

SIGNS IN THE LANDSCAPE

INTERVIEW WITH MBABARAM TRADITIONAL CUSTODIAN AND ETHNOBOTANIST GERRY TURPIN

by Charlotte Haywood

CAN YOU INTRODUCE YOURSELF...

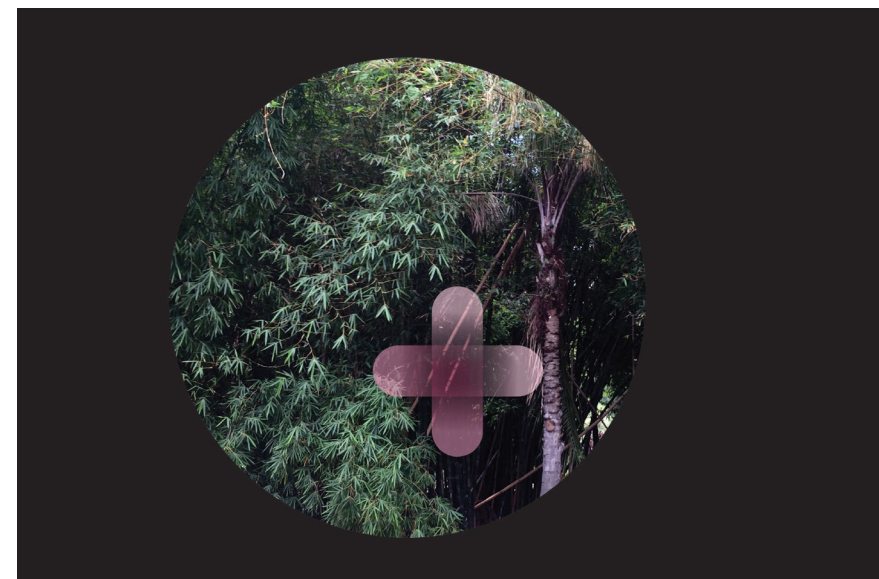
My name is Gerry Turpin. I am a Mbabaram traditional custodian from the Atherton Tablelands. I am employed by Queensland State government as an ethnobotanist, and manage the Tropical Indigenous Ethnobotany Centre (TIEC). TIEC is housed within the Australian Tropical Herbarium, at James Cook university, Cairns Campus.

WHAT IS THE TIEC? AND WHAT ROLE DOES IT PLAY?

TIEC is a joint venture between James Cook University, CSIRO and the Queensland Department of Science, and is the first Indigenous-driven ethnobotany centre in Australia. It is a valuable means of supporting Traditional Owners in the conservation, management and communication of their ethnobotanical knowledge. The concept of the centre is very much of one driven through Indigenous partnerships, with a network structure.

WHAT IS INDIGENOUS BIOCULTURAL KNOWLEDGE?

Indigenous biocultural Knowledge (IBK) is *'knowledge that encompasses people, language and culture, and their relationship to the environment'*. IBK is a more acceptable version of the widely known terms Indigenous Ecological knowledge and Traditional Ecological, emphasising the importance of cultural connections. Indigenous people have always said they're part of the environment, not separate from it. Traditional Knowledge cannot be separated from Indigenous very ways of life and their cultural values, spiritual beliefs and customary legal systems as it forms part of an holistic world-view.



WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIGENOUS BIOCULTURAL KNOWLEDGE? AND FOR THE FUTURE?

Indigenous knowledge is passed on orally in stories, songs, dance, and art. As Elders and knowledge holders continually pass away, It's important that the knowledge and skills are recorded and documented to be passed down to younger generations. *"In Africa, when an old man dies, it's a library burning."* (Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1901-1991), a Malian writer and ethnologist, UNESCO, 1960.

Two different knowledge systems; Western Science is a systematic approach to answer questions while IBK includes spiritual aspect, creation stories, cultural beliefs. Because of the differences, they can't be combined but can work side by side and inform and enhance research.

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Opportunities for IBK to work with western science is fire management e.g. cultural burning; Biodiversity – e.g. monitoring, conservation; Climate change – e.g. Indigenous calendars, indicator plants; Food security – techniques and protection e.g. native rice.

WHAT ARE INDIGENOUS SEASONAL CALENDARS AND WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THEM?

Indigenous calendars are different to the western traditional four seasons calendar. Indigenous seasonal calendars are used to anticipate the coming of seasonal food sources, breeding seasons and when plants are ready to harvest. These seasonal calendars demonstrate the wealth of knowledge of Indigenous peoples and can tell us much about the Australian ecology.

HOW IS FIRE USED IN IBK?

Over millenia, Aboriginal people have used cultural land-management practices, including cultural burning to care for country. Cultural burning techniques is specific to the location and landscape, and specific to its fauna and flora. The primary objective is not fuel reduction, although that is part of it. The many interconnected objectives includes protecting cultural and natural assets by maintaining the health of surrounding country, and habitat protection.

HOW DOES THE MOON OR THE NIGHT APPEAR IN IBK?

On our country, the first full moon indicates that the fish are with eggs. So we don't fish, or we throw the fish with eggs back into the water.



HOW CAN WE USE IBK TO LOOK AT ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT?

Biodiversity: Due to the intimate, life-sustaining and enduring connections of Indigenous people to their homelands, Indigenous knowledge custodians often hold rich knowledge of local biodiversity, especially species that were useful or essential to survival.

Threatened species: There have been several significant documented partnerships where Indigenous people have worked with 'Western' scientists to better understand the distribution, ecology and status of threatened species, all focussing on fauna. Aquatic ecosystems Indigenous people have long had a spiritual and vital connection to aquatic ecosystems.

Climate change: Many Indigenous groups across Australia have documented their seasonal knowledge. The use of illustrative Indigenous seasonal calendars has the potential to highlight culturally meaningful bio-temporal indicators of landscape response to climatic change and provide a basis for developing detailed climatic monitoring and evaluation

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FURTHER:

+ A Bridge Between Two Worlds- Gerry Turpin
www.youtube.com/watch?v=hE7KKBC1vMM

+ The Custodian- Gerry Turpin
www.ictv.com.au/video/item/4667

+ Word Up: Gerry Turpin
www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/away/features/word-up/gerry-turpin/11507426

+ Tropical Indigenous Ethnobotany Centre
www.tiec.org.au

+ Maintaining Traditional Knowledge Systems in Contemporary Society
<https://sites.google.com/site/indigenouspeopleofqueensland/maintaining-traditional-knowledge-systems-week-11>

+ Bruce Pascoe: Slow food: The arc of taste
Gerry Turpin: Working with Indigenous biocultural knowledge in natural resource management
Professor Bruce Clarkson: Balancing the science and politics of an urban ecological restoration project
www.youtube.com/watch?v=mH2nm5u0vhw



Gerry Turpin collecting plants in the field.