The BABY DREAMING PROJECT

The Snake as Sister

Interpretation the Bininj (Indigenous) way

Denise Lawungkurr Goodfellow
In 1981 I stood for Darwin City Council

I wanted to represent everyone in my ward
including the people on the local Aboriginal reserve

Mrs. Thompson, the President of the local Aboriginal reserve,
decided to test my resolve
She told me to catch her a snake which I did.

Re-enacting the snake’s capture for television

Boloko/ Quiet Snake/ Water Python
*Liasis mackloti*
I was threatened with prosecution for catching protected wildlife.

To protect me Mrs. Thompson and the other Bagot women adopted me so that, like them, I could hunt legally.

After I helped to rid an Aboriginal settlement of a serial rapist, elders named me Lawungkurr, after a Dreamtime woman still respected for her mediation skills.

Trust-building = looking after each other
Some family members
Our family was given dreamings

Yawk Yawk (Mermaid) Spirits

Dreamings are a special relationship usually with wildlife.

"Eric" 5 m. (16.5 ft) in length

Painting by L. Nganjmirra. held in Kluge-Ruhe, Collection, University of Virginia
Children’s dreaming

Rowan, aged 18 months with Black-headed Python
Dreamings must be treated with respect
Dreaming implies a responsibility for dreaming creatures and their environment
BABY DREAMING PROJECT - THE BEGINNING

What Aboriginal relatives felt about non-indigenous people

Distrust
Hate
Disdain
Thought non-Indigenous people patronising
Felt little self-confidence around them
Antagonistic
Changing attitudes

Relatives had met my birdwatching clients and began to realise that most:

- were respectful
- treated Bininj (Aboriginal people) like fellow human beings
- wanted to make friends and build bridges
- wanted to feel a special connection with nature

**elders wanted to build bridges**
In 1988 senior relatives asked me to help them start a tourism project on their country, Baby Dreaming.

But most clan members were still too shy and distrustful of strangers

*One event in particular brought about attitudinal change.*
THE SINGING

Old men were desperate - their children were coming to town and too often ending up in jail, or dying.

The old men thought they could scare all into staying on their country.

So those old men sang some relatives to death.
Djedje was to be next in line to die,
followed by his brothers and their sons.

*Baby Dreaming was one answer*
Baby Dreaming

= safety for young Kunwinjku, and a place to build bridges through visitors

For visitors = a place to build a special connection with nature
Baby Dreaming

Top End

Kikikyaw
(Little Bird Dreaming)
Training at Baby Dreaming

Aim: to build upon existing skills, knowledge and values.

Existing skill: bird spotting.
I taught the use of binoculars, and use of English bird names along with Kunwinjku ones.

Built on methods I used training Jawoyn rangers for Nitmiluk Gorge in 1989
Influences included: Saul Alinsky; Chinese approach in SE Asia and Africa.
Problem: some thought they were too "stupid” to learn

Rowan (aged 16) training Stephanie, his sister-in-law

Solution (1): Move knowledge crabwise, not top-down

Stephanie training elders from other outstations
Solution (2): use children

Six year-old Christopher teaches an Indigenous toddler about numbers

Grandsons teaching American visitor to stalk birds

Brione aged 6 and already a competent botanist teaches me about plants!
Visitors built trust

Motherless Kyle never spoke or smiled, until he met Michael, an American student.

Relatives didn’t trust doctors, until they met Dr. Melanie.

Hands on!
In response relatives began to show visitors a different view of country -

and a different view of life

*Baby Dreaming is “mother” country*
Mrs Nganjmirra in “old generation” cave where she lived as a child. Oenpelli Python was a threat to children.

All know snakes can be dangerous

Oenpelli Python/Narawan (Morelia oenpelliensis). Grows to at least 4 m.
I had to explain the meaning of Amber's name to the congregation at her wedding!

My daughter, Amber, was named after Ngalinawa to keep her safe from unscrupulous men!

Ngalinawa - a bigger, more fearsome snake than Narawan

Snake as protector
Mulga Snake/King Brown/Datbe
*Pseudechis australis*

This large snake, belonging to the family, Elapidae, is very dangerous.

My relatives call it a "women's snake" and say "it brought order in the Dreamtime"!

*How children learn to tell the difference between Datbe and a python*

Python end

Datbe end

Photo by Dr. Paul Horner, NT Museum of Arts and Sciences
Snake as sister

When Rowan was five we found an Olive Python that had been hit by a car and thrown into a creek. He begged me to save it.

To Rowan *Mandjudjurk* was not just the unfortunate victim of a speeding car, but his sister.
Baby Spirits as dangerous

Strychnine Tree /Mankudo *Strychnos lucida*
Quinine Tree/Manbede, *Petalogstima pubescens.*
Babies as protectors

Baby spirits keep their mothers safe from predators and call food to them to be caught.
Kunwinjku learn as children to look after others - humans and the dreamings, and the country.

Rosemary and Esther with young guest

Rowan, 5, “little daddy” to Jethro and Vicarina
Kunwinjku people came back to their country to join in. Petrol-sniffers, alcoholics - all wanted to be part of it.

The killings stopped
Bringing about understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples

Gave me huge insight into the lives of Aboriginal Australians
Jonathon Franzen 2011

Connecting people with natural environment
Summary

• Trust-building takes more than words;
• Kunwinjku views of both snake and baby as dangerous/protector = ‘transcendation’ of dualistic thinking (as in Hinduism and Bhuddism).
• Dreamings = conservation through building ‘special’ connections between people, wildlife and country;

• People who can converse in half a dozen languages at the age of six, who have bush skills like you wouldn’t believe, and who have social skills to die for, are not ‘stupid’ or ignorant. Instead they are a wasted resource.

We can’t give up. We all got to learn to live together
Gunyok (1946 - 1988)

We got to raise everybody up
Djedje/Reverend P. Nganjmirra (1965 -2006)

Dedicated to Gunyok, Stephanie, Djedje, Esther, and all the Nganjmirra.
And to all those visitors who helped build the bridges.

THE END