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# Indigenous cultural and natural resource management and the emerging role of the Working on Country program

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# Indigenous cultural and natural resource management and the emerging role of the Working on Country program

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## ABSTRACT

This is an opportune time to strategically develop Indigenous land and sea management in Australia. Climate change and associated land degradation is a high priority component of the Government's environment agenda. At the same time, the Indigenous estate—which includes some of the most biodiverse lands in Australia—continues to increase as a result of successful land and native title claims, and the declaration of more Indigenous Protected Areas. This paper explores government support for Indigenous land and sea management, focusing on the Commonwealth Government's Working on Country program. The paper outlines the development of formalised Indigenous cultural and natural resource management. The emergence of the Working on Country program is discussed in the context of past and current policy. The opportunities and challenges for the future of the program and the development of formalised Indigenous land and sea management in Australia more broadly are outlined. In conclusion, a note of cautious optimism is expressed: while an expanded Working on Country program underpinned by community-led priorities and aspirations has the potential to simultaneously ameliorate Indigenous poverty and ensure natural resource management, this will require targeted investment and a more holistic and less sectoral approach from government.

**Keywords:** Indigenous cultural and natural resource management, Australian government support, Working on Country program.

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## INTRODUCTION

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This is an opportune time to strategically develop Indigenous land and sea management in Australia. Climate change and associated national concerns about water quantity and quality and potential loss of biodiversity are all high priorities. Indigenous-owned land currently makes up some 20 per cent of the Australian land mass and more than 40 per cent of the Northern Territory, including 87 per cent of the coastline (Sithole, Whitehead & Kerins 2007). Research undertaken in 2006 shows that the Indigenous estate includes some of the most biodiverse lands in Australia (Altman, Buchanan & Larsen 2007). Mapping also shows that these lands are at risk of species contraction and face major threats from feral animals, exotic weeds, changed fire regimes, pollution and overgrazing (Altman & Whitehead 2003).

Efforts of Indigenous land owners and managers to care for their country have for many years been thwarted by inadequate support and only short-term funding commitments from both Commonwealth and Territory governments. Mainstream land management programs have been implemented from the top down, failing to meet Indigenous needs, as highlighted in the 1991 report *Caring for Country: Aborigines and Land Management* (Young et al. 1991).

In recent years, however, there has been emerging recognition of the important role Indigenous land and sea management groups play in managing and conserving biodiversity-rich regions. Recent responses from the Commonwealth government show promise for future targeted support for the development of formalised Indigenous land and sea management projects to promote biodiversity conservation and sustainable Indigenous development. Evidence suggests that such work not only provides benefits to the nation as a whole through the conservation of biological diversity, but also economic, social and health benefits for local Indigenous people and communities.

There is growing international literature and evidence supporting the effectiveness of community-driven projects which reflect local priorities and needs, are informed by cultural knowledge, and are culturally appropriate (Luckert et al. 2007). Support from governments is essential for the development of Indigenous land and sea management, but their role to date has to be that of facilitator and enabler rather than initiator and driver (Hunt 2005). Having capable local institutions is therefore essential, and key to this is the 'human development approach' and capacity development of Indigenous land and sea management groups in Australia (Nair 2003).

This paper seeks to explore government support for Indigenous cultural and natural resource management (ICNRM), focusing in particular on the Commonwealth Government's Working on Country program: how and why it has emerged; how it fits with other government programs and priorities; its strengths and weaknesses; the opportunities and challenges for its future; and the development of formalised Indigenous land and sea management in Australia more broadly.

The paper concludes with a note of cautious optimism. Support for Indigenous land and sea management groups is growing and the Working on Country program provides promise, but there remain challenges, and until the variety of benefits of Indigenous land and sea management are documented and equitably supported by all government departments—Commonwealth, State and Territory—the full potential of this program cannot be realised.

## INDIGENOUS CULTURAL AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Natural resource management (NRM) is not a term used by most Indigenous Australians; they talk instead about 'looking after country' or 'caring for country' (Hunt, Altman & May 2009). In the Northern Territory it is often referred to by non-Indigenous people as 'ranger programs' (Sithole, Whitehead & Kerins 2007). From an Indigenous perspective, cultural heritage is not seen as separate from NRM and therefore

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**ICNRM:**  
Indigenous  
cultural and  
natural resource  
management

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**NRM:**  
natural resource  
management

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throughout this paper the term ICNRM will be used. Indigenous people have a holistic perspective about 'country' embodying land and landforms, water and marine resources; the species supported by the land and sea; and natural heritage sites (Hunt, Altman & May 2009). Creation ancestors form part of the living cultural landscape which encompass the practices of ceremony, caring for sacred sites, burning, hunting and foraging—all of which ensure the maintenance of spiritual, cultural and economic connections to the land and sea (Garnett & Sithole 2007; Sithole, Whitehead & Kerins 2007).

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**CFC:**  
Caring for  
Country

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**NLC:**  
Northern Land  
Council

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In recent years a number of formalised community-based Indigenous natural resource management institutions have emerged, particularly in northern Australia. The Caring for Country (CFC) Unit at the Northern Land Council (NLC) has been instrumental in assisting many traditional owner groups to set up and support Indigenous land and sea management groups in the Top End. The CFC Unit was set up in 1996, primarily as an employment program in response to a grassroots movement driven by traditional owners who wanted to set up regionally-based, locally-appropriate environmental strategies that would provide employment for the community rather than receiving welfare payments or 'sit-down' money (NLC 2006). The CFC Unit supports some 35 Indigenous land and sea management groups, to varying degrees, bringing approximately 50 per cent of the Indigenous-owned land area under a more formalised management regime (Sithole, Whitehead & Kerins 2007).

These bottom-up developments have also been due, in part, to the inadequacies of mainstream institutions and programs in meeting the cultural, environmental or economic needs of Indigenous people (Orchard, Ross & Young 2003). Indeed as Orchard, Ross and Young (2003: 414) point out, while arguably most of those involved in NRM in Australia struggle to navigate the interactions between Commonwealth, State, Territory and local government responsibilities, the challenge for Indigenous people is much more complex. Indigenous people and communities have very different property laws, and requirements for and processes of decision-making on which their ICNRM activities are based (Altman & Whitehead 2003; Garnett & Sithole 2007; Hunt, Altman & May 2009).

There are now in the region of 500 Indigenous people working in Indigenous land and sea management groups in the Northern Territory (Putnis, Josif & Woodward 2007). These groups are undertaking a portfolio of activities, working on the major cultural, environmental, and biodiversity issues in the Northern Territory, including fire management, feral animal and weed control, biodiversity monitoring and threatened species protection. They also work on border protection duties, such as quarantine control and to a lesser extent the illegal movement of people and goods, including foreign fishing (Putnis, Josif & Woodward 2007).

Recent research is unequivocal in its finding that many Indigenous organisations and government agencies regard Indigenous land and sea management groups as among the most important and productive organisations in communities in northern Australia (Putnis, Josif & Woodward 2007). These groups are contributing to a broad range of environmental, cultural, social, education, health, employment and economic development outcomes (see Altman 2003; Altman, Buchanan & Larsen 2007; Altman & Larsen 2006; Burgess & Johnson 2007; Craig 1999; Garnett & Sithole 2007; Greiner et al. 2005; Luckert et al. 2007; Morrison 2007; NLC 2006; Roughley & Williams 2007; Sithole et al. 2008).

Most of these organisations grew from very humble beginnings, driven by Indigenous land-owners concerned with local environmental threats such as wildfire, weeds or feral animals. Many of them are now evolving, or have the potential to evolve into either for-profit or social enterprise organisations, carrying out payment for environmental service (PES) work. A much-cited example of this is the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement project, which has seen negotiation of a 17-year tripartite agreement with multinational corporation Conoco Philips to abate 100,000 tonnes of carbon emissions each year through customary fire management practices, with an investment of \$1 million each year for 17 years (Altman 2007a; Gorman et al. 2007). The current value of commercial contract and PES work undertaken by Indigenous land and sea management groups is conservatively estimated at \$4-6 million per annum (Putnis, Josif & Woodward

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**PES:**  
payment for  
environmental  
service

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2007). The scaling up of PES in the Top End has the potential to provide significant employment and economic development opportunities for land and sea management groups (see Concu, forthcoming, for an analysis of the opportunities and challenges associated with the development of PES in northern Australia).

Although such examples show signs of promise, in reality the majority of Indigenous land and sea management groups remain extremely fragile, under-resourced and reliant on a multitude of small, tied grant funding sources which only fund project costs, rather than wages or management and infrastructure costs. For example, in the period 2003–05 the Wagiman Guwardagun ranger program had to manage funds from 15 different sources (NLC 2006). This is not unusual: other land and sea management groups across the Top End have to contend with the same, if not more, funding sources; each with its own application process and reporting requirements.

Prior to the implementation of the Working on Country program, a participatory evaluation of Indigenous land and sea management in the Top End highlighted some of these challenges.<sup>1</sup> As well as documenting the outcomes of land and sea management, it offered some key recommendations for strengthening Indigenous land and sea management. These include:

- improved coordination among relevant organisations and agencies
- the provision of funding over longer time frames
- streamlined administrative requirements related to funding applications and reporting
- active training and mentoring of leaders within ranger groups to ensure the viability of the program in the longer term
- a higher priority given to the conservation of Indigenous knowledge and its application to land and sea management
- development of the capacity of ranger groups to record and document their activities
- greater recognition of land and sea management as a salaried job, and the development of incentive structures to reward land and sea management activities
- clearer guidelines about the nature of support delivered from the host agencies, their roles and involvement in decision making, and
- review of current procedures and processes for forming ranger groups to ensure that the right people are involved and consulted (summarised from Sithole et al. 2008).

## THE POLICY CONTEXT

In order to understand the current policies and debates surrounding ICNRM in Australia it is essential to consider the past and present context in which they formed. Contemporary institutional processes and practices affecting ICNRM are extremely complex. They are formed and bound up in Indigenous customary law, organisational infrastructure, government-initiated approaches set up specifically to serve Indigenous peoples needs, and 'mainstream' Australia-wide institutional arrangements (Orchard, Ross & Young 2003). The latter does not necessarily acknowledge the interests of Indigenous people and can therefore be exclusionary and restrictive of Indigenous natural resource managers (Orchard, Ross & Young 2003). Institutional structures have been established by a wide range of Indigenous organisations. These include specialised organisations (statutory and non-statutory) that participate in ICNRM activities such as the Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC), Aboriginal land councils, outstation resource agencies, and other Indigenous organisations such as incorporated community organisations concerned with supplying specific services to communities relating to ICNRM, health, housing and education (Orchard, Ross & Young 2003).<sup>2</sup>

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**ILC:**  
Indigenous Land  
Corporation

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In 1991 the landmark report *Caring for Country: Aborigines and Land Management* (Young et al. 1991) documented for the first time the NRM challenges facing Indigenous people, particularly in the transition from claiming lands to managing their traditional country. The report reviewed Indigenous peoples access to mainstream land management programs and Indigenous priorities and initiatives in land management. It suggested there was a fundamental mismatch between the needs of Indigenous land and land managers and the provisions of existing programs. This influential report recommended:

- a more flexible approach to mainstream programs
- secure recurrent funding to enable Indigenous groups to plan and organise their land management activities, including dedicated specialist and coordinating positions in resource agencies and land councils
- Indigenous participation in committees that assess grant applications, and
- improving awareness of Indigenous land management needs and the operational circumstances of Indigenous communities and organisations (Young et al. 1991).

In recent years a more equal partnership approach to ICNRM has emerged, with a slow transition from the government's consultative approach in working with Indigenous organisations and communities, to decision-making through negotiation and accommodation of interests. This has emerged through the establishment of partnerships between government agencies and Indigenous organisations such as the joint management of national parks, regional agreements, Indigenous land use agreements, the development of the Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) program, and training programs that acknowledge and incorporate Indigenous knowledge and practices. However it is important to note that some partnerships such as the joint management of national parks are born out of need and necessity rather than an explicit desire for a partnership approach on the part of the Government. Joint management emerged as a response to increasing legal recognition of Aboriginal rights to traditional lands, beginning with the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cwlth). The need for joint management arrangements arose when existing national parks or conservation reserves were claimed under these laws. A key element in these arrangements is that the transfer of ownership back to Aboriginal people is conditional on their support (through leaseback or other legal mechanisms) for the continuation of the national park (Smyth 2001). As Smyth (2001: 75) points out, 'it is therefore an arrangement of convenience or coercion, rather than a partnership freely entered into'. The IPA program set up in 1997 to support the establishment of IPAs, which are established voluntarily on existing Indigenous-owned land, offers a more equal partnership approach.

On a national Indigenous policy level it is also important to note the impact of the demise of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 2004. Since then the Indigenous portfolio has been divided between mainstream government departments. This is linked to the recent overarching policy shift in Indigenous affairs to focus on a whole-of-government approach. Under this new arrangement, institutional and funding structures in the Northern Territory have changed dramatically. In 2006 the Healthy Country, Healthy People (HCHP) Schedule was announced under the Overarching Agreement on Indigenous Affairs between the Commonwealth of Australia and the Northern Territory of Australia 2005–2010 (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) n.d.). The HCHP Schedule was developed in response to advocacy by the Central Land Council, the CFC Unit (NLC), outstation resource agencies, and land and sea management groups. They advocated for targeted, long-term and more streamlined funding sources—rather than continually applying for small, short-term grants from a variety of sources (S. Kerins pers. comm.). The HCHP Schedule aims to improve joint working arrangements between the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments, delivering better and more coordinated support for Indigenous land and sea management across the Northern Territory (Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA) n.d.). When the HCHP Strategic

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#### IPA:

Indigenous  
Protected Area

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#### HCHP:

Healthy Country,  
Healthy People

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#### FaHCSIA:

Department  
of Families,  
Housing,  
Community  
Services and  
Indigenous  
Affairs

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#### DEWHA:

Department of  
Environment,  
Water, Heritage  
and the Arts

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Investment framework was developed, it was proposed that government agencies and peak bodies invest in delivering tailored three-year investment packages to individual Indigenous land and sea management groups. This was built on the signalled potential release of approximately \$20 million new investment from the ILC (\$10 million) and the Aboriginals Benefit Account (\$10 million). Despite the potential of the HCHP schedule the ILC only provided \$1.5 million, but subsequently reallocated the remainder of the investment to a training package jointly developed by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) to provide training and employment opportunities around pastoralism, tourism, resource industries and ILC businesses.

In May 2007, as part of the 2007–08 Budget, the then Commonwealth Department of Environment and Water Resources announced the Working on Country program. This program was designed to action the government's commitment to support the development of Indigenous land and sea management across Australia; to provide (for the first time) longer-term, streamlined funding; and most importantly, wage support to transition people off Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program wages. Like the HCHP Schedule, this program was responding to the demands of traditional owners and others involved in Indigenous land and sea management for salaried positions instead of relying on CDEP (S. Kerins pers. comm.). The program also signalled the move to a more partnership-based approach to working with Indigenous land and sea management groups recognising a 'two-way' approach using both Indigenous knowledge and western science to manage environmental concerns (Morrison 2007). As Altman (2007b: 1) notes, 'the Working on Country program represents a symbolic and practical breakthrough in recognising, respecting, and recurrently resourcing innovative community-based resource management effort on the Indigenous owned estate'. I return to a full analysis of the Working on Country program later in the paper.

At this time there were also major changes in the Northern Territory, offering both possibilities and challenges for Indigenous land and sea management groups. These included the Australian Government's Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) implemented in response to the *Little Children are Sacred* report (Anderson & Wild 2007), and other Northern Territory local government reforms. Of these affecting Indigenous land and sea management groups, the most significant was the proposed abolition of CDEP, a program that has aided the establishment and ongoing operations of a large number of these groups (see Morrison 2007). According to Putnis, Josif and Woodward (2007), in 2007 formal Indigenous land and sea management groups used CDEP for 90 per cent of partial wage payments, capital assets and human resource management. CDEP ceased in non-remote areas in July 2009. In remote areas existing CDEP participants will continue to receive CDEP wages until 30 June 2011, while new entrants to the scheme from July 2009 will receive only income support (Macklin & O'Connor 2008). The government's envisaged alternatives for CDEP recipients include employment or other training, job ready and income support schemes such as the Structured Training and Employment Projects and Employment Related Services program and Work for the Dole. As Morrison (2007) suggests, this is clearly a backward step.

The removal of CDEP-subsidised labour will be to the detriment of already vulnerable land and sea management groups that lack the capacity to transform CDEP positions into non-subsidised jobs at award wages (Altman & Jordan 2009). Despite the provision of wage support from the Working on Country program, it will not equate to the number of CDEP-supported positions lost. CDEP positions provide a stepping-stone to full-time equivalent (FTE) Working on Country positions, and local CDEP organisations also play a significant role in providing administrative and human resource services, and equipment and vehicles (Altman & Jordan 2009; Putnis, Josif & Woodward 2007).

The following section considers the mechanism of the Working on Country program in the context of the Australian government's national NRM initiative: Caring for Our Country.

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**DEEWR:**

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

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**CDEP:**

Community Development Employment Projects

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**NTER:**

Northern Territory Emergency Response

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**FTE:**

full-time equivalent

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## CARING FOR OUR COUNTRY

### CFOC:

Caring for our  
Country

Caring for our Country (CFOC) is the Commonwealth Government initiative set up in July 2008, integrating the delivery of a number of national NRM programs, including the former Natural Heritage Trust, the National Landcare Program, and The Environment Stewardship Program, as well as the Indigenous-specific Working on Country and IPA programs (CFOC 2008a). CFOC has a budget of \$2.25 billion over five years (2008–13), with the stated goals of having 'an environment that is healthy, better-protected, well-managed, resilient, and that provides essential ecosystem services in a changing climate' (CFOC n.d.). The program is focused on six key national priority areas:

- National Reserve System
- biodiversity and natural icons
- coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats
- sustainable farm practices
- natural resource management in northern and remote Australia, and
- community skills, knowledge and engagement (CFOC 2008a).

This new approach to Commonwealth investment in environment protection and NRM followed a number of independent reviews of the previous Natural Heritage Trust program, including an evaluation of governance arrangements of Catchment Management Organisations (Turnbull & Associates 2005) and another overall evaluation of phase one of the Natural Heritage Trust (Hassell & Associates 2005). Both highlighted deficiencies in governance, funding, and monitoring and evaluation techniques. The new CFOC initiative seems to have implemented the recommendations put forward, and the wording of the program's website and documentation seems promising, emphasising clearly articulated outcomes and priorities and improved accountability (Pannell 2008a; see also CFOC 2008a, 2008b). It is intended is that this integrated approach will be less bureaucratic, reducing the administrative burden on those undertaking NRM activities. However, as Pannell (2008a: 2) remarks, 'there is a great opportunity to do better here, but it would also be easy to make a big step sideways, or even backwards given the risks of centralising decision making'.

## THE WORKING ON COUNTRY PROGRAM

The Commonwealth Government's Working on Country program has been developed in the complicated context of the array of current and previous institutional and policy changes, priorities and recommendations. The result is an Indigenous-specific program nestled under the mainstream CFOC initiative, with substantial additional funding from other government sources. It has the potential to provide a more targeted and streamlined approach to the support of ICNRM.

The Working on Country program is administered by DEWHA, with a funding commitment of \$90 million for 300 positions until 2013 under the CFOC initiative (DEWHA n.d.). However, the total funding available (incorporating other Working on Country streams described below) is significantly greater than this. In total, the funding amounts to over \$200 million, with the projected number of FTE Working on Country funded ranger positions equalling 660 positions by 2013 (K. Mackie, pers. int., 20 July 2009). A brief overview of the program is outlined in the text box on the facing page.

At the time of the NTER implementation and the subsequent CDEP reforms, the Northern Territory and Commonwealth governments were acutely aware of the impact the loss of CDEP would have on Indigenous land and sea management groups in the Northern Territory. Consequently, funding for 169 new ranger positions administered by DEWHA and 150 ILC-administered ranger positions were offered

## WORKING ON COUNTRY: FACTS AND FIGURES

Working on Country is a suite of Indigenous-specific programs, a component of which falls within the Australian Government's Caring for our Country initiative.

The stated aims of the program are:

- to support Indigenous aspirations in Caring for Country
- to protect and manage Australia's environmental and heritage values by providing paid employment for Indigenous people to undertake environmental work on country, and
- to provide training and career pathways for Indigenous people in land and sea management supported by local knowledge.

The program operates on a nationwide scale focusing on Indigenous-owned land, although the Working on Country Regional program within the framework supports Indigenous efforts on non-Indigenous owned land.

Working on Country is a recurrent program with a funding investment in the region of \$90 million over the first five years (July 2008-13) through CFOC. The original program has been significantly expanded with over \$127 million in FaHCSIA funding for subsequent Working on Country programs listed below.

The program has five streams, (with only the first stream funded by CFOC):

- Working on Country (CFOC)
- Working on Country Northern Territory
- Working on Country Regional
- Working on Country Trainees
- Working on Country Flexible positions

There is sufficient funding for 300 ranger positions under the Working on Country program: 169 positions under the Northern Territory stream, 100 Regional positions, 60 Flexible positions and 32 Trainee positions.

Funding is in the region of \$100,000 per year per position. This includes support and administration costs.

Funding for projects can be provided for between one and four years (up to 2013) as projects come on stream.

Source: DEWHA (n.d); Kathleen Mackie, (pers. int., 20 July 2009).

by the Commonwealth government (S. Kerins pers. comm.). DEWHA set up Working on Country Northern Territory, providing the same support as the national Working on Country program, specifically for land and sea management groups in the Northern Territory adversely affected by the proposed CDEP abolition. The ILC were less transparent, and it is unclear as to whether the 150 positions they received have been used for community-driven ICNRM projects (S. Kerins pers. comm.).

The Working on Country Northern Territory program provides \$63 million in funding for groups in the Northern Territory until 30 June 2010. In 2009 the funding is providing for 169 FTE ranger positions (DEWHA n.d.). Funds for this program are currently appropriated to FaHCSIA and administered by DEWHA, but in 2010 funds will be appropriated directly to DEWHA alongside the national Working on Country program (K. Mackie, pers. int., 20 July 2009).

Additional funds have been accessed from FaHCSIA and DEEWR. For 2009–10 this includes funding in the region of \$3.7 million from FaHCSIA for 60 Flexible working positions, explicitly mirroring the flexible working approach of CDEP. DEEWR is providing \$1.7 million for 32 Trainee positions, involving formal accredited training in land use management techniques. Both of these funding streams are only available for existing ranger groups (K. Mackie, pers. int., 20 July 2009). There is also funding through FaHCSIA (though administered through DEWHA) for Working on Country Regional, which funds projects across Australia in regional areas and can include partnership projects on non-Indigenous owned lands, which in 2009 accounts for 100 FTE ranger positions amounting to a sum of around \$10 million (K. Mackie, pers. int., 20 July 2009). The total funding under the Working on Country program, incorporating Working on Country National, Working on Country Northern Territory, as well as Regional and Flexible positions and other election commitments amounts to an investment of \$228 million over the five years (2008–13) providing up to 660 positions to 2013 (K. Mackie, pers. int., 20 July 2009).

The Working on Country program intersects with the IPA program—which also falls under the remit of the CFOC initiative. More than half of the established IPAs employ rangers supported by Working on Country funding (K. Mackie, pers. int., 20 July 2009). The reasons for this linkage are clear. IPAs are located on Indigenous-owned land of high biodiversity value, where some form of Indigenous institution is usually already established. Such a partnership approach offers a way of fulfilling the aims of Working on Country funding by capitalising on previous consultation and institutional development. It is also important to note that despite being a national program, the majority of Working on Country funded projects are located in the Northern Territory. This not only reflects that 50 per cent of the land in the Northern Territory is Indigenous-owned (Altman, Buchanan & Larson 2007) but is in a large part due to the additional Working on Country Northern Territory funding made available as a result of the NTER and local government reforms.

## THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

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The Working on Country program presents both opportunities and challenges for the future of Indigenous land and sea management. DEWHA have committed significant funding to support the program and has responded to calls from Indigenous land and sea managers for funding for paid positions, which is helping to deliver local employment outcomes and providing much needed workforce stability until 2013. Initial feedback from Indigenous land and sea management groups has also been positive (Putnis, Josif & Woodward 2007). DEWHA have responded adaptively and transparently to the changes brought about by the NTER and subsequent CDEP reform by establishing Working on Country Northern Territory, Working on Country Regional and through acquiring funding for training and flexible positions from DEEWR and FaHSCIA. However, the funding arrangements are currently extremely complex and fragmented. The funding sourced from other government departments has been based on reactionary measures and needs to be transformed into long-term commitments, in line with the Commonwealth's aim of a whole-of-government, streamlined approach to supporting ICNRM.

There is potential for the expansion of full-time wage support under Working on Country, but wage support is insufficient to ensure the future sustainability of Indigenous land and sea management groups. Government must acknowledge that formalised Indigenous land and sea management groups do not stand alone. The majority have been established and continue to be sustained by local outstation resource

agencies, many of which have been local CDEP-administering organisations, providing infrastructural support, administrative and human resources services, and access to equipment and vehicles. If Indigenous land and sea management activities are to develop, such organisations also need to be supported. Similarly, if the CFC Unit at the NLC is to support fledgling Indigenous land and sea management groups—the reason for which it was set up—then funding support is required for such coordination and supervision. The possible loss of organisational capacity linked to CDEP reform could impact negatively on the viability of Indigenous land and sea management in remote areas of Australia.

Despite the obvious merits of the Working on Country program, the reality is that many Indigenous land and sea management groups remain extremely fragile, under-resourced, and reliant on a multitude of small specific-purpose grants beyond Working on Country funding. More effort is needed to support local development of groups with funding to meet management and infrastructure costs, community planning, governance support and education and training. This will help to ensure that they have the capacity to implement and sustain activities beyond 2013.

Some traditional owners and associated land and sea management groups also need to confront challenges related to internal governance structures, leadership, succession planning and coordination of land and sea management activities. Government investment should target assistance in these areas. This would usefully include the strengthening of Indigenous governance arrangements, intergenerational transfer of Indigenous technical knowledge and local knowledge, and training in monitoring techniques and data analysis, including the use of new technologies (such as CyberTracker) to assist Indigenous land and sea management groups in recording data and assessing the environmental outcomes of work effort.<sup>3</sup>

As Putnis, Josif and Woodward (2007) note, the economic viability of the Indigenous land and sea management sector as a whole will depend on the ability of Indigenous groups to increase their operational capacity and stability, and successfully market their services to businesses, government agencies and industries operating in or responsible for ICNRM. Furthermore, considerable ICNRM activities continue to occur outside formal programs (Sithole et al. 2008) and much of this is unreported or unrecognised as a public good which is in the national interest. This should be remedied by government resourcing this voluntary activity as paid activity. To support this, attention needs to be paid to bolstering the capacity of fledgling groups in order for them to have the opportunity to access funding and resources. Both the Central and Northern Land Councils could play a key role in this regard.

For effective future development of Indigenous land and sea management, government support needs to go beyond the environment-focused ambit of DEWHA. Despite the declared whole-of-government approach to Indigenous affairs, support from other government departments is severely lacking in the sphere of ICNRM. There has been a failure to recognise the benefits that can be derived from a whole-of-government approach to supporting Indigenous land and sea management, in providing a suite of infrastructural, institutional, governance, education and training support. In effect there is a failure of 'whole-of government' to see 'whole-of-community'. This is exemplified by the recent Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) (COAG 2009) which recognises Indigenous peoples' cultural connections to homelands/outstations but seeks to 'avoid ... expectations of major investment in service provision where there are few economic or educational opportunities' (COAG 2009: E79).

There has been some support from FaHCSIA and DEEWR as a reactive measure to counteract the impact of the abolition of CDEP, but if the plethora of evidence-based benefits from Indigenous land and sea management are to be realised there needs to be a more proactive shift from the 'business-as-usual' silo approach to widespread support and commitment from all local and national government departments

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**COAG:**

Council of  
Australian  
Governments

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**NIRA:**

National  
Indigenous  
Reform  
Agreement

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and agencies involved in service delivery in remote Indigenous Australia. These bodies might take heed: support for the development of Indigenous land and sea management offers a low cost solution to 'Closing the Gap' in a variety of sectors including health, education and employment.

The HCHP Strategic Framework recommended that any expanded Working on Country program should make additional efforts to encourage Indigenous land and sea management groups to develop PES contracts and other commercial opportunities (e.g. the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement project; for others related to bio-security management see Muller 2008). PES should not be viewed as the sole avenue for development (see Concu forthcoming), but it would assist in lessening the reliance on government grants (Putnis, Josif & Woodward 2007). This too requires investment in institutional capacity building, but as Muller (2008: 167) cautions, it is important that PES does not become another imposition of mainstream society on Indigenous peoples, but instead that the aspirations, concerns and approaches of Indigenous land managers are respected and realised, rather than marshalling support for predetermined government agendas.

The program performance for the first year of the Working on Country program is currently being evaluated by Walter Turnbull & Associates—a requirement of the Office of Evaluation and Audit (Indigenous Programs) within the Department of Finance and Deregulation (K. Mackie, pers. int., 20 July 2009). This evaluation is part of the Monitoring, Evaluation Reporting and Improvement (MERI) Strategy framework, set up to evaluate all CFCO programs and activities. Within the MERI framework each of the six national priority areas have 20-year projections of expected achievements, as well as 24 five-year expected outcomes (see CFCO 2008b). In addition one-year to four-year targets are set against the five-year outcomes in an attempt to ensure they are achieved. The targets are outlined annually in the CFCO business plans (see CFCO 2008a). Projects then contribute to the achievement of individual or multiple targets and progress is reported through an annual report card (CFCO 2009).

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**MERI:**  
Monitoring,  
Evaluation  
Reporting and  
Improvement  
Strategy

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At this early stage it is unclear whether the MERI Strategy will be an effective tool in assessing the outcomes of CFCO programs, but it is important that it focuses on the achievement of outcomes rather than the past focus on accountability for funds spent (Pannell 2008b). Questions also remain regarding the adequacy of this overarching framework in measuring Indigenous specific outcomes from the Working on Country program, and to what extent these outcomes are predetermined to fulfil national priorities and needs. In the Indigenous context, any evaluation of the Working on Country program not only needs to be framed in terms of environmental outcomes, but should also be cognisant of the broader social, economic, cultural, education and health indicators. This would assist in providing an evidence base to inform government policy and future support for Indigenous land and sea management initiatives. Indeed, the Working on Country program has the potential to address Indigenous poverty and NRM simultaneously. The challenge will be in determining the outcomes of the program in order to obtain the evidence of the effectiveness of such investments.

On a practical level the MERI strategy document states that it is 'consistent with international and ethical best practice for evaluation and with indigenous customary and scientific norms for information collection, analysis and use' (CFCO 2009: 10). It is important that any evaluation be grounded in a participatory approach at the onset, using a flexible methodological framework that can be adapted for different groups—acknowledging the diversity of circumstances that exist—which will encourage engagement and a sense of ownership of the evaluation process by Indigenous land and sea managers.

The government's new CFCO initiative offers a more streamlined approach to NRM, focusing on six national priority areas. The Working on Country program, although Indigenous specific, is nestled under these mainstream government priorities. Attention needs to be paid to ensuring that Working on Country meets the needs, aspirations and priorities of Indigenous people and does not become another inflexible, top-down imposed program driven by government agendas and priorities.



The Working on Country program cannot be viewed in isolation from the wider government Indigenous policy framework. The Commonwealth and Territory Governments have a current policy approach of promoting labour migration away from homelands/outstations and off the Indigenous estate to attempt assimilation into the mainstream economy. For instance, Schedule E of the NIRA clearly states that any investment should look at 'facilitating voluntary mobility' and 'improving participation in the market economy' (COAG 2009: E79). Similarly the Northern Territory Government's Working Future policy framework announced in May 2009 identifies 20 of the larger Indigenous communities, to be known as Territory Growth Towns, to prioritise and systematically develop. Existing homelands/outstations will continue to be supported, provided they are 'permanently' occupied (defined as 8–9 months residence per annum); no new outstations will be financially supported; and in existing homelands/outstations residents will be required to make financial contributions to their maintenance including water, electricity and sanitation (Altman & May 2010). Many Indigenous land and sea management groups are located on, operate from, or work closely with homelands/outstations where they are better situated to monitor and manage the land and sea as apposed to urban centres. The new policy is premised on the status quo of ongoing neglect. This will impact on the wide range of environmental services Indigenous land and sea management groups provide, and which assist Australia to meet its local, national and international biodiversity obligations. As Altman ('No movement on outstations', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 May 2009) notes, 'empty landscape—terra vacua—is not in the national interest'.

The Working on Country program needs to be adaptively and flexibly managed to ensure that it continually meets the priorities and aspirations of Indigenous land and sea managers. They need to be empowered to pursue their own aspirations—and not those imagined for them behind closed doors in Canberra. Investment in human capital needs to be at the centre of this approach if the benefits accrued from the program are to be sustained beyond 2013. Achieving this requires effort on both the part of government and Indigenous land and sea management groups.

## CONCLUSION

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This is an opportune time to strategically develop Indigenous land and sea management in Australia. Climate change and associated land degradation is a high priority on the Government's environment agenda, and at the same time businesses are looking for market opportunities associated with the emerging global 'conservation economy'. Indigenous groups are managing significant areas of biodiversity rich land with limited resources. As the Indigenous estate continues to increase as a result of successful land and native title claims and more IPAs are declared, the sustained support and development of Indigenous land and sea management groups is crucial.

At a time when there is much rhetoric about failures in Indigenous development in remote Australia, the benefits attributed to ICNRM should be acknowledged and celebrated. The Working on Country program offers some grounds for optimism in this regard. An expanded program, underpinned by community-led priorities and aspirations, has the potential to ameliorate Indigenous poverty and ensure natural resource management simultaneously. This will require targeted investment and a more holistic and less sectoral approach from government.

## NOTES

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1. This community-led evaluation consulted with 70 per cent of the formal ranger groups in the Top End, seven groups operating outside the formal network and two operating outside the NLC region, as well as three Landcare groups. It was undertaken by CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems in partnership with the Aboriginal Land and Sea Management Review Team (ALSMRT) which was formed specifically to provide input into the evaluation project (Sithole et al. 2008).
2. The Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC) is a statutory authority set up under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005* to assist Indigenous people to acquire and manage land to achieve economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits and has primary responsibility for administering the Land Fund (see Sullivan 2009).  
  
Aboriginal Land Councils, such as the NLC and Central Land Council are statutory organisations set up under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cwlth) to administer land claim processes and provide administrative services relating to the land granted to Indigenous people under the Act. State-wide Aboriginal Land Councils have now been set up under State land rights legislation. Smaller entities such as the Kimberley Land Council were set up independently of government as non-statutory bodies, incorporated under legislation such as the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Councils and Association Act 1976* (Cwlth) (Orchard, Ross and Young 2003).  
  
Outstation resource agencies have been formed to facilitate the overall day-to-day administration of groups or outstation communities, often dealing with service delivery and NRM initiatives, such as the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation based in Maningrida.
3. CyberTracker software allows ranger groups to record location specific environmental observations on country using handheld computers. The data is synchronised and stored in a central database where it can be compared and analysed.



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