Thanks Jason

I acknowledge:

- the Gadigal people of the Eora nation as the owners of the land we are on today— their ancestors and their elders.
- Professor Jon Altman and Dr Sean Kerins from Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
- the researchers and elders here this evening who have contributed to this book, as well as Aboriginal elders across the country who continue to share their knowledge and experience in caring for country.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples we know our connection to country is integral to our identity as first peoples, as well as our individual identities, it’s integral to our culture and our language.

I am an Yindjibarndi person and in Yindjibarndi it is our ngurra - the Juluwarlu book about Yindjibarndi country says “Great respect is shown by our people for their ngurra, and the land is treated as a living dynamic, entity. Whenever we venture somewhere in our country, we call out to it and let it know we are there and ask it to keep us safe.”

Our people have been on country for thousands of years; managing that land, maintaining the equilibrium of life, people and country together – and as first peoples we have inherent rights to continue to not only live on the country but also continue these practices.

This is a reality – reinforced and protected by the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples.

Many of the Articles of the Declaration refer to our rights in relation to country but particularly articles 8, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 24.

Article 25 states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard.”

The essays in this book go to the heart of these rights.

Bill Neidji – Kakadu poet articulates this connection – in his poem
CONGRESS PRIORITY – COUNTRY

The National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples has identified Country as a priority policy area. In this sense Country encompasses culture and connection to country, native title and natural resource management.

Not surprisingly, at our Delegates meeting in Alice Springs last month, the policy workshops on Country identified a number of themes in the discussions that are consistent with the topics and discussion in this book. These included:

- Connection and respect – to land, to our ancestors and to our duty to protect land.
- Knowledge – sharing knowledge between elders and children; governments, communities and corporations.
- Free, Prior and informed consent – as a fundamental principle of negotiations

And a couple of quotes from the workshop participants illustrate the value of this book.

“As a community we don’t get quality advice-we need our capacity strengthened so we have better bargaining power.”

“We need to promote examples of good practice and learn from poor practices”

The Delegates spoke about maintaining the connection to country, the role of representative bodies and land councils, the importance of traditional knowledge and cultural heritage, and the impact of extractive industries.

Congress will develop an action plan from the policy work the Delegates have done. Some of the suggestions from the workshops were:

- assessing the level and extent of heritage protection laws and procedures on a state by state basis,
- determine whether national laws should be introduced for greater protection of heritage, and
- examine the relationship between native title and heritage protection.

The research presented in the collection of essays in this book can help Congress in our deliberations and policy development, our advice to governments determining the actions we will take.

THE BOOK: PEOPLE ON COUNTRY – VITAL LANDSCAPES/INDIGENOUS FUTURES

As always CAEPR and the publishers, The Federation Press, have produced an important resource that can contribute to informing debate and public policy – it should be required reading for policy makers.

Jon Altman examines the reality that much of the Australian land mass that remains environmentally secure is Aboriginal land – unfortunately it is also the land that has mineral deposits.
Whilst governments and policy makers of Australia continue to see mining as the principle economic future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – as evidenced in Paul Cleary’s book *Too Much Luck* – the benefits for Aboriginal people have been a long time coming and, to put it politely, inconsistent, if at all existent.

This book provides insights to an alternative economic future and one that can also support strong cultural futures for our peoples.

This book *People on Country – Vital Landscapes/Indigenous Futures* – provides evidence that those principles of good practice – community control, partnerships, alliances - realise real benefits for the communities and individuals involved.

The case studies from the Top End and New South Wales will help to share that good practice with other communities – something seen as essential by Congress delegates.

Chapter 10 “Countrymen standing together” Bawinanga Djelk appraises the rangers program at Maningrida.

This was of particular interest as I was at Maningrida on Friday for consultations on the new Aboriginal health plan. Consistently in our health discussions the role of culture and connection to country is raised as a factor in health and well being. In fact at the consultation at Maningrida one participant stood up and said that the people on outstations are much healthier because they are on country maintaining their traditional roles in caring for country. We know this has been evidenced in other research.

So it was great to read about the work of the rangers in managing the environment and particularly combatting the invasion of feral pigs, buffaloes and the various noxious weeds.

As explained in the chapter “One old man said that these weeds are like a sore throat, like a cold. Just a few little weeds tickling that country and making him cough. Then if you’ve got no medicine for that weed flu, it might get worse and worse. The weeds might get hold of that country like a really bad cancer. They might grow and grow and when they spread out all over his body that country might be finished – dead. Poor fellow.”

But the chapter points out the other benefits of the ranger work “…as well as Djelk being about the environment, we have always had a focus on our social role within the community; looking after country and looking after people go hand in hand for us. In practice there have been three main things that we have concentrated on. These have been the links between country and people, keeping culture and language strong, and teaching our kids.”

**PEOPLE ON COUNTRY ROLES**

People on country are performing a legitimate and valuable service – not just for themselves and their community – strengthening and maintaining culture, meeting cultural obligations to look after their country – but for the whole of Australia. Protection of the environment and maintaining a strong culture are significant contributions that these communities and individuals make to this country.
These roles, however, have not been adequately recognised or valued by governments or
the Australian population. Traditional land management practices have been at best under-
valued and at worst disregarded.

There has to be much more recognition of this contribution and the benefits,
environmentally, culturally, socially and economically – that the people on country make –
for the nation as a whole.

And while there is regularly the debate about the cost of homelands of people needing
services to stay on country we should count the cost of not having them on country.

In the new green world, I believe this attitude is changing, but I would like to see more
substantial and longer term commitments to the work of these people on country as well as
recognition that this is valuable and critical work that contributes to the identity and
sustainability of this country.

And this book provides an essential resource for the people on country – sharing good
practice, support and networks can enhance this knowledge base.

As with all economic and social development in Aboriginal lands there is no one solution, no
quick fix. Caring for country and ranger programs provide one viable option for employment
and building social capital, but, as with mining opportunities, they alone should not been
seen as a panacea.

There are many pathways to explore in economic and social development – many
opportunities to provide real employment in communities that respect and value cultural
integrity that need to also be supported.

I believe there are elements in this work that can apply to other opportunities and we
shouldn’t restrict the learnings from this research to ranger or caring for country programs.
I see it has much broader application.

I commend this book to you and to the debate, and thank Jon, Sean and all the contributors
for this excellent piece of work.

We have always been people on country

We have always been looking after country

Always was. Always will be Aboriginal land and we want to pass it on healthy to future
generations.

Thank you