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## Interview: Ros Sultan

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# 'We are looking for people who deliver'

*Ros Sultan is currently employed at the Northern Lands Council, and is a close associate and former employee of Philip Toyne, longtime head of the Australian Conservation Foundation. She is an Aborigine.*

**Q:** Donna Craig brought up the very important work you had done on the co-management of one or more national parks by Aborigines in Australia.

**Sultan:** I helped administer the putting together of a 400-page report on Aboriginal interests in parks and protected areas. Have you heard of something called the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody? Well, that was a response to Recommendation 315 of that report.

I did that when I worked for the Australian Conservation Foundation [ACF]. I have since left them and am working for an Aboriginal organization, a statutory authority set up under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, known as the Northern Lands Council, in Darwin. The name of our report is *Competing Interests*.

The other thing which I can send on to you when we have finished it, is I organized Australia's first workshop on regional agreements, and I am in the process of having that edited.

**Q:** When did the workshop take place?

**Sultan:** We ran it last year in July in Cairns. One of our principal speakers was Les Carpenter, an Inuvialuit person; he is an Inuit and he works with the Circumpolar Conference.

**Q:** Who were some of the other prominent speakers?

**Sultan:** I limited the numbers and I basically drew on people from the Cape York region, because it was specifically to do with Cape York, and I also invited Commonwealth government bureaucrats, people who could deliver! I didn't want any state bureaucrats, because they generally intimidate Aboriginal people and they never, ever deliver on anything anyway. So we had about 60 people, mainly Aboriginal people from the Cape. The organization which represents those people is the Cape York Land Council; you could speak to Noel Pearson there, the executive director. He is quite an

extraordinary young man. He is one of the main people who saw through and took carriage of the Native Title Legislation, passed in this country a couple of years ago.

What they are doing is perhaps running with Australia's first regional agreement. They are working very hard on that, and there are two people they brought in to do that work. One of them is Philip Toyne, the deputy secretary of the Department of Environment, Sports, and Territories [DEST]. That is the Commonwealth body that looks after environment in this country. And he is two down from the minister. I can give you the name of a person who is also very closely involved with this, and he could talk to you a lot about Aboriginal interests in relation to environment and all sorts of things. His name is David Bennett, and he is in the Policy Analysis Unit of DEST.

**Q:** So you were actually working at the ACF when you did that report?

**Sultan:** Yes, I was the second indigenous person they had employed in that organization.

**Q:** Wasn't Philip Toyne also involved with the ACF?

**Sultan:** Yes, he was the executive director and then he left and became a Research Fellow at ANU [Australian National University]. He is very *well placed*, from my perspective anyway, and he is also a friend of mine, which helps.

**Q:** The original study you did with the ACF, which led to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, how did that come about?

**Sultan:** It was an idea that Philip had, as a response to that recommendation which talked about Aboriginal peoples' very real involvement in parks and protected areas. I am just pulling this off the top of my head, it was so long ago. I will give you the name of the principal author, Susan Woenne-Green. She can give you the details.

**Q:** What is her background?

**Sultan:** She is from Sacramento. She is an expatriate, an Australian citizen now. She immigrated here in 1967, and spent a lot of time working in Western Australia, where she first went. She is an anthropologist, and she spent a lot of time working on our communities, particularly in the Northern Territory and South Australia. And she is a bit of an—I hate the word "expert," but she has a lot of knowledge about national parks and protected areas and traditional peoples.

**Q:** Are there any other prominent anthropologists I might talk to?

**Sultan:** A prominent anthropologist in this country—and she is also an indigenous person—is Marcia Langton, the senior policy adviser to the Cape York Land Council. She and Noel Pearson basically carried, along with other people, the Native Title stuff with the federal government.