

2022

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### Recommended Citation

Goodfellow, Denise Lawungkurr (2022) "Caring as a fundamental of sustainability and resilience in an aboriginal community," *Journal of Sustainability and Resilience*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jsr/vol2/iss2/2>

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Publisher's Note: Journal of Sustainability and Resilience (JSR) (ISSN:2744-3620) is published bi-annually by the Sustainability and Resilience Institute (SRI) of New Zealand. The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of SRI. SRI remains neutral about jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

# Caring as a fundamental of sustainability and resilience in an aboriginal community

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Received: 10/12/2021

Revised: 17/06/2022

Accepted: 28/07/2022

Published: 10/08/2022

**Abstract:** Caring is a fundamental of cultural/community sustainability and resilience among Aboriginal people. However, caring is not confined to community but, as this paper demonstrates can also be extended to both visitors and the wider society. The kindness engendered has application particularly in this time of COVID-19 for both tourism and mainstream society in general.

**Keywords:** Bininj, Kunwinjku, tourism.

## Introduction and research method

This paper concerns the Kunwinjku, “freshwater people” of Western Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia, and in particular those attached to the outstation of Kudjekbinj, Baby Dreaming. Most had little contact with Balanda (non-Indigenous people); Reverend Peterson Nganjmirra, son of one of the most senior custodians was born in the early 1960s, but did not see a Balanda until late childhood. My involvement with the Kudjekbinj people began in 1983; an elder adopted me in an attempt to keep me out of jail after I caught a snake at her request. At the time I was an alderman on Darwin City Council and her request was a test of my resolve to represent her people (Goodfellow, 2007; Goodfellow 2013). From that time onwards my relatives and I often lived together.

At my home Kunwinjku met and “liked” the birdwatching couples that I guided, and in 1988 decided to invite tourists to Kudjekbinj. In 2000, after twelve years of

discussion the Baby Dreaming Tourism Project was born.

Kunwinjku were wary of tourism having been warned by Mirarr, traditional owners of Kakadu National Park, that it would cause them to lose control of their country. So, the Project had to prioritise my relatives and Kunwinjku culture over conforming to the Northern Territory Government’s highly regulated Indigenous tourism policy with its focus on the mass market (Goodfellow, 2017; Schmallegger & Carson, 2010). Yet, the Kudjekbinj people were in some ways well equipped for tourism, having hosted guests to their country for tens of millennia; for example, they had sophisticated caring skills.

Tourism at Kudjekbinj helped to legitimise such caring in relation to tourists who generally responded empathetically, but also to those Balanda they had not met in ways that went beyond ‘tourism’, as described in the next chapter.

The method involved in this paper could be described as autoethnography, a combination of past personal experience and ethnography, the study and analysis of a culture from the point of view of a participant observer (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). However, my involvement was as a family member, never a researcher.

### **Caring: An Aboriginal perspective**

In mainstream society, one can choose to care for others or not (Romero-Martinez, Sariñana-González & Albiol, 2017), but among Bininj (Kunwinjku and related people of the northwestern Top End), caring, is not only a cultural imperative but is considered to be innate; indeed, the unborn are said to protect their mothers (Goodfellow, 2007).

As toddlers Bininj begin to learn the skills necessary to look after others, skills that according to Djedje ('my child') Peterson enable them to become competent parents and responsible members of community. In this role the children are called 'little parents'. My son Rowan became Ngaba ('little daddy') aged three, when Djedje presented him with his newborn child (Goodfellow, 2007). In Rowan over the following years, I witnessed first hand the development of a 'little parent'.

Curtin and Bird (2021) introduce a "strength-based" model of Indigenous tourism that foregrounds hosts' well-being above that of tourists, but which also demonstrates their "shared humanity" (2021, p. 1) The Project went further by providing a cultural lens through which tourism was established, and in which the sophisticated social skills of the Kudjekbinj people which had been largely ignored by mainstream society, were prominent. Yet the model also fitted the type of visitors invited. In such a milieu Bininj and Balanda

responded to each other's vulnerabilities, and tried to help.

### **Results**

Tourism enabled the Kudjekbinj people to extend caring to Balanda as the following examples show:

- Djedje and Jeremiah Galangarr put a distressed American academic through a cleansing ceremony, their concern overriding any reluctance they may have felt about using traditional healing methods on a Balanda;
- two tiny boys from Kudjekbinj decided to show a young student and birdwatcher how to stalk birds by crawling towards them on his belly;
- a sad American birdwatcher, abandoned as a child was adopted, giving him a family;
- in 2004 a backpacker was killed in Kakadu by a crocodile after her guide, ignoring warning signs had said her group could go swimming. In response Mirarr elder, Yvonne Margarula (2004) wrote an article on the need for Balanda and Bininj to look after each other; "we all have to care". Elders tried albeit unsuccessfully to shut down access to waterways they considered most dangerous.

Caring extended beyond tourism. Learning of the grief of mothers whose infants were stillborn Djedje and other elders gave me permission to publish a story about the subject, asking that I tell "sad mothers that we understand" and "we know that sadness too" (Djedje, comment to author 1992).

*The Baby* received widespread positive comment (Goodfellow 1992b; Goodfellow, 2022).

In turn Balanda supporters helped Kudjekbinj people in various ways, from friends assisting me in collecting evidence against police officers who were the subject of complaints by elders (Goodfellow, 2007) and spreading the word internationally about the Project, to a visiting child teaching a Bininj toddler how to count using a solar calculator (Goodfellow, 2022).

Despite the Project's success which included penetration into China and the USA, funding was cut in 2005 ostensibly because elders did not have the appropriate certificate to train others. Then road funding was slashed forcing residents to move to the town of Gunbalanya near the Kakadu National Park border. The move to Gunbalanya had been resisted, the outstation being seen as the only place where children could "learn Aboriginal values" (Jeremiah Galangarr, personal comment, n.d.). In 2019 they began to return, and I was invited to join them. But a year later Covid-19 arrived, and the Northern Land Council temporarily halted the issue of permits to visit Aboriginal land, although I was allowed in as a relative. On visiting in October 2021, I found that the pandemic seemed to have increased the determination of custodians to move back to Kudjekbinj.

### Tourism and COVID-19

COVID-19 is a zoonotic disease (one transmitted between humans and other animals) of the respiratory system that appeared in China in late 2019. It quickly spread worldwide and was declared a pandemic in March 2020. Apart from the huge numbers of casualties the pandemic has disrupted essential services and

business. Tourism has suffered unprecedented losses (Tung, 2021).

However, the pandemic has also created a 'new normal'. For example, people are travelling more cautiously, more independently, with trusted companions and to 'safe', non-mass destinations (Sigala, 2020). These changes may give rise to a more sustainable future (Lambert, Gupte, Fletcher, et al., 2020). Caring hosts and guides may now be more appreciated, particularly by travelers themselves as happened with the Project. Indeed, Covid-19 has given us the chance to be kinder people, to move from the world of 'homo industrialis' to that of 'eco-spiritualis', a world that involves "caring" (Zabaniotou, 2020).

### Conclusion

Although much change has impacted the Kudjekbinj people, from their loss of access to country to covid-19, caring for others still remains fundamental to their resilience and the sustainability of culture. Bininj ways and the Baby Dreaming Tourism Project offer a demonstration of how this can be achieved. And that has lessons for mainstream society. If small children can care for others, then how hard can it be for the rest of us?

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## Author profile



I am a specialist birding/natural history guide and related by adoption and marriage to Aboriginal people, including the Kunwinjku people of Arnhem Land and the Larrakia who speak for the Darwin area. My book, “Birds of Australia’s Top End” was the first field guide to include an Aboriginal language. My books are also used as university texts. In early 2009 I travelled to the US to lecture. Originally most lectures were to be on the birds/wildlife of Australia’s Top End, but with the ascendancy of Barack Obama, I received several invitations to speak on intercultural relations. My goals? To connect people and wildlife. To see a more rational approach to child-rearing and education introduced, one that has more in common with the practices of Kunwinjku people (see my book, *Quiet Snake Dreaming*). Specialties: sensitive, specialist guiding; writing; lecturing; facilitation/mediation (most experience with semi-traditional Indigenous people).