



**NATIONAL
INDIGENOUS
LAND AND
SEA
STRATEGY**

Discussion Paper: Caring for Country



Australian Government
Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation



The ILSC GROUP

PEOPLE. COUNTRY. OPPORTUNITY.

The ILSC thanks Dean Yibarbuk (Warddeken Land Management Ltd), Dr Otto Bulmaniya Campion (Arafura Swamp Rangers Aboriginal Corporation), Cissy Gore-Birch (a Jaru/Kija woman from Kununurra) and Shaun Ansell (independent consultant) for their expertise and contribution to this paper. The views expressed are for generating broader discussion and may not represent the position of the ILSC.

Caring for Country has grown from a tiny seed in the early 90s where the original ranger programs were mostly hosted by the major land councils using a combination of CDEP funding and enterprise-earned 'top-ups' to fund wages and operations.

Today, for many Indigenous communities, Caring for Country has become the 'back bone of everything' creating pride, delivering livelihoods and underpinning the ability for many people to remain on country. Ranger programs have become increasingly independent and less reliant on land councils for hosting; Indigenous land managers have been diversifying and strengthening their organisations by developing enterprises at many scales; and there is a growing role for Prescribed Body Corporates and Aboriginal-owned corporations in hosting, growing and running these programs.

There has been a major increase in enterprise activity led by the growth of the Carbon Industry through savanna burning. This has underwritten a major increase in the wealth and capacity of ranger programs at a time when support for remote Aboriginal communities and enterprise has been declining.

There has also been strong growth in engagement from non-Indigenous environmental and other non-government organisations.

While the Caring for Country industry has grown there are still major capacity gaps and an urgent need to support the continued training and upskilling of Indigenous people to take on larger roles within their organisations. And while interest from non-Indigenous organisations can bring some benefits, the values and aspirations of these organisations are not always in alignment with Indigenous people creating both opportunities and threats.

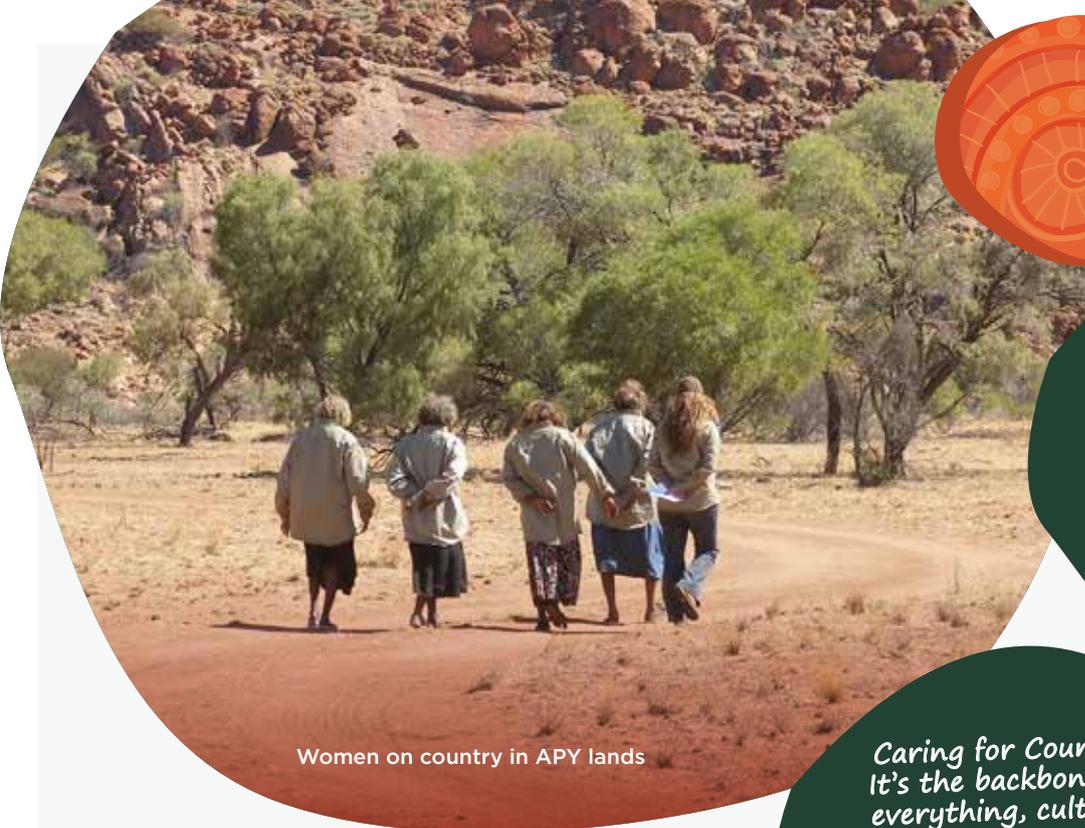
The remainder of this paper examines the opportunities and challenges for developing Caring for Country programs and offers some ideas for how the ILSC can strengthen its role in supporting Indigenous aspirations for Caring for Country. It is an outcome of discussions with Dean Yibarbuk, Dr Otto Bulmaniya Campion, Cissy Gore-Birch and Shaun Ansell who collectively provide almost 100 years of experience actively working in the Caring for Country sector across the Top End of the Northern Territory and the Kimberley region of Western Australia.

Independence is one of the big things we are really proud of. This is what we are doing. We want to stand on our own feet, we want to make our own decisions, we want to create our own destiny.

Dean Yibarbuk

Carbon is one of the things that struck us, where we can start building our own money and putting that money for our works, for our assets and to be able to pay our people.

Dean Yibarbuk



Women on country in APY lands

We want to see our young, junior rangers coming behind us. If we stand together, we all can see, we all can hear, we all can put our things in to make it better. A lot of people in the coastal areas are missing out. Let's build the resources for those coastal people.

Dean Yibarbuk

Caring for Country. It's the backbone for everything, cultural, social, economic, scientific – everything.

Dr Otto Bulmaniya
Campion

1 Opportunities

At the heart of future opportunities for Caring for Country is the fundamental ethos that underpins the movement: that it is Aboriginal-owned and that while people care for country, country in turn services people. Caring for Country should make country healthier, provide opportunity for people to improve their wellbeing, grow their strength and create livelihoods that bring prosperity.

Opportunities for growing Caring for Country include:

- Building on junior ranger programs to secure a future for the young people who will inherit the Caring for Country movement.
- Building investment in Womens Ranger programs and succession planning for our senior roles in leadership with the PBCs and Ranger programs.
- Expanding the scope of Caring for Country organisations to ensure the opportunities on Aboriginal-held lands are controlled by Aboriginal people.
- Supporting Indigenous control of sea country by growing the capacity and ability of Indigenous sea country managers.
- Supporting Indigenous groups to lead the growth of carbon and nature-based capital industries through engagement with external parties. This offers real opportunities and significant risks.
- Strengthening cultural knowledge and protocols into Caring for Country. This will create opportunities for two-way education; support reconnection with, and remaining on, country; strengthen cultural practices; recognise knowledge holders; and use cultural knowledge to drive mapping and monitoring.

Taking advantage of these opportunities will continue to drive the reoccupation of orphaned country, grow the ability of ranger groups to care for country and create more opportunities for empowerment of Aboriginal people.

When we talk about conservation it should be about prosperity, it should be about prosperity and wellbeing. That's how we see Country. If you look after Country, it feeds you, to provides for you – it looks after you.

Cissy Gore-Birch

ILSC can have a big role in funding this where we can come up with a development plan. Yes, we've got the northern Australia plan but that doesn't benefit Indigenous people.

Cissy Gore-Birch

We should be owning our own fish licence, we should be being Indigenous skippers, we should be running all this feral animal management and live export. I want to see in the long term that we own everything, we own the licences, we own the businesses, we own the Country. Let's make it happen.

Dr Otto Bulmaniya
Campion

Our Country is under threat. For people with Land Rights and Native Title Rights we can protect as much as we can but for people without these rights, I think that the ILSC can play a huge role in acquisition to help people to reconnect and rebuild cultural, environmental, economic and social capital.

Cissy Gore-Birch

2 Challenges

2.1 Resourcing

While ranger program funding has generally been growing, there are declining resources for other programs. This is reducing the capacity of local agencies to provide the fundamental services that underpin people being able to remain on country including health, education, essential services and housing maintenance, roads and airfield access. As a result, many Caring for Country organisations are delivering these services themselves diverting their scarce time and resources away from their core work of Caring for Country.

Overall resourcing for Caring for Country programs remains a key issue with a continuing need for capital and operational investments of all scales. Meanwhile, inflexible Caring for Country program funding can create barriers to Traditional Owners engagement as casual employees and limit the ability of ranger programs to respond to rapidly evolving challenges.

2.2 Protection of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)

There are continuing concerns about the need to protect the valuable intellectual property of Indigenous people and to secure their existing industries to ensure that these remain in their permanent control. See the Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Discussion paper for further analysis.



Ranger performing a controlled burn

This our land. We want to manage this effectively, so we need to be calling the shots. We need to have a healthy Country plan for all these different regions.

Cissy Gore-Birch

We have a role and obligation to look after Country and if we don't have the resourcing to look after it how are we supposed to manage it effectively. The land was taken from us and handed back to us unmanaged, with no resources.

Cissy Gore-Birch



Esperance Tjaltjraak rangers on Esperance Nyungar country, WA

2.3 Adequate representation

There is no longer a peak organisation that can effectively represent the interests of the Caring for Country movement at a national scale. This is important and must be remedied.

2.4 Lack of Indigenous focussed regional scale planning

Most groups have strong, effective healthy country plans. However, these are not coordinated regionally and there is an opportunity for Aboriginal people to drive the development of regional land management and development plans for Aboriginal land.

2.5 Succession and the impact of social issues on sustainability

Healthy people underpin strong ranger programs and many senior people are worried that growing social dysfunction is undermining the future of Caring for Country. There is an urgent need for resourcing in this space to expand the creation of livelihoods to support strong futures for young people.

2.6 Governance and capacity gaps for independent organisations

The growth of independent ranger groups is encouraging. However, these organisations often require additional governance and capacity support to ensure the ongoing development and success of their Caring for Country programs. As capacity is grown the cultural governance of Traditional Owners must be maintained and not replaced by increasingly professional and capable rangers. Caring for Country programs must remain servants to the vision and aspiration of Traditional Owners for their country and trust between all parties must be maintained.

A lot of the understanding, we need to protect it, of course we need to protect it – we don't want someone else running off with our stories. No. Those information, the ideas must stay, stay with us and be protected.

Dean Yibarbuk

Yes, you can be independent, but it is important to keep looking at the bigger picture – to be able to have one voice, to be able to understand the bigger fight when talking about lobbying for our people.

Cissy Gore-Birch

3 The ILSC Role

3.1 Prioritise strategic acquisition, resourcing and management of the traditional lands of Indigenous people who are struggling without strong Native Title rights or ownership of their lands under Land Rights legislation.

3.2 Deliver strategic funding and support through targeted funding programs for both capital, wage and operational costs, and for capacity building and training of Indigenous people within Aboriginal land management companies and Prescribed Body Corporates.

3.3 Connect Indigenous land managers and support adequate representation through regular national Caring for Country conferences/national ranger forums and the establishment of a peak body that represents Caring for Country (or support an existing body to fulfil this role).

3.4 Support regional scale Aboriginal land management and development planning, for example by “[linking] in with local providers and develop those strategic partnerships and work out how these align with Traditional Owner aspirations – across regional plans, state and commonwealth plans...” (Cissy Gore-Birch).

3.5 Unlock new Caring for Country enterprises including the growth of carbon, nature-based capital solutions and the strong entry of Aboriginal groups into the philanthropic space amongst other industries.

We need to be looking at succession planning for the future.

Cissy Gore-Birch

I always get this little spear coming from the bush saying ‘you should be servicing me with this...’

Dr Otto Bulmaniya
Campion



Ranger performing a controlled burn

3.6 Improve program funding and conditions for rangers.

Groups that are primarily ILSC funded often have reduced resourcing per capita when compared to those funded under other programs. Increase the funding of ILSC funded groups to ensure parity. Support groups in engaging more female rangers. Establish strong Enterprise Bargaining Agreements and other industrial mechanisms to support capacity growth and ranger excellence.

3.7 Strengthen water rights to ensure the protection of Indigenous water rights under threat from local developments in both extractive and agricultural industries.

3.8 Increase Indigenous employment and cultural competency within the ILSC to build on its strong foundations.



Wardaman Rangers developing their fire planning map at the Western Top End fire planning meeting.

4 Related Discussion Papers

The Carbon, Water, Fisheries and Bushfoods Discussion papers are available at www.ilsc.gov.au.

We are fortunate in the north with access to land rights and exclusive Native Title and a lot of country.... groups in the South East and South West who don't have lot of access...big population areas where traditional lands are not available for people. This is where the ILSC can play a role partnering with Indigenous corporations, private landholders and environmental NGOs to really look and land investment at handing back land to TOs.

Cissy Gore-Birch

Where is this caring for country really sitting? Who's going to look after us?

**Dr Otto Bulmaniya
Campion**

We want our children to be in the next generations. We want them to step up. We want them to be leading our land management. We need them to lead our people in the next generation.

Dean Yibarbuk



Larrakia Nation Rangers from Real Jobs Program, NT



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A feedback report summarising what we have heard from you and how we will use this important information will be available on the website.



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