

# A sacred partnership

## MANAGING MATUWA AND KURRARA KURRARA

In the centre of Western Australia, 170km north-east of Wiluna on the southern edge of the Little Sandy Desert lies an extraordinary place. Here, traditional owners are working in partnership with Parks and Wildlife to restore almost 600,000ha of semi-arid country to the way it was before European settlement and to protect its cultural values. Lorna Glen, or Matuwa as it is known by the local Martu people, and neighbouring Earahedy, or Kurrara Kurrara, are entering a new chapter of management as a formal Indigenous Protected Area.

**BY EMMA O'LEARY AND IAN KEALLEY**







“The area is a meeting place, where Martu law and culture have been practised and stories told through the generations.”

**M**artu people have occupied the area around the Little Sandy, Great Sandy and Gibson deserts for more than 40,000 years. While some remain living in the desert, others have moved into remote towns and communities. Many of the Martu people call the water holes, creeks, claypans, sand dunes, mulga forest and rocky country at Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara home. This area, with its diverse land systems, is of immense cultural value.

Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara are places where many important *jukurrpa* (Dreaming sites) and *jukurrpa tjina* (Dreaming tracks) are found. The Martu people recognise the underground water as part of the *tjukurrpa* (songline) of the *pikuta* (Euro kangaroo), which created the creeks as it travelled. While surface water is infrequent, rainfall creates a temporary but frenetic bloom of desert life. These interlinkages of ground and surface water are celebrated by Martu people as the rich animal and plant life supports important activities like camping, gathering food and bush medicine.

The area is a meeting place, where Martu law and culture have been practised and stories told through the generations. It has some of the most significant men’s and women’s cultural sites in the desert. For instance, Matuwa contains a significant

men’s area that is known across the entire western desert and is often still visited by senior men from other areas. Several exclusive women’s sites are also very important, given that they connect Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara to the major women’s Dreaming track that crosses the western desert region. By looking after country and its resources, the Martu people have kept *jukurrpa* alive and strong.

Such is the cultural significance of the area that, in 2013, the Tarlka Matuwa Piarku Aboriginal Corporation, which is the organisation representing the Wiluna Martu people, obtained exclusive possession native title at Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara.

## EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

In 1874, the explorer and later Western Australian Premier John Forrest led an expedition into uncharted land along the Murchison River and then east through the unknown desert centre of Western Australia. His expedition passed within 16km of the north-east corner of what is now Kurrara Kurrara, but then headed further east, leaving the map for the area blank. It wasn’t until some 60 years later, in the 1930s, that Lorna Glen and Earahedy (as they were otherwise known) became working pastoral stations.



*Previous page*

**Main** The spectacular expanse of Matuwa.

**Above** Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara are of immense cultural significance.

*Photos – Jennifer Eliot/Parks and Wildlife*

Over the next 70 years, pastoralists ran sheep and then cattle, and grew peanuts, cotton and lucerne hay in an irrigated area on the two properties. During this time, the Martu people started working as station hands, drovers and housemaids, integrating into pastoral life. Most of the fences on Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara were built by Martu men in the early 20th century. They built houses, birthed and raised their children and buried their people there, and continued to teach the next



generations about *jukurrpa*, never letting go of their connection to the area.

The properties have many sites where Martu and non-Martu histories have come together. For example, Yimbin Rock Hole at Kurrara Kurrara is where Martu people first camped when they arrived from the desert and is also associated with Dreaming stories, yet it was the main pastoral recruitment zone for Martu station hands. From the 1970s, the pastoral viability of the properties started to decline and eventually the era of Martu and non-Martu living and working together there ended. Much of the pastoral infrastructure remains and continues to be maintained and used, including the Lorna Glen homestead, fences, roads and tracks.

## REVERSING THE CLOCK

The early pastoralists brought cattle, camels, horses and sheep into the area, while rabbits, feral cats and foxes had also found their way to WA's arid interior and established significant populations. These introduced species have had a big impact on native animals through predation and loss of habitat.

Many animals that once roamed the arid zone in abundance, including bilbies, possums, boodies and some bird and reptile species have all but disappeared. Many species are now long gone from the area and on the brink of extinction across the country. Some of these species still hang by a thread on the mainland, while

others survive on islands off WA's coast or in protected sanctuaries.

In 2000, after 70 years of Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara being used as working pastoral stations, the leases were purchased by the State Government for conservation. The properties were considered to be in good condition, with diverse land systems. However, the decline of native animals in Australian deserts, including central WA, was of significant concern, and in 2004 an ambitious and groundbreaking wildlife reconstruction project was started by Parks and Wildlife's predecessor, the Department of Conservation and Land Management, in consultation with the Martu people.

*Operation Rangelands Restoration*, funded by the State Government and Chevron's Gorgon Gas Project offset funds, set out to restore Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara to their pre-European settlement state, including the reintroduction of 11 native mammals that once occurred across the arid zone. Restoration activities included initially working with the outgoing pastoralists on destocking and decommissioning man-made water points. Aerial baiting was then carried out to control introduced predators and a managed fire regime based on traditional Aboriginal burning practices began. By working with neighbours on boundary fencing, feral camels and cattle were less of a problem. A 1100ha predator-free acclimatisation compound was built, enabling threatened native mammals

**Above left** Tommy Ningibong, an early and well-known Aboriginal identity, helping with Earraheedy shearing.

*Photo – supplied by Ross Quartermaine*

**Above** Martu community members and Parks and Wildlife staff releasing a radio collared golden bandicoot.

*Photo – Jennifer Eliot/Parks and Wildlife*

to be introduced free from predation by feral cats (see also 'Restoring the rangelands' on page 41). So far, golden bandicoots, boodies, bilbies, Shark Bay mice, brushtail possums and mala have been translocated inside and outside of the compound. Some of the translocated mammals originate from Barrow Island off the Pilbara Coast. Captive-bred animals from Parks and Wildlife-run captive breeding programs at Shark Bay and Dryandra, near Narrogin, have also been used to provide animals for reintroduction. Following almost two decades of research under its *Western Shield* program, Parks and Wildlife developed the *Eradicat*<sup>®</sup> cat bait and an associated baiting regime that has significantly reduced the feral cat population on Matuwa.

With new generations of mammals being born at Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara, conservation efforts so far have been successful. Many native reptile, mammal and bird species are now seen in record numbers. Captive-bred bilbies were reintroduced in 2007 and a recent



survey has shown the population has more than doubled and recolonised large parts of Matuwa. The successful free-range establishment of bilbies in the wild is an Australian first. This program is one of the world's largest and most extensive science-based wildlife reconstruction projects, and the biggest arid zone project ever undertaken in Australia.

### A STRONG PARTNERSHIP

With the signing of a memorandum of understanding in 2004 to start joint management of Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara, and the *Operation Rangelands Restoration* project, for the first time since the pastoral days the Wiluna Martu people were able to physically reconnect to this important country that they had spiritually never left.

Since then, local Indigenous rangers have been employed and trained, and now work in partnership with Parks and Wildlife on a range of land management activities. The Martu rangers and community have helped Parks and Wildlife control pest animals, manage and research fire, monitor threatened species populations and construct and maintain infrastructure. The Martu people have been instrumental in building and repairing boundary fencing, which has reduced cattle grazing pressure, soil erosion and weed introduction on to Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara. This has improved the health of native vegetation, paving the



way for recovery of native animal species.

The Martu rangers have also protected the area's cultural values by maintaining cultural sites, working with elders to pass down stories and looking after *jukurrpa*. Support for traditional and customary activities including hunting, camping, sacred site protection and ceremonies have been an integral part of the partnership between Parks and Wildlife and the Martu people.

### TRADITIONAL BURNING

For thousands of years, Aboriginal people regularly burnt small patches of spinifex in the western desert for hunting, signalling, access, and for spiritual reasons. However, traditional Aboriginal burning had diminished in the area since the 1960s, resulting in massive spinifex 'megafires' that have threatened people, communities and the environment. As Aboriginal people have returned to the western desert, obtained native title and instigated land management they have reintroduced fire management around communities, access tracks, sites and hunting areas.

At Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara, the combination of western science and Indigenous knowledge and skills is creating a prescribed burning regime that reflects traditional Aboriginal burning practices. Developed and carried out by Parks and Wildlife and Martu rangers, this regime has been vital in reducing fuel to protect important sites and infrastructure, such



**Top left** Parks and Wildlife staff trap and log information about animals at Matuwa.  
*Photo – Jennifer Eliot/Parks and Wildlife*

**Top right** Prescribed burning is an effective way to reduce fuel loads to help protect historical and ecological sites in the area.  
*Photo – Parks and Wildlife*

**Above** A boodie at Matuwa.  
*Photo – Judy Dunlop/Parks and Wildlife*

as the compound and homestead, and neighbouring properties, against massive lightning-caused bushfires. It has also been important to the health of the bush, with fire being a natural part of ecosystem processes. Regular patch burning and buffers are applied in strategic locations to create a variety of vegetation at different stages since the last fire.

## Restoring the rangelands

By Jennifer Eliot

A recent trip to Matuwa has given me a new appreciation of spinifex. Previously, I didn't see any beauty in it – just a prickly bush I thought – but today thanks to an opportunity to volunteer with the Department of Parks and Wildlife's golden bandicoot (*Isoodon auratus*) translocation program, it has become a symbol of hope.

Golden bandicoots are small ground dwelling marsupials, similar to the quenda found in the south-west, that until as recently as the 1930s were found in much of northern Australia's spinifex sandplain country.

Sadly, predation by feral cats in particular has decimated mainland Australia's population, and now they only survive on some offshore islands and small areas of the Kimberley and Northern Territory mainland. That, however, is about to change.

Parks and Wildlife's *Operation Rangelands Restoration* project aims to return 11 species of native mammals to the Matuwa Indigenous Protected Area, north east of Wiluna.

The golden bandicoot is one of these species and in 2010 golden bandicoots from Barrow Island were translocated to a feral-proof enclosure at Matuwa, the first step in returning these vulnerable animals back to their rightful place. The second step, and real challenge, was to establish them outside the fenced enclosure.

It was an honour to have played a part in such an exciting project and when I responded to the call for fit and enthusiastic volunteers, I had no idea that I had just stepped into an experience of a lifetime.

When I arrived at Matuwa, the serious work of reducing feral cats in the release area outside the fenced enclosure had been done, although this work will remain ongoing.



My journey began on a crisp September morning inside Matuwa's fenced enclosure as we cleared traps, set the evening before, and I looked down at my first golden bandicoot, its pointed nose and small dark eyes looking back at me.

From that moment, I was hooked and revelled in long days which began as the sun rose and often continued long after it had set as we processed animals for release, fitted radio collars, reset traps and helped with feral cat control.

It might be easy to believe that the highlight of the trip was releasing golden bandicoots.

There is no question that it was exhilarating watching these animals take their first tentative steps into the wild, but for me the highlight came in the days after as we began radio tracking to monitor their progress.

Hearing the beep... beep... beep that signalled that our animals were still alive and seeing golden bandicoot tracks in Matuwa's pindan soils, where for too long there had been none, was as good as it gets.

An added bonus was to see abundant signs of bilbies which had been reintroduced to Matuwa 2007–09, and have now established and spread throughout their rangeland home.

The golden bandicoot's future in the wild remains uncertain; however, with the dedicated team of Parks and Wildlife



scientists on their side, they are now, at least, in with a fighting chance.

Their work has already seen the successful reintroduction of bushtail possums and bilbies to Matuwa. Let's hope they can add golden bandicoot to the list.

By the end of the trip, I had no doubt that it is vital that we continue to put energy into protecting our ecological heritage and work towards saving our vulnerable and endangered animals.

We owe it to our children.

**Clockwise from top** Fitting a golden bandicoot with a radio collar; the quintessential spinifex.

Photos – Jennifer Eliot/Parks and Wildlife  
Jennifer Eliot with a camera trap.

Photo – Keith Morris/Parks and Wildlife

If it had not been for this practice, a lightning-caused bushfire in early 2015 that was burning under hot, dry and windy conditions could have burnt extensive areas of vegetation and been disastrous for the successfully

reintroduced mammals and other wildlife that have been gradually returning to the area. Prescribed burning under the implemented fire management plan stopped the fast-spreading fire front, enabling fire crews to quickly contain the

bushfire. It burnt about 5000ha, but had the potential to burn much more, which would have been costly and dangerous to suppress and would have caused significant heritage, environmental and infrastructure damage.



## INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AREA DEDICATION

On 3 July 2015, the Tarlka Matuwa Piarku Aboriginal Corporation, which holds exclusive possession rights and interests in the two properties on behalf of the Wiluna native title holders, signed an agreement with the Commonwealth Government to dedicate Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara as an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA). A signing ceremony was held at the homestead, and was attended by more than 200 people, including the Wiluna Martu people, Parks and Wildlife staff, Central Desert Native Title Services, the Commonwealth Government and many other stakeholders.

This significant conservation partnership is the 69th IPA in Australia and sees a continuous corridor of IPAs extend from the Tanami bioregion in the Northern Territory through to the Murchison bioregion in WA. The development of the IPA is underpinned by a unique three-way partnership

**“With the IPA agreement in place, native title determined, a management plan in place and strong partnerships forged, Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara now have a robust and stable foundation for future holistic management.”**

established over the past few years. It also brings together resources from the State and Commonwealth governments, the community and other partners to continue to restore and protect the outstanding natural and cultural values of the area while generating valuable local employment and enterprise opportunities.

With the IPA agreement in place, native title determined, a management plan developed and strong partnerships forged, Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara now have a robust and stable foundation for future holistic management. By embracing the traditional elements of Martu culture and land management while also recognising the mixed European and Indigenous history, this area is a shared space where

the long-term vision of the Martu people can be worked towards. This vision is to protect and enhance the understanding of the cultural, historical and natural values of the area, and look after the wellbeing of future Martu generations. It is also a priority for the Martu people to continue with scientific programs and the training and employment of the local community through working with Parks and Wildlife as part of the *Operation Rangelands Restoration* project, and explore ecotourism and cultural options to ensure diversification and economic viability. Building this shared vision is set to bring Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara into a new, dynamic era of land management as an important model for IPAs.

.....  
**Above** Members of the Martu community gather to celebrate the signing of the Indigenous Protected Area agreement in July this year.

*Photo – Stephen van Leeuwen/Parks and Wildlife*

**Above right** Tracking radio collared animals.

*Photo – Jennifer Eliot/Parks and Wildlife*

**Emma O’Leary** is a Parks and Wildlife media relations officer based in Kensington. She can be contacted by email ([emma.o’leary@dpaw.wa.gov.au](mailto:emma.o’leary@dpaw.wa.gov.au)).

**Ian Kealley** is Parks and Wildlife’s Goldfields Regional Manager based in Kalgoorlie. He can be contacted by email ([ian.kealley@dpaw.wa.gov.au](mailto:ian.kealley@dpaw.wa.gov.au)).

**Jennifer Eliot** is a Parks and Wildlife communications officer. She can be contacted on (08) 9278 0916 or by email ([jennifer.eliot@dpaw.wa.gov.au](mailto:jennifer.eliot@dpaw.wa.gov.au)).

*The authors would like to acknowledge the Central Desert Native Title Service for source material.*

*The Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara Indigenous Protected Area Country Management Plan can be viewed at [www.centraldesert.org.au](http://www.centraldesert.org.au).*