



2022-23 Pre-Budget Submission

Country Needs People is seeking increased investment in world leading, responsible management and stewardship of Country by Indigenous Australians as a part of a post-Covid recovery

January 2022



About Country Needs People

Country Needs People is an independent, non-partisan organisation dedicated to supporting Indigenous land and sea management Australia wide. With a network of over 40 frontline organisational partners and over 100,000 Australian supporters, Country Needs People works to celebrate and strengthen the success of Indigenous Australians working on Country for the benefit all Australians.

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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Overview of current Indigenous land and sea management programs.....	5
Indigenous Ranger Program	5
Role of ranger programs	6
Indigenous Protected Area Program	7
Role of IPAs	9
Benefits of Indigenous land and sea management programs.....	10
Productivity Commission reports	10
Social Return on Investment studies	10
Closing the Gap targets.....	12
Realising other opportunities	12
Alignment with Australian Government policies.....	13
Challenges facing Indigenous land and sea management programs	14
Sustaining success.....	14
Fire management.....	15
Unmet demand for Indigenous rangers and IPAs	15
Uncertainty of funding for IPAs post 2023	16
Proposed increased investment	16
References	18

Executive Summary

The Federal Budget 2022-23 provides an opportunity for the Australian Government to increase its commitment and investment in successful programs that leverage the knowledge, strength and aspirations of Indigenous Australians. Such an investment would be part of a broader post-covid recovery plan that targets initiatives to increase Indigenous women's employment opportunities and address sustainability, biodiversity loss and climate adaptation.

The Indigenous Ranger and the Indigenous Protected Area programs have been recognised internationally as world-leading, with the latter contributing nearly 50% towards Australia's international commitments to conserve and protect land and sea country for biodiversity outcomes.

These programs have also consistently been documented as delivering major employment, economic and social benefits for Indigenous Australians and communities across Australia that align with government priorities such as Closing the Gap, investing in regional communities and the High Ambition Coalition.

Recent commitments by the Australian Government to fund existing Indigenous ranger groups out to 2028 have been welcomed. There remains however large unmet demand for new groups and additional ranger positions. The increased security of funding to 2028 does not address this unmet demand.

Similarly, recent announcements of proposed new marine Indigenous protected areas and additional land based Indigenous protected areas will not be sufficient to address the Australian Government's commitment to protecting 30% of land and sea Country by 2030, nor will it meet the demand for new Indigenous protected areas from Indigenous communities across Australia.

Further, the ability of the Indigenous Protected Area program to adequately address environmental threats, particularly bushfires and the impact of invasive species on threatened fauna and flora, is undermined by the low levels of funding. While many Indigenous protected areas have the support of indigenous ranger groups under separate funding arrangements, approximately 40% of projects are predominantly reliant on Indigenous Protected Area Program funding alone which is generally inadequate to meet the management needs of the area. That funding is estimated to be less than 1% of the per hectare cost of what the Australian Government would invest in the Parks Australia estate.

A recent report by Country Needs People, [Strong on Country](#), highlights the success of these programs but also underlines the need for consistent and reliable funding to address the threats of lack of certainty and the ability to plan into the future. The report identifies the key elements required to improve and sustain the program outcomes. This submission seeks to address a number of those elements.

Country Needs People proposes that the 2022-23 budget include the following initiatives (with costs over the forward estimates to FY25-26) to address the above issues and to ensure the ongoing success and growth of these programs:

- Over 10 years, **doubling the number of Indigenous rangers** from **1,900** (899 FTE ranger and coordinator positions) to **3,800** (1,799 FTE ranger and coordinator positions) and increasing average funding levels per FTE to allow for increased wages and operating costs for groups. Total cost over the forward estimates – \$145 million.
- **Equal employment opportunities for women** by 2030. In particular this can be realised with constructive engagement with Indigenous communities and organisations, and well-targeted, culturally appropriate initiatives.
- Investing **\$25 million per annum indexed for training, capacity building, networking and infrastructure costs** across the regions to reduce bottlenecks in delivery and to ensure that

all groups have access to infrastructure and equipment to enable them to look after Country. Total cost over the forward estimates - \$102 million.

- Over four years, **doubling support to Indigenous protected areas (IPAs)** to \$46 million pa indexed to enable additional IPAs to be declared and to increase the level of funding, particularly for those groups without separately funded Indigenous ranger teams. Total cost over the forward estimates – \$70 million.
- **Provide funding certainty for Indigenous protected areas** by committing funding for the IPA program to 2028 and bringing contracts into line with the Indigenous Ranger Program (out to 30 June 2028).

A growth plan over the next decade as outlined above will send a clear message that the Government intends to maintain and build its legacy in practical support for Indigenous land and sea management.

Overview of current Indigenous land and sea management programs

The Australian Government through the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) currently funds two highly successful program areas in Indigenous land and sea management. They are the Indigenous Ranger Program (IRP) and the Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) Program.

These programs attract cross-party support federally due to their strong environmental and Indigenous employment outcomes, health and social benefits, strong public support and emphatic support by Indigenous communities.

Indigenous Ranger Program

The Indigenous Ranger Program (IRP) is predominantly funded by NIAA through its Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), Jobs, Land and Economy Stream. From time-to-time other sources provide funds for new, smaller stand-alone initiatives such as the Murray-Darling Indigenous Rangers Program¹.

The program was previously known as the Working on Country Program which was established under the environment portfolio in the Howard Government in 2007. It formalised what had been a series of ad-hoc funding arrangements, mainly across northern Australia for caring for Country activities by Indigenous people.

The Working on Country Program was positively received and taken up by Indigenous organisations was strong reflecting the strong alignment with Indigenous peoples' aspirations and obligations to look after Country.

The program now funds 80 organisations to manage 129 Indigenous ranger groups or teams across Australia. NIAA note that 1,900 Indigenous Australians are employed through the program in casual, part-time and full-time positions or the equivalent of 899 full-time equivalent positions.² There is no publicly available data on the area of Country managed by Indigenous ranger teams.

A further 200 people are employed in non-ranger, support roles across funded organisations to manage the groups.

¹ Australian Government media release, <https://minister.awe.gov.au/pitt/media-release/mdb-indigenous-rangers> 6 April 2021, accessed 18 January 2022

² National Indigenous Australians Agency, <https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/environment/indigenous-ranger-programs>, accessed 17 January 2022.

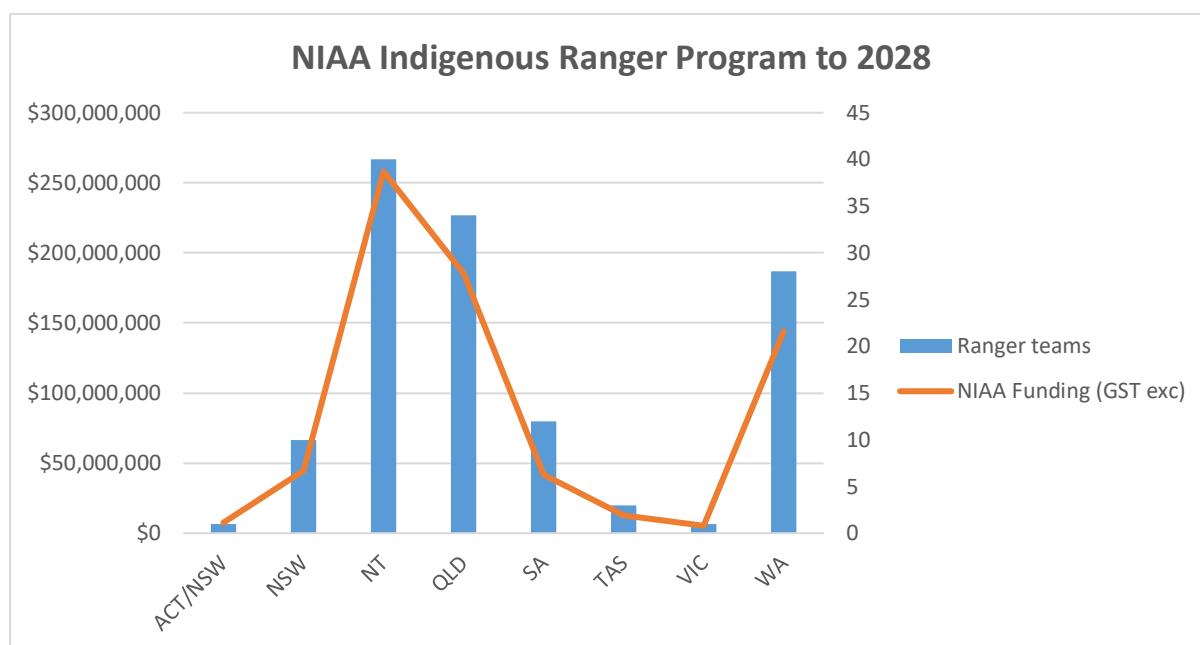
In 2020, the Minister for Indigenous Australians and the Minister for the Environment announced that funding for existing Indigenous ranger groups would be made available out to 2028 at a cost of \$746 million. Subsequently, a closed funding round for existing ranger groups was called and assessed with funding totalling \$699 million allocated. Contracts were expected to be finalised by 31 December 2021.

While the increased certainty provided by funding out to 2028 was publicly welcomed, it did not provide for any new ranger groups or increases in Indigenous ranger jobs.

When the IAS was established in 2014 following the election of the Abbott Government, the initial competitive funding round apparently attracted applications for the equivalent of 700 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions in addition to the existing 700 FTE positions being funded at that time.

Since then another 200 FTE positions have been funded through various mechanisms under the IAS guidelines without any clear strategy and generally without any competitive process. This has resulted in significant frustration for groups who are seeking funding for ranger groups but have been advised that there is no additional funds available.

Figure 1 - Funding for Indigenous Ranger Program to 2028



In mid-2021, the Australian Government announced funding totalling \$3.1 million for five river ranger groups under a new *Murray-Darling Indigenous Ranger Program*. Funds were sourced from the *Murray-Darling Community Investment Package* overseen by the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE). It is expected that up to 27 Indigenous people will be employed with five supervisor or ranger coordinator positions supporting the groups. Funding was for 12 months only from 1 July 2021 with on-going funding yet to be determined.

Contracts with organisations funded under the IRP include the head agreement and implementation of annual work plans. Historically the work plans were compiled in collaboration with departmental staff from broader management plans or healthy country plans developed by the organisations and were reflective of capacity to deliver, and with a clear focus on both environmental and cultural outcomes. However the shift to consolidate numerous Indigenous funding programs under the IAS has reduced the collaborative nature around developing work plans and the ability of government staff to provide practical technical support.

Role of ranger programs

From the outset of the Working on Country Program, the funding of ranger groups was regarded as being for the delivery of essential environmental and cultural services across Australia's ecosystems.

The work of ranger groups is varied depending upon location, the specific natural and cultural values that they are seeking to protect, and the nature and extent of local or regional threats. It may include activities such as:

- management of water sources, particularly those with significant cultural value
- protecting threatened flora species and sustaining the growth of highly valued food or medical plants
- protecting threatened fauna species and promoting traditional harvest species
- controlling invasive weeds such as Gamba Grass and Buffel Grass
- managing feral animals such as cats, foxes, buffalo, camels, goats and pigs, using traps, baiting, on-ground or aerial shooting and contract mustering where appropriate
- reducing the threats from bushfire by reinstating traditional or cultural burning alongside contemporary fire management practices
- managing the impact of visitors on cultural sites and, where feasible supporting economic development opportunities around tourism
- supporting and contributing to vital research, such as through the National Environmental Science Program (NESP)
- supporting Australia's quarantine system through fee for service work under the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS)
- reducing greenhouse gas emissions using the savanna burning method and the generation of Australian Carbon Credit Units (ACCUs) for sale through the Emissions Reduction Fund or the voluntary market.

Where there are collaborative relationships, ranger teams also contribute their traditional and local knowledge and perspectives into the conservation management practices of non-Indigenous agencies and stakeholders such as regional fires services, park managers, local shire councils and private landholders or conservation groups.

Indigenous Protected Area Program

The Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) Program was established in 1997 and has grown steadily under successive governments through a series of grant rounds. While it is currently administered by NIAA, the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE) provides policy input into new funding rounds and program administration.

The process of establishing an IPA includes competitive grant rounds and assessment of the proposed IPA's natural and cultural values against guidelines issued by the Australian Government. These guidelines may include seeking to ensure adequate representation of each of Australia's bioregions in the National Reserve System (NRS).

The IPA Program currently comprises 78 IPAs which protect and conserve 74 million hectares of land and 4 million hectares of sea country. An IPA is created by a voluntary declaration by traditional owners to manage the IPA consistent with international conservation standards³. Once declared, and accepted by the Australian Government, the IPA is then financially supported through the IPA program.

IPAs range in size from 15 hectares through to over 10 million hectares. As can be seen from Table 1, the large IPAs tend to be in Western Australia, Northern Territory and South Australia. Those

³ International Union for the Conservation of Nature, <https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/protected-area-categories>, accessed 19 January 2022

jurisdictions have significant areas under Aboriginal freehold or exclusive possession native title rights. A small number of IPAs operate over multiple tenure types with agreement of non-Indigenous tenure holders.

Table 1 - IPA by jurisdiction and average size

State / territory	No. of IPAs	Average size (hectares)
NSW	11	3,449
NT	15	1,740,329
QLD	12	81,964
SA	10	619,295
TAS	8	1,396
VIC	5	778
WA	17	2,437,018
Total	78	958,510

IPAs in total comprise approximately 46% of Australia’s National Reserve System (NRS)⁴ which forms part of Australia’s international commitments under the Convention for Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Aichi targets to protect a minimum of 17% of land and waters and 10% of coastal and marine areas. These targets are expected to increase in the future.

In June 2021, the Australian Government joined the High Ambition Coalition (HAC) for Nature and People which supports increasing the above targets to 30% land and marine protection by 2030⁵. If this target is increased, the need to increase IPAs to meet these targets will be even greater.

The IPA program funds over 800 Indigenous people in a mix of casual, part-time and full-time positions through predominantly Indigenous organisations which manage the IPAs on behalf of the traditional owners.⁶

About 60% of IPAs are also supported by Indigenous ranger teams that are funded separately by NIAA under the IRP. Where there is no complementary ranger team funded then the capacity of the IPA to manage the Country and the employment opportunities are more limited with only an IPA coordinator being employed on a permanent basis, supported by casual or contract positions filled by traditional owners or external consultants.

There are 22 IPAs currently in the planning and consultation phase pending a potential declaration at some stage. This planning phase varies in length with most groups taking at least a few years to consider and work through management strategies, priorities and governance arrangements.

⁴ National Indigenous Australians Agency, <https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/environment/indigenous-protected-areas-ipas>, accessed 17 January 2022

⁵ Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, <https://www.awe.gov.au/fast-facts-environment#convention-on-biological-diversity>, accessed 19 January 2021

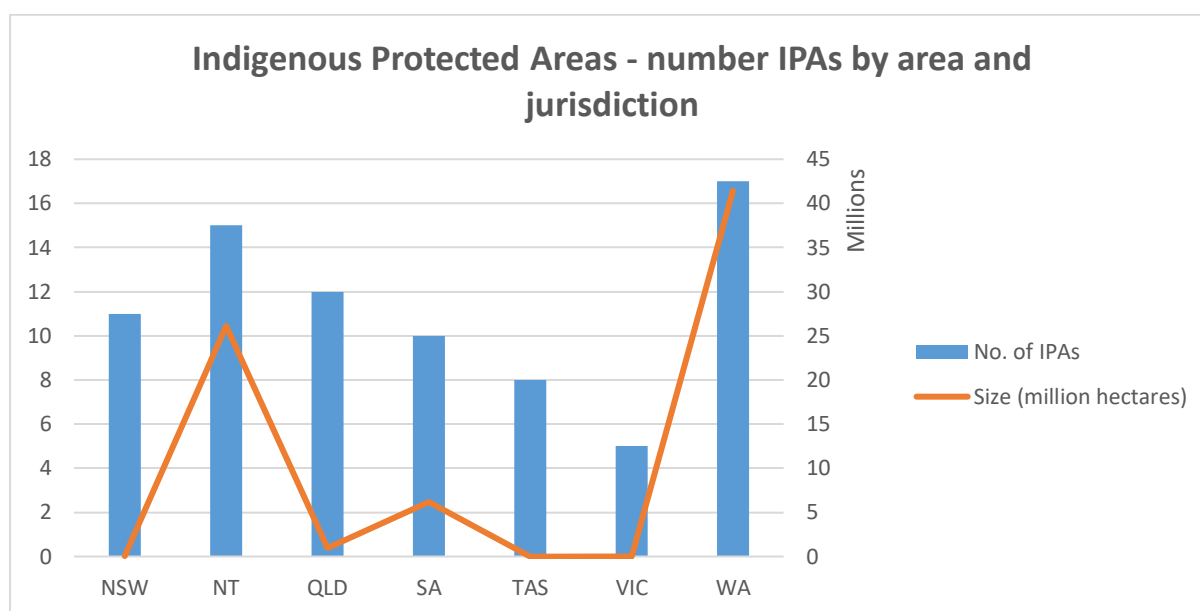
⁶ Wyatt, K and Ley, S, <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/wyatt/2021/expansion-indigenous-protection-land-and-sea>, Joint Media Release, 3 September 2021, accessed 27 January 2022.

In addition to the above, another nine marine IPA projects under the Oceans Leadership Program are expected to be announced in the coming months following a competitive process.

Part of the planning and consultation process that IPAs undertake prior to declaring an IPA is the development of a plan of management agreed to by the traditional owners and NIAA. These plans of management are reviewed periodically and include resourcing and governance arrangements for the management of the IPA.

The cost of the IPA program is estimated to be approximately \$23 million in FY2021-22. Funding for the program is ongoing and is sourced through the National Heritage Trust and NIAA funds. The current program is due to finish in June 2023.⁷

Figure 2 - Area protected by IPAs by state and territory



An independent program evaluation commissioned by NIAA has recently commenced and is due to finalise a report later in 2022. Its role in supporting an extension of funding for the IPA Program post June 2023 is unclear.

Funding provided by NIAA to IPAs is calculated using a formula which takes into consideration various factors including the size, remoteness and complexity of the IPA. Unlike the IRP, there is little publicly available information on funding for each organisation managing IPAs.

Funding is subject to a head agreement and annual work plans which organisations are required to report against. As with the IRP, the ability and availability of departmental staff to engage and support individual projects has declined over time.

Role of IPAs

The process of planning and consulting around IPAs and the regular review of the management plans ensure that local environmental, cultural management, and local economic needs are identified, and management strategies and actions are prioritised.

⁷ Australian Parliament, Environment and Communications Additional Senate Estimates Hearing,⁷ Question Number 97, 8 April 2021

Work and management activities vary for each IPA, however they are generally similar to that done by rangers under the IRP.

In the desert and areas such as Arnhem Land, IPAs are increasingly adjoining each other and providing a corridor of protected areas that will play an important role in climate adaptation, allowing species to move as the climate changes.

Benefits of Indigenous land and sea management programs

While the IRP and IPA programs are funded as environment programs addressing natural and cultural values and threats, there is widespread recognition of the broader social, community and economic benefits and outcomes for Indigenous people and communities through their operation.

Productivity Commission reports

The Productivity Commission has repeatedly highlighted Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs as programs ‘that work’.

In 2014, the Commission’s *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage - Key Indicators Report* highlighted the success of Indigenous ranger positions and cited an independent evaluation where rangers described their employment as “real jobs” in comparison to the then Community Development and Employment Program.⁸

Again, in the 2016 *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage - Key Indicators Report*, the Productivity Commission highlighted both the Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs as ‘things that work’ in providing employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.⁹ In contrast, the Commission was damning of many programs that could not demonstrate clear outcomes.

The 2020 report cited Salmon et al. which said that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people “positive relations with Country fostered through caring for and being on Country help to develop key skills and knowledges, increasing a sense of self-worth and autonomy”.¹⁰

Social Return on Investment studies

These benefits have been identified in various other reviews or studies commissioned by Indigenous organisations and the Australian Government.

A social return on investment study over a five year period by Social Ventures Australia into the land management and related on-Country programs implemented by Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa across in a group of Aboriginal communities in Western Australia reported significant avoided costs to Government.

In particular the study noted reduced interactions with the justice system calculated at nearly 15,000 fewer individual nights in prison over five years across several communities.¹¹

⁸ Urbis, Assessment of the social outcomes of the Working on Country program: Report – May 2012, cited in Productivity Commission, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2014*, Canberra, 2014, p. 4.48

⁹ Productivity Commission, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2016*, Canberra, 2016, p.4.58

¹⁰ Salmon, M., Doery, K., Dance, P., Chapman, J., Gilbert, R., Williams, R. and Lovett, R. 2019, *Defining the Indefinable: Descriptors of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ Cultures and their Links to Health and Wellbeing*, Research School of Population Health, The Australian National University, Canberra, 2019, p.9, cited in Productivity Commission, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2020*, Canberra, 2020.

¹¹ Social Ventures Australia (SVA) Consulting, *Evaluative Social Return on Investment Report: Social, economic and cultural impact of Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa’s On-Country programs*, December 2014., p.33.

Table 2 identifies the material government outcomes in order of value for the Western Australian and Australian governments from the on-Country programs. The categories and outcomes do not include health and the environment.¹²

Table 2 - Material Government Outcomes from KJ's On-Country Programs

Category	Material Outcome	WA Government	Australian Government
Heritage	Improved knowledge and subsequent protection of heritage site	•	
Justice	Less alcohol related crime	•	
	Less time spent in jail	•	
Employment	Reduction in income support payments		•
	Increased employment of Indigenous Australians		•
	More highly skilled Indigenous Australians		•

At an individual level, the study noted personal outcomes for Martu involved in Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa's on-Country programs including:

- less time in lock-up (custody)
- Increased income and ability to provide for family
- Increased pride in family members who are rangers
- Increased personal pride, confidence and purpose
- Increased enjoyment
- Less drinking
- Increased exposure to positive role models
- Increased willingness to navigate 'whitefella' world
- Positive peer network with a common purpose.¹³

In 2014-15 women made up only 36% of Indigenous rangers¹⁴, this is despite the important value for Indigenous women who are enabled to look after women's sites, bring in additional income into their families and learn new skills. Flexible arrangements mean that women can fulfil family and community responsibilities while working.

¹² Ibid., p 34

¹³ Ibid., p.28.

¹⁴ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. *Reporting back... 2014-15: How Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area Programs are Working Annual Report*, Australian Government, 2016, p.17.

Job retention is high, with a retention rate of 84% for full-time and part-time employees.¹⁵

Similar findings about the broader benefits and outcomes were found when Social Ventures Australia were engaged by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to undertake a social return on investment study of four projects operating Indigenous ranger and / or IPA programs across Australia. In 2016, the study reported a social return on investment of \$1.50 to \$3.40 for every dollar spent in the Indigenous Protected Areas, with the IPA funded for a complementary Indigenous ranger group demonstrating the highest return.¹⁶

NIAA summarised the report's assessment of the IPA and Working on Country (sic) programs as:

- *Engaging Indigenous Australians in meaningful employment to achieve large scale conservation outcomes.*
- *Facilitating reconnection with country, culture and language to achieve exceptional levels of engagement among Indigenous Australians which is driving positive social, economic, cultural and environmental outcomes.*
- *Helping to catalyse the development of an Indigenous land and sea based economy, empowering Indigenous landowners to manage their country in accordance with their priorities.*¹⁷

Closing the Gap targets

Indigenous land and sea management programs also play a role in meeting the Closing the Gap targets.

In particular target 15 requires a 15% increase in legal rights and interests in sea and land by 2030. If that target is to be fully realised, then further investment in successful programs that promote functional community-based structures is essential to the management of those legal rights and interests.

Targets for educational outcomes for children are also enhanced by connections between schools, young people and ranger work, with anecdotal evidence that young children have aspirations to be rangers when they grow up.

Realising other opportunities

Funding through the Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs is foundational to realising broader opportunities for jobs, income, social and community support as well as tackling large scale environmental degradation. Examples include participating in the carbon market, fee for service contracts such as quarantine surveillance, weed control, research support and mining rehabilitation.

In 2014-15, 65% of projects undertook commercial activities such as fee for service environmental management.¹⁸

High functioning Indigenous land and sea management organisations that have stable funding arrangements under these programs have also been successful in attracting philanthropic

¹⁵ Ibid., p.16.

¹⁶ Social Ventures Australia, Consolidated Report on Indigenous Protected Areas following social return on investment analyses, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra, 2016, p33-42.

¹⁷ National Indigenous Australians Agency, <https://www.niaa.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/social-return-investment-%E2%80%93-consolidated-report-indigenous-protected-areas>, accessed 25 January 2022.

¹⁸ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2016, Op. Cit., p.24.

investment and corporate support that allows for the delivery of additional land and sea management activities or ancillary programs / projects.

The programs have drawn the attention of other countries and international philanthropic organisations who have sought to work more closely with Indigenous people to deliver better outcomes for the environment and social and cultural benefits

In August 2021, the Canadian Government announced funding over five-years including CAN\$ 173 million for existing and new Indigenous Guardians (aka rangers) and another CAN\$ 166 million for Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs). Both of these programs have been influenced by the Australian Government's Indigenous land and sea management programs with visits both to Canada and Australia by Indigenous representatives.¹⁹

Alignment with Australian Government policies

The Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs align with the following key policy areas:

- **Australia's Strategy for Nature 2019 – 2030** – Indigenous land and sea management (ILSM) and IPAs are vital in this national biodiversity and action plan.
- **Australia's Threatened Species Strategy 2021-2031**- Indigenous protected areas and Indigenous rangers are heavily engaged in and central to threatened species management on extensive areas of land and sea both on and beyond the formal reserve system.
- **Bushfire recovery** – Indigenous fire management is increasingly seen as a critical component of biodiversity and fire response. Stable and well-resourced Indigenous land and sea management organisations are foundational in ensuring fire management is part of a comprehensive year-round approach that includes cultural values and priorities.
- **Commonwealth Biosecurity 2030** – Indigenous rangers are vital in supporting Australia's biosecurity efforts, particularly in sea country and across remote Northern Australia.
- **Biodiversity stewardship** – Indigenous rangers play a key role over large areas in keeping ecosystems resilient and able to adapt to climate change.
- **Convention on Biological Diversity negotiations** – IPAs already deliver nearly 50% of the National Reserve System. Their positive environmental outcomes will ensure Australia meets any increased commitment to 30% protected land and sea by 2030 consistent with the High Ambition Coalition (HAC) that Australia has joined.
- **Employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians** – Indigenous ranger jobs play an important role increasing employment participation rates for 20 – 64-year-olds.
- **Economic growth in regional Australia** – additional commitments for ILSM and support for associated infrastructure benefits regional Australia and assists with post-COVID economic growth. Ranger jobs lead to new career paths, support community-based enterprise, and build confidence, work skills and work ethic.
- **Workplace gender equity** – flexible growth in ranger and IPA funding will allow for equity in jobs for women and create more role models for young women and girls.

¹⁹Government of Canada, <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/news/2021/08/government-of-canada-announces-340-million-to-support-indigenous-led-conservation.html>, accessed 25 January 2022.

Challenges facing Indigenous land and sea management programs

Sustaining success

[Strong on Country](#), a report by Country Needs People published in late 2021, highlights the significant challenges that these programs face if they are to sustain their success and their status as world-leading programs.

In particular, the report identified 12 elements that characterise successful Indigenous land and sea management programs. These elements can be grouped under three pillars:

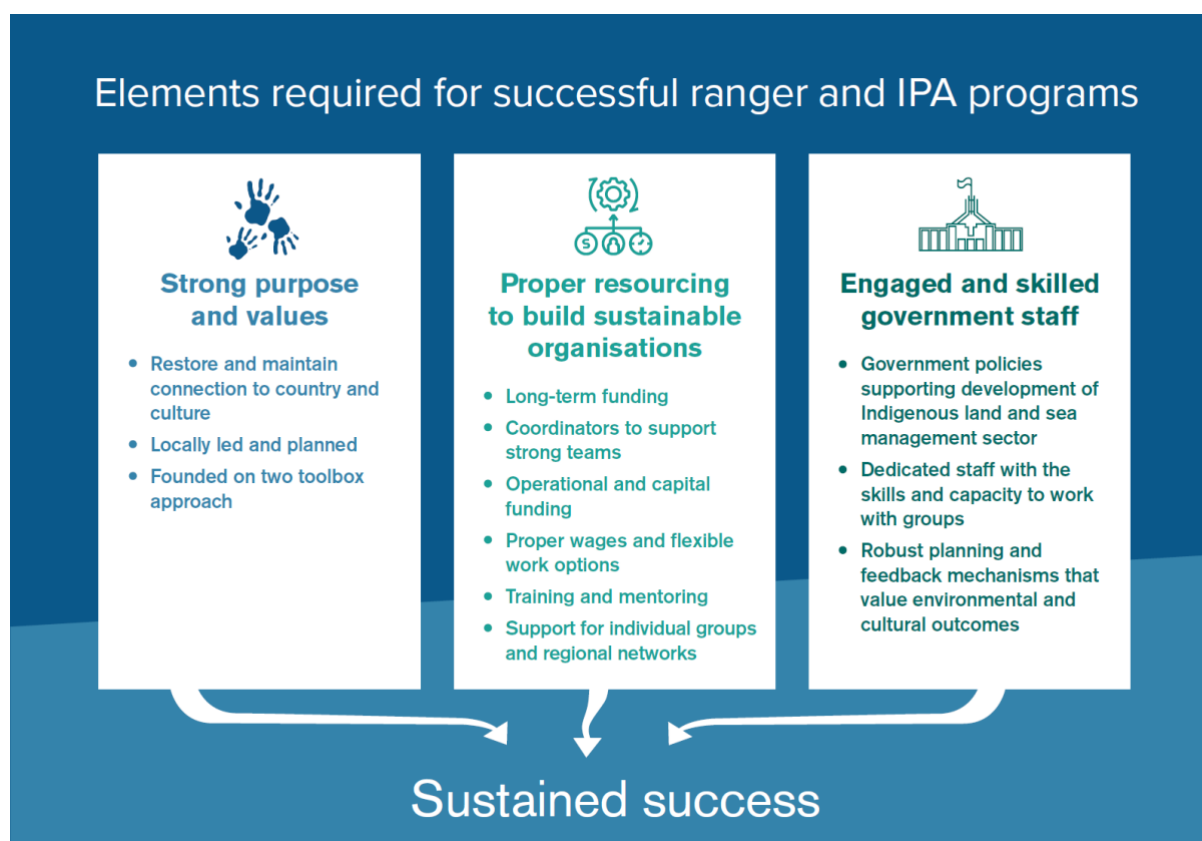
- **Strong purpose and values grounded in restoring and maintaining connection to country and culture**
 - Ranger groups and IPAs are strong when: focused on repairing and sustaining the natural and cultural values of country; locally led and planned; and founded on the two toolbox / two-way learning approach combining Indigenous knowledge and contemporary science.
- **Proper resourcing to build sustainable organisations**
 - Ranger groups and IPAs require: long- term funding; operational and capital funding; proper wages for a coordination roles and rangers, flexible work options; training and mentoring; and support for individual groups as well as networks.
- **Engaged and skilled government staff working to support and grow ranger organisations**
 - Indigenous-led land and sea management is effectively supported when strong working relationships are formed between ranger groups and government staff who understand the technical and administrative context of ranger and IPA work and are dedicated to growing its success.²⁰

The report recommendations of particular relevance for further investment by the Australian Government include the need for:

- Long term funding
- Coordinators for all teams
- Community of practice
- Operational and capital funding
- Proper wages and work conditions
- Women rangers and pathways
- Training and mentoring budgets
- National and regional ranger camps
- Mentoring, leadership and networking initiatives
- Support for groups
- Network support
- Lack of resources / knowledge in program administration

²⁰ Putnis, A., O’Leary, P., Leach, A., Ings, E. and See, P. 2021, Strong on Country: Sustaining Success in Indigenous Land and Sea Management in Australia, Country Needs People Ltd, ~~2021~~ 2021, p.31.

Figure 3 - Elements required for successful ranger and IPA programs



Fire management

Following the catastrophic bushfires in the summer of 2019-20, a particularly topical issue is fire management. The renewed discussion about the role that Indigenous traditional or cultural burning may play alongside contemporary fire management is very welcome.

However, the capacity of Indigenous people to participate in fire management is extremely limited without established Indigenous ranger teams being in place all year-round. In their absence, Indigenous cultural burning will be restricted to casual and seasonal activity with the inherent risk that skills and knowledge transferred from older knowledge holders will be forgotten or lost.

Equally preparation and ancillary land management work required to support fire work such as weed control is an ongoing year-round requirement.

This issue is a good example of where securely funded Indigenous ranger teams are fundamental to the ability to respond to new and emerging threats.

Unmet demand for Indigenous rangers and IPAs

As noted before, the commitment to fund existing ranger teams out to 2028 does not address the high levels of unmet demand for additional rangers. This demand reflects the value that Indigenous communities place on work looking after Country, and the close alignment of ranger work to Indigenous people’s cultural aspirations and obligations to look after Country and pass on knowledge to younger generations.

Similarly in recent application rounds for IPAs, Country Needs People understands that the program was heavily over-subscribed compared to the available funds.

Uncertainty of funding for IPAs post 2023

Declared IPAs are currently funded to June 2023 with further funding dependent upon a new allocation from the Government.

The lack of certainty that this situation can create as projects move into their last 12 months of funding is likely to result in higher staff turnover rates and difficulties in attracting new staff until future funding is secured.

It is therefore critical that the Government makes a commitment to continue funding the IPA program, allocate funds and renew contracts with organisations managing IPAs as soon as possible.

With the evaluation report on the program not due until later in 2022, refinements of the program will need to be considered following a commitment to future funding.

Long term contracts send a critical signal about stability and political commitment to Indigenous land and sea management. Funding certainty encourages retention of good staff, forward planning and increased capacity to strengthen governance.

It also sends an unambiguous signal that Australia values Indigenous land and sea management work and its potential. That is why the seven-year extension for the Indigenous Ranger Program announced in March 2020 was so well received by the Indigenous land and sea management sector.

Establishing a 10-15 year or longer horizon for funding would 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 were available under the Environmental Stewardship Agreements in National Landcare. Those agreements were for up to 15 years and available for private landholders, subject to regular review and the satisfactory meeting of management criteria.²¹

The same agreement opportunities should be available for Indigenous organisations working on Country providing vital environmental services to government.

Proposed increased investment

Australian Government leadership and clear policy direction to strengthen support for these key programs will assist in managing environmental threats, particularly in remote outback Australia, and significantly contribute to addressing employment and social disadvantage issues amongst Indigenous Australians in the post-Covid environment.

Country Needs People (CNP) is proposing the following with increased investment over the forward estimates:

- Over 10 years, **doubling the number of Indigenous rangers** from **1,900** (899 FTE ranger and coordinator positions) to **3,800** (1,799 FTE ranger and coordinator positions) and increasing average funding levels per FTE to allow for increased wages and operating costs for groups. Total cost over the forward estimates – \$145 million.
- **Equal employment opportunities for women** by 2030. In particular this can be realised with constructive engagement with Indigenous communities and organisations, and well-targeted, culturally appropriate initiatives.

²¹ Australian Government, <http://www.nrm.gov.au/national/continuing-investment/environmental-stewardship>, accessed on 27 January 2022.

- Investing **\$25 million per annum indexed for training, capacity building, networking and infrastructure costs** across the regions to reduce bottlenecks in delivery and to ensure that all groups have access to infrastructure and equipment to enable them to look after Country. Total cost over the forward estimates - \$102 million.
- Over four years, **doubling support to Indigenous protected areas (IPAs)** to \$46 million pa indexed to enable additional IPAs to be declared and to increase the level of funding, particularly for those groups without separately funded Indigenous ranger teams. Total cost over the forward estimates – \$70 million.
- **Provide funding certainty for Indigenous protected areas** by committing funding for the IPA program to 2028 and bringing contracts into line with the Indigenous Ranger Program (out to 30 June 2028).

A growth plan over the next decade as outlined above will send a clear message that the Government intends to maintain and build its legacy in practical support for Indigenous land and sea management. It will allow Indigenous people and organisations to enhance their role in assisting Australia to meet its domestic and international commitments to protect our natural and cultural heritage, improve biosecurity and support a stronger regional economy.

Further, it is strongly recommended that dedicated funding programs for both Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas be established with ‘ongoing’ and transparent allocations in the federal budget due to the specialised and technical nature of this work and the need for carefully tailored management and support.

References

The following additional references are provided for background information on the programs and their benefits:

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