

Country Needs People: mapping and minding shared lands

They lit fires to burn out the animals for tucker mate, no other reason, and somehow or other the 'goodies' have explained that away as caring for the environment instead of permanently altering the environment. People, usually from the city or some exalted place, bemoan the state of the so called 'camps,' and wring their hands but in actual fact that is how these people lived as hunter gatherers for they ate a section of the country out, befouled it, and moved on to continue the cycle for they knew no better and in fact had to do that to scratch an existence. Give a bush aboriginal the choice of a house or an open shed and he will pick the open shed every time.

As an opening quote for an essay about Indigenous ecological knowledge, this was too good to pass up. The lapse into biblical cadences as the writer hits his stride, the seamless segues, the sweeping non sequitur about open sheds ... After all the advocacy documents and academic essays I've been reading, to encounter a comment so bracingly, unashamedly racist is a salutary reminder of the spectrum of attitudes I'm writing into. The scepticism about Indigenous people 'caring for the environment' is shared by many who would not put their views so robustly.

The quote comes from a thread of online comments, posted in response to an article in *The Australian* about a carbon-credit arrangement between the North Kimberley Fire Abatement Project and Qantas. Workers employed through the federal government's Indigenous Rangers programs carry out managed patch burns during the cool weather to pre-empt the fierce hot-season fires that burn vast tracts of country, destroy wildlife and habitat, and generate carbon emissions. The emissions created by the low-intensity fires are subtracted from the estimated emissions of uncontrolled wildfires, a baseline figure established over several fire cycles where no managed burns have occurred. The difference constitutes the carbon credits. High-emitting businesses can voluntarily purchase these credits to offset against their own emissions. The

money feeds back into the Indigenous Rangers program that carries out the burning .

Most of the comments that followed the *Australian* article targeted the notion that corporations could purchase credits that allowed them to continue to pollute; several said that climate change was a furphy so the whole thing was a waste of money; and one suggested that the young Indigenous ranger featured should get a real job. Others claimed that bushfires in the hot season were the norm, and that burning in the cool weather was interfering with nature:

Burning in winter is not the same as what used to happen naturally — hot large fires in summer. It is obvious why we prefer the manageable winter burns but that is not how nature used to do it. So already we are ‘messing with nature’ so at least admit it and stop fussing when we release CO₂.

Whatever the origins and intentions of traditional burning practices, the ecosystems that early white settlers encountered were a result of many thousands of years of deliberate burning. And while nature no doubt played its part in generating fierce summer bushfires, 50 years of aerial imagery documenting fire activity near the community of Parnngurr, in WA’s Western Desert region, illustrates the difference between ‘natural’ and man-made fire. The Martu people continued to live a traditional desert lifestyle until the 1960s, and returned to the desert in the early 1980s when the land rights movement established communities in their homelands. Aerial imagery suggests that the interim two decades, during which regular burning did not occur and fires were generated by lightning, was a period of fierce hot-season wildfire. While this is evidence of what happens when the region is left to ‘nature’, it also shows that the Martu’s patch-burning strategy was a deliberate and effective way of avoiding such fires, and that humans had probably been interfering with nature since they invented tools and language.

Growing recognition that the Australian ecological landscape is a product of human-generated fire has provoked a shift in thinking, exemplified by Gareth Catt, the fire management officer working with the Martu. He is of the opinion that ‘an appropriate human-driven fire regime is natural, and a wildfire regime should be viewed as feral’.

In late March 2012, I was based in Parnngurr while gathering material for an exhibition called *We Don’t Need a Map* — a collaboration between Martu artists, the Martumili Artists East

Pilbara Art Centre in Newman and the Fremantle Arts Centre, and bankrolled by BHP. The object of the exhibition was to show the many dimensions of Martu culture, both contemporary and traditional. My job was to research the paintings included in the show, collecting as much information about their content as possible. Equipped with maps (the irony wasn't lost on me), a Martu wordlist, and photographs of the paintings and the artists who had painted them, I embarked on what would become an ecological treasure hunt.

This was my second trip into Martu country. Most of the artists involved with the exhibition lived in the remote communities of Parnngurr, Punmu and Kunawarritji, and many of them belonged to the generation that had grown up in the desert. Their country, east of the Pilbara, overlaps the Great Sandy, Little Sandy and Gibson deserts, and occupies a substantial section of the zone labelled 'useless' on a map drawn in 1926 to illustrate Australia's regions of habitability and opportunity.

Our trip from Parnngurr to Punmu, to talk to artists, had been cancelled because of rain. The Parnngurr Indigenous Rangers team was heading to the Canning Stock Route to do some controlled burning, so I decided to accompany them some of the way, along with the Martumili field officer, Carly, and three Martu women. The youngest, Thelma Bidu, acted as an interpreter for the two senior women, Kumpaya Girgirba and Jakayu Biljabu, who had been adults by the time they moved from the deep desert to Jigalong mission in 1963. Within 20 years Kumpaya and Jakayu were back in their home country as a result of the homelands movement. Their knowledge and authority were peerless, and to go out on country with them was the kind of serendipitous opportunity you can't plan for.

We convoyed with the ranger team as far as Warntili, a magnificent red claypan near the Canning Stock Route, full of water after the recent rains. The rangers continued on, but the Martu ladies, Carly, and I camped at Warntili for several days. It had been a good wet season, and the country was a bountiful mosaic of old and new growth. Anywhere that the spinifex was mature enough to burn, the old ladies set fire to it, revealing the burrows of *parnajarrpa* (sand goannas), a food staple in the traditional days and still a significant addition to their diet. In a single afternoon the three women caught and killed two dozen reptiles, some of which they ate the same evening. The rest they singed, eviscerated and put into the car-fridge to take back for family. 'On the way home we'll show you a really good hunting place,' they told us. I wondered what sort of country could be better than where we were.

The really good hunting place, recently burned by the rangers, looked like the remnants of a scorched earth policy. Incinerated wattles, a few dusty bloodwoods throwing a thin shade, the red sandy soil coated with fine black ash in which the bright orange mounds of *parnajarrpa* burrows stood out like signposts. We had barely pulled over before the women were out of the vehicles and scurrying across the burned ground. Kumpaya and Jakayu, well into their 70s, were soon specks in the distance. A couple of hours later they were back with half a dozen reptiles each. They showed us how to remove the intestines by squeezing them out through the anus. Carly acquitted herself well, but I was content to be an interested bystander.

Several of the paintings I researched for *We Don't Need a Map* referred directly to fire, depicting country patterned with fire mosaics. When I pursued this thread, a sophisticated understanding of burning practices emerged. The different stages of burning and growth had specific names: the newly burned ground so beloved of the old ladies was called *nyurnma*; the period when plants were fruiting and seeding was *nyukura*; *manguu* was when spinifex was ready to burn again; and *kunarka* was when the old-growth spinifex had taken over, eliminating diversity and setting up the conditions for destructive bushfires.

The Martu had worked for years with American anthropologists Doug Bird and Rebecca Bliege Bird, who had been researching the impact of anthropogenic burning, and it was apparent that the extended conversation about fire had found its way into the Martu repertoire of painting country. Not only did paintings show country 'cleaned' by fire, interspersed with new and established vegetation, they also showed specific types of vegetation: solanums and acacias, eucalypts and grevilleas, and seed-bearing grasses. My main informant was Nola Taylor, one of those indispensable interpreters who thrives on the stimulation of working with white people. Having worked closely with the Birds, Nola was used to communicating the finer points of burning practices.

This experience of researching Martu paintings led me to a similar interrogation of *Yarrkalpa* (Hunting Ground), a painting purchased by the National Museum of Australia and a key work in its exhibition *Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters*. The 5 x 3 metre painting was the centrepiece of a collaboration between eight Martu women, artist Lynette Wallworth and singer Anohni, formerly known as Antony Hegarty. Wallworth used overhead time-lapse photography to film

the making of the painting, and the immersive multi-screen result shows the painters materialising, disappearing and reappearing as they create the landscape, dot by dot, on the canvas, to the haunting accompaniment of Anohni's unique voice.

The artists paint what they know and what they do: burning country, tracking reptiles, gathering plant food. The Seven Sisters, known as *Minyipuru*, flit across the western side of the painting, pursued by an ancestral stalker called Yurla, intent on capturing the sisters for sex. Their presence is just one strand in the fabric of Martu daily life. They are a seasonal constellation, their appearance an indication that the country is dry and care must be taken with burning. The community of Parnngurr is represented by a tidy grid near the centre of the painting, with the sports oval to the north. Two rivers anchor the composition and orientate the landforms. The painting is a topographic replica of the landscape around Parnngurr: ranges and dunes and sand plains, creeks and rock holes and soakwaters. Each artist painted a section of the canvas from her own embodied knowledge, describing places, memories, ancestors, seasons, resources, burning, hunting, living.

Yarrkalpa is an encyclopaedia of seasons, burning practices, and resources. It is also a cross-cultural document influenced by many years of interaction between the Martu and ecologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, linguists, land-management experts, artists, art projects, Indigenous Rangers programs and cultural maintenance projects.

During my study of *Yarrkalpa*, Nola interpreted for Kumpaya, who had painted strips of alternating colour to indicate sand dunes and swales, and the plants that grow on them. Nola, an artist herself, specialises in painting fire scars, drawing on the satellite imagery she is familiar with through working with the American anthropologists. On *Yarrkalpa*, she painted the mosaic patterning of freshly burned country, old and new growth, and the variety of food plants that are dependent on fire. 'Nyurnma,' she said, pointing to blackened patches of canvas. 'Good for *parnajarrpa*,' Kumpaya said. The other fire-painter, Ngamaru Bidu, was less forthcoming. 'Pretty flowers,' she said, when I pointed to a multicoloured section, pretty flowers being the generic term for plants that have no specific use. The area she painted writhes with energy, like flames rippling across the landscape. After several days of consultation my reproduction of the painting was annotated with plant names: where they grow, how they are used, what birds and animals they attract, whether they are eaten by camels or threatened by buffel grass.

Among the maps I took with me on my first visits to Martu country was a reproduction of what came to be called the Waterhole map, originally drawn on three doors in Punmu in 1987, when Sue Davenport was recording cultural material with the Martu. She facilitated an exercise in collective Martu memory, in which the names and locations of nearly 600 waterholes were recalled through songs and marked on the hand drawn map. When compared to the waterholes found during subsequent aerial and GPS surveys, the locations of the original waterholes proved remarkably accurate.

The paintings I was researching for *We Don't Need a Map* were full of named sites, so it was a natural step for me to locate them on the Waterhole map. Along with fire, the tracks and activities of the ancestors, the seasonal routes people travelled in the *pujiman* (bushman) days, and edible plants and animals, the paintings made references to underground streams that came to the surface after heavy rain, and places where fresh water sprang out of salt lakes. Another feature was the convergence of subterranean flows to a waterhole or soakage. Intrigued by the apparent knowledge people had of underground streams, I applied a satellite elevational mapping program to the area covered by the Waterhole map. That an ancient river, which formed the extant Percival Lakes system, lined up with the subterranean drainage channels was no surprise, but so did all the mapped waterholes, including the wells of the Canning Stock Route, and the locations where people said underground flows came to the surface. The Martu know the waterways in their country, both above ground and below.

In 2014 a group of nine Martu elders, including two senior men and several of the women who painted *Yarrkalpa*, produced a painting called *Kulyu*, now housed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Another 5 x 3 metre canvas, *Kulyu* encompasses the entire Martu determination, an area of approximately 136,000 square kilometres. It was painted in response to fears that the tailings from uranium mining would pollute the underground water system, and shows the interrelationship between the subterranean waterways and the ecosystems that they support. To paint *Kulyu*, brothers Muuki and Waka Taylor first laid in the underground flows, which were then layered over with mud-coloured paint to represent the earth above the aqueducts. On top of this the artists painted the topographic features of the country, showing how the underground streams feed the surface waters that support the ecosystems on which the Martu depend.

Paintings like *Yarrkalpa* and *Kulyu* reflect the evolving conversation between the Martu and the organisations and individuals who have aspirations for, and designs on, their culture and country. As proof of knowledge is required, it is provided in ever more sophisticated ways, and it seems only fair that non-Indigenous Australians try to develop an equal sophistication in interpreting that proof.

The Martu have retained considerable agency in managing their affairs through two key organisations: Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa (KJ), which focuses on land, law and culture; and Martumili, which focuses on art. Both organisations were established at the behest of senior Martu custodians, and both operate on a model in which the administration and management are predominantly non-Indigenous while the advisory board and on-ground expertise are Martu.

KJ first came across my radar during one of my stints as an interim co-ordinator of the Paruku Indigenous Protected Area, in the south-east Kimberley region. I found that the best material about desert-based Indigenous programs had KJ's fingerprints all over it. The more I learned about KJ, the more it seemed a model of an Indigenous organisation delivering what it had set out to do.

Although formally established in 2005, KJ had its origins during the resettlement of the Martu homelands in the mid 1980s. Relationships forged between Martu people and particular whitefellas during that time persist to this day, and these have provided the foundation of mutual trust, respect and communication that are the hallmarks of KJ's success. Although the designation of Martu country as 'useless' contributed to it being used for rocket testing in the 1960s, this also meant that it has remained more or less pristine desert, apart from some mining activity. When the Martu returned to their homelands they had retained a strong sense of cultural identity, and an extensive traditional knowledge of culture and country. But they knew that their future depended on forming partnerships that valued both whitefella and Martu skills and experience.

The serendipitous combination of people of intelligence, vision, trust and skill produced an organisational model for KJ that is grounded in Martu culture, adaptive to new ideas and technologies, and committed to cross-cultural partnerships. The Martu directors and advisers are consistently engaged in developing programs and projects, and KJ continues to attract high-functioning non-Indigenous staff, rather than the missionary/mercenary/misfit variety. Effective, professional people stay with the organisation, corporate knowledge doesn't get lost, and long-

term partnerships are maintained.

One of those partnerships, providing economic dividends to the Martu and social and cultural dividends to the company, is with BHP. The mining giant contributes significantly to Martu projects and to the maintenance of KJ, which means that the organisation is not dependent on government funding to the same degree as many Indigenous support organisations. The Nature Conservancy, a US-based environmental organisation, is another major partner, and the other support bodies listed in KJ's newsletters indicate that it has developed effective advocacy and communication skills, and that keeping an Indigenous organisation functioning at optimum level is expensive and complex.

I'm aware that by writing at length about the Martu I risk reinforcing 'the non-Indigenous Imaginary', a concept attributed to Indigenous academic Larissa Behrendt, referring to the stereotype held by many white Australians that Indigenous people are close to 'nature'. But the Martu are proof that it's possible to live in, and maintain, their country. They exemplify how it can be done, with partnerships and complementary knowledge systems. Variations on this theme are being played out all over Australia.

In Australia, most of the population — including most of the Indigenous population — lives in major cities and large regional town. This leaves the practical husbandry of the continent to the handful of people who occupy the rest of it. How farming and grazing lands are managed is outside the scope of this essay. The rest, whether desert ecosystems, marginal pastoral country, coastal, savannah or riparian systems, Indigenous Protected Areas, Aboriginal determinations, NGO conservation holdings, unallocated Crown land, state forests or national parks, needs to be managed for water, fire, ferals, endangered species and weeds. The Indigenous Rangers program has emerged to address that need.

The Indigenous Rangers program evolved in an ad hoc fashion. It began with community-based teams such as Arnhem Land's Djelk Rangers, which were established in the early 1990s to deal with a growing feral pig problem. The Djelk Rangers ('djelk' is a Gurrgoni word that means 'land' or 'caring for land') soon became the on-ground workforce for all environmental management issues in the surrounding Indigenous landholdings. The team's role expanded to include the management of invasive weeds, fire and water buffalo. Funding came from various sources and was underpinned by the federal government's Community Development

Employment Projects (CDEP) program, one of many attempts to create a culture of paid employment to replace the dole. By the end of the '90s the Djelk Rangers were working with a variety of scientists, and developing a suite of skills specific to tropical savannah management and the evolving environmental challenges.

As Indigenous Rangers projects gained traction, so did the establishment of Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs), a Howard government program implemented in 1997 to extend the holdings of the National Reserve System, and to assist and influence the management of Aboriginal land. Land rights, native title and the homelands movement had resulted in large tracts of land coming under Indigenous jurisdiction. The types of tenure varied from pastoral leases, which already carried certain conditions, to Crown land and near-pristine desert, and the Indigenous custodians often had neither the resources nor the expertise to deal with the economic and environmental challenges that confronted them. In the advent of Howard's program for land to qualify as an IPA, traditional owners had to commit to managing their country according to standards stipulated by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. While some Indigenous groups were uneasy about adopting these externally enforced practices, in spite of the substantial funding that would come with them, others took them up.

Indigenous Rangers were a natural adjunct to the IPAs, and both programs snowballed. CDEP wages paid for the ranger teams until the Working on Country (WoC) program was established in 2007. (As you can gather, we are in the acronym zone.) WoC provided dedicated federal funding for the employment of rangers, and established the status of Indigenous Ranger as a professional occupation, with training in literacy and numeracy, first aid, data collection, firearms, fencing, welding, fire management, chainsaws, and pumps. In 2017, when this essay was originally published, WoC supported 109 Indigenous Rangers programs across Australia, providing about 2,500 full-time, part-time and casual positions each year.

The Martu and the Indigenous Rangers program were made for each other. KJ's integrated social, cultural, environmental and economic objectives allowed for immediate adoption of the program when it was formalised. From a single team in 2009, KJ now runs seven — including three teams of women rangers — out of Parnngurr, Punmu, Kunawarritji and Jigalong, employing approximately 300 people. The knowledge of elders informs every project, and the Junior Rangers program is an integral part of the school system.

Martu rangers, advised by their elders and assisted by professionals in various fields,

survey and look after waterholes and other cultural sites, cull camels and bait cats, monitor the status of threatened species (such as bilbies, black-flanked rock wallabies, great desert skinks) and manage habitat, predominately by reinstating 'right-way' fire across the entire Martu lands.

The ranger program, in partnership with land management and conservation agencies, has mobilised an Indigenous workforce with the potential to develop a unique suite of skills that are specific to particular ecosystems and target the threats to those ecosystems. Often feral animals are not perceived as a threat, especially when they have been incorporated into the local diet (as is the case with cats, camels and water buffaloes). Although people are sanguine about killing animals to eat, the wholesale culling of a food resource is often resisted. It is only through consultation and the presentation of evidence that the impacts of ferals are accepted as long-term threats to country and culture.

Fire management emerges as central to the maintenance of healthy ecosystems in large parts of Australia, whether to promote the growth of fire-dependent plants and maintain diversity and habitat in the spinifex country, or to limit hot-season bushfires and protect fire-sensitive species in the Top End. People no longer walk the country as they used to do, and the old burning methods tend to be restricted to areas within easy reach of communities or along roads. The fire strategies implemented by Indigenous rangers require an integrated approach that draws on satellite technology and fire-scar mapping, along with Indigenous knowledge, and the use of four-wheel drives and helicopters to reach remoter areas.

Country Needs People, a not-for-profit advocacy alliance now comprising more than 40 frontline Indigenous land and sea management groups, published a report in 2016 identifying key conservation work being carried out by Indigenous rangers which included fire-reduction strategies, removing buffel grass, protecting habitats for threatened species, and managing feral animals, weeds, toads and other invasive species. It's not a seamless story of success, of course. Some years back, members of a ranger team were implicated in the sale of contraband dugong and turtle meat on the local black market — as traditional custodians they could hunt the protected species. It was an example of entrepreneurial resourcefulness, but it was also illegal, given the endangered status of the dugong. And with each Indigenous Rangers project there are always personalities and politics to contend with: particular families may dominate the ranger teams and IPA positions, causing resentment and friction; powerful individuals stall progress by holding on to jobs they don't fulfil; the competing demands of family, football and funerals can

make it difficult to pin down the workforce. The rangers occupy a complicated position: flagged as the great Indigenous employment success story, they are still subject to the embedded responsibilities of family and culture as well as the pressure to meet Western expectations .

As anthropology professor Jon Altman says in his contribution to a collection of essays, *Unstable Relations: Indigenous People and Environmentalism in Contemporary Australia*, ‘They [rangers] need to constantly mediate these two perspectives while being suitably deferential to more senior landowners, their parents and immediate family.’ Altman lays out the challenges and contradictions of managing the exploding population of water buffalo in the Djelk IPA. Comprising ten clan estates, the IPA covers approximately 1,000 square kilometres, extending from the coastal flood plains and tidal river margins to the Arnhem Land plateau. It is an area of great biodiversity and high conservation value. By agreeing to have their lands declared an IPA in 2009, the Kuninjku traditional owners had committed to managing their country for environmental outcomes. In 2014, however, an aerial survey of water buffalo in Arnhem Land estimated that there were four times the number of animals that had been counted in a 1998 survey. Twenty thousand buffalo occupied the Djelk IPA, wreaking extensive damage in the wetlands, and contravening the agreed conservation principles.

Altman’s essay is a case study in the multilayered complexities of dealing with what might seem to be a straightforward environmental issue that could be solved by culling. The introduction of water buffalo from Timor to the Cobourg Peninsula, western Arnhem Land, is recorded as happening in the 1820s. However, the Kuninjku are not convinced that water buffalo are such strangers: the powerful and charismatic animal provides a high-protein staple for the Kuninjku, and status for hunters; it has a name, *nganabbarru*, in local languages, and links to myths and ceremony. According to older people, *nganabbarru* has been incorporated into the kinship system, and is thus connected to family and country. This sets buffalo apart from other feral species. (Except possibly the horse: I was once shown a horseshoe-shaped imprint in a rock in the Tanami Desert and told that it was made by a *yawarda* (horse) in the Dreamtime.)

Although the Kuninjku recognise the damage water buffalo are causing to the ecosystem by breaking down the natural barriers between saltwater and freshwater systems, the fact that the animals have created an environment in which they thrive goes some way to compensating for the loss of other habitats. Goannas and monitor lizards, a major food source with totemic significance, were almost wiped out by cane toads, which arrived in Arnhem Land in 2002. As

buffalo replace the species people used to hunt and eat, Kuninjku are increasingly dependent on them as a food source.

In spite of these complications, an agreement was reached to cull 5,000 animals in 2015. But the local Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation scuttled this plan when the prospect of selling buffalo to the live export trade raised the prospect of making money. While the idea seems reasonable, it had the hallmarks of dozens of money-making schemes that are cooked up between Indigenous corporation managers (usually white) and powerful local family interests, usually in opposition to IPA conditions. The people who come up with the schemes rarely have the expertise to deliver what they promise, and internal politics tend to sabotage projects before they get off the ground. It is not difficult to read between the lines of Altman's cryptic account in *Unstable Relations*, of the failure of the Bawinanga live buffalo trade being caused in part by the sacking of the corporation's white senior management because they didn't listen to the traditional owners.

There are manifest tensions between the Indigenous concept of 'caring for country' and Western principles of environmental preservation. Richard Martin and David Trigger document this tension in an essay also included in *Unstable Relations*. It tells the story of Pungalina, a remote pastoral lease in the Gulf Country and traditional land of the Garawa people, which was purchased in 2009 by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy and is now managed as a wildlife sanctuary by non-Indigenous caretakers. The Garawa hold native title over Pungalina, allowing them access to hunt and fish, and on a trip with traditional owners in 2012, Martin and Trigger recorded the discomfort expressed by the caretakers that the Garawa hunting rights posed a threat to the wildlife. The Garawa in turn were concerned that the Australian Wildlife Conservancy planned to reduce the cattle numbers that still grazed on the pastoral lease.

'They belong here now ... same as buffalo, pig, horse ...'

In fulfilling their roles, Indigenous rangers find themselves occupying a place where traditional obligations intersect with job accountability. They have access to well-maintained four-wheel drives, high-powered rifles, and wages. Having access to vehicles and money can trigger toxic jealousies, accompanied by relentless humbug, and for some rangers the pressure is too much. But the robustness of the Indigenous Rangers program, and its emergence out of a real and growing need to manage extensive tracts of country, has seen it develop and strengthen. This is the live ground where contradictions between conservation values, economic accountability

and Indigenous aspirations to make a viable living on their land remain visible, volatile and constantly evolving. Rather than treating this volatility as a problem, it should be part of a committed, long-term conversation.

As Tony Birch suggests in the closing essay of *Unstable Relations*, ‘difficulty, or even impossibility, is as good a place as any to begin a new conversation’. While we are still some distance from beginning a conversation on impossible ground, starting from a point of difficulty is well within reach.

In a field littered with failures, the IPA and Indigenous Rangers programs are standout success stories. There is nothing comparable for cross-generational engagement of Indigenous groups from the deep desert to the urban fringes. While the focus tends to be on the desert regions, Arnhem Land and north-west Kimberley, the ranger groups and IPAs are Australia wide. A rumour in 2016 that the Indigenous Rangers program was to be downgraded to be part of the ‘work for the dole’ system (a return to the status it had a decade ago) sent a seismic shudder through the agencies involved. Emphatic denials came from the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and commitments were made for funding until the end of 2018, and then extended to 2020.

This grudging, unpredictable and short-term approach was redressed in 2020 when the federal government committed to spending a total of \$714 million (\$102 million a year) on ranger programs between 2021 and 2028,. The March 2022 budget allocated an additional \$636 million to the same time frame, with the intention of bringing the total number of ranger groups to 208, and the number of rangers to approximately 4,000.

The Indigenous Rangers program should be embedded in education, and not just in Indigenous education, and celebrated for its flexibility and potential. The program is committed to continual adaptation and scrutiny, offering a forum in which hard questions can be asked about the conundrums that plague both black and white understandings of responsibility, accountability, conservation, custodianship, autonomy and dependency. It provides an opportunity to tease out contradictions and challenge some of the generic statements about caring for country, whether they take the form of a comment post (‘they ate a section of the country out, befouled it, and moved on’), or the claim that Indigenous people have an innate understanding of their environments and should be allowed to manage them without interference from whitefellas.

This claim, designed to invoke the ‘non-Indigenous Imaginary’, was made by an Indigenous delegate at a conference called Mapping the Inland. She was staying on message to a room full of whitefellas, and was confident that no one would challenge her, but I’m not sure she believed the claim herself.

Funding for IPAs, which was due to be axed in 2018, received a reprieve in 2017 when the federal budget committed \$1.1 billion to support existing IPAs, and \$15 million for competitive and discretionary grants to assist consultation and planning for new IPAs.

In 2020 IPAs made up more than 46% of the National Reserve System. A glance at the map of established and pending IPAs and other Indigenous-owned lands, which can be found on the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) website, shows a broad corridor of IPA land stretching from the Nullarbor to the Coral Sea: large Lego-shaped chunks of the Western Desert, the Pilbara, the Kimberley and Cape York. The south-east quadrant of Australia is notably free of large IPAs, although there are clusters of dots that indicate that the program can be applied to very small areas. Two new IPAs, declared in late 2020, brought the total to 78, with another 17 currently under consultation.

Although new IPAs are being declared all the time, the money to support them is limited, hence the need for income streams to maintain the capacity for people to live on and manage their lands. Partnerships are fundamental to this, where both Indigenous and Western knowledge is respected, and where shared concern for the health of the land is acknowledged. It’s also necessary to find a balance between environmental imperatives and economically viable ways to live on country. For many Indigenous people, mining royalties are central to their economic survival, and programs such as the carbon-credit scheme reported in *The Australian* provide environmental benefits and an income stream that is not dependent on government. Some of these partnerships have been in place for years, providing income stability for the ranger teams who carry out the burning, and proving the viability of ongoing support before the federal government committed to long-term funding.

There are hardline conservationists who believe that to preserve wild places, people must be excluded. To the Martu, indeed to many Indigenous people, such an idea is incomprehensible. In her study of the Martu fire regimes, Rebecca Bliege Bird identifies the Martu as a ‘keystone

species' in the maintenance of the Western Desert ecosystem. Tim Flannery, in his *Quarterly Essay* 'After the Future', suggests that this keystone role is now the responsibility of all Australians, with an emphasis on science-based fieldwork exemplified by non-government organisations such as the Australian Wildlife Conservancy.

The Martu understand the need for a 'two way' approach and they have provided a benchmark for how to negotiate the future we share. The specialist skills of whitefella professionals are a resource that the Martu recognise and value, while they bring to the partnership the desert-forged sensibility that tests and adopts whatever is useful, and discards whatever is not.