

Indigenous elder honoured for protecting country and culture

Laurie Baymarrwangga, an indigenous community leader from north-east Arnhem Land, has been named the Northern Territory's Senior Australian of the Year in recognition of her efforts to protect her local sea country and culture.



Credit: NAILSMA

Ninety-five-year-old Laurie, who belongs to the Galiwin'ku community, is senior custodian of Milingimbi, one of the Crocodile Islands. These are located between the Blyth and the Glyde Rivers in Arnhem Land, and separated from the mainland by a narrow channel.

Milingimbi has a land area of 70 sq km. Two-thirds of the island is below high tide level, with the highest point only a few metres above sea level.

The Yolngu (Yan-nhangu language) elder was also recently awarded a Special Commendation in the Northern Territory Research and Innovation Awards for promoting the intergenerational transmission of local language, culture, and natural resource management of Australia's remote marine estate.

Laurie helped the Yan-nhangu Traditional Owners establish the Crocodile Islands Rangers Program by contributing her knowledge of the ecosystems. The aim of the ranger program is to integrate tradition and custom with contemporary natural resource management, to ensure linguistic, cultural and biological diversity for future generations.

Laurie also started the Yan-nhangu dictionary project in 1994, including almost three thousand words linked to the marine environment around the Crocodile Islands.

On hearing of the award, Laurie thanked those who supported her vision of indigenous management of sea country, saying: 'We continue to pass on the stories of our land and sea country for the good of new generations.'

Last year, Laurie donated \$400 000 of land-rent back-payments to improving education and employment conditions on her home island so that future generations can live on 'healthy homelands'.

'This choice is more valuable than all the money in the world,' she said.

Source: North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA)

From **ECOS** online <http://www.ecomagazine.com/?paper=EC11145>