

## Indigenous Protected Areas and Indigenous Rangers: Protecting nature, creating jobs, transforming lives

*Indigenous Protected Areas and Indigenous ranger programs are delivering environmental, social and economic benefits for all Australians. These successful programs need to be secured and expanded.*

The Australian federal budget for 2017-18 provides an important opportunity to secure Australia's commitment to protecting our iconic landscapes and increasing jobs for Indigenous people, particularly in remote and regional areas by securing further Federal Government funding for Indigenous land and sea management. Two federal government funded programs, the **Indigenous Rangers (Working on Country)** program and the **Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA)** program are delivering both essential environmental services<sup>1</sup> for all Australians and major employment and social benefits in Indigenous communities<sup>2,3</sup> in accordance with federal government national priorities.<sup>4</sup>

We must recognise and invest in programs that are positive and proven to work. The Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs are now in their 10<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> year of successful operation respectively. They continue to deliver outstanding results across many different contexts in remote, rural and regional Australia. At a time when increasing amounts of government expenditure are being allocated to improve the social and economic status of Indigenous Australians, such as through reducing the dramatic overrepresentation of Indigenous Australians in prison, we must understand, secure and grow our investment in positive initiatives that are proven to work for Indigenous Australians. In the case of the Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs, these successes are being achieved along with major public benefits to all Australians through healthier environmental outcomes.

This submission proposes that the 2017-18 federal budget secures these successful programs into the future by:

1. Doubling the annual funding for Indigenous ranger programs and Indigenous Protected Areas and therefore doubling Indigenous jobs in areas of most need by 2021;
2. Extending the length of contracts to generate the stability required for Indigenous groups and individuals to build capacity and deliver lasting social economic and environmental outcomes through these programs;
3. Establishing a long-term target of 5000 ranger positions nationally to meet both environmental needs at scale across the continent and fully realise the social and economic benefits of these programs.

Unlike many programs seeking to provide gainful employment and business opportunities for remote Indigenous communities, the Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Area programs have been uniquely successful. These programs have consistently and repeatedly achieved their employment and environmental targets. They have significantly contributed towards improved socio-economic and health status of participating Indigenous communities. They have significantly improved the environmental status of more than 67 million hectares of lands of high conservation value representing almost half of Australia's National Reserve System.

### Understanding the success of Indigenous land and sea management

The resurgence of Indigenous engagement in land management over the last 25 years has been driven by local and grassroots efforts, with strikingly successful results.<sup>7,8,9</sup> Indigenous people are delivering essential environmental services across Australia's landscape by: controlling invasive weeds and feral animals;

maintaining quarantine security; protecting threatened species; managing fire in the landscape; reducing greenhouse gas emissions; and, contributing to vital environmental research.

It has become increasingly clear that the success of Indigenous land and sea management in Australia provides great value to all Australians not only for the environment, but also through positive employment, social and cultural outcomes for Indigenous Australians.<sup>12,13,3</sup> These on-ground efforts depend on the quality of local, grassroots Indigenous organisational ownership, governance, and support, as well as the continuity and growth of key federal government programs.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Australian Government's Indigenous ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs**

The Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Area programs were first implemented by the Howard Coalition Federal Government through the federal environment portfolio in 2007 and 1997 respectively.<sup>14,15</sup> While funding has been maintained since the federal election in 2013, administrative changes have brought responsibility for these programs primarily under the coordination of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Indigenous Affairs Minister. In 2016 the Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister publicly committed the government to extending existing Indigenous ranger contracts by two years to June 2020.<sup>18</sup>

Due to their strong environmental and Indigenous employment outcomes<sup>2,3</sup>, local health and social benefits<sup>7,19</sup>, strong public support<sup>20</sup>, and emphatic support by Indigenous communities<sup>21</sup>, Indigenous rangers and IPA programs continue to attract cross-partisan support federally.<sup>22,23,24,25,26,27</sup> Federal government leadership and clear policy direction to strengthen support for these key programs is vital to our ability to manage Australia's environmental issues, particularly in remote Outback Australia, and to make a major contribution to addressing employment and social disadvantage of Indigenous Australians.

The programs' success to date has been achieved by program learning which builds on existing local Indigenous efforts and creates more pragmatic, secure, and predictable core funding arrangements including for Indigenous ranger and ranger coordinator wages and basic operational support.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous ranger groups can be started, supported and retained by local and regional Indigenous organisations while delivering a range of environmental and cultural heritage management services.<sup>11,28</sup> Indigenous Protected Areas provide an avenue by which Indigenous land can be voluntarily brought into Australia's National Reserve System<sup>29</sup>, while clearly establishing local land and sea management priorities and governance, balancing environment, cultural management and local economic needs.

The Indigenous rangers program supplies vital core funding to 110 Indigenous ranger groups around Australia.<sup>2</sup> It has been delivered pragmatically to ensure work is designed within local and regional capacity to deliver outcomes. The program's approach provides sufficient flexibility and dependability to enable building of skills and capacity. An initial target of 730 ranger positions by 2018 has been met and exceeded with at least 777 full time equivalent positions currently being supported by this program.<sup>13</sup> *There is strong demand for more.*<sup>30,31</sup>

If the projected total area of Indigenous Protected Areas (an area larger in size than New South Wales) is to be managed effectively, a long term target of 5000<sup>a</sup> Indigenous rangers is essential.

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<sup>a</sup> 5000 rangers across Australia's existing Indigenous Protected Area estate of 67.2million ha would amount to just one ranger per 13,400ha. The current projected IPA estate alone is on track to reach 80million ha by 2018. 5000 rangers across this estate would be one ranger per 16,000ha. The Indigenous estate currently already held in freehold title or exclusive possession native title, which is predominantly in the Outback and remote areas, is over 170 million ha or around 20% of Australia's land mass.<sup>32</sup> 5000 rangers across this estate would represent 1 ranger per 34,000ha.

The Indigenous Protected Areas program is now a key contributor to Australia's protected areas network of the National Reserve System. Currently there are 74 declared IPAs in Australia, making up over 44% of Australia's National Reserve System and covering more than 67 million hectares.<sup>33</sup>

Demand for new IPAs is high but *cannot be met under current budget constraints*. Several further large areas, totaling well over ten million hectares are candidates for IPAs in the next few years. These new opportunities are due to land claims in progress, growing awareness and capacity of local Indigenous organisations that have not yet bid for projects<sup>30</sup>, and recognition of IPAs as realistic alternative economic options in many remote areas.

As well as enabling a strategic, coordinated, accountable framework and regional plan for environmental management, IPAs are proving a key catalyst in increasing work skills and readiness in remote Indigenous communities, creating new economic opportunities through tourism and generating real jobs where need is greatest.<sup>32</sup>

A long-term commitment to expand Indigenous ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs will assist on-ground environmental management to reach areas currently unmanaged and will also underpin a long-term, secure government vision of Indigenous partnerships for environmental protection and increased Indigenous employment.

### **An opportunity to invest in and secure success**

This year, 2017, marks eleven years since the formation of the 'Close the Gap' campaign<sup>35</sup> to address Indigenous disadvantage, and nine years since the COAG National Indigenous Reform Agreement set targets in six key measures for addressing Indigenous disadvantage, covering improved life expectancy, child mortality, education and employment.<sup>36</sup> In December 2015, the Productivity Commission reported that government is failing to meet five of those six targets and that this failure is particularly pronounced in figures for remote area employment.<sup>36</sup> At the report's release, the Chair of the Commission called on the Australian Government to refocus on "what works" particularly in the delivery of Indigenous employment given the multiple benefits jobs deliver.<sup>36,37</sup>

In 2014, the Productivity Commission's 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage - Key Indicators' report highlighted the success of Indigenous ranger positions in creating "real jobs" particularly in remote areas where many other programs had struggled to deliver.<sup>4</sup> In December 2015, the Commission reiterated the need to understand and extend such programs that work.<sup>36</sup> Again, in 2016, the Productivity Commission highlighted both the Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs as outstanding successes in their latest 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage – Key Indicators' report, which was otherwise damning of the many programs that could demonstrate no clear outcomes. This report stated that for both the Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs:

"For government, the value created from the employment outcomes include low cost land management as well as skills development and increased engagement in the work force, reduced income support payments and increased income tax, less violence and safer communities."<sup>38</sup>

## **Proven social and economic benefits of Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas**

Research undertaken over five years by Social Ventures Australia into a group of Aboriginal communities in Western Australia reported significant avoided costs to government, particularly through reduced interactions with the justice system, due to the engagement of Aboriginal individuals and communities in 'on country' Indigenous ranger and land management programs. This included 15,000 less individual nights in prison over five years across several communities. This is in part due to significant reductions in patterns of alcohol consumption amongst individuals working on country as Indigenous rangers.<sup>3</sup>

Women make up approximately 36% of Indigenous rangers. Flexible arrangements mean women can fulfil family and community responsibilities while working.<sup>40</sup>

Job retention is high with a retention rate of 84% for fulltime and part-time employees.<sup>40</sup>

In 2014-15, 65% of projects undertook commercial activities such as fee for service environmental management.<sup>40</sup>

A review conducted by Social Ventures Australia for the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet published in 2016 reported a social return on investment of up to \$3.40 for every dollar spent in Indigenous Protected Areas, with those areas employing Indigenous rangers demonstrating higher returns. A review by Allens Consulting found the true costs of the *Working on Country* program were at least 17-23% less than book costs when increased taxation revenue and decreased welfare payments were taken into account.<sup>39</sup>

Indigenous ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs promote stability and capacity for organisations and Indigenous ranger groups, encouraging the ability to take advantage of opportunities, for example terrestrial carbon management, additional fee for service contracts such as weed control, research support and mining rehabilitation, philanthropic investments and other business partnerships. The federal government role in supporting that organisational capacity through Indigenous ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs is therefore vital to realising broader opportunities for jobs and income as well as tackling large scale environmental degradation.

Establishing a 10-15 year or longer horizon for funding is critical to give potential partners and donors a strong signal that these programs are durable, supported by government and fundamental to long-term environmental management. Contract arrangements for these programs should be brought in line with long-term funding contracts such as Environmental Stewardship Agreements with farmers, currently based around contracts of up to 15 years<sup>41</sup> subject to regular review and the satisfactory meeting of management criteria.

Given the very successful operation of Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs to date, the ongoing strong support from Indigenous groups for their continuation and the environmental demand for more jobs, there is a compelling case for their expansion in the upcoming budget. Both programs need long-term funding certainty and increases in this budget to allow the sector to continue to strengthen.

## **Ensuring certainty in the Indigenous land and sea management sector**

The shift of many Indigenous programs to a more centralised administration structure under the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet has had unintentional consequences of reducing clarity, departmental expertise and program support. This has contributed to increased uncertainty over the

Australian Government's ongoing commitment to Indigenous land and sea management and particularly the Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs. It is strongly recommended that dedicated funding programs for both Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas are established with 'ongoing' status in the federal budget and clearly delineated in the budget papers due to the specialised and technical nature of this work and the need for carefully tailored management and support.

It is critical that there is close integration and coordination with the Department of Environment to ensure the elements that have made the programs successful to date are not unintentionally lost due to the new administrative arrangements. Close integration of environment and cultural management and proactive contract management by government agencies well attuned to the practical environmental and cultural outcomes of the programs is not incidental to the unprecedented success of these programs; it is fundamental to their ongoing success.

The federal government commitment over the next decade should grow the Indigenous land and sea management sector to 5000 positions. This is a reasonable estimate of the scale of management needed to avoid a steady degradation and decline of Outback ecosystems through lack of management. This would deliver effective management across the 80 million hectares predicted to be established as Indigenous Protected Areas by 2018 and support further extension over the existing Australian Indigenous owned estate of some 170 million hectares. It would also provide a highly significant increase in Indigenous jobs, using models proven to be successful and proven to deliver extensive social and economic benefit, in some of the most economically disadvantaged regions in Australia.

**Recommendations: This budget is a clear opportunity to highlight the Australian Government's practical commitment to generating Indigenous jobs and addressing Australia's pressing environmental needs by supporting increased and more secure funding for Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas.**

**This submission proposes:**

- 1. A commitment by the federal government to double the funding and therefore jobs supported by the Working on Country Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs over the forward estimates; that is, establish a target of 1600 full time equivalent supported ranger positions across both programs by June 2021. This will constitute a gradual increase of funding up to an effective doubling of existing current annual funding of approximately \$94m per annum across both programs to approximately \$188m per annum on 2016 figures by 2021.**
- 2. The extension of the length of contracts to 2030, based on annual performance and accountability, to support security, forward planning, continuity and capacity development in local organisations. Both programs to be given 'ongoing' status in their relevant portfolio budgets to increase clarity and certainty.**
- 3. The establishment of a long term target of 5000 full time equivalent dedicated Indigenous Ranger jobs nationally, demonstrating the government's real commitment, alongside state governments and Indigenous organisations, to addressing social and economic disadvantage among Indigenous Australians and to addressing Australia's large scale environmental management needs.**

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