



Media Release

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Healthy Country Healthy People **Study supports links between healthy landscapes and healthy people**

A groundbreaking study published today in the Medical Journal of Australia by researchers from the Menzies School of Health Research, Charles Darwin University, Australian National University, the Menzies Research Institute and the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health has demonstrated an association between Indigenous 'Caring for Country' practices and a healthier, happier life.

Collaborating with the Traditional Owners of western and central Arnhem Land, the 'Healthy Country, Healthy People' study assessed the health outcomes of Indigenous people participating in 'Caring for Country' activities compared to those that did not participate.

This exploratory study investigated the close connections between Indigenous people, their ancestral lands and the impacts that this may have on the health of landscapes as well as the physical health and well-being of populations.

Project leader, CDU's Professor Stephen Garnett, said that sustained pressure to centralise populations and services has led to the depopulation of homelands and the creation of remote area townships.

“Previous work has shown that Indigenous people living in remote townships suffer from a burden of illness associated with inactivity, malnutrition, and social disadvantages,” said Dr Garnett.

“This has impacted negatively on the health of both the landscapes and the people,” Dr Garnett said.

Key findings from this innovative new study have shown for the first time that people who participate in customary and contemporary land and sea management practices, particularly those living in their ancestral homelands, have significant health benefits. These include more frequent exercise, better diet, lower rates of obesity, diabetes, renal disease, cardiovascular disease and less psychological stress.

“These are the principal causes of premature death and disability for Indigenous Australians” says Dr Fay Johnston, medical co-author of the study.

The study concluded that the expansion of Caring for Country programs in remote Indigenous communities has the potential to deliver a healthier environment, sustainable economic development opportunities and the potential to deliver significant economic savings in health care expenditure.

“This is a positive study in Indigenous health that responds to Indigenous requests to investigate ‘what works’ with a focus on cultural and social drivers of improved health outcomes,” Dr Johnston said.

“Further studies will now be needed to follow on from this to allow us to delve deeper into the causes behind these improved health outcomes.”

CRC for Aboriginal Health Chief Executive, Mick Gooda said the study added to a growing body of knowledge demonstrating the relationship between access to country and improved health and wellbeing.

“This work is important because it demonstrates the need for greater government investment in Aboriginal ranger programs as part of efforts to reduce health inequality in Australia.”

