly Wambukungu Rembarrnga widow came to Donydji as the first wife of one of the Birdingal Ritharrngu.

Missionaries and evangelism

An important influence in Donydji's history has been the presence of Methodist missionaries. In particular, the Reverend Harold Shepherdson from the Elcho Island Mission was instrumental in supporting a number of homelands in their early years, among the earliest being Mirrngadja from which Donydji was a spinoff, by flying in some basic food staples, and of course, Bible study materials (even though no one at Donydji could read English and few could speak it).⁴ 'Bapa Sheppy' had a good relationship with these homeland residents and was understated in his proselytising. He believed that people should be helped to stay on their country if that was what they desired. Taking the 'good works' of the mission to the Yolngu living on their traditional lands rather than drawing them into the mission would, he claimed, reduce conflict in the large centres. Cole (1980: 89) visited the area as a missionary in 1979, and wrote that 'only Dhonydja [sic] continues during the wet season', and the people were 'a happy integrated group, hunting and living largely off the bush'. His observations were made before the wider decentralisation movement in eastern Arnhem Land, and demonstrated the commitment that those Yolngu people made to stay on their traditional land.

Cole (1980: 89) 'reported the 'local aboriginal church worker' spoke of the [Donydji people] as 'good and faithful people, part of God's family and sharing the gospel with each other'. During the 1980s, a form of Pentecostalism, which I believe was associated with a Billy Graham-inspired crusade, spread through Yolngu country, including Donydji (see Bos 1988). Among its manifestations was a type of cargo-cult mentality by which men would gather in a crowded bark hut calling out through prayer for food and asking God to send some buffalo bullets. There was also a very strong fellowship movement in which young men and women danced around a large crucifix and practised faith healing. People travelled widely to fellowship gatherings, thereby substantially expanding their social connections, including marriages, beyond Yolngu country.⁵ Before these evening fellowships, the single men would spend a great deal of time viewing themselves in fragments of mirrors, brushing their hair, rubbing oil over their skin and generally preening themselves; so, too, did the women. These were times when Jesus gave permission for single men and women to hold hands and praise the Lord. They would then pile on to a dilapidated tractor-trailer with no springs and be towed 27 km or more to another crucifix arena in the then deserted outstation of Dhunganda.

4 See also Morphy and Morphy, this volume.

5 My notebooks during that time are replete with expletives, bemoaning the hallelujah-ing of the late-night fellowships that deprived me of sleep.

The current, self-proclaimed leader of Donydji is a 58-year-old Birdingal Ritharrngu man I shall call Henry. In 1986, at the very start of the Christian fellowship in the homeland, Henry appointed himself a lay minister and led the night-time fellowship gatherings, providing sermons and hymns very often in a largely unintelligible form of English. The only obvious English words that I understood were 'Praise the Lord', 'God Jesus' and 'Hallelujah'. On the occasional Sunday morning, Henry conducted something that resembled a Catholic Mass in which he used red cordial in a cut-down plastic bottle and pieces of damper as the sacrament. In these gatherings, males and females were kept apart. The first kit-house sent to Donydji was destroyed when the aluminium frames were cut up to manufacture crucifixes. Through his Christian leadership, Henry gained considerable secular authority among missionaries and homeland support agencies that no doubt contributed to his current leadership role in Donydji.

This Christian activity peaked from late 1988 to 1992. Faith-healing sessions became important. I believe this resulted from the death, in 1987, of Henry's older brother and favourite son of the two senior Ritharrngu clansmen. As is the case with most unexpected deaths, it was attributed to sorcery or a '*Galka*'.⁶ As far as I am aware, the 'murder' was blamed on a failure to pay properly for participation in a *Nara* ceremony (see Warner 1958) that was held near the Arafura Swamp.

A consequence of this religious movement in Donydji was the return to the community of a number of women, young and old, many with their children. Christian leaders such as Henry had stressed in their sermons the importance of following Jesus as a way to bring people together and stop the fighting and harm that Yolngu were causing each other. The fellowship emphasised the role of the homeland in providing a more secure and safer environment, especially for women and children, away from the larger centres such as Gapuwiyak, the hub settlement about 130 km to the north-east by road, where there was growing social dysfunction, substance abuse and anxiety from threats of sorcery and *Galka*. Some of the women were torn between their desire for life in Donydji and what they saw as the need for at least some Western education through the school at Gapuwiyak. At that time, and indeed until very recently, the Gapuwiyak School authority did not support schooling in the homelands; if carers wanted a Western education for the children, they were expected to move to the nearest 'hub' school.

⁶ Said by some Yolngu to be a murdering manifestation or operative of a malevolent spirit that can take many forms.

The school

Residents were vocal in their desire to have a school at Donydji, recognising that unless their young people learned to read and write English and had numeracy skills, both they and the community would continue to struggle in negotiating for community infrastructure and their aspirations for the future. They were adamant that Western schooling should occur on their own land in the safety of their homeland community, where children and young people could also learn about their own language and culture. As one man said, 'the place needed to know their smell'. It was at the end of 2001, about 26 years after their own brief experiment with running a school was ended, and after continual lobbying, that Shepherdson College in Galiwinku on Elcho Island sent a teacher to Donydji, where she spent three days a week teaching under a bark and plastic shelter that had no protection from the hot gusting winds of the late dry season or from wet season rain. The education authorities were approached for a classroom, but the response was that the children needed to demonstrate their commitment to learning for a further 12 to 18 months before funding would be considered. Working with one of my postgraduate students, I decided to seek funding for a schoolhouse from charitable organisations in Melbourne through the Rotary Clubs of East Keilor and, later, Melbourne—a highly successful relationship that continues to this day. This, then, was the start of what has been the most significant development in at least the recent history of Donydji: the Mittjiwu Djaaka 'Caring for Our Community' Project, which has brought together philanthropy, volunteerism and, at times limited, government-funded organisations that should be providing infrastructure and services to homelands.

The first building completed was the schoolhouse in 2003, which soon had 35 students. A new government-funded school and teachers' residence were constructed once the original school was shown to be a success, with the children and their carers committed to a community-based Western education that incorporated local cultural studies. A number of families subsequently returned to Donydji to take advantage of the school. As a consequence, additional housing was needed. Since that time, charitable organisations operating through the Rotary Club of Melbourne (RCM) have provided close to \$1.7 million for the construction of a trade training workshop, four small houses and a three-room single men's quarters built to a design developed by the local people, all of which have solar power, three ablution blocks with laundries and solar hot-water, and three outdoor hearth-kitchens, also designed by the residents. The RCM not only raises funds for the purchase of equipment and materials for the Mittjiwu Djaaka Project, it also provides travel and support for a group of mainly Vietnam veteran volunteers. These and some other volunteers have

worked with the youth and young men (mainly) for one to two months each year since 2004, imparting practical skills in constructing the buildings and providing basic literacy and numeracy in the workplace.

In 2013, for the first time, there was a five-day school week. This was the initiative of the Mittjiwu Djaaka Project after the principal of Shepherdson College informed the community in November 2012 that government funding would only permit effectively two days of teaching each week. Before this, there was rarely a week when the school ran for more than three days; often children gathered at the school waiting for the teacher to come. The week-long teaching program, available to other children throughout Australia, was made possible by a young volunteer from La Trobe University. He agreed to live and teach in the school for the first semester of 2013. This proved to be very successful and he returned in the second semester on a salary, 40 per cent of which was provided through the RCM. The daily attendance was between 18 and 25 children. This was about 85–90 per cent of the school-age residents, compared with the 30 per cent or so regularly attending school in the hub communities.

In semester one 2014, teaching days were once again irregular and some children reluctantly moved temporarily to Gapuwiyak. Some community members complained that they were being neglected by Shepherdson College, supporting their view that 'the Government' wanted to force them from their homeland. As a consequence of what they saw as inadequate teaching, residents held a meeting in Donydji in May with the principal of Shepherdson College. They expressed their view that the operation of the Donydji School should be transferred from Shepherdson College to the Gapuwiyak School. Teachers would then drive to and from Donydji rather than use costly and irregular charter flights from Elcho Island. They argued that this arrangement would ensure at least four teaching days per week for the Donydji pupils. Following a letter to the regional director of education with their request, the transfer occurred in time for the second semester. The NT Education Department almost certainly made the decision on financial grounds rather than education outcomes.



Figure 16.2 Workshop activities: Vietnam veteran volunteer, Graham Singleton, in 2013, mentoring single men in the construction of furniture for community use and sale to other homelands and organisations in the region. The workshop was constructed in 2005, by volunteers and local men using charitable funds.

Photo: Neville White

The Donydji experience has shown that homeland education would benefit from being community-based and individually targeted rather than following the national curriculum and its inappropriate benchmarks. Most of the young people in Donydji over the age of about 14 have not acquired basic primary-level literacy and numeracy skills, and are thus not academically equipped to enrol in the middle and senior school classes corresponding to their age groups. Therefore, workplace-based literacy and numeracy and vocational education could replace the formal structure of a primary through secondary curriculum. A community-based approach would also recognise the important role that elders have in passing on cultural heritage, including local languages and an understanding of traditional values.

The recently deceased community leader of Donydji said to me shortly before he died that 'my language [is] Ritharrngu: this place [is] Ritharrngu, why they come and teach our children in a different [Yolngu] language? Young people are forgetting their fathers' tongue.' Shortly after this conversation, I raised his

concern with the assistant teacher, a young literate Djambarrpungu woman who was the only person in Donydji, indeed in the wider Yolngu community, who could write in her own as well as her mother's Ritharrngu dialect. It was decided that she would teach the older students Djambarrpuynngu, which was commonly spoken in Donydji, and Ritharrngu. Not a single student of any age could write or read his/her own dialect. Classes were given on Fridays, one of the days when there was no visiting teacher. English translations were also given. Back in Melbourne, I received a rare phone call from a 16-year-old young man, who thanked me for helping set up the Yolngu literacy class, saying that it made him feel proud and want to learn more at school.

Apart from the mentoring provided by the volunteers, there is still no formal vocational education and training course provided to the young men in Donydji—that is, those aged between about 14 and their late 20s—despite the construction of a fully equipped community training workshop. The NT education authorities no longer include vocational and adult education in school programs and hence funds are not available to run teaching programs. The Mittjiwu Djaaka Project has, however, demonstrated that vocational education and training is popular and can be successfully implemented.

For the first year after the workshop was built in 2005, there were 12 trainees who wanted to continue the training program established by the volunteers. Not long after the latter departed, a visiting teacher wrote saying the young men had approached him 'in high spirits and full of enthusiasm', anxious for more training and work experience. There were other young men from surrounding homelands and, indeed, the hub communities who wished to participate, but there was insufficient accommodation and food in Donydji to support them. The then principal of Shepherdson College recognised the value of the youth training initiative and provided a trade-qualified teacher to develop a workshop program for the next 12 months. The technical teacher later wrote to me saying that the students had displayed a 'real enthusiasm and motivation in working towards improving their own situation', and it was 'this willingness to work and learn that was his initial motivation to go and teach them'.

The young men acquired sufficient trade skills and team spirit to undertake building maintenance work under the supervision of the Vietnam veterans, who tendered for the job on their behalf. This work was satisfactorily completed for less than half the amount demanded by outside contractors. It was the first paid work any of them had ever done. Individual and collective self-esteem blossomed, and participants were keen to continue training and work. Sadly, the college's new principal decided not to continue this arrangement, saying it was not for him to provide technical training since Donydji's 'was not a real school'; it was a 'homeland learning centre'. The supportive and technically qualified teacher was moved to another school to teach the primary school curriculum

where his vocational training skills were not utilised. As an alternative, the principal instructed the primary schoolteacher to provide cooking lessons for the young men. Most of these youths wanted to learn the skills of a motor mechanic or builder, for example, and found it difficult to fit into the mixed-age primary to early secondary classroom with boys and girls, their kin, who ranged between five and 15 years of age. As a consequence, Donydji school enrolments fell by 50 per cent, with most of the youths and young men moving away from the community due to boredom.



Figure 16.3 The three rooms in the single-man's quarters, constructed by volunteers and community members in 2008. Philanthropic funds donated through the Rotary Club of Melbourne financed the project.

Photo: Neville White

The NT Education Department's withdrawal from vocational education and the low level of literacy and numeracy of Donydji people have meant that they would not be offered apprenticeships anyway. However, a recent Federal Government initiative does revive the possibility of vocational training and local employment prospects for the majority of young adults in Donydji who desire it. 'I want to live here in Gurrumala; there is too much humbug in Gapuwiyak', one teenager said to me recently. 'We can go hunting here but sometimes we get bored like it is there, and I don't want to sit around or just cut grass and clean up rubbish.'

In August 2014 the Vietnam veteran volunteers and I established a fruitful working relationship with field staff of the recently established Miwatj Employment and Participation Limited (MEP) group in Yirrkala. This is the

local contractor for the Commonwealth Government's new Remote Jobs and Community Program (RJCP), set up to supervise work-for-the-dole and be a replacement for Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP).

It is designed to increase the level of participation in the mainstream economy by encouraging and fostering new employment and training opportunities. It is also intended to foster self-sufficiency, resourcefulness and community participation where jobs are scarce—such as in the homelands.⁷



Figure 16.4 Inside the single-men's quarters: the TV was used to view Australian Football League videos, which remain popular. Electricity is from solar energy.

Photo: Neville White

MEP has agreed to continue the Donydji Workshop program. Materials were supplied by MEP to enable the volunteer mentors to train 11 young men to manufacture furniture and food boxes requested by Yolngu in Donydji and other centres. Many of the products will be sold, with the money to be returned to the workshop to pay top-up wages and buy the required tools and materials. As with many initiatives in Aboriginal Australia, apparently straightforward solutions to problems in community development become entangled in bureaucratic

7 Email, 11 July 2014, from the acting CEO, Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation.

incompetence or oversight. In this case, while RJCP policy is focused on training and employment, it appears to have made no provision for paying participants or setting up businesses in the homelands. A solution needs to be found.

Responses to mining and other development interests

As indicated above, people living in Donydji have traditional custodial rights over a substantial area of inland Yolngu country. For this reason, members of the outstation community are continually being called on to attend meetings on mining exploration proposals. The custodians' frustration about these meetings and their determination to resist these pressures are evident in a speech by my late companion Roger Y. Birdingal, which I recorded. It was made to a public meeting at Gapuwiyak on 11 January 1983, held to respond to applications for mining exploration and a gas pipeline corridor:

We are not going to change our law the way you white people keep changing yours. Every year you question us about our land. We will not give it to you. You argue strongly for mining, but you will not destroy us ... There are plenty of minerals for you in your own country. You have no permission from us. We are the landowners here. The trees are ours. The water, the rocks, the turtles and all the animals in the bush—all are ours. (McKenzie et al. 1984)

The next year, Roger again expressed his frustration and anger over the constant pressure on him and his family from mining companies through the Northern Land Council.

It was evident that a different strategy was needed if the cultural and biodiversity values of the region were to be both respected and protected. To this end, I travelled with Roger to Canberra in the early 1990s to meet with senior staff in the Australian Heritage Commission. They encouraged us to nominate this unique cultural and natural landscape for inclusion on the Register of the National Estates. This would provide national and global recognition for the Yolngu custodians and their lands as well as legislative protection from environmental damage.

Roger and his kin decided to proceed with a nomination. For the next three years, consultations and additional scientific and anthropological research were conducted at Donydji and other homelands and settlements. The nomination was based on the area being recognised as a cultural landscape, arguing that there were both high cultural and natural values that were intimately connected with

and dependent on the ongoing Aboriginal occupation of the region, especially by homeland residents. The Arafura Wetlands and Surrounds was finally interim-listed—a decision celebrated at a ceremony in Yirrkala in June 1993.

In 2001, the Arafura Wetlands and Surrounds was placed on the Full Register of the National Estate. This followed further field research with the communities involved and having to deal with strong opposition from a number of organisations, including mining companies, the NT Chamber of Mines and the Northern Land Council. The listed area of 600,000 ha became the largest Aboriginal cultural landscape on the list. However, despite the ceremony and promises, the Yolngu custodians were badly misled: there was no apparent benefit to them in the face of growing development pressures from mining companies for major roadworks, the construction of a fibre-optic cable through Donydji and proposals such as a gas pipeline to Gove.

Apart from the failure to conduct the appropriate social and environmental impact studies supposedly required by the heritage legislation, the promised economic, social and environmental benefits have not eventuated. Certainly, the Yolngu have no greater control over, or protection of, their cultural landscape than before the listing. Furthermore, it was recently discovered that the 'Arafura and Surrounds' has been transferred to the Non-Statutory Archive of the Register of the National Estate, rather than being added to the new National Heritage List. This 'provides recognition but not protection', according to an officer of Australian Heritage in a recent telephone conversation. The change in status was done without any consultation, explanation or even notice of the decision to those involved in the nomination.

Nevertheless, one positive development resulted from the nomination exercise: the formation of the Arafura Catchment Ranger Program, which brought together five homelands in the southern wetlands and the southern catchment. The communities worked together on occasions, particularly on biological surveys and in land management workshops. They each had their own rangers wearing their own carefully designed logos, who worked in the vicinity of their homelands addressing local natural and cultural resource issues. The ranger network was formed in 1996 and ran until 2002, funded by small grants obtained through the National Heritage Trust. During this time a number of intensive biological surveys were conducted in partnership between rangers from each of the five communities and scientists from the NT Parks and Wildlife Service and La Trobe University. One such survey centred on the top of the Koolatong River in the Mitchell Ranges. It was here I discovered how rapidly detailed knowledge of the cultural landscape is being lost. The last Traditional Owner raised in this rugged country, a Madarrpa Ritharrngu man, had died six months before the expedition. The other senior men in the ranger group who travelled through the country in their youth could not recall, if they ever knew, details of placenames

and sites of cultural significance. All were pleased to have returned and strongly expressed their emotional attachment to the place, promising the country that they would return and better care for it in the future. There are few remaining Yolngu who have detailed knowledge of the cultural landscape on which they were raised and with each death the world loses forever an irreplaceable fragment of a deep intellectual tradition and understanding of our world.

In 2011, the Gurruwiling Ranger group based in Ramingining employed the Donydji leader as one of its rangers to allow them to extend their carbon credit fire management program through Ritharrngu and Wagilak country. To date, there has been no attempt to train and employ other people from the community.

Service delivery

One of the major problems and ongoing frustrations for Donydji has been the poor provision of infrastructure maintenance and community services. Service delivery is far from rational; services and resources do not come from a single hub. For example, again the teacher travels by charter flight to and from Elcho Island (until this semester there were sometimes four flights per week); food and irregular health visits come from Gapuwiyak, about 90 minutes away by road; while maintenance and municipal services are supposed to be provided by the Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation at Yirrkala, some 300 km to the north-east, along the main road that runs past Gapuwiyak. Logic would suggest that Gapuwiyak would be the hub for all these services that have been so poorly organised and coordinated. In the words of the historian and writer Don Watson, who has visited Donydji on six occasions in recent years, 'the daily life of the people is conducted in the shadow of this incompetence, waste and neglect. The stories are funny, in the manner of Russian satire, but the reality, like the Russian one, is corrosive and dispiriting' (2007).

Donydji homeland today

On my first visit to Donydji almost 40 years ago, there were 58 people in 12 households; 11 of these were headed by Ritharrngu or Wagilak, with only one of them Djambarrpuynu (at that time identifying as the Liyadhalingmirri, but now calling themselves Guyula). On my most recent visit, one month ago (May 2015), there were 56 residents, 22 of whom are under the age of 17. Now, however, of the nine households, only two are Ritharrngu, none is Wagilak and the rest are Guyula. Most of the Ritharrngu are widows (sisters) of the Djambarrpuynu men (mainly brothers). Of the bachelor Ritharrngu men who were there in 1974, and who stayed until their deaths, only three established

married households at Gurrumala. There is now a much larger social range with greater marriage distances than was the case in earlier years. As a result, there has been a breakdown in customary marriage relationships. A source of recent conflict has been a number of irregular ‘marriages’ that would once have resulted in serious injury or death to one or both of the couple involved.

In the early years of the outstation, there were nearly always families in residence, although numbers fluctuated as family groups resumed a nomadic lifestyle or moved away due to tensions and conflict. This stemmed from pre-outstation life where band size varied through fission and fusion in response to economic, social and religious imperatives. People are now more reluctant to leave their houses and personal possessions, because others, especially visitors, might take or damage them. This is the reason for the continual demand for locks on doors, boxes and bags! As a consequence, tension and conflict rise within the community. For this reason, among others, there is a strong need these days for community-focused leadership rather than authority imposed within and among close families.

In the early days of the outstation, the elderly Ritharrngu brothers who were largely responsible for its establishment were respected and feared in equal measure. Their reputation as ceremonial leaders and fighters was far reaching, and they had sons and sons-in-law who could defend their interests. Their authority generally went unchallenged in the community. After they died, one of their sons, TGB, took on the mantle of leadership. TGB was also widely respected, and in contrast with some of the other male members of the homeland, he considered the interests of the wider outstation community. After TGB’s death, his younger brother has become leader—the ‘number-one landowner’. He is yet to command the same respect and authority as his ‘fathers’ or older brother and is finding it difficult to adopt a community perspective in his decision-making.

Tradition-orientated social groups in Aboriginal Australia did, and still do in many cases, function through nepotism and self-interest. Despite the widely held view of a caring and sharing society as well as the anthropological literature on ideal customary sharing and generosity, there is very often reluctant reciprocity.⁸ It is not uncommon for much desired items such as honey or tobacco to be hidden or remain undeclared when requests are made to share, or they are consumed out of sight of others. As in all societies, there were, and still are, greedy people who will bend the customary rules to satisfy their own interests. The same applies to the other base emotions, jealousy and envy.

⁸ Peterson (1993) uses the term ‘demand sharing’, while B. Schebeck, footnoted in Peterson’s article, calls it ‘mutual taking’.

Many Yolngu, particularly men, are secretive about their bank and credit union accounts, and carefully guard access to them, unlike most women, who commonly hand over their debit cards and bank details to their kin. Often this is on demand. The great imperative of men is to acquire a motor vehicle, the most prized being four-wheel-drive Toyotas. Invariably, they seek money from their sisters, mothers and grandmothers and thereby have a substantial negative impact on food supplies and other necessities.

Money, mainly from social welfare (only two people, both working in the school, now earn wages), is being spent not only on the purchase of cheap four-wheel-drives, but also on their repairs and fuel. On my visit to Donydji in November 2013, there were 13 'dead'—that is, unserviceable—motor vehicles in the outstation, not including a similar number in the community rubbish dump. While there is a good deal of 'bush mechanic' work done on the homeland through the workshop, the only qualified mechanic and spare parts outlet is in Nhulunbuy. In desperation, men from Donydji try to drive their mechanically unsound vehicles to Nhulunbuy, almost a day's travel to the north-east, where not only is servicing very expensive but also police sometimes confiscate the un-roadworthy vehicles. Frequently, vehicles do not complete the journey and are left by the roadside, where they are very often stripped. In addition, there have been many occasions when people have taken a four-wheel-drive bush taxi to Nhulunbuy to purchase parts and food and sometimes sell their craft work—at a cost of \$950 for the return trip (this is cheaper than a charter flight). On one occasion known to me a family spent \$950 to sell \$1,200 worth of craft that was to have been used to purchase clothes and food for the community.

In addition to wanting to buy food and goods not available in Gapuwiyak, a number of the residents have established bank accounts in Nhulunbuy because they do not trust the Yolngu in Gapuwiyak. This means even more frequent trips to the town in their own dilapidated vehicles, or by bush taxi or air charter, and less money for food and essential supplies. The Yolngu in Donydji, especially children, often complain that they are hungry, and despite the introduction of school breakfast there is a need for improved strategies to ensure food security, particularly for the schoolchildren and older women.

These demands on the cash economy of the outstation create the major source of tension among the residents. It has led to public accusations of greed and placed particular strain on the few wage-earners, who have suffered from the envy and jealousy of others, to the point where one young woman rejected an offer of paid employment. More frequent and extravagant funerals have contributed substantially to the financial and resource burden on the community in recent years. Associated pressures on resources have also been responsible for members of the Ritharrngu landowning group challenging people from other clans over their right to take up residence in Donydji.

Apart from changes in leadership, social composition and the economy, there has been a substantial change in the diet and foraging and hunting range of the Yolngu. In the early 1970s, families still traversed an economic range of 3,000–4,000 sq km. At that time, the bulk of the diet was vegetable, foraged by the women, while the men went out less often and over longer distances to procure fish and small game with the occasional kangaroo or wallaby, emu and, very infrequently, the big game of buffalo and wild cattle (White 1985). About 80 per cent of the annual food intake was wild food. Today, most of the fishing and hunting expeditions are undertaken in four-wheel-drive vehicles using shotguns and rifles. Fewer locations are visited, but the hunters and fishers can travel further and bring more meat back to camp than was possible previously. Now that people travel less on foot, at least over wide areas, patterns of burning and fire management of biodiversity and bush foods have changed in ways detrimental to the landscape. As noted above, knowledge of the country and its resources among the younger Yolngu is also being lost—or was never learnt. A more subtle consequence of this is a poorer understanding of songs and myths that often require a detailed knowledge of particular places through time.

The focus on hunting big game has meant an increase in wild meat and fat in the diet. Women, especially the young ones, are reluctant to forage, particularly in the thickets and swamp land, because of their fear of buffalo and pigs, the numbers of which have increased dramatically over recent years. Furthermore, with many people living in the homelands throughout the year, local vegetable foods and fruit have been hard pushed. Indeed, even in earlier times the economic range around Donydji over the seasonal cycle would have struggled to support the number of people now living in the homeland. Women now spend more time purchasing store foods from Gapuwiyak, where they use their Government Basics card.

With less foraging over a reduced range and changing food preferences, there has been a noticeable decline in ecological knowledge among the younger Donydji residents. Between 1972 and 1985 at Yirrkala, I found there to be an approximately 30 per cent loss of knowledge of plant names among men and women under early middle age. This figure is probably greater today in Donydji in the mid-teens to mid-20s age group. Of 106 species of roots, fruits and seeds in the diet in the early years of Donydji, only about 18 to 20 are now being commonly eaten (White 2001). Foods such as cycad seeds that were once carbohydrate staples for much of the year are now, like many other wild plant foods, used only as emergency foods. Today, while wild foods remain important to the community, with almost all meat being hunted and all fish caught, only about 20 per cent of the fruit and vegetables consumed during the year are from the bush. Exceptions are fruits during the wet season and early dry, and wild honey during the dry season. There is evidence that these dietary changes,

particularly the greater dependence on the Arnhem Land Progress Association store in Gapuwiyak, are leading to a decline in nutritional health when compared with the indicators of nutritional status that were recorded nearly 30 years ago (O’Dea et al. 1988). Body mass index (BMI) and abdominal fat—both indicators of the risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes—remain lower in the long-term Donydji residents than for those living in the settlements and towns of the region (Jones and White 1994), but their increasing reliance on store food could undo this.

With the improvements in infrastructure and amenity in Donydji, largely through the Mittjiwu Djaaka project, there has been an increasing number of Yolngu visitors and short-term residents who have links to the homeland through either country or close family association. Families and young men often arrive on weekends to go hunting. Against the wishes of the community, some young men sometimes bring *ganydja* (marijuana), although most people reject it and the police at Gapuwiyak have been asked by residents to intervene. The visitors are coming mainly from Gapuwiyak but there are others from large centres such as Roper River, Numbulwar and Beswick, where there is considerable social dysfunction and where many of the children display antisocial behaviours.

Concluding remarks

There are a number of external and internal forces that threaten the ongoing development and future viability of Donydji outstation. For the community to develop in line with the aspirations of most of its residents, solutions must be found to the following urgent issues:

- the failure of government-funded Homeland Resource Centres to effectively service homelands, and the general lack of coordination between government and local agencies
- the lack of educational and training opportunities for youth and young adults who are not equipped for formal secondary education
- the lack of local employment opportunities despite the willingness of residents to participate
- the need for the newly initiated RJCP services to be given the necessary personnel and resources to achieve their aim of fostering ‘self-sufficiency, resourcefulness and community participation where jobs are scarce’
- the lack of *community*-focused leadership and financial skills
- major health concerns among homelands residents; among the most urgent are dental disease, parasite infections and the availability of fresh food, especially during times when bush foods are scarce.

Donydji residents have expressed a strong desire for employment programs such as those trialled with the volunteers. With outside supervision in the early phases, there are opportunities for commercial craftwork by men and women, and possibly, ecotourism and/or study tourism involving small special interest groups. These might include university students from relevant disciplines, bird watchers and botanists. Local ranger-supervised hunting has been suggested, but this needs careful consideration for a range of environmental and social reasons. A successful educational exchange program involving Eltham High School (EHS) in Melbourne has been in place since 2010. Students from EHS spend approximately two weeks with their peers at the Donydji School learning about local Yolngu culture and languages. The high school makes a financial contribution to the Donydji community as well as building mentoring partnerships among the students. These will include visits to EHS by some of the older Donydji students, where they will undertake short vocational education and training courses.

Apart from the social justice and moral arguments that justify support for homelands, the land management practices of these communities are crucial for the maintenance of biodiversity; funds would be well spent in this area since it not only provides particularly satisfying work for many young Aboriginal people, but also allows Australia and Australians to preserve the natural and cultural values of these places for the benefit of future generations—black and white.

I strongly believe that, for this part of Aboriginal Australia at least, homelands provide the best opportunity for the Indigenous people to acquire the skills and education necessary to engage with wider Australia in the longer term, while living as they wish on their traditional lands away from many of the serious problems confronting the larger communities and towns. They also function as rest-and-recreation or respite centres for Yolngu who live in those larger centres. This benefits their mental and physical health and allows social bonds to be reinforced.

There is an additional and compelling reason to invest in outstations, one that should be attractive to economic rationalists. Evidence is mounting from medical doctors and health economists (Rowley et al. 2008; Campbell et al. 2011) that it is cheaper for governments, and taxpayers, to help people stay in their outstations than to have them migrate to the larger settlements, towns and fringes of cities such as Darwin and Alice Springs. In these centres, they do not have the social, emotional and physical support as in the homelands and are more likely to participate in substance abuse, self-harm and social disorder as ‘long-grass people’.

I conclude with two quotes: the first, by Watson (2007), expresses the pessimism of many in the wider Australian community, and I sense, of the NT and Federal governments, towards the future of homelands:

No white community would stand for [the ineptitude of the bureaucracy] but then, in general, white communities are not so heavily dependent on the Government. Some are, of course; and some, like the Aborigines of the outstations, chose to live in remote and unproductive places. But the white people who do this are commonly esteemed as authentic, if not 'iconic' Australians, and the passing of their way of life is reckoned a national tragedy. There was a time when it seemed possible the country would think this way about the Aborigines living on their homelands, but it now seems certain that this time has passed.

The second quote is from a letter written in 2012 by Joanne Yindiri Guyula and her sister Sonia Gurrpulan. The former was then the assistant teacher at Donydji School but is now completing a tertiary teaching degree in Darwin. The young women asked me to deliver their letter to the Rotary Club of Melbourne. It conveys their desire to remain in their homeland, while recognising the need for ongoing outside support to secure its, and their own, future well-being:

Napuya yakuy djaal'thirr ... Bilinu nhumaya latjuwatju dhuya gunggayunanu napuunha.

We would like you to be friends of our Donydji community and help us to build a happy future for our young people. At Donydji we don't have grog or drugs and we look after our kids and the old people. Before we only had bark huts and no school. Already you good people have helped us.

The RCM responded by establishing the 'Friends of Donydji' to raise funds for education and training in the homeland and provide support for volunteers to work with the residents.

Unlike Don Watson, I believe that with a more sympathetic, considerate and competent approach to homelands by the Federal and NT governments and their agencies, their value will be recognised by a majority of Australians.

In its *Outstations policy* Discussion Paper of July 2008, the NT Government (2008) claims that it 'values the contribution of outstations to the economic, social, and cultural life of the Territory, and the important role they play for Indigenous Territorians who have chosen to live on their traditional lands'. If this is the case, the NT and Australian governments should put their words into action and show a stronger commitment to ensuring their survival.

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