Strong on Country

Sustaining Success in Indigenous Land and Sea Management in Australia

COUNTRY NEEDS PEOPLE

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Suggested citation:

Putnis, A., O'Leary, P., Leach, A., Ings, E. and See, P. 2021, Strong on Country: Sustaining Success in Indigenous Land and Sea Management in Australia, Country Needs People Limited, Canberra.

Cover photo: Wilinggin rangers, like Dean Wungundin pictured, use smartphones to record photo and video data, cultural site assessments, location of weed infestations, navigational aids, and mapping. Credit: Annette Ruzicka

Layout and design: Andrew Hercus, Hyve Creative

Printed by: EnviroPrint Australia Pty Ltd

November 2021

www.countryneedspeople.org.au

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Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger, Zoe Bullen.
Credit: Andrew McGregor

Acknowledgements

Country Needs People acknowledges the ranger groups, their representative and host bodies and traditional owners around Australia who are working to protect country for all of us.

This report, and Country Needs People's broader network and campaign, arises from the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their land and sea management organisations. Country Needs People wishes to thank the organisations whose case studies feature in this report for providing information, images and insights. We appreciate the individuals who gave their time and energy to contribute to this report. Country Needs People also recognises those who partner with ranger groups and representative organisations, including federal and state governments, business, universities and non-government organisations. These partners are critical to further advancing the success of Australia's Indigenous land and sea management sector.

The Country Needs People network is a growing non-partisan collaboration of 41 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations from the Torres Strait to southern Western Australia and the Kimberley to Victoria and all points between. The campaign is calling for continued momentum to grow and strengthen Indigenous rangers and Indigenous protected areas and broader Indigenous community-based land and sea management right across Australia because of their unique success in delivering outstanding results for the environment, people, culture, communities and the economy.

This report was authored by Andra Putnis, Patrick O'Leary, Andy Leach, Emily Ings and Peter See for Country Needs People.

Denis Rose.
Credit: Tanya Loose

Foreword

I've been very fortunate over the last 40 years to work in heritage conservation and land and sea management for parks services, the federal government, and my own people the Gunditjmara.

In that time, I've seen a genuine quiet revolution in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' reclamation of our place as managers of the lands and sea we know we have always owned and been responsible for. In particular, our work and commitment through Indigenous protected areas, Indigenous ranger work, and a myriad of other ways we care for country continues to grow in importance as a key element of how Australia is now managing our environment and cultural heritage. But there remains a long way to go.

We still face many challenges as peoples in accessing and managing our lands and seas. In some places, we have been able to forge strong partnerships with other organisations, landholders, neighbours and governments that are genuine working partnerships. When that happens, we can see the multiple benefits that come to every Australian from backing the original owners of country to manage that country. In other places our countrymen struggle for access, recognition, resources and understanding but remain determined to care for their country.

From experience I know that with the right approach and resources we will not only establish and survive as land and sea managers but thrive and flourish. We know that this is not an easy task. Anyone who has worked within their own community will tell you it's a long hard road with many challenges and requires strong stable organisations to build their capability over time.

This report is about working from experience to ensure the elements are in place for governments to support traditional owners to enable us to do the best we can for our lands and seas. When we get this formula right, every Australian benefits.

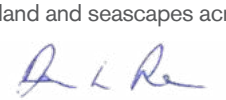
It means healthier biodiversity, sustaining and reconnecting with a multitude of living and vibrant cultures that form the core of our shared country's identity. It means jobs in the regions, remote areas and even the cities, that create opportunity for individuals and families. It means laying the foundations for stronger constructive relationships with our neighbours, local, state and federal governments, non-profit organisations and industry.

In Australia, we have a huge continent to manage, one we understand is made up of many different first nations, each with their own unique people, nature, culture and context. The challenge for us in Australia is to manage the very values we should all cherish about our country. All around Australia traditional owners are signalling by their actions and words they are ready to take up that challenge.

If we can get the key elements right, we give ourselves the best opportunity to succeed in looking after the country that we now share, but that we as traditional owners have always been an integral part of.

This report aims to look at the practical elements of: how governments, in particular, can take up their own responsibilities in truly partnering with us and our organisations; how we can learn from our previous successes, some of which we seem to have forgotten; how we can ensure that we are putting our best foot forward in delivering what is and should continue to be leading examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led work to care for and sustain country all its aspects, people, nature and culture.

Our continent is challenged by a warming climate, invasive plants and feral animals, the breakdown of a living relationship with fire, threats to fauna and flora species and impacts on our cultural values – all of which Indigenous rangers seek to address. Our land and our seas are truly what sustain us. In this work we need governments to fulfil their part. This is not a short term or trivial undertaking. We need to work with partners who are technically competent, that can engage with us and support our leadership, that understand the resources needed to do the serious job of caring for country, and that can go on the journey with us as we work in hundreds of different contexts, environments, cultural land and seascapes across Australia.



Denis Rose
Chairperson, Country Needs People
and Budj Bim IPA Manager, Gunditj Mirring

Elements required for successful ranger and IPA programs

Strong purpose and values

- Restore and maintain connection to country and culture
- Locally led and planned
- Founded on two toolbox approach

Proper resourcing to build sustainable organisations

- Long-term funding
- Coordinators to support strong teams
- Operational and capital funding
- Proper wages and flexible work options
- Training and mentoring
- Support for individual groups and regional networks

Engaged and skilled government staff

- Government policies supporting development of Indigenous land and sea management sector
- Dedicated staff with the skills and capacity to work with groups
- Robust planning and feedback mechanisms that value environmental and cultural outcomes

Sustained success

Executive summary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been caring for country for thousands of years.

Over the last thirty years, there has been an incredible journey as contemporary Indigenous land and sea management (ILSM) has grown in size, profile and scope across the country. It is clear Indigenous rangers and Indigenous protected areas (IPAs) have been a stand-out success, achieving environmental, cultural, employment and social outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the nation as a whole. Since the first ranger groups started a lot has been learned about what makes these important initiatives tick.

In March 2020, Country Needs People welcomed the Australian Government's announcement it would renew existing Indigenous ranger contracts for a further seven years. This funding extension will create significant baseline stability for many organisations and ranger teams. However, there remains a real risk Australia might miss the opportunity to use this investment as a step towards securing all the elements needed to sustain a thriving ILSM sector into the future.

Elements required to sustain success

This report identifies twelve core elements that create the conditions for the successful growth and sustainability of Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs. These are not the only elements of success, but they are ones that land and sea management groups in the Country Needs People network and beyond have consistently identified as important to them.

Taken together, the elements demonstrate that when Australia values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' aspirations to care for country and combines this with proper investment, reciprocal two-way learning and engaged and skilled government staff to support the sector, it is a game changer for the health of country and people.

These twelve elements have been set out to remind governments and other stakeholders that in Indigenous rangers and IPAs, the nation has already found a model that works. The problem is there are warning signs some of these elements are at risk of being eroded. It is vital that investments over the next seven years are accompanied by actions to reinstate and build upon the elements that are critical to success.

In particular, we need to:

- remember the core driver behind the success of Indigenous rangers and IPAs is their strong grounding in work restoring and maintaining connection to country and culture through delivering ongoing management of natural and cultural values. Action is needed to reinstate strong working relationships between ILSM organisations and government staff providing technical and other support services, as well as aggregated reporting on the environmental and cultural outcomes that are being achieved. The latter could be expanded upon to meet Australia's urgent environmental and cultural heritage challenges.
- more strongly invest in ranger training and mentoring, coordinators and support staff and capital and operational support to build sustainable ILSM organisations.
- restore two-way learning and practical working relationships between ranger groups and government staff that build understanding of the opportunities, constraints and complexities in supporting Indigenous-led land and sea management.

The recommendations can be used as a guide to assist future strategic discussions between governments, traditional owners, Indigenous ranger groups and partners.

Australia faces damaging bushfires, biodiversity loss, a changing climate and our natural and cultural heritage under extreme pressure. Indigenous rangers and IPAs are on the frontline of these issues, and traditional owners and committed locals with a unique connection to country are putting their hands up ready to grow their operations. We need to remember and apply what has been learnt so far to ensure we can sustain success. Staying focused on maintaining and where necessary rebuilding the elements that led to this success should be our priority to work together into the future.

Recommendations

Strong purpose and values

1. Restore and maintain connection to country and culture

1.1. Revise government guidelines so they more clearly reflect the core importance of the environmental and cultural objectives of Indigenous rangers and IPAs and recognise the sophisticated way these objectives lead to broader employment and social outcomes.

1.2. Value and build on the contribution IPAs are making to Australia's National Reserve System.

2. Locally led and planned

2.1. Respect and fund the consultation and planning required to support local informed decision-making for IPAs and ranger organisations.

2.2. Support ranger groups to carry out work that facilitates broader community involvement in land and sea management, including learning on country and community on-country visit programs.

3. Founded on two toolbox approach

3.1. Create a dedicated funding stream to more actively support Indigenous ranger groups to form strong partnerships with researchers, government agencies and other land managers including through two-way joint research projects, mentorships, secondments and exchanges.

3.2. Showcase projects that successfully incorporate both Indigenous and western science knowledge systems.

Proper resourcing to build sustainable organisations

4. Long-term funding

4.1. Move quickly to deliver long-term funding with built in review points to allow necessary flexibility and ensure effective use of investments.

4.2. Develop long-term rolling funding packages to support newly developing and expanding groups to access more stable and predictable core resources.

4.3. Ensure Indigenous procurement policies and business development levers encourage fee-for-service opportunities that complement and do not replace or undermine stable funding for the public good environmental and cultural stewardship role being performed by Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs.

4.4. Prioritise discussions between the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE) and the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) about consolidating long-term funding arrangements and growth of the Indigenous rangers and IPAs, recognising the central role Indigenous and sea management plays Australia wide in the delivery of environmental and social outcomes.

5. Coordinators to support strong teams

5.1. Ensure ranger coordinators are adequately funded for each ranger group proportionate to numbers and gender balance including funding for an appropriate package of support.

5.2. Ensure decisions about coordinators and their employment conditions are determined by the group accountable for the on-ground work.

5.3. Discuss how a national 'community of practice' might be established to provide opportunities for coordinators, senior Indigenous rangers and their host organisations to access training support, share information and build resilience and sustainable careers.

6. Operational and capital funding

6.1. Hold discussions across Commonwealth, state and territory governments to establish a parallel funding stream or build-in a budget allocation to support the purchase of infrastructure and assets.

7. Proper wages and flexible work options

7.1. Ensure wages and conditions reflect experience of the ranger workforce with additional funds for organisations to provide appropriate entitlements.
7.2. Create clearer career pathways for women rangers and support women's ranger teams with packages for additional coordinators, mentoring, training, operational and capital needs.
7.3. Investigate options for investing more strongly in traineeships to ensure career paths in natural resource management for young students post school are as good as possible and lead to funded positions. Creating two-year internship positions within ranger groups could be explored.
7.4. Maintain the flexibility ranger groups have to offer individuals a number of employment models – full-time, part-time, casual and trainee.

8. Training and mentoring

8.1. Provide training and mentoring budgets to all ranger organisations that reflect local priorities and broker partnerships with registered training organisations to respond to training needs.
8.2. Support regional and national ranger training camps to deliver training, career development, leadership and mentoring in economical and efficient ways.
8.3. Establish a fund to support local, regional and national mentoring, leadership and networking initiatives.

9. Support for individual groups and regional networks

9.1. Stay engaged with partners operating on the ground to ensure funding models meet the needs of traditional owners, ranger groups and regional support organisations. Over time, the guiding principle should be to strengthen capable local traditional owner governed institutions and have funding and accountability structures sitting as closely as possible to the delivery of everyday operations on the ground through regional or local organisations.
9.2. Provide appropriate resourcing to regional organisations to provide services and network to local groups, including those ranger groups who require outside support to operate effectively.

Engaged and skilled government staff

10. Government policies supporting development of the Indigenous land and sea management sector

10.1. Hold high-level discussions between NIAA and DAWE officials with the purpose of creating stronger and more substantive joint support and oversight of Indigenous ranger and IPA investments and outcomes to strengthen the vital connection between environment, cultural heritage and conservation objectives, policy, practice and technical know-how at the national level and Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs on the ground.
10.2. Strengthen the policy capability of NIAA and DAWE and commitment at senior levels to work to further develop and grow the Indigenous land and sea management sector, including with states and territories.

11. Dedicated staff with the skills and capacity to work with groups

11.1. Reinstate a dedicated team of experienced and technically capable government staff with the capability and mandate to work with groups on Indigenous-led community-based land and sea management projects, solve problems and improve the way contracts are delivered and administered to support the on-ground outcomes.

12. Robust planning and feedback mechanisms that value environmental and cultural outcomes

12.1. Reinstate a more substantive, consistent and formalised role for the environment portfolio in tracking and assisting groups to deliver environmental and cultural heritage outcomes of rangers and IPAs.
12.2. Reinstate environmental, cultural and related reporting of ranger and IPA achievements against each local management plan.

Terms

Healthy country

Traditional owners, Indigenous ranger groups and communities talk about 'healthy country' holistically as the process of caring for living landscapes that combine land and sea formations, waterways, plants, animals and the culture, heritage, laws and language of people who come from that place and reside there.

The individual goals and aspirations of traditional owners and Indigenous ranger groups can typically be found in the IPA plans or plans of management that govern specific country. These draw on the culture, language, values and aspirations of individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups as well as non-Indigenous environmental and heritage concepts to express 'healthy country' visions for specific communities and places.

Plan of management

Plans of management aim to:

- describe an area of country, its environmental, cultural and natural values
- assess the threats and condition or integrity of those values
- outline a management approach and activities planned to restore, protect and strengthen these values, and how outcomes are monitored.

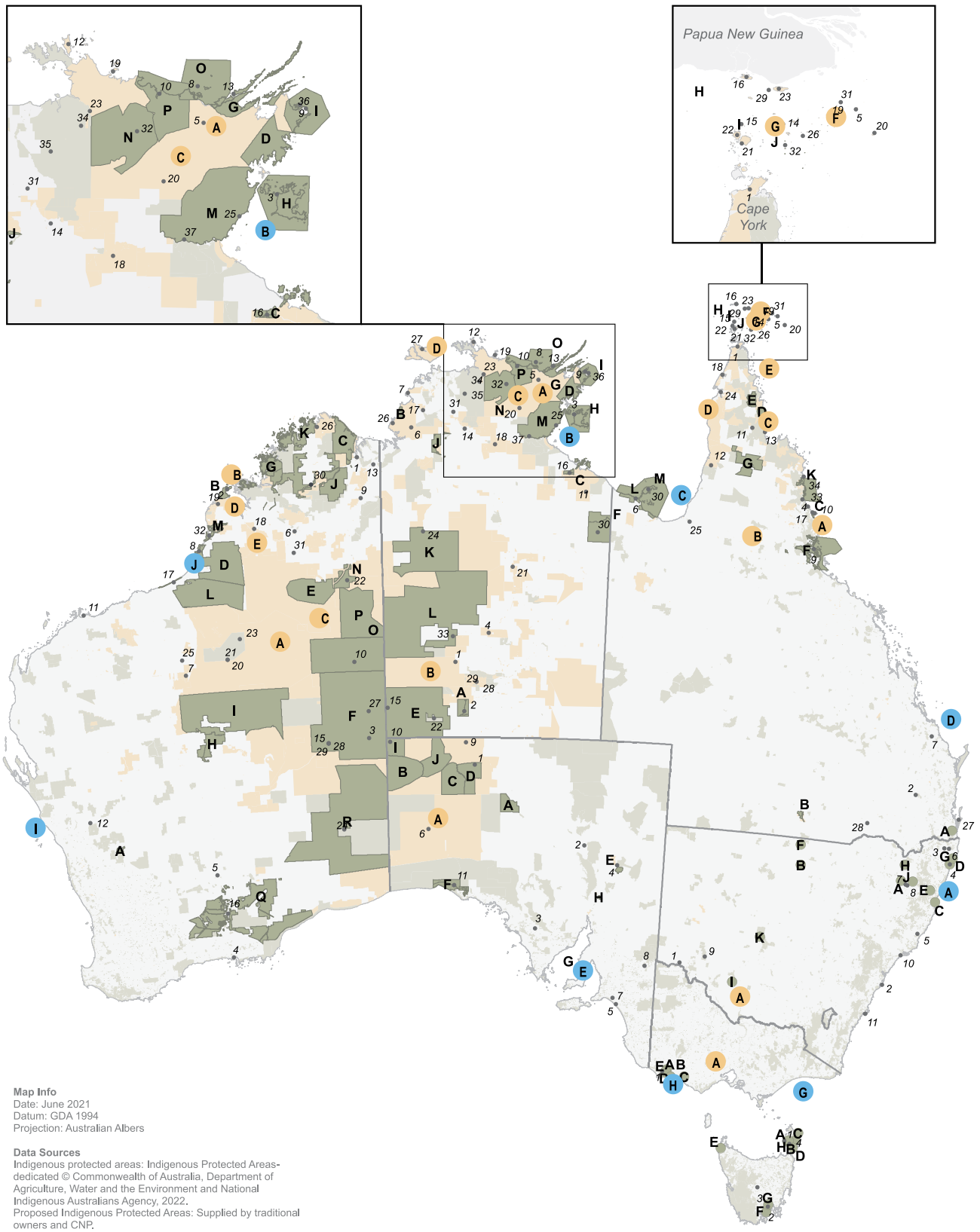
Many Indigenous rangers across Australia operate under plans of management in areas where IPAs have been formally established or under a variety other management plans specific to place. These plans recognise the connections between Indigenous people, country, traditional law and culture and governance, while also addressing regional, national and international priorities for management of natural and cultural values in the identified land and sea area.

Past experiences show that planning is a process, not a one-off event, and there is a need for reflection and renewal to ensure plans stay true to the needs and situation of the land, sea, and traditional owner groups and communities.[1]

Two Toolbox Approach / Two-way learning

The two toolbox approach or two-way learning describes the philosophy and process of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledge derived from tradition, history and local presence in the landscape combining with contemporary science and land and sea management methods.[2]

Diagram 1 - Indigenous protected areas and federally funded Indigenous ranger groups



Dedicated Indigenous Protected Area

Tarriwa Kurrukun	NSW	A
Brewarrina Ngemba Billabong	NSW	B
Gumma	NSW	C
Ngunya Jargoon	NSW	D
Dorodong	NSW	E
Weilmoringle	NSW	F
Minyumai	NSW	G
Boorabee and The Willows	NSW	H
Toogimbie	NSW	I
Wattleridge	NSW	J
Mawonga	NSW	K
Angas Downs	NT	A
Marri-Jabin (Thamurrurr - Stage 1)	NT	B
Yanyuwa (Barni - Wardimantha Awara)	NT	C
Laynhapuy	NT	D
Katiti Petermann	NT	E
Ganalanga-Mindibirrina	NT	F
Marthakal	NT	G
Anindilyakwa	NT	H
Dhimurru	NT	I
Wardaman	NT	J
Northern Tanami	NT	K
Southern Tanami	NT	L
South-East Arnhem Land	NT	M
Warddeken	NT	N
Crocodile Islands Maringa	NT	O
Djelk	NT	P
Guanaba	QLD	A
Jamba Dhandan Duringala	QLD	B
Mandingalbay Yidinji	QLD	C
Angkum - Stage 1	QLD	D
Kaanju Ngaachi Wenlock and Pascoe Rivers	QLD	E
Girringun	QLD	F
Olkola	QLD	G
Warul Kawa Island	QLD	H
Pulu	QLD	I
Warraberalgal and Porumalgal	QLD	J
Eastern Kuku Yalanji	QLD	K
Nijinda Durlga	QLD	L
Thuwathu/Bujimulla	QLD	M
Mount Willoughby	SA	A
Watarru	SA	B
Walalkara	SA	C
Antara - Sandy Bore	SA	D
Nantawarrina	SA	E
Yalata	SA	F
Wardang Island	SA	G
Yappala	SA	H
Kalka - Pipalyatjara	SA	I
Apara - Makiri - Punti	SA	J
Badger Island	TAS	A
Great Dog Island	TAS	B
Babel Island	TAS	C
Iungatalanana	TAS	D
Preminghana	TAS	E
Putalina	TAS	F
Risdon Cove	TAS	G
Mount Chappell Island	TAS	H
Kurtonitj	VIC	A
Deen Maar	VIC	B
Framlingham Forest	VIC	C
Lake Condah	VIC	D
Tyrendarra	VIC	E
Ninghan	WA	A
Bardi Jawi	WA	B
Balanggarra	WA	C
Karajarri	WA	D
Warlu Jilajaa Jumu	WA	E
Ngaanyatjarra	WA	F
Dambimangari	WA	G
Matuwa and Kurrara-Kurrara	WA	H
Birriliburu	WA	I
Wilinggin	WA	J
Uunguu	WA	K
Nyangumarta Warrarn	WA	L
Yawuru	WA	M
Paruku	WA	N
Kiwirrkurra	WA	O
Ngururrpa	WA	P
Ngadju	WA	Q
Anangu Tjutaku	WA	R

Indigenous Protected Areas in consultation

Werai Forest (CM)	NSW	A
Arafura Swamp	NT	A
Haasts Bluff	NT	B
Mimal	NT	C
Tiwi Islands	NT	D
Mamu	QLD	A
Talaroo	QLD	B
Umpila	QLD	C
Wik, Wik Way and Kugu	QLD	D
Wuthathi Shelburne Bay	QLD	E
Masigalal	QLD	F
Magani Lagaugal	QLD	G
Maralinga Tjarutja Lands	SA	A
Wurdi Youang	VIC	A
Jilakurru, Kaalpi and Western Desert Lakes	WA	A
Mayala	WA	B
Ngurra Kayanta	WA	C
Warramba garr wambooriny	WA	D
Nykina Mangala	WA	E

Sea country Indigenous Protected Areas in consultation

Ngiyambandigay Gaagal	NSW	A
South East Arnhem	NT	B
Kurtijar	QLD	C
Port Curtis Coral Coast	QLD	D
Wardang Island	SA	E
Tayaritja	TAS	F
Nanjit to Mallacoota	VIC	G
Gunditjmara	VIC	H
Yamatji Sea Connection	WA	I
Tukujana pa Karajarri Kura Jurrar	WA	J

Commonwealth Funded Indigenous Ranger Groups

Barkindji Maraura Rangers	NSW	1
Gamay Botany Bay Rangers	NSW	2
Githabul Aboriginal Rangers	NSW	3
Jahnala Yenbalehla Rangers	NSW	4
Midnorth Coast Aboriginal Rangers (TIDE)	NSW	5
Ngulingah Nimbin Rock Rangers	NSW	6
Tarriwa Kurrukun Rangers	NSW	7
Wattleridge Rangers	NSW	8
Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area Rangers	NSW	9
Worimi Green Team	NSW	10
Wreck Bay Caring for Country Rangers	NSW/ACT	11

Anangu Luritjiku Rangers	NT	1
Anangu Rangers on Angas Downs	NT	2
Anindilyakwa Rangers	NT	3
Anmatyerr Rangers	NT	4
Arafura Swamp Rangers	NT	5
Asyrikarrak Kirim Rangers	NT	6
Bulgul Land and Sea Rangers	NT	7
Crocodile Islands Rangers	NT	8
Dhimurru IPA Rangers	NT	9
Djelk Rangers	NT	10
Garawa Rangers	NT	11
Garngi Rangers	NT	12
Gumurr Marthakal Rangers	NT	13
Jawoyn Rangers	NT	14
Kaltukatjara Rangers	NT	15
Li-Anthawirriyarra Sea Rangers	NT	16
Malak Malak Land Management	NT	17
Mangarrayi Rangers	NT	18
Mardbalk Marine Rangers	NT	19
Mimal Rangers	NT	20
Muru-warinyi Ankkul Rangers	NT	21
Mutijulu Tjakura Rangers	NT	22
Njanjma Rangers	NT	23
Northern Tanami Rangers	NT	24
Numbulwar Numburindi Amalagayag Inyung Rangers	NT	25
Thamarrurr Rangers	NT	26
Tiwi Islands Land and Marine Rangers	NT	27
Tjuwanpa Rangers	NT	28
Tjuwanpa Women Rangers	NT	29
Waanyi Garawa Rangers	NT	30
Wagiman Guwardagun Rangers	NT	31
Warddeken Rangers	NT	32
Warlpiri Rangers	NT	33
Warnbi Rangers	NT	34
Werenbun Rangers	NT	35
Yirralka Rangers - Laynhapuy IPA	NT	36
Yugul Mangi Rangers	NT	37
Apudthama Rangers	QLD	1
Bunya Mountain Murri Rangers	QLD	2
Eastern Kuku Yalanji Rangers	QLD	4
Erubam Rangers	QLD	5
Gangalidda Garawa Rangers	QLD	6
Gidarjil Rangers	QLD	7
Girringun Rangers	QLD	9
Gunggandji Rangers	QLD	10
Kalan Rangers	QLD	11
Kowanyama Rangers	QLD	12
Lama Lama Rangers	QLD	13
Lamalgal Rangers	QLD	14
Mabuygiw Rangers	QLD	15
Malu Kiai Rangers	QLD	16
Mandingalbay Yidinji Rangers	QLD	17
Mapoon Land and Sea Rangers	QLD	18
Masigalgal Rangers	QLD	19
Meriam Gesep A Gur Keparem Le Rangers	QLD	20
Mua Lagalgau Rangers	QLD	21
Mura Badhulgau Rangers	QLD	22
Mura Buway Rangers	QLD	23
Nanum Wungthim Land and Sea Rangers	QLD	24
Normanton Rangers	QLD	25
Porumalgal Rangers	QLD	26
Quandamooka Rangers	QLD	27
Queensland Murray-Darling Rangers	QLD	28
Simakal Rangers	QLD	29
Wellesley Islands Indigenous Rangers	QLD	30
Ugaram Rangers	QLD	31
Warraberalgal Rangers	QLD	32
Yirrganydji Indigenous Land and Sea Rangers	QLD	33
Yuku-Baja-Muliku Rangers	QLD	34
Anangu Land Management Rangers	SA	1
Arabana Rangers	SA	2
Gawler Ranges Rangers	SA	3
Nantawarrina Rangers	SA	4
Ngarrindjeri Rangers	SA	5
Oak Valley Rangers	SA	6
Raukkan Rangers	SA	7
Riverland Rangers	SA	8
Warru Kaninytjaku APY Rangers - Musgrave Ranges	SA	9
Warru Kaninytjaku APY Rangers - Tomkinson Ranges	SA	10
Yalata IPA Rangers	SA	11
Milaythina pakana	TAS	1
Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre Rangers	TAS	2
Tasmanian Aboriginal Trainee Rangers (statewide)	TAS	3
Truwana Rangers	TAS	4
Budj Bim Rangers	VIC	1
Balanggarra Rangers	WA	1
Bardi Jawi Rangers	WA	2
Blackstone Rangers	WA	3
Esperance Tjaltjraak Cultural Rangers	WA	4
Goldfields Land Management Rangers	WA	5
Gooniyandi Rangers	WA	6
Jigalong Rangers	WA	7
Karajarri Rangers	WA	8
Kija Rangers	WA	9
Kiwirrkurra Rangers	WA	10
Marduthuni Rangers	WA	11
Midwest Aboriginal Rangers	WA	12
Miriuwung Gajerrong Rangers	WA	13
Ngaanyatjarra Rangers	WA	15
Ngadju Rangers	WA	16
Nyangumarta Rangers	WA	17
Nyikina Mangala Rangers	WA	18
Nyul Nyul Rangers	WA	19
Parngurr Rangers	WA	20
Parngurr Women Rangers	WA	21
Paruku Rangers	WA	22
Punmu Rangers	WA	23
Spinifex Land Management Rangers	WA	24
The Western Desert Martu Ranger Programme	WA	25
Uunguu Rangers	WA	26
Warakurna Rangers	WA	27
Warburton Men Rangers	WA	28
Warburton Women Rangers	WA	29
Wunggurr Rangers	WA	30
Yanunijarra Ngurrara Rangers	WA	31
Yawuru Rangers	WA	32

Long-term and now retired Bardi Jawi ranger, Chris Sampi, shows off the Bardi Jawi emblem. Credit: Kimberley Land Council

CHAPTER 1

History of Indigenous rangers and IPAs

Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs have become a powerful success story for Australia

Contemporary Indigenous land and sea management has grown over the last thirty years to become a major part of Australia's environmental and cultural management landscape. There are currently over 129 discrete Indigenous ranger groups on the frontline, managing the country from coast to coast, and 81 declared IPAs, covering over 85 million hectares of land and 4 million hectares of sea country, and comprising nearly half of Australia's National Reserve System. There remains a high demand for new ranger positions and groups, and millions of hectares of IPAs currently in development. This is a major and growing contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to protecting and managing Australia's natural and cultural resources.

The day-to day-work of Indigenous rangers and IPAs aims to improve the health of country and culture by:

- protecting country through mosaic burning tailored to local conditions reducing the risk of out-of-control wildfires
- reducing the destructive impacts of feral animals and invasive weeds
- managing and protecting threatened species and their habitats
- looking after sacred sites, on land and sea, to sustain cultural health
- keeping country healthy for bush tucker and locally valued species
- integrating cultural and natural values management, transferring and actively maintaining language, and passing knowledge across generations through active use in the course of land and sea management
- managing sea country and coastal zones
- safeguarding communities from biosecurity threats
- managing tourism access and impacts and, at times, providing interpretive information to visitors.

While many Indigenous rangers operate in remote parts of the country, often on Indigenous held land, there are also groups located or aspiring to start in regional and urban areas where there may be less access to land ownership.

> **We're born with that obligation as Aboriginal people, of caring for country, it's that strong cultural identity. The health of our country is also intrinsically linked with the health of our people. There's physical but also spiritual health, that when you removed from country, people aren't well. So for us to be able to care for country, to get help the country healthy, it means that we can become healthy people.**
>
> Gail Reynolds-Adamson, Nyungar woman and chair of Esperance Tjaltjraak Corporation in Western Australia

It is important to understand the history of Indigenous rangers and IPAs

Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs are grounded in a history of Indigenous 'caring for country' practices extending back over millennia. Over the last 30 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have led the growth of contemporary Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs across the nation, supported by governments, scientists and research institutions, non-government organisations and other stakeholders.

Resurgence of 'caring for country'

The contemporary 'caring for country' movement began in the 1970s, driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people re-asserting cultural obligations to care for traditional estates and as a component of the homelands movement in Northern Australia at the time. Further momentum built through the era of campaigning for land rights, resulting in responses by governments including legislation such as the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) 1976.* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights and interests in land, including through land rights and native title, are formally recognised over approximately 40 per cent of Australia's land mass.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people became more strongly involved in contemporary natural resource management. Initially, most Indigenous rangers were involved in the joint management of

national parks. The establishment of the Aboriginal Ranger Service on Palm Island in 1983, and Kowanyama Land and Natural Resource Management Office in 1990, signalled the beginning of the current community-owned ranger group model.

In 1985, a national workshop on Aboriginal ranger training was conducted by the Council of Nature Conservation Ministers. Further groups formed using the federal Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program to provide partial wages for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertaking land and sea management projects.

The Australian Government's first significant policy response to Indigenous 'caring for country' initiatives was the Commonwealth Employment Program in Natural and Cultural Resource Management (CEPANCRM), which provided some contract employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in land and sea management from 1988 to 1996, but was not sustained.

Growing momentum began to deliver results

Across the country, Aboriginal land councils, particularly in northern and central Australia, supported the development of ranger groups and caring for country projects through the 1990s and early 2000s. Other organisations including Indigenous and non-Indigenous not-for-profit groups also began to work more closely with traditional owners to manage their estates, particularly across northern Australia.

Significant community-focused resources available through Landcare in 1992, Coastcare in 1995, and the Natural Heritage Trust in 1996 stimulated further opportunities. Although not initially designed with Indigenous land and sea management in mind, this changed as grassroots efforts on Indigenous land gained strength. Growing numbers of Indigenous ranger groups formed across the country and started to apply for multiple grants to support their work. In remote Australia this was particularly assisted by the original CDEP program - a relatively flexible funding arrangement that allowed local Indigenous communities to build locally prioritised social enterprises of various kinds. This was a key source of workforce support for early ranger teams in remote homelands. Though CDEP did not provide full funding for ranger operations, it still provided a significant catalyst for caring for country and early ranger teams.

A significant step forward occurred in 1996, with the development of the Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) program. This program was designed to help Indigenous owners develop, declare and manage IPAs on their lands. In 1998, the first IPA, Nantawarrina, was declared in South Australia. This was soon followed steadily by IPAs across the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland and eventually into Victoria, Tasmania and New South Wales. Today many, but not all, federally-funded ranger groups work on IPAs, particularly in remote Australia.

In the early 2000s, land councils, researchers and other partners began strongly advocating for governments to further invest in Indigenous rangers undertaking environmental and conservation work.

The federal environment department, larger land councils in northern and central Australia, and other groups, supported several key ranger and IPA conferences to bring traditional owners across Australia together to share knowledge and expertise.

At the same time, state and federal ministers and senior officials were invited to visit long-standing ranger groups, such as the Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation, to see their activities and outcomes first-hand.

Multiple reports and studies produced by practitioners and researchers demonstrated the environmental, health and economic outcomes achieved by Indigenous ranger groups and called for more stable and comprehensive government support.

Over time, government agencies, businesses and non-government organisations started to show increased interest in partnering with Indigenous ranger groups across a range of areas, including carbon abatement and biosecurity delivered through a combination of direct funding, carbon credits and fee-for-service projects. Projects such as the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement project were developed, breaking new ground with Aboriginal fire management and leading to improved landscape management and valuable carbon credits.

Working on Country was a major breakthrough

In 2007 a breakthrough was achieved when the federal environment department initiated the Working on Country program. The primary policy objective of the program was to provide employment opportunities for Indigenous people to deliver environmental and cultural management services that met both their 'caring for country' aspirations and environmental and heritage goals in the national interest. This program provided much needed tailored architecture and funding to grow stronger and more stable Indigenous ranger groups across the country, resulting in more ambitious operations and plans. It provided ranger groups with more sustainable multi-year packages of funding for wages, coordinators and operational costs with relatively simple reporting and accountability structures.

Working on Country demonstrated a commitment to fund the development of Indigenous ranger groups over the long-term. It significantly improved upon the previous approach of groups solely having to rely on piecing together multiple small grants on a project-by-project basis. For many years, this need to juggle piecemeal, uncoordinated funding had placed significant barriers on Indigenous rangers and their host organisations and now many were much more able to develop and thrive.

Working on Country fostered the creation of a traditional owner, local community-based workforce of Indigenous land and sea managers on the frontline, able to strengthen their

operations. It was a step-change improvement for groups operating in incredibly challenging conditions of remoteness, cross-cultural complexity and social disadvantage and a previously more complex funding environment.

Importantly, the development and introduction of Working on Country coincided with a federal government move to change the CDEP program away from its wage model to a 'work for the dole' arrangement. Although strongly resisted by many communities at the time, this change was nevertheless rolled out by the Australian Government. In some cases, it dismantled many existing and constructive projects.

As part of this process, federal government departments were asked to identify some government services provided under the CDEP program that could be better recognised as government funded positions in order for more Aboriginal people to move into 'real' jobs with award wages. The then Department of Environment and Water Resources partially used this process to support the introduction of Working on Country. Its potential to generate jobs for Aboriginal people, including in remote and regional areas of Australia, was one of the key drivers in obtaining government approval for the program. About 30 per cent of initial Working on Country rangers were transitioned from formerly being CDEP employees. As a result, Working on Country was able to provide continuity and even strengthening of ranger groups and caring for country work during the dismantling of CDEP.

To support the Working on Country and IPA programs, the then Department of Environment and Water Resources invested in building a team of staff who worked closely with Indigenous ranger groups on workplan development and reporting. This team also provided assistance to groups in accessing other environmental and land and sea management funds and ensured robust practices to support IPA declaration and management. Other government departments at both federal and state levels also began to increasingly, partner with ranger groups for the delivery of environmental and conservation services, including the former Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, national park agencies and the Australian Government's Emission Reductions Fund. In the late 2000s, the Queensland Government began to support and grow state-funded, community-based ranger teams and encourage rangers in their regions to form networks and provided significant resources, including planning and technical support. Fee-for-service work has also generated occasional income from a range of broader business, philanthropic and government partners.

Multiple forums added to the momentum around ranger work and focused on sharing stories of outcomes being achieved by traditional owner groups. Workshops and conferences brought Indigenous rangers, research, government and non-government organisations together to share knowledge and discuss potential future directions, including the need to expand ranger and IPA operations to look after sea country. Discussions also centred on plans to increase the number of women's ranger groups operating across the country.

Throughout 2008-2013, the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (and its successor departments) continued to work with Indigenous land and sea management groups to strengthen the Working on Country and IPA programs. Together, they established important two-way accountability processes to hold both government and Indigenous land and sea management groups to account for

Charmaine Wright, Nyangumarta Ranger. Credit: Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation

outcomes including periodic reports detailing achievements, and areas for further work. Indigenous ranger groups and key government staff with land and conservation expertise formed strong working relationships, assisted by ranger conferences, workshops evaluation reports and on-country site visits.

In 2013, the Federal Government awarded 5-year contracts to Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs. This decision was critical to sustaining the further growth and development of groups across Australia, particularly through a change of government. It built on the previous 3-year funding time frames of the initial Working on Country program, which had been in turn an improvement on the often short-term and non-core funding available prior to Working on Country.

Transfer of programs to sit under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy

In late 2013, with the election of the Abbott Government, the administration of the Working on Country Program was transferred to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) to be delivered under the umbrella Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS). The IAS consolidated many different Indigenous policies and programs spanning housing, land, employment, family support, education, training, arts and sports previously delivered across federal agencies into PM&C.

This machinery of government change was viewed with great apprehension by many Indigenous organisations, including land and sea management groups and partners and is still seen by many as problematic today.

While some staff from the environment portfolio transferred to PM&C and continued to contribute to the program, an important connection between environment, heritage and conservation objectives at the national level and Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs on the ground, was significantly weakened. Additionally, some of the core corporate knowledge around both working with remote and community-based land and sea management and understanding the interconnectivity with other relevant program and policy streams across environmental and heritage issues was diminished.

In many cases, Indigenous ranger groups found themselves working with government staff who did not have knowledge of the history and goals of the program and had no or very poor understanding of the complexities of delivering successful land and sea management, a technically and logistically challenging exercise. Funding became part of the larger IAS bucket with

a focus on Indigenous welfare, education, employment and economic development objectives. Indigenous land and sea management groups sought and continue to seek to rebuild relationships and navigate difficult contract processes despite a marked reduction in practical assistance and useful working relationships with federal government staff in comparison to previous arrangements. While some efforts are being made to respond to this ongoing weakness at the time of writing, this remains a significant challenge and risk to the overall successful program delivery and a considerable reduction of informed support for on-ground organisations tasked with delivery.

Under the IAS, government support for Indigenous rangers and IPAs has largely been maintained with moderate growth in terms of quantity, albeit at times with a slightly different emphasis. Funding has come from the Jobs, Land and Economy stream of the IAS which prioritises the employment, Indigenous business, economic and social outcomes of ranger groups and IPAs.

Indigenous protected areas

Since 1996, the Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) Program has worked with traditional owners to support them to consult, declare and manage IPAs on their lands. IPAs are voluntary agreements between Indigenous communities and the Australian Government in which traditional owners are given responsibility for managing protected areas based on an agreed plan. Areas protected and managed under an IPA become part of the National Reserve System (NRS).

As of June 2022, there were 81 declared IPAs, covering over 85 million hectares of land and 4 million hectares of sea country. They comprised nearly half of Australia's National Reserve System, a major contribution of Aboriginal land to protecting iconic land and seas.

IPAs are a fundamental part of Australia's response to protecting the nation's environmental and cultural values and biodiversity and to meeting its international commitments to protecting a proportion of land and sea for conservation. If plans by the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People to increase these targets to 30% of land and sea by 2030 come to fruition, then both terrestrial and marine IPAs will again play a critical role in achieving this target.

Work is required to fully capture, monitor and acknowledge the environmental and cultural outcomes being achieved under the IPA program and to renew efforts to provide tailored support for the activities of rangers and traditional owners who manage them.

While these matters are important and reasonable priorities, including for traditional owner groups, the core strength and success of Indigenous ranger and IPA initiatives is their focus on land and sea management work that meets 'caring for country' aspirations.

The Australian Government has continued to recognise the broad range of social outcomes achieved by Indigenous rangers and IPAs and has indicated that these initiatives align with 80 per cent of the outcomes set out for the IAS. It is less clear whether there is a firm understanding of how central Indigenous land and sea management is to supporting the achievement of real outcomes in these other objectives.

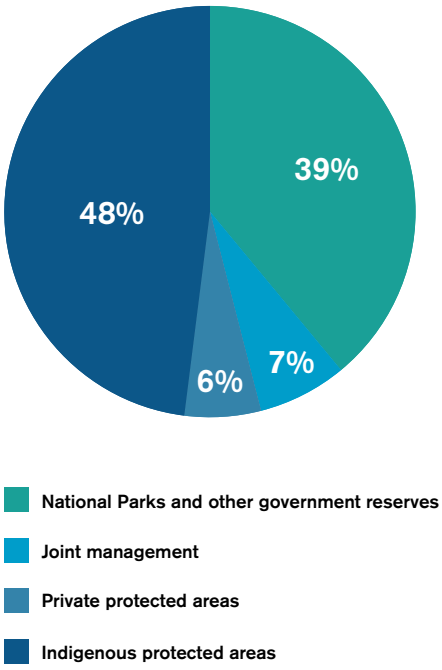
On 1 July 2018, the Federal Government transferred IPA funding from the Natural Heritage Trust to the IAS. Since May 2019, the IAS has been administered by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), a separate Executive Agency now sitting within the broader PM&C portfolio.

In March 2020, following years of sustained calls from the community for more growth and security for both Indigenous Rangers and IPAs, the Commonwealth Government announced $102 million indexed each year from 2021 to 2028 for Indigenous rangers.

This was a very significant step in response to ongoing calls for a greater level of security and has the potential to create significant baseline stability for many groups. It remains to be seen what will be implemented and how it will align with calls for reform from various quarters.

Diagram 2

IPA Program's contribution to the National Reserve System



State-based Indigenous ranger support

States and territories have taken different approaches to supporting Indigenous rangers in their regions. Funding under the federally funded IPA and ranger programs provides the primary foundation in most jurisdictions. Examples of some of the key arrangements across states and territories are below:

Queensland

The Queensland Government funds an integrated Indigenous land and sea ranger program which contracts rangers in Queensland to care for land, waterways and protected species through their community-based organisations. This program currently represents leading practice in Australia as government staff from the Department of Environment and Science work hand in hand with local Indigenous community organisations to support the delivery of ranger work.

As of June 2021, the Queensland Government spends approximately $12 million per year with funds directed to 19 Aboriginal and Torres Strait organisations, who employ over 100 Indigenous land and sea rangers across the state. In addition, training, networking and partnership support is delivered through the Department of Environment and Science.

The program is currently undergoing an expansion process to double to support 200 Indigenous rangers across Queensland over the next three years.

Western Australia

In 2017, the WA Government announced $20 million over five years for an Aboriginal Ranger Program designed to focus on ranger jobs, training and community development initiatives that deliver social, economic and environmental outcomes. Funding was distributed in three rounds with new and established groups encouraged to apply.

Funding for this program is set to increase to $50 million over the next four years.

The program is overseen by the Parks and Wildlife Service in the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions. While the commitment of dedicated Indigenous ranger funding has been a major new initiative and step forward for Western Australia, the delivery framework for ranger funding does not focus sufficiently on the core operations of community-based Indigenous land and sea management. With further adjustment in the delivery framework and quality and quantity of funding, the program could deliver greater impact for both nature and local Indigenous communities.

Northern Territory

In 2017 the Northern Territory Government committed $12.1 million for an Aboriginal Ranger Grants Program. This comprised $4.1 million over 2 years for funding for capital items, equipment and infrastructure as well as a further $8 million over four years for a Land Management and Conservation Fund to improve conservation practices on Aboriginal land.

In May 2021, the government announced a further $11.9 million for the program.

The program funds groups allocated through a competitive grant round overseen by the government and traditional owner representatives. This funding is highly complementary to federal ranger and IPA funding and provides often hard to access funds for particular areas of need including planning, project work, vehicles and infrastructure like ranger work sheds or solar power generators. The funding structure has also attracted additional monies via regulated offset requirements.

Difference between community-led Indigenous land and sea management and joint management of national parks

In some jurisdictions, joint management is offered as a form of Indigenous land and sea management that creates opportunities for traditional owners to participate in the management of national parks and similar reserves that would otherwise be state-managed only.

Jurisdictions have different legal and policy frameworks for joint management with different history, staffing experience, levels of funding and other characteristics. These frameworks also vary on the ground in different regions or parks depending upon the respective personnel, traditional owner groups involved and the legal rights that they may or may not have.

For some traditional owner groups with limited or no formal legal access or rights to country, joint management may be a pathway that enables them to reconnect with country and participate in land and sea management.

A common feature of joint management arrangements is a park council, committee or board where traditional owners are represented in varying numbers. The level of control or influence park or land management may vary widely depending upon the budget, policy framework, local governance arrangements and the people involved.

A significant complexity can be that joint management requires longer-term formal agreements. These can be demanding to negotiate, somewhat limited in range and generally carry higher level of transaction costs in negotiating with government agencies over relatively small amounts of discretionary expenditure or delivery of specific management initiatives.

In contrast, community-based management is typically enabled by funding to a land council, Indigenous not-for-profit organisation, auspice partner or other entity that works with or for an independent or semi-autonomous group of traditional owners.

Community-based management typically has a higher degree of community control and priority setting than joint management. It can also be subject to less layers of bureaucracy or complexity in negotiating management arrangements, funding and other matters. These positive aspects however still require significant demands of local traditional owners in terms of time, commitment and requirement to support administrative and governance arrangements.

While no one option fits all, strong community-based management on Indigenous lands or with negotiated access to other tenures have demonstrated multiple benefits to local people, communities and the environment.

Some groups may undertake a combination of joint management and community-based management over their country depending on their resources, legal options, access to country and other factors. Often a strong community-based management organisation has a higher capacity to negotiate more favourable joint management outcomes if they are not reliant on the parks agency or other party for their entire management budget, consultation costs or access to country.

Joint management may be beneficial or optimal for some groups, but it requires careful consideration, often bringing with it long term relationships with state or federal agencies with many elements to manage, which may be expensive in time and resources.

Joint management exists on a spectrum that varies widely across jurisdictions and contexts and in some instances may support community-based management as the delivery mechanism. Where it is on the spectrum is influenced by the level of organisational strength, capacity and independence of the traditional landowner group, prevailing legal rights to land or sea, and adequacy of funding arrangements for state and territory government agencies, and many other factors.

Timeline of Indigenous land and sea management in Australia

Prior to 1970

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples shape and manage land and sea country over millennia

1996

IPA Program established

1998

First IPA declared - Nantawarrina IPA in SA

2007

Working on Country (WoC) program established and managed by the environment department

2007

Qld establishes state ranger program

Early 1980s

Grassroots-driven 'caring for our country' model in northern Australia begins

Indigenous land & sea management work underway

Fire management

Cultural sites protection

Feral animal control

Weed control

Threatened species conservation

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples work to reestablish connection, occupation, use and management of traditional land and sea country

1970 1980 1996 1998 2007

2022

81 IPAs protect 85 million hectares of land and sea country

2022

129 federally-funded ranger teams employ

1900

rangers in mix of full-time, part-time and casual roles

2017

WA and NT governments establish ranger grant funding

2012

1423

people employed in WoC funded ranger positions in mix of full-time, part-time and casual roles

2020

Federal government commits funding existing Indigenous ranger teams to 2028

2020

Public awareness of the need to embrace Indigenous ecological knowledge peaks after devastating bushfire season

2013

5-year funding contracts awarded

2013

Transfer of administration of IPA program and Working on Country to PM&C then NIAA

2020-21

Qld, NT and WA governments all commit to ongoing or increased ranger funding

2012 2013 2017 2020 2021 →

Yanunijarra Womens Head Ranger Raylene Lenmardi oversees cool burning with an R3 Raindance machine.
Credit: Kevin Tromp, Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation

CHAPTER 2

Outcomes of Indigenous rangers and IPAs

Indigenous rangers and Indigenous protected areas are world leading initiatives

Indigenous rangers and IPAs have been the subject of numerous positive internal and external evaluations, which have identified significant environmental, cultural, social and employment outcomes from these initiatives. Indigenous rangers and IPAs have succeeded in delivering meaningful social and economic benefits to Indigenous communities, and to the nation in its journey to Close the Gap.[31]

There are significant potential economic benefits and savings to the budget through reduced health and welfare expenditure achieved by upfront investment in initiatives such as ranger groups and IPAs and associated land and sea management initiatives, with the overall return on investment estimated at more than three dollars for every dollar spent by the Australian Government where successful ranger teams and IPA projects have been combined and operating over some time.[32] Research demonstrates that taking a strengths-based approach and investing in 'people on country' as the foundation for improving the socio-economic outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is likely to deliver strong benefits in comparison with many historically siloed education, employment and other programs.[33] Indeed, Indigenous rangers and IPAs are unique in being among the small number of initiatives supported by government that are genuinely founded upon Indigenous ways of knowing and maintaining culture and country.

> **The Indigenous ranger program is a shining light of successful program design, implementation and is an active contributor to closing the gap targets and meaningful reconciliation.**
>
> Kimberley Land Council Annual Report, 2019

Environmental and cultural outcomes

Indigenous rangers and IPAs have delivered significant environmental and conservation outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the nation as a whole.

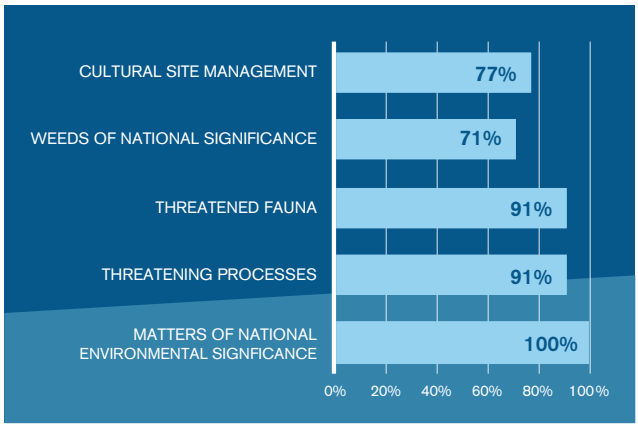
Groups are working to keep land and sea country healthy, reconnect with and safeguard ecological and cultural values, preserve biodiversity and reduce damaging trends in land and sea degradation.[34]

It is clear that work is well-targeted to priority areas. A snapshot review of Indigenous rangers and IPAs conducted by the former Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (SEWPAC)[35] concluded:

- all ranger projects were managing matters of National Environmental Significance under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*
- 91 per cent managed 'key threatening processes' such as feral pigs, cats, marine debris and invasive grasses
- 91 per cent helped protect threatened fauna species
- 71 per cent were tackling weeds of national significance
- 77 per cent were managing culturally significant sites.

Diagram 4

Percentage of ranger teams involved in key management actions



Source: SEWPAC, 2013

Lama Lama ranger, Lisa Peter. Credit: Annette Ruzicka.

More recently, there is an overall lack of systematic reporting and data collection by the NIAA across ILSM programs. While environmental and cultural outcomes achieved by Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs are hard to aggregate, given that work is focused on local projects and landscapes, snapshot data similar to that prepared above should still be possible to collate.

> **Indigenous people, their land and their cultural and natural resource management activities make core contributions to managing Australia's environment. Indigenous lands contain significant levels of biodiversity and long-term investment in Indigenous land management programs has delivered environmental, cultural and economic benefits.**
>
> State of the Environment Report, 2016

Across Australia, Indigenous rangers have reduced damaging trends in environmental degradation across a variety of ecosystems including tropical rainforests, savannah landscapes, sensitive arid and semi-arid desert environments and coastal and riverine ecosystems. However, like all land and sea managers, rangers continue to face major challenges in arresting biodiversity decline across the board.[36] In many cases, achievements are documented in scientific and academic papers and studies[37]. They are also highlighted in some of the case studies throughout this report.

> **Active involvement of Indigenous people was recognised as a key reason for the success of the National Feral Camel Action Plan.**
>
> Hart and Edwards, 2016[38]

It is clear that in many regions, Indigenous rangers and IPAs have been pivotal in assisting traditional owners and communities reconnect with country. Indigenous rangers and IPAs have been important catalysts for the transfer of Indigenous ecological knowledge across generations. Often the process of accessing and managing remote country and engaging with both senior traditional owners and younger generations is an integral part of land and sea management. The simple capacity to physically access highly valued places via four-wheel drive, boat or helicopter in order to assess and manage sites can result in a joyous reconnection with song, ceremony, story, names and language, thus revitalising long held knowledge.

Willingin Ranger, Dean Wungundin at Wanalirri, a significant cultural art site. Credit: Annette Ruzicka.

> **Mobilising the support and knowledge of Traditional Owners in remote communities [is] considered to offer one of the greatest opportunities for sustained on-ground conservation action for the greater bilby across its range.**
>
> Bradley et al, 2015[39]

Indigenous rangers and IPAs have also attracted significant interest overseas as effective and progressive models of Indigenous land and sea management with strong grassroots support. In 2017, the World Future Council awarded the IPA and Indigenous ranger programs the Bronze Future Policy Award recognising them as among the best policies in the world for combating land degradation and desertification.[40] Multiple exchange visits between Australian and Canadian First Nations rangers, guardians and representatives has resulted in added momentum to Canadian efforts to engage governments in support for Indigenous land and sea management.[41]

2019-2020 Bushfires re-ignite discussion on Indigenous fire management

The 2019-20 bushfire season was devastating for large parts of Australia. It was a nationally significant moment in which governments, scientists and the broader public began, on a much larger scale, to consider different approaches to fire management, including discussion of Aboriginal fire management practices to protect country and people.

Over the last two decades, Indigenous ranger groups in many parts of Australia have been combining local traditional fire knowledge and practice with scientific information and mapping techniques to deliver contemporary Indigenous fire management.[42] There have been many examples of success reducing the frequency and extent of uncontrolled wildfire by using low-intensity, mosaic burning to safeguard animals and plants, reduce threats to people and infrastructure, protect sacred sites and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.[43]

Indigenous ranger groups are carrying out fire management across a wide variety of savannah, desert, coastal and bush landscapes, from Cape York across the Top End to the Kimberley through to the central Australian deserts including Western Australia and in more densely settled parts of Australia. In many cases rangers are collaborating with rural fire services, national parks services and other landowners. They are best able to do this when there are well-established and sustainably Indigenous land management organisations present. Fire management is an important component of year-round management of the landscape, made more complex in contemporary Australia by a warming climate, introduced invasive weed species, feral animal impacts on vegetation and in more densely settled areas, complex patterns of settlement and human habitation.

There are many millions of hectares of land where strategic fire management is not yet sufficiently resourced and undertaken across Australia. Where Indigenous ranger groups and Indigenous land and sea management capacity is properly resourced, established and allowed time to develop, this creates stronger local and regional capacity in community-run organisations ready to partner with local, state and federal government services, neighbours, landholders and other organisations to share their knowledge and to be an integral part of carefully expanded strategic fire management across the country. In an increasingly challenging climate and fire landscape, we will need to build and secure this strength nationally even further.

Arafura Swamp Rangers, Northern Territory. Credit David Hancock

Employment and economic development

Employment numbers for Indigenous rangers have increased modestly but steadily every year since Working on Country began in 2007.[44] It is important to note that this is mostly across regional and remote Australia where employment numbers have historically been low for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and where traditional owners have greater access to and control of their country. Indigenous ranger groups, and the Indigenous land and sea management corporations that support them, are one of the largest employers of Aboriginal people in remote and regional areas. As of June 2021, there were 129 groups providing job opportunities to 2,100 full-time, part-time and casual rangers over the course of the year (nearly 899 full-time equivalent jobs).[45]

Women now make up a significant proportion of the ranger workforce. Women fill just under 50 per cent of casual ranger positions, and across all employment categories, women make up over one third of rangers, with significant unmet demand for more funded positions.[46]

More generally, communities recognise ranger work as a way to create meaningful jobs and economic development opportunities associated with land and sea management. Around 65 per cent of Indigenous land and sea management teams build on their work as Indigenous rangers and on IPAs with commercial and enterprise activities of varying scale and duration that generate additional income and jobs, the main additional activities being fee-for-service contracts, tourism and carbon abatement.[47]

It is worth noting that opportunities for fee-for-service work vary dramatically depending upon location and demand from government or industry. While fee-for-service can be a useful adjunct to core operational funding, it does have higher transaction costs, tends to be more intermittent, and is only a sustainable option if groups already have stable core funding.

Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID) Report

The Productivity Commission's *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* (OID) report in 2016 showcased Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs as 'things that work' to deliver sustained employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The OID report cited numerous independent evaluations to conclude these programs have engaged Indigenous Australians on country in meaningful employment to achieve large-scale conservation outcomes. It also concluded that rangers see their work as 'real jobs' that provide good income and conditions, interesting projects and ongoing employment. Rangers attribute high value to strengthening their connection to country and opportunities for inter-generational learning provided through their work.[48]

Education, training and mentoring

The vast majority of rangers undertake training to build skills and confidence needed for work and increase qualifications. Rangers in school programs are also helping young people develop education and career pathways.

Consistently high levels of training have been achieved over the last two decades with groups undertaking accredited training in:

- conservation and land management (now known as conservation and ecosystem management)
- cultural heritage and record-keeping
- coxswains, biosecurity, firearms safety and use of aerial incendiaries
- use of environmental monitoring tools (e.g., CyberTracker and Fulcrum)
- tourism, business and services
- literacy and numeracy skills
- remote first aid.

In recent years, groups such as Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa, Central Land Council, the Indigenous Desert Alliance, and others have also been focusing on broader leadership development and mentoring programs for rangers designed to develop broader aspirations for work and contributing to the community.

Pormpuraaw Land and Sea Rangers sharing knowledge with young people. Credit: Adam Ferguson.

Health and well-being

For more than ten years, research has demonstrated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed as rangers have improved rates of health and well-being, including through increased confidence and greater pride and sense of self-worth. In 2009, the Medical Journal of Australia published a study showing that caring for country work was associated with more exercise, healthier food consumption and boosted health for clinical indicators such as blood pressure, diabetes rates and cardiovascular disease risks.[49]

In 2018 a study conducted in central Australia by ranger groups, the Central Land Council and Australian National University, compared the health and well-being among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed as rangers versus not employed as rangers.[50] The study found participation in the CLC Ranger Program was associated with positive health and well-being outcomes for rangers.

Importantly, the study also showed levels of family well-being were significantly higher for rangers compared to non-rangers, suggesting that ranger participation benefits not only those employed but also their families. Rangers participating in the study said their work was a source of pride, self-respect, identity, belonging and happiness.

> **"I wanted to be a ranger, educating the community and our children. I wanted to achieve things for my community so people are safe and we live sustainably; protecting turtle and dugong, restoring and preserving our language, maintaining traditional gardens for community members to enjoy.**
>
> **Laura Pearson, Warraberalgal Rangers, Torres Strait**

Indigenous ranger groups working to keep communities safe during the Covid-19 pandemic

Indigenous ranger groups across the country were an important part of the network of Indigenous community-controlled organisations that stepped up to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities responded to the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many ranger groups assisted with the dissemination of critical health information, essential goods and services.[51] Rangers helped monitor travel restrictions into and out of communities to protect residents in partnership with health clinics and land councils.[52] More broadly, rangers helped maintain the health and well-being of communities by hosting local on-country events.

The strength of the Indigenous community-controlled sector in addressing the potentially catastrophic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been nationally recognised.[53]

Lama Lama Ranger team. Credit Annette Ruzicka

"Being a Wunggurr Ranger is important because I get to live and work on country with my family, and care for it as my ancestors did."
Robin Dann, Head Wunggurr Ranger. Credit: Kimberley Land Council.

CHAPTER 3

Elements behind the success of Indigenous rangers and IPAs

The following chapter sets out the twelve key elements that when combined create the conditions for successful ranger groups and IPAs.

It is important to remember these are not the only elements of success, and the context in which rangers and IPAs operate can vary significantly from place to place. However, they are elements that groups in the Country Needs People network have consistently identified as most important to them. These elements have been tested in practice, not simply theory, and are based on the past experience of Indigenous land and sea management organisations, lessons learnt in developing the IPA and ranger programs.

The twelve elements can be grouped under three pillars:

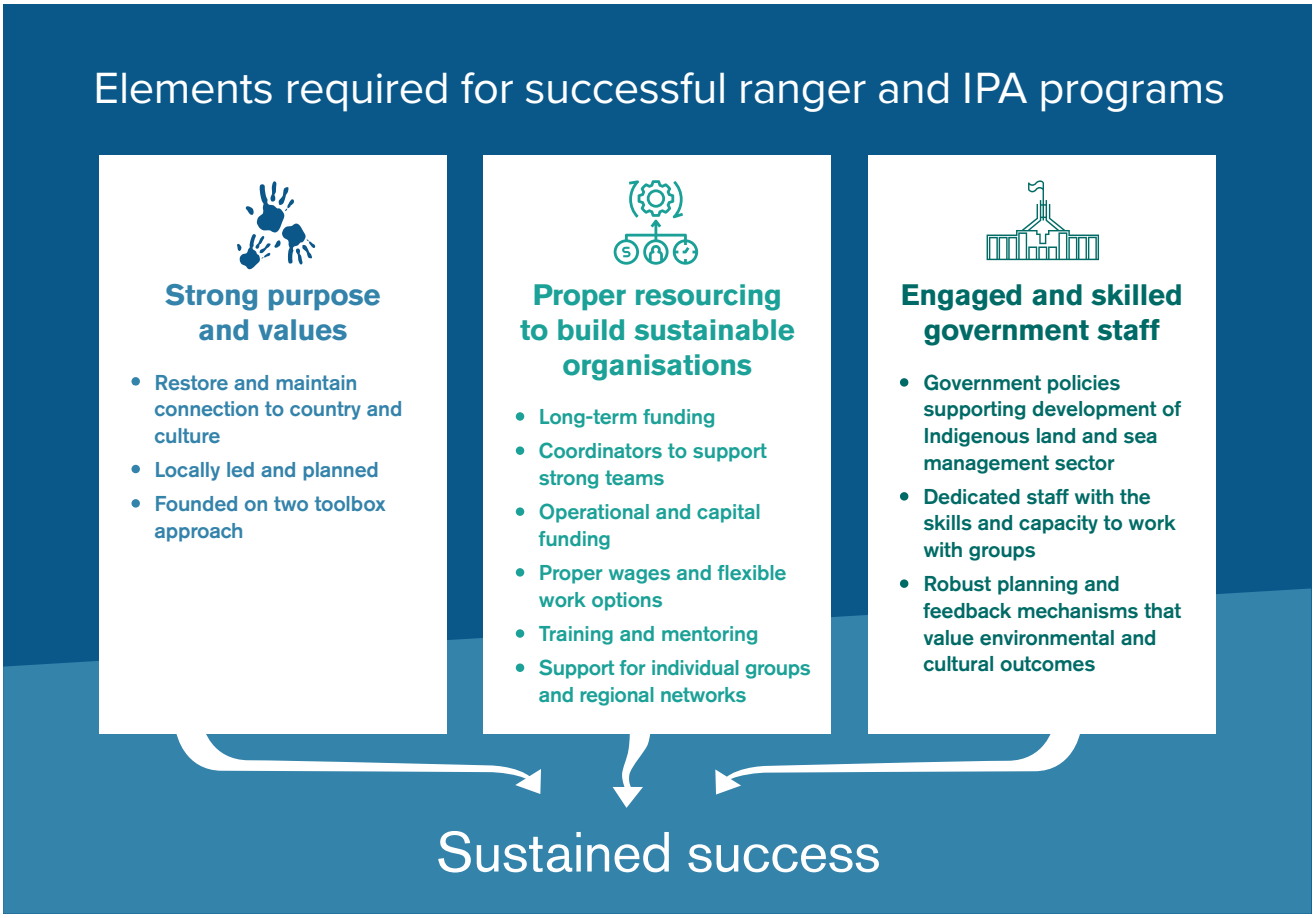
- ***Strong purpose and values grounded in restoring and maintaining connection to country and culture*** – Ranger groups and IPAs are strong when: focused on repairing and sustaining the natural and cultural values of country; locally led and planned; and founded on the two toolbox / two-way learning approach combining Aboriginal knowledge and contemporary science.
- ***Proper resourcing to build sustainable organisations*** – Ranger groups and IPAs require: long-term funding; operational and capital funding; proper wages for a coordinator and rangers, flexible work options; training and mentoring; and support for individual groups as well as networks.
- ***Engaged and skilled government staff working to support and grow ranger organisations*** – Indigenous-led land and sea management is effectively supported when strong working relationships are formed between ranger groups and government staff who understand the technical and administrative context of ranger and IPA work and are dedicated to growing its success.

These elements arise from a 30-year history of practical experience in contemporary land and sea management, have stood the test of time under challenging conditions, and can act as something of a checklist to ensure Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs continue to develop and grow. This chapter identifies practical actions Indigenous rangers, governments and other partners can take to create the best operating conditions for Indigenous land and sea management over the coming years. Some elements are not being delivered as well as they could and left unaddressed this will risk undermining the success shown to date.

Crocodile Islands Ranger carrying out weed spraying work. Credit: John Skuja.

Diagram 5

Elements required for successful ranger and IPA programs

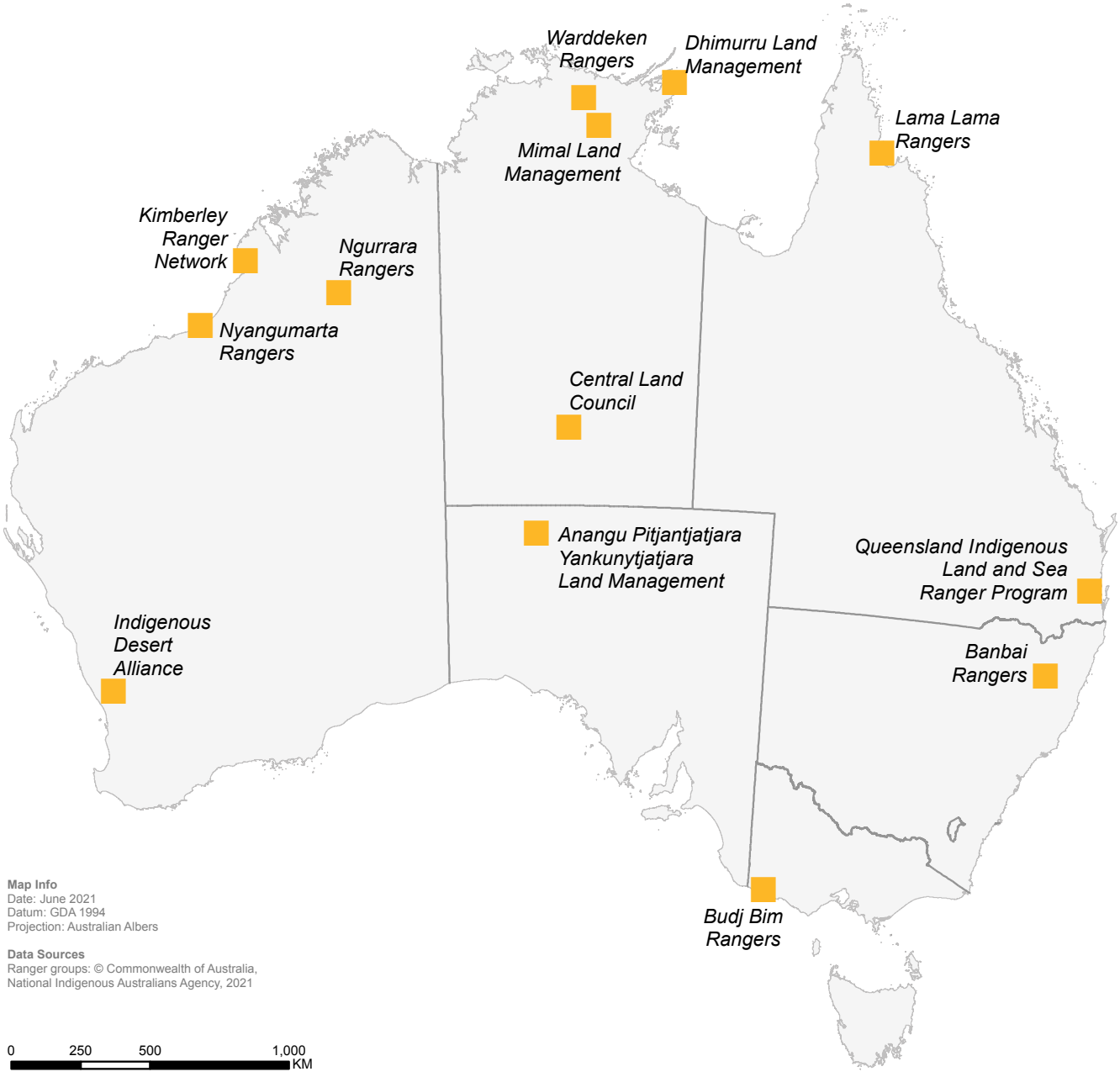


Case studies

The case studies contained in this report seek to highlight the way different elements are important for the groups and their partners at different points in time.

Diagram 6

Case study locations

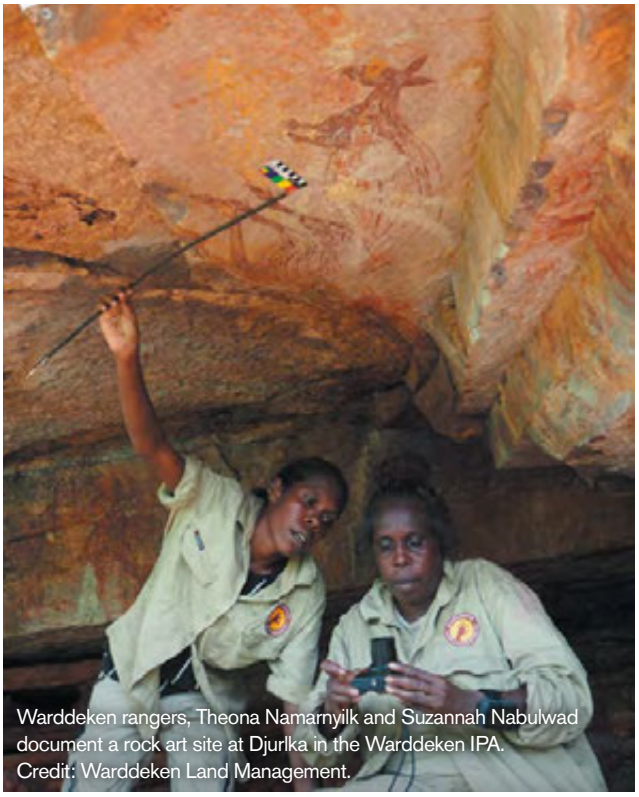


Strong purpose and values

1 Restoring and maintaining connection to country and culture

Multiple studies have demonstrated Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs deliver a broad range of positive environmental, cultural, employment and social outcomes.[54] However, in recent years, many groups report a narrower focus on largely the employment and social outcomes achieved and insufficient recognition of the primary caring for country objectives of traditional owners and communities which drive successful operations.

To sustain success, governments and partners need to understand the important employment and social outcomes being achieved are co-benefits derived from supporting the practical work Indigenous rangers do to protect, repair and sustain lands and seas and maintain cultural connections. The core driver behind Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs is the commitment traditional owners and communities have to be on country as part of traditional responsibilities to look after country. Ranger groups, IPAs and community-based land and sea management creates the opportunity for a dynamic mix of learning, skills development, cultural renewal, reconnection with county, vision and community leadership. The power of this is clear when rangers across the country talk about the strong sense of responsibility and pride they feel when carrying out land and sea management work. It is found in every plan of management and is present in every story Indigenous rangers and their elders tell.



Warddeken rangers, Theona Namarnyilk and Suzannah Nabulwad document a rock art site at Djurlka in the Warddeken IPA. Credit: Warddeken Land Management.

> **Be firm and strong for the land and the strength of your solidarity will sustain your cause.**
>
> **Roy Marika, Dhimurru founder**

Ranger jobs are highly valued by communities because they allow rangers to carry out work of intrinsic importance to traditional owners and provide valued employment where it is badly needed. While delivering properly paid jobs is a vital part of the success of Indigenous rangers and IPAs, in and of themselves, employment outcomes are not the only motivator driving groups forward. It is not the jobs alone but the fact they are connected to work regarded of high value and relevance to communities that delivers multiple benefits.

The path that specific traditional owner groups seek to take in looking after county and culture is unique to each group and always balanced with other community priorities and the local historical and contemporary context. Priorities for managing culture and country are evolving in a changing environment with new information and it is up to individual communities to decide and negotiate with government agencies about how land and sea connections drive forward their aspirations. Well-supported programs create the space for this to occur over time.

Warddeken ranger, Gavin Namarnyilk. Maintaining rock art and other cultural sites is an important role of Warddeken Land Management. Credit Rowand Taylor

The Australian community also values and seeks the significant environmental and conservation outcomes achieved in the national interest. Surveys suggest Australians value the biodiversity and conservation work carried out by Indigenous rangers and awareness has steadily been growing, most recently focused on the potential benefits of Aboriginal fire management regimes. For example, a 2018 Report, *Australian Attitudes to Nature: Backyard Barometer,* found that 82 per cent of 1,800 people surveyed were worried about future generations growing up with less access to nature and wildlife. Supporting Indigenous rangers to help protect wildlife was seen as an important policy direction by many of those surveyed.[55]

It is vital that government guidelines clearly reflect the core importance of the environmental and cultural on-country objectives of Indigenous rangers and IPAs and recognise the sophisticated way these objectives lead to broader employment and social objectives. This is essential for properly supporting Indigenous rangers and the IPA program as important contributors to the management of Australia's environment and cultural heritage. Clearer guidelines will assist in retaining and growing support for this work from traditional owners, communities and the nation as a whole.

Recommendations

- **Revise government guidelines so they more clearly reflect the core importance of the environmental and cultural objectives of Indigenous rangers and IPAs and recognise the sophisticated way these objectives lead to broader employment and social outcomes.**
- **Value and build on the contribution IPAs are making to Australia's National Reserve System.**

CASE STUDY 1

Warddeken Land Management

Every day Warddeken Land Management demonstrates what is achieved when the deep commitment traditional owners have to care for country is matched with strong governance, partnerships and stable funding.

> **Our vision is to have healthy people living and working on our healthy country in the Kuwarddewardde. We want the management of our country to be in our hands now and into the future.**
>
> Warddeken IPA Plan of Management 2016-2020

Warddeken is known for its key role developing the innovative technique of abating greenhouse gases produced in wildfires using a combination of traditional and modern fire management techniques. This methodology underpins the ground-breaking West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement (WALFA) project. WALFA has ranger groups, industry and government working together to offset greenhouse gas emissions through a mix of prescribed burns in the early dry season and some fire suppression in the late dry season. This project was initiated in 2006 with ConocoPhillips and the Darwin Liquefied Natural Gas facility, the Northern Territory (NT) Government and Darwin Centre for Bushfire Research working in partnership with the Djelk, Jawoyn, Mimal, Adjumarlarl and Warddeken rangers. To date, this project has exceeded expectations and abated more than 1.7 million tonnes of greenhouse gases with excess abatement marketed through the Aboriginal owned, not-for-profit company ALFA (NT) Ltd.

> **Carbon projects have now become one of the biggest Indigenous industries and economies in Australia and it originated here.**
>
> Warddeken Annual Report, 2016-17

In order to sustain this type of success, it is vital governments and other partners recognise the projects deep wellspring has been the enduring drive of the Narwarddeken people to look after country, pass on knowledge and create opportunities for future generations. It is by maintaining connection to this overall purpose and ensuring partnerships and resources are geared towards achieving it, that Warddeken has gone from strength to strength.

Under the Warddeken IPA Plan of Management, the Narwarddeken, rangers and partners constantly monitor progress towards their vision. The IPA Plan charts the journey that began with the Narwarddeken people's return to their outstations in the Kuwarddewardde (the stone country of the Arnhem Land Plateau) beginning in the 1970s. In 2002, the venerable Bardayal 'Lofty' Nadjamerrek returned to his childhood home at Kabulwarnamyo to establish the first of three Warddeken ranger bases. Since then, a huge amount of work has gone into establishing Warddeken Land Management as an Aboriginal-owned, not-for-profit company with a comprehensive environmental and cultural management program operating across the Kuwarddewardde.

> **All the economic, employment and social outcomes Warddeken has achieved exist as co-benefits of the core work of caring for country. At their heart, investment in IPAs and rangers is about supporting environmental and cultural management work valued by traditional owners and carried out in the national interest.**
>
> Shaun Ansell, Chief Executive Officer, Warddeken Land Management

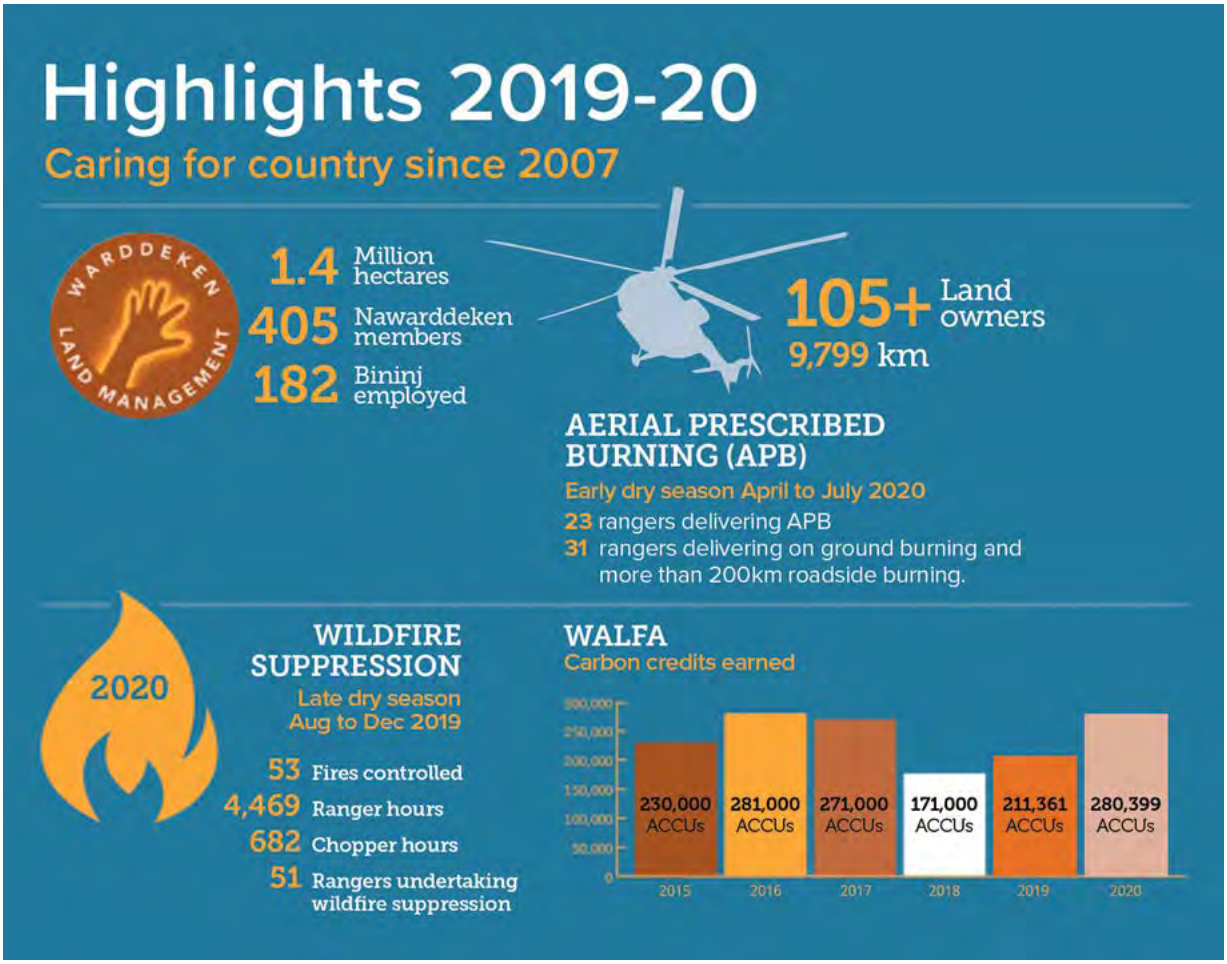
A critical factor in the success of Warddeken continues to be its lasting partnerships with funding bodies, business, research organisations and also other ranger groups in the Arnhem region. In earlier years, the introduction of stable Working on Country and IPA funding created the foundation for these partnerships across a breadth of environmental and cultural management projects. Warddeken also works alongside other NT ranger groups to help them achieve their goals and receives similar

support in turn. It is this practical network that helps rangers learn and develop together.

Warddeken has built up a huge body of land management experience and knows what is needed to sustain and grow their success. At the strategic level, its representative member-driven governance structure allows for decisions to be taken in line with its vision. On the ground, work programs rely on valuing experienced coordinators and senior rangers working with flexible teams formed to carry out seasonal as well as ongoing projects. In 2018-19, Warddeken employed 165 people who worked on weed and feral animal control, rock art conservation, education and cultural heritage, as well as fire management.

Warddeken has big plans for the future. In recent years, intense effort has been put into achieving registration of an independent school at Kabulwarnamyo: the Narwarddeken Academy. Elders are committed to achieving educational excellence. The school is seen as the pathway to developing future generations of Narwarddeken leaders, including those wanting to pursue careers in land management.

> **Where I live at Kabulwarnamyo, the place has developed. It has become a big centre with work available for people and its influence is spreading out all over the plateau. Now the younger people are living and working there. We are teaching younger people about the country, the walking routes, the place names, experiences with the country and then they in turn follow this way. This is not a new thing. It's just what our old people before us taught us.**
>
> Mary Kolkiwarra Nadjamerrek, Warddeken IPA Plan of Management



Source: Wardekken Land Management

2 Locally led and planned

For Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs to work well, they must be driven by traditional owner groups and the communities they operate within. Maintaining local leadership and community ownership of the work is ongoing and central to all aspects of operations and needs to be very sensitive to local context. Some features may include:

- establishing effective and responsive local or regional governance to determine land and sea management priorities and develop plans of management
- staying accountable to traditional owners and community members as well other partners and funders for outcomes
- creating opportunities to take elders out on country to maintain connection with culturally important landscapes and share knowledge
- appointing cultural advisors, negotiating access to sites and bringing the right people with cultural connection and/or authority along to carry out work
- recognising ranger groups as critical organisations who are often called upon to assist communities with challenges and can be stretched by these important but nevertheless frequent demands. The importance of this is particularly evident when communities face disasters (for example, cyclones, fires, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic)
- supporting initiatives such as the Learning on Country Program operating in the NT, which draws on rangers to support Indigenous students and integrate Indigenous knowledge and western knowledge systems, with the aim of improving their engagement in school.

> **I have been a ranger with Warddeken Land Management since I was 16 years old and have lived on the country my rangers manage for my whole life. I have been working as a ranger now for fourteen years…I would like to share with you one message in particular: working as a ranger is about respect. Respect for our ancestors; for our elders; for our culture; for our country; for ourselves and for our children. Respect is the key to Aboriginal people and our communities staying strong.**
>
> Ray Nadjamerrek, Warddeken ranger

Dean Yibaruk, Chair, Warddeken Land Management, and Patrick O'Leary, Executive Director, Country Needs People. Credit: Country Needs People

NT Learning on Country Program

The Learning on Country program is a secondary school-based, Indigenous ranger facilitated program operating in the Northern Territory that links Australian curriculum subjects with field-based natural and cultural resource management experiential learning and data collection.

Over 1,000 students now participate in this successful program across 15 Learning on Country sites, including Maningrida, Yirrkala Homelands, Yirrkala, Galiwin'ku, Angurugu and Umbakumba (Groote Eylandt), Milingimbi, Ramingining, Gapuwiyak, Beswick, Barunga, Borroloola, Gunbalanya, Ngukurr and Numbulwar. The program is supported by the Northern Land Council's Caring for Country Unit.

Local leadership is critical to the program as traditional owners, communities and rangers work in partnership to:

- increase inter-generational transmission of Indigenous knowledge and customary practice including by linking Australian curriculum subjects with field-based experiential learning and data collection
- integrate Indigenous knowledge and western knowledge systems, with a focus on natural resource and cultural management
- increase school attendance, course completion and retention to Year 12 or equivalent of Indigenous students enrolled
- increase transition rates to further education, training and employment for Indigenous students.

A progress evaluation conducted in 2015 demonstrated high levels of engagement in the program across students, traditional owners, rangers and communities. A subsequent evaluation is now being finalised demonstrating the cultural appropriateness and educational success being achieved by students.

Governments have been most successful when they have backed an Indigenous-led approach

Good results are achieved when governments commit to an ongoing approach of working through and supporting community-led governance for Indigenous rangers and IPAs. For example, putting traditional owners at the centre of the IPA planning and declaration process has been one of the reasons the IPA program has had such high rates of support among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

More could be achieved by governments making it a priority to take this approach. Mistakes are made when governments and other partners seek to rush and do not take the time to respect traditional owners and communities as the critical support structures for Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs. An important aspect of this can be resourcing both men's and women's engagement as cultural protocols and operations in many areas may require gender-specific approaches. However, traditional owners and communities need to take the lead on what will work best in each context as local factors will vary, sometimes significantly, from group to group.

Recommendations

- **Respect and fund the consultation and planning required to support local informed decision-making for IPAs and ranger organisations.**
- **Support ranger groups to carry out work that facilitates broader community involvement in land and sea management, including learning on country and community on-country visit programs.**

CASE STUDY 2

Lama Lama women rangers - involving everyone in caring for country

For the women involved in the Lama Lama Ranger Program, being a ranger or project officer offers a way to work together with their family to look after country and to drive forward their community's aspirations for the future.

The Lama Lama rangers develop work programs that seek to involve the wider clan group in caring for country. Working out the best way to engage traditional owners, teach children and support families is always front and centre.

> **We don't consider ourselves above, below or in-between – everyone is equal, and as Lama Lama people we are all proud to be Lama Lama…What is important to us is that feeling of being on country, of being connected to each other, of being Lama Lama – and we are all equal, we all bring something to the job of looking after land and sea, and passing down our knowledge to the next generations.**
>
> Lisa Peter, Lama Lama ranger

One of the key ways the Lama Lama rangers involve the community in their work is through the Junior Ranger Program. It is a way of bringing families out on country and keeping traditional owners involved and informed about what is happening with country. The program has become a platform for engaging young and old alike in caring for country and working together.

Employing women in the ranger programs is also seen as a great way to promote equal opportunity within the wider community, and the Lama Lama team leads by example.

> **I really enjoy talking with our project partners and offering them an insight into the history of our Lama Lama people and country. When talking with them I highlight how our clan group, both men and women, young people, senior people and elders, all work closely together in making decisions and planning for and looking after our country. We respect our cultural ways. And we encourage as many people as possible to get involved in our ranger work.**
>
> Elaine Liddy, Lama Lama rangers team leader and cultural officer

It is with strong backing from traditional owners and the community that the Lama Lama rangers have been able to strengthen their sea country management. A specialised marine ranger team is working to deliver the Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreements (TUMRAs) with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. The Lama Lama rangers want people to understand that all the work they will be doing on the surface – compliance activities, visitor management and monitoring research of important mangrove, seagrass and coral reef ecosystems – all comes from the deep wellspring of support they receive from the wider Lama Lama clan group. The more partners that understand that, the better for Lama Lama.

Lama Lama Trust Chairperson Karen Liddy (right) and Ranger Lisa Peter. Credit: Annette Ruzicka

3 Founded on two toolbox approach

One of the most commonly referred to elements sitting behind the success of Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs is the two toolbox approach, also known as two-way or both-way learning. The two toolbox approach describes the philosophy and process of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledge derived from tradition, history and local presence in the landscape combined with contemporary science. It also reflects the current reality of a vastly changed land and seascape since the arrival of European settlers. This includes climate change, large numbers of invasive animals and plants not present before European occupation, changed land and sea management practices, threats and pressures and other factors including pressure on Indigenous language and knowledge systems and removal of people from country.

> **We don't want to only follow new ways that are foreign to us, no. We want to do what our old people have done before us because this is their legacy to us. Together with non-Aboriginal culture, the two ways can go into the plan of management. That way, there will be understanding.**
>
> Rodney Naborlhborlh, Warddeken IPA Plan of Management 2016-2020

'Two-way' methods bring results greater than the sum of their parts

Across the country, there are many examples of sophisticated partnerships combining Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge leading to more effective results on the ground including in carbon farming, fire management, feral animal and weed reduction, biodiversity surveys, threatened species protection and cultural heritage protection. In practice, it is a very hands-on way for people from Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds to bring their skills and expertise to the table, listening to one another, working alongside one another, and finding the results to be more than they could have achieved on their own.

> **The Ii-Anthawirriyarra rangers control program led to a very rapid decline in feral cats and an increase in native mammals. The number of feral cats is estimated to have been reduced by 80 per cent.**
>
> Dr Rachel Paltridge, Scientist, Desert Wildlife Services

In many cases, genuine innovation is often driven by strong working relationships between researchers and local traditional owners and use of two-way knowledge systems. Some of these collaborations have produced ground-breaking results showing benefit of the years developing working relationships. This is the key lesson from examples such as the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement project (see Warddeken Land Management case study). This type of innovation is of high value to the nation as it seeks to improve how to best care for vast land and seas as well as drive sustainable economic activity, including in regional and remote areas.

> **Indigenous rangers had far superior spotting skills to the scientists who were all trained herpetologists and had experience with reptiles and doing surveys themselves… engagement with the Indigenous rangers turned our study [on devastating impacts of cane toads] from a failure to a success.**
>
> Dr Ward-Fear, University of Sydney

Governments and other partners must give two-way learning processes and opportunities the time and resources they require, so that productive and genuine relationships are developed and strengthened between traditional owners and researchers or technical specialists outside the local community.

Programs supporting Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs should encourage a sophisticated negotiation of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of seeing and managing land and sea. This centres on seeing traditional owners as key decision makers and partners in land and sea management who bring valued priorities, knowledge and skills to the table. Increasingly, traditional owners are gaining the recognition they deserve as researchers and managers in their own right, sharing valuable insights and lessons so that the evolution of land and sea management in Australia draws on traditional and local knowledge systems. Collaborations work best where there is an equitable negotiation of how to combine two powerful knowledge systems for the benefit of country and people.

Recommendations

- **Create a dedicated funding stream to more actively support Indigenous ranger groups to form strong partnerships with researchers, government agencies and other land managers including through two-way joint research projects, mentorships, secondments and exchanges.**
- **Showcase projects that successfully incorporate both Indigenous and western science knowledge systems.**

Womens Head Ranger, Raylene Lenmardi checking a pitfall trap, biodiversity survey at the goodway fire project site Kuduarra (well 46 Canning Stock Route). Ngurarra Rangers. Credit: Kevin Tromp (Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation)

CASE STUDY 3

Budj Bim rangers - two-way learning and partnerships

Every day the Budj Bim rangers demonstrate what can be achieved when rangers aim to care for country on their terms backed by genuine and enduring two-way learning and partnerships.

For decades the Budj Bim rangers have been comprehensively managing the Gunditjmara homelands and waters of south-western Victoria with sustained funding from the Working on Country and IPA programs. In July 2019, the enduring knowledge and practices of the Gunditjmara and their commitment to look after and improve country resulted in UNESCO World Heritage Listing for the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape, one of the world's most extensive and oldest aquaculture systems.

> **After World Heritage listing we celebrated the moment and then realised that our next challenge was the amount of work we had ahead of us. Our management practices will now be in the spotlight as they should be. We must keep working towards our aspirations. We don't just want to look after country but improve the health of country and our mob.**
>
> **Denis Rose, Budj Bim IPA Manager, Gunditj Mirring**

Part of the success behind the Budj Bim rangers has been the determination of senior leaders to build robust partnerships based on authentic exchanges and two-way learning. The Aboriginal knowledge, values and aspirations of the Budj Bim rangers and Gunditjmara come together with the science and land management expertise of other agencies and researchers to achieve results.

> **Good partnerships have been critical to our success. Partnerships with land management agencies, catchment management agencies, Parks Victoria but also broader support from bird researchers, fish scientists, geologists, archaeologists and many local farmers.**
>
> **Denis Rose, Budj Bim IPA Manager, Gunditj Mirring**

The Budj Bim have several formal agreements with state and regional land management agencies such as the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP). These robust working partnerships can be sustained through changes of staff.

> **All of our partnerships are based on people bringing a two-way learning approach to the table. It's about taking the time to listen, understand and learn from one another. We are always willing to share and learn – we know we don't have all the skills, expertise and resources – and we expect others to do the same.**
>
> **Denis Rose, Budj Bim IPA Manager, Gunditj Mirring**

A great example of this two-way learning approach is how DELWP and the Budj Bim managed 2019 fires on the lava flow. Gunditj Mirring were clear with their partners that heavy earth moving machinery (bulldozers, etc) shouldn't be used out on the lava flow to create fire breaks unless it was a matter of life and death as these machines could damage the now world heritage listed aquaculture channels, some that were first constructed at least 6,600 years ago.

> **We understood that DELWP was under pressure with resources. In the past they might have used bulldozers but this time we worked together. DELWP observed and respected our land and cultural values– they utilised aerial drops of fire retardant when needed rather than using the bulldozers. Together we put those fires out. People in robust partnerships are able to tell each other what we all need to know, not just what we want to hear. By and large, we all have the same aspirations.**

Denis Rose, Budj Bim IPA Manager, Gunditj Mirring

The partnerships that have developed with Budj Bim create a stable foundation for exciting and sustainable land management, research, business and cultural tourism projects. They are highly valued by Budj Bim's partners.

This has come through the development of a strong and assertive but constructive and collaborative Indigenous land and sea management organisation established by Gunditjmara people themselves in part by using IPAs and ranger funding to build their strength on country and as respected managers in the region.

> **Properly understanding and respecting everyone's interests and knowledge is the foundation for working together to look after country and improve country. Two-way learning happens when people keep things real, get on the phone, negotiate and then deliver together.**

Denis Rose, Budj Bim IPA Manager, Gunditj Mirring

Budj Bim Senior Ranger, Aaron Morgan pulling a short-fin eel trap.
Credit: Rodney Dekker

Proper resourcing to build sustainable organisations

4 Long-term funding

Over the last three decades, governments have provided essential support to Indigenous rangers and IPAs. The introduction of the Australian Government's *Working on Country* program in 2007 was a pivotal point. It provided significant core resources for wage and operational support through a specifically tailored funding stream to grow and sustain Indigenous rangers across the country over multiple years (first three years in 2007 and 2010 then five years in 2013, aside from a period in 2018 when two-year funding extension shortened contract duration). This stable funding drove the development of groups in ways that would not have been possible with project-based intermittent short-term funding alone. State and territory and, at times, federal governments have also provided support for capital, projects, training and development, though the level and quality of support has varied greatly across states and territories.

> **You can't do this kind of work on a stop-start basis, it has to be ongoing, year in, year out. We can create local jobs, tackle practical issues like erosion control, fire management, weed control and basically look after the country the way our old people always did.**
>
> Vince Harrigan, Normanby Station, Cape York

The March 2020 announcement of long-term funding was strongly welcomed

In March 2020, the Australian Government announced $102 million indexed from 2021 each year to provide seven years funding security for existing, federally-funded, Indigenous ranger groups.

This was a highly significant commitment that has the potential to deliver on a long-voiced need for greater security for existing Indigenous land and sea management groups. If delivered effectively, it will go a long way to creating the stability needed for Indigenous groups, governments, business and other partners. Greater certainty allows all stakeholders to work together to significantly grow the contribution of Indigenous rangers and IPAs in protecting and conserving land and sea country.

The announcement effectively renewed government recognition that the architecture of community-based groups and IPAs is a valuable front-line asset for the nation. The funding will allow existing groups to develop and thrive with consistent staff and planning cycles. It will be important that the Australian Government confirms forward funding for IPAs on a similar time frame.

While the length of funding contracts is critical, the timing of contract renewals also has a huge impact on the ground. It is It is difficult for groups to work effectively when governments wait until the last minute to renew contracts. Most ranger groups, and the organisations that host them, struggle to manage this uncertainty, particularly in challenging regional and remote conditions. It risks placing undue stress on already stretched organisations and making it harder to retain key staff. It also makes it very difficult to plan land and sea management operations. The Australian Government should move quickly to organise contract renewals when due for IPAs and rangers that work for both government and groups, provided functions are being effectively carried out.

There is high demand for new ranger groups and growth in existing groups

Discussions might then centre on how to best support newly developing groups to access more stable long-term resources. Across the nation, there is significant demonstrated demand from communities to establish new Indigenous ranger groups and expand existing ranger operations. There is a place for developing groups to undertake short-term, project-based work to tackle urgent environmental and conservation issues, as well as respond to community priorities, and build capacity.

Overall, longer-term contracts and core funding will continue to be critical to help developing groups grow into sustainable organisations delivering effective work programs.

> **I want to be a ranger and I've got four other blokes in town who would sign up today if we had the money. At the moment, those guys are just on Centrelink.**
>
> Andrew Minyardie, Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa Director, Bidyadanga

Diagram 7

Sustainable land and sea management organisation resourcing

Once groups secure stable funding, they have room to grow fee-for-service opportunities

Over the next decade, there may also be opportunities to draw on Indigenous procurement policies and other business development levers for highly developed ranger groups. These could include enterprise projects delivering environmental and cultural projects using a mix of stable base funding and fee-for-service models. However, it is also vital to recognise that the core public good environmental and cultural stewardship role Indigenous ranger groups perform, and receive funding for, will remain the foundation for groups over coming years. Governments and other partners can assist growth in fee-for-service and business enterprise by taking a case-by-case approach and working closely with groups. This work should add to, not seek to replace, stable baseline investment in the environmental, cultural and socioeconomic outcomes being delivered.

There are significant barriers to fee-for-service work in many parts of the country. Indigenous ranger groups face the same challenges all Australian small businesses do, but in most cases, multiplied many times over by factors of remoteness, disadvantage, being situated in zones of low economic activity and unpredictable climate conditions. This may be combined in some cases with barriers to full literacy and numeracy. Fee-for-service work can be intermittent and stop-start in nature, making it difficult for groups trying to build capacity and skills and retain staff over time and increase ranger and support staff burnout, turnover and organisational stress. We should welcome opportunities for fee-for-service and enterprise models, but not in a way that sees them as a replacement for core operational funding, as this would jeopardise the stability of groups and undermine the careful work that has gone into building them over many years.

Future funding for the IPA Program

The future funding of the IPA program needs informed discussion. Many researchers have pointed out the relatively modest amount of funding delivered through this program for the size of the contribution it is making to the National Reserve System and the complexity of the diverse ecosystems and cultural groups it services. Now more than ever, Australia faces the ongoing challenges of damaging bushfire, climate change, drought, biodiversity loss and biosecurity protection. Strengthening security and quantity of funding for the IPA program and maintaining quality oversight of environmental and cultural outcomes will be an integral part of addressing these challenges.

Recommendations

- **Move quickly to deliver long-term funding with built-in review points to allow necessary flexibility and ensure effective use of investments.**
- **Develop long-term rolling funding packages to support newly developing and expanding groups to access more stable and predictable core resources.**
- **Ensure Indigenous procurement policies and business development levers encourage fee-for-service opportunities that complement rather than replace stable funding for the public good environmental and cultural stewardship role being performed by Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs.**
- **Prioritise discussions between the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE) and the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) about consolidating long-term funding arrangements and growth of the Indigenous rangers and IPAs, recognising the central role Indigenous and sea management plays Australia-wide in the delivery of environmental and social outcomes.**

Dhimurru Senior Ranger, Fiona Yupunu Marika.
Credit: Kerry Trapnell

CASE STUDY 4

Journey of the Nyangumarta rangers - from the desert to the sea

For many years, the Nyangumarta rangers and other emerging groups in the Pilbara, Murchison and Gascoyne regions of WA drew inspiration from the achievements of the Bardi Jawi rangers in the Kimberley and Martu rangers in the western desert. However, they needed long-term funding to achieve their vision.

> **We knew what we needed to do to look after Nyangumarta country but until we got our IPA Declaration in 2015, we didn't have the stable funding needed to do it.**

Nyaparu Rose, Nyangumarta Special Projects Advisor and Nyangumarta Warrarn Aboriginal Corporation CEO

The Nyangumarta rangers are now in their 5th year of successful operation. Long-term funding has now meant the group carries out a comprehensive work program of fire management, feral animal control, weed management, water monitoring, cultural heritage protection, collection and transfer of traditional ecological knowledge and tourism development.

The 2019 year was busy with the rangers looking after 80 Mile Beach and Walyarta, carrying out numerous fauna and flora surveys, protecting threatened species (including the night parrot, greater bilby, marsupial mole and black-flanked rock wallaby) and collecting baseline data for the IPA weed management plan.

The rangers also produced Nyangumarta's seasonal calendar, compiling the traditional knowledge of Elders and rangers, and focused on cultural mapping of the Nyangumarta Warrarn IPA with a number of significant sites recorded for the first time.

> **Our work is done with cultural advisors leading the way and passing on their cultural knowledge. Nothing would happen without these advisors coming along to speak for country and telling stories. Transfer of Indigenous ecological knowledge doesn't take place in a classroom.**

Ben Puglisi, Nyangumarta IPA Coordinator

A period of stable funding has also allowed the Nyangumarta rangers to value add with a portfolio of fee-for-service work. Income generated is directly added back into the program, enabling more people to be employed and more on-country activities to be conducted. Organisations using ranger services have so far included the WA Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, the federal Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, private environmental consulting firms and resources companies.

As the Nyangumarta rangers look to the future, it is not only long-term funding, but investment in people and knowledge that's seen as the key to their success but also for ranger groups across the nation.

Nyangumarta ranger Romleesha Hunter installing a camera trap.
Credit: Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation

Money alone won't fix the huge environmental, economic and social challenges facing us all. People will fix those problems if they are empowered and have the right support. There's now growing recognition of how important traditional fire knowledge is to managing Australia's landscapes but cultural knowledge is evaporating as Elders pass away. There is no time to lose supporting Elders and young people getting out on country to transfer knowledge and build the skills needed for the challenges ahead.

Ben Puglisi, Nyangumarta IPA Coordinator

5 Coordinators to support strong teams

Coordinator positions are vital

Over the last two decades, many Indigenous rangers and their non-government and government partners have highlighted the crucial importance of having dedicated coordinators work alongside rangers. Coordinators play an important role as a source of all-round support, providing technical, practical and administrative advice and mentoring to groups. Coordinators are often the interface between traditional owners, the community, government departments, business and other organisations and have highly varied and challenging cross-cultural and networking roles. Properly funding and supporting coordination roles in ranger groups is an investment paid back many times over in terms of the work program groups can deliver. Groups without ongoing dedicated coordinators and support staff find it very difficult to develop to their full potential and often go through stop-start work and dormancy.

> **What matters most is getting the right people into coordination positions, not whether they are Indigenous or non-Indigenous. Coordinators need to be able walk in two worlds and open up opportunities for groups to get out and deliver projects on the ground.**
>
> Peter Murray, CEO, Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation

There aren't enough coordinator positions being funded to support rangers

Indigenous land and sea management groups and the organisations supporting them need flexibility to appoint coordinators based on community needs. Groups that

Arafura Swamp rangers Charlie Ramandjarri and Neville Gulaygulay, work closely with coordinator Helen Truscott. Credit: David Hancock

are accountable for results on the ground are in the best position to design arrangements that suit them. This could involve recognising the ability of experienced non-Indigenous coordinators to bring significant capacity to groups by brokering partnerships across stakeholders and opportunities for two-way learning while maintaining accountability to traditional owners and rangers. It should also involve creating supportive pathways for new rangers to consolidate and develop skills and for senior Indigenous rangers to take up coordinator positions if they aspire to do so.

Urgent work is needed to strengthen and support the coordinator network. At present in some locations across the country, resources only stretch to fund part-time positions or one coordinator for high numbers of rangers. Funding for more dedicated coordinators and a better coordinator to ranger ratio for many groups would provide a much-needed boost to the development and strength of these groups. Discussions with some groups suggest best practice is a ratio of one coordinator to approximately 6-8 FTE positions (noting that may cover a mix of 12-20 full-time, part-time and casual staff). This structure ensures coordinators are able to:

- manage the health and safety of rangers
- on-board new rangers and intensively support trainees
- source training and development opportunities
- act in appropriate circumstances as an independent broker to help chart a path through different community priorities and interests
- liaise with government and non-government partners
- coordinate planned land and sea management work
- conduct reporting, administration, salary, compliance, risk and acquittal work.

Recruiting and supporting the right people

It is not easy to recruit and retain the right people into coordinator positions in regional and remote locations. These roles ideally require people with a mix of skills and experience including cross-cultural and interpersonal skills, practical and technical experience, management of work programs, administrative and reporting requirements, as well as the ability and willingness to live in remote and regional locations.

Some coordinators who are less experienced may face challenges finding their feet, and even the most experienced coordinators require significant support in what are often highly complex roles. There are high rates of burnout associated with the complex cross-cultural role both Indigenous and non-Indigenous coordinators perform in regional and remote locations.

With increasing numbers of women rangers, it also important to fund and recruit female coordinators. This way teams can carry out work while adhering to cultural and family obligations.

Recommendations

- **Ensure ranger coordinators are adequately funded for each ranger group, proportionate to numbers and gender balance, including funding for an appropriate package of support.**
- **Ensure decisions about coordinators and their employment conditions are determined by the group accountable for the on-ground-work to be delivered.**
- **Establish a national 'community of practice' to provide opportunities for coordinators, senior Indigenous rangers and their host organisations to access training support, share information and build resilience and sustainable careers.**

CASE STUDY 5

Ngurrara rangers and the importance of coordinators

For the Ngurrara rangers having the right coordinator for the team is one of the key decisions to be made by the Prescribed Body Corporate, Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation (YAC) which has oversight of the team and manages the funding agreement with the Australian Government.

After YAC was established, it took over the responsibility for the program and the Warlu JIlajaa Jumu IPA funding from the Kimberley Land Council, which now provides networking opportunities and technical support to the ranger team.

Peter Murray is a former ranger coordinator for the team and now chief executive officer of YAC. He is a firm believer in developing career pathways for Indigenous rangers. Peter wants to see more rangers progressing to senior rangers, ranger coordinators or alternatively moving into more specialized support and management positions overseeing Indigenous land and sea management programs. A key element to enable this is to have strong, sustainable organisations building their operating and governance capacity over time.

Yet Peter is all too aware that choosing the right ranger coordinator is not straightforward and always has to be sensitive to local context and needs. This requires the position of coordinator to be flexible, allowing the right selection of a person who will fit with the group's aspirations, stage of development, local cultural considerations and skill sets required. Rangers are often more motivated by meaningful work on-country rather than in the office doing emails, funding applications, reporting requirements and other administrative tasks. At times it may be more sustainable for the group to select a non-Indigenous coordinator. This is not without its challenges, as external appointments will require housing to be found within the community.

Peter has previously mentored Indigenous ranger coordinators from his own team and other mobs and supported them as they dealt with the pressures of being responsible for a ranger team's vehicle and other assets in a strongly traditional kinship society.

Even the employment of Indigenous people from other language groups can be difficult with the local community resistant to the idea that other mobs might be speaking for their country. Often it will depend upon if the person has some connection through family to the country and the community.

Peter Murray, CEO, Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation at the Ngururrpa IPA Dedication Ceremony. Credit: Indigenous Desert Alliance

> **"Local ranger coordinators have family and kinship obligations which means they can get a lot of humbug to use the vehicle to go to funerals or lore business, or to get an advance on wages. You can end up being torn apart by these constant choices between family and your job. It is very hard and many people leave to avoid the pressure.**
>
> **Peter Murray, CEO, Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation**

The answer, says Peter is to ensure that the autonomy of YAC and Indigenous land and sea management organisations is respected as they know what is the right thing to do culturally and whether or not a local coordinator is best for the role or an external person would be better. Each mob or ranger team will be different and there should be no hard and fast rule. The ultimate aim is to have the best combination of people possible to support the traditional owners in managing country and running operations effectively.

6 Operational and capital funding

Rangers cannot work without proper equipment

Experience has clearly shown that having rangers without the proper equipment and operational funds they need to carry out land and sea management work leads to failure. Sufficient capital and operational funding is required to ensure rangers can work effectively and safely with the appropriate structures, vehicles and equipment for their local conditions. This often includes very remote and unserviced locations, rough terrain with poor access roads or tracks, and highly challenging wet and dry seasons in many parts of the country.

Nevertheless, it still remains hard for ranger groups to source funding for capital and equipment including vehicles, boats, trailers, ranger bases, chemical and other storage sheds. Many groups rely on one-off grants. There is a huge amount of inefficient work and added transaction costs involved in chasing funding to replace ageing equipment or to purchase new equipment required to deliver work programs. Often once funding for capital and equipment is finally obtained, ranger groups are able to make a leap in the efficiency and effectiveness of their operations. Working in the bush is tough on people and equipment, and funding frameworks should explicitly recognise this.

> **The Nyangumarta Rangers are leaping ahead now with the construction of the Bidyadanga ranger base: the rangers and their cultural advisors now have a proper base from which to operate, with a large shed to store vehicles, trailers and equipment, a 12-metre transportable office, an ablution block, a dangerous goods cage, an accommodation block, a sea container, and a fence securing the entire perimeter of the base.**
>
> Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation Annual Report, 2019

Sourcing sufficient capital and operational funding remains a challenge

Ranger groups have used multiple government sources to obtain capital and operational funding over the last thirty years. The Aboriginals Benefit Account in the Northern Territory and Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation have been important supporters of capital and operational equipment, though, at times, federal governments have restricted the use of these funds.

There remains a need to ensure operational and capital funding keeps pace with the growth in the numbers of rangers to ensure effective work programs can be delivered. Often this will make the difference between being able to access and remain at difficult or remote sites to deliver effective management or not. It would be a significant advance if more proactive discussions could take place across the federal, state and territory governments on how best to achieve this.

Recommendations

- **Hold discussions across federal, state and territory governments to establish a parallel funding stream or build-in a budget allocation to support the purchase of infrastructure and assets.**

ASRAC Ranger capital infrastructure is vital to maintaining caring for country work. Credit: David Hancock

CASE STUDY 6

Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Management – funding needs to be more than just wages

Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Land Management operates one of the oldest Indigenous land management programs in the country. It was formally established in 1990 to assist Anangu (the local traditional owners) to realise their aspirations to protect and work on their country, which is located in north-west South Australia adjacent to the Western Australian and Northern Territory borders.

The land management program includes 5 separate Indigenous protected areas and the Warru (black-footed rock wallaby) project.

Having sufficient operational funds is critical to the ability of APY Land Management to deliver its program effectively. Being based in a remote location (approximately 6 hours drive from Alice Springs) means that prices are inflated due to transport costs, and little, if any competition from suppliers.

> **"There needs to be some additional allowance for groups that operate in remote locations. Diesel costs us $2 per litre and replacing tyres means either an overnight trip to Alice Springs or paying $100 to $200 more for each tyre locally.**
>
> **Neil Collins, Land Management Operations Coordinator, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands**

Because operational funds are not to be used for capital expenditure without approval, a major issue for the group is the cost of vehicles, whether purchased or leased. When coupled with fuel and other running costs, vehicles are a drain on the land management budget, which in turn impacts on the ability to employ more Anangu as casual rangers.

> **"We need more money to give our people jobs looking after country and to have Toyotas to get to faraway places. It costs a lot to live and work here and sometimes we have money for work but not enough Toyotas to take everyone.**
>
> **Lorna Dodd, Antara – Sandy Bore IPA, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands**

Other significant costs that either are too costly or not allowable as operational expenses include accommodation for ranger coordinators (if they are not local community members), construction of more or larger enclosures for the Warru, road works to improve access or safety, and operational support for a person to back up the coordinator.

> **The lack of ranger coordinator accommodation in some communities puts an excessive strain on staff and creates tensions if we are using what is an extremely limited stock of Anangu houses. The options become temporary accommodation for a couple of nights a week, if available, or long drives in and out of communities each workday, which leads to faster burn out for staff. It's not a long-term option to have people working together and then sharing accommodation for 7 days a week.**

Neil Collins, Land Management Operations Coordinator, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands

Ultimately the lack of sufficient operational funds (including low indexation that does not reflect rising prices in remote locations) and the flexibility to manage them in their local context, undermines the good work of the program. It also limits opportunities for casual Anangu rangers to get work or greater integration or collaboration with other community organisations such as schools.

Having dedicated capital and project funds in the Indigenous Ranger and IPA programs would make a big difference and reduce the delays and wasted time in trying to create workarounds with different funding sources. It would also allow rangers to consider important but price-sensitive priorities, such as flying elders and traditional owners to remote country.

APY Land Management would also like to see a nationally consistent approach to issues such as insurance, a volunteer support program, and support for risk management and safety.

APY Land Management capital infrastructure includes vehicles, sheds, weeding units and safety gear. Credit: APY Land Management.

7 Proper wages and flexible work options

In 2007, Indigenous ranger groups, the Australian Government and other partners achieved a breakthrough when, for the first-time, rangers received stable and properly funded wages as part of core the core funding package under the Working on Country program. Previously, some Indigenous rangers operated with wages, but not with the scale that is now the norm.

For more than a decade, the strong positive outcomes of fair and dependable wages and flexible work models for rangers have been clear to see:

- Employment numbers have stood out and increased every year since Working on Country began. This has been achieved in multiple different contexts across regional and remote Australia where employment outcomes have historically been low.
- Employment retention rates are consistently reported as high in comparison to other roles.
- Significant numbers of rangers go on to employment in other regional industries, although many aspire to stay in land and sea management, due to the important role of the work, or to become senior rangers and leaders.

Strong women on country

The growth of women rangers has been strong over the past 10 years. Women now make up significant proportion of the ranger workforce. Women fill just under 50% of casual positions, and across all employment categories, women make up over one third of all positions. Ranger groups and IPAs have been one of the main avenues for increasing employment of Aboriginal women in regional and remote areas.

The flexible employment opportunities in Indigenous ranger groups (full-time, part-time and casual positions) have been key to supporting women to work on country while maintaining family and cultural obligations. Women rangers work in a variety of structures – sometimes women work alongside men in ranger groups, other times in dedicated women ranger teams.

Ranger groups create a platform for women to have a voice and give their views on improving the health of country and communities and to contribute unique skills and knowledge. Indigenous women often have extensive access to places and hold knowledge about the ecology of those places. They also provide an avenue for women to gain an income and achieve career development, leadership and empowerment.

"I feel more confident and more independent. I am also more willing to take on or step into experiences, whereas before I would have been more hesitant."

Mikayla Down, Lama Lama Project Officer

However, the demand for women rangers has outstripped current funding and support structures. Many women rangers are currently supported by ad-hoc grants and short-term sources beyond ranger and IPA contracts. This has created a 'boom and bust' effect in women's programs and while women rangers have managed to go along way being innovative with these funds, it is time to consider a more comprehensive approach. In particular, funding for additional coordinators would provide a much-needed boost to the development of these groups.

"I'm a huge advocate for combining technology with land and sea management in a way which enhances our understanding of country and culture. I love the way women involved with Indigenous protected areas and working as Indigenous rangers around Australia are at the cutting edge of using technology to care for country and keep culture strong."

Mikaela Jade, Cabrogal Woman, past park ranger and environmental biologist and founder of Indigital, an innovative digital story telling company.

- Longer term rangers are often more experienced, increase overall group productivity and act as mentors and role models for younger or newly starting rangers.

> **The ranger program is proving to be a such a success in Central Australia because it brings the combined benefits of environmental work and the personal and professional development of the rangers… The CLC sees it as a mark of success when its rangers develop skills and take on more specialised roles within the program. It is also happy when rangers go on to work in other jobs – it means the program has worked and enabled more of Central Australia's young Aboriginal men and women to take their rightful place in the wider workforce.**
>
> Looking after Country: The CLC Rangers, Central Land Council

Wages and working conditions need to keep pace with the increasing experience of the workforce

The recent Australian Government announcement to provide seven more years of funding for Indigenous rangers has the potential to strengthen baseline stability for many groups. However, work is needed in parallel to ensure wage structures and conditions are properly apportioned against the growing experience of the ranger workforce and expectation of work to be delivered.

The staffing profile for rangers has become more complex as organisations have matured and structured themselves to meet human resource and occupational health and safety standards. Wage levels, conditions and other employment entitlements, such as long-service leave, need to reflect this reality. Many senior rangers have over ten years' experience with ranger programs and IPAs. This group often operates at higher skill levels and have trained to meet increasing compliance standards.

Making every traineeship count

There are also growing numbers of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students aspiring to become rangers. In many regions, young people are lining up for ranger jobs and typically vacant positions are heavily over-subscribed in applications. Local communities feel ownership over these groups and take pride in results achieved.

There are some trainee schemes, drawing on the vocational education and training system, being utilised to support students with training and work experience to achieve this goal. However, increased tailored funding could help ensure that ranger training and career paths for young students post school are the very best they can be. Training needs to be matched with funds to employ young rangers so there is a clear employment pathway established at the outset.

While wages and conditions are critical, flexible work models attuned to local context are also important

Over the coming years, the flexibility ranger groups have to offer individuals a number of employment models and roles – full-time, part-time, casual and trainee and specialist cultural advisors – needs to be maintained. This allows people to take on work that will suit their family and community obligations and may create more options for women. It also creates career structures and incentives to match people's age, skill levels, experience, seniority and confidence. Flexible models also allow people to enter ranger groups in different roles and for new entrants to build confidence in the workplace over time.

In addition, retaining the flexibility for groups to pay community members casual wages for their work is important. This allows Indigenous rangers to engage senior cultural advisors for specific projects or visits to country. Additionally, the seasonal fluctuations in intensity of work can mean that some flexibility is needed to boost the permanent or full-time core workforce with part-time and casual rangers, for example, during a particularly intense fire season.

Recommendations

- **Ensure wages and conditions reflect experience of the ranger workforce with additional funds for organisations to provide appropriate entitlements.**
- **Create clearer career pathways for women rangers and support women's ranger teams with packages for additional coordinators, mentoring, training, operational and capital needs.**
- **Investigate options for investing more strongly in traineeships to ensure career paths in natural resource management for young students post school are as good as possible and lead to funded positions. Creating two-year internship positions within ranger groups could be explored.**
- **Maintain the flexibility ranger groups have to offer individuals a number of employment models – full-time, part-time, casual and trainee.**

CASE STUDY 7

Mimal rangers building for the future

For over 20 years the Mimal rangers have been working to achieve the vision of the Dalabon, Rembarrnga and Mayili traditional owners: *People taking charge of their futures and working to look after the country and culture of south-central Arnhem land*.

> **Our rangers have been working on country for 20 years, fighting weeds and feral animals, managing fire the traditional way like our ancestors and protecting our special cultural sites. It's good government can see our hard work is paying off and now we are ready to take our organisation to the next stage.**
>
> **John Dalywater, Chairman, Mimal Land Management Aboriginal Corporation**

This next stage involves:

- talking with the community and adjacent land management groups about the declaration of a new Indigenous protected area for the Bulman region
- ensuring Mimal Land Management has the right employment structures and funding to support its increasingly skilled and confident workforce
- Leading important conversations about the future of women rangers across the Northern Territory

In late 2019, the Australian Government awarded Mimal funding to support community consultation and planning towards dedicating more than 18,000 square kilometres of its management area in the Bulman region as an Indigenous protected area. Mimal's chief executive officer, Dominic Nicholls, says the Australian Government's announcement of the IPA funding is another endorsement Mimal's work, and is of national significance.

Mimal Rangers meeting with other Bawinanga Djelk rangers in Maningrida to plan areas of shared responsibility for the upcoming fire season. Credit: Mimal Land Management

Mimal was part of the founding West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement group that pushed for the return of traditional Indigenous fire management and developed the methodology, which lead the Federal Government to set up the savannah fire abatement and carbon offset system. This new IPA will allow us to direct even more resources towards threatened ecological communities and species. Importantly, it will align with Mimal's 10-year Healthy Country Plan and vision for the region.

Dominic Nicholls, Chief Executive Officer, Mimal Land Management Aboriginal Corporation

Under their new 10-year plan, Mimal aims to further professionalise their workforce and create stronger career paths for senior rangers, women rangers and graduate trainees.

We are decades on now from when Mimal started – we need government investment to keep pace with the increasing professionalisation of our workforce while retaining our flexible community-based approach. Ranger groups across the country are at a similar point. We all need to take the next step with wages, conditions and career pathways to realise our potential.

Dominic Nicholls, Chief Executive Officer, Mimal Land Management Aboriginal Corporation

Mimal is also focused on helping to strengthen the voice and support structures for women rangers working for healthy country. Mimal has dedicated group of women rangers but knows it will need a stronger package of government support, including a coordinator, to get to the next level.

But Mimal doesn't want to go it alone. In September 2019, Mimal Land Management hosted a Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum, the first in over 10 years in the Northern Territory. Over 140 women attended the event at Bawurrdarnda and talked about the need to take a holistic approach to keeping country healthy that involves dealing with broader issues facing women and children to sustain positive impacts. Mimal agreed at this event to support the establishment of an NT Strong Women for Healthy Country Network to strengthen work programs and conditions for women rangers across the NT. It subsequently hosted another forum in May 2021.

Women today still have the knowledge on how to connect to the land and understand the knowledge that was passed down from the women elders. Educated women today are becoming strong to pass knowledge on to young people to gain leadership in cultural practice and mainstream education.

Annette Miller, Director, Mimal Land Management Aboriginal Corporation

Mimal rangers, Sharea Moore and Josephine Austral. Credit: Mimal Land Management Aboriginal Corporation

8 Training and mentoring

From the outset, those working in the Indigenous land and sea management sector have understood that a key part of the business is creating pathways to meaningful work. Ranger groups have been very successful at removing barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to build confidence and skills and enter employment. Groups are well known for successfully taking on trainees and providing people with leadership and guidance from traditional owners, mentoring and technical skills.

Research has shown that Indigenous ranger groups use approaches recognised as likely to be most effective in increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment including:

- aligning employment opportunities to people's aspirations
- providing recognised education and training pathways linked to work
- customising training and employment conditions and providing intensive assistance for people needing assistance to gain skills and overcome challenges
- using mechanisms to improve the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, including ongoing mentoring, support and flexible work arrangements.

Ranger groups have become very resourceful and there are many mentoring arrangements, on-country conferences and networks in place across the country to share knowledge and skills. More experienced ranger groups often share their experiences with newer groups in their regions. There is growing recognition of the benefits of deeper mentoring conversations aimed at supporting rangers to work out what they want to achieve for their families and communities and how they might work on leadership skills to achieve their goals. In previous years, national ranger conferences, supported by the then Department of Sustainability, Environment, Wate Population and Communities, were good opportunities for two-way learning and knowledge sharing.

However, ever since ranger groups formed, training budgets have been limited and the ability to pay for and source the right training has become increasingly difficult as costs have increased. For example, costs for specialist training for firearms licensing has grown significantly. As rangers have become more experienced, training and mentoring requirements have also increased. On top of this, sourcing quality training in regional and remote locations is remains difficult, including for critical foundations such as literacy and numeracy.

Some traditional owner groups have expressed interest in developing with Indigenous-led ways to better recognise the qualifications rangers receive in Indigenous ecological knowledge while acknowledging that this is a complex consideration with risks and benefits that must be approached with caution. While discussions in this area need to managed sensitively and will be determined by traditional owners in different regions, there is an opportunity for overall improvements in training and mentoring arrangements over the next decade to be predicated on the power of two-way learning, Indigenous ecological knowledge alongside contemporary land and sea management. The leadership and guidance rangers receive from traditional owners instils confidence through the careful imparting of permission and knowledge in relation to country.

Central Land Council's community ranger program – training and mentoring. Credit: Central Land Council

Recommendations

- **Provide training and mentoring budgets to all ranger organisations that reflect local priorities and broker partnerships with registered training organisations to respond to training needs.**
- **Support regional and national ranger training camps to deliver training, career development, leadership and mentoring in economical and efficient ways.**
- **Establish a fund to support local, regional and national mentoring, leadership and networking initiatives.**

CASE STUDY 8

Central Land Council's ranger training and mentoring

The CLC's ranger program is one of Central Australia's most popular and successful initiatives in Aboriginal employment. More than 90 Aboriginal people across 12 groups work as CLC rangers on their country. For many years, the CLC's ranger employment model has emphasised training and mentoring, providing career paths both within the program and on to other employment.

The CLC has a dedicated ranger training officer who ensures that each ranger receives accredited training in a wide range of core skills such as 4WD and quad bike, first aid, chainsaw operation training and safe chemical handling. Rangers also receive training in welding, multi-media production, fire management and heavy machinery operation. All rangers are enrolled in certificate courses in conservation and ecosystem management (level II or above) and participate in literacy and numeracy training when funding is available.

Ranger mentors assist rangers to move into permanent jobs. The mentors help them set up banking and debt management arrangements, manage work readiness and performance and organise support to resolve personal issues that may affect attendance.

The CLC holds an annual week-long camp for its rangers. The camp offers intensive skills training in areas such as fire management, tracking using tablet computers, weed management and construction.

At the camp, the rangers also present to their peers about the highlights of their year.

Francis Kelly, a former CLC chair and himself a proud father of CLC rangers, is a long-time observer of ranger camps and has seen very shy men and women come out of their shells.

> **"There can be nothing better than to attend the CLC's annual ranger camp and watch the confidence of individual rangers grow year after year.**
>
> **Francis Kelly, former chairman, Central Land Council**

Peter Donohoe, manager of the CLC's land management section, believes there is room to go further. He would like to improve the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and offer more non-accredited training and activities that support rangers work skills.

Traditional owners in the CLC region are exploring ways to balance mainstream education and training with traditional ecological knowledge. The CLC is working with them to develop a 'reading the country' project where senior Aboriginal people teach rangers about tracking and other traditional skills.

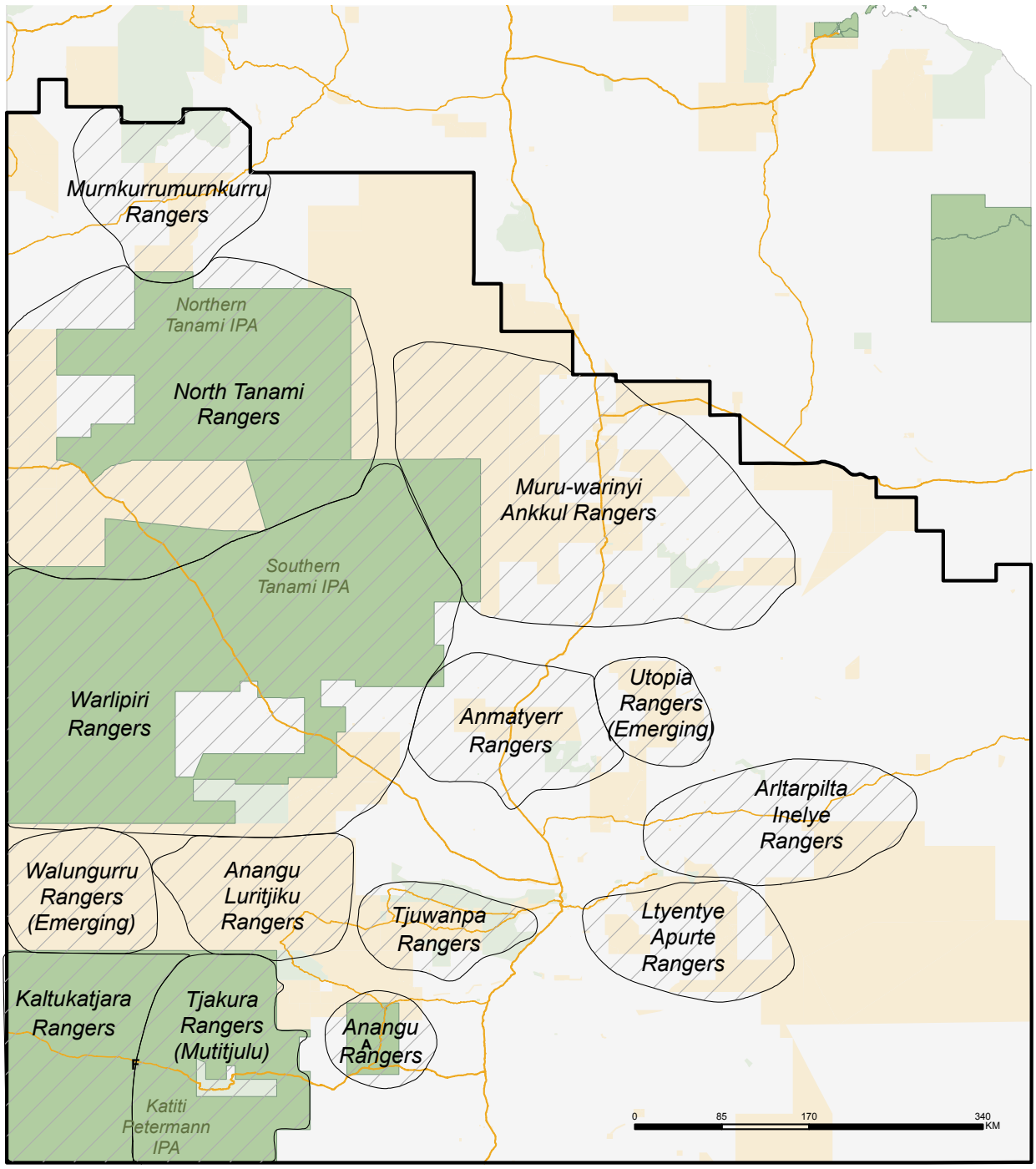
> **"The reading the country project has started in the Warlpiri area and we are hoping that once we get this going properly, we can share it with other areas. There are not many elders left now, and we need to learn from them, so we can pass that knowledge on to the next generation and they can keep that knowledge going. When we are out on country we need to be able to read the wind, the weather and the tracks to understand what the animals are doing.**
>
> **Dione Kelly, North Tanami Lead Ranger, Central Land Council**

Innovations such as the tracking skills project depend on reliable long-term funding for the CLC ranger program.

> **"Critical to our programs and initiatives is the consistent and sufficient resourcing by government of training and mentoring, as well as other wrap-around services for ranger teams and individuals.**
>
> **Peter Donohoe Manager, Land Management, Central Land Council**

Diagram 8

Ranger groups in the CLC region



Data Sources
Indigenous protected areas: Indigenous Protected Areas-dedicated © Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment and National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2020.
Proposed Indigenous Protected Areas: Supplied by traditional owners and CNP.
Ranger group working areas: based on Central Land Council Annual Report map 2020-232a, 2020
Central Land Council boundary: RATSIB © Commonwealth of Australia, National Native Title Tribunal, 2020
Land trusts: Aboriginal Land Trusts © Department of Lands, Planning and the Environment, Government of Northern Territory.

Indigenous Desert Alliance Ranger Development Program

For many years, the Indigenous Desert Alliance (IDA) has been connecting rangers from across Australia's desert country, including at annual conferences. During these conferences a series of priorities are conveyed by rangers which drives the IDA's ground-up projects. A need for more mentoring and support for rangers led to the co-design of a pilot mentoring project evolving into the current Ranger Development Program (RDP).

The RDP is a support program designed by and for desert-based rangers. It supports teams to address their developmental priorities while building the skills of rangers through project-based learning. The RDP enhances the connection of rangers across the desert and supports the sharing of knowledge through regional networks and events.

In the past ranger development has focused on technical skill-based training for narrow needs (e.g. weed management, chainsaw, 4WD etc). While this has equipped rangers with necessary competencies to do practical ranger work, there is a gap in supporting the development of interpersonal and leadership skills, enabling rangers to be self-determining and drive their career choices.

The co-designed RDP model focuses on building relationships and identifying local priorities of rangers and teams. The model uses a 'learn by doing' or project-based learning approach through linking priorities with resourcing opportunities and supporting the development of rangers' skills through practical projects. These projects include two-way science programs with local schools, ranger-led trips, small social enterprise development, women-focused exchanges and events, media and film making, wellbeing and public speaking.

Through the RDP and IDA core business, rangers are connected and continue to share learnings at a regional level. This enables the opportunity for regional-scale projects to be progressed and inspires more rangers on their development journeys.

The RDP will continue to be co-designed with rangers and will expand to support additional desert-based ranger teams, priority projects and regional forums through new partnerships and funding.

Indigenous Desert Alliance 2019 Conference. Credit: Indigenous Desert Alliance

9 Support for individual groups and regional networks

Part of the successful evolution of Indigenous land and sea management groups has been the flexible approach governments have taken to funding different organisational and support structures. This has been critical given the different stages of development, aspirations and circumstances of ranger groups across Australia.

Over the last 10 years, government funding has increasingly been delivered directly to incorporated Indigenous land and sea management organisations operating with a high degree of autonomy and with their own governance and administrative systems. This approach supports the principle that it is often better to have resources flowing to those directly responsible for delivery outcomes on the ground. However, it has also been critical that representative organisations such as land councils have continued to receive funding to directly host groups where they maintain the consent and ongoing support of traditional owners to do so.

As well as formally hosting groups, large representative organisations at times are able to create the economies of scale needed to attract quality scientific advice and capability and run training and mentoring programs for both developing and longstanding groups across their regions. Alliance and project models are also now being used to provide collaborative structures for major initiatives or projects (for example, 10 Deserts Project, the Indigenous Desert Alliance and the Indigenous Saltwater Action Group) and these can deliver large-scale and long-term outcomes.

> **In traditional times there were no borders like now – no states and territories; no native title borders and different groups drawing lines. This project removes those borders so that we can work together to keep country and people healthy. It is an ambitious project that we are keen to do.**
>
> Nyaparu Rose, 10 Deserts Project steering committee member

In coming years it will be critical that resources are available to ensure Indigenous ranger groups are able to continue setting their own directions, exercise autonomy and fund their own organisations.

Recommendations

- **Stay engaged with partners operating on the ground to ensure funding models meet the needs of traditional owners, ranger groups and regional support organisations. Over time, the guiding principle should be to strengthen capable local traditional owner governed institutions and have funding and accountability structures sitting as closely as possible to the delivery of everyday operations on the ground through regional or local organisations.**
- **Provide appropriate resourcing to regional organisations to provide services and network to local groups, including those ranger groups who require outside support to operate effectively.**

CASE STUDY 9

Kimberley Ranger Network

Across the Kimberley, Indigenous ranger teams generate sustainable indigenous livelihoods, support traditional owners to achieve their aspirations for looking after country, assert native title rights and undertake best practice cultural and natural resource management.

Since 1998, the Kimberley Land Council's Land and Sea Management Unit (LSMU) has been supporting cultural and natural resource management projects with traditional owner groups, creating and developing ranger teams, facilitating development of healthy country plans, dedication of IPAs, facilitating the ownership and control of these programs with their respective traditional owner governance bodies and providing on-going support to groups to grow in maturity and develop capability.

The key to the KLC's success has been a strong focus on native title recognition, Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC) capacity and providing a range of technical support services to groups with a range of capabilities and unique challenges and opportunities. The KLC works to empower PBCs to pursue their own goals and fulfil their aspirations, with a focus on developing and supporting independent, self-reliant and sustainable PBCs. The success of this is evidenced through Indigenous-led ranger teams and groups moving to contractual independence.

There are now sixteen ranger groups across the Kimberley, with only six of these programs still managed by the LSMU. With many PBCs choosing to run their ranger programs independent of the KLC, the role of the LSMU has been changing to increasingly focus on linking groups into a

regional network and facilitating delivery of services at scale. The KLC has brought ranger teams together under the Kimberley Ranger Network, a network of indigenous land and sea managers, to deliver landscape scale land and sea management projects, share knowledge and best practice to support capacity building, establish strategic regional partnerships and have a collective voice.

A practical example of this approach in action is with the ongoing fire operations work carried out by ranger groups with support from the LSMU. Ranger groups undertake 'right way' burning that protects culturally and environmentally significant and threatened species, reduces carbon emissions and delivers considerable social, cultural and economic benefits. LSMU provides extensive support to ranger groups across the KRN in fire management, including:

- Providing specialist fire services and regional co-ordination
- Facilitating training (30 training events since 2017, training on average 18 participants) in fire operations and supporting Indigenous knowledge transfer in traditional fire management
- Fostering the professional development of key staff within ranger teams to develop capability to fully manage burning programs autonomously
- Supporting ranger groups to conduct fire suppression work in partnership Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES)
- Developing and sharing fire operations procedures to manage risk
- Fostering relationships between relevant fire management stakeholders, including local and state government agencies, NGOs, pastoralists, communities, tourism operators and traditional owners.

The LSMU developed the *Kimberley Fire Operations Manual*, a set of fire policies and procedures to ensure the safety, success and compliance of Kimberley rangers' fire operations, which has been endorsed by the Western Australian Office of Bushfire Risk Management (OBRM) to meet ISO 31000 Risk Management standard. All KLC-affiliated groups are now operating under this manual.

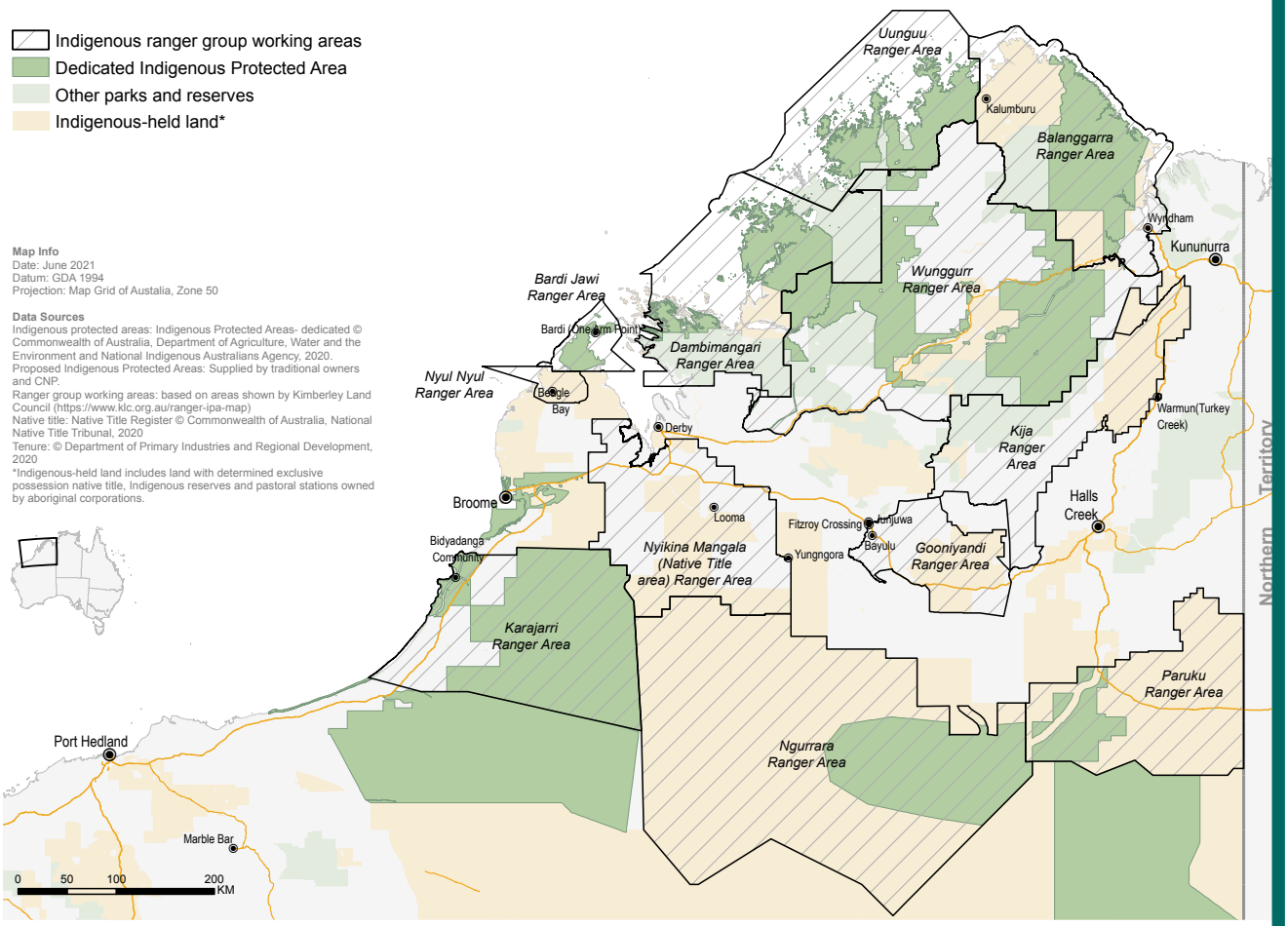
> **"The KLC successfully completed the first assurance review by the Office of Bushfire Risk Management (OBRM) of our fire operations manual and processes. The assurance program ensures that our practices reflect our procedures and fulfils our goal of working towards continuous improvement.**
>
> **Kimberley Land Council Annual Report, 2019**

It is this combination of strong ranger teams and PBCs operating with strategic support from the KLC that will ensure Indigenous land and sea management across the Kimberley Region continues to thrive into the future.

The Kimberley Land Council facilitates yearly meetings for all ranger groups across the Kimberley Ranger Network. This shot was taken at the 2019 Kimberley Healthy Country Forum hosted by Balanggarra and Wilinggin Traditional Owners. Credit: Kimberley Land Council

Diagram 9

Ranger groups and IPAs in the KLC region



Engaged and skilled government staff

10 Government policies supporting development of Indigenous land and sea management

Traditional owners, communities and their partners have done the heavy lifting in setting up contemporary Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs over recent decades. Without their leadership, support and efforts over many years in challenging conditions, the current network of IPAs, rangers and other land and sea management initiatives would not exist.

However, over the last thirty years, government agencies and staff with knowledge and understanding of land and sea management and remote communities have also played a key catalytic role creating funding frameworks which enhance the operating conditions of land and sea management and so create the best operating environment to encourage success.

In the lead up to and early years of the Working on Country program, the federal environment department played a critical role in policy development aimed at fostering Indigenous land and sea management and securing it as part of the approach to managing Australia's cultural and natural resources. There was significant two-way exchange of ideas between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land and sea management organisations and senior officials and ministers about the potential to grow the number of Indigenous rangers across the country and the results that could be achieved. This atmosphere of partnership, feedback and collaboration was critical to the establishment of the Working on Country program and its subsequent growth and evolution.

> **From prototype through to implementation, the program was characterised by genuine stakeholder engagement. The Environment Department brought in Indigenous stakeholders from around the country. Experienced project staffers were not afraid to trek out to communities to see what was possible.**
>
> **Mackie and Saunders, 2018**

In 2014, administration of both the IPA program and Working on Country funded rangers transferred to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) and subsequently came under the umbrella Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS). This change diminished dedicated policy development aimed at fostering Indigenous land and sea management, and severely weakened an important connection and collaborative ethos between environment, heritage and conservation objectives at the national level and Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs on the ground. A large amount of technical understanding of the practicalities of land and sea management was also lost from working relationships, and the core environmental and cultural outcomes on which the programs were initially devised were effectively de-prioritised.

Six years on, it is imperative to take stock of how arrangements are now working across the country. The management of the program at the federal level by the new National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) has brought important resources to the table. However, there are concerns this has been at the expense of both program integration with the federal environment department and access to informed and engaged contract management staff that truly understand the technical and related aspects of delivering complex land

Li-Anthawirriyarra Sea Rangers, Jodie Evans and Nathalia Dixon with Senator Jane Hume. Credit: Alex Inglis

and sea management projects often in very challenging contexts of remoteness and via local Indigenous governance arrangements. In parts of the country, relationships have been built with government staff in NIAA, but there is a long way to go and a general sense that NIAA is not currently in a strong position to understand the practical needs of land and sea management work. Indigenous ranger and IPA programs are no longer overseen by specialist program managers with a solid background in land and sea management. Instead, they are subject to contract management much the same as other programs including health, employment and housing, which means the focus on land and sea priorities has been lost.

There remains a need to renew face-to-face relationships and build up the expertise and knowledge of government staff working with ranger groups and IPAs. There is also a critical need to more strongly re-engage the federal department with responsibility for environmental matters, currently the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE). This is the agency which has multiple relevant programs running that connect with land and sea management, whose staff and departmental priorities are focused on the natural and cultural environment, and who can most ably assist frontline organisations needing help or advice or better coordination with state and federal land and sea management programs.

The 2020 announcement of a potential additional seven years of funding for rangers creates a platform on which to build improved partnership models between ranger groups and governments across all regions and this should be addressed as a priority. Many of these elements were in place prior to 2014 and have been effectively downgraded since then. We need to return to what was working more effectively in the recent past.

Recommendations

- **Hold high-level discussions between NIAA and DAWE officials with the purpose of creating stronger and more substantive joint support and oversight of Indigenous ranger and IPA investments and outcomes to strengthen the vital connection between environment, cultural heritage and conservation objectives, policy, practice and technical know-how at the national level, and Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs on the ground.**
- **Strengthen the policy capability of NIAA and DAWE and commitment at senior levels to work to further develop and grow the Indigenous land and sea management sector, including with states and territories.**

CASE STUDY 10

Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation – the meaning of collaboration

Situated at the western edge of the Gulf of Carpentaria, the Dhimurru Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) is approximately 550,000 hectares in size, including 450,000 hectares of marine estate. There are 17 Yolŋu clans with estates and interests in the Dhimurru IPA. It is renowned for its rich natural and cultural values including sandy beaches, rocky coastal islands, ancient dune systems and the Guwatjurumurru (Giddy River) flowing through cascades and rockpools to the coastal plain. Dhimurru operates with 'both ways management' – the recognition, nurturing and application of Yolŋu knowledge, values and practices together with contemporary scientific understanding, technologies and methodologies.

Since the early 1990s, Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation has been an inspirational example of what is achieved when traditional owners and rangers set clear expectations for how governments and other partners can best work together to manage land and sea country. Dhimurru has worked to share knowledge and develop partnerships with ministers, senior officials and government staff at every level.

> **"Government agencies need to bring an open mind and heart and bring the skills to help us work together and continue to support us do our djama. They need to be walking along side us, all the way, or it's very hard to get things done.**
>
> **Mandaka 'Djami' Marika, former managing director, Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation**

Dhimurru Rangers have frequently worked with government agencies in their Indigenous Protected Area. This picture was taken during crocodile management training with the NT Government Parks agency. Credit: Dhimurru Land Management Corporation

Since Dhimurru was first established, traditional owners and rangers have operated under clear guiding principles that emphasise Yolŋu control and empowerment alongside continued development of collaborative relationships with government agencies and other organisations.

> **Sometimes government people come with the assumption that they are in control and forget about the importance of the two-way relationships and decision-making. If governments don't come with an open mind and heart to hear our voice, that's when problems occur.**
>
> Mandaka 'Djami' Marika, former managing director, Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation

The way Dhimurru describes the role of its IPA Advisory Group is a good illustration of how government agencies and other partners can best work with Dhimurru. Membership of the IPA Advisory Group is open to all key government agencies and representative organisations with an interest in the Dhimurru IPA. Agencies and organisations are asked to bring their own "backpack" to the table containing their unique combination of commitment, authority, responsibility, and capacity to contribute to achieving the goals of the IPA.

Dhimurru believes it is timely to reflect on those qualities – commitment, authority, responsibility, and capacity – and how federal and NT government agencies based in Canberra and Darwin might renew their efforts to bring them to the table in very practical ways:

- **Commitment** – Dhimurru sees evidence of commitment in long-term agreements, secondments and, above all, time invested by government staff in learning and sharing skills and expertise by collaborating on practical land and sea management projects on the ground.
- **Authority** – Dhimurru sees agencies and staff exercising authority when officers with the ability and passion come to negotiate genuine agreements that allow for sustained collaboration.
- **Responsibility** – Dhimurru sees agencies and staff exercising authority when they understand and proactively embrace the role governments should play in meeting the goals of the IPA given their responsibilities for achieving successful policies, programs and outcomes for Yolŋu and sustainable environmental and cultural management.
- **Capacity** – Dhimurru sees government agencies building and maintaining their capacity when they employ staff with land and sea management experience and skills working with Yolŋu and proactively help those staff develop their careers.

Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation has operated for almost 30 years and has seen both highs and lows in the way government agencies have engaged with Yolŋu and rangers.

> **Without government help we'd get nowhere, government has funding and capacity to help including empowerment and training. Government has helped us train our rangers to do the work we need to do, like one of our rangers is a fisheries inspector and was trained by the government. Now we have more power for our work. They give us support so that we can train our young and emerging rangers.**
>
> Mandaka 'Djami' Marika, former managing director, Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation

Looking back over Dhimurru's experience, one message is clear. Arms-length funding relationships that are based on compliance are not likely to lead to long-term successful collaborations and make the task of traditional owners and rangers much more difficult.

What has worked well for Dhimurru is when agencies have brought not only resources but their people to the table, equipped with a real willingness to learn and concrete expertise across a range of areas from environmental management, education and training, governance and administration. That is the winning combination governments need to deliver to sustain success and the result is: ŋilimurru bukmak djäka wäŋawu – all of us together looking after country.

> **Dhimurru traditional owners have worked hard for many years to build a strong organisation. They have collaborated with governments and partners to get the job done over a long time. We always recognise the importance of those relationships and acknowledge them whenever possible. All of us working together.**
>
> Mandaka 'Djami' Marika, former managing director, Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation

11 Dedicated staff with the skills and capacity to work with groups

While government agencies need to work at the national and state levels on policies to develop the Indigenous land and sea management sector, they also need to have staff with the technical and practical expertise needed to work directly with groups on land and sea management projects.

The early years of Working on Country and the overall efforts of government staff across multiple agencies at the state and federal level over time have demonstrated it is possible for government staff with the right skills to offer to form effective working relationships with Indigenous ranger groups. This in turn improves two-way accountability and results on the ground.

> **"Working on Country worked because, first of all, having an understanding of what country means to people and secondly, having again the networks, the relationships and being prepared to be in the communities. Taking the call when someone says "I want to talk to you about the program" and getting yourself on a plane and then driving yourself west of wherever you land and meeting with a group of people you have never met in your life and talking with them.**
>
> Departmental official, former Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water Population and Communities

Experience has demonstrated that ranger groups thrive when they are supported by dedicated government staff who share technical expertise including in relation to specific environmental and cultural projects, ranger training, funding and organisational development with groups. Government staff working with Indigenous land and sea management groups should ideally have a:

- grounding in environmental, cultural and natural resource management work and experience working for Indigenous controlled organisations
- mandate and the resources to physically travel to see work of rangers, the challenges faced by their organisations and talk face-to-face
- good understanding of the regional and remote context of groups and willingness to seize opportunities, resolve challenges and work through problems together.

Arms-length funder-grant recipient relationships are not conducive to building strong working relationships. What works best is having government staff in both central and regional offices with the skills to be able to help Indigenous ranger groups mature and achieve organisational success. This need not be intensive, but the relationship should be one of shared understanding and motivation. Staff need to have the authority, expertise and technical background to work with groups to resolve issues and identify opportunities to assist practically not simply ensure a narrow sense of compliance. Government staff also need to engage with their colleagues in other relevant federal and state departments with responsibility for threatened species, fire, feral animals, cultural heritage protection, carbon and other relevant activities.

Recommendation

- **Rebuild a dedicated team of experienced and technically capable government staff with the capability and mandate to work with groups on Indigenous-led community-based land and sea management projects, solve problems and improve the way contracts are delivered and administered to support the on-ground outcomes.**

Crocodile Island Rangers setting up a trap to capture a problem crocodile on Milingimbi Island. Credit: John Skuja

CASE STUDY 11

Banbai rangers – building practical relationships with government agencies and other partners on the ground

For over two decades the Banbai rangers have been looking after country in the Wattleridge and Tarriwa Kurrukun Indigenous Protected Areas on the New England Tablelands northeast of Guyra, New South Wales. Wattleridge was the first IPA declared in New South Wales and covers 648 hectares of native bushland home to many rare and endangered plant and animal species, as well as many important cultural sites including the Kukra rock art site that has been dated between 40,000-50,000 years old. The Tarriwa Kurrukun IPA (which means 'strong one') covers 930 hectares of precious wetlands and stringybark forest.

The Banbai rangers have used consistent funding to build up their operations and are now carrying out a comprehensive land management program with seven full-time and three part-time rangers. All along it has been clear to the ranger team that partnering with other government agencies and landowners to look after country is critical, in particular to keep up with strong fire management and reduce weeds and feral animals.

> **"The 2019-2020 Bushfire Emergency was a disaster that hit Banbai country and our region hard. We've been holding workshops with community, Firesticks partners, RFS and other groups for years to assist and coordinated cultural burns and fire plans. We've been calling for increased understanding and use of traditional fire management practices to prevent these devastating bushfires.**
>
> Tremane Patterson, Banbai ranger

While important relationships between the Banbai rangers, researchers and other land managers have been fostered over many years, the horrendous 2019-2020 bushfire season really brought the importance of partnerships between Aboriginal land managers and government agencies including, the Rural Fire Service (RFS), NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and other property owners to the forefront.

During those fires, the Banbai rangers fought alongside these partners to save country, property, assets and lives.

> **"The collaborative effort of actively managing and controlling the fires was amazing. RFS, National Parks and the ranger group worked together to save the assets on country.**
>
> Dominic Cutmore, Banbai ranger

The Banbai rangers have noticed that since the terrible summer bushfires, public perceptions and conversations have changed in their region and across the nation.

There has been a real shift in attitudes. Everyone is looking to traditional fire management as a way to reduce impacts of wildfire. We recently held a workshop with projects partners, landholders and he community and it was very clear everyone valued our expertise and wanted to learn know how to burn country the right way to protect it from damaging bushfires.

Tremane Patterson, Banbai ranger

Now many agencies and landowners are reaching out to the Banbai rangers and asking them to conduct traditional fire management burns on both private and public property. There are plans for the Banbai rangers to collaborate with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Landcare, local council and other partners and lead an early season burn to protect RAMSAR listed upland wetlands and associated communities within Little Llangothlin Nature Reserve. The Banbai rangers feel very positive about their knowledge and skills being valued.

That is the foundation of genuine partnerships – real respect for the understanding of country and skills we bring to the table. It's awesome to see people looking to First Nation people to manage country and help prevent wildfires.

Tremane Patterson, Banbai ranger

With increased respect comes increased confidence. With funding from the Hunter New England and Central Coast Primary Health Network, the Banbai rangers are now planning to lead 'resilient country' workshops to help heal some of the devastation of both country and people caused by the 2019-20 fires. These workshops will be a chance for communities to conduct cultural burns across five locations and on different country. The aim is to come together manage country together and heal together.

We are hoping to get together people from across the community. Healthy country and healthy people go hand in hand. The workshops are a start, and we're looking forward to getting together. Healing country helps to heal community, and our people.

Dominic Cutmore, Banbai ranger

The Banbai rangers know they will keep going from strength to strength so long as governments and others partners stay the course and grow the support they provide alongside them.

We need to keep up with consistent long-term funding to maintain our ranger team. If we have those steady foundations in place, we can keep restoring this country and protecting it for future generations.

Tremane Patterson, Banbai ranger

Banbai rangers work with different government and non-government partners to manage fire on country. Credit: Tamworth Local Aboriginal Land Council

12 Robust planning and feedback mechanisms that value environmental and cultural outcomes

Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs work best when supported by robust, clear and community owned plans of management that are tracked with effective reporting and feedback mechanisms to maintain accountability to all partners. It is vital that reporting processes value and monitor the environmental and cultural outcomes groups are achieving through their land and sea management. This should not necessarily involve extensive mapping or evaluation processes or overly bureaucratic systems, but rather pragmatically working with groups to understand clearly what they are trying to achieve and how it's tracking, and to provide feedback.

This process works best when:

- good evidence and strong consultation come together to develop plans of management in the first place
- all parties understand the importance of these plans in setting out the aspirations of traditional owners and Indigenous ranger groups and natural and cultural resource threats and management priorities
- annual work plans are developed in line with plans of management with realistic and achievable goals and a purposeful but flexible approach taken to undertaking work
- Indigenous ranger groups and government work to properly assess activities and outcomes against plans of management using mechanisms useful to both government and groups. This maintains two-way accountability and treats land and sea management as an important and valuable undertaking, not merely the interesting side product of a ranger job. There should be an emphasis on meaningful but not overly bureaucratic reporting and feedback approaches.

These planning and accountability processes are the rigor behind Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs. Governments need to have strong systems and expertise in place to support them and ensure they are fit for purpose and beneficial to the practical needs of rangers and IPAs.

The current reporting framework has shifted away from the helpful monitoring and feedback of environmental and cultural outcomes groups are achieving to a narrower focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment outcomes, business development and compliance. If not addressed this shift has the potential, over time, to undermine not only morale but the effectiveness and productivity of land and sea management groups.

There already exisits a large community of practice to draw upon. For example, the former Working on Country and IPA units in the former environment department tracked the environmental and cultural outcomes of rangers and IPAs and made efforts to aggregate these into national snapshots. The Queensland Government's Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger Program (see case study below) also works to closely track achievements and provide practical feedback and support to participating groups.

It is critically important that efforts to improve accountability are not only implemented through formal 12 monthly reports. Substantive and practical working relationships are essential to maintaining quality of support and delivery. Both Indigenous ranger groups and government staff need to know if goals and projects have been achieved and if not, what are the barriers? Partners also need to be able to have honest discussions about how efforts in the future might be best directed, revised and adapted.

Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers planning survey points. Credit: Andrew McGregor

> We must work together with Balanda, listen to each other and share each other's ways of doing things. Like in this IPA here, there has been lots of meetings, talking together, learning about things and this has made us stronger.

Hagar Bulliwana, Warddeken IPA Plan of Management, 2016-2020

Recommendations

- Reinstate a more substantive, consistent and formalised role for the environment portfolio in tracking and assisting groups to deliver environmental and cultural heritage outcomes of rangers and IPAs.
- Reinstate environmental, cultural and related reporting of ranger and IPA achievements against each local management plan.

CASE STUDY 12

Queensland Government's Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger Program - two-way accountability

The Queensland Government's Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger Program represents leading practice in Australia at the time of writing. Staff from the Queensland Department of Environment and Science work closely with rangers to care for country across some of the most ecologically special environments in the world.

The $12 million per annum program has assisted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations with grants to employ over 100 Indigenous land and sea rangers across 24 of Queensland's regional and remote communities. The program is set to double with a recent commitment from the Queensland Government to fund 200 ranger positions over coming years as a result of advocacy through the Country Needs People network of Queensland-based land and sea management groups.

The rangers are working to conserve Queensland's important ecosystems and cultural heritage on country, in diverse locations stretching from remote Cape York to the Bunya Mountains and the Gold Coast.

> **"Our country, our land and our sea has always taken care of us in the past and it is now our job as rangers to do the same.**
>
> **Karren Liddy, Lama Lama ranger and Chairperson of Lama Lama Land Trust**

Under the program, the Queensland Department of Environment and Science do not just distribute grants. Staff work with Indigenous land and sea rangers to:

- agree negotiated work plans that reflect traditional owner, local community, and Queensland Government priorities

Queensland Stepping Up Program

The Queensland Government's Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger Program also supports the Department of Environment and Science's (DES) Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger Stepping Up Program. The DES Stepping Up program is designed to help rangers develop the key skills required to "step up" into project management roles and become leaders in their ranger groups. It is intensive training that focuses on developing ranger skills in project planning, budgeting, people management and operational logistics.

Rangers and nominated coaches work together to design practical projects that allow for on-the-job learning. After getting together for induction training, rangers manage each project within their ranger group back on Country. Coaches support the rangers to implement the project and utilise new skills. A final meeting is then held to share lessons and achievements with the group. Rangers and coaches consistently report real skills development, growth in confidence and the establishment of supportive networks that endure.

The Pormpuraaw rangers are funded primarily through the Queensland Government's Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger Program. Credit: Adam Ferguson

- provide mentoring, training, networking and support services to help both individual rangers and their host organisations deliver agreed program outcomes
- reflect and share outcomes and plan next steps.

Rangers and government staff share knowledge at annual Queensland Indigenous land and sea ranger conferences at which teams from across the state gather, hear stories of success, meet with partners and undertake local field trips to broaden their understanding of caring for country approaches. Government staff invest in co-hosting the design and delivery of this workshop and recognise its importance as a practical hands-on learning and sharing experience for everyone.

Engaged support by the Queensland Department of Environment and Science underpins the quality and reputation of the Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger Program. This backing supports rangers to go from strength to strength.

> **"I found that I liked working outside and contributing to something bigger than myself. I saw it as an opportunity to test my limits and I pulled through when I thought I wouldn't last a week…I feel more confident and more independent.**
>
> **Mikayla Down, Engagement, Communications and Finance Officer, Yintjingga Aboriginal Corporation and former Lama Lama trainee ranger.**

Queensland Looking After Country Grant Program

The Queensland Government also funds the Looking After Country Grant Program, designed to support newly developing groups in project planning and implementation, often employing casual rangers.

Annual grant rounds are held to provide opportunities for groups to apply for grants of up to $75,000. Projects are often aimed at supporting planning and development of collaborative partnerships in caring for country. Project activities funded through the program include, but are not limited to:

- cultural site management
- protected species monitoring and conservation
- revegetation and habitat restoration
- feral animal and weed management
- fire management
- erosion control and
- development and implementation of country management plans.

These grants are an important source of support for groups wanting to plan and trial land and sea management projects in their regions.

Crocodile Island Rangers completing a netpull to support fisheries research research. Credit: John Skuja

Jahnala Yenbalehla Ranger, Dewayne Edwards. Credit: Peter Eve

CHAPTER 4

The Future

It's been thirteen years since the breakthrough Working on Country program provided government support to grow stable and more ambitious Indigenous ranger groups across the country. Looking back further, it is clear that the Working on Country Program connected in a very serious way with the major push from traditional owner organisations to care for country from the 1980s to early 2000s. During this time, Australia has gone from declaring its first IPA to having 78 IPAs now covering over 74 million hectares of land and 4 million hectares of sea country, with millions of hectares in planning. That is quite a journey and it is changing the way we view land and sea management.

> **"This is about following in the footsteps of our ancestors and caring for country. This has always been our aspiration, to return our people to country, working on our own country, taking responsibility, being the authors of our own destiny, building our own skills and reconnecting with our culture.**
>
> Keron Murray, Wuthathi traditional owner and Chairman, Wuthathi Aboriginal Corporation

Over the coming decades, Australia faces a growing and increasingly complex challenge in managing vast land and seas under the ongoing threat of environmental degradation, biosecurity risks and climate change. On current trends IPAs will soon be the majority component of Australia's terrestrial protected area network by area, and their management needs to be properly resourced and appropriate to the complex challenges and vast areas they cover. Ranger groups are located across the country and ready to collaborate with governments and regional partners to grow their capabilities and deliver larger scale environmental and cultural outcomes. Australia must also take up the longstanding opportunity to strengthen connection with Indigenous cultural and ecological knowledge and values by supporting traditional owners in the sector for the benefit of all.

It will be important that governments and stakeholders move ahead to fully embrace the strong purpose and values behind Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs. They need to support the increasing development of the Indigenous ranger workforce and growth of Indigenous land and sea management as a highly valuable community-led contribution to sustainability, biodiversity, cultural heritage management and regional and remote employment.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are making a globally significant contribution to managing and protecting the systems that are under increasing pressure in Australia and around the world. To meet our own commitments to future generations of Australians, meet our international commitments and undertakings, and demonstrate we can support Indigenous leadership in this, we need to strengthen our approach through working models that we know will succeed.

This report has set out 12 key elements that can act in part as a checklist to ensure Indigenous ranger groups and IPAs continue to develop and grow. There are many more aspects beyond these to ensuring the successful continuation and growth of the sector, but these elements remain fundamental to success. There is a large body of work to build on and some practical recommendations in this report to consider. What is required now is for policy makers to work with traditional owners, rangers and their land and sea management organisations to take the next steps in that journey.

> **"It's really important to remember we have active and dynamic people out bush and people are looking for opportunities… It's that simple and we need more of it.**
>
> Scott Gorringe, Mithaka Aboriginal Corporation

All of this work needs to be driven by the power of genuine engagement and successful examples of working together between government agencies and staff and Indigenous ranger groups. We know it can be done even if, at times, we may have lost focus. To a large extent, the early years of Working on Country and the Indigenous Protected Area program set out a workable and proven example. There is a model to follow and Australia should be confident it works.

It is important we don't lose focus on the key elements of what made these programs successful in the past. It's the same elements that need to be utilised in the future to keep organisations and individuals strong in their management of country.

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