

Valuing People in the Landscape: Re-thinking Conservation Approaches

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Abstract—When Australian Governments committed to building a National Reserve System (NRS) for Australia in 1991 they didn't anticipate that some of the most important conservation gains were to be made on Indigenous owned land. An innovative Federal Government policy decision in 1996 to support Indigenous landowners to establish Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) on their land provided a breakthrough in national conservation efforts. This policy and ensuing program was established ensuring that Indigenous communities held full control of decision making, including participation, how much of their land they wished to declare and how best to manage their land. IPAs now constitute more than 35% of Australia's reserve system (some 60 IPAs covering around 48 million hectares; 118.5 million ac). The IPA concept specifically recognizes and values Indigenous knowledge and explicitly combines western science to create a unique and culturally empowering model of conservation and land management. In addition, and most importantly, IPAs provide one of the few pathways for building a sustainable economic future based around Indigenous culture. This paper will provide an overview of this unique co-production and raise some of the challenges facing this concept. It will also highlight a number of the key ingredients that make them successful.

Introduction

Since white settlement in 1788, the Australian landscape has undergone a radical transformation that has seen massive biodiversity loss from fire, land clearing, the ravages of invasive species and poor land management practices. The extent and rate of biodiversity decline has prompted a slow but growing awareness of how we think about sustainable living and the role of conservation. In particular, the last three decades have seen the rapid expansion of Australia's National Reserve System (NRS). This extraordinary and globally significant collaboration by all Australian governments, non-government organizations (NGOs), Indigenous and private landholders and the scientific community has seen a great deal of innovation in the way conservation obligations have been pursued.

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When Australian governments committed to building a NRS for Australia in 1992 they didn't anticipate that some of the most important conservation gains were to be made on Indigenous owned land. An Australian Government policy decision in 1996 to support Indigenous landowners to establish Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) on their land provided a breakthrough in national conservation efforts on private land. This policy (consistent with IUCN guidelines on protected area establishment and management) and the ensuing program ensured that Indigenous communities held full control of decision making, including participation, how much of their land they wished to declare and how best to manage their land.

IPAs now constitute more than 35% of Australia's reserve system (some 60 IPAs covering around 48 million hectares; 118.5 million ac). The IPA concept specifically recognizes and values Indigenous knowledge while utilizing western science to create a unique and culturally empowering model of conservation management. In addition, and most importantly, IPAs provide one of the few pathways for communities to pursue their long term economic and cultural development aspirations—through land and sea work.

This paper will provide an overview of this unique co-production model and raises some of the challenges facing this concept in the coming years.

Background

The evolution of the IPA concept has been complex, one where Indigenous communities and the Australian Government have worked together and adapted tactics and programs for more than 30 years. Crucial to this process has been the Australian Government's increasing recognition of the importance of the relationship between healthy country and healthy people (including cultural integrity). Indigenous control of decision making, planning and utilization of traditional knowledge has provided the basis for engagement by many communities. One of the starting points for Government recognition of this unique collaboration was generated by conflict over a proposed uranium mine in Northern Australia (east of Darwin in the Alligator Rivers region), which also had significant conservation and cultural values. An historic settlement was achieved in 1982 when a vast area of this land was handed back to Traditional Owners and then leased to the Australian Government to administer as the jointly managed Kakadu National Park (Figure 1). An area was excised out of the park for Uranium mining.

The Australian Government and some state governments have applied the jointly managed national park model in various locations across Australia. While an important model providing employment and joint decision making, the model



Figure 1—Indigenous Trainees, Kakadu NP

often generates tensions between Indigenous aspirations and government expectations. Some Traditional Owners claim that the model limits Indigenous options on what they can do with their land and that decision-making isn't always equal (Figure 2).

In an effort to expand opportunities for Indigenous engagement in land management, the Australian Government, in 1988, initiated the Contract Employment Program for Aboriginals in Natural and Cultural Resource Management (CEPANCRM). This provided incentives for state governments to contract Indigenous labor in existing national parks and other conservation estates where Indigenous people had cultural ties.

The Indigenous joint management and CEPANCRM initiatives were important developments for Indigenous groups through the 1980's and 1990's. These cemented a natural bond between conservation and Indigenous natural and cultural interests. Missing from this work however was Indigenous control and support for managing natural and cultural resources on country they already owned or occupied. Pressure mounted on governments to provide support to communities who wished to care for their own country.



Figure 2—Handback of Uluru NP 1985

The concept of IPAs emerged from three needs during the 1980's and 1990's:

1. Australian Government policy and programs were inadequately addressing Indigenous aspirations especially in areas where they occupied or owned their land.
2. Growing international and national recognition of Indigenous rights in conservation and sustainable development.
3. A pragmatic recognition that many areas of remote Australia owned and occupied by Indigenous Australians also coincided with priorities for inclusion in Australia's NRS.

As Indigenous land title had been hard fought for over many decades (through various Land Rights and Native Title struggles around Australia), Indigenous communities were highly unlikely to relinquish or share their title with government for conservation purposes. A different but innovative model was required.

The term 'Indigenous interests' is used herein to refer to Indigenous groups, organizations or individuals that have or would assert rights and interests over a particular area of land or sea. These might include one or all of the Indigenous Traditional Owners or Native Title holders (or claimants), Indigenous communities or families, Indigenous corporations or associations, or representative organizations such as land councils (Rose 2011).

In response to these needs the Australian Government undertook extensive negotiations and consultations with Indigenous interests and established the IPA program, which was launched in 1997-98. It provided a mechanism to increase the representativeness of the National Reserve System through the inclusion of Indigenous land. Indigenous groups interested in developing an IPA over their land would seek funding support from the Australian Government to undertake community consultation and the development of a plan of management covering the areas of land they wished to declare as an IPA. Governments are then invited to recognize IPAs as part of the National Reserve System. While they are not covered by any formal legal framework, like other conservation reserves in Australia, IPAs are consistent with the IUCN's definition of a protected area, being managed for conservation by 'legal or other effective means' (Dudley 2008). Crucially, the Plans of Management for IPAs designate IUCN management categories, thus enabling Australian governments to appropriately recognize their contribution to the National Reserve System (Figure 3).

While the voluntary declaration of IPAs means that they are not constrained by land tenure and legislative complexities, some have criticized this as a weakness where IPAs might be 'un-declared' by communities at any time. The counter view is the security communities derive by owning a management/governance framework for their land that provides tangible economic cultural and social benefits. Legislatively established protected areas can be and are un-gazetted in Australia, further diminishing the criticism about the security of IPAs (Rose 2012).



Figure 3—Declaration of Sthn Tanami IPA 2012

In addition to the growth and success of the IPA program, the Australian Government initiated the development of the Working on Country (WoC) Indigenous Ranger Program in 2007, providing flexible employment options for Indigenous rangers across a variety of land tenure arrangements – not just Indigenous owned land. Specifically, WoC recognizes Indigenous people's strong relationship and obligations to country and to have this land and sea management work recognized in the form of paid employment (DSEWPac 2013). The WoC program is being utilized on a number of IPAs as well as in numerous other tenure contexts and often supports the transfer of Indigenous cultural knowledge between elders and younger people. A recent review of the WoC program and its relationship to the IPA program summarized the findings by saying:

‘These programs [WoC and IPAs] have clearly impacted on individual lives and communities in ways that other Indigenous programs have not. Ranger employment, appropriate training and the establishment of IPAs have been transformative events for the individuals and communities involved, reinforcing for me the significance of caring for country as a propitious niche for many Indigenous people in contemporary Australia’ (Smyth 2012).

Indigenous Protected Areas and Working on Country Today

The demand from Indigenous landowners to develop and declare IPAs over their land has exceeded government expectations and represents the most significant growth in Australia's National Reserve System. As already mentioned, 35% of Australia's National Reserve System (covering around 134 million hectares; 331 million ac) are declared IPAs (60) covering some 48 million hectares (118.5 million ac) of land (figure 4). There are some 24 IPA consultation projects currently in development covering a further estimated 30 million hectares (74 million ac) of country, should these be declared (Figure 5).

There are many IPAs in Australia that incorporate an interface between the land and the sea (Figure 6). The cultural importance attached to these coastal areas culturally is no different to that of the land. A number of communities have been actively managing their marine environments and seeking to declare sea-country IPAs over marine areas they have attachment to. The Australian Government has been working in recent years with a number of coastal IPA groups to develop a policy context for the establishment of sea-country IPAs. This has resulted in the recent recognition by both the Australian and Northern Territory Governments of a sea country IPA managed by Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation and its partners adjacent to the Arnhem Land coast. (see <http://www.dhimurru.com.au/sea-country-ipa-management-plan-launch.html>)

A Sea Country Indigenous Protected Area provides a framework for Indigenous communities to collaboratively manage sea country with other groups who actively use the marine environment. A number of remote communities have been contracting their services to fisheries, police and Quarantine services for surveillance and management purposes. These arrangements have fostered strong and positive working relationships between the cultural aspirations of communities and those of other marine stakeholders.

Sea Country IPAs work by bringing all stakeholders together to use and manage marine resources through a collaborative framework that will deliver conservation and sustainable use outcomes (DSEWPac 2013). Because IPAs are not delivered through a legislative framework, they do not have the power to override existing laws/activities such as commercial fisheries and recreational fishing. The development of a sea country IPA therefore relies on all of the users of the sea country agreeing to work together and to only exercise their rights to use sea country in a manner that is consistent with the overall management framework of the IPA.

The Future

The success of both the IPA and WoC programs has firmly cemented the importance of Indigenous engagement in conservation management in remote Australia. Similarly, the co-benefits accruing from these programs in the form of socio-economic and cultural development are of profound significance to Indigenous communities.

The current Australian Government has recognized this co-production by:

- Committing a further \$78 million over the next five years to support the ongoing management of existing IPAs and the finalization and declaration of the 24 IPA consultation projects.
- Committing \$320 million toward job certainty for the Working on Country Indigenous Rangers to build on the current work to protect and conserve the environment and strengthen land and sea management. In announcing this commitment the Federal Environment Minister outlined the goal to employ up to 730 Indigenous rangers by 2015, a growth of 630 rangers since 2007 (Burke, 2013).

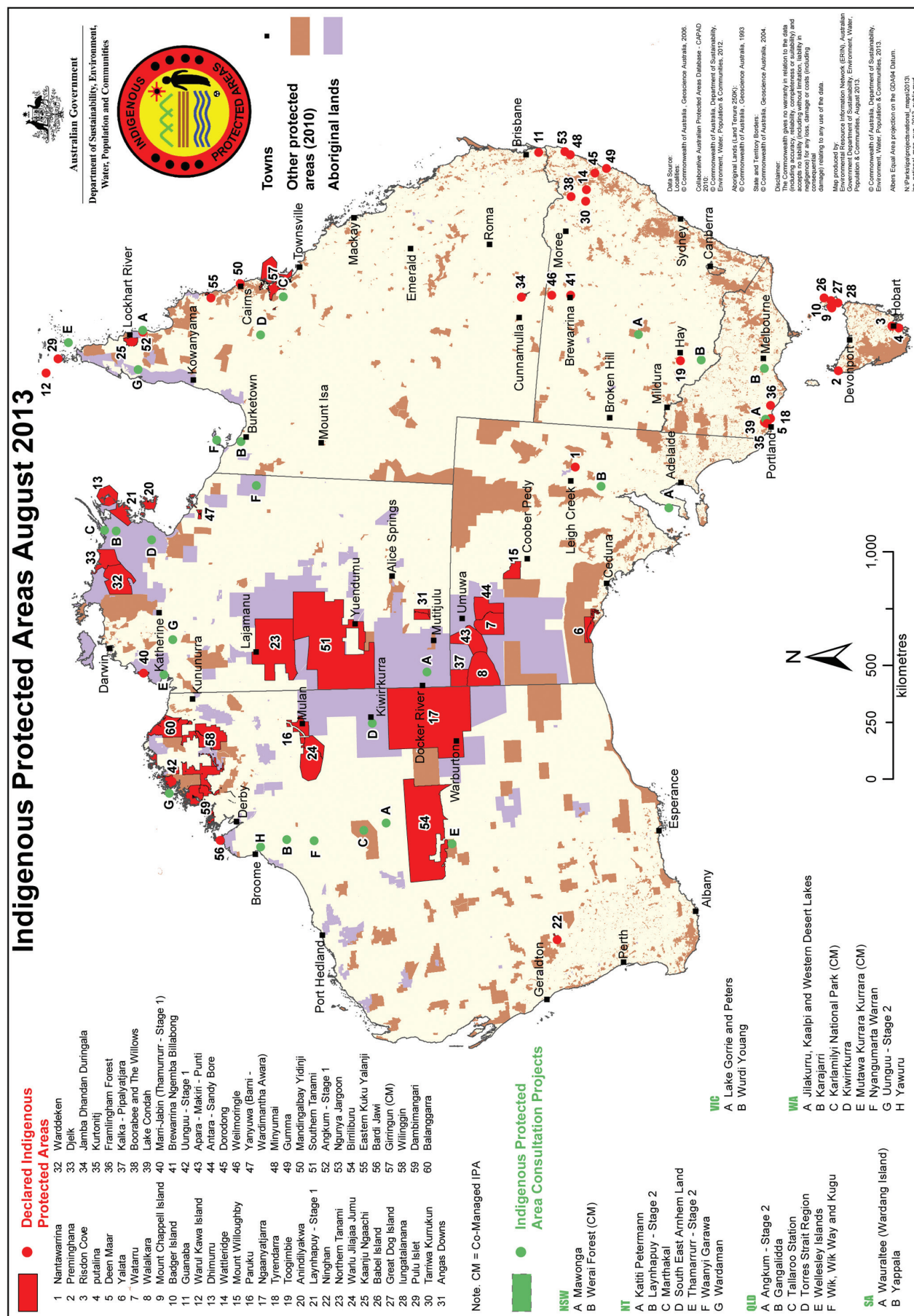


Figure 4—IPA map, August 2013



Figure 5—Declaration of Kaanju-Ngaachi IPA 2008

IPA Case Study

Dhimurru Indigenous Protected Area



Gulf of Carpentaria | Declared in November 2000

The land will exist forever. It must be protected so that it will remain the same, so that it can be seen in the same way that the elders saw it in the past. Our vision and hope is that Yolngu will continue to use the land for all the generations to come.

Dhimurru Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) was declared in November 2000. It covers over 92,000 hectares of coastline and hinterland country on the western edge of the Gulf of Carpentaria, forms part of the wider traditional lands of the Yolngu people.



All photos courtesy of Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation (Left) Turtle measuring, Jane Dermer. (Right) Turtle population monitoring. (Bottom) Ranger guided walk, Phil Wise.

Sandy beaches, rocky coastal islands, spreading mangroves and ancient dune systems are found along Dhimurru's coasts. Inland, the Guwatjurmurru (Giddy River) flows through cascades and rockpools, before meandering through the coastal plain. Dhimurru's lands are held for the Traditional Owners by the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Land Trust, and their interests are represented by the Northern Land Council. The IPA is run by the Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation, which was created in 1992 to deal with increasing numbers of visitors and growth in the local township of Nhulunbuy. They work with the Traditional Owners, who direct land management and approve access to their lands via a permit system. The Corporation looks after the day to day running of the IPA, making sure things are done in a way that reflects Yolngu cultural values.

Figure 6—IPA Case Study

Many Traditional Owners work as rangers on the IPA, monitoring and protecting the wildlife. Part of their job is surveying turtle and crocodile numbers to make sure the populations are healthy. Another key role is the removal of marine debris washed up on beaches. Every year the rangers remove tonnes of discarded fishing nets known as ghost nets, rescuing turtles and other marine life entangled and injured in the plastic mesh.

The effectiveness of this work was recognised in 2001 by a Banksia Award - Australia's prestigious environmental award scheme - in the Marine and Coastal category. This was awarded to Dhimurru for a marine project they worked on with WWF-Australia, Conservation Volunteers Australia and Northern Territory Fisheries.

Local schoolchildren, including students from Nhulunbuy and Yirrkala Primary Schools, go on interpretive walks with rangers to learn about their work, cultural traditions and how they protect the environment. The rangers also assist Australian Quarantine and Inspection Services with ship inspections (to guard against introduced species), and talk to visitors about the IPA.

IPA funding helps manage visitor pressures on popular areas by maintaining campsites and controlling access to fragile dune and beach zones which were being damaged by vehicles, causing erosion and destroying wildlife habitats. Dhimurru IPA is managed in line with the following International Union for Conservation of Nature category:

Category V - Protected Landscape/Seascape: Protected Area managed mainly for landscape/seascape conservation and recreation.

This Case Study was prepared by the Department of Environment, Water, Sustainability, Population and Communities in collaboration with the Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation. It was viewed and copied with permission from the Departments website (www.environment.gov.au) on 20 July 2013.

In the late 1980's when mainstream Australian Government policy took its first foray into the Indigenous land management field through programs like CEPANCRM it was motivated primarily by bolstering Indigenous employment opportunities. Few government officials foreshadowed the burgeoning co-productions that were to emerge - providing a socio-cultural and economic future for so many communities. These substantial outcomes have been achieved through a small amount of funding designed to engage Indigenous people to undertake conservation work.

In 2011 the Australian National Audit Office reviewed the IPA Program and noted in particular the Australian Government's adoption of a model of shared interest or co-production. For a small amount of seed funding the IPA Program engages Indigenous landowners to support their customary responsibility to care for their country consistent with national and international guidelines (ANAO 2011). For many communities the value of these programs is intrinsically cultural where healthy and productive country (especially native food species) is fundamental to community well being. In addition, jobs on country value and incorporate traditional knowledge while utilizing Western science (Rose 2012). More recently, researchers are recognizing the growing importance these programs are having on knowledge transfer, health, general community cohesion and well-being (Hunt et al. 2009) (Figure 7).

In the last decade, many Indigenous organizations, communities and enterprises have been turning their efforts to long-term sustainable economic futures – independent from government welfare support. In regional and remote Australia, it is often the IPAs, WoC and other land and sea work that has galvanized communities in to a level of confidence and optimism about their future. Pride and recognition for the 'marketability' of traditional knowledge and expertise in keeping country healthy is emerging as a central theme for optimism in Indigenous economic development. This is being manifested through innovative 'healthy-country' and business planning. As a consequence there are increasing numbers of communities and organizations at the forefront of developing and implementing a range of Indigenous enterprises, unique to remote areas, servicing land and



Figure 7—Healthy Country Planning 2011

sea management needs on Indigenous owned land, public reserves, pastoral lands as well as government and mining companies. As already stated, much of the work includes invaluable biodiversity conservation works, fire management and invasive pest work where local traditional knowledge of country is vital. With Australia's carbon pricing scheme now in place, some Northern Australian Indigenous groups have been exploring the development of managed savanna burning initiatives under the Government's Carbon Farming Initiative. The first of these to be approved under the scheme is Fish River, a property bought for the protection of cultural and environmental values. The Indigenous leadership and lessons learned in establishing this initiative is assisting Northern Australian Indigenous landholders to pursue similar income generating schemes (ILC 2013) (Figure 8)

As confidence and opportunity grow, Indigenous organizations are becoming more creative in adapting support available to them in order to design and establish sustainable futures that are unique to their land and sea aspirations. A strong feature of the IPA and WoC programs is their ability to enable these adaptations to occur. This makes for a wide range of projects all unique in how they might be implemented. One good example is the Mandinglbay Yidinji IPA near Cairns in far north Queensland. This unique IPA covers a range of conservation tenures including national park, forest reserve and a local government reserve. The area co-exists with a Native Title determination by the Australian Federal Court. Bruce Rose (2012) explains that the IPA also incorporates an environmental reserve where Native Title was extinguished by an earlier tenure and part of a Queensland marine park where exclusive Native Title has been recognized above the high tide mark.

Many of the Indigenous organizations and communities engaged in land and sea work are increasingly establishing partnerships with a wide range of public and private supporters. In many cases public funding, like the IPA and WoC programs, have provided the catalyst for Indigenous groups to actively seek additional involvement of others for their land and sea management aspirations. This has seen a significant increase in involvement of the private sector—whether it be for the provision of services or funding to help Indigenous groups to plan and manage their own land and



Figure 8—Launch of the Fish River Project 2011, Federal Environmental Minister

sea. The array of partners is wide-ranging and uniquely tailored to different groups needs. Typically, the private sector groups involved include:

- Mining companies
- Volunteer professionals
- Individual philanthropists
- Conservation organizations (in the form of direct support and through philanthropic contributions)
- Volunteer groups and organizations
- Natural Resource Management Groups

The success of these programs has reinforced that if we are to effectively care and protect our natural and cultural resources in remote Australia, then people living in these landscapes are central to this process. The growth and adaptation of the land and sea work outlined in this paper have increased pressure on government and private sector resources. There is now an urgent argument for some rethinking between Indigenous Australians, Government and the private sector on how best to continue to support this work and ensure that the increasing demand can be accommodated.

The Challenges

As indicated, private groups and the philanthropic sector are increasingly interested in investing in Indigenous land and sea work. The fact that IPA and WoC initiatives are underwritten by Australian Government policy and funding support provides some security to these private investors. In addition, the IPA and WoC programs enjoy strong bi-partisan political support from the Australia's main political parties.

The ability for Indigenous groups to genuinely drive their long-term aspirations now depends in part on the extent to which government and the private sector can work together with these groups to support them. As this paper is being written no new IPAs can be funded through the IPA program to consult for, plan and establish IPAs due to resourcing limitations. This constraint provides an important trigger for dialogue between Indigenous interests, government and the private sector to explore solutions. In anticipation of such dialogue, a number of central challenges will need to be addressed:

1. Policy framework: There are now numerous Indigenous land and sea initiatives spotted around Australia that are striving to establish long term sustainable mechanisms to ensure their viability. These are being supported through a range of inspiring enterprises, and funding partnerships with both government and the private sector. It is these demonstrations that now need to be utilized for the benefit of emerging groups who might learn from these projects. Importantly, the champions from these projects will be central to assisting in re-configuring the national policy context for this work. The leadership for this will need to come from both government and Indigenous leaders.

2. Private sector engagement: Some conservation NGO's supporting Indigenous land and sea work have been criticized for pursuing narrow, single sector, conservation interests ahead of the wider socio-cultural and economic aspirations of Indigenous groups that form an integral part of their sustainable futures. In some instances considerable

conflict and damage to Indigenous aspirations has resulted. Less experienced Indigenous organizations can be vulnerable to these well meaning but potentially dangerous overtures. By contrast, many of the larger mining companies have embarked on strategic partnerships with Indigenous groups as part of their social responsibility programs that are negotiated strictly in accordance with Indigenous interests.

3. Governance support: Indigenous communities attract considerable negative press over issues such as family and community dysfunction, alcohol abuse, violence and poor school attendance. Those communities in the process of liberating themselves from decades of dysfunction and dependence on government welfare need to establish strong leadership and governance structures as part of their liberation. Establishing such structures won't always come naturally for many remote Indigenous communities, especially where western constructs are being used. Future policy and program support for Indigenous land and sea management programs will need to build in innovative and culturally appropriate support systems to ensure communities have the best chance of succeeding.

4. Models of long-term viability: While the success of the IPA and WoC programs are undisputed the challenge will be determining sustainable financing models to ensure Indigenous people are enabled to fulfill their land and sea management aspirations. While some NGO's, in collaboration with the corporate sector are investigating Trust or Endowment models in particular regions, these examples are unlikely to be scaled up to support all groups. Some IPAs will be successful in generating funding through selling services and running enterprises. A good many will always be dependent on external support for their viability. A creative mix of models will need to be explored. Fortunately there are several Indigenous groups who are already well advanced in developing a viable and sustainable future for themselves. These successful models provide important demonstration benchmarks for assisting others as they explore their viability options.

Conclusion

Indigenous Australians see healthy country as an intrinsic virtue for healthy culture and society. The Australian Government now recognizes the importance of this special relationship between country and people, notably through the Indigenous Protected Area and the Working on Country model. More work is needed to secure this extraordinarily important model to help ensure that Indigenous aspirations can be met alongside effective management of Australia's remote regions. We know what the essential ingredients are that make IPAs and WoC successful. Some of these ingredients in the Australian context include:

- A commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizing the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of Indigenous people.
- A genuine partnership between funders and the Indigenous groups in the design, development and implementation of programs and policies

- Indigenous control of their participation, decision making, planning and implementation of programs on their land
- Recognition that Indigenous knowledge and cultural ties to land are fundamental to Indigenous engagement in programs
- Flexible and adaptive approaches to the design and development of programs and policy – recognizing that no two Indigenous groups will have the same aspirations.
- Communities being capable of establishing a strong vision and governance framework for implementing their aspirations

The significant missing link in all of this however is a leadership model that embraces community interests, government and the private sector. Should there be a ‘coming together’ of such a leadership model then perhaps we might see an unparalleled partnership of policy and funding possibilities. It could even be possible to extend the IPA-WoC thinking to embrace other privately held land across Australia. The pressures of global economic uncertainties, diminishing resources for environment programs, the impacts of climate change and the un-paralleled resource exploration interests in Australia make the timing critical for this new thinking. This will require great humility by all parties.

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