Abstract: This paper looks at the processes of consultation in relation to the care and protection of environments from Indigenous perspectives. It should be noted that the environments include not only plants and animals, but sites of significance that play such an important part in the lives of Indigenous peoples. Research has shown that in the majority of cases, management of, and decisions for the environment, were, and still are, undertaken without the inclusion of Indigenous peoples. However, the paper looks not at the environmental concerns of Indigenous peoples as such, but looks more at the area of consultation as the initial process of environmental remedy. The paper outlines how one goes about involving Indigenous peoples in environmental care, to the extent that they proffer vital, traditional environmental knowledge; who should be included in the processes of consultation; where they can be located; and why they should be included in environmental decision making. If the environmental ills currently plaguing our country are to be addressed, consultation with traditional Indigenous custodians must take place. If consultation is to be effective then the concerns of all must be placed on the table. Communication, negotiation, and compromise must be the agenda by which all stakeholders participate, by which the environments are planned for, and managed by. This paper highlights the fact that all peoples are responsible for country, that all should be invited to participate in that caring. In light of this, this paper has as its target audience, those who would make decisions for the environment, those who see ecological sustainable development as an environmental issue, and those who see that the future of all peoples lies in the care and protection of a country that has given so much, but in the last 200 plus years, has received almost nothing in return.
Consultation and the Environment: Some Indigenous Perspectives

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Keywords: consultation, environment, Indigenous.

1. Introduction
The environments that sustained diverse Indigenous families, groups or communities, consisted of all that lived and breathed, that swam, ran, swayed in the breeze, that flew, hopped, skipped and jumped, or crawled. The environments discussed in this paper are not only flora and fauna based, but also include all Indigenous places of significance, and all the resources that were utilised to develop them. These are still just as much a part of the environments, and as such, their care and protection must be given due consideration and included in any environmental decision making process.

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It is timely to mention how important it is that the different cultural backgrounds in relation to Indigenous peoples, be considered, when the consultation process is first instigated. There is a diversity of living cultures, not only in this State [1], but through the entire country, with the cultural differences amongst Indigenous peoples being just as diverse as those of non-Indigenous Australians, and just as diverse as the problems inherent in the environments today.

Included in this paper are the perspectives of a number of Indigenous peoples who have, over many years, commented on the issues that are seen by them at least, to play a significant part in the revival of ethical and appropriate environmental management. Whilst some have had the opportunity to sit at the consultation table, many have never been included in consultation processes. In order to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of those who gave freely of time and information, their perspectives, feelings, and ideas, have been italicised. It should also be noted however [that]... no one person can speak for country...the opinions of one, are not the opinions of all.
2. What is consultation?

Consultation is a process or processes whereby people from all different groups, organisations, communities, or as individuals, come together to discuss issues pertinent to them, or the people they are representing at the time. Consultation, in allowing for the provision of information by stakeholders, allows for that information to be analysed, allows Indigenous input into relevant policies and guidelines, and can create an atmosphere of trust and respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people [2]. Consultation in this context is therefore a mixture of participation, communication, negotiation, and compromise.

3. How does consultation work?

The aim of consultation should be to ensure that the voices of the various stakeholders are not only heard, but also listened to, and given the chance, people, either as individuals, groups or communities, can participate in a number of ways:

- they are invited to meetings and workshops;
- projects are put on public display for community discussion and comment;
- people are contacted by telephone and/or mail;
- door to door surveys are conducted;
- questionnaires are sent (completed and returned);
- people vote (on community issues for example);
- media campaigns are utilised;
- community members become members of local committees; and
- person to person contact takes place [3].

Whilst this list depicts how consultation can be undertaken, it does not specifically mention who should consult. In relation to the environments, with all their issues, it is important to recognise that there are a number of key stakeholders who should participate in the consultation process, not the least of these being Indigenous peoples themselves.

4. Who should speak for country?

Indigenous peoples call for consultation to be included as an integral part of all management plans or policies that directly, or indirectly, affect them. One viewpoint is that consultation and two-way discussion with all involved parties is fundamental in constructing an efficient and effective approach to cultural awareness [4].
Indigenous peoples agree that the appropriate peoples must be consulted in relation to any issue that may affect the local Indigenous community. Commented one: *This does not mean speaking with the first Indigenous person you see...may not even come from the area.* As another stated: *Partnerships with the appropriate people must be formed so that the needs of all stakeholders can be addressed.*

It is crucial to the formation of partnerships that there exists an understanding that local people must be consulted on local issues [5]. Other perceptions follow this line of thinking: *It is very important that Wiradjuri people are consulted in Wiradjuri country...all others are guests in our country...may not know about things that are important and of value to us...must speak with us first, get permission to speak to others.*

Who then, are the correct and appropriate persons to talk with? There is the suggestion that the Elders had the knowledge of all things [6]. Indigenous peoples confirm that the Elders are the most appropriate people to speak with. *The Elders must be listened to as they are the ones with the knowledge...talking with others before talking with the Elders is not the right way to go...Elders must be listened to first.* All persons commented however that *no one person can speak for country...all must be consulted eventually.*

5. Why consult?

When the issue of Indigenous heritage is raised, there appears to be a general consensus that consultation, as a partnership, is vitally important to the process of protection and preservation of that (Indigenous) heritage [7]. In writing about the subject of consultation with Indigenous peoples, one author has commented that an effective model for consultation should be devised that allows Indigenous peoples the chance to become more involved in the protection of their sites [8]. One organisation commented that the reasons for consultation are “to counteract deliberate and systematic disempowerment of Indigenous people, recognition of prior ownership, recognition of knowledge and practice, recognition of Indigenous rights, and the recognition and protection of Indigenous sites” [9]. This must be done, according to the Australian Heritage Commission, in partnership with Indigenous communities and relevant stakeholders in such a way that it is deemed to be culturally appropriate [10].

The greater the consultation levels, and the greater the involvement of Indigenous peoples, the more likelihood there is that satisfactory outcomes will ensue [11, 12], and so it is vital that the voices of Indigenous peoples are not only heard but also listened to [13]. There are those who answer the question of “why consult” with the observation that there is a great amount of knowledge in Indigenous communities, and consultation with those communities can assist in environmental protection and preservation [14, 15].
The comment “that it is in the interests of communities that heritage sites are protected and preserved and so it becomes a community responsibility to conserve heritage” [16] is a step in the right direction in relation to environmental issues, but there are words of warning. In discussing an application of a model of public involvement proposed by the Institute for Participatory Planning, is the caution however, “that guidelines should be looked at to ensure that the appropriateness of the issue is being considered” [17].

Perhaps the issue of consultation could be viewed through a different approach. Central to the protection and preservation of Indigenous places could be cultural mapping; a process that involves a community in the identification and documentation of local cultural resources [18]. In looking at the issues of cultural and economic development of communities, through the identification and documentation of local resources for example, it is very important to the success of cultural mapping, and in return, site protection, that key stakeholders and community representatives are consulted [18].

6. The benefits of consultation

When Indigenous issues are raised, there appears to be a general consensus that consultation, as a partnership, is vitally important [7]. Some have studied the effectiveness of partnerships. They have conducted research in areas that examined the issues of the formation of partnerships, the factors that lead to effective partnerships, and also to likely barriers in relation to partnerships [19]. The conclusion one may arrive at when reading their paper however is that consultation in partnerships is fairly straightforward. They comment that consultation is beneficial to those involved in the process because it can, and does, lead to trust among the participants [19]. Is it possible that it’s as easy as it sounds?

The general feeling amongst Indigenous peoples in relation to the benefits of consultation were that they saw the process as one of giving respect and honour to all those who participate in it (consultation), whilst others spoke at length on how consultation can create an awareness that is not there. One, an Elder, commented that some of the greatest benefits that can come from consultation are the creation of a greater awareness of cultures, peoples, and values. Consultation works best though when Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders know each other, and are comfortable with each other [7].
Many Indigenous peoples comment that consultation can be beneficial as it can lead to situations that are advantageous to all and can lead to more confidence in the way the system works, but they must let us have a say...some control. Many also comment that the only way consultation can be expected to produce desirable outcomes, is for that process to be an open and honest process...this is true consultation.

In an ideal world the protection of places would be undertaken by those legislated to do so [20]. Most Indigenous peoples agreed that consultation can be beneficial in the protection of places, with one commenting that, if you don’t consult, you don’t know where things are, so how the hell are you going to protect them...consultation can benefit everyone because then they would know where the places were and keep an eye on them. We do not however, live in an ideal world.

7. Barriers to effective consultation

The legal framework, the regulations, and the majority of management policies that exist in relation to environmental management and decision making are a western construct, designed by persons not of Indigenous kind, without a thought for or about, Indigenous peoples. As one Elder commented...How can effective consultation take place when some Indigenous peoples cannot understand the terminology that is used, when meetings have time constraints placed on them, or when the appropriate peoples are not spoken with?

Is it any wonder then, that Indigenous peoples find that consultation with non-Indigenous persons is neither easy nor simple [21]. In acknowledging the need for consultation, are the comments...one of the reasons the process is a hard process at the moment lies in the fact that non-Indigenous people do not consult with the appropriate persons...makes it harder for them because then they have to start all over again...like watching a dog chase it’s tail eh?

There are many environments in Wiradjuri country that are not the same as in other places. Resources such as water-ways, bush foods and medicine plants that make up environments are different than in other places, and so are perceived as being significant to local peoples and not to others. The difference between these perceptions can lead to disputes, or conflicts, of some sort. Not taking the time to understand the perceptions of another group is a major barrier to effective consultation [22]. Indigenous peoples, when asked what the barriers to effective communication may be, responded thus: They don’t really understand that we are a
different peoples, we live in different environments, our concerns are different...it’s the Aboriginal thing, talk to one or two and everything is OK... [and] people think that because we are black we don’t consult, ’cause we do, it’s our way.

An earlier suggestion that ‘one effective model’ be developed [8], highlights how the diversity of Indigenous peoples and cultures had not been not taken into account when decisions that may have affected them were discussed.

Most agreed though, that some people, when consulting, do so with good intentions. However, the good intentions are brought undone by bad practice, and that used in this manner, consultation becomes an ineffective tool. An Elder elaborated... sometimes, somebody might want to do the right thing but will go to the wrong people for advice. Again... people are afraid to speak with us...[they are] not culturally aware and they are not aware of the legalities and implications of not consulting...some people are hearing us but they are not listening to us...[they] have this head in the sand attitude...[they] hope we’ll go away. The issue is further advanced as seen in this comment...“there is no point in consulting with Indigenous people if the views, wishes and values of Indigenous people are not listened to or included in management processes” [23].

8. Indigenous guidelines to consultation

In responding to the question of how should consultation take place, most Indigenous peoples responded by commenting that there should be round table discussions, that have no rigid guidelines, no time schedule...in other words, there should be a large element of informality in all discussions...besides that, it’s easier to talk when the meeting’s informal. All however, commented that consultation should take place after initial contact. This is considered proper protocol because you just don’t go barging in to someone’s home un-announced do you?

9. Time to consult?

The dispossession from traditional lands has meant the dispossession and destruction of many traditional areas of significance. According to a Wiradjuri Elder: genocide via dislocation and assimilation has seen the continued devastation of our cultural heritage, without consulting us. Now, with the chance to speak, Indigenous peoples ask that they be consulted before development activity, or environmental decision making of any kind, begins.

Consultation in all stages of environmental decision making is needed if the broader community is to overcome or “counter Western, sometimes simplistic, ‘scientific’ models which can be perceived by some as a form of cultural imperialism” [24]. This means consulting with Indigenous peoples in the embryonic stages. Consultation with Indigenous peoples, whether as individuals, groups, or as organisations, should start from the beginning.
This should occur so that the interests of Indigenous peoples, their knowledge, beliefs, cultures, and customs are adequately addressed [25]. This should also occur so that management policies are drawn up with Indigenous input and result in the best management practices for places. Consultation however is no good after places are destroyed…no point to it. The general consensus of Indigenous peoples is that consultation should take place at the beginning, that it should be ongoing.

10. Is consultation working?
Indigenous perceptions are that whilst consultation is working in some instances, the ‘good’ is far outweighed by the ‘bad’. The overwhelming response to this question was that it could, but all activity on our land must be made known to us, so that people have to sit and talk with us…not to us, but with us. With these sentiments came others. We must rely on the policies of managements and their goodwill, not on the government making it legal…[but] policies were slippery beasts, pieces of paper drawn up mostly by white people without our say...can be changed any time they want...without including us, and as such, they can at the moment, be classed as toilet paper!

People don’t even sit down with us about anything...how can it work? In saying so, a Native Title claimant gave examples...At Condobolin in NSW; a mining company has drilled rig boring holes in land considered sacred, without the approval of the correct traditional owners of the Wiradjuri Nation. Also described was a development activity that included a road construction. This was an area where workers dug up a burial site, so the road was made with burial sand... [it] was too late to consult then because the site was destroyed and they didn’t come to us and ask us.

It seems that all is not lost though, as others have so ardently commented: Consultation has to work...will work if given a chance...people must be passionate about it... [they] must want it to work.

11. Conclusion
This paper has highlighted, albeit briefly, that there is a vast amount of literature that examines, analyses, and discusses consultation. The written resources for this paper have been selected because they look specifically at the issues regarding Indigenous peoples in the context of environmental management, and environmental decision making, which as previously indicated, includes places of significance.

Many of the authors of selected literature advocate consultation as a process or processes whereby the concerns, feelings, ideas, skills and knowledge of Indigenous peoples can be utilised. Many of these same authors suggest a model of consultation and have proffered their own version of such. They fail to realise, or take into account however, that Indigenous peoples and their respective cultures are not homogenous, they do not all do the same
things; care for country in the same manner, have the same environments and places of significance.

Indigenous peoples have argued for a long time, for consultation to be undertaken as a matter of protocol. They have argued that consultation should always take place when environmental issues are on the agenda of legislators, environmental managers, and/or environmental decision makers. Whilst not seen by Indigenous peoples as the panacea for all environmental ills, consultation is perceived as the starting point in environmental cure. This is the preferred option. It does not take courage to take it.

12. Reference


