November 2015

Australia's Indigenous Protected Areas

What is an Indigenous Protected Area?

Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) are voluntarily dedicated by Indigenous groups on Indigenous owned or managed land or sea country. They are recognised by the Australian Government as an important part of the National Reserve System, protecting the nation's biodiversity for the benefit of all Australians.

Primarily IPAs deliver cost-effective environmental, cultural, social, health and wellbeing and economic benefits to Indigenous communities. As well as protecting biodiversity and cultural resources into the future, IPAs provide employment, education and training opportunities for Indigenous people in remote areas.

An increasing IPA estate

There are currently 72 dedicated IPAs protecting over 64 million hectares, including some of Australia's rarest and most fragile environments. They make up over 40 per cent of Australia's National Reserve System. A number of IPA projects are currently in the consultation phase and once dedicated, will add several million hectares to the National Reserve System. Australia's National Reserve System aims to protect 17 per cent of bioregions in Australia by 2020.

Image: Uunguu IPA, WA: combining traditional burning practices with western science approaches to fire management. Photo: Peter Morris

What does an IPA manager do?

IPA managers look after the natural and cultural heritage of their land and sea country. Routine management activities include:

- weed and feral animal control
- revegetation programmes
- interpretive activities for visitors
- management and maintenance of visitor facilities
- protection of rock art; cultural history and language projects
- wildlife protection and research such as monitoring the impact of marine debris on threatened turtle populations.

IUCN management categories

IPA management plans describe how Indigenous groups 'care for country' using a combination of traditional Indigenous knowledge and contemporary western science. These plans identify an International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) management category to ensure that their management is in line with international standards. Most IPAs (over 90 per cent) dedicate under IUCN Categories 5 and 6, which promote a balance between conservation and other sustainable uses to deliver social and economic benefits for local Indigenous communities.

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Djelk IPA, NT: IPA managers look after their sea country in partnership with agencies such as Australian Border Force. Photo: Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation

Nantawarrina IPA, SA: Feral animal control is a key part of the day-to-day management of IPAs. Photo: Nick Rains

Social, education and health benefits

In addition to the positive environmental benefits, IPAs also provide benefits in health, education, employment and social cohesion for Indigenous people. Participation in IPA's also provides a connection and engagement opportunity with other remote Indigenous communities and sharing stories on how they manage their country.

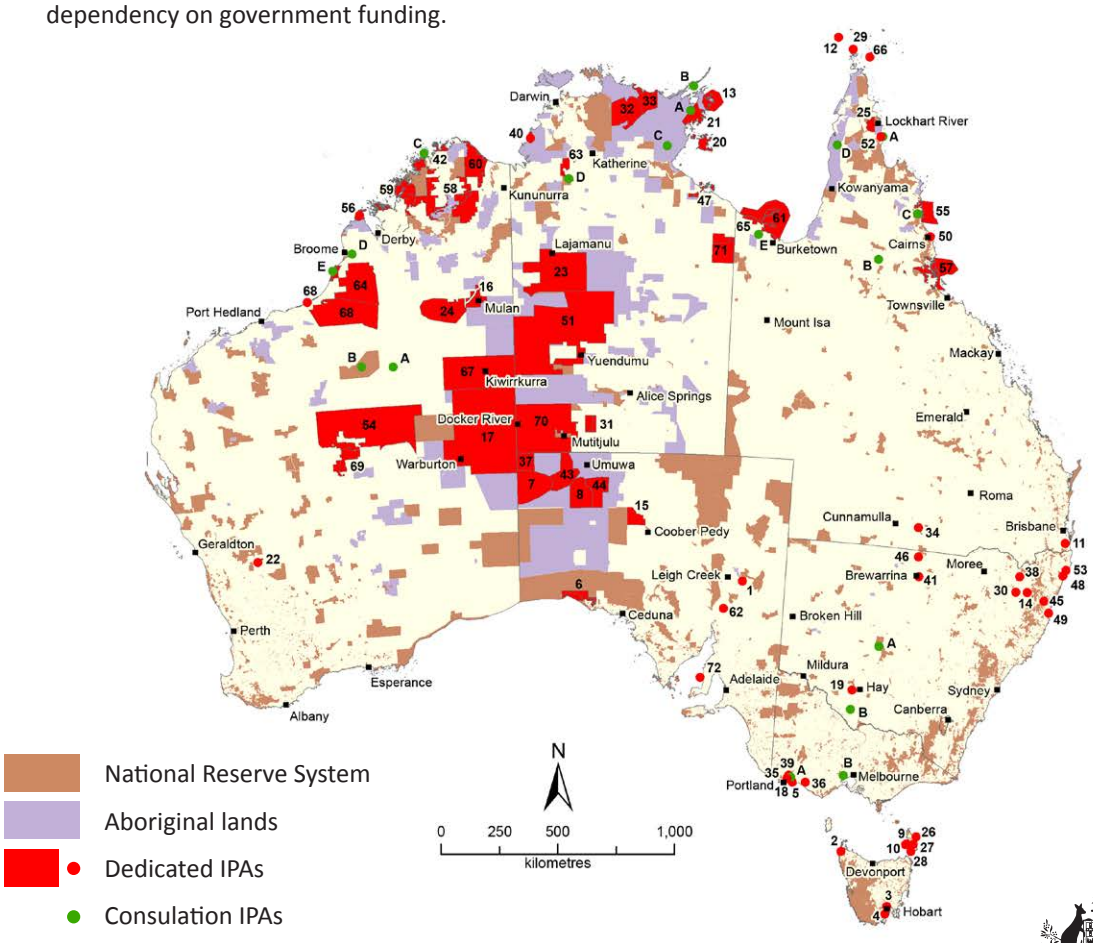
An IPA creates jobs for Indigenous men and women doing what they want to do – working and looking after country, particularly in remote locations where other employment opportunities are limited.

Training and employment opportunities build the capacity of Rangers and extend the range of services they can provide on a 'fee-for-service' basis and other commercial activities to decrease their dependency on government funding.

Rangers also work with Indigenous children and provide learning opportunities which can facilitate the transfer of traditional knowledge to younger generations. Through being a positive community role model, Rangers also provide incentives for children to stay in school and further their education.

IPAs are an evolving concept

IPAs are evolving from a management framework based solely on Indigenous land tenure to one involving multiple tenures (including sea country) coupled with cooperative management arrangements with other stakeholders who can adopt the IPA status.



Indigenous Protected Areas map, October 2015. Provided by the Department of the Environment

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