Care for Country - how it all began

TAFE NSW – New England Institute (NEI) and the Namoi Catchment Management Authority (Namoi CMA) have been in a successful and rewarding partnership for the past three years. This alliance has resulted in the development of the “Care for Country” project—unique training programs that enlist the co-operation, knowledge and enthusiasm of local Aboriginal communities in Caring for Country.

The concept for “Care for Country” originated in Gunnedah, when local Aboriginal people identified a significant generational knowledge gap in the preservation and conservation of Aboriginal landscapes. In collaboration with the Red Chief Aboriginal Land Council and Gunida Gunya Aboriginal Corporation, the project recognised Aboriginal peoples’ ability to care for country and their affinity with the land. These could both be achieved by members of the community becoming actively involved in the protection and management of Country, including site identification and preservation.

The introduction of large scale mining activity in the area also raised concerns about the further destruction of cultural heritage sites.

After a period of consultation and planning, the Gunnedah community was the first to be offered training with NEI towards Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management, followed by Certificate I in Horticulture. As a result of the training, a native plant nursery was established to support the ongoing rehabilitation and revegetation of the Wallaby Trap site. This was just one of many successful programs delivered in the Gunnedah area.
Funding from the CMA enabled delivery of the Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management to be extended to other sites in the region. To ensure the content was relevant, local Aboriginal Land Councils, organisations and community members were involved, and their support was invaluable.

Through consultation with Namoi CMA, relevant modules from the two existing training courses (Conservation and Land Management/Horticulture) were selected to deliver the new Certificate II in Indigenous Land Management.

The focus of the Care for Country project was to increase the capacity of Aboriginal communities in landscape management directly relating to natural resource management. The intention was to:

- Promote skills and confidence to engage in natural resource management activities and represent Aboriginal community interests in and responsibilities for Country;
- Develop the skills to negotiate and deliver appropriate management to emerging natural resource management issues (NRM), such as mining in the Namoi Valley;
- Provide knowledge transfer as the basis for a career path for young people, who are not currently engaged in natural resource management as there are limited employment opportunities;
- Maximise opportunities for Aboriginal people to connect with Country and play an active role in appropriate management given a paucity of Aboriginal land ownership and access to freehold lands in the Namoi Catchment; and
- Improve relationships and partnerships between Aboriginal communities, managers of public lands, government agencies and the private sector.

* Excerpt from Namoi CMA Annual Report 2007
Communities empowered

NEI has become a pivotal player in progressing community development across the region. The Institute’s reputation as a proactive, dynamic and vibrant business has enabled the fostering of strong and lasting relationships with many government, private sector and community organisations.

NEI actively seeks partnerships that will ensure employment pathways, business productivity and regional prosperity. NEI’s collaborative approach has earned many local, state and national accolades, including acknowledgement of this successful alliance, with the 2008 TAFE NSW Gili Awards - Industry Partnership Award (New England Institute & Namoi Catchment Authority).

The partnership between Namoi CMA and NEI has resulted in many significant and enduring outcomes. The positive effects of Care for Country go far beyond an individual’s participation in Natural Resource Management (NRM), but also help build the capacity of Aboriginal communities throughout the region.

The communities that become actively involved in these programs have the opportunity to play a significant role in revitalising their local traditional culture. They will be able to protect their own unique natural areas of importance and have an increased capacity for meaningful input into management strategies.
Through these programs, participants receive accredited training and nationally recognised qualifications. They can then act as a service provider to third parties in future land and heritage management projects, such as Shire Councils, Land Owners, Developers, plus Aboriginal non government and Government agencies. This leads to ‘triple bottom line’ outcomes of social, economic, and cultural development in rural and remote communities.

There are many success stories for communities involved in Care for Country programs including Traineeships with the Gunida Gunyah Aboriginal Corporation in Land Management. Initial endeavours of the Aboriginal Corporation and the local Aboriginal Land Council has led to site supervision and plant propagation work with a local coal miner, which will engage the community for landcare projects and cultural advice well into the future.

This project also meets a number of regional, state and national government priorities, including:

- Indigenous engagement and participation in NRM – partnerships and training to achieve on-ground NRM outcomes through Indigenous people;
- Capacity building – community/stakeholder involvement, educating best NRM practices, boosting capacity to deliver on-ground works in a timely and effective manner.
Partners in potential

In the past three years, over 120 Aboriginal students of all ages have participated in a wide variety of activities related to NRM, through the Care for Country project. The partnership between NEI and Namoi CMA has not only had a positive impact on the future of the Aboriginal Sites preserved, but also the people who helped in their preservation.

Courses offered through Care for Country aim to build the capacity of Aboriginal people and their communities. NEI encourage participants to utilise their newly acquired skills and knowledge to represent community interests and carry responsibilities for Country. Students can use the practical and theoretical knowledge gained to negotiate appropriate management of local sites with respect to emerging issues, such as mining and tourism.

Some participants may already be working in the industry or have knowledge of and experience in the local natural environment. The acquisition of an accredited qualification could be a stepping stone to a promotion, or convert an interest into a new employment option. Graduates wishing to obtain further qualifications can also apply for advanced standing in a number of higher level courses specialising in conservation and land management.

The Certificate II in Indigenous Land Management provides a solid introduction to a range of sectors within the Conservation and Land Management Industry. It is an entry-level course for people who work, or are keen to work at an operator level in lands, parks and wildlife or natural resource management. The course includes competencies required by a wide range of sectors, including: natural area restoration, weed management, vertebrate pest management, conservation earthworks, lands, parks and wildlife, and Indigenous land management.

Students are also offered elective options. Depending on their selection, graduates will be trained to undertake a range of duties including working with plants, working with animals, construction and maintenance, operating and maintaining machinery and equipment. Many students gain additional certificates in Weed Spraying/Chemical Handling, First Aid, Chainsaw application, construction of wire and timber fences.

A DVD version of the EnviroLearn program, (to assist in course delivery) was developed by NEI and funded by CMA. A variety of television advertisements highlighting the joint TAFE/CMA initiatives were also broadcast on commercial regional stations.
I really enjoyed the native plant identification component & going out bush looking at other sites with the Cultural & Heritage Officer for National Parks & Wildlife.

Learning about the Botanical Gardens site from local Elder, Neville Sampson was also a highlight for me.

I’ve also been surprised by how useful some of the more practical skills have been, like using a chainsaw and weed identification.

It is so important to realise sites are not just about stones & bones, but their cultural & spiritual significance too. Every site is governed by its unique Law & this needs to be acknowledged & respected at all times. With even greater input from local Elders in the planning & delivery, I can really see the great potential of these programs.

Brydee Barnett
CEO - Tamworth Local Aboriginal Land Council
Cert II- Conservation & Land Management
Tamworth Botanical Gardens
Tamworth - Botanical Gardens

Tamworth’s status as a major cultural area for Aboriginal people has been strengthened thanks to the Care for Country Project programs and the invaluable support of Tamworth Regional Council.

Nestled in the hills above Tamworth, the picturesque Botanical Gardens are owned and operated by the Tamworth Regional Council and are a popular recreational spot for the general public.

The Gardens include a heritage site covering many acres and participants in the program studied the important trading and meeting place, which contains remnants of stone tools and artefacts.

The students worked to regenerate the site through weed removal and revegetation, soil erosion solutions, fencing, pathways. The installation of interpretive signage at the site was an important step to sharing its significance and rich cultural history.

Keep it in site

Many Aboriginal Sites in the region have benefited from being a Care for Country course focus, resulting in their identification, protection and preservation. Steps have been taken to safeguard these precious assets for the future, including site promotion to avoid accidental destruction of sites and artefacts, pest and weed control, improving salinity and soil health, and fencing to reduce erosion by cattle and native animals.

The project focussed on targeted communities within the traditional lands of the Kamilaroi (Gamilaroi) nation. Five NRM related courses were delivered in the region - two in the Namoi Catchment Area, two in Border Rivers Gwydir and one in the Western region, in a cross Institute collaborative project.

Some sites of interest identified through the program were; the Boundary Site, the Stone Axe Quarry and Borah Rings, all in Tamworth; Boobera Lagoon near Boggabilla; the Fish Trap at Bourke; the Weeping Women in the Inverell area; the Ochre Site at Willow Tree and the Wallaby Trap at Gunnedah. Not all sites were appropriate for the Care for Country project, however the acknowledgement of sites in need of preservation work was also very valuable.
Boggabilla/Toomelah - Boobera Lagoon

Boobera Lagoon is a significant historical site for the people of Toomelah and Boggabilla. With years of recreational activities taking place on it, the lagoon showed signs of deterioration and was the ideal project for students of the Certificate II Conservation & Land Management (Indigenous Land Management).

Weeds and rubbish were removed, fences repaired and extended along the waters edge (with the help of the Boobera Trust). Seeds of native plants were also collected to propagate more trees for the area. The group enjoyed the program, with many graduating with their certificates.

Mungindi - Old Mission/ Old Cemetery

The Old Cemetery at Mungindi was a project that incorporated land care ideals as participants assisted in restoring sections of the site. Efforts were made to keep stock out of the site, dispose of weeds and address other problems created by erosion and weed coverage.

Every student of the Mungindi project completed all their units and graduated with Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management (Indigenous Land Management). All are interested in participating in further Care for Country projects and pursuing further training in all aspects of land care and farm machinery.

Inverell /Ashford - Weeping Lady

Many students enrolled in Certificate II Conservation & Land Management (Indigenous Land Management) and enjoyed caring for country by learning new and varied environmental work practice skills, along with First Aid and Chemical Handling.

Coonabarabran - Burra Bee Dee (the Old Mission) & local river bank

The course created much interest due to employment opportunities in the Murray Basin area and saw students from out of the area join the local group.

Brewarrina - Old Mission site & the Fish Trap on the Barwon River

The NEI and TAFE NSW – Western Institute successfully collaborated to deliver Certificate II in Indigenous Land Management, on site and at TAFE in Brewarrina. The course consisted of; site assessments; maintaining cultural practices; recording information about Country; observing environmental work practices; weed treatment; installation/maintenance of fences; sampling and testing of water; plus reporting and recognition of plants and animals. This program has been well received by the community and has created much interest in local land care and site conservation.
engaging the community

Working side by side

Community involvement throughout the region played a crucial role in the success of Care for Country courses. Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALC) and Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP) utilised the training opportunities to strengthen their organisations and plan projects that may lead to employment options in the future. The communities also lead the way towards identifying Aboriginal sites in their area in need of preservation or protection, along with important waterways and pastures. Programs that were run in conjunction with community groups were the most successful. These groups had a higher number of course completions and were more open to sharing culture, relating to the importance of caring for Country.

Community groups have also progressed further and are establishing themselves in areas where there will be a need for tree and plant regeneration, especially in those locations currently being mined. These groups, in conjunction with NEI, have utilised the skills gained to establish nurseries and collect seeds, using propagation methods to produce small plants and seedlings, in preparation for future projects.

The Aboriginal Education and Training Unit and the Trades and Primary Industry Faculty were the main NEI internal stakeholders for the Care for Country project. The sharing of knowledge, time and resources and co-operation between teaching and non-teaching staff has been a contributing factor to the projects success.

The future is now

It is planned to extend the Care for Country model across the Namoi and neighbouring catchments in a cross-regional, collaborative approach. Through site courses, further Care for Country programs and leadership, NEI will continue to motivate and re-engage rural and remote communities in education and training. The goal is to help students secure gainful employment, both within and outside the NRM industry.

The relationship between NEI, Namoi CMA, and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and State Land Councils will be further developed, to deliver programs designed to boost the capacity of all local Aboriginal Land Councils, in the New England and North West.

As the desire for mining land care solutions and the need for the preservation of Aboriginal sites increases, there will be many opportunities for our region’s Aboriginal communities to care for their Country.

With meaningful outcomes through traineeships and other associated employment, the partnership between Namoi CMA and TAFE NSW – New England Institute is continuing to create results today, tomorrow and beyond. The opportunity to follow a pathway to a career in NRM, through quality, accredited training and knowledge transfer is one clear outcome. Benefits that are harder to measure, but are just as valuable, include a renewed enthusiasm for learning, community and personal empowerment, confidence and self respect, and the chance to acquire practical, transferable work-skills.
Regional partnership shines in awards

The outstanding achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, staff and industry were recently recognised as part of National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance (NADIOC) and NAIDOC Week, at the annual TAFE NSW Skills Awards. TAFE's first university level award was the Munro Award, named after the late Dr. Stuart Munro, long-time advocate of Aboriginal education.

Awards were presented to over 200 students and over 100 staff from 18 TAFE NSW regional campuses across the state. A range of awards were presented at the awards night, including the TAFE NSW Munro Award for Excellence and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Awards.

One of the awards was presented to an Indigenous student from the Roma campus, who was recognised for their academic achievements and contributions to the community.

"The awards recognise the hard work and dedication of all TAFE NSW students," said TAFE NSW CEO, Paulita Taylor. "It's an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of our students and the contributions they make to our communities."

Stakeholders work together to preserve Aboriginal cultural site

By Helen Shearer

A partnership between three local stakeholders has seen an area fenced to preserve one of the local cultural sites. As part of a Cave for Country program, TAFE in partnership with the Narricoota Aboriginal Group and Nango Agricultural Management Group, have combined efforts to preserve a cultural site known as the "Aboriginal Cultural Site".

Artifacts were removed from the grounds earlier in the year and placed in a small museum on the premises. The area now serves as a place for the community to learn about the rich cultural history of the region.

"It's a great opportunity to work together to preserve our cultural heritage," said Mr. Waters, Manager of Nango Agricultural Management Group.

Conservation is key: Rob Henderson (Tandarri TAFE), Paul McCann (Aboriginal Cultural Site) and Lee Waters (Narricoota Aboriginal Group) have worked together to preserve the cultural site. Photo: Barry Smith
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