



Remote Indigenous communities are vital for our fragile ecosystems

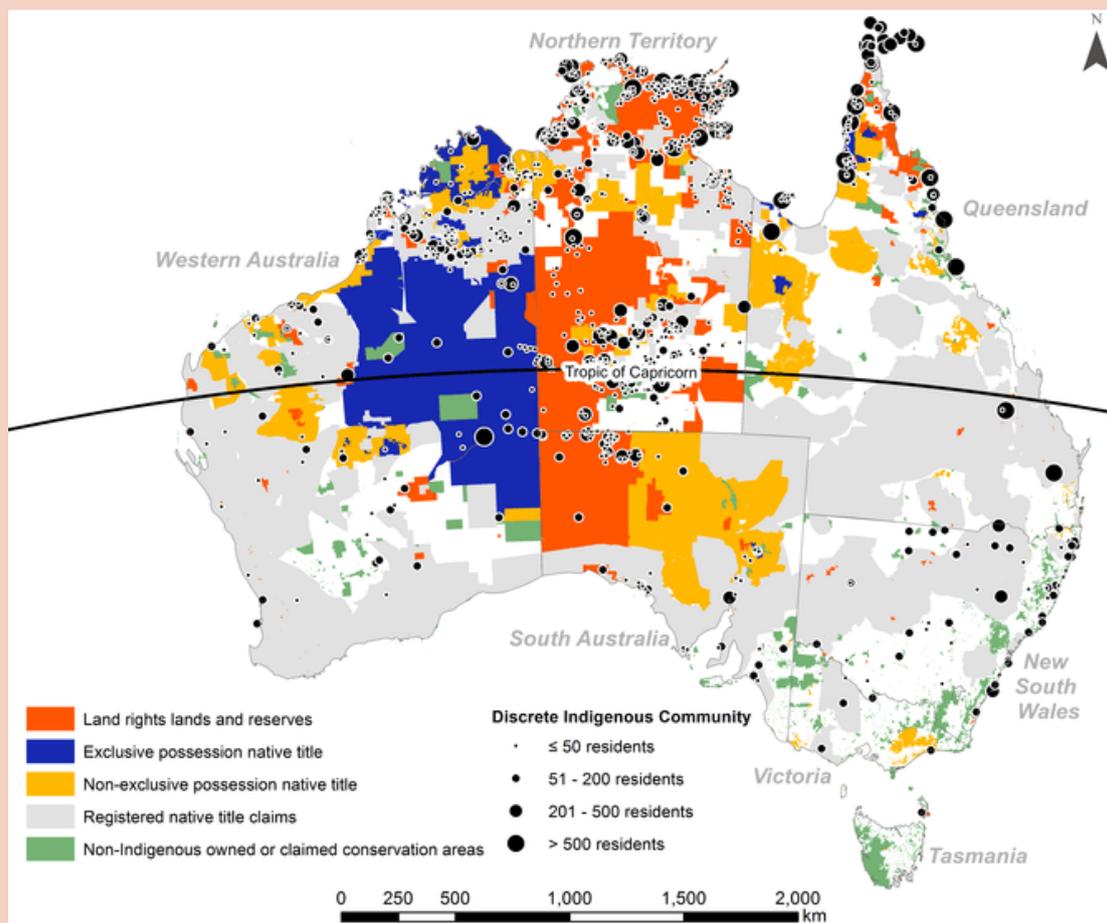
There are 1,200 small Indigenous communities scattered across regional and remote Australia.

The people who live in these vast and often inhospitable areas fulfil a key role in the environmental management of lands that are otherwise open to a host of threats including intense and widespread wildfires and invasive species – both of which can cause irreparable damage to the fragile landscape and endemic biodiversity.



Indigenous rangers like Yugul Mangi senior women (left to right) Edna Nelson, Cherry Daniels and Julie Roy, are crucial guardians of the outback environment. Photo by Emilie Ens

More than a third of Australia is recognised as Aboriginal owned and managed land, mainly in very remote regions. The ancestral connections and customary obligations of Aboriginal people to care for their land (with its inherent natural, cultural and spiritual meaning) best places them to manage its natural resources.





As Cherry Wulumirr Daniels, Senior Ngandi Traditional Owner and founder of the Yugul Mangi Women Rangers in Ngukurr said:

Our ancestors were Rangers - we were Rangers for 40,000 years and are Rangers today. It's a responsibility for us to look after those things. I am owned by and have ownership of those things... ownership to a tree or stone or billabong. We are not doing this for ourselves we are doing this for our Country and for our people and for the sake of our culture, keeping our culture alive and strong.

Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) represent a large and growing proportion of Australia's National Reserve System, especially in remote Australia. IPAs are declared voluntarily by Traditional Owners who commit to maintaining the biodiversity and cultural values within them. To achieve this, they receive government support to establish and operate Indigenous ranger programs. Without remote communities, it is likely that many of these programs would collapse.

Ranger programs provide economic value and culturally meaningful jobs to Indigenous people, who in turn manage threats to Country, protecting ecosystems through management of fire and invasive species, and seeking to rehabilitate degraded lands.

Indeed, the rapid and widespread declines of native mammals across the tropical north might well be due to past de-population and inadequate resourcing of remote communities and regions.

Boosting knowledge

Aboriginal people in remote communities also collaborate with scientists to better understand the condition of biodiversity in remote Australia. This can benefit both conservation and socio-economic development.

One example is the Yugul Mangi Rangers, based in the remote community of Ngukurr, Southeast Arnhem Land, who are working with Macquarie University, the Atlas of Living Australia and the Australian National University to survey biodiversity in one of the least scientifically understood parts of Australia.



Similarly, in north-central Arnhem Land, the Djelk Rangers, together with the Maningrida School, have worked with scientists to identify 25 new species of tarantula, as well as milking spiders for anti-venom production. The school has also hosted a pilot *Learning on Country* program that has seen improved attendance for senior students considering a career in rangering.

Yugul Mangi Rangers Kelvin Rogers and Simon Ponto found the near-threatened Leichhardt's Grasshopper in remote SE Arnhem fauna surveys. Photo: Emilie Ens



Aboriginal Sea Rangers, also based in remote communities, are playing a key role in management of endangered sea turtles. Australia's northern coastline is monitored by more than 40 clan groups through the [Ghostnets Australia] (www.ghostnets.com.au) alliance, which has recovered more than 13,000 discarded or lost fishing nets, which might otherwise have killed endangered marine life.

National benefits

Indigenous Protected Areas and ranger programs perform a vital public service of national and global conservation benefit. Though not without challenges, these programs are performing well above expectations and continue to grow with both Aboriginal community, government, private sector and philanthropic support. They enjoy considerable widespread support and acclaim.

Rangers are not only important for Australia's ecological health, but these jobs also empower people and are one of the few culturally meaningful jobs on offer in remote communities.

Support for remote communities, which are often in hard-to-reach places with climates that many non-Indigenous Australians find unbearable, is crucial to maintaining this public service.

What needs to be considered is we, as a nation, can provide sustained support to Aboriginal people who take the hard decision to live "on-country" so as to meet their enduring cultural responsibilities and improve their livelihood prospects.

All over this continent, from the remotest deserts to the tropical savannas, Aboriginal people are committed to maintaining the environmental values of their lands for themselves and for all Australians.

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