

AMRRIC's Cultural Orientation Handbook



A preparatory guide for
your experience as an
AMRRIC volunteer



For most people, travelling to a remote Australian Indigenous community for the first time is like nothing they've ever experienced in Australia. The culture, the landscape, even people's interactions with dogs can all seem very unfamiliar...

This booklet has been written for you, a potential AMRRIC volunteer, to help you understand the environment in which your volunteer experience will take place. We hope that the booklet will prepare you for a positive, meaningful experience. As a One Health Program volunteer, you will help to improve the lives of people living in remote Indigenous communities, by improving the lives of their animals.

AMRRIC's cultural orientation Handbook was first produced in 2015, with the support of the Australian Government. It is based on the experience and expertise of AMRRIC - Animal Management in Rural and Remote Indigenous communities.

NB The term Indigenous is respectfully used throughout this booklet to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Front and back cover images courtesy David Darcy.
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Introduction

What is **AMRRIC**?

AMRRIC (Animal Management in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities) is a national not-for-profit organisation that uses a One Health approach to coordinate veterinary and education programs in Indigenous communities. Our One Health approach recognises the inextricable links between human, animal and environmental health and wellbeing. By working with remote Indigenous communities to improve the health of their companion animals, we are helping to create **healthier, safer** and **happier communities**.

AMRRIC coordinates **sustainable, culturally appropriate programs** in consultation with Indigenous communities. Our work includes:

- facilitating professional, sustainable and culturally-sensitive veterinary programs that offer desexing, parasite treatments and other veterinary care of companion animals in remote communities;
- facilitating and coordinating community- and school-based education programs promoting a range of topics including animal care and empathy, responsible pet ownership, animal behaviour, bite avoidance and hygiene for health;
- training and mentoring Indigenous Animal Management Workers to oversee ongoing animal care in their communities;
- supporting culturally appropriate, ethical research in the field of animal health and education in Indigenous communities;

- advocating for Indigenous communities' interests and contributing to policy regarding the health and management of companion animals;
- working with communities to develop capacity, and give people the knowledge and empowerment to improve the health and welfare of their own companion animals and communities.

AMRRIC's philosophies...

A **One Health** approach to **reconciliation**

'**One Health**' is a term used to describe the integrated and connected nature of animal, environmental and human health. One Health practitioners recognise the inextricable links between these realms and aim to develop **solutions to health challenges** utilising a **whole-system approach**. Since its inception in 2004, AMRRIC has worked to improve the health and wellbeing of companion animals in rural and remote Indigenous communities, understanding that the benefits to each animal lead to improvements in both environmental and human health. Our programs are designed with a One Health focus where key messages of animal health and community development programs are **integrated**, maximising the overall benefits to Indigenous communities.

OUR VISION

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
communities that are healthy and safe
for people and their companion animals



We develop our beliefs, practices and principles through everyday delivery of our projects and programs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities across the country. AMRRIC is committed to reconciliation, as articulated in our **Reconciliation Action Plan**, and we assert that our commitment will continue to permeate all of our activities. Our **relationships** are developed and guided by our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island partners to identify the issues surrounding poor companion animal health that affect the health of their communities. We support the development of programs and projects by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and assist them to identify and access the resources to address their issues.

AMRRIC's service delivery model is evidence-based and recognised as a **model for best practice in animal management** by the Federal Government. Our cross-cultural sensitivity and understanding enable our work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to **promote human rights, capacity building** and **empowerment**.

*We understand that we are **enriched** through our important relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and we welcome opportunities to continue to **learn** and **share experiences** on the road to **reconciliation**.*

understanding the relationship between dogs and indigenous people

Dingoes have been on the Australian continent for the past 4000-5000 years. It is thought that they were brought to the mainland by Asian seafarers, with whom the Aboriginal people had extensive trade links (Corbett 1995, Savolainen et al. 2004).



Two Aboriginal men with dingoes, Northern Territory Administration Report Lake Mackay Expedition, June/July 1957. ("Two", 1957). www.trove.nla.gov.au

During this time dingoes have been woven into the fabric of Aboriginal life, law and culture. Sometimes, little distinction is made between dingoes and more recently introduced dogs when applying Indigenous beliefs and law.

Dingoes, and now to some extent dogs, are in some Aboriginal cultures regarded as sacred animals. They are incorporated into society and are integral to community life.

Certain dogs are formally included into family units by being given "skin" names. This automatically positions the animal into society, granting them status such as parent, grandparent, aunt, child, etc. In some cases dogs are considered important enough to attend rituals, acting as fully fledged lawmen (Kolig 1978). In certain areas dogs are also believed to be direct reincarnations of ancestors (Prouse 1993).



Image courtesy David Darcy

Corbett, L. (1995). *The dingo in Australia and Asia*, Australian Natural History Series. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.

Savolainen, P. et. al. (2004). A detailed picture of the origin of the Australian dingo, obtained from the study of mitochondrial DNA. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 101(33), 12387-12390.

Kolig, E. (1978). Aboriginal dogmatics: canines in theory, myth and dogma. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde*, 84-115

Prouse I. An Aboriginal perspective on dog health programs. In: Shield J., editor. *Dog Health in Indigenous Communities*. Cairns: Department of Primary Industries; 1993. p. 24-31. Proceedings of a Conference Held in Darwin 1993..

Dogs are also incorporated into creation and Dreaming knowledge for some Indigenous clans.



Artwork: 'Papa Tjulurrpa' (Dog Dreaming), Doris Bush Nungarrayi

The Dreaming is that part of Aboriginal culture which explains the origin and culture of the land and its people. There are many Dog Dreaming sites located around the Australian continent. Each has its own and often interconnected story of creation and movement of the dingo through the country. Stories are told covering areas over thousands of kilometres and across different language groups. Ceremonies that are based around the dingo and dog continue to be practised in Indigenous communities across Australia with relevant songs, dances and stories being passed to new generations. Some individual community members will also carry with them Dog Dreaming, meaning that they are the custodians of the law and history of dingoes and dogs.

Much of the law as it pertains to dogs remains secret and is often held in the hands of only a few in a community. Stories may be told only by certain people to a select audience but whether spoken or not, the cultural significance of dogs has implications that extend to all those living and working in Indigenous communities. These implications can also extend to the uptake of veterinary services, and vets must recognise and respect decisions based on cultural beliefs. To break the traditional law in relation to dogs can create great sadness, sickness and unrest in those community members entrusted with their dreaming.

When working in Indigenous communities, particularly when working or interacting with dogs, it is usually enough to be respectful and mindful of the fact that there are spiritual ramifications of your actions.

Dog populations in Indigenous communities



Many people new to remote communities experience what can only be described as culture shock... Often dogs play a significant role in this experience due to the differences between Indigenous community dog populations, and the way dogs are owned and managed in familiar non-Indigenous settings.

A number of issues are regularly cited as problems associated with dogs in remote communities. Some of these issues are very real; some are perceived by visitors and may or may not be a problem. These issues vary immensely from community to community.

Issues associated with unmanaged dogs include:

- overpopulation, unwanted dogs and strays
- disease for both humans and dogs
- injuries which left untreated, lead to subsequent suffering
- nuisance - noise from barking, fighting and mating
- litter and faeces
- threat of attack
- danger during car chasing

Flow-on issues associated with unmanaged dogs include:

- disempowerment - uncontrolled dogs lower community self-respect
- stress - grief over sick or dying dogs



Indigenous people own dogs for a variety of reasons. Many of these are the same reasons that non-Indigenous people own dogs, and include:

- companionship
- physical protection
- spiritual protection
- hunting aids
- as a source of warmth



Just as non-Indigenous people form deeply loving bonds with their pet dogs, so too do Indigenous people.



Image courtesy David Darcy

With this in mind, visitors to communities often have difficulty understanding why dogs may be unmanaged and experience poorer levels of health and wellbeing when compared to many non-Indigenous settings. To really understand why these issues occur, we must examine a wide variety of complex factors which impact on life in remote Indigenous communities.

Lack of access to veterinary services

Most remote communities would be lucky to receive two or three veterinary visits in a 12 month period. Some of AMRRIC's core work is in this area, aiming to facilitate veterinary programs in remote Indigenous communities. However, given the distances involved and sometimes, the unwillingness of local government areas to fulfil their animal management obligations, ensuring that all communities receive regular veterinary services is still a significant challenge.



In some instances communities now have regular veterinary programs in place with consistent veterinarians repeatedly visiting communities to build trusting relationships. Unfortunately for other communities, and particularly for outstations, veterinary visits remain seldom and sporadic.



Adjustment to loss of traditional lifestyle

Prior to European settlement of Australia, Aboriginal people managed their country according to the seasons, often accompanied by dingoes - their (mostly) self-sufficient companions.

White occupancy in the majority of areas of the Northern Territory has only occurred within the last century. Some old people can still recount their childhood memories of massacres at the hands of white settlers.

People have been asked to accept change and adopt unfamiliar law and lifestyles in the space of one to two generations. The impact of this rapid change affects all areas of Indigenous community life.

Photo: Aboriginal women, Northern Territory, 1928. Photo taken by Herbert Basedow, National Museum of Australia

The transition from a traditional, seasonally-responsive lifestyle to residence in permanent settlements is therefore a relatively new cultural phenomenon to which, in part, the issues of animal health and welfare now confronting Indigenous people in communities can be attributed.

Today, living in the confines of a town or community does not allow dogs the hunting possibilities they once experienced. Despite this, in some cases people still expect their dogs to go off hunting by themselves for food, rather than providing them sustenance. Even dog lovers may see little problem with the idea of leaving dogs to fend for themselves, and will on occasion leave them unattended at outstations for weeks.

Pups are no longer born and raised in the semi arid wild as they once were. Both external and internal dog parasites accumulate in yards that, in the absence of population control, can easily house six litters of pups a year. If yards are watered or have poorly maintained and leaking plumbing, the resulting dampness enhances parasite survivability.

All of these factors obviously lead to poor animal health and in turn poor human health and wellbeing.



The difference between dingoes and domestic dogs

Dingoes and dogs are fundamentally different in a variety of ways and this impacts on modern dog populations.

Dingoes are self-sufficient solitary or small pack-residing animals. They breed only once annually and it is only the alpha female and male that breed. Dingoes therefore only have one litter of pups per year, and the litters are typically quite small in number as their only purpose is to replace ageing animals.



In contrast, domestic dogs are more reliant on their owners for food and company. Their reproductive cycle allows them to breed twice each year and all females over 6 months of age are capable of breeding. Dogs often have upwards of 6 pups per litter and typically, all female dogs in a community will come into oestrous synchronously. These factors result in a huge potential for dog overpopulation.

Poverty and geographical isolation of remote communities

Because of poverty and geographical isolation, access to veterinary services, medication, information and education is limited. Those who live in or have visited the top-end or desert regions understand that many of the communities in northern and central Australia are very remote; sometimes a 1400 km round trip to the nearest veterinary clinic. If a car is taken to town there is usually no room left for a dog in the travelling party. Journeys to town often result in stays longer than anticipated as cars break down, finances run low, relatives get sick, etc. Housing a community dog in an urban town centre can be incredibly problematic for owners and stressful for the dog. Even if dogs could be brought to a veterinarian when sick or injured, the majority of people living in communities have incomes that prohibit the payment of standard veterinary fees.

Some communities now are stocking effective and affordable anti-parasitics in the community stores, and with time and education, community members are purchasing these treatments. However, in many community stores these products still aren't available despite ongoing lobbying from AMRRIC and local community members. Disturbingly, in some stores, instead of safe and effective treatments, highly inappropriate and dangerous chemical treatments are stocked and sold without appropriate education on their use.



Many communities are completely inaccessible by road for three to four months of every year during the monsoon season. In this time the health of dogs tends to deteriorate as the 'wet season' brings with it huge tick burdens and the increased potential for bacterial, fungal and parasitic disease. Vets rarely attend these communities while the roads are closed due to the increased risks and cost of travel and the increased risk of surgical infections.

Ideally, if capacity is built effectively, people in communities can manage the problems until a veterinarian returns, and AMRRIC works to develop this capacity. However, capacity-building programs take considerable amounts of time and money.

Health and welfare expectations of a community

Dog health and welfare need to be seen relative to the societal context in which it occurs, as people's expectations of dog health are naturally seen in relation to the realities of their own health and wellbeing.

When compared to non-Aboriginal people, Aboriginal people in Australia have significantly higher morbidity and mortality rates. In the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people born between 2010 and 2012 have a life expectancy that is 10-11 years less than other Australians. Preventable chronic diseases occur much more often and at a much younger age in Indigenous people compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. The rates of renal failure requiring dialysis are amongst the highest in the world (Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet 2014, English 2004).

Any visitors who have even brief connections to communities cannot avoid witnessing these statistics in their tragic human form. 'Sorry days' occur with saddening frequency.

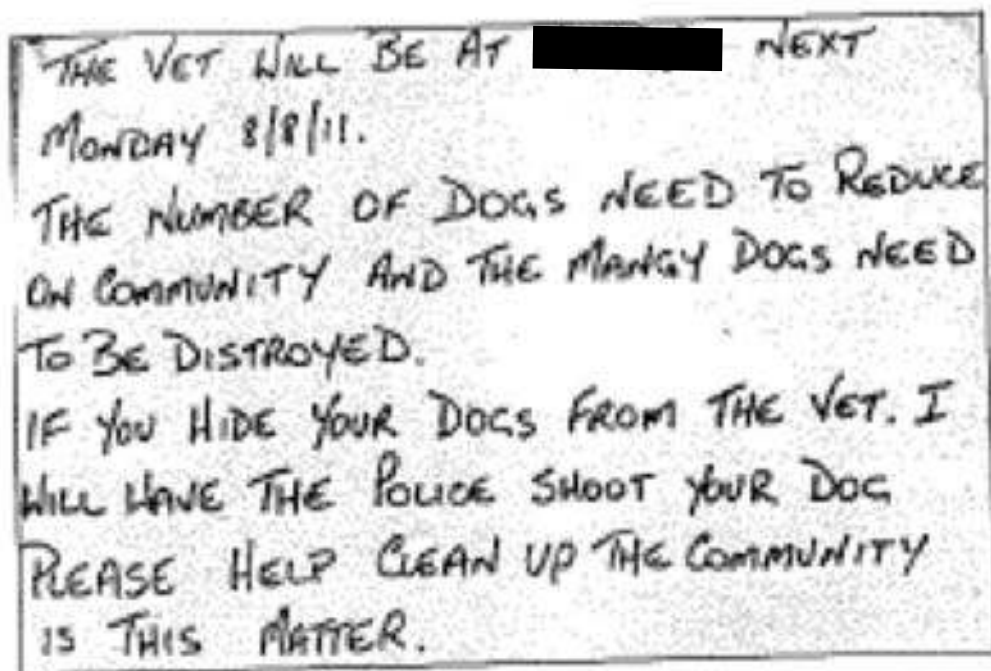
It is an awful reality that dog health and welfare must be considered within the context of community-member health. It is unrealistic to expect dog health and welfare to be better than that of their human companions in any society.



Image courtesy David Darcy

Historical animal control programs in Indigenous communities

Many Indigenous communities have been subjected to a wide variety of often brutal forms of companion animal management, with routine shooting, or more recently, large-scale euthanasia campaigns forming the mainstay of companion animal control. Attitudes, like that expressed in the notice below were, and sadly are still, not uncommon amongst local decision-makers...



THE VET WILL BE AT [REDACTED] NEXT
MONDAY 8/8/11.
THE NUMBER OF DOGS NEED TO REDUCE
ON COMMUNITY AND THE MANGY DOGS NEED
TO BE DESTROYED.
IF YOU HIDE YOUR DOGS FROM THE VET. I
WILL HAVE THE POLICE SHOOT YOUR DOG
PLEASE HELP CLEAN UP THE COMMUNITY
IS THIS MATTER.

The sign warning dogs will be shot

This notice highlights the negative reactions that sometimes occur in communities. Such strategies result in mental and emotional distress to dog-owning community members, and the community as a whole, as typically these programs have not sought consent from owners. These types of population control ultimately do little in terms of controlling animal populations, as owners seek new animals to replace those that have been taken from them. They also result in significant mistrust for future programs, whether they claim to be consultative or not. Wherever there has been a history of non-consensual culling, there is, understandably, a huge amount of trust-building to do before communities engage in services offered.

However, over the years, AMRRIC has had the great pleasure and privilege of working with dog owners in remote communities across Australia, witnessing their care and concern for their beloved animals.



Whilst to the western eye, dogs in Indigenous communities may appear to be unloved strays, this is far from the case. Just as we develop loving bonds with our pets, so too do Indigenous Australians.

To successfully deliver any program in Indigenous communities we must learn to recognise and appreciate the similarities between Indigenous and mainstream culture, whilst letting go of any ethnocentric western world views.

culture Shock and ethnocentrism

Many people new to Indigenous communities experience some form of culture shock, and unfortunately some succumb to ethnocentrism.

Culture shock is the feeling of disorientation experienced by someone who is suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture, a way of life, or set of attitudes.¹ It can present in a spectrum of severity, often related to the identified disparities between the unfamiliar culture and one's own, as well as the length of time one is immersed in a new culture. Common symptoms of culture shock include feelings of frustration, irritability, loneliness, confusion, insecurity and helplessness, as well as criticism of local people, culture and customs.

Ethnocentrism is the judgement of other cultures according to preconceptions of superiority originating in the standards and customs of one's own culture,² and is often experienced as a symptom of culture shock. Ethnocentrism causes us to dismiss the beliefs and knowledge of other cultures, based on what we believe to be true, according to our own world-view.

"Our culture orients, grounds, supports, and frames our lives. cultural beliefs are built into our world-views, providing a reference point for understanding what we observe and a guide for how to act. Those from different cultural backgrounds simply have a different frame of reference; what we perceive to be "normal" is a consequence of the culture we are raised in. It is also essential to realize that we are often blind to elements of our own culture until they are contrasted with another. Our culture is our default context, or baseline. Remembering this will help you understand why others sometimes consider your ways to be foreign, and vice versa."

1. "culture shock", OxfordDictionaries.com, 2015
Accessed 29 Jan 2015, from <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/culture-shock?q=culture+shock>

2. "ethnocentrism", OxfordDictionaries.com, 2015
Accessed 29 Jan 2015, from <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ethnocentrism>

cultural competency online course, unite for Sight Global Health University, <http://www.uniteforSight.org/cultural-competency/>
Accessed 29 Jan 2015

‘But I’m different! It won’t happen to me!’

Whilst many volunteers approach travel with an open mind, even the most non-judgmental of people can succumb to culture shock and subsequent ethnocentrism when subject to cultures that are significantly different from their own. This is particularly true in the case of veterinary care, where animal health professionals have had years of training in western world-view standards of animal health and welfare. When professionals visit Indigenous communities for the first time, they often struggle to reconcile their ethnocentric opinions on what constitutes acceptable levels of animal health and welfare. Whilst AMRRIC maintains the highest possible standards of care when delivering programs, it is also important to recognise and respect, without judgement, the cultural implications that prevent some owners from engaging in services offered.

Minimising culture shock and ethnocentrism

Preparation is essential! By knowing what to expect when you arrive in a community, you will cushion any culture shock that may ensue, ensuring a far more enjoyable and effective volunteer experience for yourself, your team and the community.

Hopefully this handbook has given you a foundational understanding of some of the challenges associated with delivering sustainable, culturally-sensitive animal management programs, but further exploration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture and social history is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the community in which you’ll be immersed. Make sure that you read the essential reading advised during your induction, and if you can find the time, the further reading recommendations provide a much deeper insight into what you’re likely to experience. It’s also a good idea to have some knowledge about the specifics of the community that you will be visiting. Where is the location of the community and which clan group are the traditional owners of the region? What is the local language spoken? How many people reside in the community? Much of this information is readily available on the internet; we encourage you to undertake some research in preparation for your trip.

Witnessing extreme poverty and health disparities suffered by our fellow Australians

The impact of witnessing first-hand the socio-economic and health disparities between different groups of our own nationality cannot be underestimated, and is a cause of significant distress for some volunteers. The challenges of such disparities can be overwhelming and at some point, you may feel helpless, or that your hard work is futile. Whilst these feelings are disheartening, try to remember that great change is most commonly the sum of many small steps. You cannot expect to solve the socio-economic and health challenges facing Indigenous communities in a week, however, take heart in the knowledge that your efforts to improve the health and welfare of the community's companion animals are making an enormous impact on the lives of both the animals and their owners. Remember too, that you are not alone in your experience. AMRRIC One Health Program teams have a wealth of experience working in remote Indigenous communities, and will certainly be able to share their experiences with you. If at any stage, you do feel any symptoms of culture shock such as feeling overwhelmed, frustrated or helpless, it's important that you discuss your feelings with a trusted staff member. AMRRIC staff have all experienced life in remote Indigenous communities, and can help you to navigate any uncomfortable, unfamiliar or distressing situations or feelings.

In summary!

For an enjoyable and effective volunteer experience, remember to:

- travel with an open mind and your sense of humour;
- maintain flexibility, a spirit of humility and a genuine interest in meeting local people;
- practice true listening and observing, rather than just seeing and hearing, and;
- realise that what you are going through is both normal, and temporary.

By taking the time to prepare and learning to appreciate, rather than judge cultural differences, your experience as an AMRRIC One Health Program volunteer will be all the more enriching.

AMRRIC volunteer roles

AMRRIC is extremely grateful to the dedicated professionals who volunteer their skills and time across a wide range of AMRRIC activities. By different means, our volunteers each contribute to improving the lives of pets and therefore improving the lives of people!

AMRRIC volunteer roles include:

- One Health Program volunteers
 - vets
 - vet nurses
 - veterinary team assistants (aka general dog's body!)
 - educators
- fundraising volunteers
- communications volunteers
- voluntary research reviewers



Further Information

Recommended websites:

AMRRIC Reconciliation Action Plan

<http://amrric.org/reconciliation-action-plan>

Reconciliation Australia's Share Our Pride Website

<http://shareourpride.reconciliation.org.au/>

RAHC Cultural Orientation Handbook

<http://www.rahc.com.au/resources-0>

University of Sydney, Kinship Learning Module

<http://sydney.edu.au/kinship-module/learning/>

Unite for Sight Cultural Competency Online Course

<http://www.uniteforsight.org/cultural-competency/>

Recommended Films:

Still Our Country (2015)

Rabbit Proof Fence (2002)

Charlie's Country (2013)

Yolngu Boy (2001)

Samson and Delilah (2009)

Recommended Books

Position Doubtful, Kim Mahood 2016

Dog Ear Cafe, Andrew Stojanovski 2010

Iwenhe Tyerrtye (what it means to be an Aboriginal person), Margaret Kemarre Turner 2010

Singing Saltwater Country, John Bradley 2010

Seven Seasons in Aurukun, Paula Shaw 2009

An Intruder's Guide to East Arnhem Land, Andrew McMillan 2007

Treading Lightly, Tex Skuthorpe and Karl Sveiby 2006

Balanda; my year in Arnhem Land, Mary Ellen Jordan 2005

Why weren't we told?, Henry Reynolds 2000

Why Warriors Lie Down and Die, Richard Trudgen 2000

Yorro Yorro, David Mowaljarlai and Jutta Malnic 1993



Animal Management in Rural and
Remote Indigenous Communities

For more information, please visit:

www.amrric.org