DIALOGUING IN THE DESERT FOR
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

AMBIVALENCE, HYBRIDITY AND
REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
Murdoch University 2007
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

....................................

Natalie McGrath
Abstract

Sustainable development is becoming institutionalised across culture and geography as a framework in which to address ecological and social crises that are increasingly apparent and manifesting in diverse ways across local spaces. It is however, dominated by binary thought which is uncomfortable with ambivalence and separates self from nature and ‘the other’ of Indigenous people. Indigenous people are beginning to use the discourse of sustainable development but approach this from relational and holistic perspectives. The negotiation of representational structures and responsibility for implementing strategies towards sustainable development must account for these cultural differences and will require dialogue. This thesis explores how institutional practice and discourse frames Indigenous representation and responsibility and how this either enables or disenables dialogue with Indigenous people.

A case study approach informed the research, and included two consultancy participatory projects in 2001-2004. The case study was located in the Western Desert of Western Australia and involved the Martu people in addition to people working within institutional structures. The first project required extending community development strategies and strengthening Martu representation to take responsibility for a housing development. The second project, titled Dialogue with the Pilbara: Newman Tomorrow, involved encouraging Martu representation in a process based upon deliberative democracy. Reflections from the fieldwork form a considerable part of the analysis. The research also included analysis of a number of interviews with local institutional actors in Newman. Two major themes are outlined: power and representation; and culture. The research is reflexive and involves the use of an autoethnographic story technique which enables a better understanding of the researcher’s implicit and changing perspectives. The lessons that emerged from the reflections from the case study are insightful for sustainable development.

The thesis involves two layers (and is structured accordingly): the first relates to a case study and the second to the theory and practice of sustainable
development. The concluding section combines these two layers and emphasises the need for greater attention to Indigenous participation and autonomy in order to achieve Indigenous sustainable development. This thesis argues that diverse and hybrid Indigenous voices require considerable amplification within the discourse of sustainable development in order to provide relational and holistic perspectives. Particular focus is required upon the negotiation of representative structures to allow for Indigenous voices to be heard, and thus permit for the negotiation of responsibility across culture (an important consideration of sustainable development). This requires ongoing dialogue, creativity and reflexivity in context.
Some of the work in this thesis has appeared in the following publications

**Book chapters**


**Refereed Journal Articles**


**Fully Refereed and Edited Conference Papers**


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