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'Food as Commons' within an Australian Aboriginal context

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68

regional, rural + remote
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'Food as Commons' within an Australian Aboriginal context

Anne Jennings

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Personal and General Introduction

I am a regional/remote-based community development practitioner and social justice activist, having pursued these interests passionately for over thirty years. Given the colonial history of Australia and the use of food in excluding Aboriginal people from their Country (for example to grow European agricultural products) and in Aboriginal missions and reserves (rations of food provision), food is one of the most significant issues for community development. Disregarding Aboriginal people's knowledge and the high nutritional value of traditional foods by, for example, replacing diets with food containing excessive levels of carbohydrates and sugars, has led to disproportionate levels of diet-related chronic disease and, at times, loss of traditional knowledge.

Whilst being non-Aboriginal, my life experience, including Aboriginal family, friends and colleagues and living and working in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, has provided me the opportunity to learn from knowledgeable Aboriginal people.

The previous issue of *New Community* (themed 'Food Security & Sovereignty') included the paper 'Growing' *Food and Community in the Remote Kimberley Region*. That article provided a case study of a grassroots community development project formed to support growing and sharing local nutritious vegetables, fruit and herbs. That study provided an overview of Australian Aboriginal peoples' past and very much still current, approaches to traditional food gathering, growing and harvesting. It then moved on to adopting an historical approach to food

growing by early colonists, starting with settlers first food gardens planted a week after arrival in 1788, through to a current case study of Incredible Edible Broome (IEB). IEB involves a Western communitarian approach to sustenance gardening, skill development and produce sharing. The second component of that article relating to Aboriginal food provision is being expanded upon here, with particular relevance to the theme 'Regional, rural and remote community development'.

Setting the Scene

This exploration is one component of a broader project, *KimberleyTransitions: Collaborating to Care for Our Common Home*. The Project includes five major studies which accept the understanding that "solutions to Kimberley problems are in Kimberley-based knowledges and ways of knowing, doing and being" (Wooltorton et al., 2019:4). The unifying thread between the studies is a collective interest in linking histories to current contexts for future generations of persons and landscapes.

Overall, the Project's vision is for people:

"... to learn to live and work as if the future matters – every person's future – properly informed by locally inclusive knowledges of caring for Country: living in deep, intertwined relationships with land, rivers and saltwater places, and with each other. An intertwined vision is also to learn from post-settlement Kimberley stories, persons, events and activities" (Wooltorton et al., 2019:5).

Practice Framework – Community Development

The practice (ways of doing) framework for this paper involves 'Community Development,' (including communities of intent and/or geographical communities), the process whereby people organise to inform, skill and empower each other to take collective action on jointly identified needs (Kenny, 2016). Those needs can include a range of features such as value-adding to community social infrastructure, through to undertaking activities to overcome disadvantage and climate change. As Ife explained,

Community development represents a vision of how things might be organised differently, so that genuine ecological sustainability and social justice, which seem unachievable at global or national levels, can be realised in the experience of human community (2013:2).

For some Aboriginal writers, however, the Western concept of 'development' is linked to industrial societies..

"a term [that] is not compatible with pre-colonial Aboriginal understandings, which have their foundations within an ecological framework that has been informed and shaped by Aboriginal ontology, land, plants and animals who share the environment with Aboriginal peoples" (Bessarab & Forrest, 2017:7). Ife (2013) concurs with this, adding that colonisation is all about top-down development. Bessarab and Forrest stress that it should be recognised that Aboriginal Australian communities are diverse and located in different geographical areas constituting regional, remote

and/or urban settings. They also point out that a useful theoretical lens for considering the purpose of community development to Aboriginal communities is the concept of the 'third space', as purported by Homi Bhabha in 1994 (in Bessarab & Forrest, 2017:10). This is a space, they maintain, where:

"... different cultures intersect or meet; it can be a space of contestation, collision and often misunderstanding due to the different world views, beliefs and understandings that people bring to that space. [It does have] "enormous potential for people to engage in conversation that can move them forward into a space of understanding and transformation, by not only identifying and acknowledging these different world views but focusing on the commonalities as a driver to move forward" (Bessarab & Forrest, 2017:10).

Further, Gooda (2017) offers the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as an approach to inform and empower Aboriginal-led community development whilst Kelly, Kickett & Bessarab (2017) propose strength-based approaches that recognise currently-held knowledge and skills that support Aboriginal community development.

Theoretical Framework – Transitions Discourse

From a transitions discourse perspective (Escobar, 2015), resolutions to Kimberley problems are in locally-established understandings and collaborative activity and actions (Wooltorton et al., 2019). Solutions are underpinned by cooperative, participative models that embrace the Transition Network program, an international community-based, grassroots environmental movement (Aiken, 2017). The Transition Network features communities stepping up to address complex challenges by working together locally and collaboratively to find solutions in self-organising ways (Hopkins, 2011, 2019; Swennerfelt, 2016). Keys to this approach include resilience, self-organisation, local scale, diversity, mutual dependence and the potential for local feedback loops (Aiken, 2017).

The broader transition dialogue begins with local and Indigenous knowledges (Escobar, 2016), aimed at strengthening this and other movements for a post-development future that emphasises decolonisation of local and Indigenous peoples in the global south and de-growth in the global north³ (Wooltorton, et al, 2019).

For these reasons, *Kimberley Transitions* recognises the cultural beliefs and practices, intellectual life, wisdom and experiences of countless generations for at least 60,000 years (Clarkson et al., 2017), whilst acknowledging continuing post-settlement efforts to maintain and strengthen Aboriginal cultural knowledges and ecological narratives (Wooltorton, 2019).

Combined Practice and Theoretical Frameworks - Commons

In addition to community development and transition dialogue, another context that combines Kimberley

peoples' realities is that of the 'commons' or 'commoning'. For the global north, the previous commons were characterised as collectively shared property, however this definition has changed into an understanding of commons as '*more-than-property*' (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Goodall, 2019; Rose & Gaynor, 2018), broadening the scope of those who could potentially become involved in commons processes. "*Commoning describes a diverse and expanding array of practices and interactions that are expressive in new forms of social relations, between and amongst groups of people, and between people and other lifeforms*" (Rose, 2018:202). It has also been noted that "*all forms of non-hierarchical human cooperation are different forms of commons*" (De Angelis, 2019:124).

Briefly, a commons can be viewed as an integrated whole and internationally, First Nations peoples offer strong evidence that the 'commoning' tradition, developed over thousands of years, remains current practice today and is expected to continue into the future as Bollier & Helfrich (2019:26) suggest:

Every commons is based on natural resources.

Every commons is a knowledge commons.

Every commons depends on a social process.

The Kimberley

The Kimberley is Western Australia's sparsely settled (in a global north context) northern region of the state. The topography includes large areas characterised by unspoiled deserts, semi-arid savanna, rugged ranges, spectacular gorges and a largely isolated coastline, plus significant animals, birds, insects and vegetation. It covers an area of 423,517 K² (Kimberley Development Commission, n.d.). Archaeological evidence reveals that Aboriginal people have been living in this area for 60,000 years (Clarkson, et al., 2017).

The 2016 Census figures indicate 41.6% of the Kimberley region's population are Indigenous, (compared to Western Australia's 3.1% and Australia's 2.8%; Kimberley Development Commission, n.d.). It has been recognised that

"... like other parts of Australia and internationally, human tragedies and associated difficulties exist, such as youth suicide, food insecurity and conflict over large scale industrial and agricultural development with threats to water, cultural and environmental values" (Wooltorton et al., 2019:4).

Aboriginal Food Systems

This section recognises Article 31 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, upholding that:

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, design, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They

also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions. (United Nations, 2007)

Recent archaeological and botanical research in the Kimberley region and other locations in Australia and Asia, confirms Aboriginal peoples' traditional food systems clearly demonstrate manipulation of plant resources has been maintained for millennia (Veth, et al., 2018; Clarkson et al., 2017; Pascoe, 2005). Thus, for thousands of year, people living in Australia have been undertaking many forms of food production, involving preparing, processing and sharing food - dispelling the myth that their only food supplies were/are sourced via hunter and gatherer practices. Aboriginal Australians have continuously maintained these practices and look to continue them into the future (Pascoe, 2005).

Archaeological evidence supports this recognition through the medium of rock art. Research into Kimberley Rock Art illustrates vast amounts of plants, grasses, trees and tubers as well as digging sticks, dilly bags and wood-hafted stone axes. Importantly, and globally significant, the rock art depicts a society that adopts long-term sophisticated physical and symbolic manipulation of plants, a practice that locates plants centrally in their lives (Veth, 2018). This confirms Aboriginal peoples played key ecological roles within their ecosystems, not only by consumption but also by the *"non-consumptive effects of ecosystem engineering"* including *"small-scale vegetation clearing, digging or other bioturbation activities, hydrological engineering (such as the provisioning of water sources or wetlands), or the use of landscape fire (e.g. burning to improve hunting returns)"* (Crabtree, Bird & Bird, 2019:174).

Bruce Pascoe, a Bunurong man from Victoria, author and historian, provides further testimony; his research into journals and diaries written by early settler explorers and colonists has *"revealed a much more complicated Aboriginal economy than the primitive hunter-gatherer lifestyle we have been told was the simple lot of Australia's First People"* (2005:11). Evidence points to pre-colonisation *"people building dams and wells, planning, irrigating and harvesting seed, preserving the surplus and storing it"* (2005:12). One botanical example provided by Pascoe is the *'desert raisin'* or *'bush tomato'*, which has been used by Central Desert people for thousands of years. This plant has become dependent on people for its propagation and spread.

"Aboriginal custodians, in turn, celebrate the plant in ceremonies, dance and song, with body paint designs often featuring its image."

Further, surplus harvests are conserved for future use grinding them into a paste and rolled into balls, allowing for transportation and/or storage. These fruit balls can be shared among family and community and they could be used in economic transfers.

Similar events occur in the Dampier Peninsula, near Broome in the Kimberley. *Acacia colei* seeds are wrapped in paperbark and stored underground and sweet lerps from bloodwood eucalypts are rolled into balls and eaten months later (Lands, 1987). A variety of seeds from that area, particularly the hard seeds, are winnowed and ground, then baked and eaten as a nutritious paste (Kenneally, Edinger & Willing, 1996).

Reports about Aboriginal people during the pre-colonisation era indicate they were healthy and physically lean, *"attributable to an active lifestyle and a nutrient-dense diet characterised by high protein, polyunsaturated fat, fibre and slowly digested carbohydrates"* (Ferguson et al., 2017:294). Australia appears to be 'waking up' to this recognition; as Lane from the Kimberley Institute in Broome explains, the world is starting to discover the *"ancient, sacred foods of Aboriginal Australia"* (2019:75). Further, he quotes growing scientific and commercial evidence relating to the nutritional value and medicinal and industrial potential of these foods. Consequently, many bush foods, previously considered valueless, are now being hailed as *'super foods'* (Lane, 2019), although generally post-colonial Australians remain remarkably unaware of Indigenous Australian food (Szabo, 2019). Wondering why this is so, given that Aboriginal Australians have been and continue to access and cultivate foods better adapted to the continent's temperature and environmental pressures, Szabo (2019) agrees with Lane, asserting that change is slowly emerging and is likely to *"rewrite a more authentic local and sustainable food paradigm."*

What could such *paradigm* be based on? At the beginning of the 21st century, the general consumer eats fewer than 200 different plants for nourishment (Cribb, 2019) and noted Australian agronomist, Bruce French, has been investigating and identifying global edible plants for 50 years. Supported by his Tasmanian Rotary Club, French has established and maintains an international and generally accessible database of over 30,000 recorded edible plants, a list continuing to grow (Food Plant Solutions, n.d.). Through the *Food Plant Solutions* project established by French, edible plants from all continents are investigated and validated, including how to grow and prepare them as food, specifically targeting countries struggling with hunger and poverty. In Australia, *"Dr French has identified no fewer than 6,100 edible native plants used by the continent's Aboriginal peoples for food and medicine for tens of thousands of years"* (Cribb, 2019:276). From French's work, Cribb surmised that, given plants on the database are mainly vegetables, they are ideally suited to *"climate-proof urban food production – being grown in a fraction of the time and with a fraction of the resources used to grow grain or large animals"* (2019:277). The overall message is that humanity has yet

to explore the diversity and possibilities provided by our planet

Food Sovereignty

The Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA), a collective of small-scale farmers, Indigenous peoples, fishers and NGOs, defines food sovereignty as “*promoting everyone’s right to access culturally-appropriate and nutritious food grown and distributed in ethical and ecologically-sound ways, and our right to democratically determine our own food and agriculture systems*” (AFSA, 2018), which concurs with Article 31 of the previously mentioned UN Declaration.

The Food Sovereignty paradigm, including “*seeds, land, water, knowledge, biodiversity – and anything else that sustains materially and symbolically or spiritually, a people in a territory – are considered a commons*” (A. Escobar, 2019:187).

They are therefore not a ‘resource’ to be exploited, as a ‘commons’ perspective recognises collaborative and collective contributions. One instance of Food Sovereignty in the Kimberley region is the water, land, vegetation and people living on and around the Mardoowarra, Fitzroy River. This significant waterway provides multiple values and life forces for Traditional Owners connected to it from the beginning of time through to the present through the sacred ancestral river and First Law (Poelina, 2019). It supplies fish, reptiles, small animals, fruits and vegetables and intergenerational cultural safety through Aboriginal beliefs, histories, knowledge systems and wisdom (Wooltorton, et al., 2019). Similar to other Traditional Owners and Native Title Holders and Claimant groups, access to and safety of their environment is at risk from external pressures, closely linked to threats to cultural integrity, land, vegetation, animals and food sovereignty and the risk of food insecurity.

Food as Commons

As previously noted, “*Commoning describes a diverse and expanding array of practices and interactions between and amongst groups of people, and between people and other lifeforms*” (Rose 2018:202). Bollier and Helfrich point out that “*Indigenous cultures, tradition and habit can make commoning seem utterly normal, rendering it invisible*” (2019:101), comparing it to western industrialised societies, where commoning is also invisible, even if “*for a different reason: it has been culturally marginalized.*” (2019:102)

It is becoming increasingly accepted that food is treated as a commodity, a market-driven opportunity to extract private value, within neoliberal domination prevailing today (Vivero-Pol et al., 2019; Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Kothari et al., 2019; Rose & Gaynor, 2018), to the detriment of all people on the planet and - undeniably - to Indigenous peoples seeking to produce and secure healthy and ecologically sustainable food. Traditional communities’ livelihoods, their solidarity and care, exhibit “*strong relationship to Nature, one that recognizes [their]*

interdependence with Nature and does not see it simply as a resource to exploit” (Vivero-Pol et al., 2019:382). This relationship is now being called the ‘revival’ of the commons, but it is an ancient practice based on the right to food that has safeguarded Indigenous peoples’ existence for thousands of years and embraced and promoted by the global south. Overall, these understandings involve Aboriginal strength-based community development processes that “*[b]egin with and focus on the strengths of a community,*” (Kelly, Kickett & Bessarab, 2017:101) incorporating spirituality and connection to land and family.

Discussion

Bessarab and Forrest (2017) wonder whether community development practices were undertaken in traditional Aboriginal societies pre-colonisation; recognising that the term ‘development’ has its origin in western industrial ideology, they probably did by envisaging different conceptual frameworks, doubtlessly including Dreaming lore. Relating this to today’s society, Bessarab and Forrest (2017:12-3) identify a “*third space that is shared by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people,*” offering the potential for transformation where diverse cultures meet, acknowledging differing belief systems and worldviews and collectively working towards “*understanding, acceptance, problem solving and moving forwards [recognising this] is where changes happen, resulting in transformation and capacity building in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal spaces.*”

Transformation is an aim of the Transitions movement; the Kimberley Transitions project has identified that, “*[a]lthough Aboriginal histories and wisdom are widely recognised in Australian transition initiatives, few programs explicitly linked to the transition movement relate to Aboriginal knowledges as a central organising idea.*” (Wooltorton et al., 2019:50) In her doctoral research on the Transition movement in Australia, Power (n.d.) identified “*[c]ritical community development with its practice-based focus on social change, power inequalities and social justice as well as research and analysis about inclusion and diversity, is potentially a great resource for Transition.*” In addition, she appreciates the importance of process (a key to community development practice) and suggests that the Transition movement could learn from knowledge bases including Indigenous wisdoms and community development.

As described, ‘food as commons’ is linked to “*food democracy, justice and sovereignty*” (Vivero-Pol et al., 2019), encompassing a range of social imperatives, including cultural knowledge, spirituality and empowerment, which is expanded by Gammage in *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*. Gammage maintains that non-Aboriginal people “*can only ‘become Australian’ through reconnection with the great lost traditions of the commons in Aboriginal culture*” (in Goodall, 2019:8). Thus, the global north is challenged to re-conceptualise food as commons by unlocking imagination and creating innovative approaches

to policy and legal frameworks for food systems - currently disallowed as they are misaligned with the dominant capitalist system (Vivero-Pol et al., 2019).

The transformative change Gammage calls for has recently been witnessed by De Angelis (2019:126), who sees "[I]ndigenous communities and new commons systems [are] emerging and becoming more visible and innovative." Archer et al. (2019, 2019:11) add to this:

"Indigenous cultural strengths and knowledge systems for looking after country and its people as part of an inclusive, responsive, innovative, diversified ecosystem services economy. This purpose is not about advocating for mutual assimilation. Rather, it is about recognising that there are now two major coexistent cultural traditions [in Australia] which, from time to time and place to place, may intersect constructively to provide mutual benefit."

I have endeavoured to identify and recognise past and present Aboriginal knowledges and practices as they relate to Country, culture and activity, particularly as they interact to benefit Aboriginal peoples' food systems. Bessarab and Forrest's (2017) call for a 'third space' and Archer et al. (2019) and Gammage's (2019) statements create optimism for the future. Considerable work is happening 'on the ground', but governments need to play their part and move from dominant, neoliberal policy and practice approaches to those more consistent with Aboriginal knowledges as currently advocated for by the global south.

"The linkages between these practice-theory frameworks are strong and jointly support the commoning processes discussed in this article, particularly as it relates to 'food as commons'."

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Endnotes

1. In Western Australia Indigenous people prefer Aboriginal Australians. First Nations and/or Indigenous will be used for areas outside of that state.
2. The Kimberley region covers the north west of Western Australia – see 'The Kimberley' section in this paper.
3. Perennial bush or tree, native to northern Australia. Western common name is 'Cole's wattle'.
4. Sweet insect excretions created by Psyllids, tiny sap-sucking insects. Depicted in the film Bookarrarra Lijyan Mardoowarra Booroo see <http://www.magalimduffie.com/films>

Engaging Youth in Regional Australia: The EYRA Study

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Abstract

This article describes the rationale, aims and methods for an Australian Research Council-funded project *Engaging Youth in Regional Australia* (the EYRA Study). The EYRA Study focusses on three key regional areas of Australia meeting our increasing demands for food, energy and resources, experiencing a steady decline in their youth populations – the Eyre Peninsula (Port Lincoln, SA), the Pilbara (Hedland, WA) and the Riverina (Griffith, NSW). This research addresses the need for prospering regional areas of Australia to have more effective policy strategies in place to (1) engage with their existing young people; (2) stay engaged with young people who leave; and (3) re-engage young people who return, taking into account the variety of scenarios that returning might involve. Through a combination of roundtable discussions, qualitative interviews, postqualitative methods and innovative creative approaches, the project aims to provide these areas with a holistic social and cultural analysis of regional youth engagement.

Introduction

Youth outmigration has been a serious dilemma for regional Australian communities for over a decade, with approximately 50% of the young people in the 15-21 age group leaving their home areas (Argent & Walmsley, 2008; Coffey et al., 2018). The reasons for youth outmigration are complex. Contextual factors such as access to higher education and more diverse employment options are relevant, but so are symbolic factors such as the lure of urban lifestyles that are seen to embody youth culture, as well as affective factors related to the lived experiences of young people (Alston, 2004; Farrugia, 2016; Stratford, 2015). Recent research has highlighted the negative consequences of prolonged youth outmigration for regional communities; these include the loss of social capital, the structural ageing of the regional work force and the effects on the sustainability of community services and businesses (e.g. Dufty-Jones et al., 2013; Luck et al., 2011). However, in view of an increasingly mobile world, regional communities realise that simply stemming the flow of outmigration is not the solution. Return migration of educated and experienced young people can be of great benefit to regional areas. Thus, the need to keep existing young people engaged in their communities so as to increase the likelihood of their return,