



# THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS

## **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 must be secured and expanded.*

The Australian federal budget for 2020-21 provides an important opportunity to grow Australia's commitment to protecting our iconic landscapes and increasing jobs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Two Federal Government funded programs, the **Indigenous Rangers (Working on Country)** program and the **Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA)** program, are delivering essential environmental services for the benefit of all Australians. They are also delivering major employment and social benefits in Indigenous communities, in accordance with Federal Government national priorities. Federal Government funding for Indigenous land and sea management should be grown and secured in the 2020-21 federal budget.

We must recognise and invest in programs that are positive and proven to work. The Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs continue to deliver outstanding results across many different contexts, in particular in remote and regional Australia. We must reinforce the quality of Indigenous land and sea management government programs with funding that encompasses operational and administrative support, and active and skilled government support.

This submission proposes that the 2020-21 federal budget secures these successful programs into the future by:

1. Doubling the annual funding for Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs and therefore doubling Indigenous ranger jobs over the next five years;
2. Extending the length of contracts to ten years or longer, 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 the environmental needs at scale across the continent and fully realise the social and economic benefits of these programs;
4. Reinforce the quality of Indigenous land and sea management government programs with funding that encompasses operational and administrative support, and active and skilled government support.

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

Government partnership with Indigenous engagement in land management over the last 25 years has been driven by local and grassroots efforts, with strikingly successful results. 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. An exigent example as destructive fires threatens the health of vast tracts of Australia's bushland is the important role that Indigenous land managers play in undertaking strategic fire management in partnerships with fire services, local governments, scientists and local landholders.

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. 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.

## **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 Department in 2007 and 1997 respectively. Funding has grown since 2013, and administrative changes have brought responsibility for these programs primarily under the coordination of the National Indigenous Australians Agency and the Minister for Indigenous Australians.

As of 2018, the Indigenous Rangers program provided core funding to 123 Indigenous ranger groups around Australia. 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 skills and capacity. An initial target of 730 ranger positions by 2018 has been met and exceeded with at least 839 full time equivalent positions currently being supported by this program.<sup>1</sup> *There is strong demand for more.*

In 2018, Indigenous ranger contracts were extended by three years to June 2021. This gave the organisations administering Indigenous ranger jobs some breathing space but is short of the previous five year contracts. It also places the ranger network out of alignment with most of the Indigenous Protected Areas network which has been renewed for five years to June 2023. The 2020 Budget announcement is a key opportunity to extend Indigenous ranger contracts beyond June 2021.

The Indigenous Protected Areas program is now a key contributor to Australia's protected areas network of the National Reserve System. Currently there are 75 declared IPAs in Australia, making up over 44% of Australia's National Reserve System and covering more than 67 million hectares. Once

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<sup>1</sup> As of September 2018, according to National Indigenous Australians Agency website.

planned new Indigenous Protected Areas are complete, IPAs will contribute more than half of the terrestrial National Reserve System by area.

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 the need is greatest.

Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs promote stability and capacity for community-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, increasing 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.

The majority of the programs' success stemmed from the initial 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. 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. Indigenous Protected Areas provide an avenue by which Indigenous land can be voluntarily brought into Australia's National Reserve System, while clearly establishing local land and sea management priorities and governance, balancing environment, cultural management, and local economic needs.

Due to their strong environmental and Indigenous employment outcomes, health and social benefits, strong public support, and emphatic support by Indigenous communities, Indigenous rangers and IPA programs continue to attract cross-partisan support federally. Federal Government leadership and clear policy direction to strengthen support for these key programs is vital to our ability to manage Australia's environmental threats, particularly in remote Outback Australia, and to make a major contribution to addressing issues related to employment and social disadvantage amongst Indigenous Australians.

### **Growing success**

Doubling funding for Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs over the next five years 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. This should be coupled with a long-term commitment to expand and secure funding to meet the vast scale of the environment, as well as demand from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Future opportunities for new Indigenous Protected Areas and Indigenous ranger jobs continue because of land claims in progress, growing awareness and capacity of local Indigenous organisations that have not yet bid for projects, and recognition of IPAs and ranger work as vital economic pathways in many remote areas as well as a practical way to strengthen local governance. 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>2</sup> Indigenous rangers is essential.

Demand for new IPAs and Indigenous ranger jobs is high but *cannot be met* with the current budget allocations. During the 2016 – 2017 financial year, the Coalition government committed \$15 million to new Indigenous Protected Areas, and since 2018, the government has announced 12 more proposed Indigenous Protected Areas with this funding. This expansion is significant on a global scale for both its environmental benefits and its recognition of Indigenous-led conservation. However, more than 30 Traditional Owner groups were unsuccessful in applying for an Indigenous Protected Area during this process because of limited government funding.

To encompass the growing aspirations of Traditional Owners across vast areas of land and sea to protect natural and cultural values through the Indigenous Protected Area and Indigenous Ranger programs funding must be increased accordingly.

### **Securing certainty**

Long-term funding, with accountability, is vital to sustaining local capacity, and environmental, social and economic benefits. 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.

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 Environmental Stewardship Agreements with farmers, currently based around contracts of up to 15 years, subject to regular review and the satisfactory meeting of management criteria.

### **Reinforcing quality**

Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas have real world outcomes to deliver for community and the public. Land and sea management requires skills, training and risk mitigation. The work being done on Indigenous Protected Areas and by Indigenous rangers includes shooting feral animals out of helicopters, spraying chemicals on invasive weeds, large scale fire management, monitoring and research, and supporting fisheries regulations on the sea. Often this is delivered in

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<sup>2</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 100million ha by 2021 and the Indigenous estate held in freehold title or exclusive possession native title covers around 20% of Australia's land mass and growing.

very remote areas with limited infrastructure. These activities require engaged support, careful risk management and a clear understanding of the land and sea management task, both in the planning and implementation. In order to ensure the best ongoing future and quality support for these programs, it is important that they receive comprehensive contract management and support from Federal Government departments, and funding allocation for both the department and resources that support land management work, for example equipment and training.

The shift of many Indigenous programs to a more centralised administration structure under the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet has frequently had the unintentional consequence of reducing clarity, departmental expertise and informed 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 Ranger 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 much better alignment and coordination with the Department of Environment to ensure the elements that have made the programs successful do not continue to be 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.

### **Proven outcomes for community, economy and natural heritage**

This year marks thirteen years since the formation of the 'Closing the Gap' campaign to address Indigenous disadvantage, and eleven years since the COAG National Indigenous Reform Agreement set targets in key measures for addressing Indigenous disadvantage, covering improved life expectancy, child mortality, education and employment. The 2019 Closing the Gap Report found the government is failing to meet five of the seven targets, but pointed to Indigenous ranger jobs and Indigenous Protected Areas as Australian Government investment supporting local solutions.

The Productivity Commission has repeatedly pointed to these benefits. In 2015, the Chair of the Productivity Commission called on the Australian Government to refocus on "what works" particularly in the delivery of Indigenous employment given the multiple benefits jobs deliver. 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. In December 2015, the Commission reiterated the need to understand and extend such programs that work. 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.”

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.

Research undertaken over five years by Social Ventures Australia into the social return on investment of land management in 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.**

Women make up approximately 36% of Indigenous rangers. Flexible arrangements mean women can fulfil family and community responsibilities while working. Job retention is high with a retention rate of 84% for fulltime and part-time employees. In 2014-15, 65% of projects undertook commercial activities such as fee for service environmental management.

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.

**Recommendations:**

**The 2020-21 federal budget announcement 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 next five years; that is, establish a target of at least 1660 full time equivalent supported ranger positions over the next five years. This will constitute a gradual increase of funding up to an effective doubling of existing current annual funding of approximately \$95 million per annum for Indigenous rangers and \$20 million per annum for Indigenous Protected Areas by 2025.**
- 2. The extension of the length of Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area contracts to ten years or longer, 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.**
- 4. Reinforce the quality of Indigenous land and sea management government programs with funding that encompasses operational and administrative support, and active and skilled government departmental support with increased oversight and support from the Department of Environment.**

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