

# **Our Country Our Way Guidelines for Australian Indigenous Protected Area Management Plans**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Little guidance has been available about how the distinctive socio-cultural characteristics of Indigenous Protected Areas can be effectively reflected in management plans. The new National Guidelines for Indigenous Protected Area Management Plans in Australia contribute to filling this gap. The Guidelines draw on experiences of management planning from Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs), which comprise more than 25% of the area of Australia's national system of terrestrial protected areas. Planning innovations that are required to address the distinctive socio-cultural characteristics are identified as (1) a strong focus on customary institutions for governance, facilitated by engaging anthropological expertise; (2) strategic planning approaches that recognise inherent inter-linkages between people and place; (3) planning frameworks that bridge scales by considering values and issues across the whole of Indigenous territories; and (4) a variety of plan formats for different users of plans, with a strong emphasis on visual and spatial forms of communication. IPA management plans can be highly effective at communicating across the interface of Indigenous and scientific knowledge systems. The Guidelines will help ensure more widespread adoption of these important innovations, and contribute to empowering Indigenous owners of IPAs.

The Guidelines were developed through a collaborative process that engaged Indigenous peoples who are IPA managers with staff of CSIRO Ecosystem Sciences, the Australian Government Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (SEWPAC), and experienced planning consultants. Engagement processes included an initial specialist workshop, presentation of a draft to IPA managers at a national workshop, and a review by SEWPAC's Indigenous Advisory Committee.

## **INTRODUCTION: WHAT ARE INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AREAS?**

Indigenous people have looked after their country in Australia for tens of thousands of years. Land and sea country is central to Indigenous people's lives and well-being. It provides an economic base, it underpins Indigenous history, innovation and culture, and is fundamental to spiritual beliefs (DEWHA, 2009). The Indigenous Protected Areas Program, established in the 1990s by the Australian Government, is a way for Indigenous people to keep looking after their traditional land and sea country with support and recognition from the Australian Government.

An agreement with the Australian Government is required for an IPA to be eligible for support from the Caring for our Country initiative. Indigenous people consider that

IPAs are based on their own initiatives and continuing traditional responsibility for country. Indigenous delegates adopted the following definition of an IPA at a national workshop in 1997:

*An Indigenous Protected Area is governed by the continuing responsibilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to care for and protect lands and waters for present and future generations. Indigenous Protected Areas may include areas of land and waters over which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are custodians, and which shall be managed for cultural biodiversity and conservation, permitting customary sustainable resource use and sharing of benefit. This definition includes land that is within the existing conservation estate, that is or has the ability to be cooperatively managed by the current management agency and the traditional owners (Environment Australia, 1997).*

This definition has much in common with the international concept of Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas, which form part of the global protected area system (IUCN/CEESP, 2010). IPAs that are declared through voluntary agreement with the Australian Government form part of Australia's National Reserve System. The first IPA was declared at Nantawarrina in South Australia in 1998. Since then the IPA program has expanded rapidly. As at October 2011, there were 48 declared IPAs over all Australian states and territories except the ACT, and more than 40 consultation projects underway (see Figure 1). These IPAs cover an area in excess of 26.3m ha or just over 33% of Australia's NRS, and 3.4% of the Australian land mass.

## **WHY DO WE NEED NATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR IPA MANAGEMENT PLANS?**

IPAs have distinctive socio-cultural characteristics which set them apart from other protected areas where the continuing responsibility of Indigenous peoples for their land and sea is not fully recognised. The Australian Government requires IPAs to have endorsed Management Plans (MPs) in place to enable it to support any IPA declaration. The purpose of these Guidelines is to assist IPA owners, custodians and managers to produce MPs that ensure outcomes of value to both Indigenous peoples and the Australian Government, and reflect the distinctive socio-cultural characteristics of these protected areas. IPA MPs bring together management based on connections between Indigenous people, country, traditional law, custom and culture with the Australian and international systems for protected area management. IPA MPs are often most effective if they ensure Indigenous peoples drive and determine how these requirements will be met.

Some excellent Guidelines already exist to help IPA managers develop plans based on the western scientific planning approach (Thomas and Middleton, 2003; Dudley, 2008; Australian Government Caring for our Country, 2009). These existing Guidelines contain material that is both highly useful and important for IPA managers. However, using these existing Guidelines alone tends to produce plans that fall short of the potential to present the unique cultural settings and the vibrant Indigenous management strategies on country. These Guidelines for IPA MPs were developed to sit alongside these existing Guidelines, and provide advice that is particularly useful to IPAs.



## **HOW WERE THE GUIDELINES DEVELOPED?**

These Guidelines were developed through collaboration between the IPA managers, traditional owners, Australian Government Indigenous Protected Area section staff (within the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities), researchers in the CSIRO an Indigenous and other consultants who have worked on IPA MPs. Engagement processes included an initial specialist workshop, presentation of a draft to IPA managers at a national workshop, and review by SEWPaC's Indigenous Advisory Committee. The Guidelines draw on experiences of management planning from Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs), which comprise more than 25% of the area of Australia's national system of terrestrial protected areas.

## **WHAT IS THE SUGGESTED CONTENT OF AN IPA MANAGEMENT PLAN?**

Most IPA Management Plans have five types of information: (1) a vision of the Traditional Owners for their country; (2) a story about how and why the IPA was established; (3) information about governance arrangements; (4) a focus on values, threats and community benefits as the basis for action; and (5) information about how the plan will be monitored and improved.

## **WHAT IS DIFFERENT BETWEEN IPA AND OTHER PROTECTED AREA MANAGEMENT PLANS?**

Four key innovations have been identified that enable management plans to meet the distinctive socio-cultural characteristics of IPAs (1) a strong focus on customary attachments, responsibilities and institutions for governance, facilitated by engaging anthropological expertise; (2) strategic planning approaches that recognise inherent inter-linkages between people and place; (3) planning frameworks that bridge scales by considering values and issues across the whole of Indigenous territories; and (4) a variety of plan formats for different users of plans, with a strong emphasis on visual and spatial forms of communication. IPA management plans can be highly effective at communicating across the interface of Indigenous and scientific knowledge systems. The Guidelines aim to enable more widespread adoption of these important innovations, and contribute to empowering Indigenous owners of IPAs. We now consider each of these innovations in turn.

## **CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS FOR GOVERNANCE**

In government-managed, and many co-managed, protected areas, the intent to manage for conservation and associated purposes is established in statutes, regulations and corporate policies. This intent does not need to be negotiated in management planning, which focuses instead on how to deliver conservation outcomes. However, in the case of IPAs, the intent to manage for conservation purposes depends on Indigenous owners' decisions. A key innovation in IPA plans is to put considerable emphasis on governance—how power and responsibilities are exercised and how decisions are made about management (Lockwood 2010)—and to recognise a fundamental and strong role for customary institutions in that governance. Indigenous owners invariably consider it important that their IPA plan states clearly that only people with the proper customary rights and responsibilities can make decisions about the IPA.

## **STRATEGIC PLANNING THAT INTERLINKS PEOPLE AND PLACE**

Strategic planning that emphasise high level purposes, such as vision and intent, rather than attempts to comprehensively address all aspects of management, is typical for IPAs (Lockwood 2006). They do not require any distinction to be drawn between natural and cultural values, obviating the common urge amongst Western-trained conservation planners to delineate goals and practices as either natural or cultural resource management. Innovations to the Conservation Action Planning (CAP) tools (TNC 2006) by the Kimberley Land Council enabled them to seamlessly encompass species and ecological communities as well as other very different elements that are important to Indigenous owners for their culture and identity. Their conservation targets include “*Wanjina Wunggurr* Law – our culture” “Right way fire”, “*Aamba* and other meat foods” “Bush plants”, “Rock art” and “*Mangguru* (marine turtles) and *Balguja* (dugong)”. Indigenous owners have said “By looking after these targets we know we will be looking after other things in our *Unguu* [home, country]... When we look after our targets the right way, we are also looking after other things that are important to us and to *aalmara* (whitefellas)” (WGAC 2010 p.8).

## **COUNTRY-BASED PLANNING THAT BRIDGES SCALES**

The term country-based planning refers to a process in which Indigenous peoples identify their aspirations and strategies across the whole of their traditional territories, unconstrained by the tenures that are recognised by governments (Smyth 2008). It offers a strategic framework for Indigenous people to consider how values and issues beyond the scale of a particular legal land tenure parcel should influence the boundaries adopted for an IPA, governance and management approaches. This also enables management aims and objectives to be developed for an entire traditional estate, which may then be considered in planning and management for adjacent tenures and sites of significance.

## **DIFFERENT PLANS FOR DIFFERENT PEOPLE**

Oral and visual communication modes continue to be strong amongst many Indigenous owner groups. IPA planning is increasingly tending to generate a suite of documents for different audiences and purposes, as is recommended more generally for protected areas (Thomas and Middleton 2003, Lockwood 2006). Indigenous paintings representing landscapes in plan view, which are often likened—albeit somewhat uncritically (Sutton 1998)—to maps, are being incorporated into plans alongside topographic and thematic maps. These parallel tools signify two-way management, that is the application of Indigenous ontologies and ecological knowledge with Western science knowledge, which is prominent among Indigenous owners’ aspirations in very many IPAs. For example, in the Northern Tanami IPA management plan, various paintings signifying localities and stories are superimposed onto a standard map projection of roads, named landscape features and family-based settlements in order to depict the location of IPA management zones in relation to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous reference points.

## **TAKE HOME MESSAGES**

- Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) now make up more than 33% of Australia’s Terrestrial National Reserve System.
- IPAs have distinctive socio-cultural characteristics.
- The “National Guidelines for IPA Management Plans” have been developed in collaboration with IPA managers and others.
- These Guidelines aim to help make sure that the distinctive characteristics of IPA are properly considered in planning and management.

- Indigenous people have led four important innovations in IPA management plans:
  - (1) adopting customary institutions for governance
  - (2) using strategic planning approaches that recognise inherent inter-linkages between people and place;
  - (3) adopting planning frameworks that bridge scales by considering values and issues across the whole of Indigenous territories; and
  - (4) presenting a variety of plan formats for different users of plans, with a strong emphasis on visual and spatial modes of communication.
- The Guidelines aim to help ensure more widespread adoption of these innovations.

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