General information: Understanding country

The following information is taken from Smyth’s 1994 key issue paper titled Understanding country: The importance of land and sea in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples belong to diverse, contemporary communities, each containing individuals with different perspectives, life experiences and aspirations. While there are many shared interests based on their status as Indigenous Australians, it should be expected that there is a diversity of opinion within communities about all issues, including the significance of land and sea.

**Caring for Country**

Systems of ownership of, access to and responsibility for traditional Aboriginal clan estates differ from place to place, but there are some common elements which indicate the importance of particular areas and particular people. Membership of a particular clan, and hence an association with a particular clan country, is given at birth. Connection to country may differ across various language groups or communities and membership to a particular group or relationship to any specific country is often prefaced by lineage connection whether that be through mother, father or both parents.

Clan membership provides access rights to the hunting, fishing and gathering resources of the clan estates, and often also some rights to resources on other related estates.

**What is ‘country?’**

In this context, ‘country’ means place of origin, literally, culturally or spiritually. It can have the political meaning of ‘nation,’ but refers to an area rather than a nation-state such as Australia. ‘Country’ refers to more than just a geographical area: it is shorthand for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that geographical area. For coastal Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders, ‘country’ includes both land and sea areas, which are regarded as inseparable from each other.

It should be appreciated that individual Indigenous persons or groups have in practice a more holistic view of the land and sea. That is, land and sea may be viewed by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples as central to their identities, their heritage and their economic futures without necessarily analysing the extent to which spiritual, economic or historical significance contribute to their overall importance.