

## **Treading Lightly: The hidden wisdom of the world's oldest people**

Karl-Erik Sveiby and Tex Skuthorpe

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by *Richard Eckersley*

Some years ago, I gave an opening address to a conference in Darwin on the challenges of the north. I argued that the forces driving social change in Australia, and hence determining our future, derived from our worldview. The Western worldview was framed around notions of material progress, which, in turn, was closely linked to economic growth. This view of progress was inequitable, unsustainable and, contrary to its core objective, it was not increasing our wellbeing and quality of life. Thus the central task was to create a new view of the world and our place in it.

Listening to the other conference presentations, especially those describing the hardships of indigenous communities in the north, I realised mine had probably been too abstract and academic, too remote from the realities of everyday life, for most of the audience, and I later apologised for this.

However, I said that almost everything I had heard had affirmed, at least to me, the essential truth of my argument. 'Indigenous people know in ways that I can't even begin to imagine that the Western worldview is just *one* view of the world, not *the* view. They know better than most that ultimately what matters to us are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves: who we are, where we have come from, why we are here.'

Now that I've read *Treading Lightly*, by Karl-Erik Sveiby and Tex Skuthorpe, I have a better understanding of just how different is the indigenous worldview. *Treading Lightly* argues we can learn a lot from traditional Aboriginal culture, which provides us with a model for building sustainable societies today.

When a colleague gave me a copy I was initially sceptical. Part of the reason was my background in science, with its adherence to objective, rational, empirical knowledge. More importantly, I thought that the indigenous way of life was just too different from ours to offer much guidance (a reaction the authors anticipate, along with others). The troubles plaguing many indigenous communities today also made it hard to see them as role models (however much they differ from pre-European settlement societies).

Yet, as I flicked through the pages, I soon became absorbed in the book and fascinated by the details of Aboriginal culture, and how deeply it is linked to the sustainability of their way of life. As the authors point out, indigenous Australians have the longest continuous cultural history in the world.

Mingled with fascination was a sort of national pride in their achievements and shame that it has taken a Finnish professor of knowledge management (Sveiby) to make me aware of them. The collaboration between Sveiby and Skuthorpe is, I suspect, highly unusual; it is also very successful. Skuthorpe put down the stories of his people, the Nhunggabarra, with the help of his partner Anne Morrill, and provided the stunning paintings for the colour plates in the book (these helped him to remember the stories). Sveiby researched written sources of information and did most of the writing. Together they allow us to make sense of traditional Aboriginal knowledge from a modern, organisational and societal perspective.

The Nhunggabarra were 'the people of the Nhunggal country', the region between the Narran and Bokhara rivers in south Queensland and northwest NSW. The authors believe much of the book applies to other indigenous peoples, but do not attempt to generalise. What emerges so strikingly is that there is nothing 'primitive' about indigenous Australians and their way of life, as often

assumed by European settlers and scientists. Instead, we get a comprehensive picture of a culture honed over thousands of years to suit the environment and to meet human needs.

The Nhunggabarra had a knowledge-based economy focused on the production of intangible value (education, art, law, entertainment, medicine, ceremonies, peacekeeping and social welfare); they practised a form of ecofarming that involved learning how nature worked and then 'helping it on the way' with a minimum of effort; they organised society on a model of leadership in which everyone had a leadership role in a specific area of knowledge, with this role shifting depending on the context; they had a spirituality that emphasised the interconnectedness of all and everything.

'Spiritual life was much more significant than material life for the Australian Aboriginal people,' the authors say. 'Instead of putting their surplus energy into squeezing more food out of the land, Aborigines expended it on *intangibles*: spiritual, intellectual and artistic activities. They carried their palaces on their backs, their cathedrals were built in their minds and they felt no need to glorify human heroes. It is in the mind and the creativity of the spirit... that Aboriginal society stands out.' This created a psychology that was completely disinterested in acquiring and possessing material things.

Everything was knowledge, woven into the complex, multilayered stories of the Nhunggabarra, which described features of the landscape and its animals, defined relationships between people within communities and between communities and the wider environment, and taught spiritual action and psychic skills. Nhunggabarra law was a code of moral and social behaviour embedded in stories and derived from their most powerful Ancestor at the time of creation. The ideal person was someone who shared unselfishly and without hesitation; cared for the children, relatives and the elderly; fulfilled kinship obligations without question; and showed compassion and respected integrity.

Farming did not just include the well-known firestick farming – burning the land to make it more attractive to game - but a system of 'live larders' that helped to provide fresh food all year round. Nor did indigenous Australians shun innovation, but tested new technologies carefully to ensure they really did 'add value' to their lives, focusing in particular on intangible innovation, including their advanced model of governance for a sustainable world.

The traditional ways of life were devastated by the arrival of Europeans. But early accounts suggest a life of relative abundance and ease. People spent between two and five hours a day gathering and preparing food; there were seasonal fluctuations but, except during extreme drought, it was not hard work. They spent a few hours more on making tools and shelters, allowing the rest of the day to be spent on 'intangibles'. As Cook noted in his journal after his visit to Australia in 1770: 'From what I have said of the Natives of New Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth; but in reality they are far happier than we Europeans.' Their behaviour suggested that 'they think themselves provided with all the necessities of Life and that they have no Superfluities.'

Sveiby and Skuthorpe say traditional Aboriginal society provides a 'model' or 'recipe' for sustainability. But the word that came to mind as I read their engaging and informative book was that this was a 'parable' for our times, an extremely important one. The moral lesson is not that we could or should adopt the indigenous way of life, but that we need to recognise that other, quite different, and even better, ways of making sense of the world and our lives are possible. And not only that: we need to examine our present situation at this most fundamental level if we are to have any hope of achieving a high, equitable and lasting quality of life.

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