

COMBINING THE EFFORTS OF ABORIGINES AND LAND MANAGEMENT
AGENCIES IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

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More than 885 000 km² of land in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia is vested as Aboriginal Freehold, leasehold or mission titles and most of this land is in the spinifex deserts. A further area of over 900 000 km² is held as vacant crown land. About 72 000 Aborigines live in or in association with these spinifex areas and the majority of people have a very strong attachment to the land. Approximately 1.8 million km² of the spinifex deserts have substantial traditional Aboriginal ownership or strong custodial claims and it follows therefore that Aborigines must play a prominent role in any well conceived programmes for nature conservation in these areas.

The challenge for nature conservation agencies is to demonstrate to Aborigines that important benefits can be derived from conservation programmes in their land and areas for which they have a cultural, if not legal, interest. It must be clear that nature conservation is a legitimate and relevant land use before any real Aboriginal commitment can be expected. Agencies must be prepared to modify programme methodologies to accommodate Aboriginal interests and cultural procedures.

Biological survey, species re-introductions and fire management programmes are readily understood and offer a "soft" first contact with Aboriginal groups while confidences are established. These programmes offer short term employment opportunities, enable people to return to country, "look after it", and return culturally significant species that have recently become extinct. Feral animal control, tourism, education and formal land management agreements are some of many programmes that might follow. Direct payment to communities might be applicable where formal conservation areas (e.g. Uluru National Park) are established on Aboriginal freehold land. Training and longer term employment benefits can accrue when formal agreements are entered into. Relevant employment is especially important in most communities because job opportunities are usually very rare.

Nature conservation agencies benefit from joint activities through harnessing the knowledge and skills of Aborigines. Participation in programmes greatly improves the extension of conservation objectives among a very significant body of land holders, and for freehold areas, extends the area in which the agencies can effect conservation effort.

Both groups benefit from the public recognition of the cooperative efforts and appreciable levels of funding can be secured for such activities, especially from Federal agencies. The Bureau of Rural Resources supports feral animal and weed control projects through funding employment, training, certain

capital costs and plant hire. DEET supports training programmes with funding for training, trainers and incidental costs, but requires guaranteed employment for people at the end of their course. The ANPWS provides funding to employ Aborigines in nature conservation but does not generally cover other programme costs. Thousands or several tens of thousands of dollars are available under the above schemes.