

Snake as Sister



Denise Lawungkurr Goodfellow

Interpretation the Bininj way;

or

Seeing the world through the eyes of others

In 1983 a senior Aboriginal woman asked me to catch a snake.

In the Beginning



Boloko/Quiet Snake/Water Python
Liasis mackloti

Re-enacting the snake's capture
for television



She was testing my resolve to
represent all in my ward*
including the Indigenous people

*I was an alderman on Darwin City Council

Denise's python on show at Bagot



That very lively Chan Ward representative, Alderman Denise Goodfellow, has never presented the solid image of the traditional "city father" - this picture helps explain why.

When I was threatened with prosecution the women adopted me so that, like them, I could hunt legally.

Later we worked together to rid an Aboriginal settlement of a serial rapist.

As a result Kunwinjku* elders named me *Lawungkurr*, after an ancestral woman still respected for her mediation skills.

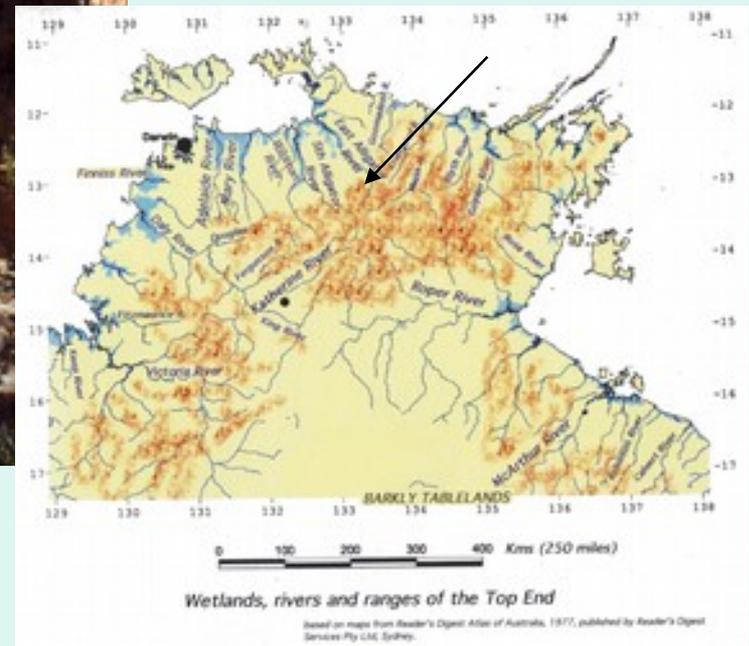
*"freshwater" people of western Arnhem Land

Baby Dreaming*



Kikikyaw
(Little Bird Dreaming)

The Kunwinjku people wanted to start a tourism project on their country.



*Baby Dreaming is considered "mother" country, in other words country where Aboriginal people evolved.

Elders' Aims for Baby Dreaming

- Keep people safe on country
- Build relationships with Balanda*
- Make some money

But they were scared of:

- Losing control/being over-run**
- Not understanding bureaucracy
- Frightened of “doing the wrong thing”

Being thought “stupid” or inferior

*white people

** Many of these fears came from the experiences of their relatives, the Mirrar, traditional owners of part of Kakadu, with tour operators, rangers and tourists.

Some elders said they were “too stupid” to learn computer skills.

They were too nervous to teach their children English or to read, because they didn't have a “certificate”.

Yet even their little children could converse in half a dozen languages, had bush skills like you wouldn't believe, and social skills to die for:-

Illiterate, but not uneducated.

Western attitudes

An American educational consultant was about to visit Egypt for the first time, to ‘help reform the educational system.’

He found the idea that a 7000-year old civilization might have some knowledge of education ‘*incomprehensible*’.

How To Eradicate Illiteracy Without Eradicating Illiterates?
Dr. Munir Fasheh, a Harvard mathematician(UNESCO, 2002:1)

(the) norms and rules of ... education are often defined by experts in so called developed countries.

They reflect the cultures of the people who make the decisions.

Professor Konai Helu Thaman, Unesco Chair in Teacher Education and Culture, University of the South Pacific.
http://www.academia.edu/575387/Learning_to_Read_the_World_Through_Other_Eyes_2008_

Some Influences

Jawoyn rangers - role-playing exercise, 1989



Background in community work including study of:

- Saul Alinsky, community organiser*
- and Montessori education

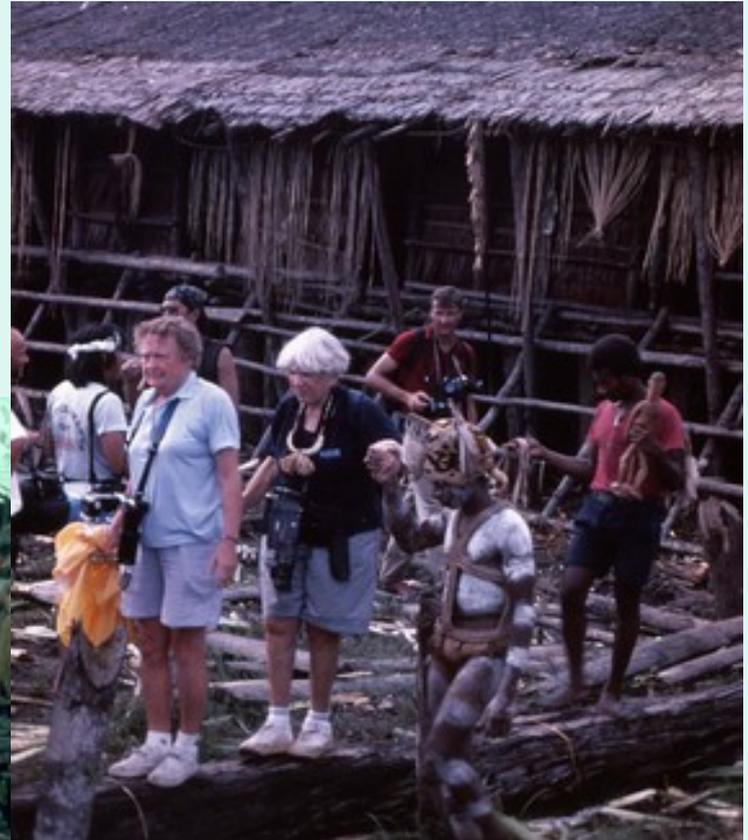
Put into practice as alderman on Darwin City Council ...

and in training Jawoyn rangers for Nitmiluk Gorge in 1989

*Both Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama were influenced by his work.

Adverse Influences

Among the Asmat, West Papua, 1990.
Irresponsible behaviour of staff and passengers
caused a riot that may have resulted in Asmat
deaths.*



*Paper presented at inaugural
international ecotourism conference,
University of Qld, 1992

Community work approach - seeing the world through the eyes of others

- Fit visitors to traditional owners (not the other way round);
- Have visitors who would treat Bininj as the educated people they are;
- Encourage visitors to see wildlife and country through Bininj eyes
- Ensure traditional owners were able to make informed decisions about tourism;
- Build upon traditional owners' existing values, skills and knowledge;
- Encourage visitors to become friends and mentors;
- Mentor the building of intelligent trust



Rowan (aged 16) teaching Jeremiah (above and Stephanie right)



“Stupid” elder learned to play complicated game in a few hours, and to type with ten fingers in a day

Solution:
appropriate teachers
and teaching in situ



Stephanie and Djedje training elders from other outstations

appropriate
teachers



Grandsons helping Yabok to play a
computer game. In turn she helped
them learn to read.



are needed to see this picture.

Grandsons teaching American student*
to stalk birds

Use appropriate teachers

Six year-old Christopher teaches
a toddler about numbers



Brione teaches me about plants used in
dyeing baskets!



*From Redlands University, California

Teach appropriate stuff!

Aim: to build upon existing skills, knowledge and values



Birdwatching class

Existing skills: skilled bird spotting; extreme patience; respect for seniors

Add:

- Binocular use;
- English bird names along with Kunwinjku ones*;
- Concept of specific names rather than just generic**;
- Improved reading and writing skills etc.

*Some bird names weren't appropriate being siblings' names.

** eg rather than just using Gekgek for a whole lot of honeyeaters!

Visitors built trust



Yabok didn't trust doctors, until she met Dr. Melanie

Hands on!





Trust-building

When parents and elders met visitors such as Michael, an American student,* they began to teach their kids English and to read

Bininj also built trust

At Baby Dreaming this little girl forgot about her scarred face.



Professor Spickard fell ill and was put through a cleansing ceremony by a concerned Rev. Nganjmirra and Jeremiah.

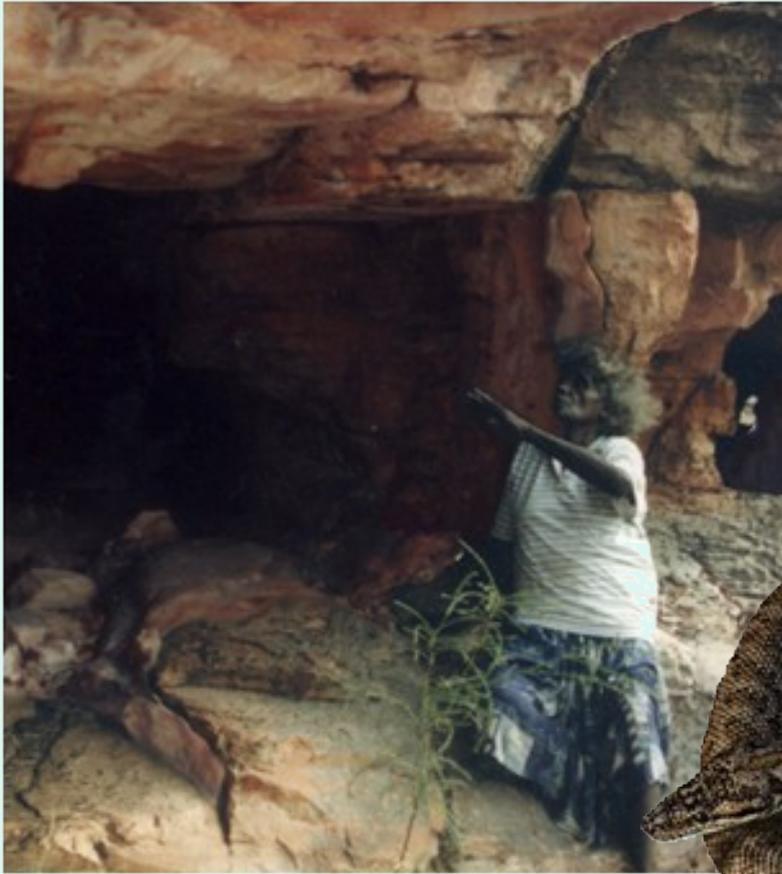
Rosemary kept a guiding hand on the child everywhere she went.



Photo
courtesy of
Prospero
Productions

**traditional owners
began to show
visitors their view
of country and
wildlife ...**

All know snakes can be dangerous



Mrs Nganjmirra in “old generation” cave where she lived as a child. Oenpelli Python was a threat to children.

Oenpelli Python/Narawan (*Morelia oenpelliensis*). Grows to at least 4 m.



Snake as keeper of order

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

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



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

**Kunwinjku say "it brought order in the
Dreamtime"!**

What about snake as protector?

Galinawa - a
*bigger, more
fearsome snake
than Narawan*

Her grandmother
named Amber Galinawa to keep
her safe from unscrupulous
men!

• *Kunwinjku views of both snake as
dangerous/protector = 'transcendation' of
dualistic thinking (as in Hinduism and
Bhuddism).*



Or snake as sister

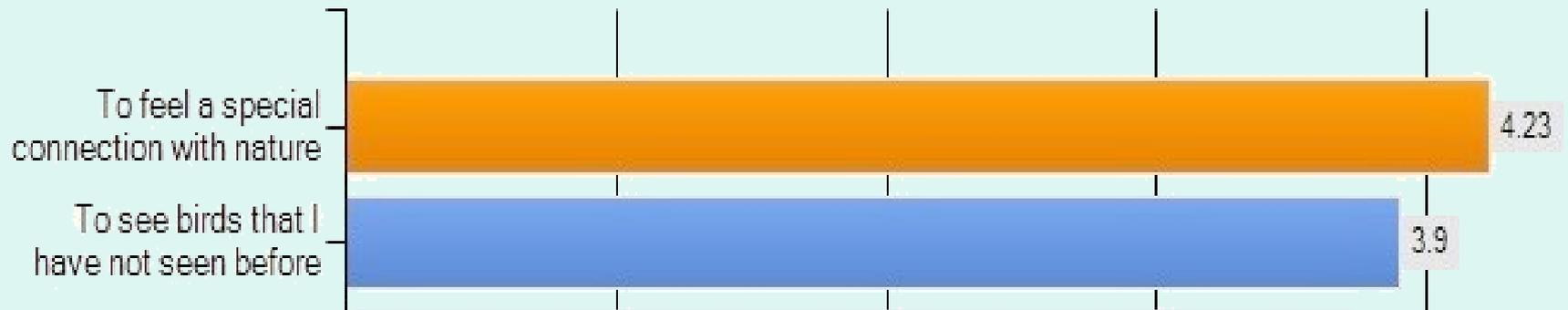


When Rowan was five he cried over an Olive Python that had been hit by a car.

To Rowan *Mandjudjurk* was not just an unfortunate roadkill, but his sister.

Priorities of birders*

How important to you are the following reasons for watching birds



Daughter-in-law with
birders at Spirit Dog*
Dreaming.

The senior traditional
owner had just died.

*She said the spirit dog
had cried at the old
man's passing.*



In a radio interview American writer, birder, conservationist, Jonathon Franzen, never mentioned the birds he saw at Spirit Dog Dreaming, just his feelings about the place

*thylacine

Results of Baby Dreaming Project:

- The Baby Dreaming newsletter - translated into characters by Singaporean friends was distributed by their business contacts throughout China.
- Visitors felt they had “made friends” and “connected” with the country, went back home and told others who wanted to come.
- Traditional owners liked the visitors, and word spread; Reverend P. Nganjmirra, said that half the outstations in the Top End were interested.
- Now when authorities did the wrong thing, the traditional owners felt confident to report them.
- They also began to teach their children English and to read and write
- Kunwinjku people came back to their country to join in and meet visitors

Government cut funding because neither the elders nor I had a Certificate 4 in training

This resulted in:

- lost potential markets in China and the USA.
- Reinforcement of the idea held by some elders that they were “stupid”

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

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

Dedicated to Gunyok, Stephanie, Rev. P. Nganjmirra,
Mrs. Managku, and Mrs. Nganjmirra,

And to all those visitors who helped build the bridges.

THE END
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