MAMMUNG The Film (previously called: Climate Change Adaptation and Human Movement in Western Australia: Partnering with Indigenous Australians Through Visual and Legal Mediums) Australia
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https://lillianrobb.wixsite.com/mammungthefilm

Project Report

Name Change

The original title for this project, Climate Change Adaptation and Human Movement in Western Australia: Partnering with Indigenous Australians Through Visual and Legal Mediums, has changed due to the finalisation of a title for the film produced. The current title of the project, MAMMUNG the Film, will be the title of our final product and allows the film and our website to be found by readers.

Summary

MAMMUNG the film explores the notion that indigenous Australians hold a living memory of the last time that the sea level rose, as well as possessing vital knowledge and understanding of land that is crucial in informing how we adapt to imminent climatic changes. The 40-minute short film follows Dr Noel Nannup, an elder of the Wadjuk Noongar people whom we call Pop Noel as a sign of respect. Pop Noel describes indigenous memory and knowledge of past climatic changes and present adaptation challenges while engaging with scientists and others on the value of that knowledge and the indigenous use of storytelling as a medium for knowledge transfer. Alongside the film is a policy report (a simplified version of which is found on our website), written to provide a reference document and summary of the key findings for use in advocacy and policy work where a film is not an appropriate medium.

Narrative Report

This project was chosen due to the connection that Lillian Robb had with our protagonist, Dr Noel Nannup. The topic was, inadvertently and long before the project idea formed, chosen by him when he raised the topic during a conversation with Lillian. This project has been indigenous-led. That choice was made due to the nature of the topic, the manner in which it was raised, and the express request of Pop Noel. This has meant that the direction of the film, including what is included and the narrative direction, has been determined by him, and double consent has been respected at every point. Consent is gathered at the beginning of each interview or recording, and then again when each draft is ready and the film is shown him, and any other indigenous person interviewed, to gather a second round of consent relating to the manner in which the footage is used and the story crafted. In the same vein, we have paid two indigenous musicians to produce the music for the film (heard now in the first version). We were able to provide these musicians with whale sounds recorded by scientists in the area that Noel speaks about throughout the film, which they have incorporated into the music along with sounds of the landscape and whispers and lyrics in the Noongar language. Through this collaboration, we were able to include further indigenous project direction and to support indigenous artists.

The challenges described in the film are strikingly similar to those faced by us during its creation. Dr Steve Hopper and Dr Mick O’Leary describe indigenous knowledge and non-indigenous science as running in parallel, explaining the same phenomena and asking the same questions, but packaging that knowledge in different forms, such as in the form of a ‘story’. This storytelling manner of knowledge transfer, however, takes time and a shift in thinking to translate into a form that can be understood by non-indigenous scientists. In the same way, Pop Noel told us ‘stories’ in the indigenous style which contain a wealth of information and knowledge. Finding a way to communicate these stories into a narrative that would fit our understanding and the themes of the film was a challenge when catering to a mostly non-indigenous audience.
In addition, all the different stories that Pop Noel tells are connected to one another, occasionally resulting in a simple clarifying question opening the door for an influx of other stories, narratives, characters, or themes. Indigenous knowledge systems have been described to us as ‘a spider web’ meaning that all the knowledge is connected in such a way that when one touches any point of that web, the whole shakes and moves in response. This was a challenge when capturing stories in a documentary style. Introducing new concepts or themes without sufficient explanation could have been very confusing for the viewer and would make a narrative arc difficult to achieve. As a response to these challenges, we chose to place the process of learning to listen and understand between our two cultures as a central theme of the film and thus explored this question on camera. This discussion turned out to be a compelling and important part of the film.

We were struck, during the preparation of this project, by the extreme level of enthusiasm and support that we received at every point. We were gifted, free of charge or obligation, drone footage, the time of a videographer, scientific maps and imagery not previously shown on film, data, whale song recordings, and numerous hours of free time from people willing to contribute simply out of support for the project. As a result of this enthusiasm, opportunities are arising for us to continue and extend this project in the future. Indeed, the current film is not a final version. Maevia will be working on the edit for the next few months and the final version will show in both Perth and Geneva in June after post-production is complete and additional footage is added. The version we present now is what we were able to achieve in 2 months, which would normally be the time allowed just to scout for a potential documentary film.

The impacts of this project are already being felt, both by us, and by every other person who has been involved. On the final day of the shoot we managed, after much flexibility and adaptation due to weather conditions, to have Pop Noel, the key scientists, and a number of those who had contributed and supported us on a chartered boat to explore the locations which Pop Noel describes throughout the film. We first took Pop Noel to the caves where Noongar people once camped and sheltered. He told us about those areas as we lowered cameras and an underwater robot into the sea to observe the caves below us. We then, with the assistance of the scientific expertise we had on board, travelled to the edge of what was once the shoreline, and paused here to hear Pop Noel speak of that place and its significance to him, as well as to appreciate the sheer magnitude of the sea level rise that had occurred. Finally, we were able to travel out to the head of the Perth Canyon, the point at which the blue whales would once have been audible and visible from the shoreline and where the sea floor drops steeply in 4 km cliffs to a depth three times that of the Grand Canyon. At this spot, Pop Noel performed a ceremony, one that we had not known he would do until that day. He returned to the ocean a piece of whalebone that he had found 7 years previously and had prepared through song. He spoke words in Noongar and thanked everyone on board describing the day, and the opportunity to perform this ceremony for the whales, as a ‘once in a lifetime’ event.

For us, this trip was incredibly important. Though it occurred, due to the weather conditions, only two days before the current deadline, limiting our ability to incorporate the footage, the strength of this day was immeasurable. First, it allowed Pop Noel to speak at the sites he was discussing. This is important as his stories are place-based and change depending on where they are told. Second, this trip enriched the collaborative process by creating discussions between Pop Noel and non-indigenous scientists around sea level rise and cultural heritage. The conversations that happened that day produced connections and plans for future collaborations and projects between almost everyone onboard. Finally, and most importantly, this trip was a way of giving back to Pop Noel, as the opportunity to visit this spot is a special and rare one for which he showed immense gratitude and excitement.

The project has given rise both to short-term ongoing projects and potential future opportunities. In the short term, Dr Mick O’Leary and his PhD student Patrick Morrison are working on the documenting of underwater indigenous cultural heritage sites to protect them from offshore developments. Mick has recently written a scientific brief for a legal appeal occurring at the Full Court of the Federal Court of
Australia on this issue as bought by the indigenous Tiwi Islanders. The case resulted in a temporary halt to the building of a pipeline across an important underwater area of cultural significance. This is a landmark decision, both legally in its ability to influence other cases and in terms of the immediate heritage sites that were protected. Mick feels that this film could be instrumental in supporting and bolstering the aim of protecting these underwater sites. As a result, we will work with him on a heritage-tailored short of this film, and Lillian will work with them and the lawyer involved at the Environmental Defenders Office to communicate, legally, the importance of reforming heritage laws to protect important sites from offshore projects, explaining and communicating the recent decision, and providing recommendations for heritage reform (details of this campaign are found on the website which will be updated as this project progresses).

In the long term, we have had some interest, including by film producers, in seeing us extend the film to a full-length documentary by returning to Perth in the future, hopefully with the assistance of additional funding should that be possible, to follow up on several leads that were raised but which we could not possibly follow in the time we had. Another option would be to tie this project more explicitly to Lillian’s PhD Research and to make a series of short films around the pacific with different indigenous groups, covering the same theme on the island nations who are facing immediate inundation as a result of climate change.

Reflection

To us, peace is more than the absence of conflict. It requires the healing and reconciliation of past conflicts. Colonial settlers in Australia explicitly attempted to destroy and disrupt indigenous knowledge and culture, including by taking children from their families to sever their connection with culture. Positioning the inclusion of indigenous voices in climate change adaptation is thus understood as a necessary act of healing and reconciliation.

During this process, we were both struck and humbled by the depth of the knowledge and experience held by this culture which is deep, complex, sensitive, and whose knowledge holders are generous in sharing it. Many of our non-indigenous interviewees revealed stories of working on scientific projects for years only to find that an indigenous elder could have explained the same idea in one morning. We were similarly humbled in realising just how valuable indigenous knowledge of land could be in understanding climate change and smoothing our process of adaptation. Not only would the failure to include these voices constitute a further act of dispossession for indigenous people, but it would also be a huge, wasted potential. MAMMUNG the film thus asks the question: will climate change bring us together as a human species? Or will we let it split us apart into conflict, dispossession, and deep misunderstanding between peoples.

Personal Statement

This project created the opportunity for such a powerful collaboration. It bought together so many different people and ideas to create something far beyond what any one of us could have done alone. It has sparked a flourishing of follow-up ideas and projects that I cannot wait to see unfold in the months and years ahead. - Lillian Robb

This project was once again a testament to the power of transdisciplinary collaboration. Not only did the medium of filmmaking joined to international law allowed for tangible engagements and promising outcomes, but this project has been extremely fulfilling professionally and personally. I feel so grateful to have embarked on this journey which has allowed us to create human, spiritual and transformational connections as well as crucial learning for both of us as well as for our protagonists. - Maevia Griffiths