Common Ground

Around Australia, the Natural Heritage Trust is funding the development of Indigenous Protected Areas to enhance traditional owners' management of their environment. In Western Australia's red centre, a new partnership is being formed between Aboriginal communities and State government agencies, including the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), which will bring traditional practices and 'whitefella' science together in the management of the land.

BY ROB THOMAS AND MANDY CLEWS

Deep in the heart of the Australian continent, the Central Ranges rise from the landscape. They sprawl across 97,000 square kilometres, running through the desert's rugged hills, mulga grasslands, spinifex dunes, and tracts of desert oak and mallee. Rolling fields of dunes and vast sand plains are punctuated by rugged gravelly rises and short-lived creeks, occasional salt lakes, soaks and rock holes. This is desert country at its scenic best.

The Central Ranges, which span the Western Australia–Northern Territory border, are valued for more than the dramatic scenery. Although the ranges have not been extensively surveyed, they are known to be an area of extremely high biodiversity, containing many unique species of endemic plants and animals. They are home to at least 650 species and subspecies of plants, of which 13 are considered to be rare. Fauna lists include 11 species of frogs, 103 of reptiles, 150 of birds and around 40 mammals, several of them rare. A further 12 species of mammals are presumed to have been lost from the region in recent times, mainly from falling prey to introduced carnivores.

But perhaps most significant is this area's cultural value. The Central Ranges lie within Aboriginal reserve land—250,000 square kilometres in total—that is home to 11 remote communities, made up of about 2,000 people, who have had a continuous association with their country for thousands of years. Indeed, it is because of this relationship with the land here that the natural conservation values are high. There has been no prior European land use, and the continuing management of the area by its traditional owners has allowed it to retain its natural history. Ironically, the Central Ranges is one of only two of Australia's 80 biogeographic regions with no formal nature conservation areas.

That is about to change, as the traditional owners, represented by the Ngaanyatjarra Council, have indicated that they wish to establish the Central Ranges as an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA), a system that conserves both cultural and biological values through collaboration with other land management agencies. IPAs are funded by the Natural Heritage Trust to be developed in a three-stage process. The first stage involves collection of data and consultation to arrive at a firm resolution from traditional owners that they wish to proceed as leaders and decision-makers with the project. The second stage is the development of management plans in consultation with land management agencies. The

Previous page
Desert oak at sunset.
Photo – Dennis Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

Top: Sowing the seed of an idea—a CALM-sponsored trip for six Ngaanyatjarra traditional owners to better understand and consider tourism as an options on their lands.

Centre left and left: Typical scenes in the Central Desert area, Western Australia.
Photos – Rob Thomas/CALM

third stage is the implementation of the management plan. The Central Ranges Indigenous Protected Area is now successfully through the first stage.

A HISTORY OF HERITAGE

Just under half of the Central Ranges area falls within Western Australia, extending west from the Western Australia–Northern Territory border to Warburton, and from south of Wingellina to north of Lake Hopkins and the Sir Frederick Range. Existing records of the natural history of the Ranges date from the early European explorers, including such early visitors as William Gosse and Ernest Giles. Other data have been gathered by opportunistic surveys and interviews with traditional owners. In modern times, over the years, the Federal and Western Australian governments had been expressing the need to incorporate nature conservation into the management of the area, particularly in the face of increasing pressure from tourism, mining, introduced animals, weeds and wildfires.

Meanwhile, the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) had had a long association with the traditional owners, their lands, and the Ngaanyatjarra Council, through the development of ranger training programs, ethno-biological research, and feral animal control work. One scientist in particular maintained a constant liaison with Aboriginal communities in the area, mainly in association with work surveying populations of the threatened black-footed rock wallaby (*Petrogale lateralis*) and conducting fox control trials. The success of this work had been in large part due to the knowledge of the elders and the assistance of the Ngaanyatjarra people, some of whom were also in regular consultation with CALM as traditional owners of the CALM-managed Gibson Desert Nature Reserve—an 18,000-square-kilometre area 100 kilometres north-west of the Central Ranges.

In 1997, the Ngaanyatjarra Council appointed a land use planner, who approached CALM for support in the Council's submission to the Natural Heritage Trust to investigate the potential to establish an IPA. The idea was further expanded to include the CALM-managed Gibson Desert Nature Reserve. In 1998, the application was successful and the Ngaanyatjarra Council received funding from Environment Australia to develop the IPA. Phase one, the initial surveying and consultation, could now begin.

Top: Black-footed rock wallaby. A trial baiting program at the Townsend Ridges in collaboration with the Ngaanyatjarra people has seen the population recover from the brink of extinction.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Above: Townsend Ridges (*Piyul*), a fox-baiting site.
Photo – Rob Thomas/CALM

CONSULTATION: ABORIGINAL HOSTS

The consultation phase of the IPA process took both CALM representatives to traditional desert country, and traditional owners to other CALM-managed areas in Western Australia. Some consultation meetings were held within Aboriginal communities, but others were bush meetings, conducted en route to areas of particular interest and cultural significance to the elders. One such meeting took place during a cross-country expedition through the Gibson Desert. Elders took CALM representatives to highly significant sites and explained their concerns about them. A firm mutual trust developed on this odyssey, as elders shared their stories and knowledge, and CALM staff were able to explain how they, too, looked after the land.

During this period, Ngaanyatjarra elders were able to decide that they were comfortable with the IPA concept, and were keen to tell the Government and the people of Western Australia how their people had always looked after the land. An elder from the Wingellina community expressed his feelings on the matter with a clever analogy: '*Yakirris* (head bands) used to be made of possum fur and human hair,' he said. 'Now they are made of wool, and the wool is made by whitefellas. But it is still a *yakirri*, and it still represents the Law. Ngaanyatjarra people have always looked after the land, so maybe these IPAs are like the *yakirri*—a whitefella name for looking after the land.'

CONSULTATION: CALM HOSTS

At CALM's invitation, a group of elders were also taken to visit some of CALM's developments and to see some of the Western Shield endangered species captive breeding and operational programs. The purpose of the trip was to show the elders a range of nature-based and cultural tourism experiences, and to show them how a whole suite of animals can be reintroduced to their former country if introduced predators are successfully brought under control. Many connections were apparent between tourism, looking after the land, and employment, and there was a great deal of discussion of how this could be integrated with traditional cultural practices.

The group on the tour visited Mulka's Cave, Wave Rock, Dryandra Woodland, Yanchep and Francois Peron National Parks, Monkey Mia and a number of tourism development sites within the Shark Bay World Heritage Area. They also visited captive breeding enclosures, which form an integral part of CALM's

Top left: Consultation about IPA with Ngaanyatjarra people at Jameson in the Central Ranges.

Centre left: The Gibson Desert Nature Reserve—trust and cooperation between CALM (Ian Kealley in rock hole) and Ngaanyatjarra people (drawing water from rock hole).

Left: Ngaanyatjarra men working on collecting biological data in the Central Ranges.
Photos – Rob Thomas/CALM

Western Shield project. The elders knew all of the animals, and many were remembered as having occurred throughout the Ngaanyatjarra lands, although they have disappeared in recent times because of predation by foxes and cats. The men also described how these animals were caught for food in early times. The results of introduced predator control at Dryandra and Peron Peninsula were of particular interest because of the potential to extend the predator control into the Ngaanyatjarra lands.

The tour enabled the elders to experience, first hand, the successful integration of conservation, land management, tourism and employment in many CALM-managed areas. These experiences led to discussions about the importance of product development and site design for tourism, the potential for cultural tourism, and the management of culturally significant sites. It was evident that nature-based tourism could offset the costs of management while increasing public awareness and understanding, and that the development of the Great Central Highway through Ngaanyatjarra lands and the proposed building of a cultural centre at Warburton could tap into this potential. There were also lengthy discussions in Ngaanyatjarra language about the possibilities for collaborative management throughout the lands.

MUTUAL BENEFITS

Many other issues emerged during the consultation phase. The traditional owners were pleased at the recognition that their land's conservation value was the result of their management practices. However, they were concerned that they did not have the resources to manage their country properly now that they were no longer walking it. They also knew that if traditional management ceased, the country would change. But perhaps their greatest worry was that younger generations were not learning the Law and how to look after the country. They perceived a need to create land management jobs that recognised traditional knowledge and made it relevant for young people. They also perceived an advantage in working with scientists to look after the country. And while they could see the benefit of tourists visiting some areas within the

Above: Traditional fire management in the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve.

Right: Arthur Robertson explaining how the animals lived and were caught for food in his lifetime (captive breeding animals, Peron) in the Central Ranges and Gibson Desert areas.
Photos – Rob Thomas/CALM

Gibson Desert, Western Australia. The management of the 1.8 million hectare reserve in remote WA will benefit from the involvement of Ngaanyatjarra people and their traditional skills and knowledge.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Ngaanyatjarra lands, they wanted to safeguard culturally significant areas from harm.

They could also see other tangible benefits that would emerge from an IPA and collaborative management agreements, such as new bores, water tanks, roads and other infrastructure, and the provision of a better standard of transport, all providing training and employment opportunities. These features could enhance and protect Ngaanyatjarra country and culture, without surrendering control of the land. Collaboration would also assist with managing change and the resulting impacts that are outside traditional Law, including feral animals, weeds and tourism.

The consultation process was also illuminating to CALM officers, indicating the benefits collaboration would bring to their organisation. There was recognition of the unique knowledge and skills of the traditional owners in managing their land. Clearly a great deal could be learnt about plants and animals in the Ngaanyatjarra lands that is not revealed by science. There was unanimous agreement in CALM that a land management partnership would result in enormous benefits to the nature conservation effort.

The consultation stage also affirmed to all parties that developing the IPA would not be completely straightforward. All those involved recognised and acknowledged that there was potential for conflict, as traditional practices such as hunting and harvesting plants and animals might need to be modified to maintain certain protected areas, and scientific methods would have to take into account cultural sensitivities. However, this awareness is an essential part of a firm basis for proceeding, and the Ngaanyatjarra people have the assurance that under the IPA system, final decisions reside with them.

THE NEXT STAGE

The consultation stage has cleared the way for management planning to take place for the Central Ranges and the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve. CALM staff will be visiting the areas frequently to help people develop their ideas on nature-based and cultural tourism, and to facilitate collaborative agreements about feral animal control, reintroduction of locally extinct animals, and the management of weeds, hunting, fire, timber-harvesting and project funding.

The IPA process has brought about a growing mutual realisation between traditional owners and a State conservation agency that their long-term interests are virtually the same. The ultimate result will be Aboriginal-owned natural and cultural conservation on Aboriginal land, but the IPA is about more than this. It is about initiative, recognition, self-determination, mutual understanding and reconciliation; and as such, it benefits all stakeholders in the Western Australian environment.

Rob Thomas is the Regional Leader of Nature Conservation in the Goldfields Region and is coordinating CALM's participation in the Central Ranges and Gibson Desert IPA project. Rob can be contacted on (08) 9021 2677 or email (calmgold@bigpond.com.au).

Keith Noble is the Land Use Planner for the Ngaanyatjarra Council and is the Project Manager for the IPA project. Keith can be contacted on (08) 8956 7699 or email (knoble@ngaanyatjarra.org.au).

The authors would particularly like to acknowledge and thank the Ngaanyatjarra people for their inspiration, trust and generosity in sharing their land and their stories with us 'whitefellas'.

058395

Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME FIFTEEN NUMBER 2, SUMMER 1999–2000

How many seals or sea lions are there around WA's coasts? See 'A Tale of Two Seals' on page 42.

"What I wasn't prepared for was the magic of the experience." See 'Desert Impressions' on page 35 for the story of a LANDSCOPE Expedition.

The malleefowl has declined to 46 per cent of its former range. Read about the combined effort to save it on page 17.

FEATURES

COMMON GROUND
ROB THOMAS, KEITH NOBLE & MANDY CLEWS......10

SAVING THE MALLEEFOWL
SANDRA MCKENZIE & JOHN BLYTH......17

BALANCING ACT
IAN HERFORD, JOHN IRELAND & MANDY CLEWS......22

WONDERFUL KALBARRI
ALAN THORNE......28

DESERT IMPRESSIONS
MARIANNE LEWIS......35

A TALE OF TWO SEALS
NICK GALES......42

THE DEFIANT SEED
ANNE COCHRANE......49

Enjoy the WA environment—and don't get hurt! See 'Balancing Act' on page 23.

Traditional owners are working with CALM and other agencies to manage the land. See page 10.

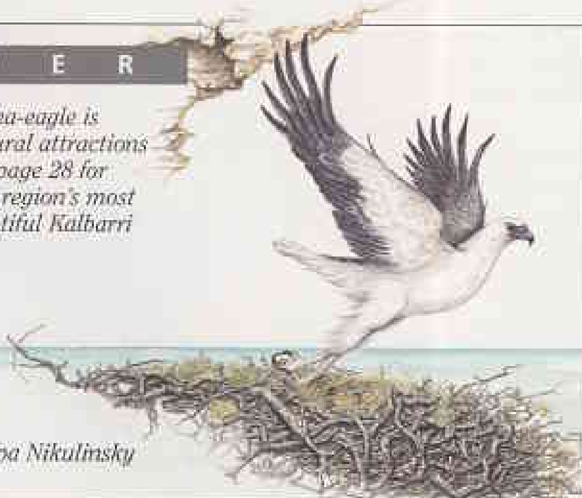
REGULARS

BUSH TELEGRAPH......4

ENDANGERED
CAMERONS CAVE ECOLOGICAL CENTRE......53

URBAN ANTICS
TWINKLE, TWINKLE LITTLE STAR......54

COVER



The white-breasted sea-eagle is one of the many natural attractions of the mid-west. See page 28 for a story on one of the region's most famous places—beautiful Kalbarri National Park.

Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky

Executive Editor: Ron Kawalilak
Managing Editor: Ray Bailey
Editor: David Gough
Story Editors: Mandy Clews, Verna Costello, Sandra Toby, Carolyn Thomson-Dans
Scientific/technical advice: Andrew Burbidge, Greg Keighery, Ian Abbott, Neil Burrows, Paul Jones and staff of CALMScience Division
Design and production: Tiffany Aberin, Maria Duthie, Sue Marais
Illustration: Gooitzen van der Meer, Ian Dickinson
Marketing: Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (08) 9334 0296 Fax: (08) 9334 0498
Subscription enquiries: ☎ (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437
Colour Separation by Colourbox Digital
Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print

© ISSN 0815-4465 All material copyright. No part of the contents of the publication may be reproduced without the consent of the publishers

Please do not send unsolicited material to *LANDSCOPE*, but feel free to telephone the Editor.

Visit *LANDSCOPE* online on our award-winning Internet site NatureBase at http://www.calm.wa.gov.au

Published by
Department of Conservation and Land Management,
Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia