



Indigenous led conservation Empowering people, community and connection to country

When Western Australia's Aboriginal Ranger Program launched in 2017, it was expected to create jobs and help with conservation outcomes. More than halfway through the program, it is the strong social and cultural impacts that are being most deeply felt throughout communities.

by Dr Kate Rodger and Dr Amanda Smith





In the more than 50,000 years prior to European settlement, Aboriginal people practiced a complex system of land management. Australia is home to hundreds of individual nations or countries, each with distinct cultural practices and methods of flourishing in a harsh environment.

Sharing of knowledge and caring for country is a fundamental part of Aboriginal culture. In modern times, caring for country is supported through Aboriginal ranger programs across Australia that combine traditional methods and generational knowledge with modern technologies and land management practices.

The ranger programs are managed by Aboriginal organisations, strongly guided by Aboriginal elders and community, with support and funding from government.

In remote communities, job opportunities are scarce and being employed as a ranger is not only helping with income and training, but with confidence and a sense of purpose.

In Western Australia, Aboriginal rangers are assisting the State Government to manage country and protect the environment with extraordinary results.

MAKING PROGRESS

WA's Aboriginal Ranger Program is a five-year, \$20-million initiative helping Aboriginal organisations manage country



and protect the environment with support from the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) and across government.

Since the program was launched in 2017, 35 grants have been awarded to 28 projects across the State. Mid-way through the program, more than 300 people have already been employed, of which more than half are women, and \$11 million in funding has been leveraged from project partners.

Rangers undertake land and sea management including conservation, cultural, tourism and education activities across a range of tenures. Education and training are key components of the program, with almost 292 rangers commencing training (including on-the-job training) and 40 TAFE qualifications being achieved.

The key benefit identified from the Aboriginal Ranger Program was the creation of jobs and the associated

income. Jobs are often scarce and welfare dependency is high in remote areas. The opportunity for employment as rangers addresses this barrier and this program creates meaningful jobs with real benefits, whether casual, part time or full time.

The employment of rangers creates significant social, cultural and economic benefits as well as contributing to improved community wellbeing and resilience through building leadership skills and enabling partnerships with private sector organisations.

Fieldwork, including interviews and participant observation, were undertaken with two case study projects that involved Bardi Jawi Rangers, Nyul Nyul Rangers, Karajarri Rangers and Ngurrara Rangers in the Kimberley, as part of a scientific process to evaluate the social outcomes of the program. A third case study with Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers has also commenced.



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Main Bardi Jawi rangers.

Inset left Bardi Jawi ranger inspects a tree.

Photos – Shem Bisluk/DBCA

Inset right Karajarri rangers.

Photo – Amanda Smith/DBCA

Above Bardi Jawi ranger tends to seedlings.

Left Nyul Nyul rangers.

Opposite page

Above left Nyul Nyul rangers planting seeds.

Right Dampier Peninsula.

Photos – Shem Bisluk/DBCA

ABORIGINAL RANGER PROGRAM

FUNDED PROJECTS



Learn more about WA's Aboriginal Ranger Program

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



In their words...

DBCA research staff visited two case study projects in the Kimberley and spoke to rangers and key partners about the program. This is what they said:



COUNTRY AND COMMUNITY

“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. We need more women working with the rangers.” *Elder, Karajarri*

“Elders are teaching us. Being back out on country to see where our ancestors came from. Elders are happy and proud that sharing knowledge to us – being a ranger gives us that opportunity.” *Ranger, Ngurrara*

“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” *Ranger, Nyul Nyul*

“My family and people in community, every day when I walk to work with my uniform on they look at me and are very supportive. I have got the whole community behind me. Seeing me as first young ranger at the age of 18 when I first started. I felt really proud of myself.” *Ranger, Karajarri*



PARTNERSHIPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

“We have seen some of our rangers come into this program who are very shy and don't like to talk much but through experiences like going out with elders, going out with project partners, working with Parks and Wildlife they slowly get more confidence.” *Indigenous Protected Area Coordinator*

“Social benefits and conservation benefits are massive. In terms of the return on investment is massive, in terms of reduced cost for government, in terms of social welfare and health that has been shown.” *Key Partner*

“With the ranger program a nice balance, got some good partnerships synergies happening in ranger program. Empowering Aboriginal organisations to be able to run their own show and not need a KLC or DBCA.” *Key Partner*

“They [rangers] get an opportunity to learn and share their culture and when the department 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 Partner*

EMPLOYMENT

“Pretty hard to get job around here and seeing the application on the board I really wanted it and wanted to be a ranger.” *Ranger, Bardi Jawi*

“It is hard to have jobs around here If I didn't have ranger program I would be at home with no income. Hanging off family, asking parents for money.” *Ranger, Bardi Jawi*

“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 family.” *Ranger, Karajarri*

“We see significant benefits for Aboriginal people through that employment [as rangers] and we also see the individuals who are employed really develop a skill set and confidence and being able to get out on country and undertake those land management activities. From this we see a real benefit to the individuals.” *Key Partner*

EMPOWERING WOMEN

Aboriginal women play an important role in strengthening social and family networks in the community. Traditionally the Indigenous ranger workforce has been male dominated. The Aboriginal Ranger Program focuses on employing women rangers to promote social change where by women act as leaders in the community and drivers of change. It also promotes gender equality so women can access opportunities that are available to men.

“Two different reasons for really promoting women. One is that within Australia we do still have really significant gender inequality. This is part of bridging that gap. 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. Women also have different knowledge bases and they bring different things to the program and different sets of knowledge that let you do more so you manage in a fuller way. Then there is also the community aspect of it. In community it is really well evidenced that women are leaders and that women are a big



part of shaping the positive drivers in a community. Women demonstrating what it is to have a job, women having money and using that in a really positive way. I think women are key change agents in community and getting them into the ranger program is essential.” *Key Partner*

“Get more women looking after country. All men used to get the jobs so good to have women getting jobs. Provide for family. Getting our certificates and education which is good.”

Ranger, Bardi Jawi



Fast facts:



- 35 grants awarded
- 304 people employed so far
- 161 women (52.9 per cent) employed under the program
- 40 TAFE qualifications achieved
- 292 training opportunities
- 215 people completed training*
- 53 partnerships with government/not for profit/other organisation
- 22 joint operations with government agencies
- 115 trips to significant sites
- 82 sites where work has been undertaken to protect heritage values
- 411 ha of weed management
- 965,005 ha of feral animal management
- 129 ha actively managed for improved land management (e.g. habitat restoration, fencing, erosion management)
- 11,588 ha prescribed burning and bushfire suppression
- 86 flora or fauna surveys carried out
- 589 km of track managed

Figures as at June 2020. *Including on-the-job training.

Opposite page

- 1) Ardyaloon (One Arm Point).
 - 2) Nyul Nyul ranger.
- Photos – Shem Bisluk/DBCA
- 3) Ngurrara rangers.
 - 4) Bardi Jawi rangers.
- Photo – Amanda Smith/DBCA

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- 5) Bardi Jawi rangers.
 - 6) Karajarri ranger.
- Photos – Shem Bisluk/DBCA
Photo – Amanda Smith/DBCA

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Additional input provided by **Dampier Peninsula Women Rangers** and **Karajarri-Ngurrara Rangers**.

Anonymity of those quoted has been maintained in line with social research best practice.