Customary water management systems and the modern water economy: insights from Australia and East Timor

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Room 515, Level 5, 207 Bouverie Street, Carlton
4pm - 5.30pm

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Prof Marcia Langton, School of Population Health, University of Melbourne
‘Cultural flows’ or allocations: Water policy in Australia and indigenous interests
One of the significant failings in Australian water policy and legal reform is the identification and description of Indigenous values in forms that are feasible to implement and interpret in governance and cultural heritage processes. This issue will remain a contentious one while policy frameworks fail to address the indigenous customary rights, property rights and cultural rights in water resource management and regulation and only sporadic attention is directed to the role of indigenous people in water policy, law and management regimes. Australia’s system of water allocation and pricing conflicts with traditional conceptualisations of water use and potentially inhibits economic development. The findings from three case studies from different state jurisdictions are reported with an emphasis on the ‘fit’ between indigenous cultural concerns and Australia’s state and federal water policy concepts that are predicated on quantitative and economic mechanisms.

Dr Lisa Palmer, Department of Resource Management and Geography, University of Melbourne
The ritual ecology of water in Timor Leste
This paper examines a water focused society in the eastern region of Baucau in Timor Leste. Here, I follow shimmering trails of water and water associated spirit beings travelling through the karstic landscape from the mountains to the sea (and back again). I argue that in this cosmopolitical configuration of life and being it is the material reality and symbolism of water itself which is critical to creating and maintaining place, understanding space and relationships. These understandings of and interactions with underground water, and the springs from where it emerges, are deeply embedded in the foundational organizing principles of local social, political and economic life and underpin productive processes such as terraced rice ecology. As water is viewed through the prism of relationship, not as a possessory form of individuated property, such understandings create social, cultural and ecological categories and forms of organization grounded in inter-dependent relationships, an integrated complex fused together by the interconnected spiritual, political, social and ecological domains and syncretic realities associated with water. This paper examines this reality and the ways in which the persistence of such customary systems are acknowledged in the development context of Timor Leste.

Dr Sue Jackson, Division of Ecosystem Sciences, CSIRO
Addressing Indigenous water values in environmental water management
Although environmental flow assessments and allocations have been practiced in Australia for nearly 20 years, to date they have not effectively incorporated indigenous values. In many cases, even though indigenous people rely substantially on aquatic resources, environmental flows have been assumed to be an acceptable surrogate for the protection of indigenous interests. This paper argues that the need to adapt flow assessments to account for linkages and dependencies between people and rivers is equally applicable to developed world indigenous contexts such as Australia as it is to developing countries where there has been some attempt to address indigenous or subsistence water requirements. Drawing on empirical data from north Australia, I propose three challenges to conventional environmental flow assessments that, if met, will improve the ability of water resource planning to address indigenous interests.