

# Verification of Kowanyama Carbon Project Core Benefits - September 2019

Core benefits identified:

- *the carbon project enables continuation of cultural practice; and*
- *the carbon project enables the bringing together of western and Indigenous science.*



**Semi structured interview with John Clark (Manager Kowanyama Aboriginal Land and Natural Resource Management Office) conducted by Sarah Blakely and Jason Jia (Mapoon Rangers) and recorded by Lauren Bowyer (AbCF)**

### Purpose of this report

The first Indigenous-led carbon farming core benefits verification was recently conducted by Mapoon Land & Sea Rangers Sarah Blakely and Jason Jia. **Findings and verification recommendation will be presented to the Independent Advisory Body for endorsement.**

This short report, however, provides a snapshot of the implementation process of this inaugural event that took place in Kowanyama, Cape York, 22-27 September.

During the initial roll-out, AbCF staff will be involved in verifications as support to verifiers. This provides an opportunity for the Indigenous-led verification approach to be observed, analysed and improved. This report therefore explores the process primarily. A visual report, however is the primary source for sharing the core benefits identified and their significance as told through the eyes of the Aboriginal verifiers, Kowanyama rangers and Traditional Owners.



Map of Cape York Queensland

## Background

This Indigenous-led approach has been many years in the making. Decades of collective thinking and analysis about what is required to achieve genuine, beyond rhetorical, Indigenous empowerment.

For a majority Indigenous staffed not-for-profit, it was not good enough for an Indigenous-led approach to be a 'light-touch' add on or after thought. Showcasing Indigenous sea and land management as part of the solution to the climate challenges we all face is crucial to our approach. Building Indigenous capacity in the verification and impact measurement of carbon project core benefits, was a no-brainer.

This first Indigenous-led verification saw a team of seven travel to Kowanyama for six nights. Another crucial component of our approach is being on-country for a good amount of time. What afterall, can be achieved or learned in a one to two days with a fly-in-fly-out visit.

Central to our team were Jason Jia and Sarah Blakely, rangers from Old Mapoon Cape York. Aboriginal Carbon Foundation (AbCF) staff Rowan Foley, Lauren Bowyer and Lisa McMurray were also on board as coaches and support in the background. Hugh Woodbury from Centre for Appropriate Technology (CfAT) and Professor Sue Jackson from Griffith University were observing.

The team travelled in two 4WDs from Cairns. Jason and Sarah had flown from Weipa as this was the only option for them to travel to Kowanyama: via Cairns. As Qantas is the only carrier ex Weipa (an hour's drive from Mapoon) the cost of return flights is jarring. Following a day-long drive the team arrived in Kowanyama on sunset.

## Mapoon verifiers Sarah Blakely and Jason Jia





Following the completion of the Aboriginal Carbon Farming and Core Benefits Management course (10722NAT) in Mapoon in May 2018, Sarah and Jason were identified by AbCF and the Manager of the Mapoon Land and Sea Office, Lee Ase, as suitable verifier candidates. Sarah and Jason are senior rangers with significant experience in land and sea management and education. Both have diverse career histories and experience which coincidentally includes dance performance and teaching.

We realise that with this opportunity comes great obligation and commitment. It's a great honour for Traditional Owners to travel to another Traditional Owner's country to explore their carbon projects and inherent cultural practice. Who better then, than a Traditional Owner to understand the governing cultural protocols any verification must follow?

Visiting other Traditional homelands and communities is only possible if someone has been invited and has access to a car. Public transport, beyond cost prohibitive regional airlines (if there is an airstrip) is non-existent. Being on someone else's country is a great privilege and honour and great respect was shown to Kowanyama clans: Kokoberra, Yir Yoront (or Kokomnjen), Kunjen and Olgol.

Throughout the week Sarah and Jason and the Kowanyama Traditional Owners were at all times inquiring and exchanging information about cultural practices. The verification process creates opportunities for Traditional Owners to build Indigenous networks, Australia wide, contributing to the sharing and strengthening of the oldest continuous culture on the planet.

## Orientation and refresher training

Working with the right people and having the correct authorisations and relationships is crucial when conducting verifications. Kowanyama Land and Sea Office Manager John Clark orientates the team as to the project location.



Jason and Sarah had completed the Aboriginal Carbon Farming and Core Benefits Management course (10722NAT) in May 2018. Given the time between the course and the verification the first day of the verification was spent providing refresher training and using the tools. We practiced facilitating focus groups and semi-structure interviews and asking open-ended and flow-on questions.

The dedication and commitment from Sarah and Jason to this process was evident from the first day. Copious notes were scribbled, and ideas bounced around as to how to make people feel most relaxed and how to encourage shy people to speak up. We roll-played different scenarios and watched videos that demonstrated tips for interviewing. At the end of the day, the team were feeling confident and excited about the beginning of the verification.

All too often community development programming in remote Aboriginal communities is implemented with great seriousness and over-concern. We feel it important to create an ambience that is upbeat and focused on strengths. As a result, much clowning around takes place which sees participants enjoying the process and returning on consecutive days.





## Visiting country and homelands

The opportunity to visit another person's country is a great privilege. The morning of Day 2 was spent visiting key locations surrounding Kowanyama community.



The location of the carbon farming project is approximately 240kms east of Kowanyama on the Oriners and Sefton pastoral lease which is owned by the Kowanyama Shire Council and home to the Traditional Owners: the Yam family. A portion of funds generated from the carbon sales employ two Yam family Traditional Owners as rangers who are permanently located at the project site.



**The team exploring country at the junction where Topsy Creek meets the Gulf of Carpentaria**



Young people like Traditional Owner Dion Bermister who has worked away for nine years in the mines and has a multitude of skills including building, are returning to their homelands because of their cultural connection and calling to their country. Dion isn't interested in living in town, but instead has applied his skills and know-how to build up his homeland, on the edge of a wetland and with a small generator powering everything he needs. As more demand for homeland living emerges it's hoped the profits from the carbon project can continue to contribute to the development of homeland infrastructure.

Our exploring of country culminated in a delicious lunch at Dion's place. Within our team are Aboriginal people from numerous clans from Central Australia to South East Queensland to Cape York. The opportunity for country men and women from different parts of Australia to come together left the team feeling rejuvenated and set the week off on the right note. Again, this is a mindful strategy within the framework approach that encourages sufficient time for Aboriginal people to come together and build new relationships, essential when sharing stories of the impact from their carbon projects.



## Identification of core benefits



**Introduction activity: Kowanyama rangers Stafford and Tommy drawing & sharing their 'Life Picture'**



**Introduction activity: Jason drawing his 'Life Picture'**



Flexibility and understanding are essential when working in remote Aboriginal communities. Even with all the meticulous organisation there will often be unplanned circumstances that will influence how a visit unfolds. What we have come to learn over the years is that rarely a field trip unfolds the way it was planned. Thankfully however, what does happen is often more beneficial and informative than previously imagined.

In this case the community was preparing for sorry business and as a result our key contact John Clark was juggling funeral and verification preparations. Given the sorry business arrangements some rangers were occupied elsewhere. However, this meant a broader cross section of the community were involved in the verification process. As a result, participants involved represented the following key informant categories: rangers, Traditional Owners, Yam family members (where the project is located) young men, older men, school aged girls, women, and CSIRO scientists.

Key to this process is the place-based determination of what core benefits are most significant. Following an introduction/ice-breaker activity; the collection of consent approvals for sharing information; and discussion about the importance of understanding carbon project core benefits, Jason and Sarah led the rangers and community members through a process to determine the most important aspects of the carbon project (burning). Each person chose one or two picture cards<sup>1</sup> and then explained what was happening and why what was happening in the image they chose was so significant. A facilitated discussion led by Sarah prioritised the benefits and a process of elimination revealed the following two key core benefits from the carbon project:

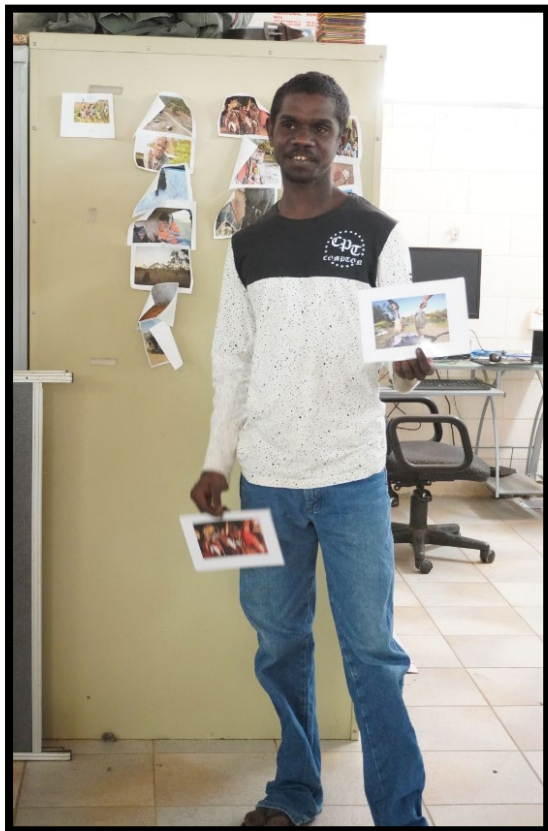
- *the carbon project enables continuation of cultural practice;*
- *the carbon project enables the bringing together of western and Indigenous science.*



**Identification of the core benefits from the picture cards (indicator bank)**

---

<sup>1</sup> The set of carbon project picture cards comprise 80 images relating to different components and common outcomes of carbon project.



Discussion about what is happening in the cards and why that card was chosen





### Prioritising the most significant core benefits through a facilitated process of elimination

#### Creation of the verification tree (evaluation plan)

Once the place-based, most significant core benefits have been identified, the next step is to develop a verification tree. Drawing on adult education techniques that build energy and motivation around impact measurement the first step is to draw a tree for each identified core benefit. In the three times this exercise has been conducted (two pilots and this first verification) participants have enjoyed the opportunity to express themselves creatively. Fortuitously, artists within the groups were called on to provide aesthetic oversight, resulting in colourful and dynamic verification trees (In some cases complete with native animals).

The verification **model of rigour** is “asking the right questions, to the right people, in the right way”. Each core benefit is then explored to determine:

- what is important to know about the core benefits chosen;
- who are the right people to provide that information;
- where and how is the best way to speak with that person;
- what protocols exist that need to guide the verification; and
- what other existing data (qualitative or quantitative) exists to triangulate the core benefit data being collected.

The verification tree then becomes the road map for data collection, analysis and creation of the visual report.



Sarah introducing the steps involved in creating the verification tree (evaluation plan)





**Step 1 - drawing the verification tree**



**Step 2 – what do we want to know about this core benefit (the right questions)**

Step 2 of the verification process explores what questions the group/s want to ask to find out more about the core benefits they have identified. The process also explores what other information external stakeholders might like to know about the core benefits.

The verification participants wanted to know the importance of the core benefits chosen and how they have benefited the ranger group and the community more broadly. Because of the cross section of the community participating in the verification, the right people (step 3 of the process) who possessed that knowledge, were already in the room.

Once the right people were identified then the group considered other existing information that could be drawn on (step 4) to triangulate new data being collected.

## Data collection

Once the verification tree was complete, data collection could begin. Sarah and Jason learnt video and photography techniques as part of the *Aboriginal Carbon Farming and Core Benefits Management course (10722NAT)*. Jason has advanced photography skills, however through his role as Cultural Officer with the Mapoon ranger program. In this instance AbCF Marketing Manager Lauren Bowyer was on hand to film interviews, freeing up Jason and Sarah to concentrate on facilitation.

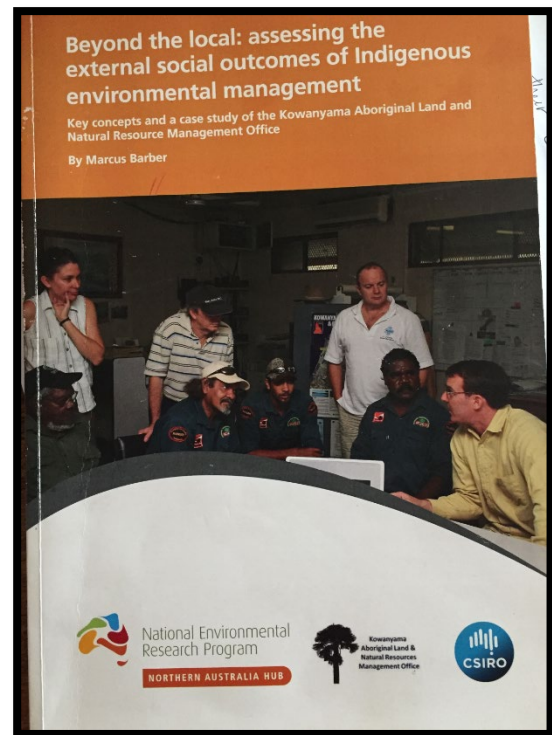
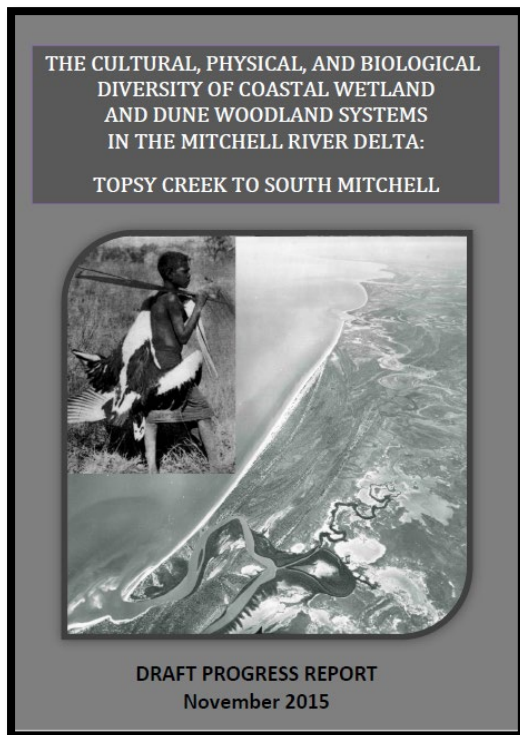
As is the case in any field work, flexibility is the key and focus groups and semi-structured interviews were prioritised to coincide with the right people's available. Residing in the community for the whole week meant components of the verification could be rearranged as needed, due to the length of time staying in Kowanyama.







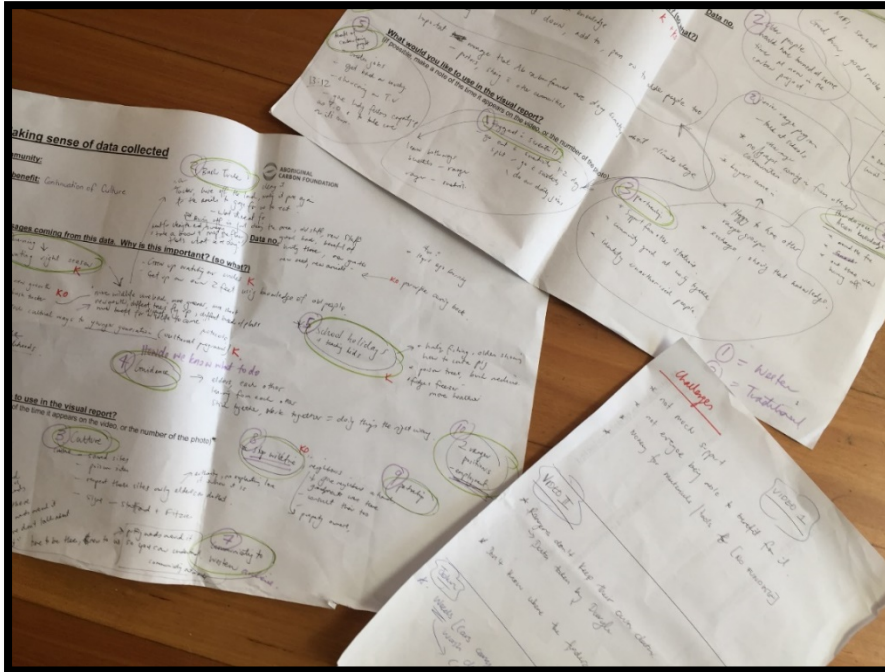
**Focus groups held with rangers and Traditional Owners from Oriners (the project location)**



**Existing data to triangulate and support the verification of the core benefits identified**

## Data analysis and key themes emerging from the core benefits

Once adequate data was collected, the team spent time reviewing the information collected and ‘making sense’ of the themes and messages emerging. This a crucial component of the verification and informs the creation of the ‘visual report’.





## Core benefit - the carbon project enables continuation of cultural practice

The following key themes emerged as impacts of this core benefit:

- Learning how to burn the right way
- Increase in bush tucker and species that have been missing for a long time (e.g. echidna)
- Increase in the right plants and vegetation
- The right people visiting and protecting cultural sites
- The opportunity for Traditional Owners to be out on country applying cultural practice
- The opportunity to take kids out on country during school holidays learning traditional ways
- A feeling of wellbeing enabled through being back on country burning the right way
- An opportunity to share this with an interested western audience
- The stopping of wildfires and working closely with neighbours who have a respect of traditional fire management
- The development of many partnerships with stakeholders from different walks of life (e.g. NAB, CSIRO, universities etc.)
- The creation of new ranger positions to be based at the project site

*“burning off is just cleaning the area, getting rid of the old stuff, so the new stuff can grow back, just like taking a broom and mop and sweeping the floor, that’s what we’re doing here”*

*“more wildlife coming back, more greener, more shoots, new growths, different trees flying up, different breeds of plants, more benefit for different wildlife to come back”*

*“the feeling we get when we’re on country is hard to put into words, you have to be out there with us, around it, it’s hard to explain, that’s why we don’t talk about it much, it’s a feeling”*



## Core benefit - the carbon project enables the bringing together of western and Indigenous science

The following key themes emerged as impacts of this core benefit:

- New technology and knowledge are being passed on to young and old people
- New training opportunities are available through western science
- New technology allows detection of wind change, humidity and heat which leads to efficient burning
- Both groups, western and Indigenous scientists learn new ways of fire management practice
- Junior rangers have access to western scientists
- Relationship building with other stations because of the 'credibility' western science brings
- Community interested in the project because of the exposure it brings to western science
- Buyers see the project as credible as it has both western and Indigenous frameworks applied
- Showcases Indigenous land and sea management as contributing to Climate Change solutions
- Creates jobs and gets people back on country

*"... we're interested in learning from western knowledge and how it can benefit traditional knowledge, we like learning about the new technology and passing it down, add too, and pass on to the older people too ..."*

*"... important message that Aboriginal carbon farmers are doing something about climate change."*

*"New tools help us do a good burn, good smoke to the atmosphere."*





## Visual report

Most importantly this process is to be led by Indigenous rangers and other Traditional Owners. Acknowledging that English literacy can be limited at times the process has been built around tools and activities that don't require high levels of written English proficiency.

As a result, the report prepared from the verifications will be visual as opposed to written. Furthermore, verifiers and carbon producers controlling the story they wish to tell and how to portray that visually, produces an authentic and engaging outcome.

The video is shared with community representatives to ensure representation of data collected has correctly been portrayed. This is a vital step in data sovereignty and control of what messages are shared about the carbon project.

## Key recommendations for the next verification

- Allowing a day for the verifiers and AbCF team to engage in refresher training: going through the verification process and tools and practicing facilitation and interviewing is essential.
- Following the refresher training day, spending a couple of days out on country discussing the core benefits in-situ where people feel most invigorated.

## Key insights from this verification

- Indigenous leadership qualities are recognised and built on.
- Spending a whole week with the carbon farmers will produce the richest verification outcome.
- Sharing knowledge between communities is enabled in situ (not in a Workshop or forum).
- Support from AbCF staff will be required for some time as verifiers build up their facilitation and interview skills and techniques.
- Spending time on someone else's country for rangers is an honour and privilege and something that rarely happens because of the travel constraints.
- Peer to peer verification of environmental, social and cultural values produces a superior outcome and experience.
- Australian ingenuity is as good as European and/or North American.
- An Indigenous-led verification works!!!

## Next steps

- Following approval of the visual report from community representatives and verification participants Sarah and Jason will give final authorisation to the credible and true visual report and verification process.
- The visual report and verifiers' authorisation will then be submitted to the Core Benefits Advisory Group meeting Nov 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019 for final approval. Subject to approval a verification certificate will be issued.