

A new era of empowerment in caring for country?

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Through the [Working on Country program](#) and the [Indigenous Land Corporation](#) the Federal Government funds hundreds of Indigenous rangers to apply their traditional knowledge in looking after land and sea country. But, the focus on the ranger program often overshadows the role of remote Indigenous communities in ‘caring for country’ as part of a deeper spiritual connection to, and respect for, their environment.



Credit: [Big Gecko](#)

Across the Northern Territory, the Indigenous ranger program has been important in the management of Aboriginal land and sea country. However, in addition to this ‘formal’ delivery of land management services – such as [prescribed burning](#), ‘ghost net’ patrols, monitoring wildlife, and controlling animal and plant pests – Aboriginal people living on their country provide environmental and cultural management services through custodial obligation.¹

This traditional approach is very different to that of non-Indigenous land management. The ranger program has played an important role in merging ‘old’ and ‘new’ ways and acting as a conduit between different management ideologies.²

The program is now regarded as the main point of contact for natural resource-based activities instigated by government and research bodies. This has reduced the costs that would otherwise have been incurred through engagement with the broader Indigenous community.

Since 2007, the federal government has put in place a number of policy initiatives that have had unintended social consequences for Aboriginal communities.³ These policies have undermined the authority of Traditional Owners on their lands and created tension between government officials, Indigenous communities and the ranger program.

One such initiative was a shift in government funding from the *Natural Heritage Trust* program to *Caring for our*

Country. With this change came a greater accountability of money spent.⁴ This has changed land management from being ‘program based’ through the ranger program to more specific payment-for-service arrangements.⁵

Assuming the payment-for-service model is to become the main method of land management, service contract objectives need to align with both the buyers’ expectations and the providers’ cultural perspectives. In terms of equity, the cost of natural resource management (NRM) activities provided by both Indigenous and other NRM groups needs to be comparable.

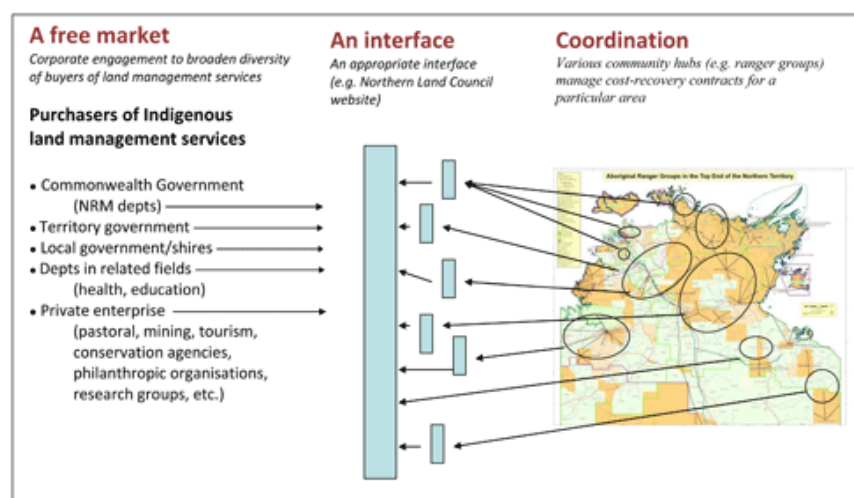
In terms of market opportunities, a much broader demand exists for land management services on and around Aboriginal land than is currently provided by Indigenous communities.

These opportunities range from local services, such as weed management and revegetation for nearby mining companies, or fire management around Telstra infrastructure, to land management activities, such as management of a threatened rainforest patch for ecological and cultural values. The latter is an example of a project that might appeal to a more regional or international market, such as an NGO or conservation agency.

For buyers, the inhibiting factor in engaging with Indigenous communities to provide these services is the cost. While government departments have the capacity to sustain these high costs and connect with Indigenous ranger groups to negotiate ‘payment-for-service’ delivery contracts, it is difficult for other potential buyers of land management services to overcome community engagement costs. The reasons are many: the remote location of the communities, language constraints, ignorance of cultural considerations and the difficult process of negotiating contracts.

We propose a framework to help facilitate this process (see below). In this scheme, a simple website or clearinghouse would provide the interface through which contracts are exchanged with Indigenous community hubs (such as ranger groups) and where external stakeholders could go to choose and purchase services.

This clearinghouse could also help finalise the terms of agreement in service delivery to ensure the timing, outcomes, reporting and payment of this activity meets both parties’ expectations.⁵



Credit: Credit: Julian Gorman

To date, the dual layer of governance – traditional and federal government – in the management of Aboriginal lands has created poor communication and tension. A more localised approach through community hubs would involve the most appropriate people from each Aboriginal community in service delivery. This would reduce conflict and empower local knowledge leaders in the planning and delivery of land management services.

Such a model would require engagement from within the community by people who not only talk the local languages, but who also understand the local cultural context. One group playing such a community engagement role is the [Aboriginal Research Practitioners’ Network](#).⁶

There are other considerations to creating a framework for more equitable and accountable delivery of natural and cultural resource management on and around Aboriginal lands. These include:

1. involving NRM boards and federal and state government departments
2. government incentives to encourage corporate involvement in the purchase of services

3. developing a training and business structure for community hubs to manage contracts.

Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that land management will be seen as a business in its own right into the future, [providing Indigenous people with greater livelihood opportunities and an ability to remain living on their country.](#)

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¹ Luckert M, Campbell B, Gorman J and Garnett S (Eds) (2007) *Investing in Indigenous Natural Resource Management*. Charles Darwin University Press, Darwin.

² Aslin H and Bennett DH (2005) Two Tool Boxes for Wildlife Management? *Human Dimensions Wildlife* **10**, 95–107.

³ Gorman J and Vemuri S (2011) Social implications of bridging the gap through ‘caring for country’ in remote Indigenous communities of the Northern Territory, Australia. *The Rangelands Journal* **34**(1), 63–73. www.publish.csiro.au/paper/RJ11037.

⁴ Australian National Audit Office (2008) Regional Delivery Model for the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, *Audit Report No. 21 2007–08*. The Australian National Audit Office, Canberra.

⁵ Gorman J and Vemuri S (2010) Payment for ecosystem services (PES) as a model for integrated natural cultural resource management (INCRM). *The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability* **6**(3), 11–21.

⁶ Sithole B, Hunter-Xenie H and Dunnett D (2009) *Research as opportunities for Aboriginal engagement a case study of the Aboriginal Research Practitioners’ Network*. Learning Communities, the Journal of Learning in Diverse Social Contexts.

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