



## *Caring for biodiversity in the Tanami*



Traditional Aboriginal land owners of the Northern Tanami Desert, the Warlpiri people have managed their land for more than 25,000 years.

In 2001 they became part of a special program, the Wulain Rangers, helping deal with the land management problems of the 21st century.

The Rangers work in an area covering around 50,000 square kilometres, important for both biodiversity and cultural heritage.

They survey wildlife and native plants, carry out controlled burns and help manage weeds and feral animals around outstations. A mining company benefits from their assistance with a five year biodiversity monitoring project and the Rangers also contribute to outdoor classes run by a local school.

The Wulain Homelands Association and the Central Land Council began the Ranger program in 2001, at Lajamanu, nearly 600 kilometres south west of Katherine. They aim to use Aboriginal land, as well as cultural knowledge and skills, to boost local economies and provide local employment.

The Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust has provided \$170,000 for the project to date, under its Indigenous Protected Area Programme. Part of this funding has contributed to employing a full-time coordinator.

The Ranger initiative is based on a simple plan; to employ and train some eight local men and women and equip them with a vehicle, tools and the safety gear needed for natural and cultural resource management tasks across the vast land trusts surrounding Lajamanu.

### **The Northern Tanami country**

The Hooker Creek and Central Desert Land Aboriginal Trust lands of the Northern Tanami, where the Wulain Rangers work are made up of savanna and desert environments.

The region is an important refuge for arid-zone threatened species like the Bilby, Grey Falcon, Spectacled Hare-wallaby, Mulgara (a medium sized, rare marsupial mouse), Great Desert Skink and Woma Python.





A high proportion of plant species found in the area are restricted to this particular bioregion and there's still much to be learned about the region's biology.

### **What the rangers do**

The Ranger program is managed along much the same lines as a football team. It has a Club Committee of traditional owners and outstation residents; a Team Manager, or Ranger Coordinator; a Coach, who is a Senior Ranger who helps the younger members; a Captain, or Head Ranger, and the players, or individual Rangers.

Employed under the Australian Government's Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), the Rangers carry out a variety of natural resource management and conservation work. They also have the opportunity to travel to meetings, workshops and seminars to network with and learn from others involved in Indigenous land management.

### **Fauna and flora survey**

The Rangers have been part of cross-cultural teams developing fauna and flora inventories of their land. They work in collaboration with senior traditional owners and government agencies such as the Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Service, the Northern Territory Herbarium and the (former) Australian Heritage Commission.

### **Fire management**

They have been involved in fire management, carrying out early burns along the roads and track and around outstation buildings, to control wildfire. This takes place at times that don't interfere with traditional patch burning associated with hunting and the regeneration of bush foods.



### *Outstations*

Remote outstations and their surrounds are prone to weed invasion and feral pests like foxes and cats. Together with outstation residents, the Wulain Rangers are helping to manage land and water so that these problems are reduced. They are also working to improve general environmental health and raise awareness of contemporary land care issues.

### *Mining: environmental employment*

The Rangers work with Newmont Mining Corporation which operates the Tanami and Granites gold mines, approximately 250 kilometres south of Lajamanu. The company employs them to undertake a variety of tasks including weed control at revegetation sites affected by mining and bi-annual environmental monitoring surveys.

In collaboration with the Central Land Council and Newmont Mining, the Rangers are involved in a five-year biodiversity monitoring project. This includes recording and assessing biodiversity over an area of 40,000 square kilometres. The Rangers are helping to observe and trap fauna and monitor and record flora at 100 sites spread across the Central Tanami. By assessing the cumulative impact of influences like wildfire, mining, weeds and feral animals, the project will enable people to better understand the environmental condition of the country.

### *Country visits program*

Lajamanu School runs a cultural program as part of their curriculum, known as 'Country Visits'. The Rangers participate in these outdoor classes by contributing their contemporary knowledge and experience in land and wildlife. They also help by preparing camping sites in advance and supporting the involvement of senior traditional owners.

### *The future*

The Central Land Council is seeking to enhance the whole program through the establishment of an Indigenous Protected Area covering the Rangers' area of management responsibility. This will:

- boost the development of a more strategic and long term plan of management for the area, which will mean a clearer work plan for the Rangers;
- ensure more secure on-going funding;
- put in place better planning and feedback processes for the traditional owners;
- focus Central Land Council efforts on developing environmental management activities and procedures for the regions that take into account the needs of the many people involved in the area.

In future, the Rangers also hope to develop some commercial enterprises leading to self-funded work. Eco-tourism and bush food harvesting both have good potential in the relatively productive and visually dramatic semi-arid Tanami region.





## Lessons learnt

- Traditional Aboriginal land owners have a major contribution to make to managing the current problems facing their land, and the use of Aboriginal Ranger groups helps maintain traditional knowledge of Warlpiri ways of managing and living on the land in the community.
- A number of different government programs can be coordinated to produce a structured, culturally appropriate program to conserve biodiversity and also provide jobs, training and enterprise for young Indigenous members of a remote community.
- Aboriginal Ranger groups play a crucial role in managing the vast landscapes of the Northern Territory and as well as environmental improvements, they can achieve social, cultural and economic benefits for their communities.
- Aboriginal Ranger groups provide the opportunity for Aboriginal communities to be consulted and engaged in dealing with resource management issues on their land.

Biodiversity encompasses the variety of all living things. Conserving biological diversity gives us the best chance of adapting to our rapidly changing world.

This leaflet is one of a series showing how farmers, Indigenous communities, local government and community groups have either initiated special biodiversity projects, or have successfully incorporated biodiversity protection into their work and daily lives.

We hope these success stories provide useful information and inspiration to others in similar situations.

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