

Desert Ranger Sector Sustainability Plan

Ensuring the desert ranger sector is strong into the future



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Acknowledgments

IDA and SVA respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land and their elders past, present and emerging wherever we gather. We wish to honour Aboriginal peoples across the desert, who have been caring for their homelands since the beginning of time. We recognise their continuing connection to land, water and sky and the contribution of Indigenous Rangers who are protecting desert country for future generations.

Published April 2025

Definitions and Abbreviations

DCCEEW	Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water
Desert ranger sector	The ~65 desert ranger teams across Australia that IDA supports including associated organisations such as Prescribed Body Corporates, Native Title representative bodies and service providers working in partnership with desert ranger teams
Desert ranger teams	The ~65 desert ranger teams across Australia that IDA supports
Funders	All departments, organisations and individuals funding Indigenous Land Management Organisations in the desert (including state, territory and federal governments, non-government organisations, resource companies, philanthropic organisations and any other private organisation funding the sector)
IDA	Indigenous Desert Alliance
IDA members	The 27 members of IDA ¹
ILMO	Indigenous Land Management Organisations
IPA	Indigenous Protected Areas
IRSS	NIAA Indigenous Ranger Sector Strategy
KPIs	Key performance indicators
NGOs	Non-Government Organisations
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency
PBC	Prescribed Body Corporate

The IDA respects the autonomy and self-determination of its members, recognising that their views and positions are their own. This plan does not speak on behalf of individual members.

Disclaimer

SVA has prepared this report with IDA in good faith, on the basis of the research and information available to SVA at the date of publication.

Information has been obtained from sources that SVA believes to be reliable and up to date. SVA does not give any representation, warranty, express or implied, assurance or guarantee as to the accuracy, adequacy, completeness, currency or reliability of any of the information.

This report was prepared by SVA for the use and benefit of IDA, and for the purpose for which it was provided.

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¹ Full list of members available on IDA website at <https://www.indigenousdesertalliance.com/members>.



About the Indigenous Desert Alliance

The Indigenous Desert Alliance (IDA) leads an active network for Indigenous ranger teams in Australia's desert region. IDA is an Indigenous controlled, member-based organisation that plays a vital role in 'Keeping the Desert Connected' and building resilience for desert ranger programs.

IDA is focussed on working with members and partners to ensure that Indigenous people are enabled to collaboratively manage Australia's desert country and through this, to realise their social, cultural, environmental and economic aspirations.

IDA does this through:

- facilitating opportunities for Indigenous land managers across the desert to come together to speak with one voice for desert country
- strengthening connections between desert groups through maintaining a vibrant information sharing and ranger team exchange network
- providing capacity strengthening support for rangers and their organisations to enhance the outcomes for the Indigenous land management sector in the desert
- managing critical landscape scale collaborative projects with our members across the desert

IDA's role is to amplify the voice of desert rangers.



About SVA Consulting

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) is a not-for-profit organisation that works with partners to alleviate disadvantage – towards an Australia where all people and communities thrive.

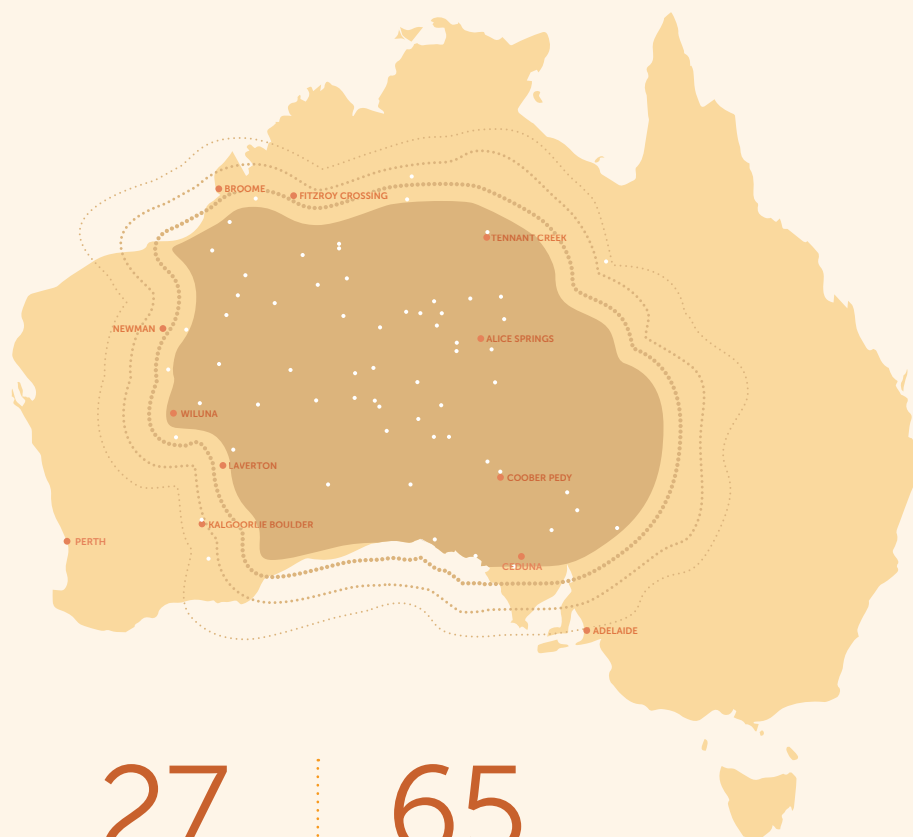
We influence systems to deliver better social outcomes for people by learning about what works in communities, helping organisations be more effective, sharing our perspectives and advocating for change.

SVA Consulting is Australia's leading not-for-profit consultancy. We focus solely on social impact and work with partners to increase their capacity to create positive change. Thanks to more than 15 years of working with not-for-profits, Aboriginal community controlled organisations, government and funders, we have developed a deep understanding of the sector and 'what works'.

Our team is passionate about what they do and use their diverse experience to work together to solve Australia's most pressing challenges.

For more information, contact us at: consulting@socialventures.org.au

Desert Ranger Teams



27
Members*

65
Ranger Teams

Figure 1 above: Map of Indigenous desert ranger team locations within Australia's arid zone.

* Indicates members of the IDA as at March 2025

Alinytjara Wilurara Landscape Board*

APY Land Management*

Antara-Sandy Bore Rangers
Apara-Makiri-Punti Rangers
Kalka-Pipalyatjara Rangers
Walalkara Rangers
Waru East Rangers
Waru West Rangers
Watarru IPA Rangers

Arabana Aboriginal Corporation*

Arabana Rangers

Australian Wildlife Conservancy

Newhaven Sanctuary Rangers
Ngalurrjtju Sanctuary Rangers

Central Land Council*

Anangu Luritjiku Rangers
Anmatyerr Rangers
Aputula Rangers
Akityarre Rangers
Kaltukutjarra Rangers
Ltyentye Apurte Rangers
Murnkurrumurnkurru Rangers
Muru-warinyi Ankkul Rangers
North Tanami Rangers
Tjakura Rangers
Tjuwanpa Rangers
Walungurru Rangers
Warlpiri Rangers
Utopia Rangers

Coober Pedy Council

Kanku-Breakaways Co-management

Desert Support Services*

Birriliburu Rangers*
Kiwirrkurra Rangers*
Kulyakartu Rangers
Marputu Rangers
Ngurra Kayanta Rangers*
Ngururpa Rangers*
Wakamurru Rangers

Dugalunji Aboriginal Corporation

Lake Eyre Basin Rangers

Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation*

Far West Coast Rangers

Gawler Ranges Aboriginal Corporation

Gawler Ranges Rangers AC

Goldfields Aboriginal Community Services*

GACS Rangers

Jamukurnu Yapalikurnu Aboriginal Corporation*

Martu Rangers

Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa (KJ)*

Jigalong Rangers
Kunawarritji Rangers
Parnngurr Rangers
Punmu Rangers

Karajarri Traditional Lands Association*

Karajarri Rangers

Kimberley Land Council*

Kumirrk Rangers
Paruku Rangers

Kokatha Aboriginal Corporation

Kokatha Rangers

Maralinga Tjarutja Aboriginal Corporation*

Oak Valley Rangers

Mithaka Aboriginal Corporation

Mithaka Rangers

Muṯitjulu Community Aboriginal Corporation*

Mala Rangers

Ngaanyatjarra Council*

Blackstone Rangers
Warakurna Rangers
Warburton Rangers
Jameson Rangers

Ngadju Conservation Aboriginal Corporation*

Ngadju Rangers

Nipapanha Aboriginal Corporation*

Nantawarrina Rangers

Nyangumarta Warrarn Aboriginal Corporation*

Nyangumarta Rangers

Pila Nguru Aboriginal Corporation*

Spinifex Rangers

Tarlka Matuwa Piarku Aboriginal Corporation

Wiluna Martu Rangers

Tjirilya Aboriginal Corporation

Mt Willoughby Rangers

Tjiwarl Aboriginal Corporation*

Tjiwarl Rangers

Tjuwanpa Aboriginal Corporation*

Tjuwanpa Womens Rangers

Walalakoo Aboriginal Corporation

Nyinkina Mangala Rangers

Warnpurru Aboriginal Corporation

Warnpurru Rangers

Yalata Aboriginal Corporation*

Yalata Rangers

Yappala IPA

Yappala IPA Rangers

Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation*

Ngurrara Rangers

Yilka Heritage and Land Care*

Yilka Rangers

About This Sustainability Plan

The desert is the beating heart of Australia, spanning one-third of the continent. It's a region of great beauty, with more than 30 Indigenous languages spoken, world famous art movements, iconic landscapes and animals, and dozens of culturally rich Aboriginal communities that have remained connected to their Country since the beginning of time.

The knowledge and responsibility that desert mob carry for our homelands has been handed down, one generation to the next. Today, this passing down of knowledge and responsibility for continuing culture is strengthened through Indigenous ranger programs. This is a national success story because not only are ranger programs keeping our desert culture strong, but they are also achieving social, environmental and economic aspirations for our communities at the same time. This is good news for all Australians too – globally significant biodiversity is being cared for and protected, and future generations will enjoy the benefits of learning from and connecting to healthy desert Country.

Today, ranger teams and the ranger base are an integral part of the fabric of our communities, linking together social, cultural, environmental and well-being outcomes across all age demographics. Ranger jobs are highly sought after, and a ranger badge and uniform are worn with pride. In primary schools, students routinely identify 'ranger' as their preferred career option – influenced no doubt,

by the role models that rangers play within their communities. Ranger programs also offer significant opportunities from which Traditional Owners and their communities can apply aspects of their cultural and strategic aspirations and move towards greater sustainability.

In 2023, Nipapanha Community Aboriginal Corporation celebrated the 25th anniversary of Nantawarrina Indigenous Protected Area (IPA), Australia's oldest IPA, and recently, Ngurra Kayanta Aboriginal Corporation have announced the dedication of Ngurra Kayanta IPA, Australia's newest IPA. This shows that while desert mob have never stopped looking after Country, the Indigenous land management (ILM) sector, as it is today, is still emerging and developing.

Planning and systematically responding to the needs of our sector is now vital and collaboration will be key. The best conservation and land management is collaborative and Aboriginal people have always worked this way. So, with this collaborative spirit in mind, may I present to you this plan for action that is building on what our old people started long ago.

This plan is a contribution to our collective vision for a thriving Australian desert and its people, focused on future prosperity. The plan has been informed by the experiences and realities of desert-based Indigenous ranger programs, and from this collective experience, a sustainability plan has been formed to educate

and enable policy makers, funders, partners and supporters to contribute proactively and meaningfully to the ILM sector.

In short, this plan will help ensure the sustainability and growth of ranger teams to manage and nurture the largest culturally connected ecosystem on the planet – desert Country.

Yuwa palya,

Sam Murray, Indigenous Desert Alliance CEO



Indigenous Desert Alliance Conference 2024, Uluru

Purpose of this sustainability plan: a call to action

Indigenous ranger programs were formally established in 2007 through the Australian Government's Working on Country program, and since then, have grown significantly. Government funding for the programs has increased dramatically, with a recent Australian Government commitment of \$1.3bn of funding for the sector². This includes funding to support the employment outcomes of ranger programs, with additional funding recently allocated through the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) to support ranger jobs, as well as funding from the Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water (DCCEEW) to support the achievement of environmental outcomes such as the preservation of critical habitats for endangered flora and fauna³.

State and Territory governments are important stakeholders in funding ranger programs, currently bringing localised funding opportunities, and potential for future funding to compliment national funding programs⁴. State and Territory governments are becoming increasingly important stakeholders in this sector as both funders of ranger programs, but also as a key stakeholder, as States and Territories increasingly

recognise the value and need for Indigenous governance in managing conservation tenure.

The private sector is also playing a critical role in the sector's growth, for instance through the emergence of potential natural capital markets starting to create additional funding sources and incentives for sustainable land management⁵.

Desert ranger teams have steadily grown in their capacity, delivering social, cultural and environmental outcomes that are widely celebrated at a community, national and international level. Multiple social return on investment (SROI) studies have been undertaken on ranger programs with repeated evidence demonstrating significant social returns and value for money.

It is important to acknowledge and celebrate the successes of ranger programs. However, what has not been sufficiently acknowledged is that the ranger sector is also facing very real challenges that threatens to undermine its long-term sustainability. It is important to acknowledge that the sector's growth and development has been built on significant amounts of in kind support from communities, service providers and others, however as the sector

professionalises, a response is required to enable organisations to direct resourcing and investment in a manner which enables rangers to thrive and grow locally.

The purpose of this sustainability plan is to highlight issues that the sector currently faces while also presenting short to long term practical solutions that funders, policy makers, and other sector allies can support to enable the desert ranger sector to remain resilient, strong, and self-sustaining into the future.

² Australian Government, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. "Joint Media Release: Celebrating World Ranger Day 2023." Minister for the Environment and Water, <https://minister.dcceew.gov.au/plibersek/media-releases/joint-media-release-celebrating-world-ranger-day-2023>. Accessed 2 September 2024.

³ National Indigenous Australians Agency. "Double the Number of Indigenous Rangers." National Indigenous Australians Agency, <https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/closing-gap/double-number-indigenous-rangers>. Accessed 2 September 2024.

⁴ Northern Territory Government. "Aboriginal Ranger Grants Program." Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security, 2024, <https://depws.nt.gov.au/programs-and-strategies/aboriginal-ranger-grants-program>. Accessed 18 Sept. 2024; Western Australian Government. "New Aboriginal Ranger Program Grants Available." Government of Western Australia, 11 Aug. 2023, <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/media-statements/Cook-Labor-Government/New-Aboriginal-Ranger-Program-grants-available>. Accessed 18 September 2024.

⁵ Indigenous Country and Biodiversity Alliance, <https://www.icballiance.org>. Accessed January 2025.

Purpose of this sustainability plan: a call to action

The primary audience of this document is current and future funders of the desert ranger sector including Federal, State and Territory governments, philanthropic foundations and corporates, to enable more strategic investment and to influence policy decisions which are reflective of the needs of the desert.

If we want the ranger sector to thrive into the future, we need to be honest about the challenges that the sector currently faces. We also need to be honest about what funders and other stakeholders need to do to help keep the sector sustainable into the future.

This is the impetus for this sustainability plan: the need to list out practical solutions to keep the ranger sector sustainable into the future, which funders and other stakeholders can support in a complementary way, jointly contributing to shared solutions.

Broader context of this work

This sustainability plan builds on the extensive advocacy work of the national Indigenous ranger sector and acknowledges the significant input and consultation previously undertaken. Building on this body of work this plan seeks to communicate the implementation of these plans into a desert context – a bioregion spanning one third of Australia.

A recent example includes the work of Country Needs People in its 2021 report *Strong on Country: Sustaining Success in Indigenous Land and Sea Management in Australia*. This report identifies core elements for the successful growth and sustainability of Indigenous ranger programs and Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) across Australia.

The IDA sees an opportunity to build on this work through this sustainability plan to express the specific needs of the desert ranger sector.

Another recent example of work underway in the sector is the National Indigenous Australians Agency's (NIAA) current development of the Indigenous Ranger Sector Strategy 2022-2028 (IRSS).⁶ The IRSS is being developed to direct NIAA's work with the Indigenous ranger sector in years to come. A consultation draft for the development of the IRSS was published in April 2022. No final strategy has yet been released.

This sustainability plan continues the momentum for advocacy and change, honing in on the specific needs of the desert rangers that IDA works with and providing practical short and longer-term solutions to these challenges that will work for the desert ranger sector.

⁶ National Indigenous Australians Agency, Indigenous Ranger Sector Strategy, <https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/environment-and-land/indigenous-rangers/indigenous-ranger-sector-strategy>. Accessed May 2024.

Purpose of this sustainability plan: a call to action

Methodology of this document

IDA engaged the not-for-profit independent social impact consultancy Social Ventures Australia, to facilitate conversations with the IDA board, executive and staff, and to consult with several IDA member representatives to better understand the current state of the ranger sector, specific challenges it currently faces, and solutions that will need to be implemented to ensure a strong and sustainable future for the sector. As such, this plan was developed in close collaboration and consultation with the IDA board and IDA executive, informed by the views of IDA members who are at the front-line of the sector's challenges and best-placed to offer solutions that will keep the sector's future strong.

It is important to note that the IDA has a representative board of Indigenous directors from across the deserts. The board includes male and female representatives from each of the four IDA wards (north west, north east, south west, and south east wards).

Structure of this document

This sustainability plan is structured in four parts:

- 1) Why Australia needs the desert ranger sector
- 2) What makes a strong and sustainable desert ranger sector
- 3) Key issues threatening the desert ranger sector's sustainability

Issue 1: The desert ranger sector is not represented in conversations of national significance in land management

Issue 2: Inadequate engagement with desert rangers means community priorities are often not properly reflected in program processes, policies and funding agreements

Issue 3: Low cultural competence and insufficient understanding of desert context strains funding relationships

Issue 4: Desert ranger programs are hindered by rigid, short-term funding contracts that do not recognise the integrated environmental, social and cultural outcomes of ranger work

Issue 5: Insufficient capital funding for ranger infrastructure and asset needs

Issue 6: Insufficient operational funding to cover true operational costs of ranger programs

Issue 7: More investment needed in ranger training and career pathways to support sustainable careers in the sector

- 4) What funders and allies can do: a plan for the future (identifies practical steps to be taken to ensure the desert ranger sector is sustainable in the future)

Why Australia needs the desert ranger sector

Australia's desert region is important

The deserts of Australia are globally significant and represent the world's largest connected network of protected areas spanning over one third of Australia's land mass (2.7 million km²) and more than 40% of the Australian National Reserve. The deserts are rich in unique plant and animal life and are home to 78 of Australia's threatened species.⁷

The desert is crisscrossed with songlines (dreaming tracks) and home to thousands of culturally and spiritually important sites. It is of immense cultural value to its Traditional Owners who have lived in harmony with the land for tens of thousands of years, using traditional knowledge passed down through generations to care for Country and maintain their strong spiritual connection to the desert.

"We respect the old people and rangers are looking after Country for them [...]. The senior rangers passed away and gave us the responsibility to carry on this work"⁸

Indigenous desert ranger

Figure 2 below: Looking after country because country looks after us – how the desert sector cares for country



Why Australia needs the desert ranger sector

The desert ranger sector cares for Australia's desert Country

Today, it is desert ranger teams and their communities that cares for desert Country protecting it for Australia, the world and the Traditional Owners who have called it home for thousands of generations.

The desert ranger sector includes the work of 65 (and growing) desert ranger teams across Australia and associated organisations such as Prescribed Body Corporates, Native Title representative bodies and service providers working in partnership with desert ranger teams. The desert ranger sector manages Country through programs that incorporate both Indigenous and non-Indigenous sustainable land management practices.

Ranger teams in the desert share unique characteristics. They operate in areas far from major cities and on Country in some of the most remote areas in Australia where connection to culture, language and traditional governance systems remains strong.

Desert ranger teams play a crucial role in preserving the unique ecosystems and biodiversity of the desert. Their work is vital locally, in preserving biodiversity through the application of deep cultural knowledge to the natural world, as well as nationally and globally, in combating the large-scale effects of climate change and desertification.

Desert rangers look after Country "right-way", a term which describes an Indigenous perspective of land management. Land does not exist as a physical entity to be managed in isolation by technical experts, rather it is part of a tri-fold relationship between culture and people. Desert rangers are obligated by culture and family and by historical and spiritual linkages to look after country, not manage it.

These core elements of the work of desert rangers is represented in *figure 2*.

Desert rangers maintain custodianship of Country, while adapting to significant environmental and social changes. Their work spans environmental management including weed and pest control, significant species management and cultural sites management. Rangers work in two worlds, and their care for country in a contemporary context involves combining modern technology and best practice

research and expertise. Rangers are the interface between Indigenous Science and non-Indigenous science translating traditional systems into current land management practice. (see 1 in *figure 2*). Fire management is an example where modern tools are being used by rangers in a way guided by traditional knowledge practices, and these practices are a growing area of focus when it comes to climate change resilience.

Intergenerational transfer of knowledge is key to the future sustainability of the desert and a fundamental element of how desert ranger programs are run. Indigenous cultural and ecological knowledge is based on thousands of years of expertise and application. Indigenous ranger programs enable the passing down of this knowledge through generations (see 2 in *figure 2*).

Desert rangers work to support ongoing access to the resources of Country, like sustainable bush foods and clean healthy water, for all generations (see 3 in *figure 2*). Their work is about learning from older generations and teaching younger generations, ensuring knowledge will always be carried forward, and shared and used in the right way (see 4 in *figure 2*).

⁹ Country Needs People, 25 years of Indigenous Protected Areas: Our land, our future (2023) <https://assets.nationbuilder.com/thecountryneedsitspeople/pages/6212/attachments/original/1700004680/25-years-of-Indigenous-Protected-Areas-2023.pdf>. Accessed September 2024

¹⁰ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. (n.d.). Achieving 30 by 30: Protecting Australia's land and sea. Australian Government. Retrieved August 30, 2024, from <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/land/achieving-30-by-30>. Accessed August 2024.

Why Australia needs the desert ranger sector

The desert ranger sector is even more important now in today's changing times

The work of desert rangers has always been important. Desert rangers have lived in harmony with Country through active management and cultural practice for tens of thousands of years and therefore play an integral role in nurturing and caring for Country. Today however, the importance of their work is amplified as Australia and the world grapple with the effects of a changing climate on the environment and social inequality. The work of desert rangers is indispensable for a sustainable future, noting safeguarding biodiversity hotspots like the Australian desert is critical to the survival and shared future of humanity.

The desert ranger sector plays a crucial role in mitigating the effects of climate change and biodiversity destruction nationally and globally,⁹ as a key stakeholder in the achievement of Australian Government commitments like the "30 by 30" initiative.

In line with the landmark 2022 United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15) agreement, the Australian Government has committed to protecting

and conserving 30% of Australian marine areas and 30% of land by 2030, to slow biodiversity loss and restore ecosystems.¹⁰ Given that more than 40% of the National Reserve System is under Indigenous governance in the desert, and with consultations currently underway for six new large desert Indigenous Protected Areas, desert rangers are essential to achieving the 30 by 30 target. Without the voice of those that care for desert Country at the table, it will be significantly harder for Australia to meet its commitments.

The desert ranger sector also contributes significantly to broader socio-economic change which is critical in light of Australia's poor progress towards our Closing the Gap targets with the Productivity Commission recently reporting in July 2024 that only five out of the 19 targets are on track.¹¹ Desert communities in particular continue to face complex socio-economic challenges, including lack of appropriate housing, limited job opportunities, high cost of living and food insecurity.¹²

The desert ranger sector presents a real opportunity for Australia to better meet these goals as ranger work has the potential to directly address many of these targets including employment; economic

participation; social and emotional wellbeing; maintaining cultural, spiritual, physical and economic relationship with land and waters; and maintaining strong and flourishing cultures and languages.¹³

The significant role the desert ranger sector may play in improving the social, economic and cultural outcomes for Indigenous people in Australia has been acknowledged by the Australian Government, which is now investing over \$575m into ranger sector jobs between 2021 and 2028, with ambitions to double the ranger workforce by 2030.¹⁴

But there is still much to do to ensure the desert ranger sector remains strong and sustainable into the future such that it can continue to play its significant role in supporting Australia to care for desert Country and improve the lives of Indigenous people.

Indigenous desert rangers, with the permission of their Elders, and the cultural knowledge and local information that rangers act on has important teachings for all Australians, and the wider world, on how to love and care for Country. This needs to be acknowledged and supported now, and guaranteed into the future.

¹¹ Productivity Commission (2024, July). Closing the gap annual data compilation report: July 2024. Australian Government. Retrieved from <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/annual-data-report/closing-the-gap-annual-data-compilation-july2024.pdf>

¹² Central Land Council. (2023, February). Submission to the Inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia. Retrieved from <https://www.clc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/D23-9043-230217-CLC-submission-to-the-Inquiry-into-the-Extent-and-Nature-of-Poverty-in-Australia-FINAL-1.pdf>

¹³ Closing the Gap, Closing the Gap Targets and Outcomes. Australian Government. <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>. Accessed September 2024.

¹⁴ National Indigenous Australians Agency. "Double the Number of Indigenous Rangers." National Indigenous Australians Agency, <https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/closing-gap/double-number-indigenous-rangers>. Accessed 2 September 2024.

What Makes A Strong & Sustainable Desert Ranger Sector

This section tells the story of what a strong and sustainable desert ranger sector looks like. This story has been captured in *figure 3* below, which represents the ideal ranger sector from the perspective of desert ranger teams.

In developing this story, IDA worked closely with its members over two years to imagine what a strong and sustainable desert ranger sector looks like in the long-term, creating a shared vision for IDA and its members to work towards. In particular, key characteristics of a strong and sustainable sector that are particularly worth mentioning here are highlighted with numbers and considered below.

- 1 Ranger activities that are interwoven with community, country and culture
- 2 Productive and respectful relationships and an open dialogue between funders, partners, communities and rangers
- 3 Fit for purpose infrastructure to support their program delivery
- 4 Regional offices that enhance on the ground service delivery
- 5 Opportunities to exchange experiences and learnings with other ranger groups, community members and experts

Figure 3 below: A strong and sustainable desert ranger sector.



What Makes A Strong & Sustainable Desert Ranger Sector

- 1 First, a sustainable desert ranger sector involves ranger activities that are interwoven with **community, Country and culture** (see 1 in *figure 3*). Ranger activities operate alongside cultural activities, with participation from members of the wider community, across generations and on Country. Desert rangers are part of the wider community, sitting and working with Elders and other community members towards community-established outcomes. Interconnected culture, Country and community is the foundation of desert ranger work.

This means that desert ranger programs are not viewed only through the lens of the employment outcomes they create, or the environmental outcomes they support, but rather, all stakeholders recognise desert ranger programs contribute to interlinked outcomes across Country, community and culture together. In a world where cultural, community and Country outcomes are all recognised, there is funding available to achieve all outcomes that rangers and their communities consider important. The voice of desert rangers is at the centre and desert rangers decide how ranger programs are designed to achieve the outcomes that are important to desert rangers and their communities.

- 2 A strong and sustainable desert ranger sector also involves **productive and respectful relationships and an open dialogue between funders, partners, communities and rangers** (see 2 in *figure 3*).

All desert ranger sector stakeholders have a role to play: Government provides essential policy support and funding, while partnerships with NGOs, the private sector, and philanthropy brings in additional resources and expertise. However, it is essential that engagement with desert rangers is genuine and facilitated through productive and respectful relationships. Open communication ensures the incorporation of community perspectives and aspirations into desert ranger program funding agreements, which means desert ranger teams can work towards outcomes that are genuinely led by them and their communities.

- 3 To be sustainable, desert ranger teams also require suitable, fit for purpose **infrastructure to support their program delivery** (see 3 in *figure 3*). This includes well-built on country facilities and ranger bases that meet the operational needs of the desert ranger teams, as well as other necessary infrastructure and assets it takes to deliver ranger programs such as suitable vehicles, trailers, camping equipment and satellite communication systems. In a strong and sustainable sector, funding is available that meets the infrastructure and asset needs of desert ranger teams enabling them to do their job effectively.

- 4 Sustainable desert ranger teams are also supported where appropriate by **regional offices that enhance on the ground service delivery** (see 4 in *figure 3*) through operational and governance support. For

ranger programs to thrive they require professional administrative support to implement the array of projects and programs for which they are delivering.

“What does a good remote station look like? At the very least you need an office and coordinator accommodation. You need a good shed that is climate change proof (with air conditioning and a water tank). Some rangers are just working in a shack.”

IDA Member

- 5 Finally, strong and sustainable desert ranger teams have **opportunities to exchange experiences and learnings with other ranger groups, community members and experts** (see 5 in *figure 3*). The desert ranger sector has a culture of learning and knowledge sharing, where rangers can connect with each other and the wider sector to voice ideas, influence policy and design programs. Connected to this mindset of learning and exchange, desert rangers feel valued in their role and see life-long, satisfying career pathways in the sector.

Key issues threatening the desert ranger sector's sustainability

Today, desert rangers are doing valuable, respected work at the intersection of Country, culture and community.¹⁵ However, it also needs to be acknowledged that the desert ranger sector is simultaneously facing challenges that threaten to undermine its long-term sustainability, impacting on the achievement of the vision of a strong and sustainable desert ranger sector described above.

IDA members and sector allies have consistently reported that many characteristics present in the vision above are not being seen today. For example, the critical interconnectedness of Country, culture and community which forms the heart of ranger work is inadequately reflected in funding and partnership arrangements. Furthermore, ranger groups either do not have or work out of dilapidated ranger bases with insufficient vehicles and equipment. Ranger

coordinators in particular are also under increasing pressure with inadequate resourcing to meet administration and compliance requirements, and the operational needs of ranger groups. The sector therefore experiences very high turnover in ranger coordinators which leads to regular loss of corporate and community knowledge and relationships. These relationships take a significant time to rebuild, leading to productivity loss.

As a result of these pressures, the sustainability of the desert ranger sector is under threat.

This section discusses seven issues that are creating an unsustainable future for the sector. The next section then presents practical and actionable short to long term actions that funders and other sector allies can support to enable the sector to remain resilient and strong into the future.

Key Issues

- #1** The desert ranger sector is not adequately represented in conversations of national significance in land management
- #2** Inadequate engagement with desert rangers means community priorities are often not properly reflected in program processes, policies and funding agreements
- #3** Low cultural competence and insufficient understanding of desert context strains funding relationships
- #4** Desert ranger programs are hindered by rigid, short-term funding contracts that do not recognise the integrated environmental, social and cultural outcomes of ranger work
- #5** Insufficient capital funding for ranger infrastructure and asset needs
- #6** Insufficient operational funding to cover true operational costs of ranger programs
- #7** More investment needed in ranger training and career pathways to support sustainable careers in the sector

¹⁵ Fisher, R., Boyd, E. "Indigenous Rangers Are Burning the Desert the Right Way – To Stop the Wrong Kind of Intense Fires from Raging." The Conversation, 28 August 2023, retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/indigenous-rangers-are-burning-the-desert-the-right-way-to-stop-the-wrong-kind-of-intense-fires-from-raging-211900>

KEY ISSUES

#1 The desert ranger sector is not adequately represented in conversations of national significance in land management

Desert rangers are working on the front lines of a rapidly changing environment, protecting and managing vast desert landscapes that are crucial for biodiversity and climate regulation. Sixty five desert ranger teams work across 26 Indigenous Protected Areas, more than 40% of Australia's National Reserve System across an area representing a third of Australia's land mass.

It is clear that the desert is changing, with climate change exacerbating the heat, the dry, the rain, and making life for all those living there more and more difficult.¹⁶ Desert rangers are a central stakeholder in emerging biodiversity markets and in driving innovative solutions to growing environmental challenges and the social complexities that come with these.

Desert rangers also play an integral role in reducing the social inequities created by colonisation and now exacerbated by climate change, providing meaningful employment opportunities in remote desert areas where job prospects are limited and providing opportunities for economic empowerment through services spanning land management, tourism and more. Desert rangers therefore contribute to significant national policy agendas like 30 by 30 and

Closing the Gap, that are fundamental to an equitable future for all Australians.

However, despite these contributions, the desert bioregion, and ranger teams from this region are not proportionally represented in state and federal discussions around these critical areas of national significance. Despite the significant contributions of the desert ranger sector to the national policy agenda, desert representatives are not always deemed an essential stakeholder in conversations about Australia's climate change response, social equity solutions, and other critical policy discussions.

"The desert can be totally left out of policy documents"

IDA Member

This absence means that the significance of the desert and the frontline knowledge of rangers is often underappreciated and routinely sidelined in national conversations. The on-the-ground perspectives and expertise of the ranger teams are not systematically considered in policy-making and public discourse. The complexities and uniqueness of the desert are not understood and therefore policy cannot be

easily developed to address these needs. This creates missed opportunities for policies to fully address the unique challenges and to leverage the unique strengths of the desert region.

The voice of desert ranger teams needs to be elevated so that Australia's national and international agendas are more inclusive, effective, and can properly contribute to Australia's climate resilience and social equity.

"Policy doesn't reflect the needs of arid Australia. [...] We need more reality in policy and guidelines"

IDA Member

¹⁶ Murray, Sam. "Want to See What Climate Change Does? I'll Show You My WA Desert Home." WAtoday, 11 Dec. 2023, <https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/want-to-see-what-climate-change-does-i-ll-show-you-my-wa-desert-home-20231208-p5eq7e.html>. Accessed 18 Sept. 2024.

KEY ISSUES

#2 Inadequate engagement with desert rangers means community priorities are often not properly reflected in program processes, policies and funding agreements

Desert ranger teams work on Country with deep cultural significance, in areas often far from cities where most Australians live. Many desert ranger stakeholders, including funders, are located in places geographically and culturally distant from ranger teams. This creates a geographic and cultural barrier to understanding the unique aspirations and needs of desert rangers and their communities.

This geographic and cultural barrier creates challenges for effective engagement between funders and desert ranger teams, and a sense that engagement does not systematically take a culturally appropriate approach that respects unique cultural practices of the desert. This may involve meetings and consultations being scheduled at culturally inappropriate times or conducted in a language that is not fully understood by all those involved. Consultations may also be scheduled during field season when rangers and other staff are too busy to leave Country and attend meetings.

Compounding this, currently, there is a sense of over-consultation, with desert ranger teams and their communities repeatedly being asked for input through poorly designed consultation activities. There are currently limited avenues for collective consultation on issues that span the experience of many desert ranger teams.

There needs to be more meaningful, open and respectful engagement principles and better structures for the voices of desert ranger teams and their communities to be channelled into funding agreements in a streamlined and culturally appropriate way.

The current engagement process means that the priorities of desert ranger teams and their communities are not being reflected in funding agreements. Agreements contain funding priorities that do not align with the actual needs and goals of ranger teams and their communities. An example is funders prioritising the achievement of specific conservation outcomes, without sufficiently acknowledging the long-term cultural and social benefits of desert ranger teams. Funding agreements need to be properly tailored to the needs of desert ranger teams and their communities through appropriate and well-designed engagement with desert rangers.

“We are constantly trying to massage the wishes of Traditional Owners into a Healthy Country Plan, let alone into a spreadsheet. What we try to articulate is that everything is really meshed together”

IDA Member

KEY ISSUES

#3 Low cultural competence and insufficient understanding of desert context strains funding relationships

Government and funder personnel managing desert ranger program contracts are typically based in city locations while desert ranger teams are based in some of the most remote areas of Australia. There is therefore an inherent cultural and geographical disconnect between contract managers and desert ranger teams. While the sector is aware of the need to improve cultural competence, there is still a long way to go in ensuring contract managers and other stakeholders interacting with the sector have the right level of cultural understanding to engage in a respectful and productive way. For example, it is culturally important that rangers attend funerals for their family. During the field season, there can be many cases of sorry business in and around communities which require rangers to step away from their work duties for periods of time. Sorry business is a period of mourning in First Nations communities that involves the whole community and may prohibit other events, meetings, or consultations out of respect for the deceased.

Improving cultural competence is an important part of reconciliation and has increasingly been prioritised by government agencies and other stakeholders working with Indigenous Australians. Despite this good-will to improve cross-cultural working practices, there are still barriers in the way that funders and ranger teams connect, which creates friction and strain in funding relationships.

“Cultural timelines and protocols are not well accommodated by funders” – IDA member

IDA Member

Better understanding the broader desert context in which ranger teams operate is also important. The desert is unique in its vastness and its remoteness, creating opportunities and challenges that are difficult to understand without direct on-the-ground experience of desert conditions. For example, the time it takes to travel to the places that the ranger teams manage, or the conditions of the roads impacting on vehicles, or the environmental conditions impacting on ranger infrastructure, are not routinely recognised in expectations of contract delivery.

There needs to be greater investment by funders in learning about the desert and its uniqueness.

“It’s great that rangers are so supported by government, but government doesn’t make it easy to do the work. Contract managers are not appropriately trained or focused on land management”

IDA Member

KEY ISSUES

#4 Desert ranger programs are hindered by rigid funding contracts that do not always recognise the integrated environmental, social and cultural outcomes of ranger work

Desert ranger programs access investment from both government and non-government sources, including from the NIAA, DCCEEW, state and territory governments, NGO partners, corporate partners and research partners. Funding should reflect the integrated environmental, social and cultural outcomes of ranger work in reporting requirements and key performance indicators (KPIs).

Recognising integrated environmental, social and cultural outcomes of ranger work

Desert ranger teams work for Country, culture and people together. Their work weaves together environmental management with deep cultural connection to Country. However, funding KPIs and associated reporting requirements do not always recognise or reflect the integrated outcomes of desert ranger work.

Funding contracts target specific outcome themes, depending on the focus and interest of the funder. For example, the Indigenous Ranger Program focusses on employment outcomes whereas the Indigenous Protected Areas Program focusses on environmental management and funding environmental outcomes of ranger programs, and ranger groups are expected to perform and report according to those specific areas. In practice however, desert ranger programs span these two

outcome areas and beyond, including important social and cultural outcomes.

Another layer of complexity is added for desert ranger teams that are also accessing state and territory funding schemes, and other funding sources, which all have their own sets of outcomes ranger groups are required to report back on. It should be noted that state based ranger funding has been a welcome addition to resources for the sector and it will be important to ensure that as funding changes over time, state-based program outcomes are complimentary to what desert ranger programs are already doing, so that desert ranger teams do not face more layers of operational and reporting complexities as time goes on.

“There’s a mismatch in the fundamental characterisation of what a ranger program is. It creates employment, environmental and social and cultural outcomes.”

IDA Member

Currently, multiple funding sources with different outcome requirements already create a significant reporting burden for desert ranger teams. Desert ranger teams are required to report back to funders on specific outcomes of relevance to that funder, but

the outcomes management frameworks, or KPIs, are not flexible enough to recognise that environmental, social and cultural outcomes are interconnected and that the program is in fact achieving broad outcomes across many areas. For instance, reporting solely on the environmental outcomes of a program does not paint the full picture of the significant social and cultural outcomes that the program creates.

Desert rangers then need to report back to different funders on different outcomes that in practice are inextricably linked. This creates a significant administrative burden for ranger teams that are already under-resourced, which detracts from the important on-the-ground work.

“Many funding sources mean high administrative costs and onerous reporting”

IDA Member

KEY ISSUES

#4 Desert ranger programs are hindered by rigid funding contracts that do not always recognise the integrated environmental, social and cultural outcomes of ranger work

Insufficient funding for cultural outcomes

The cultural outcomes of ranger programs are inadequately funded. Funders recognise outcomes related to jobs and environmental protection, but the systematic recognition and resourcing of cultural outcomes has eroded over time. While cultural outcomes were once a priority (and was what generated early success and buy-in from communities), the pivot to a stronger government focus on jobs and environment has reduced resources for cultural activities. This means there is very limited funding for important cultural work such as return to country trips. As a result, these cultural outcomes are not adequately funded today, and ranger teams are not able to easily obtain funding necessary to deliver cultural components of ranger work, which in fact overlap with most other ranger activities.

Desert ranger teams are frustrated at having to continuously reassert the integrated nature of social, environmental and cultural outcomes, but then having to shoehorn their activities into distinct funding streams. A sustainable sector would include funders and other stakeholders recognising that ranger teams work for Country, culture and people holistically, and subsequently appropriately funding the cultural component of the work. It is also important to note that for rangers working on

Country, cultural safety and authority is of equal weighting to work health and safety concepts from a Western perspective. Rangers must ensure that they are operating safely on Country from a cultural perspective. This requires an appropriate level of funding for cultural outcomes and activities.

“Environmental sites sit in their broader cultural context. What we haven’t been able to achieve is big camps, with [Traditional Owner group] coming together to sit at one spot and talk about all those connections [...] to build up that understanding of how [Traditional Owner group] sees the world”

IDA Member

“Funding focuses on discrete areas of project activity. You can get fire or bilby tracking projects funded, but there are cultural elements to that. We’re forced in our grant applications to speak to those other priorities, rather than culture which is the priority for TOs”

IDA Member

“Funding should have a broader focus enabling people to be on Country, which ultimately has an environmental benefit”

IDA Member

Funding contracts are too rigid

Funding contracts are also at times insufficiently flexible to be practical, efficient and effective. For instance, contracts are often too rigid and do not enable ranger teams to spend money in accordance with theirs and their community’s needs, particularly in terms of rolling over contracts or reallocating underspends to other areas of need such as infrastructure or cultural priorities as discussed above.

This rigidity prevents ranger teams from responding effectively to changing circumstances or prioritising community needs. The fact that funding comes from siloed funding streams that narrowly focus on either jobs or environmental dimensions of ranger programs (and do not properly recognise the cultural dimension of ranger programs as discussed above), means that desert ranger teams struggle to allocate funding as required.

“Activities don’t happen because available funds can’t be reallocated”

IDA Member

“A main challenge with the sector is the rigid reporting structures and the inability to use funding to grow a ranger program”

IDA Member

KEY ISSUES

#5 Insufficient capital funding for ranger infrastructure and asset needs

Insufficient funding for ranger bases and other infrastructure essentials

Funding contracts do not appropriately cover the infrastructure and asset needs of ranger teams, which is hindering the ability of ranger teams to do their work effectively. Many ranger teams are operating from inadequate ranger bases with inadequate equipment. Unlike a national park, where purpose built operational bases are constructed for the purpose of managing the area being conserved, very few ranger teams in the desert are working from purpose built facilities. The vast majority of ranger teams in the desert operate from infrastructure, which was surplus to community requirements, or had been left unused or dilapidated. More investment in infrastructure and assets is required to ensure it is suitable for purpose and that it complies with Australian workplace safety standards.

Many desert ranger teams also report they do not have access to reliable vehicles, limiting their capacity to reach Country safely. Vehicles are presenting as a particular issue as some funders have indicated reluctance to fund these assets despite them being an essential part of running a ranger program.

“Grant money doesn’t cover infrastructure. Infrastructure is so expensive, how can you expect smaller ranger groups to find money for the right infrastructure?”

IDA Member

The effect of insufficient funds for infrastructure is compounded by the inflexibility of funding processes, policies and contracts described in Issues 2 and 4, which prevent underspends from being reallocated to important infrastructure and asset needs, as required by each ranger team.

“There is a need for flexibility to carry money forward to fund infrastructure needs. The effort that we go to zero out our funding, is ridiculous and unnecessary, particularly in the middle of our works program”

IDA Member

Insufficient dedicated ranger housing

A significant barrier to the long-term sustainability of the desert ranger sector is that there is insufficient dedicated ranger program housing in desert communities. Housing is critical in attracting and retaining skilled staff members, and without sufficient housing stock, ranger programs will be increasingly challenging to run.

This housing challenge is part of the much broader issue of housing shortages in remote communities generally. Desert communities are repeatedly advocating for more and better housing. Many ranger program staff members and their families face

housing insecurity, which compounds much wider interrelated socio-economic challenges.

The housing shortage, within ranger programs and more broadly across communities affects the stability and continuity of ranger programs and undermines the ability of desert rangers and their communities to build a long-term vision for their work.

“We need infrastructure to support a sustainable program. [...] Coordinators live in sub-standard housing”

IDA Member

“People have been drifting away from communities over the last 10-15 years. 50% of houses in those communities are beyond economic repair. They are not habitable. People can’t live in those kinds of conditions. They might want to live in those communities, but they can’t cause they’re in such a bad state”

IDA Member

KEY ISSUES

#6 Insufficient operational funding to cover true operational costs of ranger programs

Funding contracts do not currently cover the real costs of running an effective and sustainable ranger program. Ranger programs operate in some of the most remote areas in Australia and involves significant operational costs. Funding contracts underestimate these costs and do not systematically include fundamental operational needs beyond salaries. These costs include the resourcing needed for training and professional development, community engagement, monitoring and evaluation and the purchase and delivery of specialised assets.

As ranger programs evolve, their operational needs may also become more complex. Programs that manage increasingly large areas or engage in more diverse activities require more sophisticated data management systems, additional administrative staff and enhanced logistical support. As the complexity of a program increases, so does the need for additional operational resources.

Smaller ranger teams particularly suffer from inadequate operational funding, because they do not have systems and additional resources in place to support the delivery of more complex work.

"Desert rangers are out in far more remote and inaccessible locations, going on multi week trips, using huge amounts of fuel and 4WD tires. This has a much greater cost, that isn't being understood"

Funder

"Smaller ranger organisations don't have the systems behind them to do their work"

IDA Member

Insurance costs pose a particular problem. Increasing costs of insurance are not systematically recognised by funders and these insurance costs are likely to continue increasing, particularly in the context of fire management work in some jurisdictions in the context of increasingly hot and unpredictable climactic environments.

"It is increasingly hard for desert ranger groups to access fire insurance. Government should intervene. Otherwise, the work will come to a halt or ranger organisations will need to take the risk of doing fire management without insurance"

IDA Member

Funders need to pay what it takes to properly run a sustainable ranger program. By addressing the operational funding shortfall and ensuring that agreements accurately reflect the full operational costs including safety costs and equipment required to run ranger programs, the ranger sector will be both more effective and more sustainable.

KEY ISSUES

#7 More investment needed in ranger training and career pathways to support sustainable careers in the sector

Desert ranger programs do not systematically accommodate the cultural and family responsibilities that are integral to Indigenous communities, which means career pathways in the sector are not sufficiently flexible and adaptable to accommodate these cultural and family responsibilities. This inflexibility can make it challenging for rangers to balance their professional and personal lives and impacts on their desire to stay in the ranger sector over the long-term.

Some cohorts are particularly affected by this, including young people, primary carers and women, which means that they struggle to engage in desert ranger careers over the long term.

Compounding this, many ranger programs lack clear career progression opportunities which can also discourage long-term commitment of staff members.

The ranger sector is only as sustainable as the rangers who work within it, so prioritising appropriate, rewarding career pathways is critical.

"We need to invest in growing the confidence of new rangers coming through and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge"

IDA Member

It is important to also be thoughtful about what a desirable career pathway looks like for each ranger group as different groups will have different career aspirations. For example, while one ranger group may value a clear pathway to becoming head ranger and a ranger coordinator, another group or community may simply value stable and reliable employment. There is an opportunity to pilot innovative career pathways that better reflect the aspirations and needs of desert rangers. What these pilots may look like will depend on the individual ranger group and community, however, some stakeholders in consultations identified the development of a "senior cultural ranger" role alongside a ranger coordinator role may be an effective way to create a different career pathway that acknowledges the extensive cultural authority and expertise of some rangers.

We need pathways for rangers designed by rangers

IDA Member

Not all mob want to necessarily build and expand, many want stability [...] Rangers need to have choice and opportunity

IDA Member

Accredited and Non-Accredited Skills Development

There is also currently a gap in quality, job-linked, place-based accredited and non-accredited training for rangers. While there has been a recent push for accredited training and certification, that training is not always place-based and relevant to desert ranger work. Furthermore, non-accredited but important training that rangers undergo on-Country with Elders and community is also often not recognised. This gap can hinder the development of essential skills and limit career advancement and engagement opportunities. Currently any on-Country and culturally based training opportunities are either very limited or too costly to be accessible for ranger teams in desert communities. Needing to travel long distances to regional centres for training is also a barrier.

KEY ISSUES

#7 More investment needed in ranger training and career pathways to support sustainable careers in the sector

"We don't value the thousands of years of knowledge about Country [enough]. This is relevant to the capacity building discussions. What knowledge and skills are we valuing? What knowledge and skills do people want?"

Funder

Many rangers also encounter a glass ceiling in their careers due to insufficient investment in leadership development and self-advocacy training. While they may have accessed formal accredited skills development training, there is a barrier to taking on leadership roles because of insufficient investment in leadership and mentoring skills development. Mentoring is a critical part of providing desert rangers with the skills and confidence needed to pursue leadership opportunities, yet mentoring programs are currently inadequately resourced.

Importantly, training pathways do not sufficiently acknowledge and value deep generational knowledge about Country and integrate this into capacity-building programs.

"Government needs to fund delivering training on country so the people can access it and get more from it"

Funder

What funders and allies can do: a plan for the future

The desert ranger sector is vital for the environmental, cultural, social and economic wellbeing of Australia. However, for the desert ranger sector to thrive and remain sustainable into the future, the seven issues discussed above must be addressed by funders, allies and the sector together.

Below is a sustainability plan in the form of a table that presents practical solutions to these seven issues. The table identifies short, medium and long term actions that need to be taken to ensure the desert ranger sector has a strong and sustainable future.

The intention of the table is to provide practical and time bound opportunities to address the issues faced by the sector, and to present these in such a way that government, corporations, funders and allies can identify how they may align to and support certain activities.

It is worth noting, that while the table does not intend to propose any particularly strict prioritisation (support to solve any issue at any time will be useful to strengthen the sector), the table does group some issues as “foundational steps”. These have been emphasised as particularly important as they relate to building meaningful engagement and strengthening cultural competency.

The sustainability plan table is to be read as follows:

- The first column summarises the issue discussed above
- The second column summarises the proposed solution to the issue
- The third column lists short to medium term actions that need to be taken to begin laying the foundations to resolve the issue
- The fourth column lists long term actions that build on previous actions to resolve the issue
- The fifth column describes the desired long-term outcome that will be achieved should actions be implemented and the issue resolved

The ambition is for each and every action in this plan to be completed over the coming years, setting the desert ranger sector up for long-term sustainability, guaranteeing that:

- **The desert ranger sector is a respected contributor to national interests, consistently represented in key forums and actively shaping major national agendas**
- **Funding contracts, processes and policies appropriately reflect the priorities of desert ranger teams and their communities**
- **Recognition by all funders that desert ranger programs deliver deeply connected environmental, cultural and social outcomes and that funding agreements support the full scope of activities needed to care for Country**
- **Desert ranger teams have the infrastructure and operational resourcing they need to run effective, sustainable programs**
- **And finally, rangers have access to proper training, mentoring, and career pathways to achieve their goals.**

Now is the time to take the opportunity to make change for the better.

Solutions, Actions & Outcomes

This plan sets out practical solutions to address key issues threatening the sustainability of the desert ranger sector.

- The first column states the issue (for a more detailed description and discussion of the issue refer to the section above),
- The second column summarises the proposed solutions,
- The third column lists short to medium term actions,
- The fourth column lists long term actions that build on previous actions, and;
- The fifth column describes the desired long term outcome that will be achieved should the proposed actions be implemented.

Foundational steps

Issue	Solution	Stage 1 Actions	Stage 2 Actions	Outcomes
The desert ranger sector is not adequately represented in conversations of national significance in land management	Ensure the systematic involvement of desert ranger teams in shaping national agendas. Support the active presence of strong desert voices at key reference groups, panels and conferences	1.1 IDA and desert ranger teams identify and publicise the national agenda items where they consider desert ranger team voices are a fundamental input. 1.2 Stakeholders engaging with desert ranger teams ensure participation of desert sector representatives in national conversations as business as usual.	1.3 Stakeholders looking to consult with the sector allocate funding to IDA and IDA members for appropriate consultation and preparation of informed, collective responses to critical agenda items 1.4 Stakeholders commit to ongoing consultation with IDA and desert ranger teams to ensure desert ranger voices continue to be centred in national conversations 1.5 All stakeholders seek inputs and recommendations from the desert ranger sector as business as usual, take these seriously and adopt these into national strategies.	The desert ranger sector is appropriately acknowledged and appreciated as a key voice and contributor to outcomes of national interest. The desert ranger sector is represented on key reference groups, panels and at conferences as business as usual, and has a platform to advocate for the value and relevance of desert rangers to major national agendas. Desert ranger teams systematically inform national agendas.
Inadequate engagement with desert rangers means community priorities are not properly reflected in program processes, policies and funding agreements	Improve engagement processes with desert ranger teams to ensure aspirations and needs of desert ranger teams and communities are reflected in funding arrangements. Establish structured processes to elevate local desert ranger voices in funding conversations, including local desert ranger networks bringing together local groups into more collective voices.	2.1 Funders develop engagement principles together with desert ranger teams. 2.2 Funders commit to implementing those principles, reviewing and updating current practices. 2.3 Investment in the development of local networks which bring desert ranger teams together to engage with stakeholders, funders, and partners as a collective voice.	2.4 Funders continuously review the application of engagement principles, with a commitment to continuous improvement. 2.5 Funders systematically incorporate local community priorities heard through consultation into ranger program funding agreements.	There is a structured and culturally appropriate way for funders to engage with desert ranger teams and communities. The priorities of desert ranger teams and their communities are reflected in funding agreements.

Foundational steps

Issue	Solution	Stage 1 Actions	Stage 2 Actions	Outcomes
Low cultural competence and insufficient understanding of desert context strains funding relationships	Funders increase their cultural awareness and their understanding of the practical realities of running a ranger program successfully in the desert. Increase investment and participation by funders in opportunities to go out on-Country and to attend desert events of significance such as forums and conferences. These are important	3.1 Funders require their own contract managers to visit ranger operations in person to understand reality of service delivery. 3.2 Funders commit to properly resourcing their contract managers and other internal representatives to attend desert events of significance like desert ranger forums 3.3 There is increased investment in desert specific cultural awareness training programs, including funding for new programs where programs do not currently exist. 3.4 All stakeholders engaging with desert rangers do cultural awareness training that relates specifically to the desert context 3.5 All funders and other non-desert stakeholders continue building on their Indigenous employment policies to increase the number of Indigenous people with an understanding of the desert context in contract manager roles.	3.6 Contract managers connect regularly with desert ranger coordinators and desert ranger program staff to discuss how well funding agreements are meeting local needs and adaptively manage agreements to better reflect those needs.	Funders have an improved understanding of the cultural and practical complexities of delivering ranger programs in the desert . This is reflected in the negotiation, drafting and implementation of contracts.

Building on the foundations

Issue	Solution	Stage 1 Actions	Stage 2 Actions	Outcomes
Desert ranger programs are hindered by rigid funding contracts that do not always recognise the integrated environmental, social and cultural outcomes of ranger work	Recognise the integrated nature of running a ranger program and the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness associated with a siloed or inflexible funding approach. Funders adapt to be more streamlined and collaborative, to remove fractured and repetitive conversations that separate Country from culture. Support the development of tailored and integrated funding streams for desert ranger programs, responsive to desert needs	4.1 Funders update all desert ranger program funding agreements to reflect and enable a more integrated and collaborative approach. At a minimum, agreements should recognise the integrated environmental, social and cultural outcomes for ranger work, and this should be reflected in: - Ranger program measures of success / outcome metrics Flexibility for desert ranger teams to apply funds flexibly across environmental, social and cultural needs of ranger work Flexibility to roll over funds to later years in multi-year agreements in alignment with organisational priorities. 4.2 Contract managers more commonly and appropriately use flexibility mechanisms within contracts or policies to better respond to local needs, and to enable greater co-investment towards common outcomes.	4.3 Funders of desert ranger teams come together with the desert ranger sector to co-design a more integrated and collaborative funding approach that recognises the holistic nature of ranger program outcomes.	Funder program documents (strategies and agreements) recognise and enable the interconnectedness of Country, culture and community. Funders acknowledge and respect that ranger programs lead to integrated environmental, cultural and social outcomes. Funding properly supports ranger teams to carry out the environmental, cultural and social activities they need to care for Country as a whole.
Insufficient capital funding for ranger infrastructure and asset needs	Increase funding for infrastructure and asset needs, including dedicated ranger housing, to properly meet the needs of desert ranger teams	5.1 Undertake foundational assessments of infrastructure needs across desert ranger teams 5.2 Support desert ranger teams to develop individual plans/business cases for improved infrastructure (e.g. construction needs, tenures, cost estimates etc) 5.3 Establish parallel funding stream or built-in budget line allocations to support the acquisition of infrastructure and assets requires to run an effective and sustainable ranger program	5.4 Funders continuously review desert ranger teams' infrastructure and asset needs as part of contract management processes to ensure appropriate investment to meet needs over time	Every desert ranger team has fit for purpose infrastructure and assets to run an effective and sustainable program and manage country safely, in line with community aspirations. There is sufficient appropriate housing to enable the delivery of a ranger program in line with community aspirations

Building on the foundations

Issue	Solution	Stage 1 Actions	Stage 2 Actions	Outcomes
Insufficient operational funding to cover the true operational costs of ranger programs	Fully fund the true operational costs of ranger programs by increasing operational funding to fully cover the costs of running a ranger program	6.1 Define how much operational funding is required for ranger teams to sustainably operate, identifying the true cost of operations and the current shortfall in operational funding 6.2 Support desert ranger teams to develop individual plans/business cases for improved operational funding 6.3 Establish a funding stream or built-in budget line allocations for operational funding for all types of agreements to meet the true operational costs of an effective and sustainable ranger program	6.4 Funders continuously review operational needs as part of the contract management process to ensure appropriate investment to meet needs over time	Every ranger program's operational needs are appropriately funded – funders are paying what it takes to run a sustainable and effective ranger program
More investment needed in ranger training and career pathways to support sustainable careers in the sector	Support desert ranger sector to pilot and implement flexible work arrangements that support ranger needs (noting that stipulating rigid employment KPIs in funding agreements hamstrings employers' capacity to facilitate flexibility in work arrangements) Invest in co-designed place-based training programs to build capability of the ranger workforce in line with ranger aspirations. This will focus on both accredited and non-accredited training as both are equally important (this includes soft skills and leadership skills)	Career paths 7.1 Support desert ranger organisations to pilot flexible work options 7.2 Support desert ranger organisations to engage or re-engage with specific cohorts (women and youth) to bring them into the ranger roles 7.3 Support desert ranger organisations to pilot career pathways or organisational structures that recognise the skills of rangers as they really are/are suited to what rangers want (e.g. resourcing the role "senior cultural ranger") 7.4 Funders to review agreements to ensure they contain appropriate funding for wages and entitlements. Skills development 7.5 Government and training organisations work with the desert ranger sector to understand existing skills within desert ranger teams, skills desert rangers want and skills desert rangers need, to identify training needs and the resourcing necessary to support desert ranger teams to obtain these	7.6 Invest in the development and implementation of co-designed desert-specific training programs (including both accredited and non-accredited training for soft skills and leadership skills – both are equally important) to support the progression of rangers through their chosen career pathways	Rangers have access to appropriate training and mentoring opportunities, and pathways that enable them to achieve their ambitions Retention of rangers is improved as rangers feel empowered and valued in their roles Organisations are appropriately resourced to remunerate rangers according to their skills and experience There is increased accessibility to training and employment for women, youth and single parents

Conclusion

The desert ranger sector plays a vital role in addressing socio-economic challenges and Closing the Gap targets, offering employment, cultural preservation, enhanced environmental stewardship, climate resilience and economic opportunities for both Indigenous communities and all Australians. With significant government investment and plans to expand the workforce, the impact of the sector is significant and far reaching. Simply put, we look after country because country looks after us.

However, continued and growing support is essential to ensure the desert ranger sector's long-term strength and sustainability. The practical solutions set out in this sustainability plan can only be achieved with desert ranger teams, communities, government, funders and allies all working together with a shared vision for healthy desert country and thriving desert communities. The ambition is for each and every action set out in this report to be achieved in the coming years. Now is the time to take this collaborative opportunity to get started and make change for the better.



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