



The Hon Josh Frydenberg MP
Treasurer
Parliament House
CANBERRA, ACT 2601
By email: prebudgetsubs@treasury.gov.au

Dear Treasurer,

Re: Pre-Budget Submission

Please find attached the submission of Country Needs People to the 2021-22 Budget process. Country Needs People is a national non-profit, ACNC registered charity, that works closely with a network of over 40 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partner groups to support traditional owner aspirations around sustainable land and sea management.

Our work aims to extend and secure the multiple benefits available to all Australians that stem from having well-resourced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community based organisations managing their own country.

Importantly at a time of great economic challenge to Australians of Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage alike, this work generates valued and meaningful local jobs, has strong ownership at community level, and has succeeded strongly where many other policies, programs and initiatives have failed. In a wealthy nation such as Australia we should be focused on backing practical initiatives such as these that the community has demonstrated will work, for people, nature, culture and jobs.

Please don't hesitate to be in touch if there is any further information you require in relation to this submission.

Regards,

Patrick O'Leary
Executive Director
Country Needs People





Indigenous Protected Areas and Indigenous Rangers: Protecting nature, creating jobs, transforming lives

Indigenous Protected Areas and Indigenous Ranger programs are delivering environmental, social and economic benefits for all Australians. These successful programs must be secured and expanded.

Federal Government Budget Submission 2021 – 2022

The Country Needs People campaign is an alliance of 40 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land and sea management organisations and Country Needs People Pty Ltd. Together we work to ensure Traditional Owner organisations are able to effectively care for country and culture.

For more information, please contact Patrick O’Leary, Executive Director, Country Needs People, 0417 063 917, paddy@countryneedspeople.org.au



The Australian federal budget for 2021-22 provides a significant opportunity to grow Australia's commitment to protecting our iconic landscapes and increasing jobs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Two Federal Government funded programs, the **Indigenous Ranger (Working on Country)** program and the **Indigenous Protected Area (IPA)** program, deliver essential environmental services for the benefit of all Australians. They also provide major employment and social benefits in Indigenous communities, in accordance with Federal Government national priorities. Federal Government funding for Indigenous land and sea management should be grown and further secured in the 2021-22 federal budget.

We must recognise and invest in programs that are positive and proven to work. The Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs continue to deliver outstanding results across many different contexts, particularly remote and regional Australia. We must reinforce the quality of Indigenous land and sea management government programs with funding that encompasses operational and administrative support, as well as active and skilled government support.

This submission proposes that the 2020-21 federal budget secures these successful programs into the future by:

1. Doubling the annual funding for Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs and therefore doubling Indigenous ranger jobs over the next five to seven years;
2. Establishing a long-term target of 5000 ranger positions nationally to meet the environmental needs at scale across the continent and fully realise the social and economic benefits of these programs;
3. Reinforce the quality of Indigenous land and sea management government programs with funding that encompasses operational and administrative support, and active and skilled government support.

Understanding the success of Indigenous land and sea management

Government partnership with Indigenous engagement in land management over the last 25 years has been driven by local and grassroots efforts, with strikingly successful results. Indigenous people deliver essential environmental services across Australia's landscape by controlling invasive weeds and feral animals, maintaining quarantine security, protecting threatened species, managing fire in the landscape, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and contributing to vital environmental research. A particularly salient issue is fire management following the catastrophic bushfire summer of 2019-20. The renewed discussion of Indigenous contribution to historical and contemporary fire management is welcome. However, it must be followed with practical support. The value of having secure, well trained, community run Indigenous land and sea managers in situ year round to manage a plethora of issues such as weeds, feral animals, fire, threatened species, cultural protections could not be more and more obvious. Valuing traditional knowledge and perspectives creates the conditions for more substantive collaborative relationships with local non-Indigenous agencies and stakeholders such as regional fires services, park managers, local shires and private landholders.

It has become increasingly clear that the success of Indigenous land and sea management in Australia provides great value to all Australians not only for the environment but also through positive employment, social and cultural outcomes for Indigenous Australians. These on-





ground efforts depend on the quality of local, grassroots Indigenous organisational ownership, governance and support, as well as the continuity and growth of critical federal government programs.

The Australian Government's Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs

The Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs were first implemented by the Howard coalition Federal Government through the federal Environment Department in 2007 and 1997 respectively. Funding has grown since 2013, and administrative changes have brought responsibility for these programs primarily under the coordination of the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and the Minister for Indigenous Australians. The new Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment also has an important ongoing role with multiple overlapping responsibilities regarding these programs.

As of 2020, the Indigenous Ranger program provided core funding to 127 Indigenous ranger groups around Australia. The funding is delivered pragmatically to ensure work is designed within local and regional capacity to deliver outcomes. The program's approach has to date provided sufficient flexibility and dependability to enable building skills and capacity. At least 894 full time equivalent positions currently being supported by this program¹. *There is strong demand for more.*

In 2020, Minister Wyatt committed to extending Indigenous ranger contracts by seven years to June 2028. This step was very well received by Indigenous Land and Sea Management organisations and is a significant contribution to longer-term certainty to Traditional Owner organisations administering Indigenous ranger jobs. The ministerial press release (reference) also said that this would bring ranger contracts in line with Indigenous Protected Area contracts, a highly valued parallel program.

The Indigenous Protected Area program is now a key contributor to Australia's protected areas network of the National Reserve System. There are currently 78 declared IPAs in Australia, making up over 46% of Australia's National Reserve System and covering more than 74.6 million hectares. Over the coming years, once new Indigenous Protected Areas in planning are declared, IPAs will contribute more than half of the terrestrial National Reserve System by area.

As well as enabling a strategic, coordinated, accountable framework and regional plan for environmental management, IPAs are proving a key catalyst in increasing work skills and readiness in remote Indigenous communities. IPAs also create new economic opportunities through tourism and generate real jobs where the need is greatest.

Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs promote stability and capacity for community-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, increasing their ability to take advantage of business opportunities such as terrestrial carbon management, additional fee for service contracts such as weed control, research support and mining rehabilitation, philanthropic investments and other business partnerships. The Federal Government's role in supporting that organisational capacity through Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs is vital to realising broader opportunities for jobs and income and tackling large scale environmental degradation.

¹ As of January 2021, according to National Indigenous Australians Agency website.





The majority of the programs' success stemmed from the initial program learning, which builds on existing local Indigenous efforts and creates more pragmatic, secure, and predictable core funding arrangements, including Indigenous ranger and ranger coordinator wages, as well as basic operational support. Indigenous ranger groups are started, supported and retained by local and regional Indigenous organisations while delivering various environmental and cultural heritage management services. Indigenous Protected Areas provide an avenue by which Indigenous land can be voluntarily brought into Australia's National Reserve System, while clearly establishing local land and sea management priorities and governance, as well as balancing environment, cultural management, and local economic needs.

Due to their strong environmental and Indigenous employment outcomes, health and social benefits, strong public support, and emphatic support by Indigenous communities, Indigenous rangers and IPA programs continue to attract cross-partisan support federally. Federal Government leadership and clear policy direction to strengthen support for these key programs are vital to our ability to manage Australia's environmental threats, particularly in remote outback Australia, and heavily contribute to addressing employment and social disadvantage issues amongst Indigenous Australians.

Growing success

Doubling funding for Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs over the next five years will assist in on-ground environmental management to reach areas currently unmanaged. It will also underpin a long-term, secure government vision of Indigenous partnerships for environmental protection and increased Indigenous employment. Doubling ranger funding should be coupled with a long-term commitment to secure funding to meet the vast scale of the Australian environment, as well as program demand from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Future opportunities for new Indigenous Protected Areas and Indigenous ranger teams continue to grow. This growth is attributed to land claims in progress, growing awareness of these programs, the capacity of local Indigenous organisations that have not yet bid for projects, recognition of IPAs and ranger work as vital economic pathways in many communities, and as a practical way to strengthen local governance. The projected total area of Indigenous Protected Areas (declared and currently in planning) will be larger in size than New South Wales and complex in the diversity of ecosystems it supports. If this area is to be managed effectively, a long-term target in the order of 5000², Indigenous rangers should be a goal.

Current budget allocations do not meet the current demand for Indigenous ranger jobs. During the 2016 – 2017 financial year, the Coalition government committed \$15 million to new Indigenous Protected Areas, and since 2018, the Government has announced 12 more proposed Indigenous Protected Areas with this funding. Two of these areas declared operational in 2020 alone cover over 7 million hectares. Ten further IPAs have been allocated planning funding from that outlay, and are projected to cover over 23 million hectares. When completed, if adequately funded, this expansion is significant on a global scale for both its

² 5000 rangers across Australia's existing Indigenous Protected Area estate of 67.2million ha would amount to just one ranger per 13,400ha.

The current projected IPA estate alone is on track to reach 100million ha by 2021 and the Indigenous estate held in freehold title or exclusive possession native title covers around 20% of Australia's land mass and growing.





environmental benefits and its recognition of Indigenous-led conservation. However, more than 30 Traditional Owner groups were unsuccessful in applying for a Indigenous Protected Area during this process because of limited government funding. It's clear that further investments in existing, developing and potential Indigenous Protected Areas will provide rapid and strong economic, social and environmental returns.

To encompass Traditional Owners' growing aspirations to protect natural and cultural values across vast land and sea areas through the Indigenous Protected Area and Indigenous Ranger programs, the federal government must increase funding accordingly.

Securing certainty

Long-term funding, with accountability to various stakeholders, is vital to sustaining local capacity and environmental, social and economic benefits. Long term contracts send a critical signal about stability and political commitment to Indigenous land and sea management. Funding certainty encourages retention of good staff, forward planning and increased capacity to strengthen governance. It also sends an unambiguous signal that Australia values Indigenous land and sea management work and its potential. That is why the seven year extension announced in March 2020 was so well received by the Indigenous Land and Sea management sector.

Establishing a 10-15 year or longer horizon for funding would give potential partners and donors a strong signal that these programs are durable, supported by Government and fundamental to long-term environmental management. Contract arrangements for these programs should be brought in line with long-term funding contracts such as Environmental Stewardship Agreements with farmers, currently based around contracts of up to 15 years, subject to regular review and the satisfactory meeting of management criteria.

Reinforcing quality

Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas have real world outcomes to deliver for local communities and the wider public. Land and sea management requires skills, training and risk mitigation. The work on Indigenous Protected Areas carried out by Indigenous rangers includes shooting feral animals out of helicopters and from the ground, spraying chemicals on invasive weeds, large scale fire management, scientific monitoring and research, supporting fisheries regulations at sea, and much more. Often the work is delivered in very remote areas with limited infrastructure. These activities require engaged support, careful risk management and a clear understanding of the land and sea management task, both in the planning and implementation. To ensure the best ongoing future and quality support for these programs, they must receive comprehensive contract management and support from Federal Government departments, and funding allocation for both the department and resources that support land management work, for example, equipment and training.

The shift of many Indigenous programs to a more centralised administration structure initially under the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and then the National Indigenous Australians Agency in 2014 has had the unintentional consequence of reducing clarity, departmental expertise and informed program support in delivery. This has contributed to decreasing the quality and understanding of the Australian Government's ongoing relationship to Indigenous land and sea management and particularly the Indigenous Ranger and Indigenous Protected Areas programs.





There must be much better alignment and coordination with the Department of Environment (currently Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment) to ensure the elements that have made the programs successful do not continue to be unintentionally degraded due to the new administrative arrangements. The close integration of environment and cultural management, proactive, collaborative, technically informed and supporting contract management by government agencies well attuned to practical outcomes is not incidental to these programs' unprecedented success. Rather, it is fundamental.

It is strongly recommended that dedicated funding programs for both Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas are established with 'ongoing' status in the federal budget and clearly delineated in the budget papers due to the specialised and technical nature of this work and the need for carefully tailored management and support.

Proven outcomes for community, economy and natural heritage

This year marks fourteen years since the formation of the 'Closing the Gap' campaign to address Indigenous disadvantage, and twelve years since the COAG National Indigenous Reform Agreement set targets in key measures for addressing Indigenous disadvantage, covering improved life expectancy, child mortality, education and employment. The Closing the Gap Report from 2019 found the Government was failing to meet five of the seven CTG targets, but the report pointed to Indigenous ranger jobs and Indigenous Protected Areas as Australian Government investment supporting local solutions.

During 2020 the CTG targets have been reviewed and reset, but the Indigenous ranger and Indigenous Protected Area programs remain highly relevant to these reviewed goals. In particular, target 15 relating to 15% increase in legal rights and interests in sea and land by 2030. If these targets are to be fully realised, then the government must make investments in functional community based structures to manage those areas.

The Productivity Commission has repeatedly pointed to the benefits of realising these targets. In 2015, the Chair of the Productivity Commission called on the Australian Government to refocus on "what works" particularly in the delivery of Indigenous employment given the multiple benefits jobs deliver. In 2014, the Productivity Commission's 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage - Key Indicators' report highlighted the success of Indigenous ranger positions in creating "real jobs" particularly in remote areas where many other programs had struggled to deliver. In December 2015, the Commission reiterated the need to understand and extend such programs that work. Again, in 2016, the Productivity Commission highlighted both the Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs as outstanding successes in their latest 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage – Key Indicators' report, which was otherwise damning of the many programs that could demonstrate no clear outcomes. This report stated that for both the Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs:

"For government, the value created from the employment outcomes include low cost land management as well as skills development and increased engagement in the work force, reduced income support payments and increased income tax, less violence and safer communities."

A review conducted by Social Ventures Australia for the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet published in 2016 reported a social return on investment of up to **\$3.40** for every dollar spent in Indigenous Protected Areas, with those areas employing Indigenous rangers demonstrating even higher returns. A review by Allens Consulting found the true costs of





the *Working on Country* program were at least 17-23% less than book costs when increased taxation revenue and decreased welfare payments were taken into account.

Research undertaken over five years by Social Ventures Australia into the social return on investment of land management in a group of Aboriginal communities in Western Australia reported significant avoided costs to Government, particularly through reduced interactions with the justice system, due to the engagement of Aboriginal individuals and communities in 'on country' Indigenous ranger and land management programs. Including **15,000 less individual nights in prison over five years across several communities.**

Women make up approximately 36% of Indigenous rangers. Flexible arrangements mean that women can fulfil family and community responsibilities while working. Job retention is high, with a retention rate of 84% for full-time and part-time employees. In 2014-15, 65% of projects undertook commercial activities such as fee for service environmental management.

Given the very successful operation of Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs to date, the ongoing strong support from Indigenous groups for their continuation and the environmental demand for more jobs, there is a compelling case for their expansion in the upcoming budget. Both programs need long-term funding certainty and increases in this budget to allow the sector to continue to strengthen.





Recommendations:

The 2021-22 federal budget announcement is a clear opportunity to highlight the Australian Government's practical commitment to generating Indigenous jobs and addressing Australia's pressing environmental needs by supporting increased and more secure funding for Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas. It also remains a key means of adding economic stimulus and job creation to regions and sections of Australian society that are clearly in need.

This submission proposes:

- 1. A commitment by the Federal Government to double the funding and therefore jobs supported by the Working on Country Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas programs over the next five years; that is, establish a target of at least 1660 full time equivalent supported ranger positions over the next five years. This will constitute a gradual increase of funding up to an effective doubling of existing current annual funding of approximately \$100 million per annum for Indigenous rangers and \$22 million per annum for Indigenous Protected Areas by 2026.**
- 2. The establishment of a long-term target of 5000 full time equivalent dedicated Indigenous ranger jobs nationally, demonstrating the Government's real commitment, alongside state governments and Indigenous organisations. This will address issues of social and economic disadvantage among Indigenous Australians and address Australia's large-scale environmental management needs.**
- 3. Reinforce the quality of Indigenous land and sea management government programs with funding that encompasses operational and administrative support, and active and skilled government departmental support with increased oversight and support from the Department of Environment.**





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