



July 25, 2017 by Rod Reeve



## The red, white and blue of the world's remote Indigenous communities

Remote Indigenous communities live across the vast red landscape in Australia. Remote northern Polar communities live amongst icy white terrains and remote Pacific Islanders are spread across blue oceans. Although this seems obvious now, I only fully realised the similarities of these landscapes when I recently listened to presentations from fellow researchers in the northern hemisphere at the International Society for Society and Natural Resources (IASNR) conference at the Umeå University in northern Sweden (see my presentation here<sup>i</sup>).

*Although remote Indigenous communities live across the red, white and blue of deserts, ice and oceans, the similarities of their lives are striking*

To the outsider, it is remarkable to see the First Peoples of these unique regions persisting to keep their traditional way-of-life going. Even though 'the system' is working hard against them, they persist. Climate change is bringing rapid encroachments. Abnormal weather events are becoming more frequent in the deserts of Australia and the northern polar ecosystems. Sea levels are rising around remote islands in the Pacific. At a national level, remote communities struggle for significance with governments who have budget constraints and who are driven to get re-elected (there are very few voters or marginal seats in remote areas). On top of this, the diversity of the communities makes one-size-fits-all policies costly and difficult for the full range of health care, education, employment, food, transport and energy services for remote communities.

So why do Indigenous communities persist in the Anthropocene? Well, it's mainly because their well-being and cultural beliefs are so integrally attached to their environments. It's often heard that 'Indigenous people don't own land, the land owns them'. This inter-connection has been refined over thousands of generations in Australia. Although most remote Indigenous people are nomadic, they choose not to migrate off their lands. As Neil Adger, Professor of Human Geography at University of Exeter explained at Umeå, they aren't really much different to the rest of us: 6 out of 7 of the world's inhabitants don't migrate (and most of the migration is intra-country from rural areas to cities for economic (employment) reasons).

And, why is it important that Indigenous communities persist to live in remote areas? This deserves a big answer, and some would say, 'why is this relevant and why should we care?' After all, Reconciliation Australia found that 6 out of 10 white Australians claim that they have never met an Indigenous person<sup>ii</sup>, let alone an Indigenous person living in remote Australia. I can only skim over my understanding of the main reasons.



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First and foremost, it's important to these people – and the 'United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples' comprehensively covers the rights of Indigenous people. This has also been a dominant theme throughout the extensive research of the 7-year Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation in Australia. There are an estimated 370 million Indigenous people in the world and most don't live in remote areas. For example, less than a quarter of Australia's 669,900 people who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the 2016 Census live in remote Australia.

*Part-way through my presentation at the Centre for Sami Studies at the University of Tromsø in Norway, I was stuck in my tracks by a young Sami researcher who asked me why Australia was one of only four countries [out of 159 countries] to vote against the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I was able to explain that he was right, and that Australia eventually signed up to the declaration in 2009.*

Much has been described about the value of retaining and understanding traditional knowledge and the value of the diversity of culture, art, food and other assets of Indigenous people (especially as the other 7 billion people become increasingly homogenised). According to the World Bank<sup>iii</sup>, traditional Indigenous territories encompass up to 22 percent of the world's land surface and they coincide with areas that hold 80 percent of the planet's biodiversity. And, this only includes the physical assets, not spiritual and cultural.

An Inuit woman from Canada explained in her presentation at Umeå that traditional knowledge and languages were rapidly disappearing as their elders passed away. She also presented evidence of how governments and businesses like banks, Telco's and supermarkets were withdrawing their services from their remote areas ... where had I heard these things before?



**The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the General Assembly on 13 September 2007**

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.slideshare.net/Ninti\\_One/the-interplay-between-society-and-the-natural-environment-in-remote-areas-with-a-focus-on-community-value-from-mining-and-indigenous-communities](https://www.slideshare.net/Ninti_One/the-interplay-between-society-and-the-natural-environment-in-remote-areas-with-a-focus-on-community-value-from-mining-and-indigenous-communities)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2016/11/29/6-10-white-australians-claim-they-have-never-met-indigenous-person-so-what>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTBIODIVERSITY/Resources/RoleofIndigenousPeoplesinBiodiversityConservation.pdf>