

## Australian Conservation Coach Naomi Hobson Shares How Open Standards Are Bringing Her Umpila People “Back to Country”



My name is Naomi Hobson, I am an Umpila person through my father’s father and this is a bit of my story about how we re-energised our fading traditional owner group and made a plan to keep our country and our culture strong and healthy.

Our traditional country lies about halfway up the east coast of Cape York Peninsula, from a little spot on the coast called

Breakfast Creek north to a place called Friendly Point.

Our country is tropical with all the biodiversity imaginable of a place punctuated by rainforest filled mountains and watersheds that descend dramatically to the coast through our ever changing ecosystems on the coastal lowlands that border with thick mangroves, sand-dunes and shallow coastal waters. “Umpila country” then spreads some 50-70 kilometers out to sea where we have islands with fringing coral reef, enormous barrier reefs and sand cays that nurtures our diverse saltwater species such as sea turtles, dugongs and whales.

Our Umpila ancestors noted creation sites, declared special areas and established living areas that we have looked after as the traditional custodians for over a thousand generations.

But this part of my little story starts in the 1990’s when as a young girl I was fortunate to have a rich reserve of cultural and clan leadership. As a little girl, I knew no other feeling than cultural stability and groups of elders with detailed knowledge of everything we needed to know and understand about our identity our resources and our natural environment. I listened at big meetings and heard big ideas and strategies to secure our land and how it would be cared for.

My Umpila world fell apart in 1996 when our leader, my paternal grandfather, passed away suddenly. His passing was followed in succession by the passing of a handful of older cultural knowledge keepers. I felt a sense of great loss and had nothing to do with my father’s country for a long time. I felt bare, like we had no strength and guidance any longer, I was ending my teenage years and instead of further enriching ourselves through land acquisition opportunities and cultural and economic development opportunities of the time, we floundered as a clan, we lost our way. While we still maintained knowledge and cultural identity, we lost our wise counsel, a person to bring Umpila people together and lead. The country suffered because it saw less and less visits from traditional owners, and our younger people only grew up hearing about their stories and their country. For them these were just stories that must have seemed unreal.

For more than the ten years prior to 2008, Umpila had made little advancement with our aspiration to be on country and to look after our rich cultural and environmental values.

As it happened, in 2008, a small group of us started to worry about Umpila again and we got

talking to our remaining elders about what to do about the lack of progress for Umpila. We slowly pulled the family groups together for meetings and discussions and through this re-ignited a desire to get organised. With a handful of young relatives we developed a solid social foundation and a representative group to move forward where the elders left off more than a decade earlier. Things were different from before and rather than relying heavily on our elders to do everything, our group is a mix of elders with their knowledge and wisdom and young people with our energy, western education, our willingness to learn and a desire to build relationships with the outside world to support us. We formed an Umpila Steering Group in mid-2009.

The Steering Group has members chosen from each family group, so all of the country is spoken for. Its role is to develop and implement an Umpila program.

We undertook some small projects that provided opportunities for our elders to take people back to country, map some places out, and think about land and sea management aspirations as our elders had previously discussed. These small projects also help grow the seed of social capital development, looking after country and renewing the Umpila cultural identity of our younger people and providing opportunities for our elders to rekindle their dreams of keeping the country and our culture alive.

Even in these early days of coming together again, we realized the need to develop a plan so we could see and understand better, our way forward.

With the development of key relationships in particular with Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation (our indigenous Regional Organisation), The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Bush Heritage Australia (BHA), in early 2011 I was offered the opportunity to participate in Healthy Country Planning. (Healthy Country Planning (HCP/CAP) is an adaptation of Conservation Action Planning (CAP)/Open Standards tailored for community planning purposes.) With the full support of my elders, I jumped at the opportunity. I felt comfortable with the training program and excited at how we could apply this framework with Umpila to develop a plan.

The obvious benefit I received from the HCP/CAP training and coaching was that we were trained and coached on real issues that I was able to take back to my people for further discussion and consideration. My families were both happy with the skills that I have developed and confident that we were pursuing a process that will benefit us socially, culturally and support conservation and management of our homelands.

Our HCP/CAP coaches have helped us to develop the confidence to deliver this planning and enabled us all to understand that everybody has a contribution to make. I always use the motto "there is no wrong answer" and "everyone's contribution is welcome and valued". The patience of our trainers also helped us see through the framework and understand the linkages between each step. This took a couple of goes, but we can now see the interdependencies and how our ideas determined our objectives and strategies.

With the support of coaches we were able to proceed with complete confidence in a thorough planning process that engaged all of our clan members; our cultural elders, our hunters, and even our young teenage boys and girls felt comfortable to be involved.

We found the beauty of the HCP/CAP process is that it engages people in a non-confronting way and is flexible enough to observe all of our cultural protocols and things like our relationship observance customs.

Until HCP/CAP came along we were stuck on how to think through a way forward. We had many passionate people who all want to see things happen but without a way to think clearer, capture all the ideas and work through a logical framework to understand what we should do, why and when. We remained a bit confused and frustrated.

Now, HCP/CAP as a tool in our tool belts, we have accomplished the first healthy country plan in Queensland's Cape York Peninsula region. We are now filled with confidence that our objectives and strategies will deliver the healthy cultural and biodiversity outcomes we desire. And that we will be working on our country looking after all the things that are important to us and managing cultural and environmental threats that we now have and those to come.

My story is only able to be told like this because of the wisdom of my elders that couldn't be happier to see me, and the little group I work with, step up and take responsibility.



*“Seeing these young people talk up and planning big future for Umpila, makes mitpi ngaiyu [spirit mine] happy...you know...my puya [heart] is light now and...I sleep much better at night time now...very good, very good...thank you.”*

— Lawrence Omeenyo, Umpila Elder