

Voices from Country

A collection of quotes from participants
of the Native Oceans Exchange

The Comcaac in Australia

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Stephen Ambar: *Head Ranger Hammond Island*

It is very lovely to have them people back on my Hammond Island here where I live and work as a Community Ranger and... the turtle conservation is a very important thing for our lifestyle and livelihood... for the future of the generations to come... and working together with the Indigenous overseas would help the cause immensely.

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Lifestyle and the living up here is pretty expensive... so as Indigenous and living with the community we need to eat our turtle to sustain our life and our cultural practices...

**Alison Anderson:** *Minister for Environment & Parks, NT Government*

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I know about my land and my law and culture and it is the same here, and it's about exchanging views and ideas—from a cultural perspective to the scientific perspective—and working together to make sure that we say to people if there is to be an issue, look after the environment. If the land and sea and rivers are healthier, than the people are healthy.

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I think it's an absolutely wonderful experience. This is what we have to encourage more of... cultural exchanges. And getting ideas from one another, because not one thing is perfect and we can learn from each other you know.

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Indigenous people from other countries know about law and culture and rivers and seas and land as well... and it's really good to see the Seri here on Dhimurru land... and making sure that they understand and exchange ideas as well so they can take ideas back from them. And the Dhimurru Rangers... obviously when they went over there to Mexico, would have brought back ideas to encompass in the way they do things here.

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I think this is a perfect opportunity for all society to work with Indigenous people from the land and make sure that we put in these partnerships. I think is very, very important that we have partnerships with Indigenous Rangers or environmentalists on the ground because our people know about the land, they know about the environment, they know about the oceans and the rivers because it's a part of us you know.

James Bon: *Quarantine Officer and Chairperson of a regional fisheries*

Things that I got out of this exchange is the sharing of the knowledge of the different people... different Indigenous people from all around the world. We have all the same issues... it would be nice to see the management plans from all different areas around the world could work together or share ideas... how to protect the species of dugong and turtle.

Warren Canendo: *Ngadjon Traditional Owner*

...it is there for future generations. We don't lose it because we are losing our elders, we've got this database... we can keep them for future generations and we don't lose who we are as traditional owners.

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Within that database you can hold your music, your dance, management tools, site recording forms... anything, that work with government, as well as stories. And it's a good database because it's you know, for the elders, and all of that... getting that information and putting it on the database so it can be kept for future generations.

## **Frank David:** *Gallery Officer Gab Titui Cultural Centre*

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And this is where we actually hold our culture and tradition intact. Having a centre like this, is where guests, tourists, even the locals, the Torres Strait Islanders, this is where they come in to have a connection with the past. And having a centre like this here, this actually helps us create a future for the present people.

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Our Elders is always the backbone of everything we do... they hold the key to wisdom and understanding of life and they are the key to our future.

Tim Dykman: *Co-director Ocean Revolution*

There are big gaps in the knowledge base that western scientists have been using. Western sciences have been the ones that get the most attention, the most money, and the most visibility in terms of conservation but in fact there is an entire group of people that has been practicing conservation... although they don't think of it in that way... for over 40,000 years--since human beings started populating the planet. So our idea is if we can add this knowledge base, this cultural bio-diversity knowledge to the rest of the knowledge that exists in the world that we'll have a bigger pool of experts, we'll have a bigger pool of knowledge and more likely we will have a better outcome in all of our attempts to adapt our lifestyles to the 21st century.

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All in all it was an amazing trip, both in terms of my own... the formation of my own vision about how important Indigenous knowledge is in the world, the ideas I was able to get from Traditional Owners about what they needed support in, what kind of exchanges they wanted, who they wanted to speak to... and in terms of watching the exchange and the valuing of the different bits of knowledge from each group—both from the group that we visited in Nhulunbuy and the group that we visited in Thursday Island and the group [Meriam Mir Nation] that we visited in the far edges of... really one of the most remote regions of Australia and certainly one of the most beautiful regions and hotspots of bio-cultural diversity in the world.

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conservation becomes an economic alternative to any other unsustainable economic alternatives and it also gives them a place in world, a dignity in the world for their

Traditional Knowledge about sea turtles and dugongs and allows them to have leverage to turn that Traditional Knowledge into protection for the community—in a way that they want to protect it—and a podium from which to transfer their Traditional Knowledge and their culture to those of us in the western world.

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if you want to bring an economic... if you want to do eco-tourism in your area, if you want to bring tourists to your area, if you want good sustainable economic impetus for your community, protecting your turtles and thinking about their habitat is a very important thing to do.

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We're forming a group of ambassadors and advocates around the world... young leaders like the Australian young leaders, the Seri young leaders, who are going out to many different parts of the world to be ambassadors... both in Indigenous communities and in the scientific community for the sea turtle and by reflection for the health of the ocean. We caught fish for the community... because this being an island, quite remote, they're dependant on the oceanic resources that surround the island both for food and nutrition, for economic sustainability and for preservation on their cultures, so making sure that there is as little diminishment of the natural resources is a cultural imperative, it's one of the long standing traditions in their culture.

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...then we went on during the evening and observed turtles nesting on the beach and had the chance to talk to community members... conservation leaders... about their tagging process, about their concern about oceanic resources and about their own particular Indigenous situation where often their knowledge is not given full credence... in terms of setting up marine protected areas. They feel that they are able to set up the marine protected areas themselves and certainly from the explanations that I heard they are... they were very detailed in their plan and actually their plan was based on tens of thousands of years of experience with the marine life here. The kind of experience that it would cost millions and millions of dollars for the western world to document.

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Ocean Revolution is a group that goes around the world trying to find young ocean conservation leaders, young ocean activist that are ready to be added to the workforce of people trying to change the course of our environment of our planet... both in scientific terms and in conservation terms and in cultural terms.

Mayra Estrella: *Cultural Director Grupo Tortuguero Comcaac*

Now I realise the importance of the Indigenous communities like ours. I feel a great peace inside, that I never felt before.

In all the beaches, the islands and I believe that to me, this... will be great example for my community, and I'll continue with the Sea turtle protection.

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*Summarised by Alberto Mellado:* Mayra talked to us about the feelings she had when she just arrived to Australia—the feeling of being with Indigenous brothers who are working on

conservation. She feels that she falls in love with Indigenous children—she will always keep in her heart and she will take the feeling and share with our communities back in Sonora Mexico.

## **Henry Garnier:** *Traditional Owner*

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I feel proud to know them [the Comcaac] because they do have the same problem as us. Whereas you know, I think they stopped eating turtle altogether but they have other resource which would help out in there every day living by the way of food, and it is a privilege to me because I'm 72 and to meet other Indigenous people... from Indigenous tribes from the other side of the world... it gives me a great pleasure to know that there are similar people living on the other side of the world like us... and our problems all seem to entwine together. But I am sure that by swapping information and all that, we will get to minimise the problems we have... But this is a start and as time goes on I feel within myself that... I'll probably be gone by then... I feel within myself that we will reach an agreement one of these days... but I don't think I will ever be a part of it... but knowing that Indigenous people are trying very hard to solve these problems.

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I have been involved in politics for 13 years... since 1991 until 2004. And I handled a portfolio of fisheries. And one of our main thoughts was protection of turtles and dugong. A lot of world's interest have been centred in Torres Strait, because we are sea faring people... our islands are small, not like the mainland and we depend entirely on the sea... our resources comes from the sea... that's how we survive. To stop it completely would be a disaster for us and we would like, together with government, put something in place... not only nationally but internationally, to protect... especially the turtle, which is migratory.

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The dugong is also an international thing because Papua New Guinea is so close to us and they also eat dugong and hunt it commercially, so therefore we have to meet with Papua New Guinea to come to some sort of an agreement as by way of protecting dugong. And I know it's going to be a hard long road, but eventually I think we will find an answer that is agreeable to all involved.

## **Gabrielle Hoeffler:** *Director Grupo Tortuguero*

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*Summarised by Alberto Mellado:* [Dhimurru] are doing an excellent job preserving their culture preserving their environment. And this is the kind of work that we are working so hard to develop. They are doing an excellent, excellent job preserving their culture, and there are many, many things are so beautiful. The environment and the culture are really beautiful.

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Summarised by Alberto Mellado: Gabrielle talked to us about the importance of having other job options for Indigenous communities. How important it is to find other sources that provides a better way of life for the communities—so he is happy to see how the Rangers are doing; how the Indigenous communities are having such a good way of life—even when they are facing cultural issues too. But he is glad to see very good examples of how

Indigenous peoples are adapting to this century... so he has seen very good examples that he can in the future apply in our communities.

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Watching the nesting here is magical for us and the local people have given us the chance to participate in this project and their work. It's an honour for us...contributing to international sea turtle conservation.

We are very happy... no matter that we are a little bit tired because of all the days and trips on this journey... but in this experience our tiredness disappears—looking other ways to work, and the conservation effort continues.

Today we had a chance to tag sea turtles, also do measurements with my friends Alberto and Myra. We are very excited. We know that we are a big family in sea turtle conservation. No matter the language, with different kind of skin, different eyes, different customs... but in the end we are still a big family looking after sea turtle conservation on a global level.

And in cases like this, that is happening far, far away, allows us to be apart of a big conservation net with our Indigenous brothers from Murray Island—we are contributing to the local conservation effort. We're adding our grain of sand, like we say in Mexico, for the sea turtle conservation.

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We have seen a huge encourage to continue our labour... they feel the same respect for the nature as we do. And this encourage us so much more to continue our work about it.

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*Summarised by Alberto Mellado::* Visiting the Australian Indigenous communities, sharing the stories, sharing the places, sharing their stories about creation that is very similar to ours—their stories about how things got name by some defined entity.

### **Rod Kennett:** *Coordinator NAILSMA Dugong and Marine Turtle Project*

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I think one of the really exciting things in this exchange has been being able to bring together world leaders in turtle and dugong conservation and management, so Indigenous groups from around the world getting together... we brought together the Seri who are leading the way in making decisions about stopping hunting— maintaining cultural connections to turtle and dugong—but have actually made the decisions to forego, or stop hunting. In Zenadh Kes we are seeing groups who are leading the way in Australia and indeed the world in developing community management plans to ensure that their hunting is sustainable in the context of all the other impacts on turtle and dugong populations.

In Nhulunbuy with met with the Dhimurru Rangers who are leading the world in many ways—in terms of managing turtle and dugong—particularly with regards to marine debris impacts... so using helicopters to survey beaches, putting satellite transmitters of turtles released from nets... these are all world first, world leading things that have been done.

So I think it's about bringing together Indigenous people from around the world to share those ideas... but those groups are really world leaders so we are sharing world-leading ideas.

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What resonates with people is the importance of Traditional Knowledge, the importance of Elders and their guidance.

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The challenges of working with government seems to be the same in Australia as they are in Mexico.

### **Toshie Kris:** *Chairperson Torres Strait Regional Authority*

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...we then found out that we can actually learn a lot more from other Indigenous groups throughout the country. So we were working with the Northern Territory Aboriginals... because of how the movement of those species takes them from northern Australia to Queensland... and it was through the involvement with NAILSMA that they talked about travelling to Mexico to look at what is happening over there. And, on the return from the journey... when Kenny, Frank and all the others went to Mexico and came back and they gave the report and we thought well... it was like sending them back to another Torres Strait. They were going from one home to another and the issues were the same, the principals were the same... and all of a sudden we were looking at an issue very similar on the other side of the world

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If you look at the value of travelling... a group of Indigenous people from Torres Strait to Mexico to look at what was happening there... to bring that information back, you can't match it in dollars.

The amount of information that you could exchange, from one Indigenous group to another, it was never... you can't weigh that in dollars. You could weigh it in gold, but not in dollars. It was worth a lot more than what money could buy. And I think that really helped... not only us going over there but also getting you guys to come back here... the Traditional Owners come back to look at how we were managing.

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This last election that happened this year... we've seen a big amount, a huge amount of young people coming into politics. And all of a sudden there is change when looking at introducing traditional culture and to ensure that western society give us recognition so that we can implement traditional laws and get it recognised under the western system. And I think that's very important... especially when you look at traditional practices of sustainability... whether it's turtle or dugong or crayfish or traditional food, I think it's very important... and with the new blend of youth coming through the elected arm, being elected into the governance, it has made the Australian Government sit back and notice what we are trying to achieve. It's about getting recognition as Indigenous people to this country.

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In our culture we had a chief, we had a group of elders who would be the advisors of the chief, and if you look at the current structure, it would be equivalent to having a president

and a group of governors who would be giving the president advice. We had that structure. All we want is for the western society to give us the recognition to say... hold on these people have had a government structure and that's how we managed the land. We sign about the land, we sing about the issues, we tell stories, we dance. Now we want them to give us the full recognition so we can implement programs so that we do manage our land and our sea and our resources so that it would be there for future generations to come.

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Everything that happens in the Torres Strait, we say yes or no.... the elected members, the traditional owners. We get elected to sit and make decisions on our region. And we say to our people, let's make management plans for dugong and turtle; we talk to government about what money we need.

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When we argue with the Australian Government, we say to them... where we come from traditional here... we've had government structure. You've taken that away from us, now we want you to put that back. If you don't have that in place, nothing will work. We've got community bylaws, or Traditional laws. The traditional laws will govern how things happen in the community.

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Tim mentioned about just that one word 'change'... and a lot of changes are happening in the world... one of the biggest change that Indigenous people are facing is getting our community traditional bylaws being accepted and recognised by western society so that when we do look at sustainable management... we've had that since time immemorial... and I think what we're doing now is sharing that knowledge on how we can get that implemented so that it will benefit the future generations... but we don't just talk about it or sing and dance about it... but we can still practice it in the future.

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We've got a free movement treaty. That helps us getting back that traditional law because it compliments the treaty movement... not just what is... what Queensland wants to implement in our community.

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This treaty that we have with Papua New Guinea... that gives recognition to traditional trade between tribes. Traditionally you could go and trade with other tribes but now in this day and age you have to get a visa to go and visit... this treaty that we have you don't have to get a visa you just get a permit by the chief. And if the chief says yes, you can visit and if the chief says no you can't visit.

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We have said to the government you must give recognition to traditional law. If you can't legislate traditional law, you will never have a management plan. And I think its one big win that we've had.

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We actually established what we call the Torres Strait Land and Sea Management Unit which we work closely with the Commonwealth Government and in particular NAILSMA which is the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance... that provided us with some funding to produce what we call Community-based plans in the management of Dugong and Turtle. The great thing about that was we were actually getting traditional and cultural law implemented into the western society by using funding to implement these programs.

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For any Indigenous group to make that step to actually ensure the safe sustainable management of those species happen, then you know, you actually have to give credit to the people... you know, to take that stand.

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If we were not going to put a management plan in place, then one day we are never going to have turtles in our area. There will never be turtles, there will never be dugongs.

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The opportunity came up for us to travel to Mexico to actually look at what was happening on the other side of the world... came at such a time that... I don't know whether you could call it fate... but the time of that was just immaculate... and what came out of that... the report that came back was that the same situation we were facing was equivalent to what was being faced by other Indigenous tribes... not only in Mexico, but throughout the world... and I think that in a lot of places... especially in Indigenous people right throughout the world there are a lot of similarities.

And when we start to travel and visit each other and then talk about these issues and concerns we have and how we are going to go about implementing programs to look at sustainable management... all of a sudden we are all sailing the same ship... regardless of whether it's going north, south, east or west... whether it's motorised or not, but the issues that we were facing were very, very similar... the principals were the same... you know, the only difference between that is the government structure and how you are going to go about implementing programs so that you can benefit the people on the ground.

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I think your elders could sit back, and probably relax a bit, but knowing that the future is really bright for your country because the young people in your region are standing up and taking... grabbing hold of that issue and ensuring that there is light in the future for tradition to happen.

**Frank Loban:** *Senior Natural Resource Management Officer (Sea) TSRA*

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I think International Exchanges benefits both parties involved. You've got the exchange of culture, ideas and experiences. And I believe that international exchanges are critical because of the experiences people share with each other are not unique but similar and similar solutions between exchanging peoples can be shared and learnt from... especially when one people can learn from the other.

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It's easy to say that Indigenous people all over the world experience similar experiences in trying to manage their country... but it is another thing to actually meet the people and talk to them and liaise with them one on one. And have them here on our county was a great experience. As was in the beginning of the year when we went over to Mexico. We saw probably a small glimpse of some of the issues they experience over there and I think that Indigenous people meeting other Indigenous people who have the same issues with regards to marine species is a big step in trying to manage marine turtles as a whole.

Stranded Man

I think it's really important that we empower Yolngu people to take control of their lives, and their work, and their country—it's really important to them. It's important to everybody who comes here to understand that this is Yolngu country, and to see it is fantastic.

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Understanding and knowledge is really important and these guys have got heaps of knowledge about their country, so for white people like us who come here, it's important that we learn from the guys.

## Alberto Mellado: *founder of the Comcaac Native Oyster Project*

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We are very glad to be here with Indigenous people working with our partner Ocean Revolution because we are truthful on this exchange, this cultural exchange sharing about our issues of conservation of natural resources, natural and cultural resources... we have been learning in the exchange many useful tools that we have seeing here that we can develop in our country

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I think the different cultures we have so much to share like with the Rangers two days ago we had a very, very strong connection. We shared stories about creation of cultures, Indigenous people and places and they are the same stories that we have in Seri Society of the natural resources, so you can get amazed at how the stories look like they are the same even though they are on the other side of the world and you can take all this experience and you can build the connections and also you're sharing all kinds of skills and research data which for sure will all be helpful for Australians and Mexicans.

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We are concerned about our elders passing away and we have lost many elders in the last two decades, so I think the Traditional Knowledge has not been lost because they pass their knowledge through the histories and talking but it is still their Traditional Knowledge, so we have to do some graphical tools so that we can all collaborate to work, and land management, and cultural sites is an issue that we have... we all know where the traditional areas and how important they are, but we have to have something like this... we have to.

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We will take this example to our country because we have connections to the Mexican Government and they don't realise that Indigenous people, even when there are

Indigenous attention agencies from the Government, so they have a job because of Indigenous people but they don't realise that Indigenous people have the capacity, they have the structures... the social structure to manage and put in place programs for protecting the environment, programs to improve quality of life... they are sceptics about the Indigenous people's capacity.

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Since the ISTS meeting in Loreto back in January, in 2008 in Mexico... has open particularly my mind, about how the Indigenous people are capable to manage their natural resources... their own land, to fight for their rights. In a different way that we need, in this 21st Century.

The inspiration and the support that we are receiving from NGOs like NAILSMA and OCEAN REVOLUTION and specially the CHRISTENSEN FUND... Are inspiring people, to keep our world safe for tomorrow.

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One strong example that I will take to home is how the Australian government is getting more involved with the Indigenous people... not just in the sea turtle conservation, which is the basis of this cultural exchange... But the whole marine environment, and the land have been just amazing this encourage me and my brothers from the Comcaac Nation... To work more... and harder for it, and to look after the other species that we are not considering maybe or that we should consider right now because we are in time.

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I was talking about this huge program that is a huge pool for Indigenous people and cultures and it's amazing how they have integrated all their cultural information and photos and all kinds of associated things with the sights and they can update and they can introduce more information as long as they consider it important.

### **George Nona:** *Craftsman and Artist*

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I do artefacts in Torres Strait, authentic artefacts. I do masks and headdresses. I only use traditional methods... why? Because it's dying off. I try to spread it all over Torres Strait so they can revive the culture and keep it going. The main point is reviving the culture.

### **Malawup Nona:** *Traditional Owner*

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Well, you can see the pristine area of the Miriam estate here and it's the very reason why we went to court—basically preserving and conserving what we have—natural resources.

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We're getting a better understanding from all agencies now that there is a flow of communication among people to work together to make it happen... that what we have will be there for the future generations to come.

Eddie Sailor: *Erubam le Turtle & Dugong Management Officer*

It was very inspiring to see that international support and funding is coming through NAILSMA and Ocean Revolution and the Christensen Fund to provide support in training of the development of Indigenous communities around the world to benefit the Indigenous populations to work achieve our goals in maintaining and sustaining our turtle populations.

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This exchange was very beneficial as to find out a few similarities in the Indigenous management of turtle populations. We are aiming for the same goal—to conserve and sustain our turtle species.

### **Patrick White:** *Dhimurru Sea Ranger*

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We went over there to do satellite tracking with Angela from Napranum... and another lady from Cairns... she is based in Cairns and she does rehabilitation for turtles like injured turtles... rehabilitate is and then let them go. Just to show them how it was their first time to see a satellite track put on an Olive Ridley. Share knowledge.

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It's a part of Yolngu thing you know, like for example Yolngu go to another place to share language or knowledge of the land or of the whole area. It just to communicate and have the network you know, have that good link with other Ranger groups.

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Yet we look after dugong and turtle around here but sometimes we get really hungry... we eat them.

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Going out and talking about lots of places on our country and telling you stories and sharing knowledge and telling you our stories, and their mob telling us about your stories and we reckon we thought that it was really interesting and similar to our history stories.

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But even better with being using the CyberTracker which is more easier than instead of writing down stuff... get the job done quickly... less money being spent on the chopper.

### **Djawa Yunupingu:** *Managing Director Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation*

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Both ways learning is learning the western scientific knowledge and the local Traditional Knowledge—which all Indigenous people from all over the world to have. And this experience is that only the Indigenous people can see and have and understand. A lot of the non-Indigenous people are still trying to gain from us so my message there is, we are well adapted, we can do this, we can in the hope of you people being recognized and the same in Australia.

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We are still looking out the window... to be able to be recognized as the first Australians and you people on that side of the world are still trying to have that hope in being recognized as the custodian's that your forefathers and our forefathers once had and once walked on the face of the earth which was rightfully ours.