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Submission on the Indigenous Protected Areas

Program Review

WWF-Australia March 2006

The cost-effectiveness of IPAP, and effective levels of investment needed to improve the IPA program

There is no doubt that IPAs provide a very cost-effective way of managing large areas of Aboriginal-owned lands in the rangelands. The 13.8 million hectares currently included within the 19 declared IPAs are costing the federal government about $2.5 million dollars per year. This represents a tiny level of investment compared to the operating budget for one of our best-resourced World Heritage Areas – Kakadu National Park – which has an annual operating budget of around $12 million dollars (Szarbo and Smyth 2003).

In terms of value for investment, Indigenous lands (particularly in rangelands areas) are important refuges for biodiversity, and often retain species and ecosystems that have been lost or degraded in more productive agricultural landscapes. For example, Aboriginal lands in the Tanami, Great Sandy, Gibson and Simpson/Strzlecki Desert bioregions now support most of the remaining known populations of several nationally-listed threatened species such as ampurta, bilby, great desert skink, marsupial mole and mulgara (eg Central Land Council 2005), and in the NT the majority of nationally significant shorebirds sites are on Indigenous-owned lands (Northern Territory Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts 2006).

IPAs are also contributing significantly toward attaining CAR goals under the NRS program:

> *The majority of IPAP projects are in regions where there have been no acquisitions under the NRSP. Seven projects are within IBRA regions of High priority for the National Reserve System (NRS), and sixteen projects occur in regions where protected areas cover less than 10% of the area. The Central Ranges IBRA region, where two projects are occurring, has no existing protected areas for conservation and Dampierland and Tanami IBRA regions, each with one IPA project, have less than 1% included within protected areas.*
> (Centre for Environmental Management, 1999)

The NRS is well recognized as one of the most cost-effective means to protect biodiversity. Major progress has been made to establish the terrestrial NRS over the past 13 years: between 1991 and 2004, over 31 million hectares have been added, this includes the IPAP. However, the National land and Water Audit found that approximately half of Australia's bioregions are of high priority to consolidate the National Reserve System and that in many bioregions the opportunity for a fully representative system is being lost through the extent of development (Sattler & Creighton 2002). Additions to the NRS through the IPAP need to consider and prioritise strategic locations given the range of social, cultural and ecological values and the range of threats to those values. Climate change is also expected to have large impacts on biodiversity values, and there is an urgent need for the IPAP to incorporate considerations of climate change when planning additions to the NRS through the IPAP.

However, conservation cannot be achieved by reservation alone – areas must be sufficiently resourced for effective management. The cost effectiveness of investing in managing relatively intact ecosystems has been borne out in a recent report (Commonwealth of Australia 2005) that has shown that it is *seven times* more cost effective to conserve intact ecosystems rather than attempting to re-establish them after they have been cleared or significantly degraded. The principle of investing in maintaining intact systems rather than investing heavily in repairing degraded systems is at the heart of the recommendations of the government report *Sustaining our Natural Systems and Biodiversity* (PMSEIC 2002). However, this fundamental principal is not being enacted, as evidenced by the current skewing of investment of NHT funds into land and water remediation and rehabilitation compared to management of the NRS (WCPA 2006).

The current level of investment in the IPAP falls far short of the level needed to effectively manage fire, weeds and feral animal threats facing biodiversity across the current network of IPAs. In 2005, declared IPAs received on average $178,000 per annum (DEH website data), which is clearly insufficient for all operational needs. For example, Ngaanyatjarra Lands IPA receives on average $212,000 per annum through the IPAP to manage over 9.8 million hectares of country.

In order to support the necessary IPA management staff, wages for traditional owner involvement in management activities, vehicles, field equipment and general operational costs in the rangelands (where areas under management are very large, remote from mainstream services, and often include inaccessible areas) IPA coordinators generally need to expend considerable effort and time in trying to cobble together sufficient funding from a wide variety of sources to augment the basic IPAP funding levels. The administration necessary to service these various funding arrangements eats into the valuable time of IPA staff needed to dedicate to on-ground management effort on their protected areas.

Investing in ongoing conservation management of Indigenous lands aligns with one of the key priorities identified by the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) in 2002 to conserve the remaining biodiversity through consolidation of the NRS (Possingham *et al.* 2002). The report *Setting Biodiversity Priorities* found that consolidating the NRS is one of the most cost-effective investments needed to conserve the country's remaining biodiversity, and that an investment of $350 million dollars would achieve 80% protection of the full range of regional ecosystems and save 14,700 native species (Possingham *et al.* 2002).

As well as substantially increasing the total annual budget of the IPAP (ideally increasing it five-fold to around $30 million dollars) it is also necessary to address the issue of long term security of funding available through this program. The field of NRM project development is littered with well-intentioned attempts to build capacity and involvement of Indigenous groups in managing country, however many of these programs have failed to deliver either conservation or capacity building outcomes because funding programs (and consequently funding priorities) change regularly, and are only available to support very short term projects.

State and territory agencies are increasingly contributing resources and support to IPAs, but this has been sporadic and short-term. To date, therefore, it is only the IPA owners and managers who have been able to make the type of long-term commitments that effective protected area management requires.
(Szarbo and Smyth 2003)

Ideally IPA funding contracts would be changed from their current annual/biennial cycle to a five-year funding cycle to enable Indigenous organisations to plan IPA management (and employment) programs effectively.

IPAP management effectiveness and the need to secure dedicated natural and cultural resource employment funding for Indigenous participants

IPA management structures vary greatly, but the most effective arrangements involve a dedicated natural or cultural resource management organization which supports the aspirations of traditional owners and provides land management services (Szarbo and Smyth 2003) and infrastructure support to enable traditional owners to effectively realize those aspirations. IPAs that rely on buying-in external expertise to guide management and undertake on-ground projects are less likely to build program ownership and capacity within traditional owner groups (Szarbo and Smyth 2003).

Funding support for Indigenous land management agencies is increasingly under threat since the abolition of ATSIC, and is often patched together from a variety of different government and non-government sources, few of which have overlapping objectives or reporting requirements. The IPAP needs to seriously review funding requirements for basic management support for IPAs and invest sufficient funds to enable the appropriate level of staffing and infrastructure support to allow an effective on-ground management and capacity building program to be developed within each IPA.

The key to the success of IPAs is strong and ongoing involvement of traditional owners in all aspects of planning and implementing land management programs. Currently, most, if not all, indigenous land management programs around Australia rely on basic short-term employment funding through the Community Development and Employment Program (CDEP) with "top-up" funds provided through a variety of government and non-government sources (NRETA 2006). This reliance on what is essentially a welfare-based program to support land management employment opportunities for indigenous people is woeful, and seriously restricts the IPAP from building up a network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people skilled in two-way (traditional and contemporary) land management. Allocating additional resources to increase the standard of management across the IPAP should benefit both biodiversity and people.

If we were to consider this issue in purely economic terms, the cost of dedicating long-term funding to an Indigenous people's cultural and natural resource management employment program on country would be substantially cheaper than having to buy in external expertise and fly them in to (often) remote areas to undertake the necessary fire, feral and weed management activities needed to reduce the ongoing threats to biodiversity across the indigenous estate.

Depopulation of Indigenous lands is a significant emerging NRM issue around the world and in Australia (M. Stafford-Smith *pers. comm.* 2005; S. Garnett *pers. comm.* 2005) and is compounded by the extremely limited employment opportunities (other than work-for-the-dole schemes) on remote Indigenous lands. The absence of people on country has serious ramifications for resourcing the ongoing threat abatement activities required just to "hold the line" on species loss and ecosystem degradation.

Investment in a dedicated employment program for Indigenous people to undertake necessary threat abatement activities where they align with cultural aspirations (which they do in many cases around fire management and species recovery efforts) is a much cheaper option than having to invest in the future in contracting in NRM services for remediating biodiversity losses due to the proliferation of detrimental wildfire regimes and burgeoning feral herbivore, predator and invasive plant populations on Indigenous lands.

The CEPANCRM (Contract Employment Program for Aboriginals in Natural and Cultural Resource Management) model which operated for a decade up until 1997 promoted a whole-of-government approach to employment, education and social outcomes and successfully delivered significant employment opportunities for the 8,900 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed across 932 projects over the life of the program (Orchard 2000).

CEPANCRM attempted to introduce equity in employment, training and income opportunities for Indigenous people and reduce their welfare dependence whilst delivering much-needed land management outcomes (Orchard 2000). Although the program was reviewed favourably, this was not sufficient to enable the program to retain funding.

Since the demise of CEPANCRM there are few options to build long-term Indigenous employment opportunities in natural or cultural resource management, and there are few Indigenous people employed in permanent NRM positions in federal, state, or local government agencies, or within Indigenous Land Councils or Proscribed Bodies Corporate. Within most declared IPAs there only at most one or two

Indigenous people employed through IPA funding, and the bulk of the indigenous workforce relies on CDEP and "top up" funding.

It is critical that the Australian government (as part of this Review) gives serious consideration to reinstating a dedicated Indigenous cultural and natural resource management program (such as CEPANCRM) that has sufficient long-term funding and whole-of-government support to allow for the development of a culturally acceptable employment program that delivers sound training, employment and career development opportunities for Indigenous participants.

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Published March 2006 by WWF-Australia.

Cover image: Early morning at Yunpu, Paruku IPA © Tanya Vernes
World Wide Fund for Nature ABN: 57 001 594 074