Investigating health, economic and socio-political factors that need consideration when establishing Victorian Aboriginal land management projects


This article focuses on three Victorian Aboriginal groups (Bangerang, Boonwurrung and Yorta Yorta) to explore elements that provide or discourage development of land management projects. Results from this small qualitative study show that a number of distinct health, socio-political and economic factors need to be considered when developing Aboriginal land management projects. This study indicates that a greater involvement in Aboriginal land management projects – critical to Aboriginal peoples’ health, economic and social structures - will only occur through increased community consultation, respect, training, consistency between all stakeholders involved, resources and the provision of employment opportunities. Further research is required to strengthen this evidence, allowing policy-makers to be progressive when developing land management projects for Aboriginal Victorian people as a health promoting tool.

Keywords: Aboriginal Victorian people, land management, social determinants of health, government policy

The relationship Aboriginal people have to Country is central to their health, economic and socio-political structures (Flick 1998; Wilson & Ellender 2002; Richmond et al. 2005; Russell 2005). This paper reports on research that aimed to understand Aboriginal Victorian people’s experiences on their Country because ‘ecological restoration [can] be enhanced through the use of local environmental narratives’ (Robertson et al. 2000, p. 119). The Yorta Yorta, Boonwurrung and Bangerang communities are the focus of the research project because of their strong relationship with land and the limited academic research carried out in these communities on this topic (Parlee et al. 2005). This investigation focuses on health, economic and socio-political factors that need consideration when establishing Victorian Aboriginal land management projects. The following literature review underlines health, economic and socio-political factors that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on a day-to-day basis. Although brief, this section underlines some health and social inequalities impacting on some of the Traditional Custodians of Victoria and Australia.

Health factors

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people suffer greater health burdens compared to the non-Aboriginal population (Ring & Firman 1998; Roxbee & Wallace 2003). Durie (1999) explained that the poor health status of Aboriginal peoples is due to economic disadvantage, resource alienation and political oppression. Contemporary and historical contributing factors in Victoria include a lack of a sense of identity, which resulted from the creation of missions that grouped people from different tribes together (Broome 2005); the absence of a legally binding treaty between the Aboriginal population and government (Langton 2001-2005); limited primary health care services in urban and rural settings (SCRGSP 2007); and the lack of a skilled Aboriginal workforce (VACCHO 2008).

Psycho-social factors, such as employment, education and upbringing, can influence health and have been referred to as ‘social determinants of health’ (Reidpath 2004). Marmot (1999) identified ten social determinants of health in society, including stress, social exclusion, unemployment and addiction. Aboriginal scholars Vickery et al. (2004) noted that, although Marmot’s ten social determinants of health are relevant, they are not

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1 An Aboriginal person is one who belongs to an Indigenous population through self-identification (group consciousness) and is recognised and accepted by the population as a member (United Nations 2004, p. 2).
2 ‘Country’ is a term used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It donates a place (traditional land) that gives and receives life and consists of ‘people, animals, plants, dreaming, underground, earth, soil, minerals, water, surface water, and air’ (SAMLIV Project Team 2003; North Central Catchment Management Authority 2006).
framed with an ‘Indigenous viewpoint’. Social determinants that are relevant to Indigenous Australians include reconciliation, land, cultural survival, poverty, education and racism (Devitt, 2001; Anderson et al. 2004; Vickery et al. 2004; Carson 2007).

**Economic factors**

Income and education impact on an individual’s ability to ‘engage’ and ‘influence’ society (Wallace & Wallace 1997). Indigenous Australians are known to have the lowest economic status of all Australians (Altman 2000). Poor socio-economic, education and employment levels have links to financial hardship, poverty, debt, homelessness, family breakdown, social isolation and crime (Wallace & Wallace 1997). Indigenous Australians suffer disproportionately high levels of domestic violence and over-representation in the justice system (Boreland & Hunter 2000; Gentle & Taylor 2002). Saggers and Gray (2001, p. 23) acknowledged that Indigenous people’s high levels of substance abuse can lead to ‘social consequences [including] violence, disruption of family relationships, school absenteeism… unemployment, food shortages and neglect’. Such consequences are under-reported in local, state and national data because of shame and fear of experiencing racism, police response and reprisal (Stanley et al. 2003).

**Socio-political factors**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience extreme levels of racism in Australia (Paradies 2005). This is typified historically by their exclusion from elite and mainstream power structures, as highlighted by Indigenous people not being recognised as Australian citizens until 1967 (Hetzel 2000; Hunter 2004; Karvelas 2006). Nugent (2003) noted that Aboriginal Australians grow up learning two kinds of histories: memories preserved by family, and a humiliating textbook history taught in schools that does not recognise the depth of Indigenous culture. Behrendt (2003) noted that reconciliation can only occur when sovereignty is acknowledged through the recognition of past injustices, property rights and cultural practices.

Davis et al. (2004) noted that cultural practices, such as Aboriginal land management, serve as tools to integrate spiritual, emotional and physical aspects of health and wellbeing. Protecting Country is the inherited right and responsibility that Aboriginal people feel (DSE 2004). The management of Country involves the manipulation of the environment to enable an increase in sustainable natural resources (Horstman & Wightman 2001; Atkinson 2005). Not all Aboriginal ecological knowledge is sustainable, increasing the need for collaboration between western and traditional land management practices (Dixon 2005). Victorian Aboriginal people’s priority is to promote opportunities for agriculture and aquaculture businesses, as well as horticultural enterprises that develop skills in these fields (SAMLIV Project Team 2003). Aboriginal park rangers have proven to be effective in engaging cultural relationships with Country without separating spiritual, ecological and social aspects (Burgess et al. 2005).

Victorian Government policies have attempted to engage Aboriginal communities in the decision-making process by developing co-management programs (Kingsley et al. 2008). Howitt (2001) highlighted the difficulties in this, stating that ignorance and misunderstanding continue to characterise inter-cultural relations. Langton et al. (2005, p. 29) acknowledged that ‘rather than recognising their traditional rights to land… governments tend to develop measures for the protection of traditional and Indigenous biodiversity related knowledge… for the primary purpose of commercialising and commodifying particular aspects’. Kaschula et al. (2005) identified that, when focusing on Aboriginal knowledge, there are hidden political agendas of groups seeking custodianship of the land.

The Native Title Act 1993, overturning the concept of Terra Nullius\(^3\), gave hope to the Indigenous custodians that common law could remedy past wrongs and recognise Indigenous sovereignty (Neate 2004). However, Tehran (2003) and Hemming (2002) noted that this Act has been ineffective. The lack of success, especially in Victoria, is based on a political manoeuvre of advocates ‘scaring’ the public into believing that Native Title could steal people’s ‘backyards’; an approach considered by Behrendt (2002) as ‘psychological Terra Nullius’.

Taken together, these factors undermine both the opportunity and capacity of Aboriginal people in Victoria to engage in the management of their traditional lands in ways that are beneficial to their individual and community health and wellbeing, and the sustainability of the land (Kingsley et al. 2009).

**Methodology**

Research focused on Indigenous people involves strict guidelines to ensure that ethical frameworks are

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3 Terra Nullius: the English colonial powers described land that was unclaimed according to English property law as not belonging to anyone. This was to have devastating effects on Indigenous populations (Welsh 2005).
negotiated between the researcher (non–Indigenous in this case) and Indigenous people (AIATSIS 2000; Henderson et al. 2002; NHMRC 2003; Henry et al. 2004). Throughout this study, these guidelines were enforced by an Aboriginal reference group and the ethics committee of The University of Melbourne. The reference group formed at the start of the project from representatives of Aboriginal organisations and Traditional Custodians of the Boonwurrung, Bangerang and Yorta Yorta communities.

The Country of these three Traditional Custodian groups within Victoria is identified in Figure 1. The map indicates that Boonwurrung language boundaries are located around the Melbourne metropolitan area, Port Phillip Bay and the south coast, whereas the Yorta Yorta and Bangerang peoples come from the Murray-Goulburn region. The three Traditional Custodian groups were selected for this study after consultation with local Victorian Aboriginal people and organisations.

This project explored the structures of consciousness in human experiences to show how Aboriginal people make sense of Country. Qualitative methodology was used to gain a greater insight (Berglund 2001; Ward & Holman 2001; Altschuler et al. 2004). The study involved qualitative, semi-structured interviews (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). Of the 13 participants who chose to participate in the study, eight were female and five male; seven were Traditional Custodians and six were Aboriginal land managers. Traditional Custodians represented the local people of the region, whereas the Aboriginal land managers were generally not local to the area but protected and managed the land.

Interviews were conducted using open-ended questions. Questions explored factors affecting land management projects, as well as ways of improving contact with Country. An example question was, ‘how can we improve our understanding of the factors that facilitate or inhibit these land management projects within these three Indigenous groups’ boundaries?’ Immediately after interviews were conducted, a summary was completed by the researcher to gather emerging themes and details about the conversation; this process assisted in the data analysis (Dawson 2002). Thematic analysis was used to identify themes that stood alone in the data (Browne 2004). It also focused on the contextual meaning of the data (Flick 2002). If more information was required or the participant wanted to be re-interviewed, another interview was conducted. Participants involved in this research were invited to contribute to ongoing research.

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4 Traditional Custodian: a person(s) or group who, by right of tradition, have inherited a custodial role of caring for Country through bloodline connections.
development of the project and, although they declined, to co-author this paper.

A limitation of this study was that the methodology was applied with only three of the 32 Victorian Aboriginal communities (Parks Victoria et al. 2005). As such, these data cannot be generalised across all Victorian Aboriginal groups. In addition, because of time and resource constraints, not all key participants could be interviewed, and reliability checks followed up with face-to-face interviews could not be conducted in all circumstances.

Results

Participants described nine factors that impact on their ability to develop land management projects in Victoria. These factors were political barriers; access, development and recognition of land; health issues; cultural loss; racism and lack of recognition of culture; socio-economic; colonisation; destruction of the natural environment; and Native Title because the law seemed not to be working in Victoria.

Participants reflected on land management projects established to involve Aboriginal peoples in Victoria. Others identified the cultural differences between Aboriginal and ‘Western’ knowledge and how it has impacted on projects ‘getting off the ground’. Participants wanted a ‘doorway’ that would allow greater involvement with traditional lands, incorporating increased community consultation, respect, training, resources and employment opportunities, and consistency between all stakeholders involved.

Boundaries, government tokenism and understanding of Indigenous culture

The saddest thing is we are fighting over boundaries when we are never going to get Native Title... before we were united just fighting for recognition (Boonerwrung Traditional Custodian).

Participants acknowledged that boundary issues cause disharmony. For example, a Bangerang Traditional Custodian stated,

I would like to talk to my kids and tell them who we are but there is (sic) conflicting stories from two groups I respect. There hasn’t been enough thought put into the next generation.

Yorta Yorta and Bangerang participants mentioned that internal politics were due to both groups giving little acknowledgment of Traditional Custodian status to each other. A Yorta Yorta participant mentioned that this caused ‘Families to be against families, brother against brother and Elders versus Elders, making people feel caught in the middle’. Boonwurrung participants mentioned that the cultural heritage legislation caused animosity with a neighbouring tribe because it ‘Only recognised groups who were incorporated entities; as a consequence we were initially left off the map’.

This disharmony was due to economic factors and power because there is ‘money to be made’ by controlling land. A land manager (Boonwurrung area) stated, ‘Government administrated boundaries create problems; it’s up to communities to show strength and intelligence... [and] unite’. Another land manager (Boonwurrung area) said, ‘We have to go back and see where it went wrong, we have to understand the roots of inter-clan politics... we need to discuss it’. A Boonwurrung Traditional Custodian emphasised that ‘Government would, rather than sort out boundary issues, find it easier to have us fighting because then they don’t have to service our needs’. This may be a reason why one Aboriginal land manager (Murray-Goulburn region) mentioned that people are hesitant to work for government; there is still a stigma attached... they took the land away and still stop us from participating on it. But people have to move on... [and] learn to work together.

Government employees were perceived as having different sets of values compared to Aboriginal communities. A sentiment that angered many was that ‘The government believe that we are no longer here... [because we] are not black and not living traditional like the mob up north’. Participants acknowledged that the government could not ‘differentiate who were Traditional Owners and who were not’, and they do not understand the importance of significant sites.

One participant, a land manager (Boonwurrung region), mentioned that, ‘There are people around saying they’re all pro-Aboriginal but I have seen under opposition governments they were not’. Participants showed anger towards non-Aboriginal people that act like they care about Aboriginal people’s welfare when it benefits themselves. An Aboriginal land manager in the Boonwurrung region said, ‘We want to contribute but we want respect for our knowledge; and consultants come in, get paid all this money and take their information and run’.

Most participants mentioned that there had been an increased involvement in political autonomy but ‘not to the extent [that] government word the[ir] rhetoric’. This statement refers to politicians stating that they have managed to fully include Aboriginal people in the management of Victoria national parks when this is not the case. The underlining theme was that government
programs need to be ‘planned with the health and respect of the people they target’.

**Access, development and recognition of Indigenous land**

Participants commented that most land in Victoria is held in private ownership. A Yorta Yorta Traditional Custodian noted that, because of this, ‘[You] will not see a giving back of national parks but you will see co-management strategies where local Indigenous people are consulted more… it’s not ownership but it’s recognition’. An Aboriginal land manager (Boonwurrung region) mentioned that, ‘When Aboriginal people start to feel a sense that they have been recognised, things will improve… you never get over past injustices but you work towards softening the blow’. A Bangerang respondent said, ‘We don’t have land but our aspiration is for all Indigenous groups to have some connection to land management’. Due to recent developments in urban regions, Aboriginal people have had to adapt to the concrete on their ground and ‘to the mass capitalism’ that has little respect for the environment. A land manager (Boonwurrung region) acknowledged that historical and contemporary issues occurring in Aboriginal communities and on their traditional land meant that

there are not many cases where handing back a place would be best for Indigenous people; a lot don’t know how to manage land these days - cats, foxes, weeds. Traditional land management would not know how to deal with that... we need equal parts Indigenous and non-Indigenous to catch up.

**Health issues**

In the past, people were dying in their 50s and you go ‘that’s young’… now people in their 20s are having heart attacks (Yorta Yorta Traditional Custodian).

The current poor health of Aboriginal Victorians means that Elders, who had the greatest wealth of knowledge, are dying without passing on their knowledge. This is causing disharmony in communities, as the Yorta Yorta Traditional Custodian above expressed. A Boonwurrung Elder noted, ‘Everyone says where are the Elders? Well we are bloody busy, if we are still alive… we have to fight for our own survival to keep telling the stories’. An Aboriginal land manager working in the Boonwurrung region mentioned that this occurred because of the dislocation of culture where, for example, ‘Families [have] become fragmented and domestic violence and alcohol abuse become ingrained’. A Boonwurrung Traditional Custodian said, ‘People who live on land and speak their language... are still killing themselves because it is the drunkenness, the violence and the imposed culture’.

**Cultural loss impacting on identity**

Because Victorian Aboriginal people were isolated from land and cultural activities for over 200 years, traditional information was lost, causing individuals to feel dispossessed. A participant mentioned that, because of this, in her early life, ‘I didn’t see the benefits of what culture had to offer me... all I got taught was the negative stereotypes’. A Bangerang Traditional Custodian mentioned that, ‘I can be anywhere and send my roots into the ground and find my identity. Many Aboriginal people are dislocated from this’. A Boonwurrung Traditional Custodian stated, ‘The young ones, they’re going to be the next journey... you have to interact, give them a reason why they are worth living… they are hurting’. A Yorta Yorta Traditional Custodian mentioned that environmental destruction (for example, logging of trees and extinction of native flora and fauna) caused people to feel like their ‘Culture was gone from [the] place... and these places tell the stories of our people’.

**Racism and lack of cultural recognition**

I saw educated people talking about the environment who didn’t mention Indigenous people... it was hard looking up to people with wonderful knowledge and they do everything politically correctly yet they could easily separate Indigenous people from their land.

Participants collectively considered that there ‘is not enough recognition’ of their being the Traditional Custodians of the land in Victoria, as emphasised in the quote above from a Bangerang member. An Aboriginal land manager (Murray-Goulburn region) mentioned that, ‘Land management is high on the agenda but recognition of being the original custodians is higher’. Another Aboriginal land manager (Boonwurrung region) said, ‘There’s got to be appreciation and respect of our cultural protocols’. Most participants mentioned that interpretation signs acknowledging Traditional Custodians and providing information about cultural protocols, history and practices would be a positive step.

Participants said people only ‘want the exoticness of Aboriginal culture’. They noted that Aboriginal culture in Victoria was displayed as a form of entertainment rather than valued as an educational, political, cultural and historical part of the state. For example, a Bangerang Traditional Custodian noted, ‘There are cows in and around Barmah forest stomping on our burial sites; if we did that in Melbourne General Cemetery, all hell would break loose’. Therefore, participants acknowledged that, ‘We have to make sure we are valued’; it is about ‘establishing relevance in a capitalist society’; and ‘The
history of this country needs to be taught to all the young ones (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) so they grow up with an understanding’. In the past, an Aboriginal land manager (Murray-Goulburn region) mentioned, ‘Elders would be asked to do smoking ceremonies and go [using] their own petrol, get tea… and they would say thank you so much… now, it’s 300 bucks and people understand’. Participants acknowledged that it was still a slow process and most people in Victoria forget to acknowledge the Aboriginal people of this land.

Participants identified that racism was ‘ingrained into society’. One Bangerang participant noted, ‘They [racist people] are all around us but they are quiet… setting seeds of ugliness into someone else’s mind and letting them cause the argument’. As a Boonwurrung Traditional Custodian put it, this may be because

They see us as a threat… Think we stop progress because they have to get surveys done whenever they want to put in new infrastructure… we understand it has to happen but why do we have to lose our sites?

Participants gave many examples of racism occurring; however, one stood out:

A woman [told me]… Aboriginal people got land given back to them and all they had to do was maintain the access road… it would have to be done by bulldozers and graders but they didn’t get given any training or finances and this woman complains that they never maintained the access road… It was set up to fail. This lady and her non-Indigenous community will say ‘see we told you so’ (Yorta Yorta Traditional Custodian).

Another theme that emerged was the perception that the wider Victorian population knew everything about Aboriginal people. Participants believe that non-Indigenous people think that there are no Aboriginal people in the state or viewed them in a negative light. Some participants mentioned that people ‘stereotyped them wrongly’, believing Indigenous people are always ‘drunk’ and ‘We are not black… it’s that mentality, you don’t fit into the mould – it’s alienation’.

**Socio-economic determinants**

Problems like education level, drugs - this is associated with being bored and unemployed… people struggle to get a ranger job without a degree… we need to provide opportunities for training (Aboriginal land manager - Boonwurrung region).

Participants noted that the ‘criteria in schools was (sic) not suitable for Indigenous people’ but recognised that ‘Land management is nothing if you are uneducated’. One Aboriginal land manager (Boonwurrung region) said,

You are going to walk into a community with limited skills and there is going to have to be a succession of training… [so] people can manage land. Indigenous people have had a bad experience with education - so target it so it is enjoyable.

These negative educational experiences often relate to ‘Children being taken from schools [stolen generation]… parents saw that happening so they are wary of the place’. Another issue mentioned by all participants was that, ‘There is a lack of Indigenous teachers… Indigenous knowledge is taught by white fellas… it’s important to have Indigenous perspectives’.

Employment was talked about but only in relation to low level jobs. A Boonwurrung Elder was angered that, ‘We are getting burnt out… why can’t we do the normal 9 to 5 jobs’. This Elder felt that she was pushed by government, non-government and community to be involved in everything and was getting burnt out. Others noted the effect of employment barriers like criminal records because ‘It’s not secret Aboriginal people have higher incarceration rates’.

Participants mentioned that Aboriginal communities were under-resourced. A Yorta Yorta Traditional Custodian mentioned, ‘Families in crisis situations… poverty having a lot to do with it’. Aboriginal people in these situations ‘Can’t deal with the baggage and the pain because we have to create our own economics - to pay the rent’. This is a very important issue because industries based around Indigenous peoples in Australia are worth billions.

**Colonisation**

English interventions had a devastating effect on Aboriginal culture in Victoria. A Boonwurrung Elder noted that culture became ‘Fragmented and the missions burnt everything… it’s hard to regain’. Because of the missions, ‘Most Victorian black fellas are connected… we have all been so moved around’. A Bangerang Traditional Custodian stated, ‘Indigenous people are lacking how to express themselves… it was never an issue before… our community is spread everywhere… from everyone else’s decisions on what is best for us’. A Yorta Yorta Traditional Custodian acknowledged being part of the stolen generation. She reflected,

I was taken off my mother through the assimilation policy. I was one of the lucky ones because I was adopted by two wonderful parents. I ended back in my homeland… When I went back to my family I questioned why my other cousins didn’t ask more questions. But they’ve grown up within it. I’d missed out, there was a gap in my life.

**Destruction of the natural environment**

Participants noted, ‘You now have to look a lot deeper’ to reconnect with nature and, ‘In some cases you have to
re-introduce people to the land’. A Bangerang Traditional Custodian mentioned that, in respect to destruction of the environment (like cattle being able to graze in Barmah State Forest), ‘There are emotions Indigenous people feel they don’t know how to deal with… when things go wrong on my Country I am furious’. One Yorta Yorta Traditional Custodian sadly reflected,

My uncles… told me that they could look into the Murray [River] and see the crayfish and now it’s a ditch, the water is pushed through so fast the banks have eroded and fallen in the river…

All participants acknowledged that the only way to improve local land management was to have people working in national parks who have a local relationship with the area and have worked there for a number of years. They felt that, by the government employing contractors who had no affinity towards the land, it was not getting managed correctly. A Bangerang Traditional Custodian stated, ‘We didn’t have problems until we had to share this country… 400 native species in 150 years have become extinct… Aboriginal people have had to sit back and watch it happen to their land’. A Yorta Yorta Traditional Custodian reflected on making a possum skin cloak for the opening ceremony of the 2006 Commonwealth Games saying,

I made the first possum cloak that has been made along the river for 150 years… I thought it would be a special experience… tying me right back to my family because we collected ochre from that same line going back thousand years… It felt awful; the forest was a mess…

Native Title for Victorian Aboriginal people

All participants noted that Native Title in Victoria ‘pitted groups against each other’, ‘divided communities’, only giving ‘more money to lawyers’. This may be because it ‘Got people’s hopes up, so it’s set back the trust… I don’t think it is going to give land justice… the evidence is set too high’. The evidence standard required to gain Native Title has been set so high that it ‘Has created a situation where you are involved with anthropologists that delve deeper into people’s backgrounds, being invasive’. One land manager (Boonwurrung region) mentioned, ‘We don’t have capacity for Native Title in Victoria because you can’t prove that connection to Country; but because I don’t live on Country I am no less a Traditional Owner’. Participants felt that the current Native Title legislation did not reflect Victorian Aboriginal people’s connection to their traditional land.

One Bangerang participant believed that the Native Title Act was developed ‘To make sure Aboriginal people couldn’t land grab people’s property and to create animosity’. Local people spoke about the Yorta Yorta claims, saying

They have lost faith in the legislation… Yorta Yorta people didn’t maintain control with an area because they were forcefully removed - Native Title does not allow for spiritual connection and therefore does not understand Aboriginal people.

This lack of understanding caused ‘Yorta Yorta to nearly destroy each other… you have to take what’s in your mind and memory to validate who you are’. One positive aspect from the Yorta Yorta claims was noted by a land manager in the region stating,

Water in the claim made everyone jump up… if it did nothing for the Indigenous community in a legal sense, it certainly made the non-Indigenous land owners sit up… it gave non-Indigenous people who were ignorant to what was going on, [reason to] learn and understand where the Indigenous person was coming from.

Current projects to involve Aboriginal Victorian people in land management

There has been increased consultation occurring between Aboriginal Traditional Custodians and the wider community in terms of what happens on Country. An Aboriginal land manager (Boonwurrung region) stated, ‘Indigenous communities used to be like another interest group; now they are a stakeholder group with legislation enforcing this’. This showed a shift in government policy toward Traditional Owner groups; a positive step. Another Aboriginal land manager from the Boonwurrung region said, ‘Aboriginal people need to take the initiative… getting over their own mission mentality to sit back and wait for people to come to them… consultative groups create a vehicle for that process’. Participants understood that, if they did not show initiative and a proactive approach, they would see no improvements.

Many spoke about recent Aboriginal land management projects. Park rangers were ‘Successful to a certain degree to keep Indigenous people in parks but it didn’t translate to the community’ (Aboriginal land manager, Boonwurrung region). Participants mentioned that they were learning new skills, with one Boonwurrung participant saying, ‘I know how to use white man’s technology… I am trying to map out the Country so we can tell the stories’. However, an Aboriginal land manager from the Boonwurrung region mentioned that, while ‘Aboriginal people in Victoria are being involved in land management… it’s still the early stages and people are still coming to terms with being spoken to and some are a bit overwhelmed’. For Aboriginal people who have usually been excluded from this process, it was a learning opportunity for the people to be involved.
Western science verses Aboriginal knowledge

Currently in society, Aboriginal ‘people live in two worlds’ where they are ‘conditioned in a framework’ of western science. As a result, individuals ‘Did not have time to practise culture because they had to put the bread and butter on the table’ (Bangerang Traditional Custodian). Focusing on education, it was noted that people ‘Need basic tertiary qualification; that’s the way park management is headed… certainly things can be done traditionally but with both you are there’ (Aboriginal land manager, Boonwurrung region). However, he went further and mentioned the education system commonly ‘Has non-Indigenous people talking about Indigenous issues to Indigenous people… it can be tense and uncomfortable… it’s obvious the lack of communication skills we have between Indigenous and non-Indigenous’. Therefore, participants mentioned that there has to be an increased understanding between these cultures. As one Yorta Yorta participant succinctly stated, ‘To improve relationships with Indigenous communities you need consistency, honesty and trust’.

Factors to be considered in Indigenous land management

Participants recognised that, ‘We can set up 6000 projects… but unless the people are interested themselves they are going to fail’. Projects can be successful with levels of trust built that ‘filter through to the community’, because if ‘Aboriginal people feel that they are out of this they will close down’ and not see relevance in participating. Participants mentioned that for success to occur there needs to be respect given to Elders. Also, ‘Indigenous people would prefer to be spoken to rather than fill out things’.

For success, different stakeholders in the Aboriginal and environmental sectors need to come together. A land manager (Boonwurrung region) said that there needs to be an ‘Increase in involvement of the whole community, not just Indigenous people’. Aboriginal people need to be involved ‘From the word go; don’t [just] leave them till you need to tick the boxes’. This involvement needs to be sustainable and needs to be consistent. For example, ‘People tend to stay in Indigenous jobs; there should be pathways out of this position and into the mainstream’. Therefore, if consultants are to be involved, ‘It should be part of their tender that they have to [train Aboriginal individuals]… because if they are forced from the start to involve Aboriginal people as part of the process… you would get more trust’.

This training should involve cultural heritage, conservation and re-vegetation. An Aboriginal land manager stated that, ‘People haven’t got the skills that they need to re-vegetate; then we are going to go back to land that is degraded and needs rehabilitation’. When doing this training, you must consider that ‘not everyone reads’ and ‘there needs to be support networks’. With Indigenous groups, ‘You need patient teachers who are flexible’. A Yorta Yorta Traditional Custodian noted that, ‘Government training never has a component that could be put towards a certificate… so people can take that and continue study’. Another said, ‘You need champions within the system that facilitate change but with the view that they are looking to put people above them… you can’t put black fellas in the position uneducated’.

For this to occur, there needs to be an increase in funding to manage land and gain training to do it; but ‘Handing over money is not right; you have to look long-term, as long as they have a sense of ownership and the money is tightly controlled’. To make this effective, ‘You need to have Indigenous presence, like Indigenous role models’. However, one participant stated, ‘About the proportional employment, I would rather the ones that want to work do - I don’t want to force people to work but sometimes we need to give people a kick’. The biggest consideration when developing these projects is to understand that Aboriginal ‘communities across the state have their own views’. Nevertheless, no matter which Aboriginal group in Victoria is involved, it was recognised that there is ‘This spiritual connection to work on their land… it’s a culture not a career’.

Discussion

The themes presented in the results section show that there is a diverse range of factors that impede the development of Aboriginal land management projects in Victoria. Federal and state government administered traditional boundaries cause confusion, conflict and power struggles. Participants in this study highlighted that this caused groups to be pitted against each other and therefore there was a need to be aware of the power struggles between different groups who seek custodianship (Kaschula et al. 2005). Participants acknowledged that the Victorian Government did not understand Aboriginal cultural protocols. Ryan et al. (2006) highlighted, as did the participants of this study, that this undermines the current government policies of mutual relationships with Aboriginal communities; a view similar to that of Howitt (2001), who identified that ignorance and misunderstanding still characterise such relationships.

There was recognition by the participants of this study that the lack of access, together with the development on traditional lands in Victoria, causes disharmony between
some Aboriginal Victorian people and the government. This may be because the social roles of preserving and protecting Country have been derailed, with little acknowledgement of the Traditional Custodians of the land (DSE 2004). Accordingly, the participants reinforced the need for Aboriginal Victorian groups to have some connection to land management.

Participants identified that the losses in cultural knowledge inadvertently cause youth to feel disenfranchised, living in two worlds (the Western and Aboriginal). This corroborates earlier research by Nugent (2003). Participants felt that they did not receive appropriate recognition for being the original custodians. They linked this to racism. Paradies (2005) highlighted that racism gravely impacts on Aboriginal communities. Participants commented that Aboriginal Victorian peoples suffer low economic status which affects their ability to develop land management projects. This supports research identifying that Aboriginal people suffer high unemployment levels, low income and job insecurity (Altman 2000). Participants asserted that this is because of colonial practices such as the stolen generations, missions and the destruction of the environment eroding social status and causing individuals to be bored and disenfranchised. This corroborates research identifying that colonisation and Aboriginal land management have clear links with the health status of Aboriginal people (DSE 2004; Vickery et al. 2004).

A key finding was the reaction towards the Native Title Act. Participants acknowledged that the Native Title Act has reduced trust between Aboriginal groups and the wider community. Participants mentioned that there was an increase in consultation; however, Aboriginal people felt overwhelmed with this new responsibility. Communicating the importance of Aboriginal involvement in land management needs to be logical so that the relevance of land management projects can be established, with respect for Aboriginal people being established with the whole community.

This research demonstrated the complexity of trying to implement strategies to achieve greater Aboriginal involvement in land management. Greater involvement will only occur through increased community consultation, respect, training, resources and employment opportunities, and consistency between all stakeholders involved. There is a need for consultation and trust within Aboriginal communities, and between Aboriginal communities, government and the broader community. Increased funds are also needed for Aboriginal communities to sustainably manage and train successive managers on the land. Also, non-Aboriginal people need to understand that, Aboriginal ‘Communities across the state have their own views’. The development of land management projects may be a way of improving public health for Victorian Aboriginal peoples and therefore policy makers should focus attention on the potential benefits of such initiatives.

**Conclusion**

With the Aboriginal Australian population suffering dramatic health inequalities, this research is timely. This study adds another layer of understanding of Aboriginal people’s connection to this country, which is poorly understood in mainstream society. As this article highlights, the development of Victorian Aboriginal land management projects is complex and a number of political, economic, social and cultural determinants inhibit programs from progressing. Strategies and programs that target increased participation in land management must consider building capacity, relationships, partnerships, consultation, consistency between all stakeholders, education, training and collaboration between the Victorian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. Aboriginal land management projects may be a key way of improving Aboriginal population health in Australia, and therefore policymakers should be focusing on such initiatives as facilitators of health. Further research into what communities specifically want from their Aboriginal land management projects would enhance this idea, and government agencies and not-for-profit organisations should look laterally at developing such projects as a positive health strategy.

**Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank the communities of focus in this project (Yorta Yorta Nation, Bangerang and Boonerwrung Tribes) for assisting and allowing this study. A special acknowledgement is made for the contribution, assistance and knowledge given by John Belling, Leon Atkinson, Caroline Martin, Caroline Briggs, Treahna Hamm, Wayne Atkinson, Wendy Berick, Barry Coombes and Dean Stewart.

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