

Collecting seeds and capturing culture



For 600 generations, the Spinifex people have maintained and fostered their spiritual and cultural connection to their traditional lands in the heart of the Great Victoria Desert. For many Spinifex women this has meant passing their rich bio-cultural knowledge of plants and seeds down through generations. Now, thanks to the creation of the *Aboriginal Ranger Program*, the Spinifex women will be supported to combine their traditional knowledge with modern plant biology to ensure this knowledge is protected, and to provide positive opportunities for all those involved.

by Mitzi Vance





Deep in the heart of Western Australia's spinifex country, within the arid, remote, rugged and beautiful Great Victoria Desert, is the traditional land of the Spinifex people. This group of hunter-gatherers only returned to their land in 1984, following years of displacement and relocation caused by the Maralinga Atomic Testing in the 1950s. A group of Spinifex people are regarded as the last known Indigenous people to emerge from the desert in Australia, when a family of seven emerged in 1986.

Today, in their community of Tjuntjuntjara, some 700 kilometres east of Kalgoorlie, and in one of the most remote communities in the State, they continue to live a largely traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle. They have vowed to "never leave their traditional country, as their cultural responsibility and obligation is to look after their land, heritage and culture", as did their forebearers.

In 1997, the Spinifex people received worldwide attention for their poignant traditional paintings, which depicted Spinifex country and captured the area's stories and history. This helped support a native title claim for the area, and eventually culminated in a major exhibition of their work in London in 2005, which helped raise the profile of Australia's Indigenous artists.

In 2000, the Spinifex people received recognition of their native title land – the first determination of native title in WA and the second in Australia following the proclamation of the Native Title Act. Following the granting of native title rights, the Spinifex people established the Pila Nguru Aboriginal Corporation to govern their native title rights.

AN ANCIENT LAND

Extending west for 200 kilometres from the South Australia border and north-south some 280 kilometres from the top of the Nullarbor Plain, Pila Nguru country encompasses 5.5 million hectares of arid desert, which houses about 370 species of native plants, including mulga, western myall, sandalwood and



Opposite page

Inset top Debbie Hansen travelled to Perth to visit the WA Herbarium.

Photo – Andrew Crawford/DBCA

Main The Spinifex people have maintained a connection to their land for 600 generations.

*Photo – Marie Lochman/Lochman
Transparencies*

sheoaks, as well as varieties of sennas, emu bushes, and spinifex.

These plants and the seeds they produce are important for the Spinifex peoples' way of life. In Tjuntjuntjara there is a small group of Spinifex women who are dedicated to ensuring cultural knowledge is passed from generation to generation and who live by the premise that if you care for Country then it will care for you, particularly around plants and seeds, which are traditionally the responsibility of women.

This life-long commitment is now being supported by the State Government's new \$20 million five-year *Aboriginal Ranger Program*, which will see Spinifex women trained as rangers. As well as helping to continue this important cultural and conservation practice, this program will also create pathways for young women and children, generating social and economic benefits for their community.

For the Spinifex women, funding provided through the program will help



Hear more about the Spinifex women's visit

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's 'LANDSCOPE' playlist on YouTube.





“By understanding modern techniques in plant conservation, the Spinifex women rangers can combine contemporary practices with traditional knowledge to collect and grow seeds that will help them develop business opportunities and eco-tourism ventures such as bush-tucker tours.”

Above Marie Brown (second from left), Debbie Hansen (third from left), Rochelle Franks (third from right), Samantha Doudle (second from right) and Nancy Donegan (right) spent time with DBCA’s Andrew Crawford (left) and Anne Cochran (centre).
Photo – Ryonen Butcher/DBCA

support meaningful work and training opportunities, in balance with their family responsibilities. This is important considering their very remote location. It will also, for the first time, bring together traditional bio-cultural knowledge and modern plant biology and ecology principles to provide meaningful and positive outcomes.

MINYMA UNINYPA

As part of the *Aboriginal Ranger Program*, the Pila Nguru Aboriginal Corporation received funding of \$770,000 for ‘Minyma Uninypa’ – the three-year project that will employ and train Spinifex women rangers in collecting and growing seeds to help support their community.

Since being announced as a recipient of round one funding earlier this year, Pila Nguru has established the Minyma Uninypa Women Ranger team. Led by Spinifex women ranger coordinator Samantha Doudle, four of the team – Marie Brown, Nancy Donegan, Debbie Hansen and Rochelle Franks – have already visited DBCA’s Threatened

Flora Seed Centre in Perth for a week of training. Herbarium botanist Ryonen Butcher gave the rangers insight into plant identification, before Andrew Crawford spent the remainder of the week training the women about seed, including how to clean and quantify collections, how to test their quality, how to store them to ensure their longevity, and how to germinate them.

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Learning how to store and propagate seeds builds on their traditional knowledge about when to collect seeds, which Nancy Donegan says is based around the seasons: “the calls of different birds, the sun and the stars”.

The training will also help the women participate in the preparation and planning of Anglo Gold Ashtanti’s Tropicana Gold Mine rehabilitation program and potentially take on fee-for-service activities while also progressing their qualifications towards a three-year Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management.

PARTNERSHIPS

Anglo Gold Ashtanti, Great Victoria Desert Biodiversity Trust, Red Dirt Seeds

and the Australian Government are significant supporters of the project and have contributed \$191,000 in funding and in-kind contributions worth \$278,000. Anglo Gold Ashtanti has provided a transportable laboratory building for the Spinifex women to use and the Australian Government is connecting the electrical and plumbing services, while the Great Victoria Desert Biodiversity Trust is providing \$16,000 for laboratory and seed collecting equipment. DBCA, in addition to the one-week training program in Perth, will support a visit by Andrew to Tjuntjuntjara each year to assist with further training and review the seed collection and storage program.

FOLLOWING FOOTSTEPS

The Minyma Uninypa Team will join the award-winning Spinifex Land Management team, based in Tjuntjuntjara, which uses adaptive management to plan and achieve land management outcomes over the 94,000-square-kilometre area they manage on behalf of the Spinifex, Pilki and Mamungari traditional owners.

The processes and outcomes from Minyma Uninypa will be shared widely with other Indigenous land management groups, including the Indigenous Desert Alliance, 10 Deserts project and the Great Victoria Desert Adaptive Management Partnership.



Above Sandalwood is one species found in the Great Victoria Desert.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Above right The Aboriginal Training Program is providing career pathways for Aboriginal people.

Below right Nancy Donegan weighing seed with Samantha Doudle.
Photos – Andrew Crawford/DBCA

Aboriginal Ranger Program

The State Government's *Aboriginal Ranger Program* aims to protect the environment and leverage the social and economic benefits that employment provides in regional and remote areas. It will provide a pathway for Aboriginal people to develop careers in land and sea management and create long-term opportunities in Aboriginal communities.

The \$20 million five-year program is working to increase employment and training of Aboriginal people in land and sea management, including conservation, cultural, tourism and education activities across a range of tenures. This investment supports new and established ranger groups across WA to manage Country in partnership with public and private sectors.

Significant progress has been made in implementing the program since it began in September 2017. The Spinifex women project was one of 13 recipients provided with funding under round one of the program, which totalled \$8.5 million. The range of applications received from across the State, including the Kimberley, Midwest and South West regions strongly reflects the aspirations of Aboriginal people to establish new ranger programs to manage their Country.

The first round will see 85 new jobs created, of which more than half will be for female rangers.

Aboriginal people are being employed to carry out work such as biodiversity monitoring and research, management of tourism and cultural sites, weeds and feral animal control, prescribed burning, bushfire suppression and environmental protection works.

Consultation with Aboriginal groups was carried out to ensure Aboriginal knowledge and aspirations informed the program's design and delivery.

The ranger program is empowering Aboriginal people and providing real jobs and training that will assist in building stronger communities and a better economy for the future.



TJUNTJUNTJARA'S FUTURE

Through meeting and talking with the women during their training in Perth, it was not hard to see the enthusiasm, positivity and excitement that this new opportunity will bring to their community.

Nancy said that empowering women to take a role in the ranger program was important to the young girls of the community; it will teach them where to find seeds and to understand when they are ripe according to the seasons. More importantly, it will provide an opportunity for elders to teach young people, because, as Nancy says, it's "easier to teach young people and learn while their elders are around".

With a population of about 150 people, which can grow to 500 during cultural business occasions, Tjuntjuntjara has a small community school of about 30 children. A popular and important part of the school is its *Learning on Country*

program, where students go bush to experience and understand their culture and how to care for it under the guidance of rangers.

According to the Spinifex women, being a ranger is seen as the ultimate 'dream job' by many children. And now, thanks to the Seed Women project, young girls will have a career path, which, as ranger leader Samantha Doudle says, "is really special in an area as remote as this with its lack of employment opportunities".

Essentially, this is what the *Aboriginal Ranger Program* is all about – building stronger, more resilient communities by creating more jobs and leadership roles for people on Country that achieve wide-reaching benefits. Added to this is successful cross-cultural engagement, traditional knowledge transfer and capacity building and business

development opportunities. But what is really special about the Minyma Uninypa is that it recognises and celebrates the vital role that Aboriginal women play in caring for Country in remote areas, and empowers them to continue and expand their work to benefit generations to come.



Mitzi Vance was a DBCA projects coordinator. For more information about the *Aboriginal Ranger Program*, visit www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/parks/aboriginal-involvement/504-aboriginal-ranger-program