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INTERVIEW

Yarning up with Gerry Turpin – An Interview about Indigenous biocultural knowledges

By Gerry Turpin and Liz Cameron

Aboriginal conversations usually take place around a fire, so that we can sit and immerse ourselves not only through talk but connect with Country. The act of yarning serves as a medium to establish and build respectful relationships, exchange stories and traditions and to preserve and pass on cultural knowledge. This interview with Ethnobotanist Gerry Turpin (Fig. 1) began like all other initial yarning conversations on who we are and where we belong.

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Figure 1. Gerry Turpin assessing culturally important species Bloodroot (*Haemodorum coccineum*) at the 'Bringing Back the Good Fire' project on his ancestral lands, Mbabaram Country.

Liz: Over the last few years, there has been a significant growth in Indigenous people engaging in environmental sciences. Gerry, how did you become deeply involved in this discipline?

Gerry: In my life, as soon as you become of age, you leave school to support yourself. I went to Year 11 and then coming to age left school to support myself. My first job was picking potatoes in a paddock, which set the scene for the next ten years in undertaking farm work, labouring and fruit picking. I found work whenever I could and had no aspirations for higher education such as University. I did try to obtain a Senior Certificate through TFE night school, but there was no one to guide me. On one of my travels in Brisbane, I was connected by the National Indigenous Employment Scheme with the Queensland Department of Primary Industries, which provided me with opportunities to learn new skills. This included lab techniques, working with plants and mounting specimens onto cardboard for library collections and looking after the greenhouses. I later undertook training in regional ecological mapping as a technical officer and after a few years I became interested in native plants. My problem was I could do the work but did not have the piece of paper to apply for any botanist jobs until an Indigenous

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Ecological Management & Restoration *Linking science and practice*

Scholarship to go to university became available through the state department. Within this program, I studied full time and would work on holidays. This opportunity was invaluable to me as I continued to receive a full salary, which in turn led to the successful completion of my university degree. As a mature age student, married with twins this type of support was helpful. While at university, one of my lecturers, Susanne Schmidt pushed me to ethnobotany projects – she inspired and supported me. I've now been in the department for over 30 years. Over the years, I have built a niche in this area and have been involved with many different partnerships.

Figure 2. Gerry Turpin (left) with his mob, the Mbabaram, and Vickie Mylrea (Savannah Gulf NRM) at Watsonville, Mbabaram Country, 2017.

Liz: As the first government employed Indigenous Ethnobotanist what is an important aspect of your role?

Gerry: I spend a lot of time with Indigenous communities (Figs 2, 3). I support Indigenous communities in decision-making about certain plants including plant knowledge and the protection of that knowledge. One of my roles is recording and documenting traditional plant use with various Indigenous communities in north Queensland, particularly on Cape York Peninsula. Another aspect of my role is to ensure protocols are put in place and that everyone understands the importance of these protocols.

Liz: How did you get involved in the Ecological Society of Australia (ESA)?

Gerry: I started getting involved some 10 years ago with ESA through conference attendance and later presentations. I became involved in a working group to look at Indigenous engagement that led to developing a strategy to support Indigenous Ecological Knowledge structures. I also was involved in establishing an active Indigenous scientists' network. ESA developed an annual Indigenous Symposium, which continues to be well represented by many Indigenous groups and Traditional Owners. This led to my appointment as on the ESA Board as Director of Indigenous Engagement. I owe much gratitude to Dr Ro Hill and Dr Emilie Ens for initially establishing the Indigenous Symposium. One of our first documents included a reconciliation action plan along with further information on Indigenous protocols. I stepped down this year from the position and another person will be invited to step into the role.

Liz: ESA has been a pillar of progress towards recognising that Indigenous knowledge is of equal standing to Western Knowledge. What aspects have helped drive such change?

Gerry: ESA has been instrumental to making positive changes. They are one of the forefront thinkers in pushing an Indigenous agenda considerably over the years. ESA has been involved in writing up many of the necessary protocols. There has also been a great deal of work on intellectual property and restorative work such as Indigenous regeneration projects. In a way, it has rectified many of the problems of ecological research the past where there has been no exchange or benefits to communities.

Liz: I see a lot of sadness over the mismanagement and abuse of Country and its resources. What are some of the concerns you see?

Gerry: There was a lot of mismanagement going on with Western science taking priority over Indigenous science. Since colonisation Aboriginal land management practices have been taken out of the equation with many of our lands locked up. This included National Parks and even environmental groups that haves good intentions to protect Country, but for Aboriginal people it has resulted in having no access to their traditional lands. Aboriginal people have always been part of the environment and until people realise this we will continue to struggle.

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Figure 3. Gerry Turpin (far right) with the Mbabaram Land Managers, at Watsonville, Mbabaram Country, 2017.

Liz: I have heard much about two-way education and its value for not only Indigenous people but an opportunity for others to gain a deeper understanding of our culture. When and how did the term 'two-way' ecology begin?

Gerry: Previously Western science dominated the way people viewed and managed Country. This ideal pushed Aboriginal knowledge aside and has resulted in a great loss of knowing. Two-way knowledge is more of a Western Australian term that came from the many WA mob coming to speak at the ESA conferences. This phrase has been adopted across most of the nation. It is used to highlight the importance of Indigenous and Western sciences in working together. It was also specifically used in fire management practices (Figs 1, 4), particularly in the Northern Territory and grew out of a concern that we were managing the whole nation on only one way. Such ways were not distinctive to geographical areas, nor utilising local Indigenous knowledge. The term Indigenous Biocultural Knowledge offers a good understanding of this concept as it includes the word culture. It is now taking momentum all over the place as people are starting to realise its importance on a national level.

Liz: Consultation is an important element of working together. When working on Country, is each community consulted and what takes place? I understand this takes time and requires lengthy discussions from a collective group, but what is best practice?

Gerry: Consulting with Indigenous people is fundamental to every activity. This needs to include finding the right people for right country, relationship building and when designing projects, include free prior and informed consent and benefit sharing. Best practice in consultation requires acknowledging there is another valuable knowledge system out there. As Aboriginal people have always been part of the environment, acknowledging their knowledge as a science is fundamental to the engagement process. This involves getting to know Aboriginal people, to go out on Country and have a yarn. Consultation also includes discussions about the benefits to the community that are not just of a financial nature but should filter down to what a community needs. This may include training in scientific techniques or assistance in infrastructure. Community consultation needs to involve an understanding of specific people and place including the relationships these people have with Country.

Liz: Considering the past where Western knowledge was privileged over Indigenous knowledge what are some of the challenges communities still face – is there a sense of cautiousness when engaging with non-Indigenous scientists?

Gerry: There remains some caution within each community due to historical events. For example, some pharmaceutical companies have taken some of our plants for medicinal purposes such as a certain species of the pitjuri or Eucalyptus species and have created multimillion dollar businesses with no consideration or benefit to Aboriginal people. There continues to be people still trying to do things without permission such as overseas companies trying to put a patency on native plants. Previously, the Australian Biodiscovery Act (2004) existed only in Queensland, but the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments have also recently passed biodiscovery laws. The problem is that most of Australia still has no laws on the protection of our native plants and thus, it is often open slather for commercialisation. Another issue is that there are two forms of Indigenous knowledge, one to share and one not to share. Shared

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Figure 4. Gerry Turpin participating in cultural burning at Turraburra, Iningai Country, Barcaldine, Queensland.

knowledge is decided by each community while sacred knowledge is not shared.

Liz: You have mentioned consultation as being part of engagement with Indigenous communities, what sort of engagement is needed when researchers wish to do work on a particular Country?

Gerry: True engagement starts with an equal partnership. This includes ensuring that Indigenous communities are co-managers and co-designers in each project. Engagement needs to be consistent so there is benefit sharing. Any activities done on Country require a set of protocols that including gaining consent from the traditional owners. This requires any contracts to be outlined in plain English and time spent explaining all aspects of a project. Finding the right people for right country and relationship building is the first point of call in forming a proper partnership. Once this happens other things will fall into place. Another aspect of true engagement includes understanding each communities' laws and practices. One cannot simply walk into a community without permission. By including Indigenous people as part of the project, researchers can gain a greater insight into many of the cultural and spiritual aspects of Country. Ecologists also need to learn the community's language as this will provide them with further information of specific plants and animals. Local language should also be included in reports and presentations as our words are often descriptive and can build better partnerships – particularly when we are co-presenting.

Liz: You mention co-presenting as being part of the engagement process. What ways can ecologists build on this collaborative partnership?

Gerry: Co-presenting highlights how two-way engagement works. There has been a history of Western ecologists presenting on behalf of Indigenous people, which only highlights one perspective. This is now changing where Indigenous people are becoming co-presenters, co-managers and co-authors on projects.

Liz: In my experience, there are few conferences that are culturally welcoming when it comes to presenting. I have found many Indigenous colleagues feeling uncomfortable and out of place presenting alone on stage. How can conferences facilitate better ways to engage Indigenous people?

Gerry: The best way is to co-present with others. I have seen groups of people come up together and speak as a united voice. I have also witnessed presenters use videos and more visual imagery to describe and highlight the work that they do rather than using graphs or just speaking. This engages the audience more. Another aspect in co-presenting at conferences is that there is a need for researchers to consider additional funding to ensure communities can also attend conferences. As funding has become more limited and more competitive, we need to support Traditional Owners to attend these activities. This requires pre-thinking when applying for grants.

Liz: How can people learn about Indigenous ecological knowledge? As an academic and researcher, I am often appalled by the lack of Indigenous presence in our educational systems, especially in environmental sciences. This has left a gap of knowledge central to progress in two-way knowledge exchange.

Gerry: There is a growing interest worldwide in Indigenous knowledges with various environmental groups

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and societies now including this in their practices. Australia is quite behind in this compared to the rest of the world. There is a lack of anything Indigenous in schools with little cultural awareness training provided before researchers come onto Country. Learning needs to start at the early years with universities embedding Indigenous knowledges into every discipline. From my experience, teachers in schools are keen to have Indigenous content but find it difficult to know who to contact.

Liz: I imagine your job is quite extensive as you are a significant contact person for both Indigenous communities and research inquiries. From a cultural perspective what spiritual aspects come into play with your research?

Gerry: Yes, a lot of the time I act as a cultural broker. While I tend to focus on plants other things also come into play – such as the spiritual aspects of plants. For example, some plants have laws attached to them or taboos, for example, certain plants should not to be consumed until a male is initiated. Some plants are viewed as ancestors or have value in other areas. These complex involvements are often overlooked by Western scientists who tend to study just the physical aspects of the plant rather than its spiritual or cultural relationship.

Liz: Out of curiosity, what is your favourite plant and why?

Gerry: That would have to be the peanut tree, which is a part of the family. It produces bright red capsules that taste really nice. It has other multiple uses and medicinal values. Its bark is used for string making, basket weaving and traditional fibre-craft clothing. The leaves have antibacterial value and useful for coughs and colds.

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