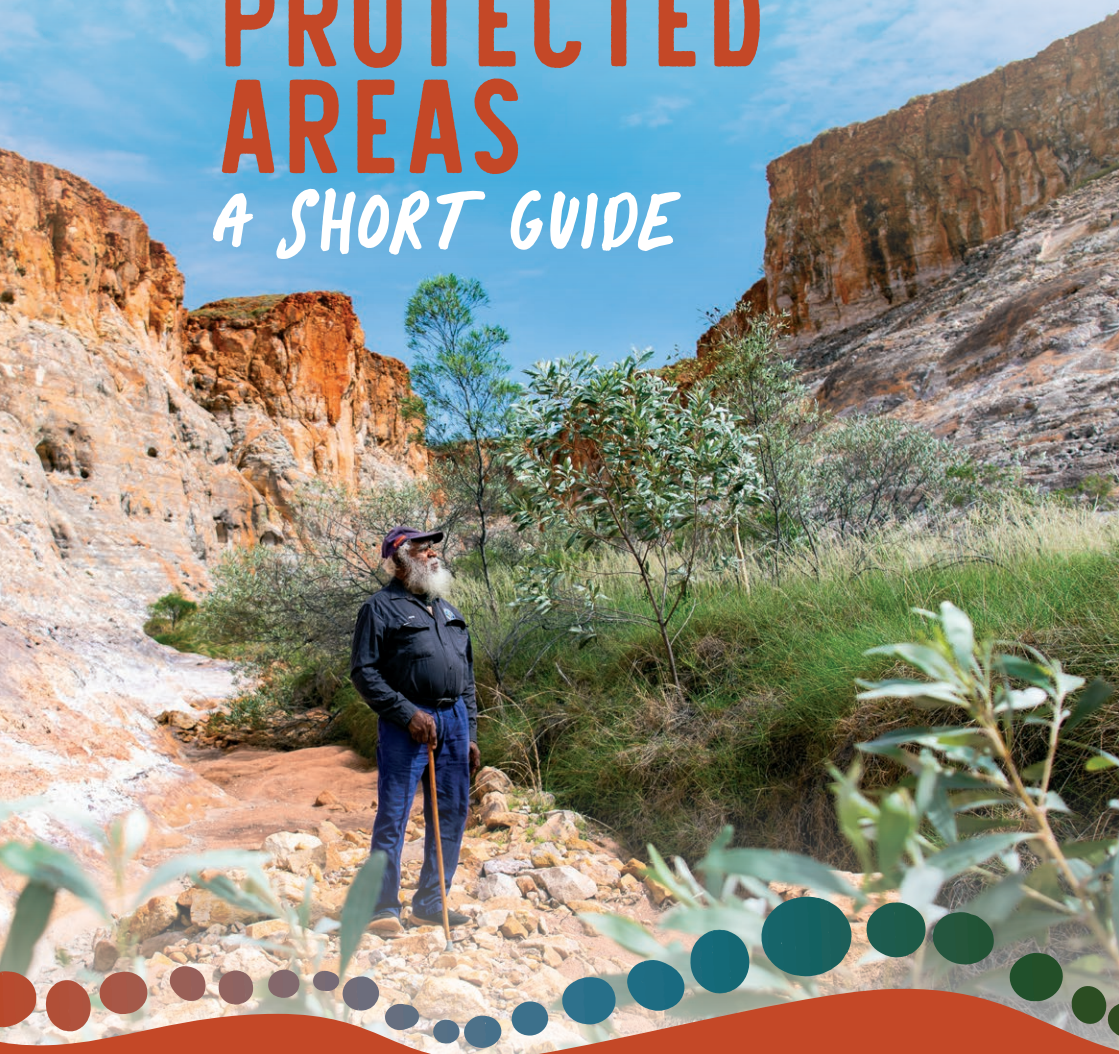


# INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AREAS

*A SHORT GUIDE*



[countryneedspeople.org.au](http://countryneedspeople.org.au)



**COUNTRY  
NEEDS  
PEOPLE**

# OVERVIEW

Australia's Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) network is a world-leading example of Indigenous conservation leadership and collaboration. Led by Traditional Owners, IPAs not only protect nature, they also sustain culture. They help unlock new opportunities for collaboration and sustainable enterprise.

The IPA estate is diverse and enormous. There are now 91 IPAs around Australia covering more than 104M ha on land and 6M ha on sea, with more in development. The IPA estate is 13 times the size of Tasmania, far bigger than the US states of Texas or California, and larger than the area of France and Germany combined. It covers tropical, desert and temperate ecosystems of incredible variety.

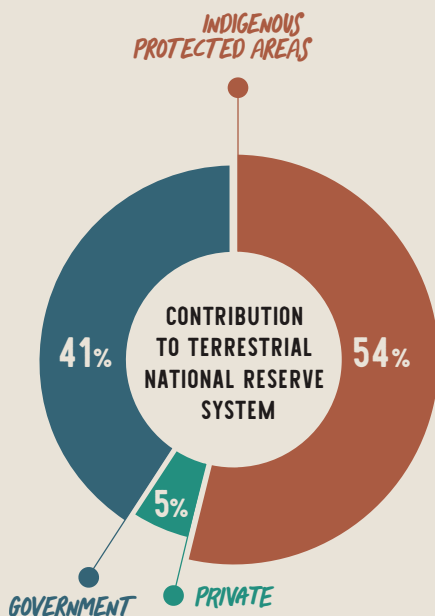
IPAs now represent around 54% of all protected areas on land in Australia and provide a framework for modern Indigenous land and sea management. Grounded in traditional knowledge and incorporating western science, contemporary management recognises and responds to the intensifying threats from changed fire patterns, invasive weeds, feral animals, and a heating climate. IPAs generate local jobs through the work of Indigenous Rangers, thus supporting economic activity and overall wellbeing in their local communities.

## Maintaining Cultural Connections

Australia's diverse ecosystems have co-evolved with Indigenous presence, usage, and management over millennia. They are a product of a long interrelationship between people and place. Cultural values are interwoven through every aspect of land and seascapes, and while heavily impacted by colonisation, dispossession and contemporary land management pressures, the cultural connection nevertheless remains.

IPAs now represent around 54% of all protected areas on land in Australia.

IPAs enable Traditional Owners to reestablish their vital role in protecting and managing these ecosystems, and sustaining the intricate cultural values imbued in land and sea. Each IPA is the outcome of years of consultation by Traditional Owner-led organisations.



“

First Nations landowners are contributing their land, knowledge and efforts towards the betterment of Australia's biodiversity.

—  
Denis Rose

Gunditjmara Traditional Owner,  
Founding Chair  
Country Needs People

**IPAs:**





“

We believe that if you get people  
back on Country, begin that  
healing journey, then Country will  
heal itself as well.

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Allira Alvoen, IPA Manager  
Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal  
Corporation



Allira Alvoen, IPA Manager, Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation.  
Photo: Annette Ruzicka



Karajarri Rangers Hayley Mulardy, Roxanne Possum, Sharon Everett & Juana Ejai.

**Photo:** Annette Ruzicka

## How IPAs work

IPAs are voluntary agreements to manage and protect Country between Traditional Owners and the Federal Government, and can only be initiated by Traditional Owners of Country. Each IPA has a management plan developed through extensive consultation with the wider Traditional Owner group determining priorities for management and protection of cultural values, biodiversity, community development needs and related matters.

Management plans are developed with clear priorities and against criteria which satisfy International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) standards. They allow for different categories of protection ranging from the highly protected through to flexible multiple use management. Though mainly occurring on Indigenous-held lands, IPAs can be designated over any tenure, including sea, with the agreement of the underlying tenure holder. They do not change the legal status of land or sea contained within them.

Funded by the Federal Government, the IPA program allocates funding for the consultation and management plan drafting stage. The management plan is finalised when both Traditional Owners and government agree the key elements are in place.

It cannot be finalised unless Traditional Owners agree, and the consultation time and process is determined by Traditional Owners.

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Once a management plan has been completed and approved, the IPA becomes operational and receives operational funding. Typically this is combined with additional Indigenous Ranger funding as the two programs are highly compatible and naturally aligned.

By drawing on the strength of Traditional Owner connection to Country to build Indigenous-led, proactive and collaborative solutions to protecting nature and supporting culture, IPAs provide a resilient and flexible response to the environmental challenges facing Australia as we head into the future.

# SAFEGUARDING BIODIVERSITY AND CULTURE

Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) safeguard an incredible array of environmental and cultural values. They are critical to supporting better management and protection of the precious, interwoven biodiversity and cultural riches of our entire continent.

IPAs are located in every corner of our country from the tropical north, through the deserts and spinifex plains of Central Australia, right down to the temperate ecosystems of south-east Australia and the wildflower strongholds of Western Australia's south-west.

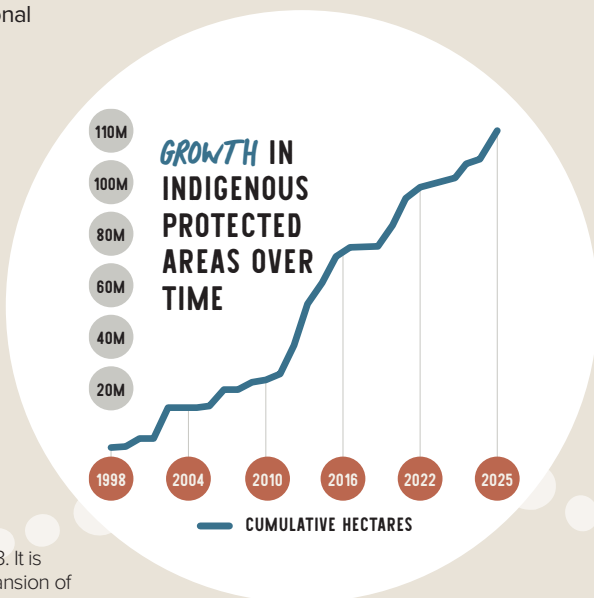
At least 357\* threatened species listed under federal environmental legislation are found in IPAs, including iconic fauna such as the night parrot, cassowary, koala and sea turtles, and cultural priority species such as emu, dingo, goanna, kangaroo and wallaby.

Physical ecosystems and cultural values of land and sea are not separate for Traditional Owners, but intimately connected, so detrimental impacts on living species, ecosystems and the natural world have profound cultural implications.

Across the country Indigenous Rangers are working hard to control or eradicate introduced feral pests such as buffalo, pigs, cats, camels, goats, deer and cane toads. They are also tackling the rapid spread of noxious weeds including African gamba grass and buffel grass, just two examples of how exotic flora can become a massive threat to biodiversity, human safety and culture.

Australia faces profound challenges to maintain the living beauty of our continent into the future. IPAs are a contemporary response to these challenges. They provide a strong framework for collaboration with stakeholders in land and sea management. They revitalise unbroken Indigenous connection and care and deliver a 'two-toolbox' approach, combining Indigenous and non-Indigenous ecological knowledge systems to care for nature, culture and people for the benefit of us all.

At least 357 threatened species listed under federal environmental legislation are found in IPAs.



\*Analysis undertaken by DCCEEW in June 2023. It is likely that this figure has increased with the expansion of the IPA network since then.



# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As Traditional Owners continue to expand their management of land and sea Country through the IPA program, it is imperative the Federal Government continues to increase its funding and support to ensure Indigenous Ranger groups are properly resourced to do their vital work effectively over an increasingly large and complex geographical footprint.

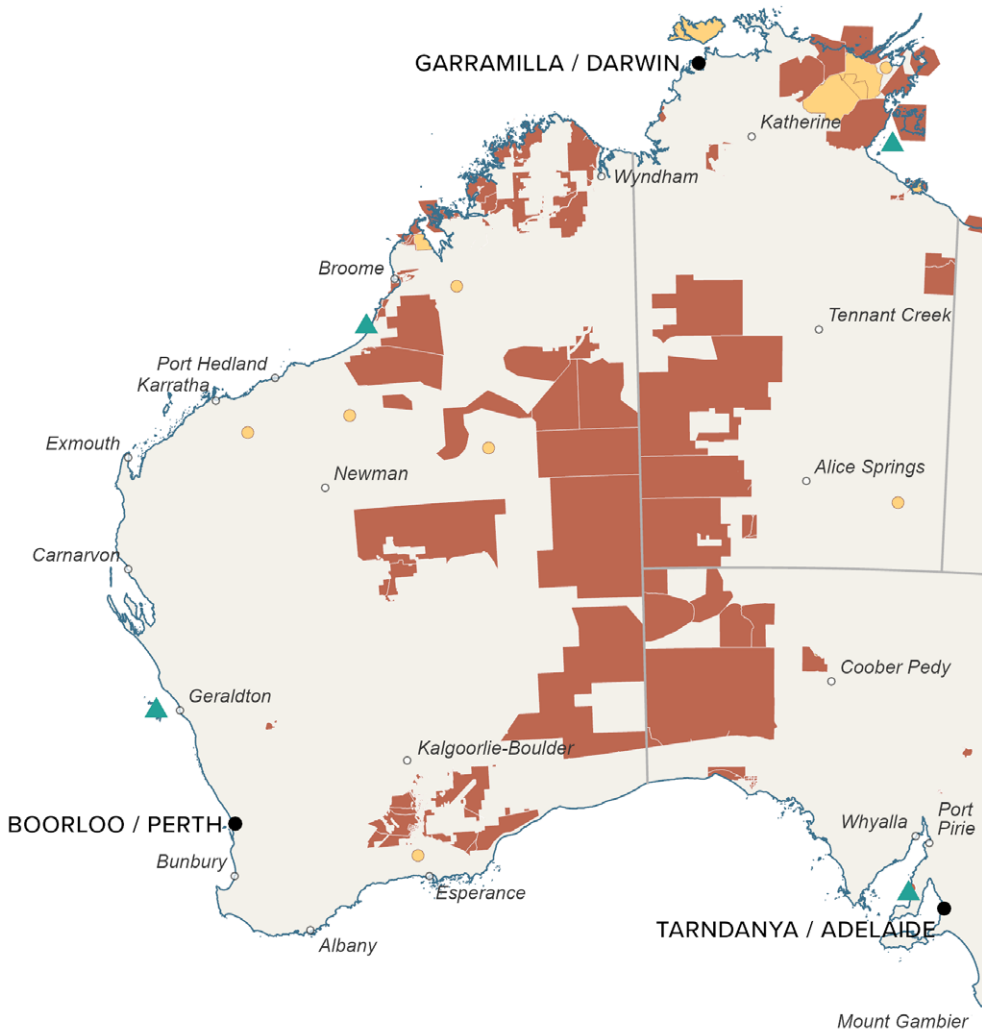
**Security of funding and support is key to the ongoing success of a well-managed and well-run IPA network across Australia.**

An additional challenge is that IPAs are predominantly in underserved regional and very remote areas. It is no small task to run complex land and sea management operations in locations already experiencing multiple issues such as chronic housing shortages, poor service provision, and climate change impacts.

It's critical that our key government agencies, particularly the federal environment department, are adequately staffed and equipped to better support IPAs. Security of funding and support is key to the ongoing success of a well-managed and well-run IPA network across Australia – a model of Indigenous-led collaborative conservation and sustainable development that will yield environmental dividends for generations to come.

Budj Bim Ranger Tony Rotumah. **Photo:** Annette Ruzicka, permission courtesy of his family.





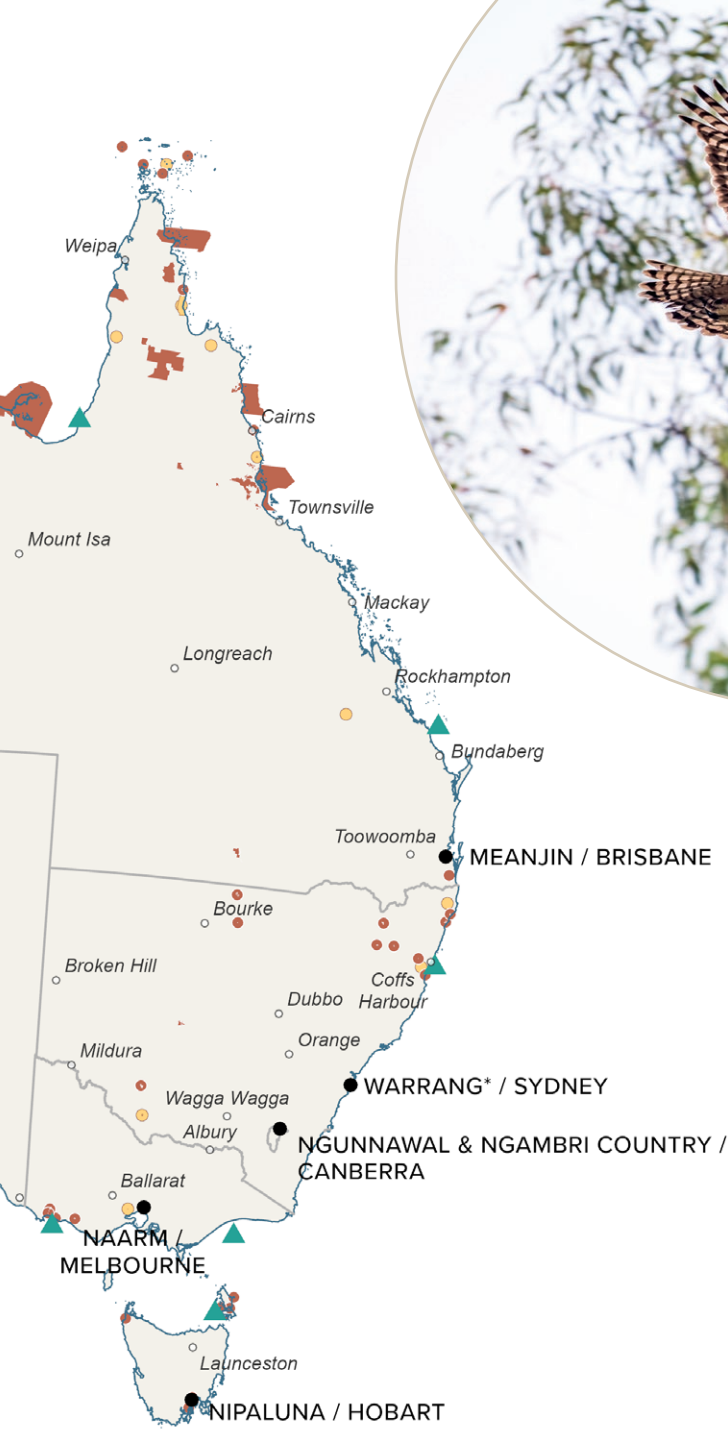
- Indigenous Protected Areas
- Proposed Indigenous Protected Areas
- Proposed Sea Country Indigenous Protected Areas

NOTES: \* Sydney Cove

DISCLAIMER\* Regarding dual place names for cities, Country Needs People recognises that alternative words and spellings do exist and that these place names do not always represent the whole geographical footprint.

DATA SOURCES: Dedicated Indigenous Protected Areas, Commonwealth of Australia 2025.





The endangered Red Goshawk, Tiwi Islands Proposed IPA.  
**Photo:** Annette Ruzicka



# INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AREAS TIMELINE

**65, 000 BC - 1788**

**Uninterrupted traditional use and management of land and sea Country by Indigenous Australians.**

Australian ecosystems and human usage evolve together to shape pre-European environment.

**1788**

**Colonisation and settlement begins ongoing process of removal of Traditional Owners** from occupation and management of Country and suppression of language and culture.

**1976**

**NT Aboriginal Land Rights Act** enacted by Federal Government, enabling claims for unallocated land including under intertidal zone.

**1994-95**

**IPA program gets initial funding from Federal Government**, first meetings held with Traditional Owners and federal environment department to explore interest.

**1996**

**New Coalition Government** supports ongoing development of IPA program.

**1998**

**First IPA in Australia declared –** Nantawarrina, SA.

**2002**

**First IPA in WA established –** Ngaanyatjarra.

**2013**

**62 IPAs now established.** Five-year contracts issued to existing IPA and Indigenous Rangers network from 2013-2018.

**2019**

**Budj Bim Cultural Landscape inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.**

(\*not comprehensive)



Turtles, Dhimurru IPA, NT.



Left: Tiwi Islands Proposed IPA  
*Photo: Annette Ruzicka*

Right: Bush fruit at Karajarri IPA, WA.  
*Photo: Annette Ruzicka*

1981

**Australia's first jointly managed national parks declared.** Gurig National Park managed by NT Government, and Stage 1 of Kakadu National Park managed by Federal Government, both in conjunction with Traditional Owners.

1992

**Mabo Case** - High Court recognises the rights of the Meriam people, finding the existence of Native Title which overturns Terra Nullius.

1993

**Native Title Act passed** in Australian Federal Parliament.

1999

**4 IPAs declared** – Preminghana (TAS), Risdon Cove (TAS), Putalina (TAS), Deen Maar (VIC) & Yalata (SA).

**Environment Protection Biodiversity Act passed**, mentions role of Indigenous Australians in conservation and management.

2000

**First IPA in QLD established** – Guanaba.

2001

**First IPA in NT established** - Dhimurru. It's the first IPA with significant amount of Sea Country including sacred sites.

**First IPA in NSW established** – Wattleridge

**Croker-Island sea claim case confirms Native Title exists in the sea.**

2022

**CNP's advocacy ahead of Federal Election secures cross-party support for Rangers & IPAs.**

Funding for 10 Sea Country IPAs announced by Federal Government.

**May**  
**Newly elected federal Labor Party commits to expanding IPA budget by \$10M PA.**

2023

**Federal Government announces funding for additional 10 IPAs.**

2025

**91 IPAs in Australia covering 104M ha on land and 6M ha on sea.**



# SUPPORT

## INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AREAS

The IPA program benefits all Australians.

Find out more and show your support by visiting

**[countryneedspeople.org.au](http://countryneedspeople.org.au)**

**Tel:** 1300 505 274

**Email:** [gday@countryneedspeople.org.au](mailto:gday@countryneedspeople.org.au)

**Postal:** GPO Box 969 Canberra City ACT 2601

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We acknowledge Indigenous partners, Traditional Owners, Elders past, present and emerging and extend our appreciation for their support and guidance of our daily work. We live and work on land and sea that always was and always will be Aboriginal land.



**COUNTRY  
NEEDS  
PEOPLE**

Protecting nature,  
transforming lives

**[www.countryneedspeople.org.au](http://www.countryneedspeople.org.au)**



Above: Budj Bim World Heritage Ranger Sammy Walsh Bannam. **Photo:** Annette Ruzicka

Front Cover: Karajarri Elder Mr John Watson, Karajarri IPA. **Photo:** Annette Ruzicka

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