

Indigenous Protected Areas Program Evaluation Community Report

February 2024



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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this publication may contain images of sites of cultural significance. Ninti One sincerely apologises for any distress, sadness and/or offence this may cause.



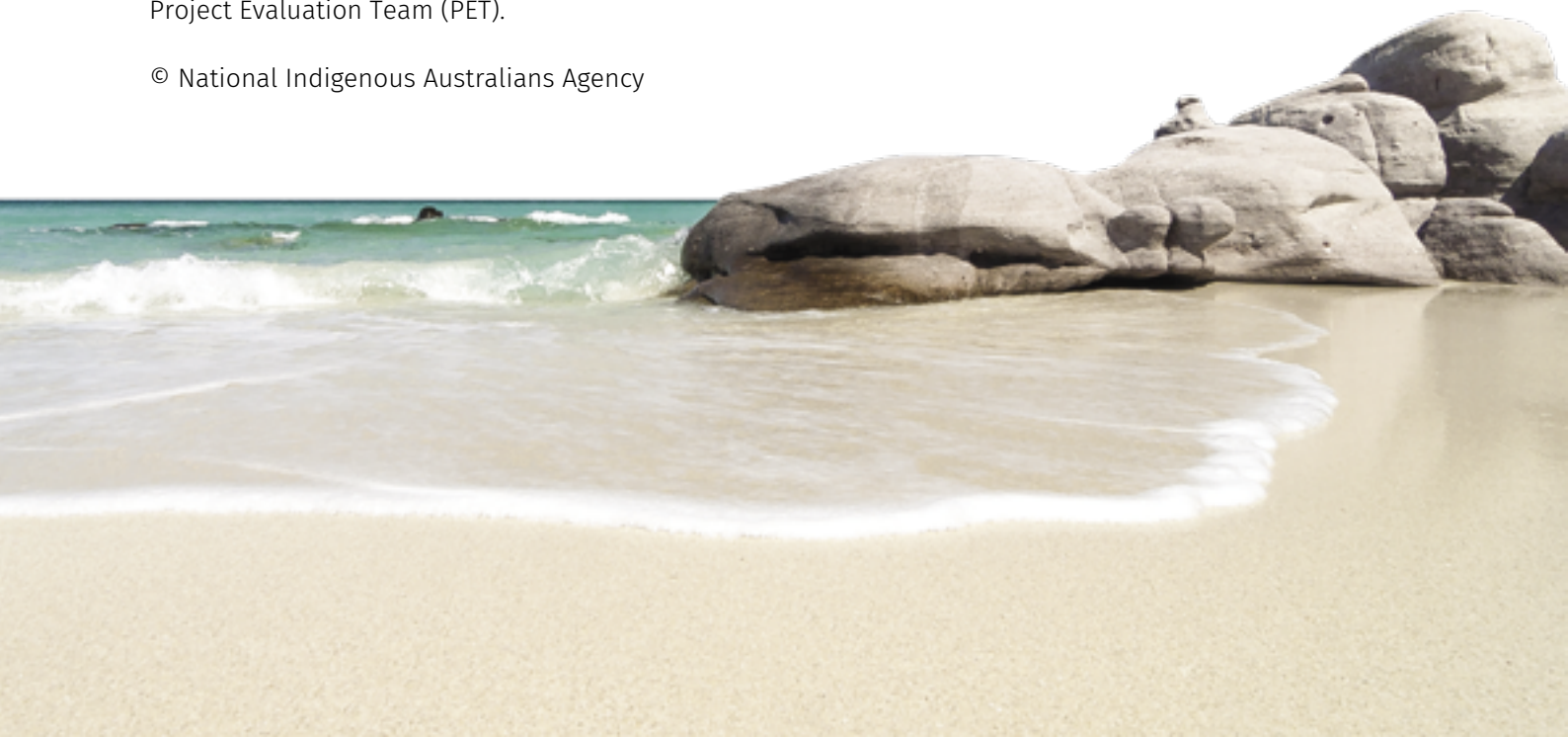
The Indigenous Protected Areas Program Evaluation was commissioned by NIAA. This Community Report aims to inform IPA provider organisations and other Indigenous participants about the evaluation project and its findings. The report was written and researched for Ninti One Limited by Rod Little, Tammy Abbott, Keryn Maloney, Andy Bubb, Rod Reeve (Ninti One Limited); Emma Woodward, Pethie Lyons, Peta Braedon, Petina Pert, Rosemary Hill (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation [CSIRO]); and Diane Jarvis, James Cook University (JCU). Ninti One gratefully acknowledges the assistance and support provided by NIAA and the Interagency Project Evaluation Team (PET).

Ninti One is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island not-for-profit organisation, led by Chair Professor Tom Calma AO. It exists to build opportunities with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and people living in remote Australia, through research, innovation and engagement.

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*Cover image: putalina IPA, Tasmania.
Inside cover image: Anindilyakwa IPA,
Northern Territory.*

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What is the IPA Program?

Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) are areas of land and sea Country managed by Indigenous people to protect and conserve biodiversity and cultural values.

The IPAs are part of Australia's National Reserve System (NRS), which is the network of formally recognised parks, reserves and protected areas across Australia. The IPA Program is funded by the Australian Government.

When an IPA project has been dedicated and the Australian Government funds it, we call it an 'IPA project.' These IPA projects, and the IPA Program more broadly, were the focus of this evaluation.

Program



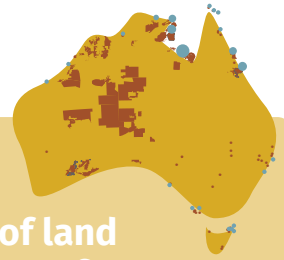
Projects

Dedicated IPAs cover more than

87 million hectares of land and 5 million hectares of sea

The IPA Program has provided a way for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to plan how they manage their land and sea Country.

At the beginning of the evaluation, there were 78 IPAs. As of February 2024 there are 84 IPAs.



The IPA Program has operated for over 25 years with strong government support. It is built on a community-led approach to caring for Country and keeping culture strong.

Traditional Owners can agree with the Australian Government to dedicate an IPA over their land and sea Country. IPAs are supported by an international framework that describes how to manage protected areas.

The objectives of the IPA Program are to:

- Protect and conserve Australia's biodiversity
- Help Indigenous Australians manage their land and sea Country for environmental, cultural, social and economic benefits
- Increase the size of the NRS and improve its condition.



IPA Program operations

The IPA Program is administered by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) with the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW).



National Indigenous Australians Agency



Australian Government

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

The Australian Government has committed

\$231.5 million

to the next phase of the IPA Program over 5 years, from 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2028 from the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT).



What is the IPA Program? continued

IPAs make up about half of the NRS. They improve biodiversity through connecting habitats, controlling feral species, managing weeds, restoring habitat and monitoring threatened species.

IPAs also deliver:

Cultural values

Managing IPAs helps Indigenous communities protect the cultural values of their Country for future generations and results in significant health, education, economic and social benefits.

Caring for Country

IPAs create jobs for Indigenous men and women – working and looking after their land.

Employment

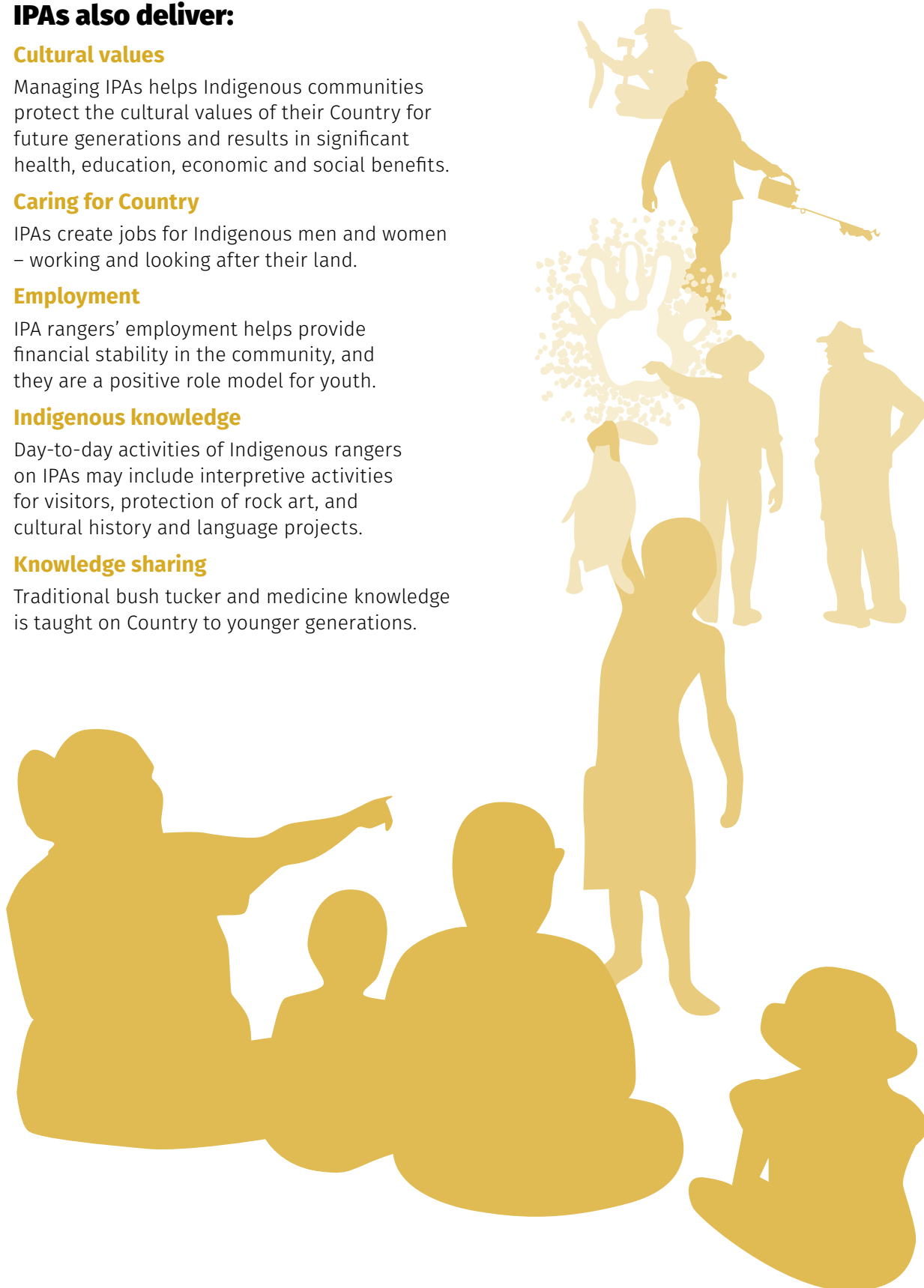
IPA rangers' employment helps provide financial stability in the community, and they are a positive role model for youth.

Indigenous knowledge

Day-to-day activities of Indigenous rangers on IPAs may include interpretive activities for visitors, protection of rock art, and cultural history and language projects.

Knowledge sharing

Traditional bush tucker and medicine knowledge is taught on Country to younger generations.



The purpose of the evaluation

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) contracted Ninti One to evaluate the IPA Program.

While the lessons from previous reviews remain important, this evaluation focuses on the years since the last IPA Program review in 2016. The evaluation examined how well the objectives and outcomes of the IPA Program are being achieved across different places and at different scales. The evaluation will help the Australian Government improve the program and will inform how the program is funded because it will highlight the key factors that influence how the objectives and outcomes are achieved.

The evaluation asked:

1

To what extent has the IPA Program achieved biodiversity conservation outcomes, including those at a landscape scale?

2

To what extent has the IPA Program worked to strengthen Indigenous peoples' connections to Country and culture and create social and economic benefits?

3

What are the key contexts/factors that affect the achievement of IPA Program objectives, and how can they be used to strengthen impacts through future program design?

4

To what extent are IPA Program objectives still relevant and appropriate to meet the needs of IPA providers and the Australian Government?

Image: Yappala IPA, South Australia.



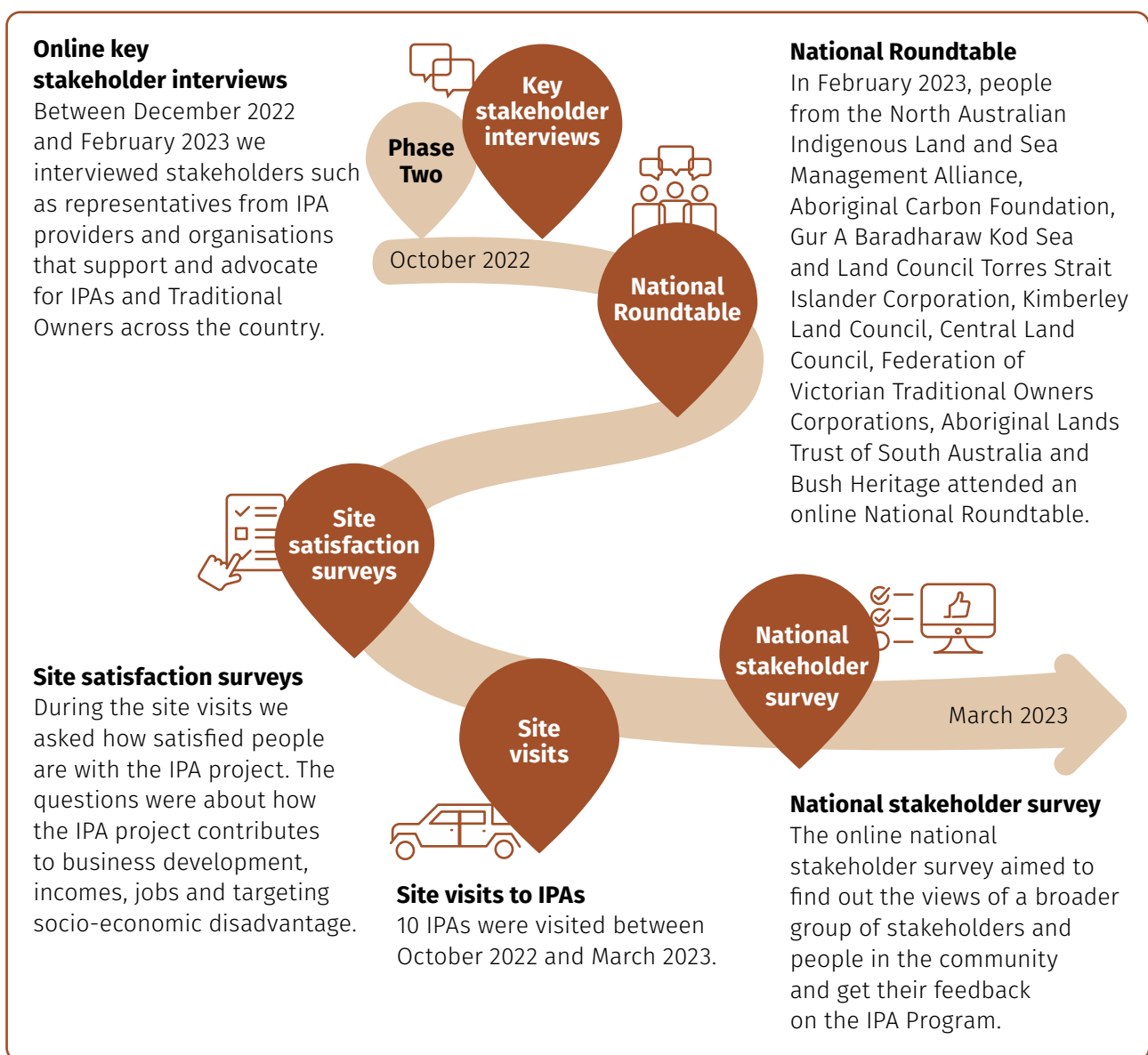
How the evaluation was conducted

We did the evaluation in 2 phases, from October 2021 to March 2023.

In **Phase One**, we identified knowledge gaps by doing a literature review and desktop analysis to analyse existing data. This research and synthesis was written up in the Phase One report. Then we worked with NIAA and DCCEEW to develop a detailed Evaluation Plan.

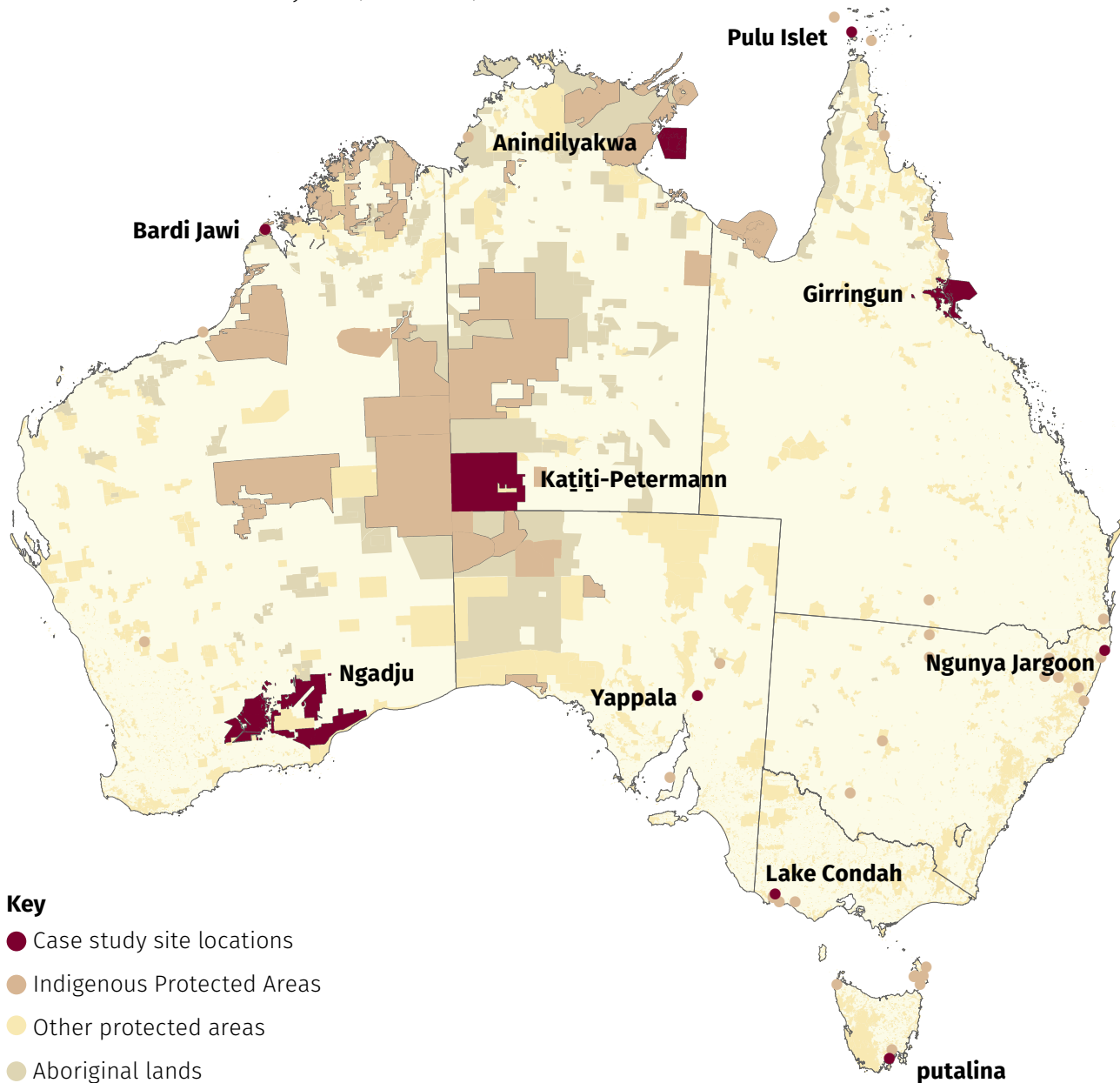
In **Phase Two**, we worked directly with representatives of IPA provider organisations and Traditional Owners to collect data through culturally appropriate participatory processes, with a yarning approach.

During the site visits to 10 IPAs, Traditional Owners and IPA provider organisations told us their views about what makes the IPA Program strong, what helps make it strong and what makes it challenging. We collated these and categorised them into key themes. Then we added more data collected through the methods shown in the box.



Case study site locations

Indigenous people who deliver IPA projects yarned with us at these case study sites. The recommendations of the IPA evaluation are based on these site-based yarns (and voices).



We identified 10 case study sites to inform the evaluation of the IPA Program. The evaluation was led by an Indigenous team, and we used appropriate Indigenous methodologies to collect data with Indigenous people in the case study sites. The team collected data with the IPA project providers and community using Yarning as the main method, along with surveys and some on-Country visits.

Key findings and recommendations

A summary of key findings and recommendations of the IPA Program Evaluation, aligned with the 4 evaluation questions:

1

To what extent has the IPA Program achieved biodiversity conservation outcomes, including those at a landscape scale?

IPAs make the NRS more comprehensive, representative and adequate. They help Australia's achieve its international obligations for biodiversity conservation by:

- providing 50% of the area of the NRS
- contributing to conservation outcomes in 51 of 89 (57%) of Australia's terrestrial bioregions and 104 of 419 (25%) of Australia's terrestrial sub-bioregions
- providing habitat representation for 66% (441) of Australia's threatened species and 100% (~26) of Australia's listed threatened ecological communities
- providing a globally significant connected corridor of protected habitat in central Australia, enhancing resilience and improving the connectivity of the NRS.

The evaluation found that IPAs do manage land and sea Country in a way that helps conservation.

However:

- Funding on a per-hectare basis is much lower than on the rest of the NRS, and it is insufficient to meet management requirements.
- The relationship between funding and agreement that IPAs benefit the health of Country was statistically significant, suggesting that more and sustained funding is key to further improving biodiversity outcomes provided by IPA projects.
- The projects that can access funding support are the ones that can demonstrate biodiversity outcomes.
- Monitoring programs are needed to demonstrate outcomes for biodiversity and cultural management, but these programs cannot be built without resources and support.

Recommendations

- 1.1 Review how effective monitoring programs are, including how data is collected and managed, to help understand what stops management being able to adapt. Review current support and capability across the IPA Program, as this is influenced by partnerships.
- 1.2 Support Indigenous people to lead conversations about collecting, managing and analysing data to help management of IPAs adapt. Pay attention to Indigenous data sovereignty. Support people to give and receive feedback about monitoring data and adapting monitoring programs.
- 1.3 In partnership with Indigenous people, build regional data networks to help land and sea management.
- 1.4 Review how we can show that cultural management actions contribute to biodiversity outcomes.
- 1.5 Develop a way to make sure research is led by the priorities of Indigenous people. Allocate funds specifically for IPA priorities. Allocate separate funds for cultural outcomes (including sacred sites, discrete language or culture programs, on-Country learning).
- 1.6 Develop processes to analyse and report on IPAs and potentially across the full Indigenous land and sea management sector.
- 1.7 Review the skills people have in land and sea management and the NRS. Identify training options for Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff across the NRS.

To what extent has the IPA Program worked to strengthen Indigenous peoples' connections to Country and culture and create social and economic benefits?

IPAs deliver significant social, economic and other benefits. However, funding and support are too low for many IPAs, and people are often choosing to work without pay for the love of Country.

- Rangers on IPAs learn skills that they can use to get other jobs in natural resource management and resource development industries and in government.
- Not many businesses exist across the visited IPAs, but IPA providers did talk about the opportunities and their hopes for local businesses to develop.
- IPAs bring benefits such as intergenerational teaching, community relations, jobs, learning how to respond to disaster, and enabling mob to be on Country, which provides relief from the stress of everyday life. People working for IPAs express significant pride for Country and culture.
- IPAs can provide culturally safe workplaces and employment conditions. Networks in the IPA Program can be used to help people respond to and recover from disaster.
- The benefits of IPAs increase over time, including in the growth of Indigenous-owned businesses.
- People see more benefits when funding increases, but benefits are, and are perceived to be, relatively small.

Recommendations

- 2.1 Increase opportunities for Indigenous people to lead at all levels of the IPA Program. Support Indigenous people to find ways to measure IPA outcomes, including what makes them successful in terms of social wellbeing.
- 2.2 Review how cultural management actions are monitored so it is clear how they contribute to biodiversity outcomes.
- 2.3 Give more support to 2-way learning opportunities when Plans of Management are developed so community can be stronger in delivering on the goals of the IPA, including strengthening language, culture and knowledge.

Image: Western Bearded Dragon, Ngadju IPA, Western Australia.



Key findings and recommendations continued

What are the key contexts/factors that affect the achievement of IPA Program objectives, and how can they be used to strengthen impacts through future program design?

The keys to the IPA Program meeting its aims are:

- Indigenous culture and connection to Country
- cultural leadership and authority and the role of Elders in ensuring good governance and appropriate decision-making
- community support, partnerships and collaborations
- enough resources and authority to support management/connection to Country
- recognition and support for both cultural and biodiversity outcomes
- strong organisational and administrative capacity, as well as experience gained over time.

Image: Giringun IPA, Queensland.

Recommendations

- 3.1 Strengthen ways to develop the IPA sector by formalising training and accreditation.
- 3.2 Identify career pathways and develop an award system for rangers.
- 3.3 Develop benchmarks so that funding is shared equitably across the NRS.
- 3.4 Address silos by reviewing how IPAs and the ranger program are separated.
- 3.5 Make IPA funding more transparent, including what the priorities are and how they are measured.
- 3.6 IPA partners to identify the level of resourcing they need to deliver the agreed outcomes in the Plans of Management.
- 3.7 Support appropriate governance, which may require additional resourcing.
- 3.8 Review and streamline reporting requirements so government can work better with IPA providers.
- 3.9 Explore how IPA providers can have more control over the protection of Country (similar to National Park rangers).



4

To what extent are IPA Program objectives still relevant and appropriate to meet the needs of IPA providers and the Australian Government?

IPA Program objectives should be reviewed to ensure alignment with the priorities and needs of IPA providers. IPA providers want to expand existing IPA projects to protect different parts of Country and want to develop new IPA projects that involve different groups and regional approaches.

An underlying theme in the evaluation was equity in the IPA Program. Traditional Owners want to discuss a range of values and hopes and need regional representation to have a good decision-making partnership with government. Government and IPA providers agree that a regional model means working with state and territory authorities.

The new government policies in the Nature Repair Market Bill 2023 and National Net Zero Authority clearly identify engagement with First Peoples' knowledge, cultures and communities and align with some of the new objectives of IPA providers.

Recommendations

- 4.1 Review IPA Program objectives as the approach must be holistic and centred on people, culture and Country.
- 4.2 Identify options for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak organisations and/or networks to partner with governments (including in scoping national IPA representation to government).
- 4.3 Review opportunities for state and territory governments to work more closely on developing and managing IPAs.
- 4.4 Make sure Plans of Management address climate change risk, disaster response and nature-based solutions for climate. Develop strategies that align the aims of IPA providers and government, and build exposure by linking to national frameworks and reporting.
- 4.5 Align IPA reporting with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap targets such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.

Image: Girringun IPA, Queensland.



The evaluation showed that although the partners are all committed to the IPA Program, they desire a strengthened common vision.

Over time, the IPA Program has evolved to recognise multiple goals (including biodiversity, social and economic), but the evaluation showed that more discussion is needed to make sure the Australian Government and IPA providers share the vision for the program. Discussing these findings and recommendations with the IPA providers that were not included in the evaluation will ensure a fuller picture given the complexity, remoteness, size and operating environment of the IPAs.

The IPA Program has potential to deliver biodiversity, economic, social and wellbeing outcomes at scale. The Closing the Gap strategy provides a way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have more control in deciding how those outcomes might best be realised. Stronger Indigenous leadership of the IPA Program will be critical so it can deliver better life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as well as support the government's policy goals in Indigenous affairs.

This was a major evaluation led by Indigenous evaluators and an Indigenous company. The Yarning approach generated rich information through meaningful and valuable research work that strongly respected place-based culture. Data collected through conversations on Country tended to be more qualitative than quantitative, giving detail about the story that complemented the numbers collected in other ways (for example through surveys).

This Indigenous-led evaluation is aligned with the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy framework (2020), which puts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at its centre, and Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) ethics approval guidelines.

Image: Lake Condah IPA, Victoria.

