

Impacts and Achievements of the MTSRF

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Showcasing the Australian Government's investment
in the MTSRF for improved sustainability of the
North Queensland region, and Australia

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Cairns, North Queensland



Abstract

[MTSRF Project Number 4.9.1](#)

Empowering Indigenous peoples' biocultural diversity through cultural landscapes: A case study from the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area

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The biological and geological significance of the Australian tropical forests has been recognised through world heritage listing as a natural site since 1988. However, while Aboriginal people have occupied these forests and shaped the biodiversity for at least 8000 years, their ongoing living cultural traditions have not been adequately recognised or included in management. The Wet Tropics Regional Agreement in 2005 committed Australian governments to work in partnership with the region's Rainforest Aboriginal People, and recognise their ongoing cultural connections to the world heritage area. The Aboriginal Rainforest Council (ARC), an organisation whose contemporary governance structure incorporated the eighteen Rainforest tribes, obtained government support, in partnership with other organisations, to prepare a nomination for cultural landscape heritage recognition. Traditional Owners, supported by MTSRF researchers, led the development of this nomination, empowering new understanding of links between culture and nature, encapsulated in the term biocultural diversity.

Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' fire management systems emerged as an important example of technological innovations that enabled rainforest occupation. Suppression of Aboriginal fire practices is linked to loss of biodiversity, including species of world heritage significance. The distribution and morphology of hundreds of endemic and other plant species has been affected by Aboriginal utilisation over millennia. Aboriginal techniques for ensuring sustainable use are linked to ecological knowledge of seasonal indicators. The Australian Government is currently considering the cultural heritage nomination put forward by the ARC. We identified three conditions that enable cultural heritage processes to empower Indigenous peoples to protect biocultural diversity: Indigenous governance; Indigenous-driven exploration of the interactions that have produced the biocultural diversity; and Indigenous engagement in communication of the results of that exploration. We consider the implications of these findings for theory and practice in conservation of biocultural diversity.



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Empowering Indigenous biocultural diversity through world heritage cultural landscapes in the wet tropics

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4.9.1 Project Leader and researchers Prof Steve Turton, Dr Mike Wood, Dr Maureen Fuary, Dr Robyn Wilson, Mr Warren Canendo, Ms Linda Leftwich; Terrain NRM Team Ms Chantal Roder, Dr Allan Dale; WTMA Team Mr Nigel Hedgcock; Rainforest Aboriginal people: Ms Allison Halliday, Dr Henrietta Marrie, Ms Rhonda Brim, Mr Peter Wallace, Ms Margaret Freeman, Mr Ken Reys.



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- Outline:
 - Biocultural diversity and cultural landscapes
 - Wet tropics as a biocultural landscape
 - Cultural heritage nomination
 - Did it empower community efforts?
 - What next?





Biocultural diversity and cultural landscapes

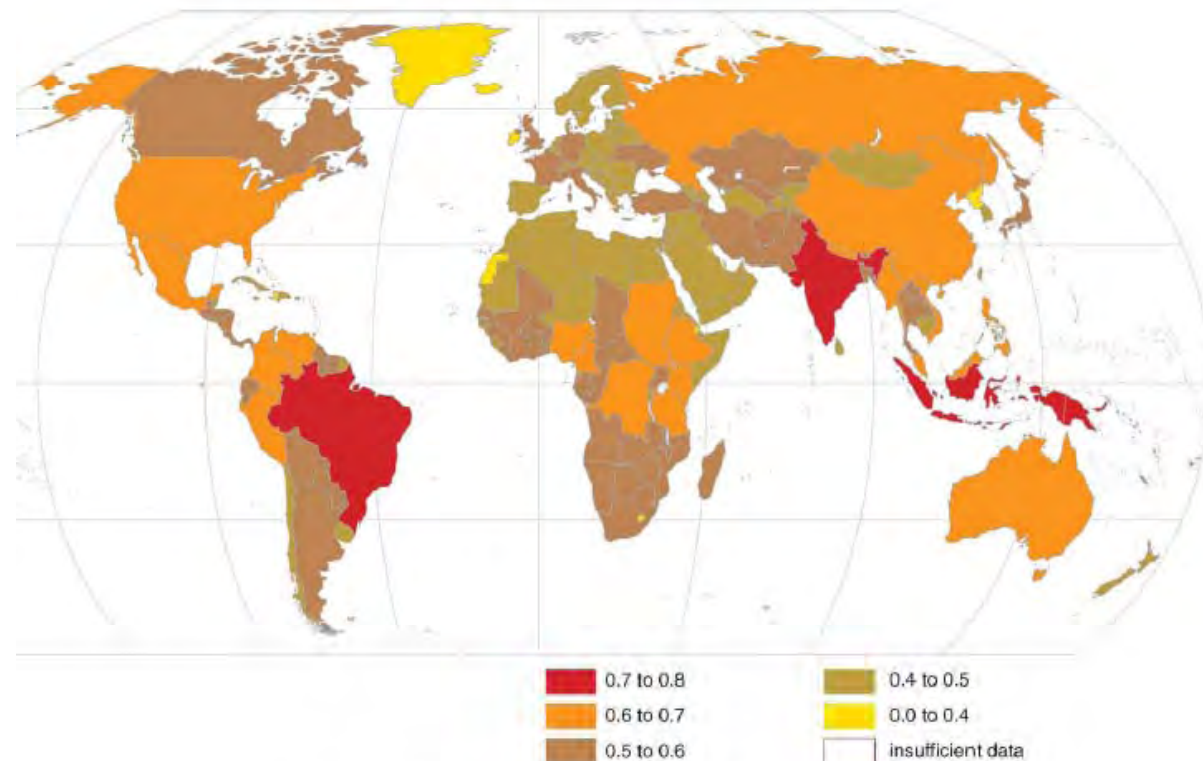
- Cultural landscapes: ecosystems that exist in their current state due to the complex interactions between people and their environment
- Outstanding examples on World Heritage list
- Include Indigenous traditional management systems: Uluru, Tongariro
- Biocultural diversity:
 - Diversity of life includes human cultures and languages
 - Links exist between natural biodiversity and human cultural diversity
 - Links developed through mutual adaptation and possible co-evolution
- Close links between concepts of cultural landscapes and biocultural diversity
- Key question of our research: can international heritage designations empowering Indigenous community efforts to reverse loss of biocultural diversity? ←





Understanding biocultural diversity

- Conceptual models early stage
- Globally correlations with biodiversity notable
- But don't know if from
 - Co-evolution
 - Asymmetric causation
 - Other factors affecting both



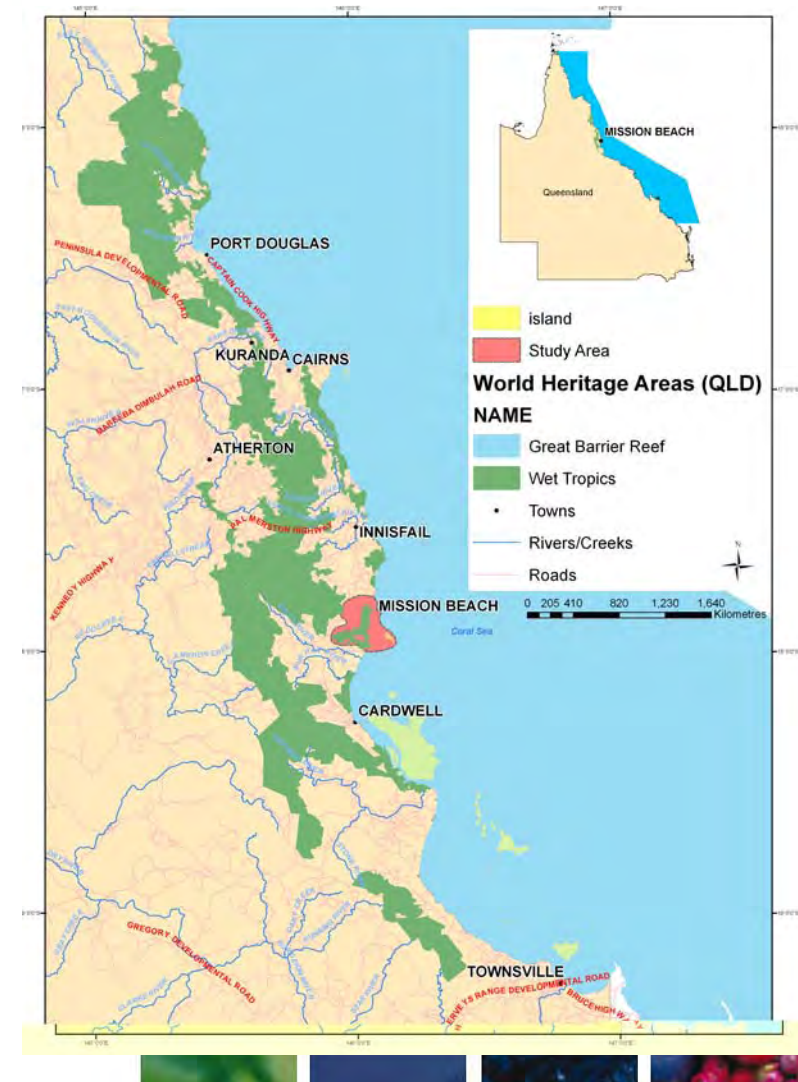
Map 1. Index of biocultural diversity IBCD-RICH.





Wet Tropics World Heritage Area

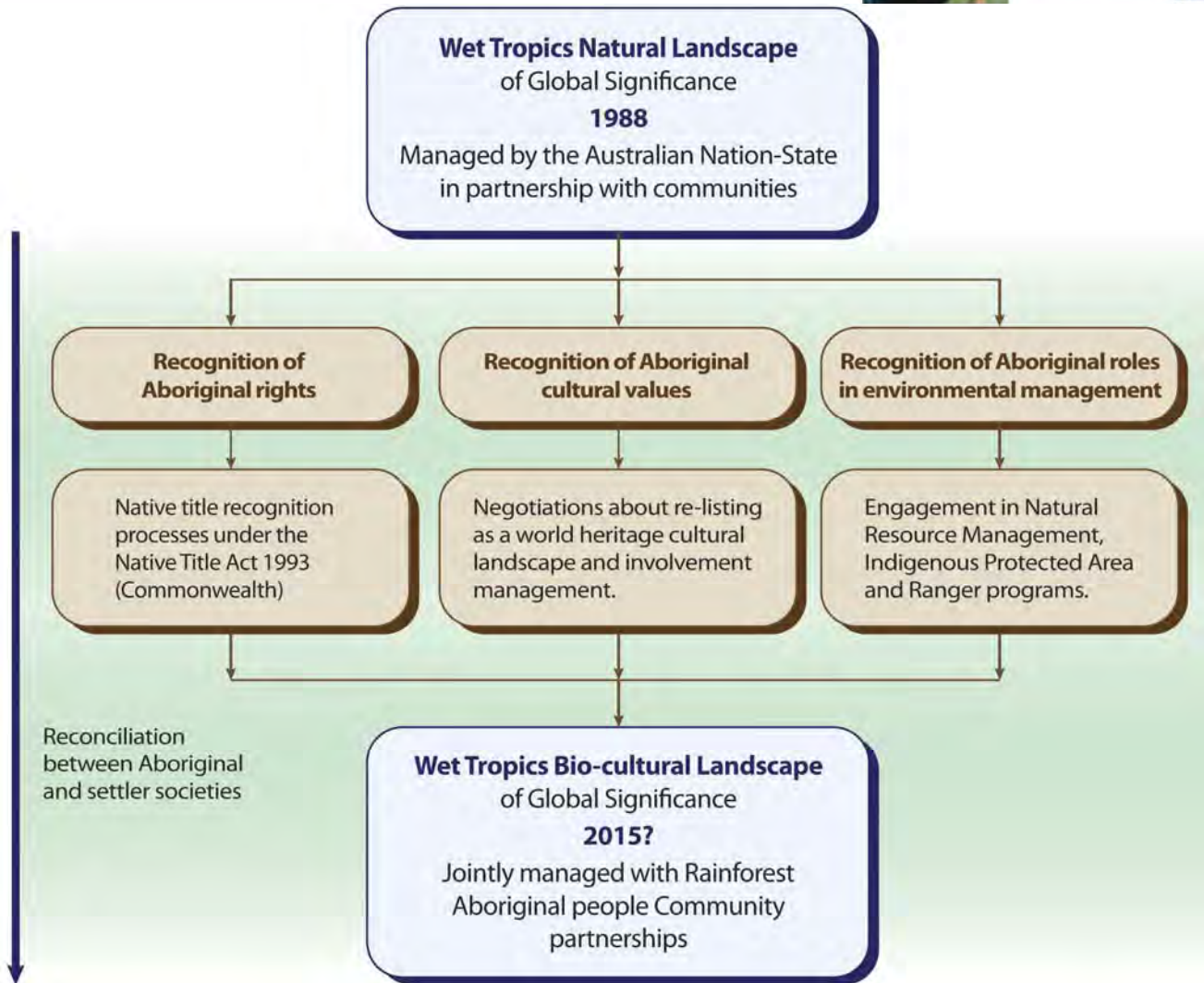
- Listed as a natural site in 1988
- Eighteen tribal groups with traditional connections: : Bandjin, Djabugay, Djiru, Girramay, Gugu-Badhun, Gulnay, Kunggandji, Jirrbal, Koko Muluridji, Kuku-Yalanji, Ma:Mu, Ngadjon-jii, Nywaigi, Warrgamay, Warungnu, Yidinji, Yirrganydji and Wulgurukaba
- Occupation for at least 8000 years
- Cultural landscape imbued with deeply significant spiritual meaning, useful plant and animal resources, languages, traditional ecological knowledge, cultural sites and human history.
- A site of high Indigenous biocultural diversity



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Re-nomination of the wet tropics for cultural listing

- **Commitment in the Wet Tropics Regional Agreement**
- National heritage listing first step
- Partnership Project over 2 years 2006-2008
- Cultural mapping plus preparation of nomination document
- Co-research team supporting Rainforest Aboriginal people through MTSRF project
- Empowering of community efforts for three reasons:
 - Rainforest Aboriginal governance
 - Moulding heritage discourse
 - Rainforest Aboriginal understanding of the linkages



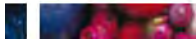
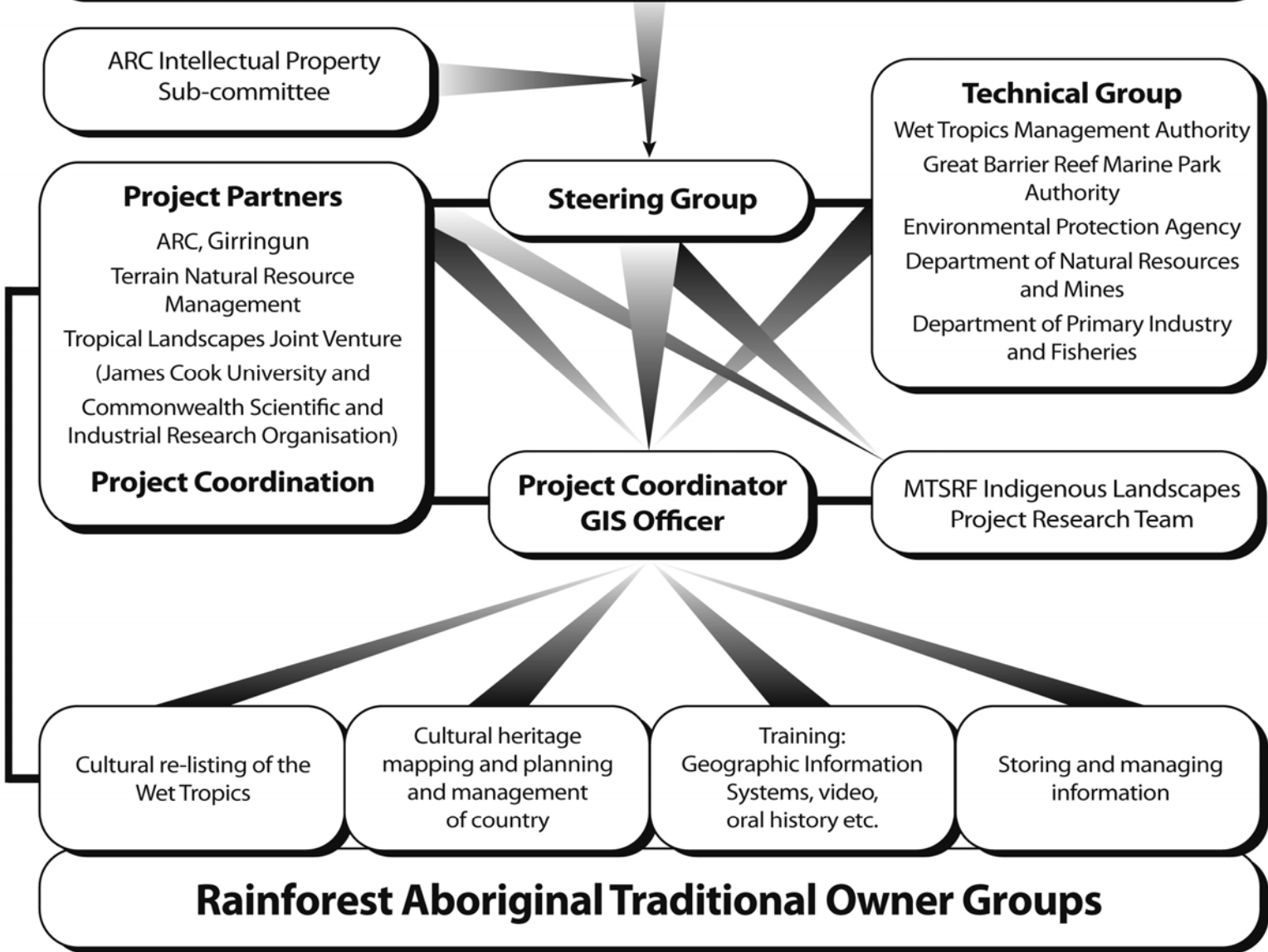
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Rainforest Aboriginal Traditional Owner Groups

Aboriginal Rainforest Council (ARC) and Giringun Aboriginal Corporation

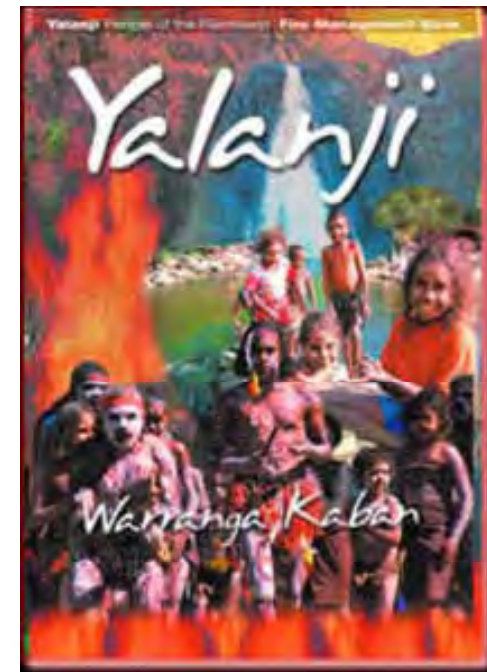




Moulding heritage discourse

- **Intellectual Property Sub-committee**
- Anthropological, archaeological, historical, start
- Required greater emphasis on living cultural traditions
- DVDs of elders talking about their heritage
- Biocultural landscape - if “bio” part globally significant than “cultural” part must be also
- Expert Panel, ICOMOS, Aust Govt
- Current criteria suggest focus on
 - Unique rainforest occupation
 - Unique fire and toxic food technology
 - Cultural connections
- DVD illustrative only, require literature
- ARC produced nomination including both

You got a story, that's your dreaming, to sing...that comes from the Ngujakura, from the beginning of time (Dolly Yougie, from the Yalanji Fire Book)



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UNESCO Linkages	Rainforest Aboriginal example linkages between cultural and natural diversity
1 Language and linguistic diversity	Our songs link us to the rainforest and also to the sounds of the rainforest – the scrub turkey song sounds like a scrub turkey
2 Material culture	Unique bicornual baskets, bark blankets, decorated tree buttress shields, huge wooden swords, slate grindstones etc.
3 Knowledge	Our seasonal calendars: the call of the green cicada announces the arrival of the stormy season
4 Modes of subsistence	Indigenous techniques for harvesting materials including fish, wood, bark, grass, and lawyer cane influence rainforests
5 Economic relations	Indigenous knowledge of country is the basis of tourism businesses of Yalanji, Tjapukai, Ngandonji and others
6 Social relations	Social relationships with our old people continue as forms of social memory in the landscape and form part of our traditions and practices
7 Belief systems	Our moiety and section systems create inter-linkages between rainforest species and ourselves



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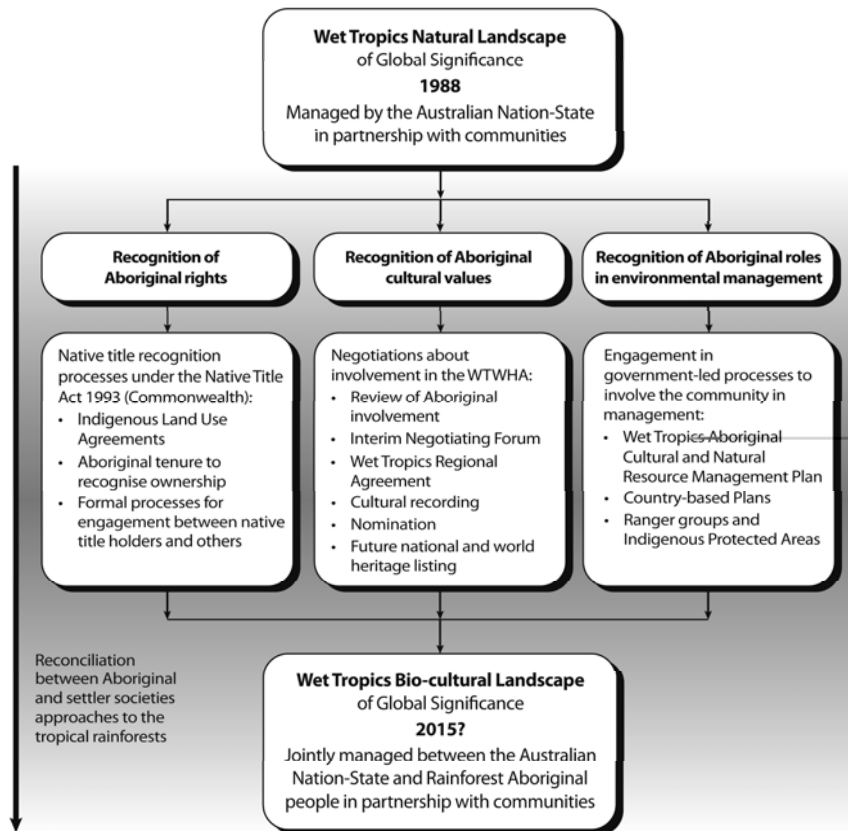
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Reversal of biocultural diversity loss?



- **Depends on outcomes of ongoing process for recognition**
- Indigenous governance very important
- Endogenous development theory
- Indigenous organizations still struggle to survive – despite so many agencies depending on the role of Giringun, Jabalbina and others
- Urgent need for better policy to support these roles



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Conclusion

- World Heritage cultural landscapes potentially empowering
- Conditions include Indigenous governance, moulding of heritage discourse, exploring links
- Better understanding of the links needed
- Great support for Rainforest Aboriginal peoples' governance and organisations critical



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