
THOMAS

Caring for Country

Environmental benefits from the Aboriginal Ranger Program

by Dr Kate Rodger and Dr Amanda Smith

Traditional Owners have been caring for Country for millennia. After colonisation, their connection to country and ability to care for Country was sometimes forcibly removed but the Aboriginal Ranger Program is playing a part in restoring that connection, with benefits for the rangers themselves, the community and, importantly, the environment.

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Left Ngurrara Rangers on Country.
Right Bardi Jawi Country, Dampier Peninsula.
Photos – Shem Bisluk/DBCA

Above Nyul Nyul rangers at controlled burn.
Photo – Sophie Henderson/DBCA

Working on and caring for Country is a significant part of Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal people were disempowered across Australia after colonisation. Being forced off their Country resulted in reduced access to their traditional way of life and ability to care for Country. They also lost their legal control, coinciding with the loss of some of the key components of their culture including language, Law/Lore, spirituality and family.

"A lot of people have lost that connection," a Ranger Coordinator said. "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."

However, 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.

In 2017, a state-wide Aboriginal Ranger Program (ARP) commenced in Western Australia as a five-year, $20 million initiative for Aboriginal organisations to manage Country and protect the environment with support from the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA). Through the ARP, rangers are able to spend time on Country, learning about and caring for Country.

"So much knowledge comes from just being on Country," a Land and Sea Manager said. "The drive in to where we are going can be just as important because the old people tell me about all these things. If you don't know the landscape, it can look quite similar as you are driving through but as you get told about everything you begin to understand about Country."

By spending time on Country rangers are able to learn how to care for Country.

"People used to know when they could hunt and catch things from what was flowering or what was happening in the environment," a Ranger Coordinator said. "So, through the ranger program they have got that opportunity to develop that understanding of how it all works."

WA's Aboriginal Ranger Program has funded more than 30 different ranger programs from 2017 to December 2021, with more than 800 people being employed across the State and almost 50 percent of those roles being filled by women.

A unique approach was taken of funding ranger groups on and off tenure, with on-tenure referring to DBCA-managed lands and water. Across the suite of different projects, rangers have been undertaking environmental work on Country including fire management, biodiversity monitoring and research, feral animal and weed management,

Hear directly from Aboriginal rangers about their experiences

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To end of June 2022 there has been:

More than 7200 hectares actively managed

More than 2000 kilometres of track managed

More than 270 threatened flora and fauna surveys

More than 1,350,000 hectares managed for feral animals

More than 2000 hectares managed for weeds

traditional knowledge transfer, cultural site management and management of visitors or tourism and tourism assets. All of these are helping to deliver a range of environmental and cultural benefits.

TANGIBLE OUTCOMES

The fundamental outcome of the program is the increased capacity within the Aboriginal community to undertake land and sea management. This caring for Country encompasses conservation and maintenance of tangible aspects including the flora and fauna.

A number of environmental outcomes have enhanced the protection of cultural and biodiversity values through management activities undertaken by Aboriginal rangers.

"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 our Elders," a Woman Ranger Coordinator said. "We want to keep our language and culture alive and in doing so the transfer of knowledge is the key."

A number of environmental benefits were identified and include the removal of feral animals, weeds, biodiversity surveys, fire management as well as protecting cultural sites.

"Aboriginal people have a special connection with land," said the CEO of an Aboriginal Corporation. "There are elements of Aboriginal culture that have 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 complementary relationship between Traditional Owners and non-Indigenous people coming together as a collective to care for Country."

TWO-WAY LEARNING

Working together and the sharing of knowledge, often referred to as two-way learning, draws upon western science as well as indigenous cultural knowledge

Top Esperance Tjaltjraak Country.

Inset Karajarri Ranger showing a native plant.
Photos – Shem Bisluk/DBCA

Above Bardi Jawi Oorany rangers in a greenhouse.
Photo – Amanda Smith/DBCA

"[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 [the] 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 Ranger)

to care for Country. This approach encourages collaboration and sharing of knowledge between all those managing the land and sea as Aboriginal people undertake traditional practices when caring for Country whilst incorporating scientific research.

Two-way learning has a positive impact, not just on looking after Country but also for non-Aboriginal managers, funding partners and the broader community who gain a greater exposure and appreciation of traditional knowledge.

"They [Aboriginal people] get an opportunity to learn and share their culture," a key project partner said. "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."

"The combination of those two things is really powerful when we are working with Traditional Owners managing Country."

A good example of this is Traditional Owners working with DBCA on and off tenure in helping to share and gain knowledge of cultural fire practices and how these principles can assist in guiding the use of fire in today's landscapes

As Traditional Owners, Aboriginal people have a cultural responsibility to care for Country using fire as a key management tool. Traditional Aboriginal burning practices have been severely disrupted with many of WA's landscapes changing significantly due to the establishment of permanent communities, infrastructure, agriculture and other industries.

Through the program, Aboriginal Rangers have undertaken prescribed burning and bushfire suppression over more than four million hectares of land.

"We do right way fire," said the CEO of an Aboriginal Corporation. "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."

HEALTHY COUNTRY

Conserving the natural environment, or caring for Country, is a key focus of the ranger groups.

"We have a healthy Country plan that was developed and articulates our priorities" an Indigenous Protected Area Coordinator said.

Above Bardi Jawi Oorany rangers and DBCA staff spotting Gouldian finches.
Photo – Shem Bisluk/DBCA

"Looking after plants and animals and knowledge, indigenous knowledge transfer, cultural sites, wetlands and springs (no rivers) and the coastline, which is quite pristine."

The Aboriginal Ranger Program provided resources for biodiversity monitoring and management to better protect the environment.

"We do lot water monitoring and lot of jila [water] sites and we do lot of camera trapping, bilby monitoring, reptiles, night parrots," an Aboriginal ranger said.

"We also do trapping of 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."

With the support of key funding partners, several of the ranger groups are involved with the collection, storage and propagation of native seeds. Rangers

are spending time collecting seeds from culturally significant plants, as well as rare and endangered species to contribute to seed banking and the production of bush medicines.

"It is good learning that on Country and seeing the different bush plants and looking after them," an Aboriginal ranger said. "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."

Rangers are trained and learning skills in propagation and regeneration of vegetation.

"I like doing the seed collection, I find that interesting," an Aboriginal ranger said. "Working out when to pick them and how to store them. I like learning on Country. Actually, going out and finding and seeing it for yourself. I didn't know much…but by just going out I'm learning about Country, I'm learning the scientific names for all the plants."

CARING FOR COUNTRY

The outcome of being back on Country, caring for Country is a healthy Country (see 'Connection to Boodja: A healing process' *LANDSCOPE* Spring 2021).

"If you have got a healthy Country, it means that you are going to be healthier in yourself mentally and physically," an Aboriginal ranger said. "Looking after it [Country] and taking care of it makes Country healthy."

The environmental outcomes and benefits identified from the Aboriginal Ranger Program are extensive. In March 2021, the State Government acknowledged the success of the program and committed $66.5 million in additional funding to continue and expand the program from 2021 to 2026.

This has been well received by Aboriginal communities because as they have identified, if there were no Aboriginal rangers on Country then the "…impact would be not only on the people but also the conservation and protection of Country, 'cause if we don't have rangers then we can't look after Country," an Aboriginal ranger said.

"The government…they need somebody out here looking after Country, nobody else can do it," a Ranger Coordinator said. "They need Aboriginal people."

Top left Esperance Tjaltjraak rangers marking trails.

Top right Ngurrara rangers spending time out on Country.

Above left Esperance Tjaltjraak rangers learning about macroinvertebrate sampling.
Photos – Amanda Smith/DBCA

Above Ngurrara Ranger explaining bush medicines.
Photo – Shem Bisluk/DBCA

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Editor's note: names throughout this article have been withheld for cultural and best practice research purposes.

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