Inquiry into remote community stores
Committee Room 1R2, Parliament House

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Submission

Food systems have usually been conceived of as a set of activities ranging from production through to consumption. Food security in rural and remote area Australia is a complex issue with multiple environmental, social, political and economic determinants encompassing availability, access and utilisation. Food production in remote areas is concerned with processing, distribution and consumption as well as traditional hunting, food gathering and 'caring for country' activities. The interactions between these traditional and commercial food production and supply issues are affected by interactions between these drivers, the activities involved with accessing food in rural and remote area communities and the outcomes achieved by these systems that should at all times promote all people, at all times having physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

Consultations in the development of this submission included input from participants at a seminar from the Human Ecology Forum, Australian National University in which participants were asked to provide feedback; and my personal and professional experiences of living and working in remote area communities[1].

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[1] I lived in remote areas for five years managing community health clinics. Remote area store user and supplier. Member of the Cape York Stores Committee concerned with transportation of food; inaugural speaker at the Food, Nutrition and Human Rights conference in Cairns, 1998 and conference facilitator at 2nd Food, Nutrition and Human Rights conference in Alice Springs 2008. I coordinated Well Person's Health Check programs in north Queensland - community screening addressed health and nutritional outcomes for people living in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. PhD Candidate, Fenner School, Australian National University. I am primarily concerned with the pattern of conduct between humans and our natural world. Meriam ancestry, recognised by members of Torres Strait Islander communities in ACT, Queensland and Torres Straits.

Need for a broader articulation of food production and supply systems:

This submission is concerned with the need for a broader articulation of food production and supply systems in rural and remote area communities, namely the inclusion of:

- The interactions between and within biogeophysical and human environments, which determine a set of food production and supply activities;

- The activities themselves (production, through to consumption; and hunting and gathering); and

- Outcomes of the activities (contributions to food security, environmental security and social welfare).

Context for this broader articulation:

The need for a broader articulation is necessary as food security systems, ecosystem services and social welfare in rural and remote locations will be affected in the immediate future by global environmental changes and global market downturns. These changes affect the capacity of the modern food system to deliver goods to people in geographically isolated communities. These changes also challenge underpinning societal assumptions inherent in remote area stores and the capacity for people in these communities to benefit from secure food sources. Food Security is an integral human right in domestic and international law including the right to freedom from hunger and malnutrition and to right to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing and to the continuous improvement in living conditions.

In this submission I seek to include a broader articulation of food security into government policies that might result in the uptake of strategies concerning the production, supply and consumption of food in rural and remote area Australia. This broader articulation might also assist in developing an evidence base to build adaptive capacities in rural and remote area communities. These capacities would aim to bolster the resilience of food systems in the face of global environmental and economic change. The first objective would be to redress the problems inherent in modern food systems in servicing remote area communities.

Modern Food Systems

Modern food systems present multiple challenges across Australia. Some challenges are environmental e.g. supply of water for irrigation and a trend toward larger farm sizes. Other challenges are directly related to the corporate concentration in processing and packaging of food which has now surpassed farming as the dominant economic activity in the overall food system. Additionally, challenges arise from the activities of distribution and retail of food

around the globe. Food distribution networks have greatly expanded as trade routes have improved and extended meaning food now travels over large distances exacerbating the negative effects of the 'ecological footprint' as well as facilitating an unequal distribution of the quality and quantity of food. Food availability affects consumer purchasing patterns. Different populations of people have adapted different patterns of eating; consequently nutritional concerns about food relate to malnutrition in some places and obesity in others.

QUESTIONS:

1. A can of baked beans grown in India and packaged in China makes its way to the Mimili Store on the APY Lands. Whilst they might seem expensive, what are ecological costs to the environment of the can of baked beans? Are there ways to reduce the ecological footprint of supplying food to communities? What are they?

2. If Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in overcrowded housing, or live in large family groups, is it necessary to package 500mls of hair shampoo, or buy it in bulk? Does packaging of goods in remote area stores need to be reviewed?

3. Is an urban shop shelf a good purchasing model for people, or would it be better as a bulk-food, minimal packaging cooperative?

4. In places where you do not have consumer choice, is it necessary to spend additional money on advertising and packaging?

5. Should we have plastic bags in rural and remote area stores?

6. Can stores be held legally accountable for exacerbating the nutrition concerns in communities if they are positioned to be the only source of food in the community?

Societal Assumptions underpinning stores in rural and remote area communities

These modern food systems have been developed to meet the needs of people residing in urban areas in Australia – populations of people who almost solely rely on purchasing food. In rural and remote area communities the terms 'store' (i.e. to amass then hoard food until it is ready to be consumed) or 'shop' (to engage with the global and corporate world to consume a purchase) undermines the role of traditional food production and consumption in rural and remote communities, who 'hunt' game or who 'gather' food. Also missing from these terms is the integrity of the social aspects of food production and supply systems that underpin Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities: intergenerational teaching and learning, looking after country, remembering storylines, sharing time on country with family and friends, talking in language and recognising aspects of the biosystems of which we are a part.

'Stores' and 'Shops' also pre-determine the protein sources available for consumption – chicken, beef and lamb replacing goanna, dugong and kangaroo. Shops in essence, perpetuate

food insecurity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote areas by introducing processed food that contains fat, added chemicals, and high levels of salt and sugar. These products replace traditional food sources available in traditional food systems. These systems of food production and consumption require human intervention and care of country. Rather than expending energy to acquire food, people can now access processed food from a shop. The utilisation of store food in rural and remote area communities is affected by poor hygiene, storage capacities, food preferences and physiological conditions which affect food absorption (e.g. people with chronic disease).

Modern food supply systems also assume that the quality of 'modern foods' is better than or an appropriate replacement for ancient foods. E.g. Roma Tomatoes are better than Bush Tomatoes, John West Salmon is better than Murray Island Sardines.

QUESTIONS:

7. Are we trying to replicate urban based stores into remote area communities? How are these different? Should they be different?

8. Are stores in rural and remote areas to completely replace the food production capacity of the eco systems in which people live?

9. Can stores supplement the food production systems of ecosystems in which people live? If so, then how?

10. Does store food have to be grown in crops, or farmed or graze and be transported from over 100 kilometres away from the community?

11. Is it possible for stores to receive and sell produce generated from members of the community?

12. Does each crop have to generate a profit?

13. Is 'new' food (generated from modern food systems) better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than 'ancient' food (generated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander food systems)? If it is not better, then how can we have better representation of 'ancient' food in stores?

Climate Change

Climate change will have significant impacts in Australia. One of the most arid continents in the world and vulnerable to disruptions to water supply, increases in the severity of storms, floods and droughts and coastal erosion due to sea level rise; climate change will have negative impacts on human health. There are equity, health, human rights and livelihood issues to consider in relation to climate change. It is likely that Indigenous peoples living in

rural and remote areas will be the first and most severely affected group of people in Australia.

Socially, climate change has a disproportionate impact on already vulnerable people and communities. While the Declaration of Indigenous Rights state that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the right to participate in and to strengthen Indigenous cultural life including traditional food security; the Interagency Support Group on Indigenous Issues in September 2007 concluded that changes in climate will gravely harm the health of Indigenous peoples, traditional lands and waters and that many of the plants and animals upon which they depend for survival will be threatened by the immediate impacts for climate change" [2] Peoples cultural lives and traditional food sources are likely to be stressed by climate change in coming years.

In the next ten years we also expect to have Australia's first climate change refugees – Torres Strait Islanders living on coral cays in the Torres Strait will become displaced due to rising sea levels, and people from inland communities will also have to consider relocation as the desertification of Australia's inland areas and the lack of a sustainable water supply affects people's ability to live in these areas.

Prior to being displaced as a result of climate change, it is likely that household costs will increase for people living in rural and remote Australia. For example people's capacity to pay for electricity in remote areas will be adversely affected by climate change. Increasing temperatures will increase the usage of electrical appliances as people attempt to control the environments in houses and buildings. This will increase costs for individual users. Similarly, costs will increase as the magnitude and frequency of natural disasters increases; the cost of insuring houses, buildings and infrastructure against extreme events will also rise, be inhibitive or even withdrawn in some areas.

Long term climatic change and health impacts:
Long term climate change increases malnutrition and consequent disorders affecting people's health and wellbeing. Climate change impacts on food production with implications for child growth and development. Climate change also impacts on health in the following ways:
- Increased deaths and injury resulting from heatwaves, fires and droughts;
- Increased risk of water-borne infectious diseases from poor water quality;

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[2] UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, *Interagency Support Group on Indigenous Peoples Issues*, Collated Paper on Indigenous People and Climate Change, February 2008. available from www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/E_C19_2008_CRP.2.doc

- Increased frequency of cardio respiratory diseases due to higher concentrates of ground-level ozone;
- Increase in vector borne diseases caused by wider distribution of infectious diseases;
- Increases in food-borne infectious diseases, through exposure to higher temperatures;
- Increases in asthma and allergic diseases from increased production of spores and pollens;
- Mental health problems and emotional stresses associated with social, economic and demographic dislocations (particularly with Children)[3]

Temperatures will affect transportation and storage in communities and households:
Machinery in the stores is currently manufactured to operate at 35 degrees Celsius, will need to operate at 45 degrees Celsius with increases in temperatures across Australia likely. This will require more repairs (particularly on refrigeration equipment), be more costly (as professionals will have to travel to communities to fix the problem, or send the equipment away for repair or replacement).

Transportation to remote areas will be affected by temperature increases e.g. 45 degrees Celsius – train lines buckle affecting rail transportation; maintaining constant temperatures of refrigeration on route for fresh produce will be more difficult. Higher temperatures result in bacterial food borne disease and water borne infections requiring attention to food hygiene practices.

This requires increased capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to implement food security measures in their places of residence. This will require the purchase of household storage and refrigeration equipment that has to be run out of the household budget.

Climate change will increase consumer spending and transference of costs to consumers:
Climate change as it affects food production and food supply issues will mean more costs built into the end users costs for store based products.

If refrigeration in stores is not able to function properly in increasing heat, or electricity becomes unstable, or goes out for a couple of hours (or days in the event of storms and cyclones) then more food will need to be thrown out, or people risk food poisoning.

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[3] G Horton and T McMichael 2008, *Climate Change Health Check 2020*: a report prepared for the Climate Institute of Australia, Doctors for the Environment, www.dea.org.au, p. 10.

Current electricity grid capacity in communities will need to grow expedientially as people try to maintain comfortable levels of heating and cooling to houses that are not designed for large scale climatic variations. This will make electricity supply capacity less constant putting food security at risk.

The quality of food supply will change:
The likelihood is that food supply will move toward non-perishable goods to keep costs down. The AMA's position is that this will increase malnutrition – as a change in diet as a response to climate change issues - increasing supply of processed foods replacing scarce, traditional food supplies becoming extinct will see a change in diet likely to result in increases in the rates of diabetes, obesity and hypertension.

Reduced industry will see a downturn in the quality of food in rural and remote area stores:
Downturns in tourism and other industries (mining) will mean a down turn in the quality of food provided to remote area stores. Community stores enjoy increased quality of food and profit from stores while servicing industry clients who have capacity to pay for consumables. As industries move away from remote areas, the imperative to provide the quality food to customers who cannot pay is reduced.

Increases in temperatures and costs of fuel will make it difficult to hunt:
Heat Strain is likely to affect people's capacity for hunting and gathering and the biodiversity of regions in which that activity is carried out. Additionally, fuel costs combined with the running costs of owning and maintaining vehicles or boats in remote areas will increase over time, making people's ability to access country difficult.

An ecosystems approach to food production and supply
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have multiple objectives beyond achieving and maintaining food security in rural and remote areas; in some instances preferring to go hungry but preserving other household assets (fuel for the car). In traditional food production and supply systems, country is a natural resource base; an asset upon which people depended for this survival and is just as relevant to food security as is financial, social or physical assets. The environment is more than just a food production place for people; it is a buffer against a variety of biophysical or social or economic shocks and is seen to be interdependent with people and where they live. Ecosystems are coupled with social systems in communities. People and environments have been mutually interdependent with each other; country facilitating human and environmental interactions and through these interactions, facilitated the foundations of social and cultural belonging in Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander societies. Shops do not derive from these same values, ethics and do not facilitate the foundation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society.

Overcoming the vulnerability of rural and remote area food systems

Stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities contribute to the vulnerability of food systems, described as a state when food systems are disrupted and fail to deliver food security, whether this is due to an overwhelming shock, structural issues, and actors in conflicts or environmental degradation[4]. Developing an ecological framework in which to consider the impact of stores will necessarily reposition human affairs in the ecosystems in which we live. Reconfiguring remote area stores into sustainability stores can only be achieved in the reconfiguration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities into sustainability academies.

I recently spoke at the *Science meets Parliament* event about establishing partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and scientists. I concluded by stating that outback Australia could be conceptualised as a science park in which both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and scientists worked with others in mutually beneficial relationships to make improvements to the ecosystems, and consequently human societies who invariably rely on these ecosystems. I stated that it was necessary to redefine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities from being 'urbanised ghettos in geographically isolated places' into 'sustainability academies', places in which peoples lives, energy sources, food production and supply and education was enhanced by living sustainably, by living 'off the grid' and within the ecological confines of their 'country'. Living sustainably could be achievable as Aboriginal people own and control over 25% of Australia's land mass. I make some suggestions here that could be considered as policy platforms into the future for rural and remote area stores.

Recommendation 1

Adopt a broader articulation of food production and supply issues in remote area communities to include the interactions between and within biogeophysical and human environments, determine a set of food production and supply activities; and in which the outcomes of food production and supply systems contribute to food security, environmental security and social welfare

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[4] P.J. Ericksen, "What is the vulnerability of a food system to global environmental change?" Published in *Ecology and Society* (Volume 13, Number 2, Article 14, 2008).

Recommendation 2

Consider remote area stores as supplementing the food production capacities of the ecosystems in which people live. Consider the ecological costs of modern food production and supply systems and reduce the 'ecological footprint' of stock in remote area stores.

Recommendation 3

Consider reconfiguring Aboriginal communities into sustainability academies, in which all community and redevelop societal infrastructure (schools, councils [governance], clinics, and stores) on principles of sustainability.

Recommendation 4

Undertake a spatially explicit analysis looking at food flows, local food availability, networks and linkages with sources/sinks. Sustainability academies would operate as a centre node which interacted with a series of external nodes or supply sources - hopefully within 100 kilometres.

Recommendation 5

Dedicate resources so research can be undertaken into the concepts of sustainability stores, in sustainability communities to conceive what food production and supply might look like, what values would underpin a newly redefined food system for remote area stores. If possible, dedicate resources to 5 pilot communities to become 'sustainable academies'.

Recommendation 6

Do vulnerability analysis of food systems in remote areas and develop adaptation strategies to overcome or lessen these vulnerabilities.

Recommendation 7

Assess ecosystem services and localised food production or supply as possible sources of employment and income including the development and building of alternative food storage and preparation equipment (eg Solar Ovens from Costa Rica), servicing individual communities with the opportunity to grow their own fresh tropical fruits and vegetables in the short term, and, as experience and skill levels build up, to service wider markets.

Recommendation 8

Ascertain whether different distribution networks could be developed at local level and explicitly around sustainable remote area stores. A more traditional food production and supply system might facilitate different relationships between cash, sharing, exchanging, and

increase vulnerable people's buying power. Investing in teaching micro business skills to community people might supplement a sustainability store in remote area community.