

Singleton Water Licence Aboriginal Cultural Values Assessment

PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW REPORT TO THE CENTRAL LAND COUNCIL

Singleton Pastoral Lease and surrounding water drawdown areas across Neutral Junction
Pastoral Lease, Warrabri Aboriginal Land Trust and Iliyarne Aboriginal Land Trust,
Northern Territory, Australia.

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PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW REPORT BY SUSAN DALE DONALDSON

In September 2020, Fortune Agribusiness Funds Management Pty Ltd (Fortune Agribusiness) applied for a water licence over Singleton Pastoral Lease (PL) located within the Central Plains management zone of the Western Davenport Water Allocation Plan (WDWAP), near Wycliffe Well in the Northern Territory. Whilst the proposed water extraction zone is located on Singleton PL, the estimated ground water drawdown area is estimated as extending beyond the water extraction zone to other parts of Singleton PL, and across Neutral Junction PL, Warrabri Aboriginal Land Trust (ALT) and Iliyarne ALT (see figure 1).

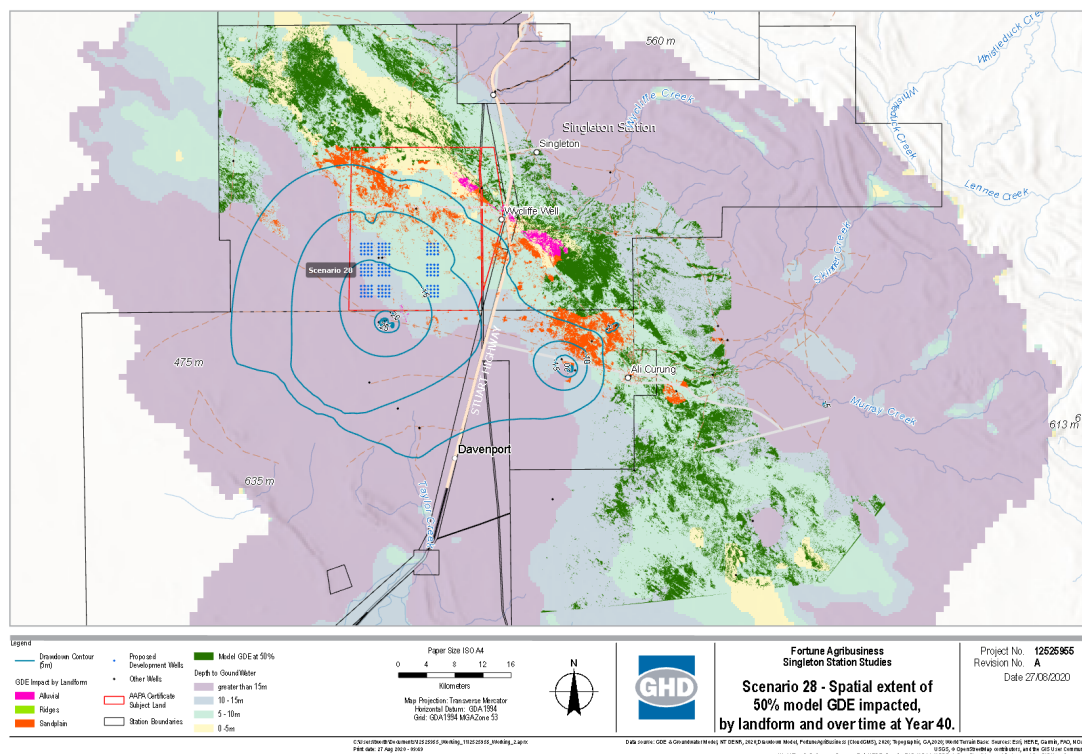


Figure 1 Spatial extent of drawdown area showing the AAPA certificate area, extraction zone and GDE

Source: Fortune Agribusiness 2020:28.

In May 2021, the Central Land Council (CLC) was instructed by Traditional Owners to identify the cultural values associated with the Singleton Water Licence (SWL) area and to consider how these values might be impacted by the granting of the water license. Anthropological consultant Susan Dale Donaldson was engaged by the CLC to undertake the cultural values assessment which took place

between June and July 2021. The assessment has provided a broadly representative overview of the presence of sacred sites, of the associated cultural values and potential impacts, as summarised below.

The cultural values assessment involved a literature review and consultations with 80 Traditional Owners which identified a rich and complex Aboriginal cultural landscape across the SWL ground water drawdown area and important cultural values associated with groundwater dependent ecosystems (GDEs). The assessment found the SWL area to be situated on *Kaytetye* country and directly associated with 4 traditional Aboriginal land-owning groups (*Anerre*, *Waake-Akwerlpe*, *Iliyarne* and *Arlpwe*). An additional 23 Aboriginal groups, from *Alyawarr*, *Warumungu* and *Warlpiri* countries, with kinship and ritual ties to these four groups, were also identified across the broader Western Davenport District.

Traditional Owners' belief in the *Altyerre* (Dreaming) Law and the need to **follow the Law** is the cornerstone cultural value arising from this assessment and the foundation of all other identified cultural values. Taking care of sacred sites by maintaining the existing condition of sites into the future according to ancient laws and customs, appeases the creator spirits residing at important places. If traditional roles and responsibilities are not carried out by Traditional Owners, and if sacred sites are damaged as a result of the actions of Traditional Owners or others, punishment is imposed on senior Traditional Owners by *Altyerre* forces resulting in sickness, injury and even death. Social sanctions may also result; Traditional Owners can be forced into temporary or permanent isolation from their traditional group which can lead to psychological stress and guilt associated with being responsible for ruining the country belonging to their spiritual ancestors, their actual ancestors, the current generation of kin and their descendants.

Whilst there is a strong belief held by Traditional Owners in the power of ritual, for instance for rainmakers to make rain to increase water supply, and a belief in the ongoing force of the *Altyerre* regardless of secular activities and impacts, it is also apparent that the current generation of Traditional Owners **fear the consequences of not following the Law** by acting in accordance with traditional laws and customs. This was a major theme expressed during this assessment, as described below:

'Aboriginal law is strong. If I do the wrong thing and my trees dies, I'll be gone. If Dreaming trees get lost, we be gone too. We got to tell them this. Someone will be in trouble, the bloke not listening to us, he will get sick. That's our law. Our law is in the ground and will not change.

When I'm gone my family got him. Our main word to them is "please take it easy on the water all around the world".' *Frankie Holmes Akemarre*

'Country is happy when we talk to it and look after it. I did a painting about how lovely Wycliffe Creek is, with the ducks and the shade trees. Our old people might get sick and kirda might die if the shade trees fall. We would be sad as kwertengerl for Iliyarne if we lost our shade and our water and if the ducks flew away to find water. We would be sad and feel shame because Iliyarne wouldn't be their home anymore, they can't live without water. If the trees die the witchetty grubs die too, they can't fly away like a duck can...We would feel sad for them too.'

Lindy Brodie Nungarrayi

'The songs and the ceremonies will be alive forever; nothing can touch them. The rainmakers have powers. In the early days they (stations) not use too much water now they want more, too much. Each one (Aboriginal group) has *Ngappa* (water) dreaming, they follow their line and hand it over. We got to look out for the owners, they will get sick if they don't do their job and look after their country.'

Donald Thompson Akemarre

'We know the *Nguramulla* (Spirit people) live in the land and if we don't look after our land, they will feel sad and get sick and so will Traditional Owners. That's why we always look after our country. If we have no water, we will be very concerned about the things that can't travel too far, like the crabs, witchetty grubs and mussels. They will die. A bird can fly away but a little crab can't go far'

Michael Jones Jampin

'If we Iliyarne people let our land go dry, other people will growl at us. We need to keep the water until we die so that it can jump over to our children and their children all the way like that. The spirit people will get upset if we let that country go dry. They will make us sick, especially Rodger Tommy the main *kirda* (owner through father), and his sons and daughters. We are his *kwertengerl* (owner through mother) and we watch over that country for him.'

Heather Anderson Narrurlu

This assessment also revealed the strong **spiritual connection between Traditional Owners and sacred sites**, the places embodying the *Altyerre* (Dreaming). 29 sacred sites were identified within the

drawdown area and were found to be associated with over 21 *Altyerre* mythologies. Many of the *Altyerre* tracks traverse the drawdown area and interlink with places across the broader cultural landscape. Whilst all of the mythologies across the drawdown area relate to the *Altyerre* creation of the land and water, a number of mythologies specifically relate to water such as ancestors carrying and digging for water, ancestors teaching others how to sing for rain and groups attending large rain ceremonies. These mythological episodes continue to be re-enacted by Traditional Owners today in ritual, through song, dance, paint, story-telling and by visiting the spiritual ancestors residing at sacred places. Damage to sacred sites can **impact Traditional Owners' spiritual connection to country**.

Each of the 29 sacred sites identified within the drawdown area were all beyond the extraction zone and have features associated with GDE; soakages, bean trees, orange trees, coolabah trees, creeks, swamps, supplejack trees, ghost gum trees, and bloodwood trees. It is understood that the mulga patches associated with sacred soakages are not GDE features. Of these 29 sacred sites, nine were visited during the research period and a further 11 important sacred sites were visited across the broader cultural landscape beyond the drawdown area and included features all associated with GDE such as soakages, springs, bean trees, fig trees, red river gum trees, coolabah trees, creeks, swamps, and ghost gum trees.

The Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority issued the company with a sacred sites Authority Certificate for the proposed work; the subject land covers an area larger than the extraction zone but less than the estimated ground water drawdown area (C2019/083) (see figure 1). As a consequence of the Authority Certificate not covering the entire drawdown area, the process fails to take into account the possibility of sacred site desecration caused by a reduction in groundwater across other parts of Singleton PL and parts of Neutral Junction PL, Warrabri ALT and Iliyarne ALT. Moreover, whilst an arborist has been suggested by AAPA in the covering letter of the AC [not a condition], it is not clear if the AAPA has considered the potential impact of a reduction in groundwater to the sacred sites they identified.

The assessment also found that the spiritual connection Traditional Owners have with their country is strengthened by **ritual activity** which is also linked to the powerful forces of the *Altyerre*. There are a number of ceremonial grounds close to the drawdown area, used in the past, as well as today. The rainmakers undertake rituals to make rain and other ritual leaders undertake rituals to increase species across the drawdown area such as lilies and frogs.

Many of these ritual activities require specific flora and fauna species obtained across the drawdown area. The current proposal to reduce groundwater has the potential to adversely impact GDE species which Traditional Owners customarily require for ritual activity. **Specific items required for ritual (e.g., bird feathers/water) may become scarce and in turn undermine ritual activity.** Some ritual items are interchangeable (turkey down feathers > nappy fluff) others are not (water required from specific sacred sites). Below are a few examples of this cultural value expressed by Traditional Owners:

‘We do ceremony to liven up the bees’ wings to make them strong, so they make more honey. We know the different types of honey, from the different flowers. The white gum flowers make sweeter honey than bloodwood flowers. We take the honey and leave the bee house because that’s where he lives. That’s his place. We call water Arntwe in Kaytetye and Kwaty in Alyawarr and Ngappa in Warumungu and Warlpiri. That’s the water that falls from the sky and the water that’s in the ground. It’s all water. It’s all from the Dreaming. It’s all precious.’ *Frankie Holmes Akemarre*

‘We use bird feathers for ceremony; bush turkey (down) feathers, black feathers from the eagle, emu tail feathers. If these birds die or fly away, we would have to seek permission from Warlmanpa, Jingili, Mudburra and Warlpiri mob to get these things from their country. We would have to travel to this which means more work. It would make things harder because we would have to drive a long way.’ *Michael Jones Jampin*

‘We use the white cockatoo feathers for young fella business. We collect the ones that have fallen on the ground. The sons and nephews pass feathers onto their mothers and aunties. We need to look after the white gum trees where the cockatoos nest. If these trees dies then the birds will have no nests for their babies and we will have no feathers for our ceremony. We need water to keep the trees and the cockies and our business alive.’ *Evangeline Presley*

My dreaming is sugar bag. I can eat sugar bag, but I wouldn’t eat the last one. If the sugar bag disappears, I will still have my totem, but no sugar bag to eat and share.’ *David Curtis Jungarrayi*

Traditional Owners have roles and responsibilities to maintain and protect their country including the plants and animals; in Aboriginal thinking, **everything is connected and especially to water**. Looking after country in a broad sense relates to sustaining the biodiversity through regular burns, cleaning out/covering up soakages and other activities. These cultural activities relate to preserving all aspects of the cultural landscape, including water sources, for future generations so that culturally valued natural resources can be sustained. The potential for **Traditional Owners to get sick or die** as a result of not looking after the water upon which the plants and animals living on their country rely, was a key theme expressed during this assessment, as outlined below:

‘The old people before us looked after the country proper way. They had to look after their country for us, that was their job. Things are getting harder and harder. If they take the water, how are we going to look after our country?’ *Sonny Curtis Jappanangka*

‘The rangers have a focus on prevention where wildlife and plants are concerned. This water license isn’t going to help them in the job they do. It all comes down to water. We have to preserve underground water. People can use it but not to this level. It is very irresponsible of the Northern Territory Government to do that. Small scale is not too bad. This is awful.’ *David Curtis Jungarrayi*

‘It will be hard for Aboriginal people to care for their country because having no underground water is a hard problem to fix. The rangers work hard, but this will be a big problem for them. We might need water monitors so that the problem doesn’t get bad. We worry about our future and the future of our grandchildren.’ *Jorna Murphy Nappangarti*

Whilst this research did not identify any sacred sites within the immediate extraction area, the extraction area has been identified as **prime hunting ground** by Traditional Owners. Additionally, the broader drawdown area and the surrounding cultural landscape including Taylor Creek and the sand dune/floodout systems associate with Wycliffe Creek are regionally significant resource rich areas accessed across a range of seasons. A vast array of flora and fauna species utilised by Traditional Owners were documented during this assessment, many of which dependant on ground water. The Wakurlpu and Alekarenge communities in particular utilise their ‘back yard’, within the drawdown area, to collect natural resources. Continuing to ‘go hunting’ is vital to the maintenance of good mental, physical and

spiritual health for Aboriginal people and an important way to transmit cultural knowledge and practices to younger generations.

The importance of soakage water to Aboriginal people in the region was first documented by Stuart in 1862 when in the vicinity of the Crawford Range and Taylor Creek he recorded 'soakages dug in the Creek by the natives. There is no surface water, but apparently plenty by digging in the bed of the creek'.¹ Aboriginal people's reliance upon and valuing of water and other natural resources in this dry region continued throughout the 1900s (see Bell 1983; Koch & Koch 1993; Olney 1999; Turpin 2000; CLC 2008). The establishment of Warrabri settlement in 1956, now known as Alekarenge (Ali Curung), enabled Kaytetye families and their neighbours to remain on or close to their traditional lands. Others worked and lived on nearby Singleton and Neutral Junction Stations. Historical accounts in the 1960s reveal how the Aboriginal people who call this region 'home' in a traditional sense, were 'apparently prepared to stay at Singleton no matter how bad the conditions'.² Oral histories reveal that Traditional Owners and their ancestors have never ceased hunting and gathering on their traditional lands which includes collecting water from soaks, springs, swamps and creeks.

There is concern that this culturally important activity will be impacted by a reduction in ground water and there will be a subsequent loss of associated cultural knowledge. Traditional Owners fear that the bigger animals will go to another Country to find water, and the smaller species will die out. **People will feel a sense of shame and loss if they allow species to die out or find a 'new home'.**

'Water is precious for life. If we have no water, we will die. Our pencil yams and bush bananas will die and the animals that can travel will go to green country.' *John Duggie Akemarre*

'In the early days spring water was drunk with grass straws. The zebra finches will take you to water. We would cover up the soak with clay so that the water didn't evaporate. The sun would suck the water up if we didn't cover it over. Old people will tell you, if there is no water in the ground, certain trees will hold water in dry times. When the water is all gone, special trees will get killed off, we are seeing this already. The animals that can't escape to find water will die. The crabs in the mud might die and the bilbies. There used to be bilbies at Greenwood when I

¹ Stuart 1865:79.

² Singleton Station CENSUS F133/22 (65/32) ; 1967.

was growing up. They live in small groups and eat witchety grubs. How will they survive without water? If there are no roos, we won't go hunting. If there is no water, it will be hard to hunt.'

Sonny Curtis Jappanangka

'The land of honey that Singleton, and frogs. The land of plenty, our own big garden, that's how I look at it. It is everyone's hunting ground, especially from Alekarenge. We have to speak on behalf of the insects and animals. The insects are working hard, they all have a job to do. You are not going to see all the ants marching along with protest signs, we have to do it for them. You look at the honey bee giving life to others by pollinating flowers. There will be nothing without the bees, and no honey for us. The bees need the gum flowers to make the honey. If our bloodwoods and other gums die, the bees will have no food and can't make honey. We love our sugar bag. It makes me cry when I think of not having any more honey.'

Maureen O'Keefe Nampijinpa

As evidenced by existing literature and consultations with Traditional Owners, it is apparent there was much **historical seasonal movement between soaks and living areas and ceremonial grounds** across the drawdown area and beyond. Seasonal movement was previously a matter of ongoing residence, subsistence and ritual obligation, whereas nowadays seasonal movement to water sources is on a visiting/camping/ hunting / ritual basis. Whilst country continues to be accessed for cultural purposes, movement between water sources has reduced. The continued cultural pattern being expressed links people to their past and provides promise for the future of their important cultural practises.

When Traditional Owners visit a soak today, memories of how the place was visited in the past is recollected and new memories are made. Historical stories about places and the people who lived at particular soakages is an important way for their descendants to connect to their ancestor's country. Family connections were historically formed as men and women worked on Singleton and Neutral Junction Stations. Strong connections were formed to a number of places used to evade conflict at Coniston and Barrow Creek.

'My father brought me here and we will bring our kids here too. I can't believe this tree is still standing. It is so old. This is the main tree connecting me to my grandpa and to my grandkids. I will feel no good if it dies.'

Brian Jakarra

As outlined above, today there are hundreds of Aboriginal people living close to the drawdown area and or regularly accessing the land for cultural purposes. There is a fear that people will not attempt to **travel lengthy distances in fear of getting thirsty and dying**. There is a fear that people will 'stay in town' if there is no available water on country. Concerns have also been raised by Traditional Owners that if people break down in their motor vehicles when out hunting in remote areas, they might not be able to rely on their traditional ecological knowledge to survive because the landscape and its resources may be altered.

'Our old people originally found water; we can find water too in the same places. Water is precious. We can't give away our water, we have to think of our family and future. We will hold the money in our pocket only a little while.' *Michael Wilson Kngwarrey*

'Don't they see that there are people living on this land? Living off this land? It's like when the British tested rockets at Maralinga they were blind and didn't see that people were living there. Then they made the people sick and blind. The birds fell out of the sky. Their country was ruined. Yami Lester was blinded and he had no idea what was happening. Today we know what's about to happen, there is about to be a water crisis. We have to stop it before it happens.' *Maureen O'Keefe Nampijinpa*

'We have a community outstation at Wakurlpu. If the water levels drop our water goes salty and if that happens, we will not be able to live there. We would have no drinking water and wouldn't be able to grow anything. If the water drops at Singleton, the water levels under the surrounding communities will get pulled to Singleton and reduce the water in the communities.' *David Curtis Jungarrayi*

Based on in-depth discussions with Traditional Owners when undertaking this assessment, it is clear that Traditional Owners would prefer to sustain the current health of their country and maintain their custodial responsibilities to it by not approving the Singleton Water Licence, rather than the alternative scenario of seeing their country get sick, having their traditional rights and interests eroded, and holding the psychological stress and guilt associated with knowing their descendants may lose important cultural values which have been sustained by Kaytetye people for thousands of years.

Traditional Owners desire to continue their active role in managing their traditional lands and waters for the future benefit of their society and culture. They want to defend their cultural values and guard the foundation of their ancient religion. To enable this to occur, it is recommended that the broad range of cultural values identified be sustained and safeguarded in accordance with national and international cultural heritage management practise (ICOMOS 2017; UNESCO 2003).

Good practise in the field of cultural heritage management includes working in cooperation with Traditional Owners to develop and apply an approach to cultural heritage management inclusive of a broad range of tangible and intangible cultural values. Moreover, Traditional Owners should be empowered as active decision makers in matters that affect their land and waters. In this way, the Traditional Owners' cultural values aren't merely documented, they are integrated into an active management process which involves the Traditional Owners themselves.

ADDENDUM

Singleton Water Licence Aboriginal Cultural Values Assessment

PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW REPORT

15TH SEPTEMBER 2021

The preliminary overview report prepared for the CLC (10th August 2021) defined the Singleton Water License drawdown area as based on the contour lines described by Fortune Agribusiness (see Figure 1 of the preliminary report). A subsequent consideration of the Fortune Agribusiness modelling highlighted that the drawdown area also includes areas outside the depicted contour lines where impacts to GDEs are predicted, and in particular, to GDEs located in alluvial and sandplain landforms. These areas are also highlighted on the Fortune Agribusiness map (see Figure 1 of the preliminary report, orange and pink shading).

This means that the drawdown area for the project is larger than was assumed in my preliminary overview report. The revised definition of the drawdown area is the area identified by Fortune Agribusiness where impacts to GDEs will occur, which includes the area covered by the drawdown contours **and** GDE impacts by landforms, inclusive of GDE impact to alluvial and sandplain landforms.

Sacred site information gathered during my fieldwork included information about the wider regional context. I have re-analysed this information while taking into account the true predicted drawdown area. This assessment identified a total of **40 sacred sites within the drawdown area**; 29 within the drawdown contour line area and a further 11 within the wider impacted alluvial and sandplain area.