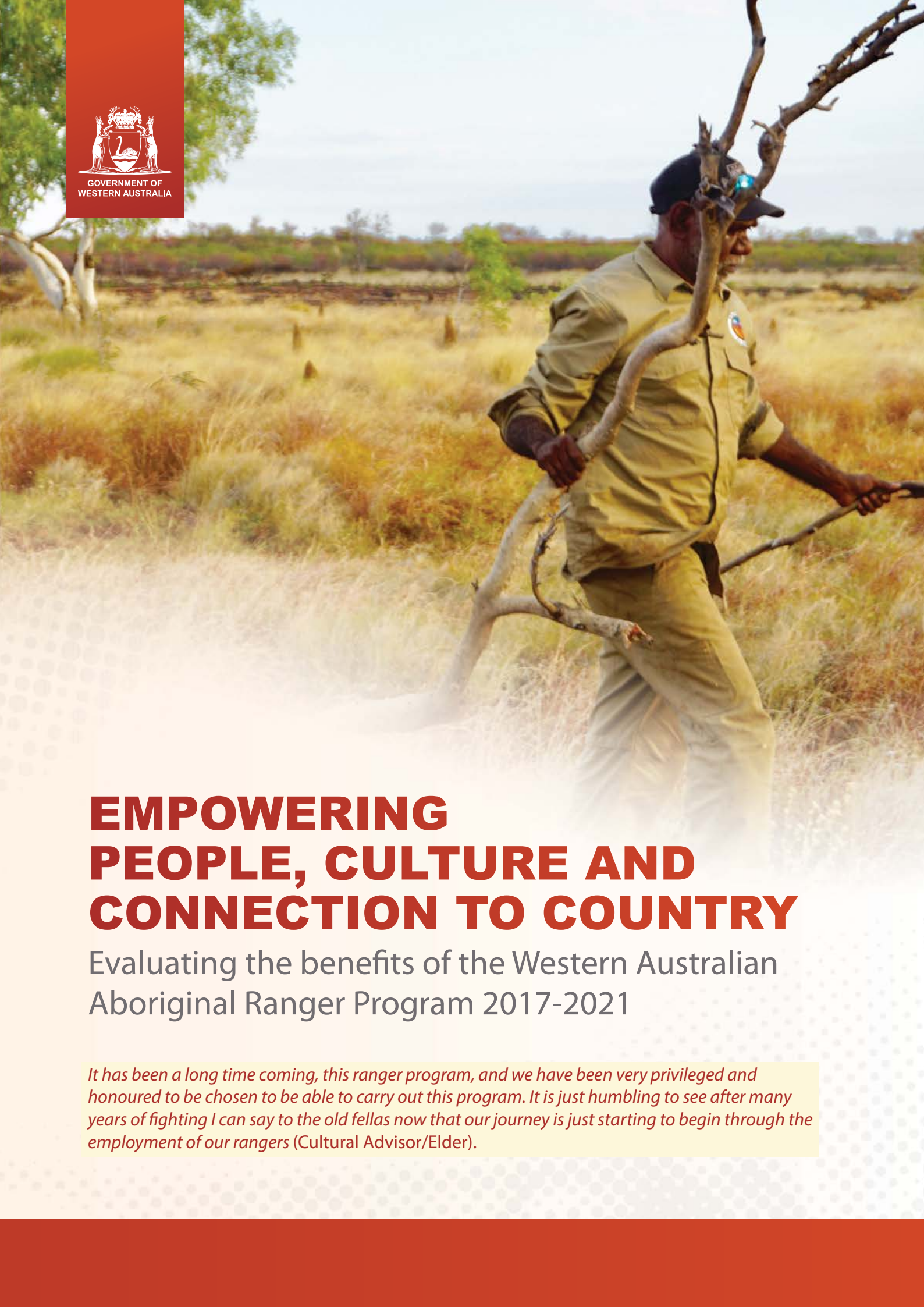




EMPOWERING PEOPLE, CULTURE AND CONNECTION TO COUNTRY

Evaluating the benefits of the Western Australian
Aboriginal Ranger Program 2017-2021

It has been a long time coming, this ranger program, and we have been very privileged and honoured to be chosen to be able to carry out this program. It is just humbling to see after many years of fighting I can say to the old fellas now that our journey is just starting to begin through the employment of our rangers (Cultural Advisor/Elder).



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Acknowledgment DBCA acknowledges the traditional owners throughout Western Australia (WA) and their continuing connection to the land, water, sea, and community. We pay our respects to all members of the Aboriginal communities and their cultures; and to elders both past and present. We thank the ranger groups, their representatives and in particular the Bardi Jawi Rangers, Nyul Nyul Rangers, Ngurrara Rangers, Karajarri Rangers, Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers, associated Aboriginal Corporations and all Key Funding Partners for contributing to this research, sharing their knowledge and taking us out on Country.

Although the authors both work for DBCA which administers the funds for the Aboriginal Ranger Program (ARP) they had no input into the design and implementation of the ARP and are not involved in the day to day operations of the program. This process was undertaken by a different section of the department. The authors are social scientists that undertake research on human interactions in our natural environment as well as human monitoring across the department that includes evaluation of various department programs. Their unit works as an independent unit, not involved in the programs they assess nor are they involved in any of the decision making or process for this program.

Front cover Ngurrara Ranger collecting firewood.

Back cover Bardi Jawi Oorany Rangers Gouldian finch field work.

Above left Ngurrara Rangers looking at bush plants.

Above right Esperance Tjaltjraak Country. Photos – Amanda Smith

Foreword by Minister for Environment

It is with great pleasure that I present this report to Western Australians and other interested parties. This document is the culmination of four years' work to identify the social outcomes of the McGowan Government's Aboriginal Ranger Program – a program designed to create jobs, training and community development opportunities to empower Aboriginal people across Western Australia.

Since it began in 2017 with an initial \$20 million commitment over five years, the Aboriginal Ranger Program has funded 35 ranger programs resulting in more than 800 people being employed across the State. In 2021, the State Government committed a further \$50 million over four years to expand the program. Another \$16.5 million was later added, taking the total phase 2 commitment to \$66.5 million over five years. Investment at this level is truly a testament to the success of the program, and in particular, the people working on the ground, driving and delivering it.

Social researchers from the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) have spent time in the field getting to know the Aboriginal rangers in the program, obtaining a wealth of information about the work they do, their desire to care for country, and the many ways the Aboriginal Ranger Program has benefited the broader community.

For me, the highlight of this report is the direct quotes from rangers employed through funding from the program. These are the people who speak with firsthand experience about the impacts of employment on country, and the wide-ranging effects that flow from that. This study found the positive impacts include increases in self-confidence, pride, gender equality and improved mental and physical health. In addition, there have been reported improvements in training and education outcomes and better career prospects, as well as intergenerational knowledge transfer, which is absolutely vital for young people.

The Aboriginal Ranger Program is part of the State Government's commitment toward empowering Aboriginal people and conserving country. It goes hand in hand with our work to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Under the direction of the *Closing the Gap Jurisdictional Implementation Plan for Western Australia*, we can achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal people through meaningful partnerships that protect and conserve country.

Western Australia's *Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy 2021–2029* puts culture at the heart of its efforts to ensure Aboriginal Australians are empowered to live good lives and choose their own futures from a secure foundation. I am pleased to see the Aboriginal Ranger Program is investing in and building these foundations in a very real way – providing jobs, training, and opportunities to care for country.

Please enjoy this comprehensive evaluation into the social outcomes of the Aboriginal Ranger Program. I look forward to building on the program's success in the years to come.



A stylized, handwritten signature in dark ink, likely belonging to Hon Reece Whitby MLA.

Minister for Environment; Climate Action
Hon Reece Whitby MLA

Executive summary

One of the most powerful benefits is that those rangers are role models in their communities, and they also provide a cultural connection between the community and working on country and working with elders recording traditional knowledge. Then using that traditional knowledge in their daily practise has been a positive benefit, not only for themselves but the whole community (Key Project Partner).

This report examines the important and diverse social and economic, cultural and environmental benefits resulting from the Aboriginal Ranger Program (ARP) in Western Australia. The ARP was originally launched in 2017 and was a five-year, \$20 million grant program under Royalties for Regions, administered by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA). Since its inception the ARP has funded 35 different ranger programs resulting in over 800 people being employed across the State of which 45 percent were filled by women and 95 percent identified as Aboriginal. Across the different projects rangers undertook environmental work on country including biodiversity monitoring and research; fire management; feral animal and weed management; traditional knowledge transfer, cultural site management and management of visitors or tourism and tourism assets. A smaller number of projects included cultural awareness and immersion experiences for visitors, guided Welcome to Country tours and education programs and mentoring.

This report draws upon qualitative case study analysis measuring change over time, quantitative outcomes from annual reports and supporting literature to develop an understanding of the social and economic, cultural, and environmental benefits resulting from the ARP.

Key benefits identified

The key factor of the success of the ARP is that it gives the opportunity for Aboriginal people to be on country. By offering meaningful employment on country, the ARP is contributing to the *Western Australian Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy 2021-2029*. Being employed as a ranger offers financial security as well as respect from community and family. By being on country they are able to learn about and reconnect with country and culture which in turn empowers individuals, families and community. The rangers reported that being a ranger on country contributes to mental health, and social, emotional and spiritual well-being, all of which are key foundations for empowerment. By building these foundations through employment as rangers on country, many of the futures become a reality. Through the ARP, rangers and elders are on country, looking after country, undertaking further education and training resulting in future jobs and careers prospects and increased opportunity for culture to be passed on to the next generation. The ARP is contributing to the empowerment of Aboriginal people and families through employment and training on country allowing for connection to country and culture.

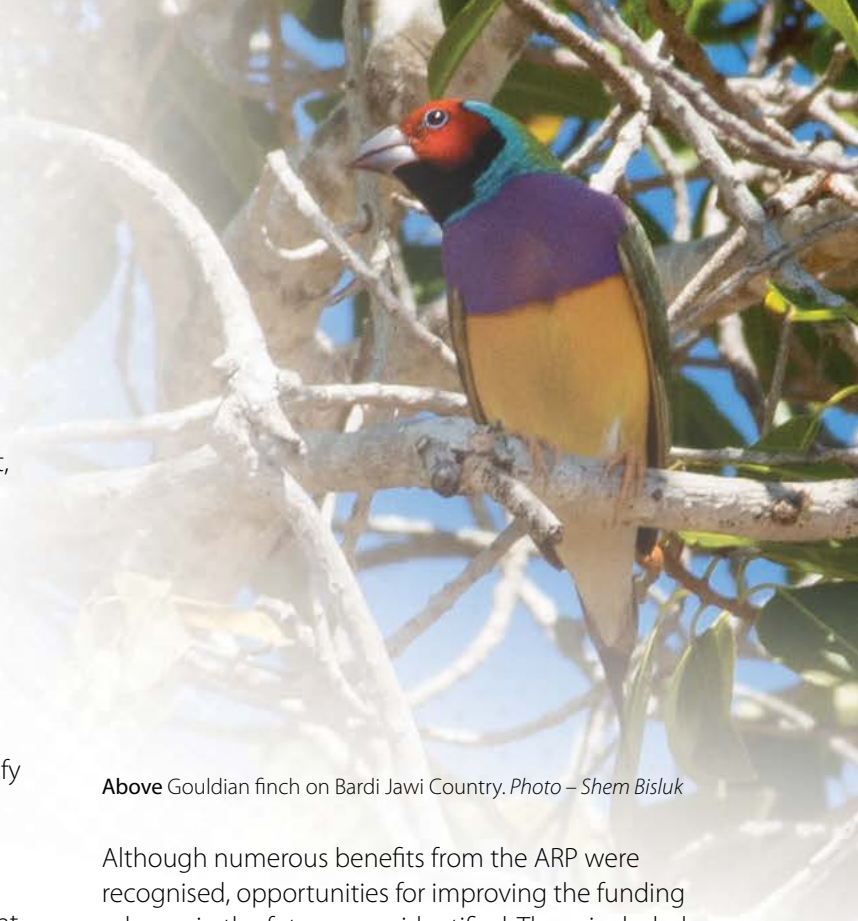
Key outcomes

Key outcomes identified include:

- New jobs for Aboriginal people looking after country resulting in increased capacity for decision making for country. The ARP is valuable as it offers opportunities to both established and emerging ranger groups on and off DBCA-managed lands and waters. Established ranger groups can build capacity, as funding additional staff in established programs enables them to value add to achieve organisational outcomes. Whilst emerging groups are provided access to training or the opportunity to create Healthy Country Plans to allow them to build staff to establish ranger programs.
- Enhanced cross-cultural engagement and exchange between Aboriginal people, the broader community and State Government.
- Increased capacity within the Aboriginal community to undertake land and sea management.
- Strengthened ability for Aboriginal organisations to

Inset left Bardi Jawi Oorany Rangers spotting Gouldian finches.
Photo – Shem Bisluk





Above Gouldian finch on Bardi Jawi Country. *Photo – Shem Bisluk*

facilitate and provide a range of services enabling ongoing full time, part time and casual employment, and income generation opportunities through partnerships and fee-for-service contracts and agreements.

- Enhanced protection of cultural and biodiversity values through land management activities undertaken by Aboriginal rangers on and off DBCA-managed lands and waters.
- Empowered Aboriginal communities that can identify and address cultural and environmental priorities, leading to more resilient communities and broader health, educational and social benefits.
- Empowered Aboriginal people and communities that can contribute to jointly managing DBCA-managed lands and waters.

The Western Australian Government recognises that the environmental, cultural, social and economic benefits of Aboriginal ranger programs have been far and wide reaching. They have provided an integral step towards improved community wellbeing and reducing poverty through economic opportunities and building leadership in remote and regional communities. A Social Return on Investment (SROI) assessment was undertaken to measure and value the economic impact of the ARP outcomes. In 2018 the Tjaltjraak Ranger Program commenced with a one-year grant through the ARP to provide employment of a Program Coordinator along with 12 trainee rangers to undertake education and training. From the initial investment of \$605,400 (including money and in-kind contribution primarily from State Government) the total value associated with the outcomes was estimated to be \$1,913,939. This resulted in a SROI ratio of 3:1, meaning for every \$1 invested, approximately \$3 of social, economic, cultural and environmental value was created. Significant economic outcomes identified for State Government included increased employment of Aboriginal people resulting in reduced social disorder interactions generating cost savings to government through increased income tax and lower expenditure on policing and welfare. These findings were comparable to other SROIs in the Indigenous natural resource management context and highlight the benefits of employing and training rangers on country. Being on country and caring for country is core to the success of the Program as healthy country and healthy people are interwoven.

Although numerous benefits from the ARP were recognised, opportunities for improving the funding scheme in the future were identified. These included:

- The need for long-term funding to provide job security for those employed.
- Existing funding doesn't support office space or vehicles and the additional ARP funded rangers required extra space and vehicles which can be expensive.
- Attracting and supporting more young people: to support at-risk youth could offer internships, mentoring programs, youth programs on country, school-based learning; partnerships with established organisations such as Clontarf Aboriginal College for junior ranger groups; encouragement of rangers to be involved with knowledge sharing at schools (that matches curriculum).
- Focus on increasing the number of sea country funded projects.
- Ranger groups would like more training opportunities and interaction with DBCA. In future, the possibility of opening up DBCA courses for professional development for Aboriginal rangers could be explored.
- An interest in developing tourism products was expressed by some ranger groups but requires additional resourcing and knowledge that is complementary to the ranger program due to limited tourism expertise or experience. The development of tourism products involves specialist advice, training and skills as many ranger groups are predominantly trained in conservation management not tourism product development. Tourism training would support the development of tourism opportunities.



We have all got a significant site or place where we have grown up with our elders. Or we've got a Dreaming or a story that our family has told us and every time we go past that certain place we feel overwhelmed and joy knowing that we are doing our ancestors proud (ARP Ranger).

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Background

Throughout Australia, employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote areas are limited. To help combat this, Aboriginal ranger programs have been introduced across the country. These programs incorporate traditional land and sea management and include a broad range of environmental and cultural management activities. The Aboriginal Ranger Program (ARP; the Program) in Western Australia was originally launched in 2017 as a five-year, \$20 million grant program under Royalties for Regions, administered by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA). It enabled new and existing Aboriginal¹ organisations to employ and train rangers to carry out land and sea management and tourism activities across a range of tenures. The ARP aimed to be led by the Aboriginal community and Aboriginal organisations with support from DBCA and across government. The Program was designed to support Aboriginal groups and businesses and focused on new jobs for rangers across tenures, but inclusive of national parks and reserves, Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs), other Aboriginal tenures and Unallocated Crown land (UCL).

The objectives of the Program were:

- To work with Aboriginal communities to develop and implement a successful and sustainable Aboriginal ranger employment program to provide new jobs, protect the environment and provide social and economic benefits to Aboriginal people in regional and remote areas.
- To provide training for Aboriginal people to develop their skills in conservation and land management, tourism and guided experiences to better meet the demand for ranger work.
- To scale up and expand the ARP by leveraging funds from other State and Commonwealth agencies, industry and philanthropic groups.

Since 2017, the \$20 million grant program has been committed to 35 projects statewide, run by 28 Aboriginal organisations. Funding was allocated through three competitive Expression of Interest (EOI) processes (funding rounds), giving opportunity for new, emerging or existing ranger programs to apply for funding for distinct one to four year projects. Funding amounts ranged from \$200,000 to over \$1 million with most of the projects being multi-year, with a fairly even spread of new or emerging groups funded as well as existing groups. In March 2021, the McGowan Government acknowledged the importance and success of the ARP and committed an additional \$50 million in funding to continue the project through to 2025. Another \$16.5 million was later added, taking the total phase 2 commitment to \$66.5 million over five years.

The Program applied across the State, except for the Perth metropolitan area² and employed Aboriginal people as rangers to undertake land and sea management activities such as:

- biodiversity monitoring and research
- traditional knowledge transfer
- fire management
- cultural site management
- feral animal and weed management
- cultural awareness and immersion experiences for visitors
- guided Welcome to Country tours and/or talks for visitors
- management of visitors or tourists and tourism assets
- education programs and mentoring.

1 Throughout this paper the term Aboriginal has been used which encompasses all Indigenous people including both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The term was selected because Torres Strait Islanders do not have claims to land rights in Western Australia where this research is based, and it is the preferred word of those interviewed for this research.

2 The Perth metropolitan area was excluded in Phase 1 of the ARP due to it being funded by Royalties for Regions, which excludes funding for the metropolitan area.



GOVERNMENT OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

ABORIGINAL RANGER PROGRAM

FUNDING RECIPIENTS UNDER PHASE 1



All funding amounts include GST



Evaluating the benefits of the Aboriginal Ranger Program

This report draws on case study analysis and quantifiable outcomes to build an objective picture of the environmental, cultural, social, and economic benefits gained from the ARP to December 2021. Over the duration of 2018 to 2021, data was collected from each Phase 1 ARP funded project through annual reports including the number of people employed, and the number undertaking training, along with a suite of environmental and cultural outcomes³. The flow-on social, cultural and economic benefits to people, country, community and culture were captured through case study analysis. To measure change over time, fieldwork took place over a four-year period commencing in 2018 and finishing in December 2021. Field studies on country with rangers, in depth interviews and participant observation were undertaken as a part of the scientific process to evaluate the social outcomes of the program. Over 70 interviews were undertaken with Aboriginal rangers, ranger group coordinators, Indigenous Protected

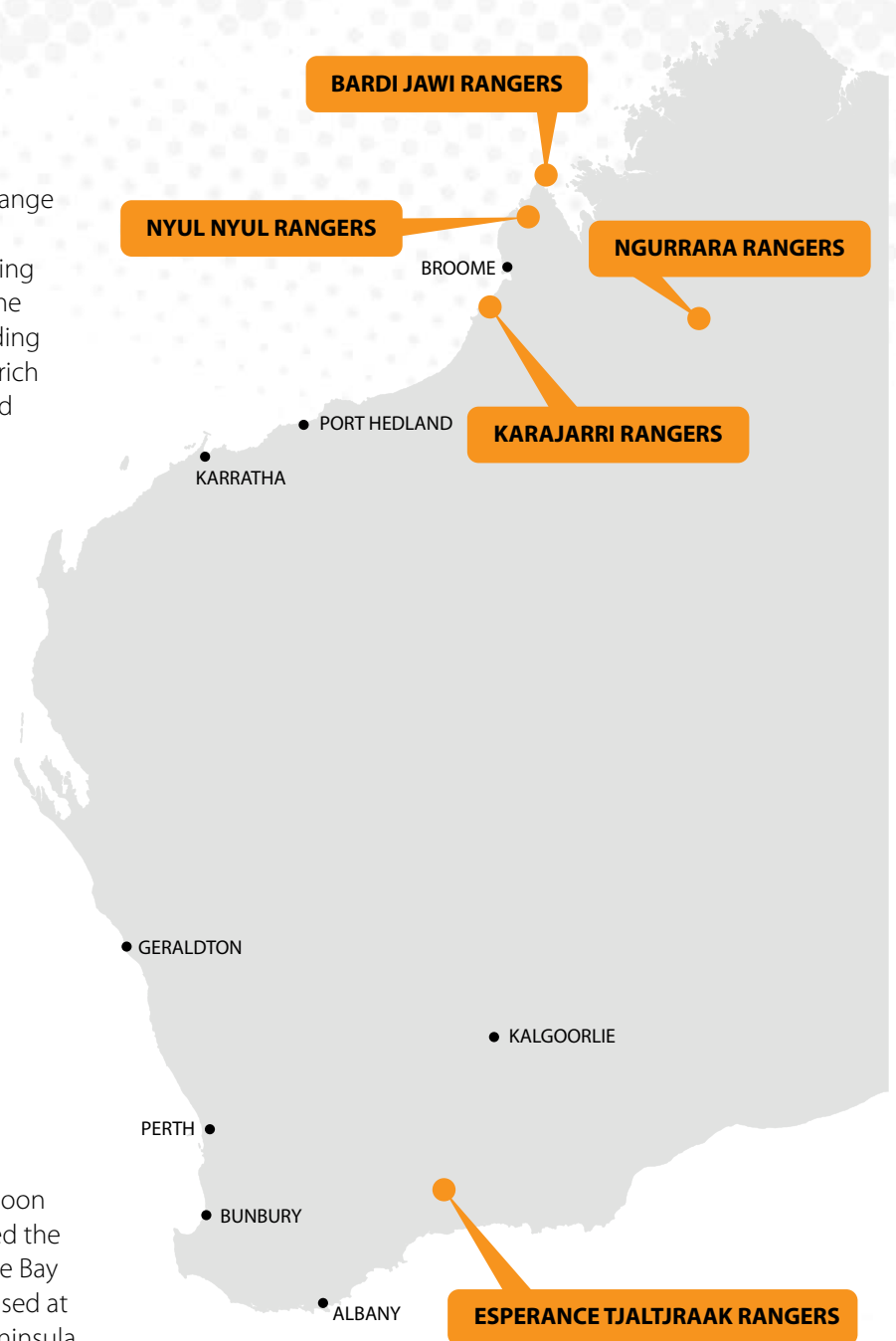
Area (IPA) coordinators as well as Healthy Country Coordinators; traditional owners, and elders. Key project partners associated with the Aboriginal ranger projects were also interviewed including Kimberley Land Council, DBCA, Environs Kimberley, World Wide Fund for Nature, North Regional TAFE, South Coast NRM, Esperance Shire and others. For some of these organisations multiple people were interviewed. Many of the participants were interviewed at the start of the Program funding and towards the end to measure change over time. Interviews and time spent on country was the key approach undertaken and is often preferred in Aboriginal contexts because they allow participants to express themselves using their own words and concepts rather than imposing categories of a survey or quantitative measure (Chouinard & Cousins 2007). The data presented within the report from the interviews have been anonymised and quotes are written verbatim to ensure views are shared in their words.

³ All quantitative figures for the program in this report are representative to December 2021 and as such do not represent the final figures for Phase 1 of the ARP funding as several projects were still in progress.

Above Bardi Jawi Oorany Rangers with DBCA staff. *Photo – Shem Bisluk*

Selected case studies

From the original funded projects, three were selected for case study analysis to evaluate change over time. Case study research allowed the opportunity to collect a variety of data, including interviews, documents and observations on the ranger groups to gain an in-depth understanding of change over time. To allow for information-rich cases purposeful sampling, a selection method to allow for multiple cases within a case, was undertaken to provide insights (Schoch, 2020). The three funded projects selected incorporated geographical dispersion, a variety of projects and a representation of male and female rangers. Although several funded projects were identified as meeting these criteria they were not selected for this research as they had either recently been evaluated by other organisations or there was a delay in their commencement due to internal organisational changes such as staffing changes. As a result, case studies selected by the researchers and an internal panel at DBCA included two projects based in the north west of WA with four ranger programs. The first was Karajarri-Ngurrara Desert Fire and Biodiversity Project involving the Karajarri Ranger Program based out of Bidyadanga and Ngurrara Ranger Program based out of Fitzroy Crossing. The second was the Dampier Peninsula Women Rangers Monsoon Vine Thicket Recovery Program, which included the Nyul Nyul Ranger Program based out of Beagle Bay and the Bardi Jawi Oorany Ranger Program based at Ardyaloon, One Arm Point on the Dampier Peninsula. A further case study was chosen based in the south coast of WA, the Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger Program.



Below Nyul Nyul Country. *Photo – Shem Bisluk*







Outcomes

If you measure success in a way of we are looking at changing people's lives, I think it has been absolutely a fundamental change. I think the way in which the ranger program has been initiated here and the sense of pride and the connection to country and the bringing together of community, that sense of cultural pride in being able to care for country has been absolutely insurmountable (Aboriginal Corporation Chairperson).

The ARP is funding both emerging and established ranger groups. It facilitated established groups to build capacity through funding additional staff, enabling them to value-add to the program resulting in them achieving organisational outcomes more quickly. Emerging groups were given the opportunities to create Healthy Country Plans, or access training for new rangers, or develop staff to establish ranger programs. Through the ARP, Aboriginal organisations were empowered to design and implement their own programs, creating more jobs for rangers on country by offering a mixture of full time, part time and casual positions.

The employment opportunities offered by the ARP not only delivered environmental benefits but also a suite of social, cultural and economic benefits by recognising cultural connection to country and allowing Aboriginal people the opportunity to be on country, caring for country. Multiple benefits identified across the life of the program were categorised into Social and Economic, Cultural and Environmental. However, many of the benefits cannot be placed in one discrete category and instead are relevant across all with the emphasis on the overlaps and interconnectedness of outcomes. For the purposes of this report, they are discussed as discrete entities, even though they are all interwoven with much interrelation. Although this report focuses on reporting the social benefits from the employment of Aboriginal rangers from the WA State Government funding, it is important to note some ranger groups receive investment (grants, funding) from other funding bodies and industry (e.g. Working on Country (WoC), IPA programs, Caring for our Country, Kimberley Land Council) ⁴. As such, the assessment of social outcomes achieved by these projects are relevant to the funding of Aboriginal rangers.

⁴ In 2022 DBCA engaged an external consultant to undertake a funding landscape study that mapped the breadth of available funding sources and analysed gaps and overlaps in objectives and financial support available for emerging and established Aboriginal ranger organisations operating in Western Australia. This report is available via request.

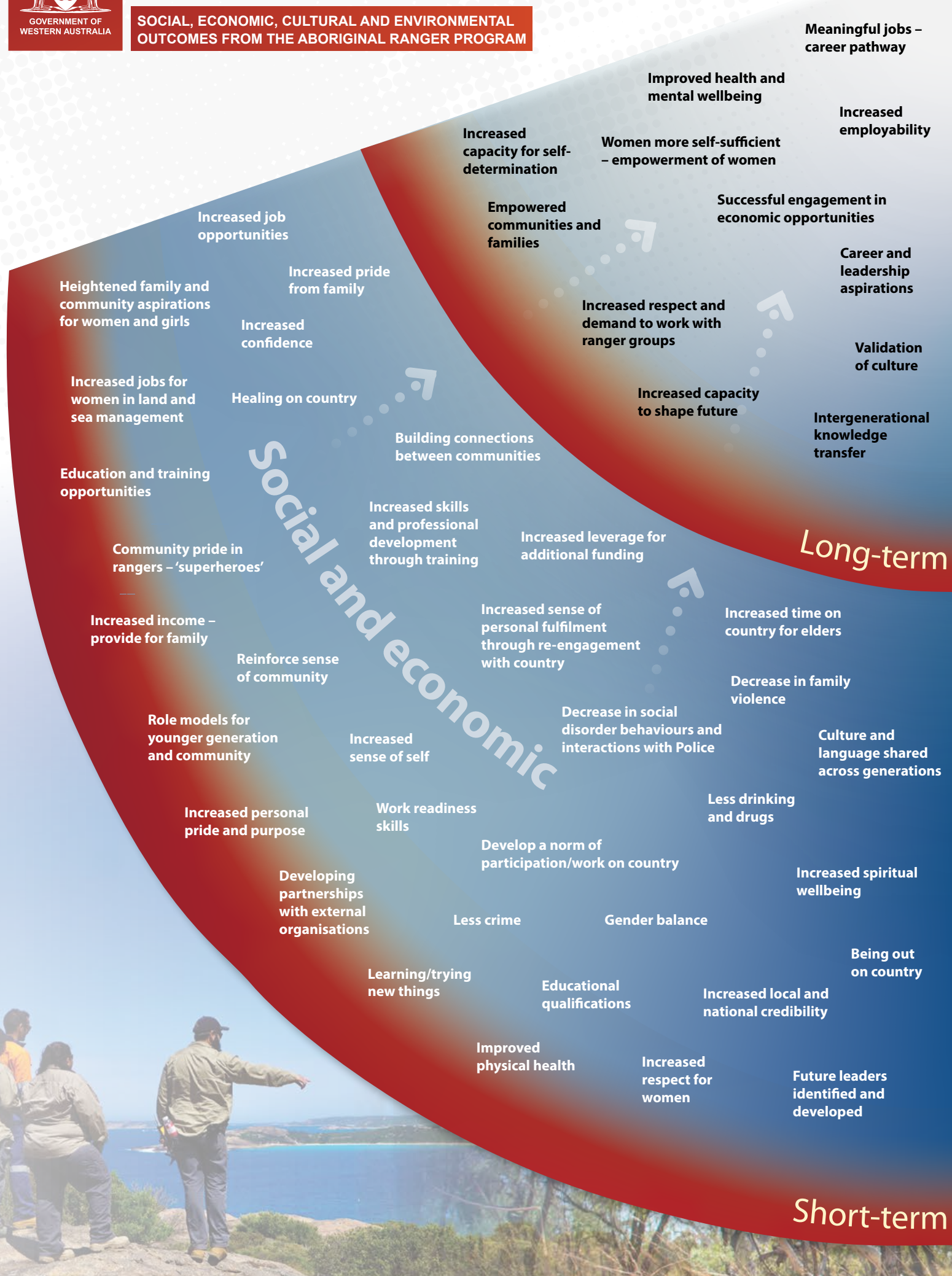
Left Bardi Jawi Country, Cape Leveque. Photo – Amanda Smith

Above Interviews with Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers. Photo – Shem Bisluk

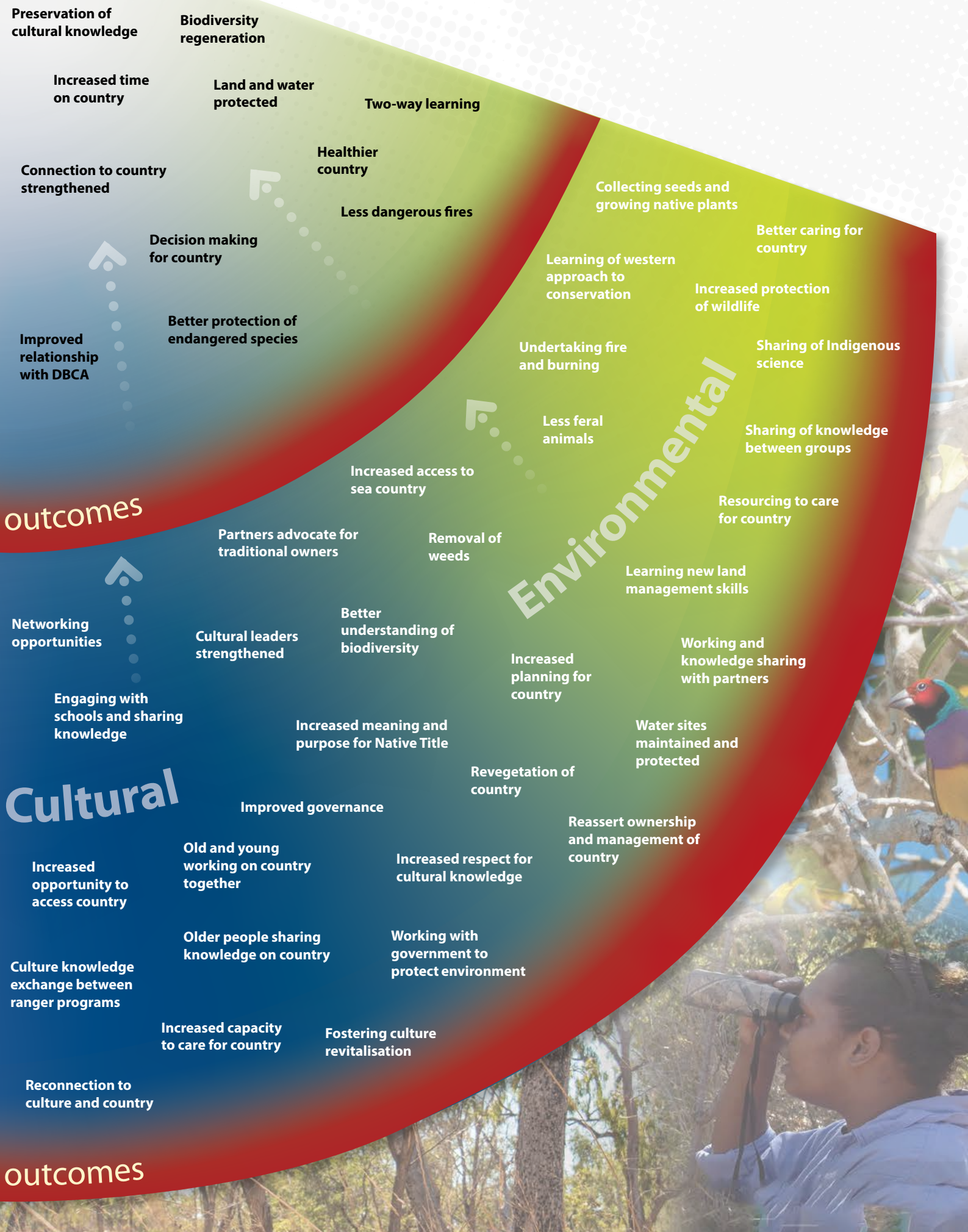
ABORIGINAL RANGER PROGRAM

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL
OUTCOMES FROM THE ABORIGINAL RANGER PROGRAM

Empowering people, cul



ture, connection to country



Social and economic benefits

The ranger program is tremendously important, and we see the value not only for a management point of view in managing parks and environment and land country, but we see it so important from a social perspective for the people on country. Not only for the people who are directly engaged but also the indirect benefits flow out. You go walking around a community and see the social disadvantages but when you see the rangers walking through with a sense of pride and the community looking up to those rangers that means a lot. It gives them pride in what they are doing, it gives them pride in their country and it gives them a real feeling of connection that they can demonstrate. They are doing something that is of significant cultural importance which is very difficult for white fella to explain until they have seen it (Key Project Partner).

The social and economic outcomes of the ARP are wide ranging. The key outcomes discussed in this report include employment, education and training, empowering people and community, gender equality, mental health and wellbeing, engaging with schools and communities and building partnerships.



Inset Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers marking trails.
Below Karajarri Rangers. Photos – Amanda Smith



Aboriginal rangers are important in community where there is limited number of good jobs that have a meaning and a purpose. Meaningful work and people can do job that gives them satisfaction. Gives them a chance to work on country and they don't have to leave their country. Allows them to be close to family. As rangers develop their skills they are not leaving to go onto other jobs, they want to stay (IPA Coordinator).



Inset Karajarri Ranger photographing plants. Photo – Peter Nicholas

Employment

We are getting jobs for unemployed Aboriginal people. Some who wouldn't be able to get a job in the normal workplace. It is hard to find a job because it is a small town. People employ who they know (ARP Funded Ranger).

A fundamental social and economic benefit identified from the ARP was the creation of meaningful jobs with the associated income and career development opportunities. Many Aboriginal people experience long term disadvantage in employment, impacting on their economic situation as well as limiting further opportunities for education, training and future employment (McLachlan et al. 2013; Ewing et al. 2017). Increasing employment opportunities for Aboriginal people has been a Federal Government initiative toward Closing the Gap since the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to six targets relating to Indigenous life expectancy, health, education and employment in 2008: *Each ranger comes from a big family and having a good wage, most or some families are on CDP and that doesn't give them enough to go around the family. We have got rangers earning good wages now and that gives them the opportunity to look after their family. They can bring food to the table and even if it is fuel for the vehicle. I think having full time rangers with good wages is good because it helps their families (Ranger Coordinator).* Employment as a ranger is significant as jobs are often scarce and welfare dependency is high in remote areas, resulting in lower economic advancement for Aboriginal people, particularly women: *It is hard to get a job. If I didn't have the ranger program, I would be at home with no income. Having a job, you feel like you are active, takes a lot of worries away (ARP Funded Ranger).*

As of December 2021, over 800 people have been employed with ARP funding, of which 45 percent were women and 95 percent identified as Aboriginal. Of those Aboriginal employees, 84 percent were employed as Aboriginal rangers, 8 percent were elders/cultural advisors, 2 percent were in senior roles, and 2 percent were in support roles.

When this ranger program started happening, I was in the NT [Northern Territory] and I heard that we had started our own ranger group so I came back to work as a ranger. I'll keep working and follow things that my grandparents passed down to me and I will try to pass that down to my kids and the younger generation about our country (ARP Funded Ranger).

Being employed as rangers on country addresses the barrier of unemployment by creating meaningful jobs that align with the rangers' interests with real environmental outcomes: *It is employment in communities that often have very little employment. It is not painting rocks, it is being on country where people want to be, where people have got knowledge looking after country, passing on information from young to old, doing really positive meaningful work (Key Project Partner).* A job as a ranger offers employment that aligns with cultural and community needs through caring for country. A number of rangers commented that being a ranger on country was the best job they have ever had. *I was working, doing a bit of painting and a few other jobs but always wanted to work on country, this is my grandfather's country so to get paid to look after it, it's a dream job (ARP Funded Ranger).* Several rangers suggested that they were primarily attracted to the job because of the cultural and family opportunity with the financial rewards a secondary consideration. *My salary has had a big downfall now compared to mine site but then I put it into perspective... coming back and working on country and being in town now and I enjoy it a lot more now. I don't really care about losing the extra money because I am enjoying what I am doing. It doesn't really feel like a job (ARP Funded Ranger).*

Employment has been found to significantly contribute to people's health and well-being as it provides not only financial independence but also skills and training that can open future opportunities (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2018). Working as a ranger is not just a way of earning money but also offers the opportunity to pursue further interests by learning about culture and country whilst developing skills through education and training. Ranger jobs require accredited conservation and land management qualifications and can have long term career paths: *Opens up doors for other jobs if you want them. But to tell the truth I don't really want to work anywhere else (ARP Funded Ranger).*



Education and training

So that is my biggest thing, I really want to learn (ARP Funded Ranger).

An aspect of the ARP that differentiated it from some of the other grant programs was the inclusion of education and training for rangers: *Increased [opportunity for] training for rangers is really important. Especially women rangers, as often they don't have the same opportunities as men have within the communities for employment and training (Key Project Partner).* Aboriginal rangers undertook training to equip them for their work as rangers on country and to further their career opportunities. In addition to on-the-job training and short courses, rangers were undertaking their TAFE certificates in Conservation and Land Management, Indigenous Land Management and Aboriginal Site Works along with Training and Assessment: *I left school and with the training I learnt more. I like all the training I do... I am on my Cert III at the moment (ARP Funded Ranger).* This is an important element of the ARP funding, as education and training are identified as key factors in closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of society (McLachlan et al. 2013; Ewing et al. 2017). *It is important for rangers to do their training, Conservation and Land Management Cert II and III because it gives them the ability to step out and apart from going out on country, it gives them the ability to learn more and to gain more skills to make their jobs better to do and more confidence in themselves (Ranger Coordinator).* Improving education helps to increase employment rates as well as empowering Aboriginal people.

Being here on country is good because I get to do the training and at the end get a good pay rise and working for country. I love going out on country, learning about trees and plants and seeds. Even when I go fishing now, I'm looking at the trees, given me a connection at a deeper level. I'm getting the knowledge to share with the little ones, but I am still trying to learn more (ARP Funded Ranger).

In addition to their accredited courses, ARP rangers undertook non-accredited training such as first aid, cultural heritage, fauna handling, coxswain licences, chainsaw operations, 1080 training, four-wheel-drive training, public speaking, leadership and digital media. *One of my favourite memories is when we got to go to Dryandra with some of the other guys. We got to do some fauna handling and stuff and we stayed up there for a week so that was good (ARP Funded Ranger).* These training opportunities allow rangers to improve their technical skills and knowledge as well as offering opportunity to develop new skills: *...got to do aerial burning training. Now I got my certificate I have done my first burn. It was really good. I got to be navigator. I like looking at country from up in the air. Build up my confidence as well (ARP Funded Woman Ranger).* The training model provided through the ARP is primarily on country and is delivered in culturally appropriate ways that provides practical hands-on learning experiences. There is a strong level of commitment and support in the ranger programs that assists with retention and students completing their studies. Distinct field-based aspects of the training make learning about culture and environment more interesting rather than classroom-only based learning: *The training is in context. It is useful and applied. When out on country it puts it all together and they find it more enjoyable and more practical. Better way of learning (Key Project Partner).*

Above Nyul Nyul Rangers training session. Photo – Shem Bisluk



It has got incredible and fairly wide-reaching economic impacts. People who are upcoming leaders who move from the ranger program to run successful tourism ventures. People who move from the ranger program to be the CEO of the local organisation (Key Project Partner).

Field fauna monitoring and surveying course

Tjaltjraak Rangers and their Coordinator undertook a DBCA fauna handling at Dryandra Woodland National Park before undertaking monitoring of threatened species on country.

...So important for them to be out there in their country looking after the environment and learning on country. To be on country (Key Project Partner).



Through employment and the coinciding education and training the ARP was found to give rangers the opportunity to further their careers where desired. *The ranger program was developed to give young people a job and get a bit of experience in the workforce and then if they want, they can move on to other job opportunities. Training gives skill sets and more confidence to be out in the workforce (ARP Funded Ranger).* This could be internally within the ranger program from trainee to ranger to senior ranger to coordinator as well as externally. Through the ARP some rangers developed their skills and knowledge, allowing them to find employment elsewhere. *People have said the "Ranger program is just another funding by the government" but it can take you places. Like you can get another job, it takes you places. There is a few rangers that I knew from the ranger program that ended up in mining and they ended up being an environmental officer (Ranger Coordinator).*

The ARP provided some rangers with ideas about future employment and learning opportunities that would still allow them to maintain their connection with culture and country: *I want to go down path of anthropology but there is that many choices that I could go down with the new CEO we have. He has given me big list of choices of path I can go down but it is just a matter of picking one really (ARP Funded Ranger).*



Above Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers at Mount Beaumont.

Inset Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger macroinvertebrate sampling. Photos – Amanda Smith



Social Return on Investment – education and training for Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger Group

It has been a long time coming, this ranger program, and we have been very privileged and honoured to be chosen to be able to carry out this program. It is just humbling to see that after many years of fighting, can say to the old fellas now that our journey is just starting to begin through the employment of our rangers (Tjaltjraak Senior Cultural Advisor).

A Social Return on Investment (SROI) was undertaken to understand, measure and value the changes resulting from the ARP funding of Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers*. This cost-benefit approach was undertaken to determine the social outcomes by quantifying and assigning monetary value for any changes that occurred as a result of the ARP funding. The Tjaltjraak Ranger Program was selected as a case study as it was a new ranger group that was primarily funded by the ARP, making it easy to identify and assign outcomes of the ARP funding.

The Esperance Tjaltjraak Native Title Aboriginal Corporation (ETNTAC) have native title rights over 27,000 square kilometres of land around Esperance (Kepa Kurl). Tjaltjraak is a traditional Esperance Wudjari name for local blue gum tree which means “Glow in the Dark”. The eucalypt is culturally significant and the Kepa Kurl Wudjari people believe that the distribution of the Tjaltjraak corresponds closely to their territory and that as far as the Tjaltjraak grow to the east and north, so extends their country. Tjaltjraak Elders identified the need for a ranger program to allow them to provide secure futures for their people, culture and allow for healing of country. In 2018 the Tjaltjraak Ranger Program commenced with a one-year grant through the ARP to provide employment

of a Program Coordinator along with 12 trainee rangers to undertake education and training through South Regional TAFE in Certificate III Conservation and Land Management and Certificate III in Aboriginal Sites Work as well as skills-based training on country. Delivery incorporated practical firefighting knowledge and skills as well as intergenerational knowledge transfer in the cultural training aspects. Community elders were employed part-time to provide valuable intergenerational knowledge transfer on country.

I have done my training, we have lots of training opportunities. Got my chainsaw tickets, chemicals, fire training. Aboriginal heritage training. Lots of on the job training (ARP Funded Esperance Ranger).

The SROI methodology was used to complete the analysis. The analysis demonstrates that the Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger Program generated significant social, economic, cultural and environmental outcomes through employing trainee rangers for education and training. The most significant cultural outcomes for rangers relate to better caring for country and reconnecting to country. The employment of rangers resulted in increased personal income with none of the rangers having pre-existing full-time work. Education and training allowed for professional development with 11 rangers successfully obtaining Certificate III qualifications in Conservation and Land Management and Aboriginal Sites Work as well as other formal training. Outcomes for community and elders included the conservation of culture and language, and connection to country strengthened, along with increased respect from the non-Indigenous community. For ETNTAC, some of the outcomes included successful engagement in economic opportunities such

Above Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers looking over the Recherche Archipelago. Photo – Amanda Smith



as fee-for-service and increased leverage for funding from other sources. Environmental outcomes identified resulted in better caring for country for the benefit of the entire community and included invasive weed control, erosion control, revegetation, access management and dieback control measures. Significant economic outcomes identified for State Government included increased employment of Aboriginal people resulting in reduced social disorder interactions generating cost savings to government through increased income tax and lower expenditure on policing and welfare.

Financial proxies were used to approximate the value of these outcomes. The total social, economic, cultural and environmental value associated with the outcomes was estimated to be **\$1,913,939** for the one-year funding in 2018-2019. During this period, **\$605,400**

(including money and in-kind contribution) was invested in the programs, with the majority coming from State Government. The Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger Program delivered an SROI ratio of **3:1** based upon the investment and operations of the 2018–2019 financial year. That is, for every **\$1** invested, approximately **\$3** of social, economic, cultural and environmental value has been created. These findings were comparable to other SROIs in the Indigenous natural resource management context (see [Social Ventures Australia](#)) who reported return on investment ranging from 1.5:1 up to 3.4:1 for every dollar spent, highlighting the benefits and outcomes from employing and training rangers on country (Social Ventures Australia, 2016).

*Full SROI report available upon request.

Inset, clockwise from top left Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers education tools. Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger making traditional tools for school demonstration. Esperance Tjaltjraak Country, pigface. *Photos – Amanda Smith*; Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger undertaking water monitoring. **Below** Esperance Tjaltjraak Country. *Photos – Shem Bisluk*



Empowering people and community

Ranger programs [...] we find them tremendously important, and we see the value of them not only for a management point of view in managing parks and environment and sea country but we see it so important from a social perspective for the people on country. Not only for the people who are directly engaged but then the indirect benefits flow out (Key Project Partner).

Empowerment is important when examining the relative disadvantage of Aboriginal Australians (Fredericks 2009). It can be defined as "...people assuming control and mastery over their lives in the context of their social and political environment; they gain a sense of control and purposefulness as they participate in the democratic life of their community for social change." (Wallerstein, 1992: 198). *Being employed as a ranger gives us more security in our job and more power. The community and family, friends, look up to us. Working as a ranger team much easier know to preserve culture* (ARP Funded Ranger). Beliefs and attitudes that are interconnected to empowerment include hope,



Inset Ngurrara Ranger. Photo – Shem Bisluk

Below Karajarri Rangers with elder. Photo – Amanda Smith

choice, self-confidence, autonomy over decisions and efficacy. Employment and education are often seen as key contributors to empowerment by creating change or transformation through increasing independence and giving autonomy and power to people to control their lives ... *we are empowering our young ones. Before they might have been lost, don't know who they are, don't know where they come from. Whereas now it is like "oh, I belong somewhere, this is my home"* (Aboriginal Elder).



Scan this QR code to view
*Capacity building and
personal development*
– Karajarri Rangers on
DBCA's Parks and Wildlife
Service YouTube channel.





Inset left Karajarri Country. Photo – Amanda Smith

Inset right Karajarri Ranger identifying plants. Photo – Peter Nicholas

Caring for and managing the land and sea provided rangers with additional personal and social benefits through the flow-on effects coming from employment and education (incorporating training and skills development): *We see significant benefits for Aboriginal people through that employment and we also see the individuals who are employed really develop a skillset and confidence and being able to get out on country and undertake those land management activities. We see a real benefit to the individuals* (Key Project Partner). Being back on country, caring for country resulted in increased self-esteem, confidence and pride: *My family is proud of me being a ranger, especially my three older sons and my little girl and my two twins come to the ranger base to see me there. They say they love my job. I love my job* (ARP Funded Ranger). Empowered Aboriginal people and communities can identify and address cultural and environmental priorities, leading to more resilient communities and broader health, educational and social benefits. As one key project partner commented: *Conservation benefits come from having Aboriginal knowledge from people on land, experts working in with people, so conservation benefits are massive. You also get employment, money flow into communities, pride, protection of cultural knowledge and valuing their contribution.*

Through employment and working on country as rangers, Aboriginal people can believe in themselves and what they are achieving: *I just love being a ranger. I have a great grandmother born out here and just love being here doing my ancestors proud, love being out there. Very proud of country and what we do* (ARP Funded Ranger). Improved confidence as a result of increased self-esteem and pride was identified as an outcome of being employed as a ranger on country: *Seeing me as first young ranger at the age of 18 when I first started to now... I feel really proud of myself* (ARP Funded Ranger). Increased confidence developed not only from employment and the coinciding education and training, but also

through the opportunities that being a ranger offered. New experiences included travel and networking opportunities, talking to schools and presenting at conferences gave them confidence in themselves and their role as a ranger: *I have gotten confident in talking to people, like in front of everyone. Standing up there and everyone is staring at you. Yeah, I have gotten a bit more confident in doing that. Doing either school stuff or outside of school we have got to do things like the wildflower talks* (ARP Funded Ranger).

The ARP funding opened up networking opportunities with other ranger groups that was seen as a valuable opportunity for self-confidence, pride and knowledge sharing: *They were very shy some of them to start with when it comes to speaking in front of other people and groups and now they are just shining* (Ranger Coordinator). Opportunities for travel, training and education through the ARP contributed to increased confidence and enjoyment of being employed as a ranger: *We have got rangers in Botswana at the moment who before they started with the ranger program would have doubted and been unclear about where they are going with life. People in the ranger program know where they are going in life. They are not transitioning from the ranger program to a real job they are in their passion profession, they are on country doing good things and have got reasons to be* (Key Project Partner).

The case study evaluation highlighted those rangers are seen as role models by their families: *I have been a role model for my family. Helped me to provide for my kids* (ARP Funded Ranger) and in their communities: *We play a big role in the community, even though we are rangers I think about half of the time they think we are super rangers, they think we are powerful enough to take on the world* (Aboriginal Ranger). Rangers reported that by having a job that is important and respected provided a great sense of achievement as well as greater ability to manage their own lives: *All the men used to get the jobs, so it is*



Inset left Karajarri Ranger photographing plants. Photo – Peter Nicholas

Inset right Ngurrara Rangers on country.

Below Karajarri Country. Photos – Amanda Smith

good to have women getting jobs. We can then provide for family. We are also getting our certificates and education which is good (ARP Funded Woman Ranger). Through their employment rangers are empowered to create change through growing independence: Well, I didn't have a [driver's] licence before till I got the job and felt like I needed it. They encouraged it. Since I have become a ranger it has helped out a lot. Got my own place now, was staying with my older brother before but since I got a job and stable income got my own place (ARP Funded Ranger).

Activities involving rangers including workshops, tours, camps, school activities and presentations increased the exposure of the ARP to the broader community. They

frequently engage with schools and community through cultural workshops and presentations: *We get so much positive feedback from the school groups and community groups that go through the program with the rangers they are like "Wow this is amazing, can you please keep coming and offering this service to our community" (Ranger Coordinator).* This raised profile helped to develop positive perceptions of the Aboriginal ranger groups in the wider community: *It makes community think that we are out there, gives us respect and more awareness about our culture. They believed that there were no Aboriginal people here. Now we are looking after country (ARP Funded Ranger).*



A woman with dark curly hair, wearing a blue long-sleeved button-down shirt with a patch on the sleeve, is holding a small green plant in a greenhouse. She is looking towards the camera. In the background, there are wooden structures and other plants in pots.

But it is like if you start doing that training and start being a ranger and start to build that confidence and sense of self. Those things take time to build up. Especially when talking to these young women. I just think confidence is a huge thing and feeling like they can do it and do anything they want to do (Women Ranger Coordinator).

Contributing to gender equality

Gender equality is important. Ranger program has been heavily dominated with men for a number of years. Women come with different set of knowledge to do different things and manage country and culture (Key Project Partner).

The ARP funding aimed to increase the number of female rangers with just under half of all ranger positions funded through the ARP between 2017 and 2021 filled by women. Gender bias is an area of concern as there is a general tendency for governments to fund conservation initiatives with male-dominated organisations (Langton et al., 2014) with the Aboriginal ranger workforce traditionally being male-dominated (Daniels et al. 2022): *I didn't even think that we would have the opportunity of having women on the ground on country as rangers, never thought (Aboriginal Woman Ranger).* Women are particularly vulnerable to oppression (Stark 2013), while in remote and rural communities, girls and women have the least opportunities to obtain employment, education, healthcare and justice (U.N, 2004). In the 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 66 per cent of Aboriginal women cited no jobs available

as a barrier to finding employment in remote areas (ABS 2016) *Especially for the young girls, there is a lack of certainty...there are limited job opportunities in the community (Aboriginal Woman Ranger).*

The employment of women rangers allows for women's business to be undertaken and for women to reconnect and care for country and culture: *There is also a concept of 'right people right country'. Women often speak for different country, and they open up the ability to manage in different ways (Key Project Partner).* Caring for country supports the customary and social practices of women, as within country there are gendered landscapes and women and men express their relationship with the land in different ways (Weir et al. 2011). By being on country, women rangers have the opportunity to learn about and undertake women's business on country. The unique traditional knowledge that Aboriginal women have is invaluable (WWF 2018) including hunting and gathering practices, women's ceremonies, and bush medicine: *Have the opportunity to do women's business and go to women's sites (Aboriginal Woman Ranger).*

Above Bardi Jawi Oorany Ranger in greenhouse. Photo – Sophie Henderson



It is really empowering for them [women rangers] and it turns them into leaders within their cultural group that is really important (Key Project Partner).

Empowering women

In Australia, Aboriginal women are consistently found at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder resulting in them being one of the world's most marginalised groups, particularly in very remote areas of Australia where there are reduced employment opportunities resulting in lower economic advancement: *I have seen the young girls, they go to school and when they come out of school there is nothing there for them and the next minute they are having babies because there is nothing else to do (Women Ranger Coordinator).* Aboriginal women still strive to make better lives not just for themselves but for their families and communities by becoming catalysts for change, including improvements in health, well-being and social change.

Employment and education are seen as an important contributor to empowering women. Having an income increases women's independence, reduces gender inequality and gives women financial power to make decisions resulting in social change. Having a job as a ranger: *Not only creates employment but financial independence and training for women (Key Project Partner).* The employment as a ranger specifically is significant as jobs are often scarce and welfare dependency is high in remote areas: *It is hard to get a job. If I didn't have the ranger program, I would be at home with no income. Having a job, you feel like you are active, takes a lot of worries away (ARP Funded Woman Ranger).* Through training and education, women strengthen and support

their communities and provide a positive environment for the next generation of children as Aboriginal women are the mothers of future leaders. Investing in training and education of Aboriginal women and girls means investing in the leadership capacity of future generations: *You can start from scratch and build something for yourself and get qualified. Even if you have nothing, you can make a better future for yourself and your family (ARP Funded Woman Ranger).*

I started off with nothing. It was really good, for my goal I put down that I wanted to have things of my own. Like my own car, my own house, driver's licence... I never had any of those and today I have got what I need. I think it is giving me things back what I need. I got my manual driver's licence. Last year I was doing my training on my coxswain (ARP Funded Women Ranger).

Above Ngurrara Rangers with DBCA staff. Photo – Shem Bisluk

Opposite page

Above Nyul Nyul Country. Photo – Shem Bisluk

Inset left Nyul Nyul Ranger and DBCA staff working together on country. Photo – Kate Rodger

Inset right Bardi Jawi Oorany Rangers recording Gouldian finch sightings.

Below Nyul Nyul Country. Photos – Amanda Smith

It is giving women the opportunity to step up and take the lead in full time jobs. To be able to spread their wings and become something more than a mother at home. To feel good about themselves. To be independent. That is what I like to see with my women rangers group...is strong Indigenous, young independent women (ARP Ranger Coordinator).



A woman can come to work and earn money, that job security means that she may not need to rely on a man and that may also mean not have to rely on domestic violence or anything else like that. So that empowers women (Women Coordinator).

Scan this QR code to view
*Empowering women and
role models for community –
Bardi Jawi/Nyul Nyul Rangers
on DBCA's Parks and Wildlife
Service YouTube channel.*



It is pretty different out here [compared to town] when we are in town it is a different feeling. But when we are out here we get that spiritual feeling and healing. It clears our mind and everyone get up every morning after good sleep with smiles and stories to tell around the fire. It is really good, it really healing place out here out on country (ARP Funded Ranger).



Health and mental wellbeing

Come out on country with the rangers which makes us feel happy and the spirit is with us when we go with them (Aboriginal Elder).

It has been recognised that employment can have significant health benefits, particularly around mental health. Suicide rates are more than twice as high in young Indigenous Australians compared to non-Indigenous Australians. In 2016 to 2020 in Western Australia the highest suicide rates were those aged between 25-34 (AIHW, 2022). Ranger programs, including the ARP, were identified as a part of the solution: *Youth suicide in the Kimberley is an epidemic that the world needs to know about...is tragic and is tearing communities apart. The ranger program is a significant part of a solution to that. It is positive, it is positive for individuals, it is positive for communities (Key Project Partner).*

Keep the kids off technology and keep them out of jail. Lot of trouble in town. Stealing and breaking into cars mainly cars and kids sniffing petrol, suicide. That is why we want to take kids in trouble out on country to avoid jail or suicide. When you are in jail it is hard. In town you have got drugs and alcohol but when you are out bush you have got a lot of freedom (ARP Funded Ranger).

Job satisfaction can contribute to increased self-esteem and employment can have flow-on effects on households and family members. The rangers interviewed reported their enjoyment with jobs and working on country improved mental well-being: *Wearing my uniform makes me feel good and I can do the*

best I can. And when I put on my boots I feel like I'm up there [pointing to sky]. Sometimes I don't like to get a lift to work because when I'm walking I get that feeling. Not too heavy... just nice and light (ARP Funded Women Ranger).

Being employed as rangers may also contribute to a reduction in alcohol consumption, improving social welfare and potentially health in remote communities: *The social benefits are massive. In terms of the return on investment...it's massive in terms of reduced cost for government...in terms of social welfare and health, that has been shown (Key Project Partner).* The opportunity to be employed as a ranger gave a purpose and a reason to avoid the consumption of alcohol: *If I wasn't a ranger I would be out on the street wasting my life on grog like the other young people do back home. Hard for young people out here...there is alcohol and drugs and not much people got support like young people and teenagers. Some kids come up to me and ask if rangers can help them. I am learning so I can be a role model for my younger sister and brother (ARP Funded Ranger).*

The link between health of the natural environment and of Aboriginal people was frequently mentioned. Healthy country meaning the opportunity to connect with country and culture meant healthy people: *If you have got a healthy country it means that you are going to be healthier in yourself mentally and physically. You've got all your food there, if you feel good about it you can see it is healthy. Looking after it and taking care of it makes country healthy (ARP Funded Ranger).*

Above Ngurrara Ranger. Photo – Shem Bisluk



Engaging with community and schools

We play a big role in our community, and it shows a big pride to a lot of younger kids as well, especially with doing programs with kids. We take kids out on country and teach them about country and what country can give to you (Aboriginal Woman Ranger).

The evaluation found that rangers see their work as an important service to community and schools. Ranger groups reported taking Aboriginal children and school groups out on country: *Benefits for the community from this program – because get school kids involved with the ranger activities like camping and taking them out to the springs and showing them birds and learning about birds, trees... teaching them. Passing on knowledge because we always take elders out who passes knowledge onto us and we teach the younger ones what to do and what not to do on country (Aboriginal Ranger).* This is an important component of their role as there is concern that many children have lost their connection to country and culture: *There is the need for connection to country and*

culture. The implications of loss of connection to culture and country – talking to kids in Broome and they are missing culture and that connection to country as a development of identity. People who know who they are can be their best selves and have stronger feet and make better decisions and will be able to think about their family because they are sure of themselves. If you are not sure of who you are, and I've seen kids who are not sure of who they are and they don't know how to be, whereas the kids who do get out on country have really strong families (IPA Coordinator).

As a result of rangers taking children out on country there is a greater understanding of what country offers and the importance in caring for country: *From elders coming out on country with you and hearing their stories. They are sharing stories between each other and we get to hear it. Now we get to share it at schools. I went to school here all my life and we didn't have any culture in our school, no one local came to talk to. Now they learn about their local area and the culture so that they can start educating others (ARP Funded Ranger).*

Above Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers giving cultural talks to school teachers. Photo – Kate Rodger
Inset left Ngurrara Rangers with Djugerari school children. Photo – Ngurrara Rangers
Inset right Bardi Jawi Oorany Ranger discussing Gouldian finch monitoring. Photo – Kate Rodger



Building partnerships

The State Government's contribution is important...it is a really clear and positive expression of WA's commitment to working alongside and with Indigenous people to create incredible cultural and natural resource management outcomes. A positive expression of how we want to work together as a State and as a nation (Key Project Partner).

The ARP funding allowed for positive relationships to develop with government and other organisations. Through the structure of the ARP funding process, DBCA was seen to be leading the way by encouraging multiple organisations to partner and support the Program. Partnerships strengthen the ranger groups. *Partnerships, when we are working together with stakeholders and traditional owners we are achieve our best outcomes. When we are working together we are able to achieve more than working by ourselves (Key Project Partner).*

The funding allowed for a positive relationship with DBCA to be developed when there were limited opportunities

previously. When DBCA works together with ranger groups, traditional owners and key stakeholders, increased outcomes were possible: *Benefit is that we all work together, and we bring different things to the table. Working together enables us all to share knowledge and work towards the same goal. Cultural knowledge to scientific knowledge (Key Project Partner).*

In the past, DBCA had been viewed by some of the ranger groups as an 'authority'. The ARP has allowed for relationships between Aboriginal ranger groups and DBCA to develop through the opportunity to undertake hands-on work with DBCA staff on country working together: *Before ARP we had less funding and less opportunity to undertake fire [management]. Chopper is very expensive but with partnering with DBCA we could do it. This partnership gives us access to things could not get before such as training and money. Opens up new opportunities which can only get better (Aboriginal Corporation CEO).*

Since the commencement of the ARP in 2017 there have been:



Over 100 partnerships with government, not for profit and other organisations



Over 85 joint operations with government



Over 100 fee-for-service contracts



Over \$6,184,000 funds leveraged from external sources

Above Nyul Nyul Rangers poisoning the weed Neem tree with Environs Kimberley staff. Photo – Shem Bisluk



Cultural

Our home, our heart, it is where we want to be. It is where every Aboriginal person wants to be, to be out on country. Just a feeling of the connection, being connected to country. We are a part of it, and it is a part of me (ARP Funded Ranger).

Being on country, caring for country not only encompasses conservation and maintenance of the natural environment (including flora and fauna) but also the significant intangible cultural and spiritual aspects such as ancestral songlines, kinship relationships, community and the sharing of traditional knowledge (Daniels et al., 2022):

Today's ranger program that we have got continues the aspirations of the old people for looking after and caring for country and done in a way that the cultural values are embedded and protected (Aboriginal Elder).

Above Esperance Tjaltjraak Country, Dempster Head.

Right Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers education tools. *Photos – Amanda Smith*

Since 2018:



Around 300
Aboriginal heritage
value sites protected



Nearly 500
trips to significant
cultural sites



Connection to country

Connection to country is not necessarily achieved just by living or working on country, instead it requires the ability to access, use and learn about country (Weir, Stacey and Youngetob, AIATSIS, 2011). Through the ARP, rangers were given this opportunity: *The discovery about culture really. I wouldn't have known about it if I didn't have this job. Being on country and looking after country is the thing I have been looking forward to* (ARP Funded Ranger). For many of the rangers there was a need to learn about their country and culture: *You can be connected to country but not have an understanding of country. You have to have that proper connection of country to survive in this country and to look after it* (Ranger Coordinator). The work undertaken by rangers on country helps to improve, protect and restore the environment and cultural heritage sites. This involved fencing, upkeep of walking trails, establishing interpretation signs at culturally significant sites and undertaking archaeological digs: *I didn't know much about the cultural sites with the artefacts but by just going out and actually finding I'm learning about country*. By working on country, it provides the rangers the opportunity to learn about country: *...you need to know the country you are a part of, the country and the stories and the songlines* (Aboriginal Elder).



Above Ngurrara Country. Photo – Amanda Smith

Inset top Ngurrara Rangers on country demonstrating how grinding stones are used. Photo – Kate Rodger

Inset above Ngurrara Country, Fitzroy River.

Below Karajarri Ranger Welcome to Country at Injudinah Spring. Photos – Amanda Smith





It [the ARP] is giving traditional owners and rangers chance to go on country to where there is untouched areas and collect stories around those waterholes. The best outcome from the ARP was access to country and having the opportunity to go out on country with traditional owners delivering land management in cultural ways and also mainstream (Aboriginal Corporation CEO).

Reconnection to country

A lot of people have lost that connection. What happened in the early days, people were taken away from their country and were told you had to be educated and act like a white person otherwise you won't be considered a citizen...way back from my grandmother's time. My grandmother came from Ruby Plains in the Tanami Desert, I can't go back there and say that I have got connection to the country there. I have got connection to the people there. I don't know the country, I have been back there a little bit but a lot I don't know (Ranger Coordinator).

The increased access to country and opportunity to work on country through the ARP is part of the healing process by allowing the younger generation to reconnect to country. *The funding that we have gotten from the State allows us to go back out there and have that connect back on country, that spiritual connection to country is a very important part of the healing process. When we are talking about healing it is not just the physical but it is also the spiritual healing and that can only be done back on country (Chairperson Aboriginal Corporation).*

The sharing of knowledge supports the reconnection to culture and country for the younger generation. The ARP funding has allowed the younger generation to have the opportunity to reconnect with country: *Families and parents and old people lost who they were because of what Australia has done. Because of our history we have created*

the problem. We took them off country and this ranger program is allowing people to find out who they are. They get that tangible contextual work from being on country (IPA Coordinator).

For more detail please see Rodger, K and Smith, A (Spring 2021) *Caring for Country; A Healing Process* LANDSCOPE magazine, Volume 37 (1).

Country is where knowledge comes from and cultural identity: *There is a lot of things but just being out there on country and feel at home and in your heart, feel good. Just love being out on country everywhere. Everything, the ocean, the land is a part of me (ARP Funded Ranger).* The increased access to country and opportunity to work on country through the ARP allowed rangers to form a sense of identity and belonging: *Personally, it makes me feel good and a sense of being somewhere, a sense of place. Got a lot of connection...it feels humble and good that I'm out protecting and caring for country that my grandmother and pops fought hard to get back. Makes me feel sense of belonging and that I'm accomplishing something (ARP Funded Ranger).*

Scan this QR code to view *Connection to Boodja; a healing process* – Tjaltjraak Rangers on DBCA's Parks and Wildlife Service YouTube channel.



Above Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers at Dempster Head. Photo – Amanda Smith



I'd like to stay and teach until I fall over, then our younger generations like... [name removed] can teach her kids and younger generation (Senior Aboriginal Ranger).

Intergenerational knowledge transfer

A lot of them know a lot of the places, they just don't know the importance, so my role is to start to embed, inform, teach or guide the rangers and their leaders into following the aspirations because in the culture we have an honour, we are duty bound to pass our knowledge down to our kids and our grandkids and our great grandkids. So, I am actually fulfilling that for a lot of the old people who aren't here today (Cultural Advisor/Elder).

Sharing of knowledge and caring for country is a fundamental part of Aboriginal culture. Yet, senior Aboriginal people are concerned that the cultural knowledge, practices and law were being lost due to the lack of intergenerational knowledge transfer. Through the ARP, elders have the opportunity to spend time out on country with the rangers allowing for culture and knowledge to be shared across the generations: *Sharing of knowledge between generations. It is important to share our knowledge with our children, grandchildren. Tell them the stories about our country (Aboriginal Elder).* This not only enhances both connection to and caring for country but also reassures elders and traditional owners that the cultural knowledge is being passed to the younger generations. *Sharing of knowledge, allowing for culture and language to be strengthened and conserved is possible through the ARP. Culture and knowledge are shared across the generations (Cultural Advisor/Elder).*

I think it is important that the elders come out as well when we are out on country with the rangers because it shares their knowledge... So, I think it is important they share their knowledge, their stories. Keep the Dreaming stories going, pass them on to the next generations and they can pass it on to the next (ARP Funded Ranger).

The involvement of elders and traditional owners validates the need for them and their knowledge: *Ranger program is good, asking elders to go out with them and tell them what we did a long time ago and how we survived on eating bush foods and lizards. Young people learning from us. Good for them to learn from us and listening (Aboriginal Elder).* By being on country and working on country the rangers have the opportunity to learn about their culture, heritage and language. These experiences then allow for culture and language to be conserved: *We're still learning about our language. It sort of died out with a lot of the elders. So now we're trying to learn from some of the elders that still remember. Got time to spend with family out on country learning about culture and language. Wouldn't have happened without the ARP (ARP Funded Ranger).*

The rangers then have that knowledge to share with their own children: *Being a ranger allows us to take our children out on country. We talk to our children and teach them about country. This is my dad's country. We get to go to places that we haven't been able to go to before. Take young fellas and taught them their country to make them understand their own country (ARP Funded Ranger).*

Above Ngurrara Rangers at ranger station. Photo – Amanda Smith

Environmental benefits – healthy country

Indigenous people are particularly well positioned to be on country, to care for country, both the environmental assets and also the cultural and heritage assets of it (Key Project Partner).

The ARP funds ranger groups on and off tenure (in this case, on-tenure refers to DBCA-managed lands and water). Those off tenure on IPAs (areas of land or sea cared for by traditional owners) are an essential component of Australia's National Reserve System and deliver a range of environmental benefits. The key environmental outcome identified was enhanced protection of cultural and biodiversity values through land management activities undertaken by Aboriginal rangers. *The government, they need somebody out here looking after country, nobody else can do it. They need Aboriginal people (Ranger Coordinator).* Through the ARP there is increased capacity within the Aboriginal community to undertake land and sea management. Caring for country encompasses conservation and maintenance of tangible aspects including the natural environment (including flora and fauna). Environmental benefits identified were multiple and included the removal of feral animals, weeds, biodiversity surveys, fire management as well as protecting cultural sites. If there were no Aboriginal rangers on country then the *...impacts would be not only on the people but also the conservation and protection of country, 'cause if we don't have rangers then can't look after country (Aboriginal Woman Ranger).*



Inset top Ngurrara Rangers. Photo – Kate Rodger

Inset above Esperance Tjaltjiraak Ranger taking lake water sample on country.

Below Bardi Jawi Country, Dampier Peninsula. Photos – Shem Bisluk





Over 7100 hectares
actively managed



Over 850 kilometres
of track managed



Over 1200 hectares
managed for weeds



Over 170 threatened flora and fauna surveys



Over 1,290,000 hectares
managed for feral animals

Top Esperance Tjaltjraak Country. Photo – Shem Bisluk

Above left Karajarri Rangers installing trails.

Above right Karajarri Ranger weeding. Photos – Peter Nicholas

Below Ngurrara Country. Photos – Amanda Smith

[The] Gouldian finch is important because it is rare and not seen for ages. Now can see it due to the management they have put in place. Seeing them coming back is amazing – all coming back now. Community mob don't know about bird, so we have to teach them about the bird. They start to value them more as well and get excited about it as well (ARP Funded Woman Ranger).

Monitoring and managing of wildlife and the natural environment

We do lot water monitoring and lot of jila [water] sites and we do lot of camera trapping, bilby monitoring, reptiles, night parrots. We also do trapping feral animals like cats that are our main big problem out here, getting rid of them. It is really important for us to be out here to try and manage and protect and look after (ARP Funded Ranger).

Management of the natural environment including the flora and fauna was a key focus of the ranger groups: *We have a healthy country plan that was developed and articulates the priorities. Looking after plants and animals and knowledge, Indigenous knowledge transfer, cultural sites wetlands and springs (no rivers) and the coastline which is quite pristine (IPA Coordinator).* The ARP provided resources to better protect through biodiversity monitoring and management: *We are involved in bilby project. Bilby project – rangers heavily involved across the country desert looking for bilbies. Found some of the biggest populations (IPA Coordinator).*

A wide range of management activities were undertaken by the ARP rangers... *We do everything. Go out on country with bilbies and animals trapping, look at plants, fire (ARP Funded Ranger).* Key projects from the case studies included:

- Monitoring of threatened species in Cape Arid National Park
- Feral animal management in Cape Arid National Park
- Weed control in Lake Warden Ramsar wetland system

- Gouldian finch surveys on the Dampier Peninsula
- Revegetation of monsoon vine thicket at Ardyaloon / One Arm Point
- Bilby and hopping mouse monitoring in the Great Sandy Desert
- Biodiversity surveys to examine the impacts of 'right-way fire' on native animals in the Great Sandy Desert.

We do heaps of stuff from feral animals, biodiversity surveys, fire management, water monitoring and looking after country and most importantly is the knowledge transfer with traditional owners. We want to keep our language and culture alive and in doing so the transfer of knowledge is the key (Woman Ranger Coordinator).

Above Bardi Jawi Oorany Ranger looking for Gouldian finches.

Photo – Sophie Henderson

Inset Ngurrara Rangers setting feral cat trap. *Photo – Amanda Smith*





Seed banks and nursery

It is good learning that on country and seeing the different bush plants and looking after them. Get some seeds and start growing some of them. We have been growing some bush plants at the ranger base. Have been doing bush medicine with lip balms, ointment foot balms (Aboriginal Women Ranger).

With the support of key funding partners, several of the ARP ranger groups were involved with the collection, storage and propagation of native seeds. From the case studies, Bardi Jawi Oorany, Nyul Nyul and Karajarri Rangers have collected seeds from culturally significant plants as well as rare and endangered ones to contribute to the seed banking of these species and the production of bush medicines. Women rangers are also growing plants in their nurseries to contribute to the protection of these species as well as rehabilitation of degraded areas to safeguard against invasive weeds, fire and climate change. Rangers are trained and learning skills in propagation and regeneration of vegetation. For example, the monsoon vine thicket is a culturally significant plant found in the Dampier Peninsula that the rangers have been working with local primary schools to protect: *We work with the nursery and native plants at the school. We go up to their little nursery in the school. We are showing them how to start growing more natives...more than pretty plants. We have planted a little native area with monsoon vine thicket* (ARP Funded Woman Ranger).



Above Nyul Nyul Ranger with native seed. Photo – Amanda Smith

Inset top Bardi Jawi Oorany Ranger collecting plants. Photo – Sophie Henderson

Inset above Bardi Jawi Oorany Rangers in greenhouse. Photo – Amanda Smith



Fire

We do right way fire. So, we get traditional knowledge of burning and for fire and then we get the scientific knowledge – like lot of machines and stuff. We go by two things - traditional way and scientific way (Aboriginal Corporation CEO).

Fire is a key management tool Aboriginal people use to manage and care for country. As traditional owners, Aboriginal people have a cultural responsibility to care for country using fire. They have applied fire to natural environments to maintain diverse ecosystems and keep ecosystems balanced. For the past 200 years or more Aboriginal traditional burning practices have been severely disrupted with many of Western Australia's landscapes changing significantly due to the establishment of permanent communities, infrastructure, agriculture and other industries. A key environmental benefit of the ARP was traditional owners working with DBCA on and off tenure in helping to share (two-way learning), and gain knowledge of cultural fire practices and how these principles can assist in guiding the use of fire in today's landscapes.: ... *DBCA funded ranger program is starting to enable in getting DFES [the Department of Fire and Emergency Services] and local fire brigades, the Shire and Esperance Tjaltjraak working together with DBCA in regards to changing the way burning practices happen. There is going to be cultural burning principles starting to be incorporated into the controlled burn plans and specific fire training for the rangers. It is really encouraging to see the local bushfire brigades and DFES being receptive to that and supporting that (Ranger Coordinator).*



**Over 2,874,000
hectares prescribed burning
and bushfire suppression
through the ARP**

Above, Inset top, Inset below Nyul Nyul Rangers at controlled burn.
Photos – Sophie Henderson

So, to have that science alongside cultural use and delivering that then it really changes the dynamic and the other community members see them as role models for the younger generation and that is a really empowering thing (Ranger Coordinator).



Two-way learning – sharing of knowledge to care for country

Aboriginal people have a special connection with land. Obviously, there are elements of Aboriginal culture that has been suppressed for hundreds of years that they can bring to the forefront on how to care for country, but also mixed with modern science there is a great complement between traditional owners and non-Indigenous people coming together as a collective to care for country (Aboriginal Corporation CEO).

Two-way learning draws upon western science as well as Indigenous cultural knowledge to care for country. This allows for traditional practices to occur and for Aboriginal input into decision making on how to care for country whilst supported by scientific research. It encourages collaboration and sharing of knowledge and learnings between all those managing the land and sea. A further outcome identified is the non-Aboriginal managers, funding partners and the broader community gain a greater exposure and appreciation of traditional knowledge.

They [Aboriginal people] get an opportunity to learn and share their culture and when the department [DBCA] is lucky enough to be in collaboration with traditional owners, not only do we get to talk about the western science and monitoring, but we get to learn some of that traditional ecological knowledge and the combination of those two things is really powerful when we are working with traditional owners managing country (Key Project Partner).

Above Karajarri Elder with DBCA staff. Photo – Peter Nicholas

Inset above Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers learning about macroinvertebrate sampling.

Inset right Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers with elders at archaeological dig on country. Photos – Amanda Smith



I think it is good we are starting to work with farmers, and DBCA rangers. It gives us more of a chance to work in national parks and help out the DBCA mob and help the farmers as well with bit of back burn and stuff like that. I reckon it has been pretty good. We are learning from them and they are learning from us...it is more like a two-way street sort of thing. I reckon it is pretty good (ARP Funded Ranger).



Empowering people

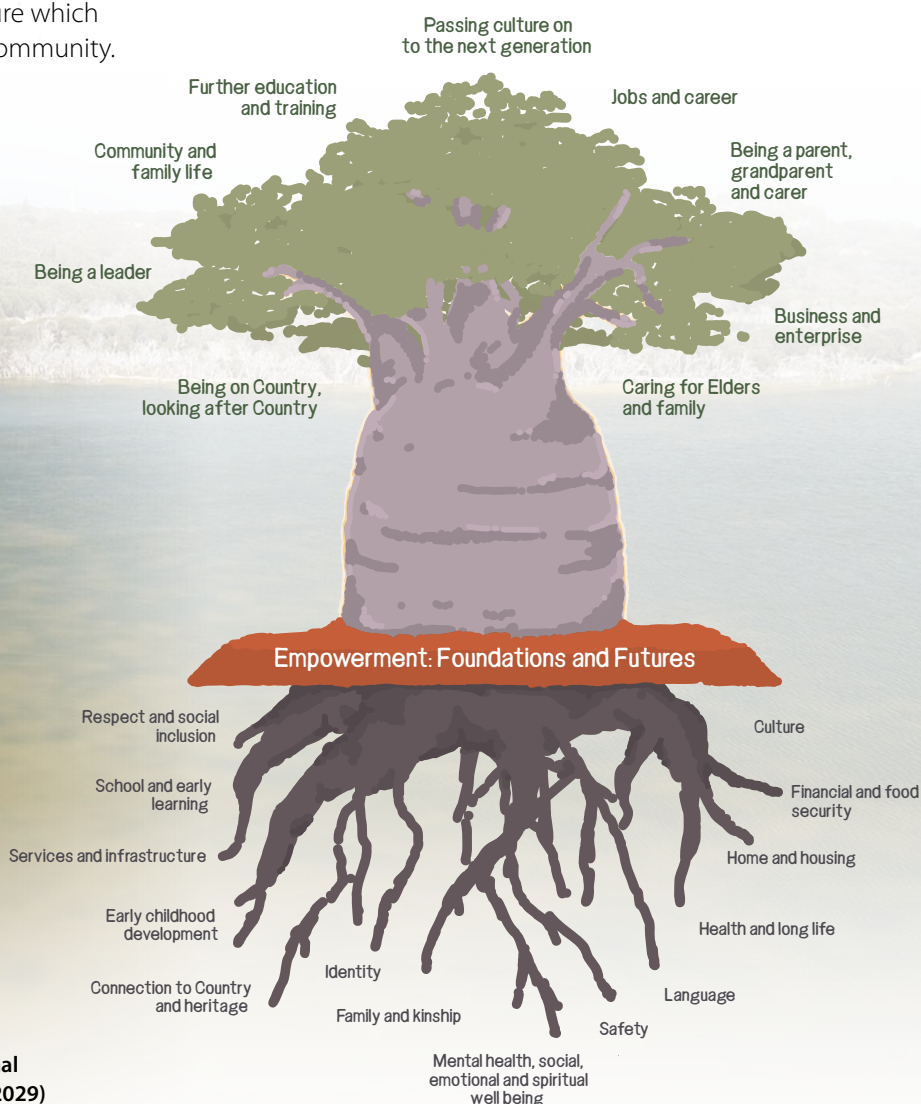
I had a dream while I was growing up and I actually fulfilled one of my dreams, to become a ranger, and I am actually doing it. Ticked off one of my major goals...Not a lot of Indigenous people ticking off goals you know (Aboriginal Ranger).

When examining the key outcomes, many closely align with Western Australian Government's *Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy 2021-2029*, which was developed through extensive consultation with Aboriginal people throughout Western Australia. The Strategy includes a conceptual diagram "Empowerment: Foundations and Futures" outlining the important strategic outcome areas for Aboriginal people illustrating that every person requires secure foundations to grow from and positive futures to grow into. Several of the key foundations for empowerment align with the outcomes identified from the ARP. The key factor of the success of the ARP is that it gives the opportunity for Aboriginal people to be on country. Being employed as a ranger offers financial security as well as respect from community and family. By being on country they are able to learn about and reconnect with country and culture which in turn empowers individuals, families and community.

Scan this QR code to view *Empowering people, culture and connection to country* - Ngurrara Rangers on DBCA's Parks and Wildlife Service YouTube channel.



The rangers reported that working on country contributes to mental health, and social, emotional and spiritual well-being, all of which are key foundations for empowerment. By building these foundations through employment as rangers on country, many of the futures become a reality. Through the ARP, rangers and elders are on country, looking after country, undertaking further education and training resulting in future jobs and career prospects and increased opportunity for culture to be passed on to the next generation. The ARP is contributing to the empowerment of Aboriginal people and families through employment on country allowing for connection to country and culture.



Empowerment: Foundations and Futures (Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy – Western Australia 2021-2029)



Opportunities going forward

Although there were multiple benefits identified from the ARP, there were also some opportunities for improvements to the funding scheme and process (see Rodger and Smith (2021) *Stakeholder perceptions of the Aboriginal Ranger Program Funding Process* for more detail). Key points were:

- Ranger programs need longer term job security for those they are employing e.g. three to five years, so there is a need for long-term grants.
- Existing funding doesn't support office space or vehicles: sometimes for established organisations, additional ARP funded rangers required extra space and vehicles (cost of hiring vehicles in remote areas is high). This funding is also difficult to source elsewhere.
- Professional development opportunities: some Aboriginal rangers would like the opportunity to progress into different roles where they have aspirations. This could potentially be achieved through opening up DBCA courses for professional development.
- A strong leadership team is needed to mentor younger or less experienced rangers to develop their skills. Additional training and mentoring are required to support this, which ARP could potentially fund.
- Attracting and supporting more young people: to support at-risk youth could offer internships, mentoring programs, youth programs on country, school-based learning; partnerships with established organisations such as Clontarf Aboriginal College for junior ranger groups; encouragement of rangers to be involved with knowledge sharing at schools (that matches curriculum).
- Focus on increasing the number of sea country funded projects. Most of the projects currently focus on land based projects and as native title extends to sea country there needs to be more funded opportunities for sea based projects.
- Ranger groups would like more training opportunities and interaction with DBCA. In future, the possibility of opening up DBCA courses for professional development for Aboriginal rangers could be explored.
- An interest in developing tourism products was expressed by some ranger groups but requires additional resourcing and knowledge that is complementary to the ranger program due to limited tourism expertise or experience. The development of tourism products involves specialist advice, training and skills as many ranger groups are predominantly trained in conservation management not tourism product development. Tourism training would support the development of tourism opportunities.

Above Bardi Jawi Country.

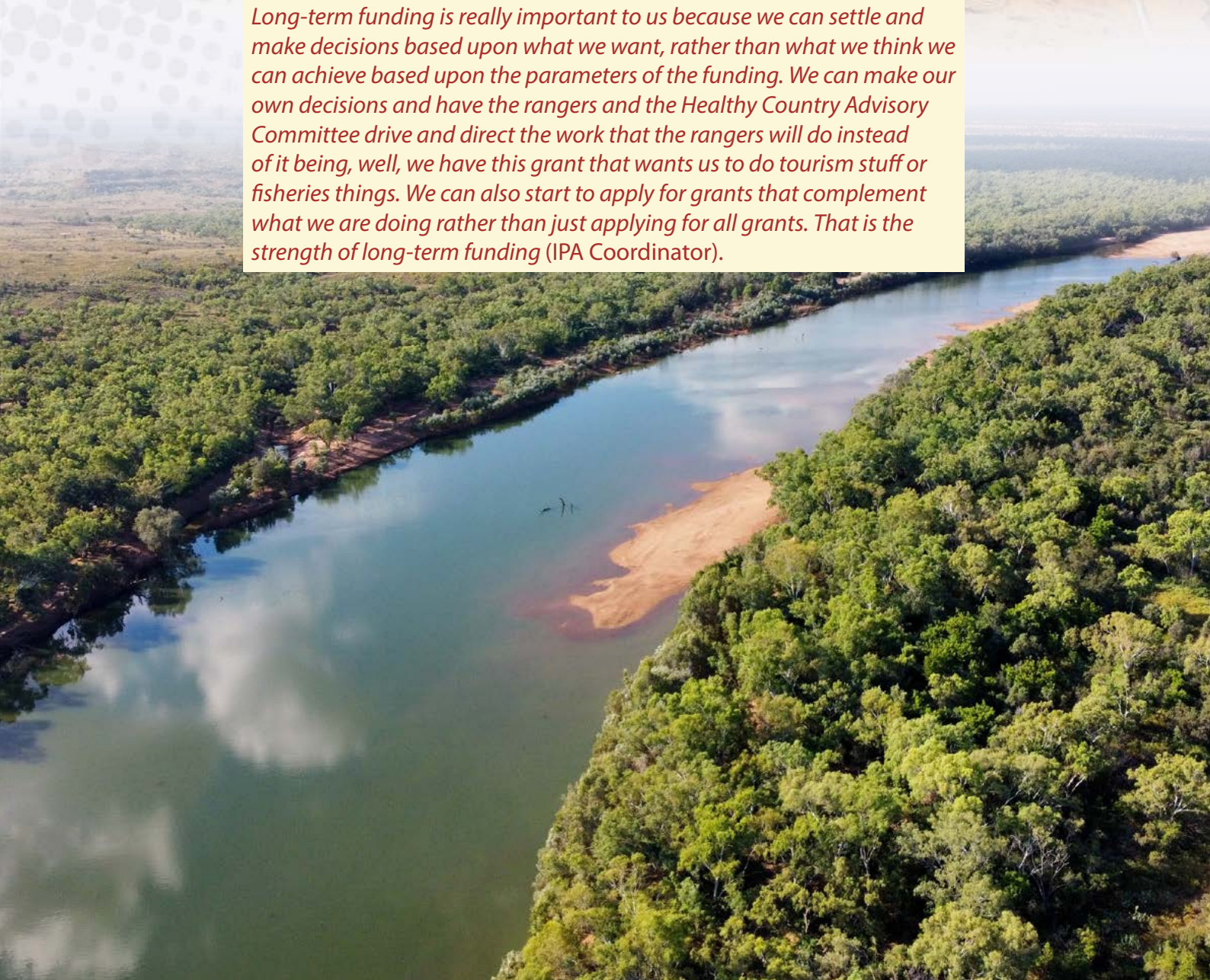
Opposite page

Above Ngurrara Rangers and DBCA staff on country.

Below Ngurrara Country, Fitzroy River. *Photos – Shem Bisluk*



Long-term funding is really important to us because we can settle and make decisions based upon what we want, rather than what we think we can achieve based upon the parameters of the funding. We can make our own decisions and have the rangers and the Healthy Country Advisory Committee drive and direct the work that the rangers will do instead of it being, well, we have this grant that wants us to do tourism stuff or fisheries things. We can also start to apply for grants that complement what we are doing rather than just applying for all grants. That is the strength of long-term funding (IPA Coordinator).





Conclusion - country is core

The position of ranger is highly respected by community, by elders and also by youth. Fits in well with their culture and provide a service to protect the environment which we all get benefit from (IPA Coordinator).

The Western Australian Government recognises that the environmental, cultural, social and economic benefits of Aboriginal ranger programs have been far and wide reaching. They have provided an integral step towards improved community well-being and reducing poverty through economic opportunities and building leadership in remote and regional communities. A SROI was undertaken to measure and value the economic impact of the ARP outcomes. In 2018 the Tjaltjraak Ranger Program commenced with a one-year grant through the ARP to provide employment of a Program Coordinator

along with 12 trainee rangers to undertake education and training. From the initial investment of \$605,400 (including money and in-kind contribution primarily from State Government) the total value associated with the outcomes was estimated to be \$1,913,939. **This resulted in a SROI ratio of 3:1 meaning for every \$1 invested, approximately \$3 of social, economic, cultural and environmental value was created.** Significant economic outcomes identified for State Government included increased employment of Aboriginal people resulting in reduced social disorder interactions generating cost savings to government through increased income tax and lower expenditure on policing and welfare. These findings were comparable to other SROIs in the Indigenous natural resource management context and highlight the benefits and outcomes from employing and training rangers on country.

Above Ngurrara Rangers on country.

Below Bardi Jawi Country. Photos – Shern Bisluk





By offering meaningful employment on country, the ARP is helping empower Aboriginal people and contributing to the Western Australian *Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy 2021-2029*. Being on country and caring for country is core to the success of the Program as healthy country and healthy people are interwoven. The overall outcomes achieved by the ARP include:

- New jobs for Aboriginal people looking after country, resulting in increased capacity for decision making for country. The ARP is valuable as it offers opportunities to both established and emerging ranger groups on and off DBCA-managed lands and waters. Established ranger groups can build capacity, as funding additional staff in established programs enables them to value add to achieve organisational outcomes. Whilst emerging groups are provided access to training or the opportunity to create Healthy Country Plans to allow them to build staff to establish ranger programs.
- Enhanced cross-cultural engagement and exchange between Aboriginal people, the broader community and the State Government.
- Increased capacity within the Aboriginal community to undertake land and sea management.
- Strengthened capacity of Aboriginal organisations to facilitate and provide a range of services enabling ongoing full time, part time and casual employment, and income generation opportunities through partnerships and fee-for-service contracts and agreements.
- Enhanced protection of cultural and biodiversity values through land management activities undertaken by Aboriginal rangers on and off DBCA-managed lands and waters.
- Empowered Aboriginal communities that can identify and address cultural and environmental priorities, leading to more resilient communities and broader health, educational and social benefits.
- Empowered Aboriginal people and communities that can contribute to jointly manage DBCA managed lands and waters.

Above Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger education tools.

Inset Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers checking wildlife camera trap.

Photos – Amanda Smith



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Appendix - Publications

Additional publications that are complementary to this report

- Aboriginal Ranger Program: Funding Landscape Study (2022). Prepared by Push Consulting for DBCA. Email aboriginalrangerprogram@dbca.wa.gov.au to request access to report.
- Connection to Boodja LANDSCOPE Spring 2021: [Connection to Boodja Landscape Spring 2021.pdf](#)
- Indigenous Lead Conservation LANDSCOPE Summer 2020-21: [Indigenous Led Conservation LANDSCOPE Summer 2020_21.pdf](#)
- Social Return on Investment – Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger Training. Email arp_evaluation@dbca.wa.gov.au to request access to report.
- Rodger, K. and Smith, A. (2021) Stakeholder Perceptions of the ARP Funding Process. Email arp_evaluation@dbca.wa.gov.au to request access to report.
- Yarning Time – In their words: participants speak about Aboriginal Ranger Program: [Yarning-Time_July-2021.pdf](#)

Above Ngurrara Rangers lighting traditional medicine plant. Photo – Amanda Smith



**ABORIGINAL RANGER
PROGRAM**
CARING FOR COUNTRY