

## Indigenous land and sea management — a case study

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## **Cover image**

Beach debris removal in the Laynhapuy IPA, NT  
Photo by Yirralka Rangers & DSEWPaC

## Preface

This report was commissioned by the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities to help inform the Australia State of the Environment (SoE) 2011 report. As part of ensuring its scientific credibility, this report has been independently peer reviewed.

The Minister for Environment is required, under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, to table a report in Parliament every five years on the State of the Environment.

The Australia State of the Environment (SoE) 2011 report is a substantive, hardcopy report compiled by an independent committee appointed by the Minister for Environment. The report is an assessment of the current condition of the Australian environment, the pressures on it and the drivers of those pressures. It details management initiatives in place to address environmental concerns and the effectiveness of those initiatives.

The main purpose of SoE 2011 is to provide relevant and useful information on environmental issues to the public and decision-makers, in order to raise awareness and support more informed environmental management decisions that lead to more sustainable use and effective conservation of environmental assets.

The 2011 SoE report, commissioned technical reports and other supplementary products are available online at [www.environment.gov.au/soe](http://www.environment.gov.au/soe).

## **Indigenous land and sea management- a case study**

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## **Summary**

Indigenous land and sea management, also referred to as “caring for country”, includes a wide range of environmental, natural resource and cultural heritage management activities undertaken by individuals, groups and organisations across Australia. These activities have their origins in the holistic relationship between traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies and their customary land and sea estates or “country” for at least 50,000 years. In recent decades, stimulated in part by the return of significant areas of land to Indigenous ownership from late 1970s onwards, Indigenous communities, groups and organisations have increasingly become engaged in land and sea management, either through employment in government agencies, such as national parks and natural resource management organisations, or, increasingly, by establishing their own land and sea management agencies and ranger groups.

All levels of governments, recognising the high biodiversity and other environmental values on Indigenous management lands, have responded to these caring for country initiatives through funding, partnerships and other support. The Commonwealth Government provides significant investment through the Working on Country Program, which provides the employment of approximately 600 Indigenous rangers nationwide, and the Indigenous Protected Area Program which supports Indigenous groups to establish protected areas on their own country to contribute to national conservation goals.

Indigenous land and sea management initiatives are contributing to a developing conservation-based economy with significant social, health and cultural benefits, especially in remote regions. Ongoing financial support and some institutional reform, including greater recognition of Indigenous management of sea country, will be required to enable these opportunities to reach their full potential.

## **1 Introduction**

Indigenous land and sea management, also referred to as “caring for country”<sup>1</sup>, includes a wide range of environmental, natural resource and cultural heritage management activities undertaken by individuals, groups and organisations. These activities have their origins in the holistic relationship between traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies and their customary land and sea estates or “country” for at least 50,000 years<sup>2</sup>. During this long time period, the Australian environment has undergone significant changes in response to climatic and sea level variations, and many present day environments, particularly in coastal and island regions, have only ever existed in the presence of Indigenous people.

Caring for country embraces a combination of long-established cultural practices, such as species-specific ceremonies, seasonal use of traditional resources or use of fire to maintain desired environmental conditions, as well as contemporary practices such as feral animal and weed management, biodiversity surveys and satellite tracking of marine turtles. This case study, as part of the Australian Government’s State of the Environment reporting process, begins with an overview of Indigenous land and sea management in recent decades and then summarises current institutional arrangements, on-ground operational activities, the impacts of these activities on values relevant to State of Environment reporting and priorities to deliver enhanced outcomes. The case study concludes with a discussion on current trends and consideration of future directions.

## **2 Development of Indigenous Land and Sea Management**

Coinciding with the era of Aboriginal land claims, beginning with the passage of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cth), Indigenous groups and organisations continued or re-asserted their cultural obligations to care for their traditional estates by establishing their own ranger groups to manage successfully claimed land and by seeking involvement in the management of national parks<sup>3</sup>. Key events in this period include the early examples of joint management at Kakadu National Park and Gurig National Park<sup>4</sup> in the Northern Territory and the development of Aboriginal ranger training and employment programs in most states and territories; by 1985 there was sufficient interest in this field to convene a national workshop on Aboriginal ranger training<sup>5</sup>. The establishment of the Aboriginal Ranger Service on Palm Island in 1983<sup>6</sup> and Kowanyama Land and Natural Resource Management Office in 1990<sup>7</sup> heralded a new direction for contemporary Indigenous land management independent of government agencies.

Looking back from the perspective of 2011, these events can be seen as trailblazers for the burgeoning caring for country movement of today: Aboriginal engagement in national park management, through formal joint management arrangements and other mechanisms, now occurs or is emerging in all Australian jurisdictions; the concept of independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ranger groups and other locally managed Indigenous land and sea management organisations has now extended across Australia and employs several thousand Indigenous people.

A feature of the history of these caring for country initiatives is their origins as Aboriginal initiatives rather than government policies. Previously, government agencies had maintained a monopoly on employing rangers and managing national parks. Many of the early Indigenous rangers groups relied exclusively on Community Employment Development Program (CDEP) (work for the dole) funding; some of the groups supplemented their income through fee-for-service contracts and funding from non-government sources, while others struggled to maintain continuity of ranger employment, lacked adequate coordination and closed down<sup>8</sup>.

The Australian Government's Commonwealth Employment Program in Natural and Cultural Resource Management (CEPANCRM), which provided contract employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in land and sea management from 1988 to 1996, was the first significant policy response to these Indigenous initiatives. An evaluation of CEPANCRM showed that a total of 8,490 Indigenous people obtained contract employment on national parks, marine parks and crown lands and one third of the projects resulted in Indigenous community organisations starting their own land management contracting teams, heritage consultancies and tourism enterprises<sup>9,10</sup>.

Other significant Commonwealth initiatives that laid the foundation for further legal recognition of, and policy and funding support for, Indigenous engagement in land and sea management include the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody which recommended national principles for Indigenous ownership and joint management of national parks<sup>11</sup>, and the Coastal Zone Inquiry which recommended significant legal and policy reform to recognise and support Indigenous use and management of Australia's coastal land and sea environments and natural resources<sup>12,13</sup>.

In recent years, coinciding with greater awareness of the outstanding biodiversity and other environmental values on Indigenous managed lands across Australia<sup>14</sup>, all levels of government, as well as non-government Natural Resource Management bodies, have



responded to various extents through policy innovations, partnerships and funding support<sup>15</sup>. Particularly through the Indigenous Protected Area and Working on Country initiatives, discussed further below, the Australian Government is currently the major government investor in this field. State and territory government have also developed various strategies to support management of Indigenous held lands in their jurisdictions<sup>16,17,18</sup>.

Indigenous ranger groups are generally engaged in patrolling, managing and monitoring areas of Aboriginal land that have returned to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ownerships as a result of land claims or the recognition of continuing native title under the *Native Title Act 1993 (Cth)*. However, increasingly Indigenous ranger groups also engage in land and sea management activities in areas that may not be formally under Indigenous ownership but which lie within the traditional land and sea estates of the groups involved. This trend from “tenure-based” to “country-based” Indigenous engagement in land and sea management reflects a growing appreciation by government agencies and the wider community that Indigenous caring for country rights, interests and obligations are based on cultural connections to traditional estates irrespective of their current tenure. This trend can be observed, for example, in increased Indigenous engagement in national park and marine park management whether or not these protected areas have been returned to Indigenous ownership<sup>19</sup>.

Over the last decade Indigenous organisations have employed increasingly sophisticated processes and technologies to support local land and sea management initiatives, including, for example, the use of:

- Geographic Information Systems for recording spatial data relating to cultural heritage, biodiversity, resource use etc;
- CyberTracker software for digital recording of field observations and activities;
- Satellite and radio tracking of key species;
- Species-specific planning (e.g. dugong management plans and Traditional Use of Marine Resource Agreements);
- Whole-of-country planning, leading to partnership-building with government and non-government organisations.

### **3 Institutional Arrangements**

In pre-colonial times, caring for country was undertaken by individuals and clan groups with inherited rights and responsibility to particular land and sea estates, under the guidance of initiated elders and other knowledge-holders. These cultural rights and practices still underpin all contemporary land and sea management activities, but they have adapted and evolved over time and are delivered by a diversity of local, regional, state, territory and national institutional arrangements.

#### ***Community Level Arrangements***

There are now several hundred community-managed Indigenous land and sea management groups or organisations around Australia. Some of these comprise ranger groups employed by local community councils, while others are more fully developed Indigenous land and sea management agencies employing specialist planning and research staff as well as operational rangers, often with Traditional Owner governance arrangements separate or complementary

to local community councils<sup>20,21</sup>. While the majority of these groups and organisations are located in remote communities in northern and central Australia, Indigenous ranger groups and other caring for country initiatives occur throughout Australia, including the southern mainland states and Tasmania.

### ***Regional Level Arrangements***

Regional level arrangements include Indigenous organisations that coordinate or support local ranger groups and other land and sea management initiatives, as well as “mainstream” regional organisations, such as natural resource management bodies, that have explicit policies and programs to support Indigenous engagement in environmental, natural resource management or cultural heritage management. Regional Indigenous organisations include Aboriginal land (and sea) councils and Native Title Representative Bodies which coordinate a wide range of policy, research, planning and on-ground activities, including the training and employment of rangers<sup>20</sup>. Other examples of regional organisations include:

- North Australian Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) - an alliance comprising the Northern Land Council, Carpentaria Land Council and Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation which supports land and sea management activities across northern Australia;
- Girringun Aboriginal Corporation which coordinates land and sea management activities on behalf of nine tribal groups in north Queensland between Ingham and Innisfail;
- Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN), an alliance of 10 Traditional Owner groups from along the River Murray and its tributaries;
- Torres Strait Regional Authority (which is a statutory body established under Commonwealth legislation) coordinates support for island-based ranger groups and plays a significant role in fisheries, coastal and marine research and management, including measures to ensure sustainable harvest of dugong and marine turtles and combat coastal erosion associated with climate change and sea level rise<sup>22</sup>.

### ***State/Territory Level Arrangements***

State and Territory governments provide varying levels of legislative, policy and program support for Indigenous engagement in land and sea management including through:

- Recognition of Indigenous rights to access and use traditional resources for cultural and domestic purposes;
- Indigenous employment strategies within government agencies;
- Specialist Indigenous policy and liaison units within government agencies;
- Co-management and other forms of Indigenous engagement in protected area management (including Aboriginal ownership of national parks in some jurisdictions);
- Support for the management of Indigenous Protected Areas;
- Indigenous fisheries strategies (including recognition of a distinct Indigenous fishery and support for Indigenous commercial fishing initiatives)<sup>23</sup>;
- Indigenous representation on environmental and resource management advisory committees;
- Registration and protection of Indigenous heritage sites.



Despite significant improvements in State and Territory legislative and policy recognition of Indigenous engagement in land and sea management in recent years, inequalities remain between and within jurisdictions. In the Northern Territory most national parks are managed in partnerships with Traditional Owners (including Aboriginal ownership and formal joint management)<sup>24</sup>, while in other jurisdictions such partnerships remain the exception rather than the rule<sup>25</sup>. In Queensland the *Cape York Peninsula Heritage Act 2007* provides for Aboriginal ownership and joint management of all national parks in Cape York Peninsula, but similar opportunities are currently not available elsewhere in the state<sup>26</sup>. And throughout Australia there are some Traditional Owner groups whose opportunities for engagement in land and sea management are severely limited by urban development, agricultural land uses, mining and other developments.

In 2006 the Northern Territory Government entered into an agreement with the Commonwealth to provide targeted, long term funding for Indigenous land and sea management funding across the Top End and in Central Australia<sup>27</sup>. The recent Commonwealth “Intervention” into remote communities in the Northern Territory has also resulted in additional land management funding becoming available in this jurisdiction but not in other states and territories.

### ***National Level Arrangements***

There is no national Indigenous organisation that specifically supports land and sea management. The Australian Government, through its legislation, policies and programs, provides support for Indigenous land and sea management through:

- *Native Title Act 1993*
- *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*
- *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975*
- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984*
- Grants and other funding programs, including Working on Country, Indigenous Protected Areas, Indigenous Land Management Facilitators, Indigenous heritage Program and the National Indigenous Land and Sea Management Conference (held every two to three years).

Native title rights, including rights to own, access and use land, water and natural resources, though potentially available nationally through the *Native Title Act*, are limited by the tenure history of particular locations and by the impact of colonial and post-colonial history on Indigenous culture and connection to country. Where native title rights are recognised they may be restricted by other prevailing uses (such as national parks or pastoral leases) and they tend to be less comprehensively recognised on the sea as compared to on land. Nevertheless, native title determinations have been instrumental in achieving enhanced engagement in the management of national parks and other protected areas and led to Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) and other agreements that support Indigenous engagement in land and sea management – though native title determinations and ILUAs in themselves are not accompanied by land management resources and support as a matter of course.

The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* (EPBC Act) includes several provisions that protect Aboriginal interests in planning processes for Commonwealth reserves, protect Indigenous traditional use (except for the purpose of sale) from restrictive provisions of the Act with respect to hunting, gathering and ceremony, and set out

requirements for Indigenous membership of boards for Commonwealth protected areas (such as Uluru, Kakadu and Booderee national parks). The EPBC Act also establishes the Indigenous Advisory Committee (IAC) that advises the Minister on the operations of the Act as it relates to the rights and interests of Indigenous people. A sub-committee of the IAC has been established to provide advice on the delivery of the Indigenous Protected Area program.

The *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act* includes several provisions that recognise Indigenous interests within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP), including:

- The requirement that at least one member must be an Indigenous person with knowledge of, or experience concerning, Indigenous issues relating to the Marine Park;
- Protection of Indigenous cultural values, including traditional hunting, fishing and gathering;
- Collaborative management of culturally significant resources through Traditional Use of Marine Resource Agreements (TUMRAs);
- Establishment of an Indigenous Reef Advisory Committee and Indigenous representation on other reef advisory committees.

Indigenous engagement in the management of the GBRMP has increased in recent years but does not yet equate with the level of engagement and decision-making associated with Commonwealth Aboriginal owned and jointly managed terrestrial protected areas, such as Kakadu, Uluru and Booderee national parks established by the Commonwealth<sup>28</sup>. This discrepancy relates to differences in legal recognition of Indigenous rights on land and sea, underlying which is a profound cultural difference between the Indigenous view of the sea as an integral part of traditional coastal estates and the view of Australian governments and the wider society that regard the sea as an open commons managed by government on behalf of all Australian and quite separate from land, which can be privately owned<sup>29</sup>.

With respect to the GBRMP, TUMRAs do explicitly recognise that particular areas of the marine park are the cultural domain of particular Traditional Owner groups, particularly with respect to the use and allocation of traditional resources such as dugongs and marine turtles. TUMRAs are resource allocation agreements made between members of a Traditional Owner group and then endorsed and supported by the Marine Park Authority<sup>30</sup>. TUMRAs are a “country-based” instrument that may lead to further Indigenous engagement and partnerships in management of the GBRMP over time.

The two largest Australian Government programs that support Indigenous land and sea management are:

- The Indigenous Protected Area Program, which funds the planning and management of protected areas established by Indigenous people, as well as the negotiation of enhanced Indigenous involvement in the management of government protected areas; and
- Working on Country, which provides funding for the employment of Indigenous rangers on Indigenous owned or government owned land.

Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) emerged from an Australian Government commitment in the early 1990s to establish a system of protected areas that is comprehensive, adequate and representative of all the terrestrial bioregions of Australia. As some of the bioregions occur only on Aboriginal-owned land, a program was developed in collaboration with Indigenous

representative organisations to provide funding and other support to enable Indigenous groups to establish protected areas on their own lands. In recognition that many government protected areas had already been established on traditional estates without Traditional Owners' consent, the IPA program also includes funding to enable Traditional Owners to negotiate enhanced engagement in the management of existing government-declared national parks and other protected areas<sup>31</sup>. See Attachment 1 for a map showing locations of IPA projects.

The first IPA was established in Nantawarrina in South Australia in 1998 and there are now 42 declared IPAs in all Australian states and mainland territories (except the ACT). There are currently an additional 40 IPA projects that are in the consultation phase, as well as eight "co-management" projects focusing on enhanced Indigenous engagement in existing protected areas. IPAs are established independently of the EPBC Act or any other state or territory legislation, in accordance with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) protected area definition which states that protected areas can be managed by "*legal and other effective means*". In practice, IPAs are typically managed by a combination of legal means (land ownership, community by-laws etc.) and other effective means (ranger patrols, liaison, education, signage, research etc.).

For the first 10 years of the IPA program, IPAs were established only on Aboriginal-owned land, and IPAs now comprise over 25% of the total terrestrial protected area estate (the National Reserve System). More recently, some Traditional Owners groups have been exploring the establishment of IPAs based on "country" rather than tenure, which would enable the traditional land and sea estates of coastal Indigenous groups to be included in an IPA. Some of these exploratory projects include areas where government national parks and marine parks have already been established; in such instances, IPAs would become a holistic, country-based management framework that complements the existing protected area management arrangements on land or sea within the proposed IPA<sup>21</sup>. Discussions are currently underway between Traditional Owners, government agencies and other stakeholders regarding these proposed country-based IPAs, the first of which may be declared or "dedicated" (the term used in the IUCN definition) in 2011.

The commencement of the Working on Country (WoC) program in 2008 represented a significant shift from casual CDEP funded Indigenous ranger employment to long term, full time or permanent part-time ranger employment. The WoC Program currently provides support to 77 ranger groups across Australia comprising a total of approximately 600 Indigenous rangers. It is anticipated that the program will support a total of 660 rangers by 2013<sup>32</sup>. See Attachment 2 for a map showing locations of WoC projects.

Many WoC-funded ranger groups are involved in partnerships with a diverse range of government, scientific, natural resource management and conservation organisations, which have both environmental and social benefits for the individuals and organisations involved.

In 2009-10 Indigenous ranger groups reported a range of social and health benefits, such as:

- increased pride, self-esteem, independence and respect from peers
- improved organisational skills;
- increased involvement in the community including sports and governance;
- improved skills in interacting with the wider community;
- improved outlook on work, life and family;
- better nutrition, increased physical activity and fitness;

- weight loss, giving up smoking, reduced consumption of alcohol;
- increased access to bush food resources;
- obtaining drivers licences.

Ranger groups also provide direct benefits for community members, enabling greater access to country which in turn facilitates the maintenance of cultural responsibilities for country, increased physical activity, access to bush foods and traditional medicines etc. For some rangers, however, these benefits are partially offset by increased stress from ‘community humbug’; and others are still learning to deal with an increase in income, community pressures and the day to day responsibilities that come with employment.

#### **4 Operational Aspects: progress, challenges and opportunities**

Though independent from direct government control, many of Indigenous land and sea management groups remain heavily dependent on government funding programs, such as IPA and WoC, and hence are vulnerable to changes in government policy. This vulnerability is particularly evident in 2011 as both the IPA and WoC programs have reached the limit of their current funding capacity and are not inviting new funding applications this year.

Many of the longer established groups, however, have diversified their funding sources by building partnerships with non-government conservation groups, research institutions, philanthropic organisations and the private sector (mining companies and others). Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation, which manages a large coastal IPA in northeast Arnhemland, for example, obtains operational, employment, capital and project funding from multiple investment, research and operational partners, which reduces reliance on IPA Program funding<sup>33</sup>. Kowanyama Land and Natural Resource Management Office, responsible for managing the extensive Kowanyama Community lands, pastoral leases and a jointly managed national park on western Cape York Peninsula, has for many years supplemented its land management budget by providing commercial camping facilities to recreational fishers during the dry season<sup>7</sup>. Warrdeken IPA in Central Arnhemland is partly funded by the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement Project, involving a carbon offset agreement with a major gas corporation which funds traditional burning practices that emit less carbon than unmanaged wildfires<sup>34</sup>.

Funding aside, there are significant challenges in establishing, maintaining and developing community-based environmental management groups in remote locations, without the institutional resources normally available to equivalent government agencies<sup>35</sup>. These challenges include:

- Establishing governance structures that remain compatible with systems of Traditional Owner authority while being responsive to contemporary environmental management challenges and opportunities;
- Managing multiple funding and other partnerships, including often complex and time-consuming grant application and reporting processes;
- Managing community expectations for employment, environmental and cultural outcomes – in particular, the demand for ranger employment typically exceeds the availability of ranger positions in most communities.

Counterbalancing these challenges is a growing acceptance of community-based Indigenous land and sea management capabilities by government environmental and natural resource managers, researchers, the non-government conservation sector and industry. Coupled with

the capacity of regional Indigenous organisations to support local initiatives, this growing acceptance is providing new opportunities for partnerships, including, for example:

- Australian National University's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), with funding from the Sydney Myer Foundation, has implemented a People on Country Program to provide scientific, governance and other support to several Indigenous land and sea management groups in the Northern Territory;
- The Nature Conservancy, Bush Heritage and WWF-Australia have supported the planning and management of several IPAs;
- Queensland University of Technology has partnered with the Anindilyakwa Land and Sea Rangers to develop an audio remote sensing system to record and analyse amphibian vocalisations on Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria to protect the island from possible invasion by cane toads;
- The Saltwater People Network and I-Tracker program being implemented by NAILSMA is providing training and data management support to coastal Indigenous groups across Northern Australia to strengthen their capacity to record, analyse and apply information obtained during ranger patrols and surveys;
- Ecotrust Australia has recently been established to promote "reliable prosperity" in Northern Australia through the intersection of cultural resilience, ecosystem conservation, economic opportunity and community vitality, providing another potential support partner for Indigenous land and sea management.

Collectively these initiatives are part of an emerging caring for country economy across Australia, which is likely to continue to grow in response to increasing environmental pressures, including climate change. It is an economy that has been described as a "propitious niche" for Indigenous groups, in recognition of the cultural significance of caring for country to all Indigenous peoples and the increasing value placed on environmental management by the wider community and governments<sup>36</sup>. As a propitious niche, caring for country has some parallels with Indigenous art, which plays a significant role within Indigenous cultures and more recently also within the wider society and economy.

## **5 Impact on Environmental Values**

Notwithstanding the difficulty in explicitly linking particular environmental management efforts with particular environmental outcomes, Indigenous land and sea managers are increasingly conscious of the need to demonstrate management effectiveness. While Indigenous ranger groups continue to document and report management effort (kilometres of fencing erected, hours of patrolling undertaken, areas of weed sprayed etc.) there is increasing attention given to monitoring environmental condition to measure management effectiveness. For example, partnerships between ecologists and Warrdeken Land Management have established baseline data and monitoring programs to measure the effectiveness of management actions taken to reduce the impact of feral water buffaloes on perennial freshwater spring environments of the Arnhem Plateau<sup>37</sup>. Freshwater monitoring and control measures are also being taken by Yugul Mangi Land and Sea Rangers to protect billabongs from damage inflicted by feral horses, buffalo and pigs<sup>38</sup>.

In addition, collection of baseline information, such as fauna and flora surveys, satellite tracking of marine turtles, mapping cultural sites and recording traditional knowledge all contribute to supporting values relevant to tracking the State of the Environment<sup>39</sup>. Management effort, such as feral animal control measures, weed control measures and

removal of tonnes of ghost nets (abandoned commercial fishing nets) from marine areas are also legitimate indicators of improved environmental outcomes, even if those outcomes are difficult to quantify.

Feedback from Indigenous ranger groups supported by WoC funding, provides further indicators of the environmental benefits of caring for country initiatives. Based on data for 2009-2010\*, these indicators include:

- 94% of Working on Country Indigenous ranger groups undertook work that contributed to the protection and management of environmental issues of national significance (as defined by the *EPBC Act 1999*);
- Five ranger groups were undertaking work within World Heritage Areas;
- Four groups were working within National Heritage Listed areas;
- Six groups were working in RAMSAR wetlands;
- A key focus of environmental activities was on managing key threatening processes such as feral animals (64% of ranger groups), controlling Weeds of National Significance (41.3%) and undertaking survey and management activities associated with threatened fauna species (37.3%);
- Cultural site management was undertaken by 76% of groups;
- 80% of groups undertook activities that involved sharing traditional knowledge and community education and engagement.

Another way to view Indigenous contributions to managing Australia's biodiversity and other environmental values is to observe the consequences of the cessation of Aboriginal management practices resulting from the removal of Traditional Owners from the landscape. For example, an increase in late dry season wildfires on Waanyi/ Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust land on the Northern Territory/Queensland border, associated with the departure of Aboriginal people from the area, has resulted in habitat loss, soil erosion and damage to neighbouring pastoral areas; and weed invasions, such as *Mimosa pigra* in Arnhemland, which can be halted and managed by Indigenous rangers, can spread rapidly and undetected in depopulated areas<sup>40</sup>.

Consideration of the impact of Indigenous land and sea management on environmental values raises significant cross-cultural issues of context and perspective, including "whose values?" and "what are the desirable impacts?" Australia's Indigenous people and cultures have adapted to major climatic, sea level and environmental changes over the last 50,000 years and it should not be surprising that their responses to some current environmental challenges may be different to the responses of people and cultures more recently arrived here. While there are many shared environmental values, there are also contested values, for example, regarding the presence of buffaloes, horses and other introduced animals in the Australian landscape. Whether such animals are regarded as "bush tucker, bush pets or bush pests"<sup>41</sup> depends on an array of cultural, economic and scientific perspectives that require a two-way process of knowledge-sharing to understand. Contemporary Indigenous land and sea management initiatives across Australia are providing innovative frameworks for that understanding to occur.

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\* Data provided by Indigenous Policy Branch, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, April 2011.

## **6 Priorities for Future Arrangements**

There is clear evidence that Indigenous caring for country activities are contributing to the protection and management of key environmental values across Australia, while also contributing to social development, cultural maintenance and community health and wellbeing<sup>42,34</sup>. Support for these initiatives should continue and grow into the future along several interrelated pathways, including:

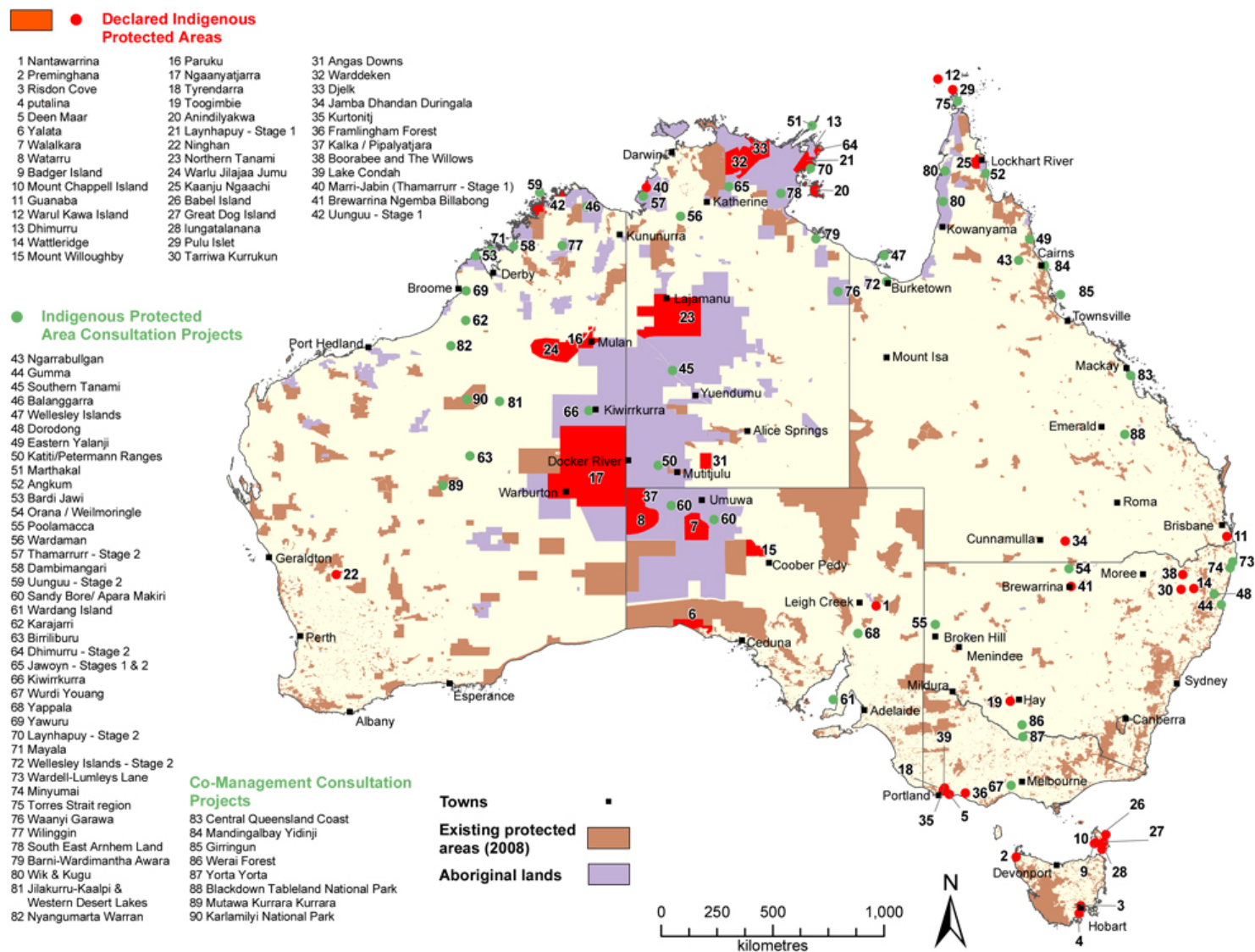
- Enhanced support for Indigenous participation within government and non-government land and sea management agencies and projects;
- Enhanced support for independent Indigenous land and sea management agencies and ranger groups;
- Enhanced support for partnerships between environmental researchers and Indigenous groups, including support for training and education of Indigenous people in environmental research disciplines.

While governments, especially the Commonwealth Government, have been funding Indigenous land and sea management initiatives for over 30 years, there has been a quantum increase in funding and other support in recent years. The continued growth in the capacity of Indigenous groups to undertake their own land and sea management is likely to be accompanied by new and diverse partnerships with government, research and non-government conservation agencies, leading to mutual benefits for all parties. In this respect, support for independent caring for country groups should not be seen as a pathway to separate development for Indigenous communities, but rather a process of empowerment that enables them to engage in beneficial partnerships of their choosing. The next ten years will demonstrate whether a land and sea management economy is a short term or long term propitious niche for Indigenous people in remote communities and elsewhere in Australia. A clear sign that it has a long term future is that these initiatives are grounded in Indigenous culture and have been driven by Indigenous groups and organisations, rather than by government policies. The challenge for governments is to respond positively to this momentum without overburdening the recipients of funding and other support with excessive reporting and compliance processes.

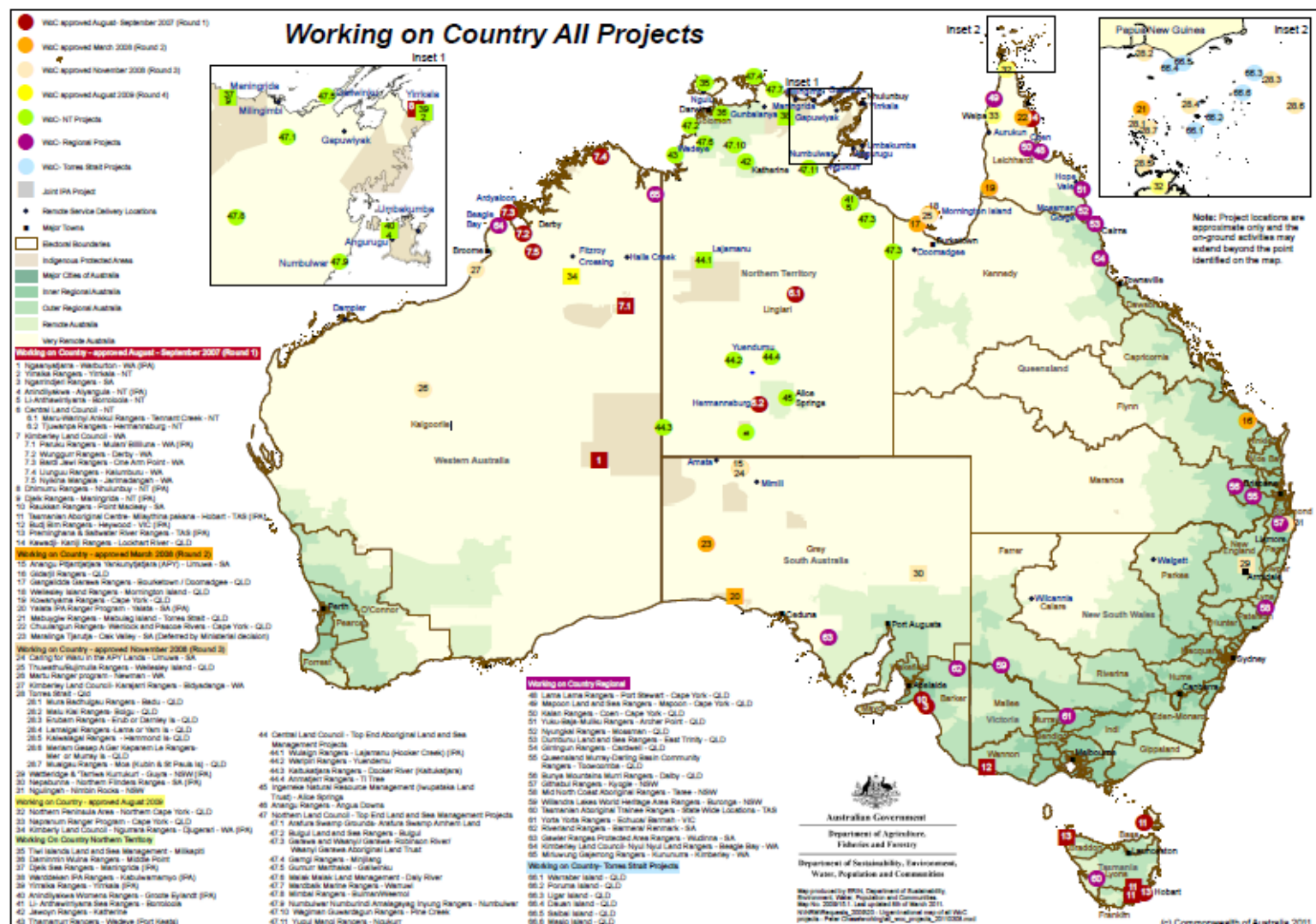
The next ten years can also expect to see further developments in a tenure-blind, country-based approach to Indigenous engagement in land and sea management. This is consistent with Indigenous perspectives of land and sea, and it also provides a framework for integrated, landscape/seascape scale environmental management. For this process to prosper, particularly in coastal regions, there will need to be some changes to current marine management arrangements, complementing the changes that have already occurred on land, particularly with respect to protected areas. The proposed joint management of Roebuck Bay Marine Park and its integration with coastal and intertidal reserves in the Kimberley region as part of the Yawuru native title settlement<sup>43</sup> is an indication that this shift is already underway. A review of the principles underpinning the National Reserve System for Marine Protected Areas (NRSMPA), which currently requires MPAs to be established by Act of Parliament, contrary to concept of management by “legal and other effective means” adopted by the IUCN, is an urgently needed reform.



## ATTACHMENT 1: Locations of Indigenous Protected Area Projects



## ATTACHMENT 2: Locations of Working on Country Projects



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