



Creative
RESPONDERS

Episode 2 Transcript

We would like to acknowledge the traditional owners on whose land this podcast was produced and pay our respects to their elders past and present. We would also like to acknowledge the commitment and sacrifice of First Nations people in the preservation of country and culture. This was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Phil Rist: I remember going up in the helicopter not long after fisheries rung up and they said they're gonna get a helicopter and go look around the saltwater country here and they said you wanna come and I said yeah alright I'll jump on a helicopter you know and have a look.

Scotia: Right after Cyclone Yasi hit the wet tropics of North Queensland, Phil Rist looked down from a helicopter.

Phil Rist: Over the top of the range when we were flying over the range going down to Ingham and then we were going come up along the coast and along the beach and the Alexandra palms - They normally flower a certain time of year but the hill was - it was it was like they just responded after this disaster may never blooming everywhere. They were flowering it was an amazing sight. And so your country you know it goes through its natural processes and how it heals itself but it's still a long way, it's still not a hundred percent there, Scotia. Some vegetation on the mangroves and some of the country up the back are still recovering from it. You know you can see the scars are still there. But it'll come back. It will come back. +

Scotia: This is Creative Responders, a podcast from the Creative Recovery Network. I'm Scotia Monkivitch.

This time, we're taking you to Cardwell - half-way between Townsville and Cairns on the East Coast of Australia - to look at that regeneration after Cyclone Yasi.

You're going to hear about the role Arts, culture, and Indigenous-led recovery played in the immediate response, and in the years since.

When the cyclone hit, the local Indigenous Arts centre turned into a shelter.

What happened next changed the way the local First Nations leaders and rangers see their role in the community, and emergency response.

Phil Rist: My name's Phil Rist. I'm the Executive Officer and one of the co-founders of Girringun...

Scotia: Phil's led Girringun since it was founded in the mid-1990s.

Phil Rist: I'm a Nywaigi person from round Ingham area.

Girringun Aboriginal Corporation is a Traditional Owner managed and owned community organisation in North Queensland.

Phil Rist: We're between the two major World Heritage areas here. We've got the Wet Tropics World Heritage area - goes right down to the end of my country down to the southern end and goes all way up to Cooktown and then we've got the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park World Heritage area. And then you go out towards we've also got some sort of some open sort of Gum Tree Country and black soil plain and and that as well as or more semi semi dry sort of country.

Scotia: It represents nine traditional owner groups in the area, bringing them together to run a range of programs.

Phil Rist: If we start from the south. We've got my mob, the Nywaigi people. We've got Warragamay, Bandjin which is Hinchinbrook Island mob, and Girramay here. Djiru which is around Mission Beach area. Gulnay from around the Tully River area, Gugu Badhun from random Greenvale. Jirrbal from around that top of the part of the Atherton Tablelands around Ravenshoe and those sort of places. Herberton. And then we've got Warungnu people which is out towards a little bit further north than Gugu Badhun around Greenville but further north right round the top upper reaches of the Herbert River area there. So they're the nine groups yeah vast country you know big area big area and um yeah we've been together now for a long long time.

Scotia: Girringun fills all sorts of roles in the local community. There are always a lot of activities going on at once.

It runs a ranger program, advises at a policy level, maintains a nursery of local native plants ... on the day we visit 30 young people are doing their Coxswain certificate so they can go out on water Country and help monitor and protect the reef.

But something they're known for throughout Australia and internationally is their Arts Centre.

The Girringun Arts Centre is in the main street of Cardwell.

If you drive the four hours up the coast from Townsville to Cairns it's right in the middle.

Joann: you'll see there's some beautiful big boomerangs painted with local art. And it's a great way of grabbing the traveler's attention.

Scotia: Joann Russo is showing us around.

Joann: I'm the manager of the Girringun Aboriginal Arts Center in Cardwell.

Joann: So we're, we've come through our beautiful big glass doors into the gallery space as you can see it's full of work created by the nine traditional groups we work with.

Joann: So the works you see here are a representation of their history their culture and the new stories about the ever-changing lands around them and environments around them and how they still connect to country today.

Scotia: If you've seen work from Giringun it's likely been a Bagu. There's a display of traditional Bagu on the back wall of the gallery.

Joann: To you and I or people who are unfamiliar with them they look a little human ish form. They're a traditional tool used to create fire. It's historically known in predominantly used throughout the region with the groups that we represent and work with and they're based on the fire spirit and it is in the image of a man. Each one is painted in ochres from the local clays around the area. Each pattern you will see is a signature of the artist and expresses or marks ownership of the bagu.

Scotia: These Bagu are the traditional form, made out of local wood.

Joann: The hard is the fire stick itself which is referred to as the Jerman and then the body itself is the soft which is the the milky pine and you put the two together rub then creates fire.

Scotia: And they can only be created by certain people in the community, adhering to certain protocols.

Joann: So there are a lot of protocols around the traditional form. Certain people from the groups can make them and you know we try to adhere to that and through consultation with the Elders they were given permission to create a contemporary form which is more inclusive of everyone in the community.

Scotia: This contemporary form of the Bagu is in the gallery too, displayed in a cabinet, all colour, on stands of different heights.

Joann: And because the bagu form is so unique to us it was a way for all the other artists to create that branding awareness of rainforest country but then also give them a form or a medium in telling stories of their own. Whether they are traditional stories or whether they're contemporary stories or you know some of the stories are about Creation some are actually about the changes in the environment. The impacts to the environment. You see trees, you see flowers. You've got a landscape with birds. Colors, patterns. It's constantly just a reflection of what they're seeing and what they're doing in everyday life. And they are very special.

The artists. They use them in a very interesting way of even expressing moods and how they're feeling at that time. You know you get happy ones you get sad ones.

Scotia: These contemporary Bagu forms have been displayed in galleries and at exhibits around the world.

There are some along the foreshore, as you drive into Cardwell.

Joann: I'm sure when you would have been driving in did you notice there were three on the forshore. Yeah I've been told that's one of the most Instagram photos for the Cardwell region.

Scotia: While we're talking in the gallery one of the Giringun rangers comes by.

Michael: My name's Michael George, I'm a proud Warragamay man from down at Ingham. I'm one of the senior rangers here, been here for about three years. So basically what we're doing at the moment here in Giringun is mainly some compliancing on the waters with fisheries and marine parks and do our own compliancing for cultural reasons. And fires... Giringun does our own planned burns now which I help manage and whatnot.

Scotia: Can you explain maybe a little way of how you work with the local elders in deciding these kind of projects that you do or the way that you then engage back into Country as protector?

Michael: So everything we do with the rangers actually goes through the elders or all the nine tribes that are under Giringun. Our ranger coordinator actually contacts them or our communications officer contacts them. We go to sit down with them before we actually do the project tell them what we're gonna do where we're gonna do it. We even bring them with us, bring them out on the country itself so they get back on country and they will talk to the country for us to do the work. And we try and get our Elders out there as much as possible get them in the cars and take them places they haven't been in years because you know these days the Elder's wisdom and knowledge is very valuable to us. And that's what we need to do and get back to the country itself and actually try to preserve it for the younger generation coming through.

Scotia: This engagement with local Elders - through the Arts Centre and the Ranger program, is essential for Giringun.

And the Knowledge they share is increasingly important to disaster preparedness as the impact of climate change becomes ever more apparent.

Michael: We had one of our Girramay Elders here, Grandad Claud, he was talking to us about what's been happening at Murray Upper, Murray Falls and that and he's said the seasons are just changing too much. We had a big wet season. And now this big dry season coming up. It's going to be massive for us. And he said he's never seen it like this before. They normally have perfect seasons so they know exactly what to do and what not to do on certain seasons and they're saying you can't really pick it at the moment. Three months of the year is supposed to be for wet. We had 5 months of rain so...and now it's going to become a big dry season and the rain made it worse for us.

Michael is helping out with the coxswains training in the workshop space today. And it's clear he's often around the Arts Centre as well.

Joann: The Rangers assist us when we want to go out on country collecting materials

Joann: So the rangers assist us when we want to go out on country collecting materials and all of the programs are like that, every program that Giringun has - each and every one is

intertwined with each other which is great because then there's more minds, more collaboration, just bigger and better things and just really diversifying because everything revolves around our culture but also it's about the environment in which we live and how do we protect that and maintain that through cultural knowledge and practice.

Scotia: The artists gather on Tuesdays, out at a ranger station in the National Park that's been turned into a workshop.

There they work with clay, wood, painting and weaving. They share stories and work some of those stories into their art.

And some tell the stories of what's happened here, after Yasi.

Joann: Most of the new contemporary weavings that we are looking at at the minute are made from various recycled materials.

Scotia: Joann shows us some weavings that don't look like the others ... they're made out of comms wire.

Joann: You know some of them originally so we have other mindis, mindis were actually used to hold a message stick. So it was a way of communicating so we're taking a modern way of communicating recycling it in a traditional way of communicating so it's I think it's very ironic.

Joann: Especially after Yasi you know anything that is lying around instead of just going to landfill were taken, actually there were some leftover chainsaws that were after Yasi that we used as part of the cleanup and they were repurposed into a sculptural piece. So yeah nothing is ever wasted and if there is a limit on natural materials we go scouting for anything that may be used as a substitute.

Scotia: In February 2011 tropical cyclone Yasi was building off the coast of Queensland.

Yasi was a massive category-five cyclone. People evacuated the region, or sought shelter where they could.

As it approached the coast, Premier Anna Bligh told Queenslanders it had the potential to be the biggest cyclone the state had ever seen.

Phil Rist: And there was like 40 or so people in Girringun at this time, kids and all

Phil was one of those people, gathered in the art studio. At the time it was still behind the gallery in town, about a block back from the beach.

Phil Rist: We was there when we first started we had mattresses and everything. And then the coppers come in and the SES and they said we've gotta tell you guys that if it hits at high tide this will all be under.

Phil Rist: So our modelling has told us that if it arrives at high tide and they pointed to the wall they said this is how far the water would be. Come on you guys roll up the swag. We've got to get out of here.

Scotia: They got as many people as possible upstairs, to the second-storey of the Girringun offices.

Phil Rist: And so some of the men stayed downstairs you know ended up staying there. It wouldn't have been ideal trying to move around at night with this thing baring down so we had to start moving. And I think it was about this time now we started packing up. But that was where we was first and then so some of the men stayed downstairs and everybody else women and children and babies and that went up went upstairs up into the up in the top there.

Phil Rist: It was it was a frightening frightening show. It felt like if I could describe it it felt like some evil monster or something just trying to rip the ceiling off. You know you can you could hear him come and then just kind of dddddd And it's like he's right he's trying to dig his finger into the roof and rip it off you know.

Scotia: The storm moved past Cardwell, up over the mountains, cutting a destructive path through North Queensland.

Phil Rist: Getting up in the morning it was like something out of War of the Worlds out the back sitting standing up on the back veranda. You could almost expect to see those big giant things walking [makes noise] this sort of stuff you know. It was pretty freaky. It was pretty freaky the change was drastic.

Scotia: The Girringun office and arts centre was still full of people - the cyclone damaged 75 percent of Cardwell's properties and destroyed crops on surrounding farms.

The highway that ran through town looked like it had been swallowed up by the beach.

Phil Rist: So when they set up a bit of a emergency centre down at the library there where everybody met.

Scotia: After a few days, Phil and his wife headed down there to get some water and supplies for everyone holed up at Girringun, and he ran into one of their partners.

Phil Rist: He said we've been waiting for you to turn up here because we wanna talk to you about um entering into an agreement between Girringun and the state government to employ about 30 or 40 people.

Scotia: For Phil, it was recognition of the role Girringun was already filling in the community.

Phil Rist: ... they were waiting for me specifically to get there to that emergency centre to have a yarn about that. I signed the contract there and then.

And so we had uh went through a process of getting around 40 people signed up to start participating in the cleanup.

And some of those people that were part of that still work for us at Girringun now.

And so there was that concerted effort from a Girringun perspective and government I suppose of really diving into the recovery process.

Scotia: It was new territory for the organisation - but not unlike what they already did as rangers.

Phil Rist: They would they would go around to people's backyards you know and because they were a little bit to the side they were able to go and 'aw let's go and help out Mrs Jones out here or you know there was that flexibility there I suppose or whatever you know.

The only way that some of those community members could really show their appreciation, other than a cup of tea and a scone you know, was going and putting it up in a public place and then so that you know you get into the IGA supermarket there or wherever they are on the public notice board and there's all these little yellow stick-its saying we thank you Girringun, we really appreciate you guys coming and helping us and just a little story to go with it. I should have collected them and kept them but I didn't even think about it. But it was quite emotional to see that stuff there and how people wanted to show their appreciation.

It really opened up our eyes to how we should better respond to this stuff or be better prepared to respond to it in the future.

We was always keen to be involved in the community but that was the day that I think that was a time that that became a profound reality.

Scotia: Not only did it cause Phil to rethink the role Girringun played in emergency response - but it changed the way the organisation approached community and social issues.

Phil Rist: So before Cyclone Yasi we were heavily involved in basic cultural heritage and stuff. But when that cyclone hit that was still there but our - how we dealt with the social issues we went through the roof. How we deal with our people. How are we, like I mentioned about you know health and even education all this sort of business. Those social issues really really came to the fore there. So we had to shift our thinking from the normal not shift but maintain it but now focus a bit on on that stuff as well.

Scotia: In the years since Cyclone Yasi, the importance of the arts centre in building community resilience and as a way of fortifying the confidence of Traditional Owners and Elders has become clear.

Phil Rist: And we've been doing that ever since, it's become a much more even sort of a level and we got to look after our mob and this this arts centre is one of those mechanisms for doing that. You know people have pride and they, as we spoke last time, they use their art to tell a story about Cyclone Yasi and that and their personal journeys and that.

The story of this shared experience was articulated and shared through the work produced - the grief over the cyclones impact on country and importantly, its capacity to regenerate.

Something else you can also see reflected in the art from the time is the resilience of community that was collectively rebuilt.

Phil says the process of engaging with the Arts Centre over the years since its establishment has been transformative for some.

Phil Rist: I've grown up with these people in my life.

Scotia: They've gained confidence in telling their stories.

Phil: But now they're jumping on planes going all over the world standing up in front of an audience to be on a podium and speaking and speaking with so much confidence. And I scratch my head sometimes and think, what the hell's happened here? In a good way you know. And that's part of coming out here, sitting down with each other and and fellowship with each other and and sharing stories and ideas.

Scotia: In 2015 the United Nations endorsed the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

It's an agreement adopted by the international community that maps a way forward for reducing the health impacts, economic losses and physical damage caused by disaster.

Something really important about Sendai is that it recommends that post-disaster reconstruction should be based on "respecting cultural sensitivity" and free "prior informed consent" of Indigenous peoples.

This is significant - it acknowledges that something needed to change in the way governments were engaging with Indigenous populations. It's a shift that places greater value on Indigenous Knowledges in the development and implementation of policies.

The Sendai Framework, together with the UN Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, has the potential to launch a new generation of resilience-building where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples work closely together.

Indigenous peoples all over the world have co-existed with large weather events for many centuries, relying on signs from the environment to indicate seasonal change...

Phil Rist: And from a cultural perspective you know uh those that those storms have been around for thousands of years.

Scotia: As Phil points out, the impact that colonisation has had on the landscape around Cardwell has changed the impact cyclones and other disasters have on the community.

Phil Rist: White man intervention has made these these storms even worse. You know a lot of elders say that - that the farming practices, pastoralists or whatever, they change water courses and straighten them out, so when the water comes down it just rushes down and takes everything.

And so forth so the changing landscape has really added to that could have been a Category 3 or 4 cyclone but because of the changing of the landscape it's become a five.

Scotia: Indigenous peoples have always had strategies to prepare for these seasonal weather events that are now referred to as natural disasters but the changes that have been imposed on the land have disrupted the deep connectedness between land and people.

Phil Rist: And it's around season you know we had our cultural calendars we didn't have a paper that says this is November December and this sort of stuff - we had a seasonal calendar. And that's when they moved into the higher country and up the back up here there's caves everywhere Scotia, and that's where a lot of them go and set up a semi-permanent camp there. But also in the rainforest it was a bit of a natural break there. The Barrier Reef was a was a was a natural barrier as well, and other than that you just try to hole up somewhere and just wait I suppose you know.

Scotia: So colonisation, through infrastructure overlay and agriculture impacts, has enhanced the impact disasters have and disrupted the capacity of First Nations communities to adequately prepare and respond.

For this reason, it is important to acknowledge that decolonisation goes hand in hand with indigenous peoples leading the way.

While the international framework emphasises drawing on Indigenous Knowledges to enhance scientific knowledge, poorly-handled engagement could exacerbate these problems.

It's an issue made more urgent by climate change, with increasingly unpredictable and extreme weather events.

Seraeah Wyles: My name is Seraeah Wyles I'm a Girramay, Warrgamay woman so Girramay from the Cardwell region and Warrgamay from Ingham region. I'm the communication officer here at Giringun, I've been here for four years and two months now. I started off as a volunteer because I just wanted to come back to Country and work for my people and I was very passionate about what Giringun was about and I wanted to work for my mob.

Scotia: Seraeah's main role at Giringun is to engage with the Traditional Owners and keep them informed and engaged in everything the organisation is doing.

Seraeah: And what are the opportunities for traditional owners and just to let them know about any sort of opportunities out in the community as well with some of our partner organizations. But a lot of it is based on our land and sea country activities.

Scotia: We need to see Traditional Owners from the wet tropics centred in discussions around climate impact.

Seraeah: You know there's a real shift in the sense that it is affecting a lot of our country within the Wet Tropics. I think my real focus is is trying to prioritize you know what effects of climate change are affecting our region.

Scotia: It's a conversation she's having more and more with Elders who have a deep knowledge of Country.

Seraeah: They're the people that would actually see the significant changes like in terms of what used to be a very full running creek is now no water there. And so there has to be a reason why there's no water. So you know it's like looking at you know how to investigate those things and use tribal ecological knowledge to the Western science knowledge and you know using our partners that we work very closely with like Terrain NRM our room or Wet Tropics Management Authority to find or investigate those things.

Scotia: One example is right off the coast.

Seraeah: You know like I know in sea country it's definitely coral bleaching. You know that's a big thing for us because we have six saltwater groups and one of the biggest coral bleaching is in I believe Juru and Girramay country which is Cardwell and Mission Beach

So you know I think rather than not talk about I think we need to talk about it now and really need to educate our traditional owner community about you know that these are the climate change things are happening. And I guess just engage with them and ask them what are the things that you notice that could possibly be climate change effects and then work on I guess solutions how to I guess minimize them or to solve them.

I'm very concerned because you know I don't want to see our country be degraded anymore. You know we've had a lot of rainforest especially in the Girringun region removed for agriculture. You know and I think a lot more work has to be put back into reconnecting. Reconnecting those you know rainforest areas. But yeah look I know climate change is affecting us quite rapidly and I think like we need to start acting really quickly. But it's just about how we do that and how we get all of our people together. Because nine tribes is such a lot of people and the country we have to cover is like one point two million hectares of land so massive it is a massive task but anything's possible.

I definitely think Girringun is has been like a you know big support in terms of bridging that gap with the community. Look some people are still very old school. They're still very set in their ways. But you know you can only just keep trying and I think the more we tell our story the more we share and the more that the broader community can understand where people are coming from and you know why country and cultural practices are so important to us I think they might just come around.

Scotia: At Girringun there's a concerted effort across the art centre, the ranger program, and their post-Yasi emergency response, to centre Indigenous Knowledges and Traditional Owner-led decision making.

But given the problems are exacerbated by colonisation, and framed through non-Indigenous structures, how can Indigenous Knowledges be incorporated in a meaningful way by emergency management?

What is best practice here?

Phil Rist: What I call it is contemporary sovereign or de facto sovereignty.

Phil points to the relationship Girringun and the government now have on water Country as an example of what is increasingly possible across a range of sectors.

Phil Rist: When years ago there was no such thing as legitimate hunting turtle and dugong in a white fella way. There was always legitimate hunting in a black fella way. But in a white fella way there was no such thing as legitimate hunting of turtle and dugong. And Giringun we were the first to establish this thing called the Traditional Uses of Marine Resources Agreement. And it is based on our sovereignty. Fast forward now - whenever one of our mob want to go hunt a dugong or a turtle, they must come through Giringun. And then we refer to the relevant Traditional Owner group. And there's a whole process in this here before we issue that authority and it is us that issues the authority not government and not anybody else.

So when we issue an authority to hunt we then let GRUMPA know, The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, that Giringun has just issued an authority and that's all the role that government played in it. But it is us under our decision making process and under our own process that we issue that authority to take a turtle or dugong, nobody else. So we act as if we have the sovereign and the world acts as if we have the right to sovereignty. And that's just part of this process of building that cultural legitimacy and that sovereignty. But in a way that everybody's a part of it and everybody recognises it.

Scotia: We've heard about how Cyclone Yasi changed the relationship Giringun had with the local community.

And how it changed how the organisation approached social issues, doubled down on the need to build capacity for the resilience of the Indigenous communities it supported.

But it was the catalyst for another change - it set an example of how Indigenous rangers could mobilise in emergency response.

Phil Rist: Three of our neighbouring ranger groups turned up Scotia, just turned up out of the blue. But having said that they they went through their own troubles to get there you know.

This outside, practical support from Indigenous rangers made Phil realise the potential for the rangers in emergency management more broadly.

If they were able to mobilise in response to Yasi without any structures in place, what could be possible with formalised connections and training?

Phil Rist: How about we get better at doing it as an alliance of all. Because in those places the ranger programs have more gear more resources and government sometimes, they've got boats and tractors and goodness knows what else.

Scotia: Giringun can imagine their lessons from Yasi being implemented by other Indigenous ranger groups.

Phil Rist: We went armed with our experiences from that we went to the Ingenu which is right up the top up in the Cape, I think it's the northern most part of this country before you start getting into the Torres Strait and New Guinea. And every year they have these big Northern Rangers, northern Australia ranger conferences where all the rangers from Kimberly's right across come together - Indigenous rangers. So we put together a bit of a PowerPoint presentation. And we went to that range conferences and said to them, well this what we've learned.

Scotia: Their presentation put forward the idea of an Indigenous Rangers Disaster Response Strategy. It was met with unanimous support.

Girringun is now leading the process with government and partners to develop this further into an Emergency response protocol framework that can be adapted and implemented in consultation with traditional owner groups across different communities.

Phil Rist: And it just seems like a massive sin if we don't be in a position to mobilize those sort of resources to react to this sort of business you know.

Creative Responders is an initiative of The Creative Recovery Network. Thanks to Phil, Joann, Michael, Saraya, Nephi, Joyce, Olivia and the rest of the Girringun team

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Thanks for listening.