

Science for Saving Species

Research findings factsheet

Project 6.2.2



National Environmental Science Programme

Influence of governance regimes on the capacity of Indigenous peoples to participate in conservation management

In brief

Local Indigenous communities play a crucial role in conservation management in Australia. We examined how the potential for Indigenous communities to equitably participate in conservation management is influenced by governance regimes. We examined the three most common types of governance arrangements for conservation land in Australia: agency governed; agency driven co-governed; and Indigenous driven co-governed, such as Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs). And, how these regimes influence Indigenous participation in cultural heritage, fire and significant species management.

We found that Indigenous driven co-governance provides opportunities for Indigenous communities to actively participate in the management of cultural heritage, fire and significant species management, in addition to allowing Indigenous communities to pursue other objectives for culturally significant species and maintenance of cultural heritage values encompassing

the wider cultural landscape. Given the significant amount of land in Australia designated as IPAs, a positive implication is that Indigenous communities are already likely to have authority in management of a significant (and increasing) proportion of the nation's conservation estate.

Agencies perceive clearly defined boundaries between cultural heritage, significant species and fire management, which contrasts with Indigenous approaches, where individual elements are perceived as interconnected within wider cultural landscapes. On agency-governed and agency co-governed land, Indigenous participation is largely focused on cultural heritage, and there are currently low rates of engagement by local Indigenous communities in management of significant species and fire.

We provide a number of recommendations to increase the equity with which local Indigenous communities participate in conservation management on land governed under these regimes.

Context

Indigenous peoples already play a vital role in contemporary conservation planning and management, and even greater participation will be key to future conservation priorities and positive outcomes. Much of the world's biodiversity occurs on land inhabited or owned by Indigenous peoples. Local and Indigenous people often use knowledge systems and management practices that have great utility in achieving conservation aims. Further, the engagement of Indigenous Peoples in conservation management is ethically necessary, because Indigenous communities have a right to plan and make decisions about management processes that affect their lands.

However, agencies and local Indigenous communities differ in their perceptions of conservation values, and in their respective roles in managing those values. These differences can exclude or marginalise the aspirations and responsibilities of Indigenous communities and present them with challenges to participating in conservation management in ways that also achieve Indigenous aims.



Our research aims

We set out to compare the influence that different environmental governance regimes have on the capacity of local Indigenous communities to engage in conservation management. In particular we sought to:

(1) compare levels of Indigenous engagement in conservation management under different governance regimes; (2) examine agency expectations of Indigenous roles in collaborative management; and (3) compare the stated

management priorities for species that are considered important (i.e., because they are threatened species, culturally important species, or both) under different governance regimes.

What we did

We identified conservation area management plans from a range of different Australian bioregions that have high potential for Indigenous engagement in threatened species management.

We categorised these plans, generally called "Plans of Management" or "Healthy Country Plans", according to four categories of governance regime: (1) Indigenous-governed collaborations; (2) Indigenous-driven co-governance (such as IPAs); (3) agency-driven co-governance (under formal joint-management agreements); and (4) agency governance (legally

declared conservation areas). Next, we assessed the relative degree of Indigenous community involvement in planning and decision-making in three general themes: the management of significant species, fire and cultural heritage.

We used a quantitative scoring method to describe rates of Indigenous engagement according to management theme and governance type. We also drew on qualitative evidence, using it to describe expectations about Indigenous engagement in the planning and decision-making about, and implementation of, conservation management actions.

Our findings

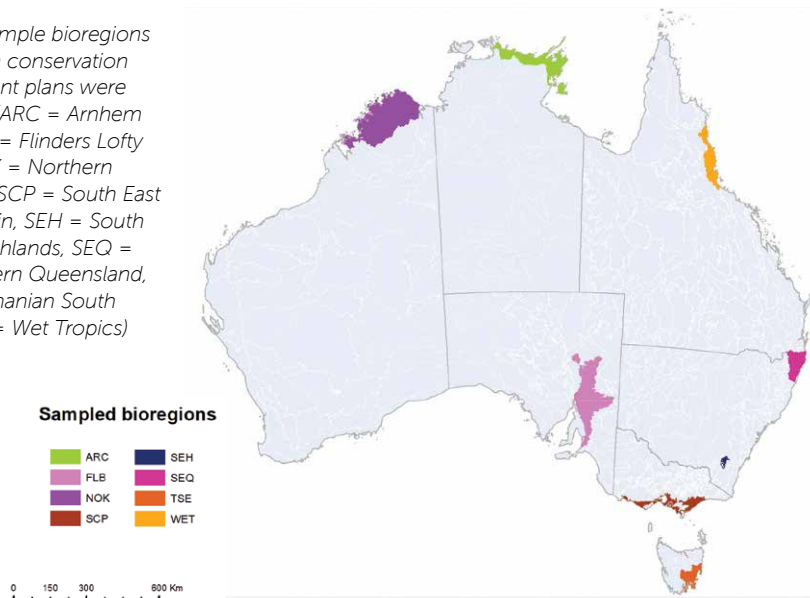
Our findings drew on a total of 128 management plans from eight sample bioregions: 11 from Indigenous co-governance regimes; 10 from agency-driven co-governance regimes; and 107 from agency governance regimes. We did not identify any Indigenous collaboration regimes in our data, but this may be accounted for by such collaborations not being listed in the databases we used. (See figure 2.)

Agency governance regimes

Indigenous engagement in agency governance regimes was generally associated with cultural heritage management, with little scope for participation in fire management and even less so in significant species management. For each of the three management categories in agency governance regime plans, engagement was more likely to be an aspiration than to be actively occurring.

In the few agency governance regime plans that committed to Indigenous engagement in significant species and fire management, the roles of Indigenous partners were generally limited to including knowledge to improve the management of agency-defined values. In other cases, Indigenous roles were confined to the management of areas perceived to be of legitimate interest to Indigenous communities, such as the potential impacts of fire on cultural heritage sites.

Figure 1. Sample bioregions from which conservation management plans were reviewed. (ARC = Arnhem Coast, FLB = Flinders Lofty Block, NOK = Northern Kimberley, SCP = South East Coastal Plain, SEH = South Eastern Highlands, SEQ = South Eastern Queensland, TSE = Tasmanian South East, WET = Wet Tropics)



Our findings (continued)

Agency co-governance regimes

In comparison to agency governance regimes, agency driven co-governance regimes appeared to have been more actively engaged with Indigenous groups in cultural heritage management.

Agency co-governance regime plans had higher levels of engagement in significant species and fire management than agency governance regimes, but active engagement was reported in less than half of such plans. Significant species were generally threatened species, and Indigenous participation was often not mentioned in management strategies. Engagement for fire and significant species was often limited to inclusion of Indigenous labour or knowledge to achieve agency conservation objectives.

Some plans included culturally significant species and prioritised recovery of species that are both culturally significant and threatened species. Others gave Indigenous partners greater control in significant species management by requiring the consent of Indigenous partners before permits to research particular species were approved. Some agency co-governance regime plans were explicit about the importance of involving Indigenous partners in all three management categories and linked this to maintaining cultural health.

Indigenous co-governance

All reviewed Indigenous co-governance approach plans described active management being undertaken in all three management categories, apart from one plan in which fire management remained an aspiration. In these plans, the roles of Indigenous partners were much more than just custodians

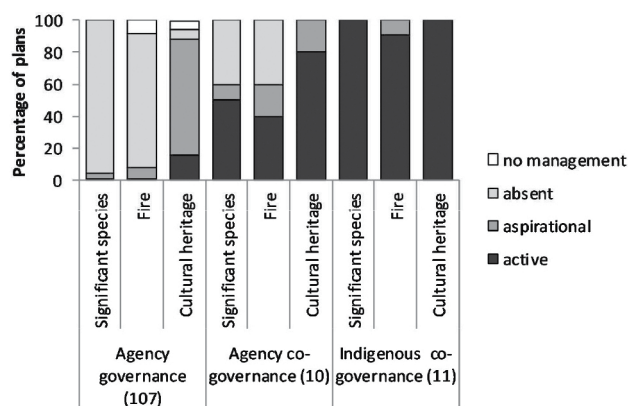


Figure 2. Commitment to Indigenous engagement in significant species, fire and cultural heritage management in conservation plans prepared for conservation areas under three types of governance regime in Australian regions with high potential for Indigenous involvement (bracketed figures are the number of plans analysed.)

of culturally significant sites, because management of significant species and fire were described as major concerns.

Where species were identified as targets for management, it was generally as plants and animals or groups of plants and animals with cultural significance. Threatened species were generally not considered management priorities in Indigenous co-governance plans. Where threatened species were considered significant, it was because they also happened to be culturally significant species (e.g., dugong and marine turtles) and this was stated as the motivating factor in listing them as management priorities. Use of plants and animals for food, medicine and materials was linked to maintaining cultural heritage, and was in turn prescribed by customary laws and knowledge associated with cultural health, for example, by undertaking rituals to ensure populations of plant and animal species remain healthy. It was sometimes made explicit that threatened species were not a management priority, but were likely to benefit from conservation actions aimed at other values.

Different perceptions

Our results show that agencies and local Indigenous communities differ

in their perceptions of conservation values and their respective roles in managing those values. Agencies perceive clearly defined boundaries between cultural heritage, significant species and fire management, and the currently low engagement rates of Indigenous communities in the latter two categories might be explained by agencies perceiving cultural heritage to be the most important focus of Indigenous participation. This would align with western conservation paradigms which generally perceive "nature" and "culture" as separable constructs with their own values and associated management strategies, and "cultural heritage" as pertaining exclusively to particular sites or artefacts considered to have static, historical significance.

Indigenous communities perceive their role as much more than protection of particular cultural heritage sites, with maintenance of cultural heritage values encompassing the wider cultural landscape. For Indigenous peoples, the ability to sustain cultural landscapes relies on the capacity to participate in all aspects of conservation management.

Threats to plants and animals were found to often be perceived within the wider cultural context rather

Further reading

This factsheet summarises key findings from: Duncan, T., Villarreal-Rosas, J., Garnett, S.T., Carwardine, J., Robinson, C.J., (2018) Influence of environmental governance regimes on the capacity of Indigenous Peoples to participate in conservation management. *PARKS* 24.2 November 2018.

Further Information Tom Duncan – goodtom13@hotmail.com

Our findings (continued)

than through ecological changes, for example, one healthy country plan attributes increasing difficulty in hunting dugong to changes in social networks. Using plants and

animals for food, medicine and materials was linked to maintaining cultural heritage, and was in turn prescribed by customary laws and knowledge associated with cultural

health, for example, by undertaking rituals to ensure populations of plant and animal species remain healthy.

Recommendations

Governments at all levels should engage local Indigenous communities in management of Country. Data shows Indigenous communities will engage with government in cultural heritage, significant species and fire. While this would enhance equity in governance, successfully achieving the commitments set out in government policy also requires other changes to be made. Governments are likely to continue to hold responsibility for most conservation management in the future, and the capacity for Indigenous peoples to participate in Indigenous co-governance regimes depends strongly on short-term and unpredictable levels of government funding.

Indigenous co-governance regimes are an essential component in lifting rates of Indigenous engagement. Our results suggest that Indigenous co-governance regimes currently provide better opportunities for local Indigenous communities to access procedural equity than the other governance regimes considered in our analysis. Given the significant amount of land in Australia designated as Indigenous Protected Areas, a positive implication is that Indigenous

communities are already likely to have government recognised authority in management, and therefore established NRM understanding over a significant (and increasing) proportion of the nation's conservation estate.

Our key recommendation is for government agencies to increase engagement and participation with local Indigenous communities in fire and significant species management on land under agency governance and agency co-governance regimes, and to move from aspiration to active engagement for cultural heritage management on land under agency governance regimes.

Indigenous communities see their role in conservation management as much more than protection of particular cultural heritage sites but rather encompassing the wider cultural landscape and associated indicators of cultural health, such as language or transmission of knowledge. Given this, important ways to increase Indigenous participation and equity include:

- monitoring cultural wellbeing along with biodiversity
- recognise the planning structures used in IPA plans, which emphasise linkages

between people, places and plants and animals, for broader use in management plans and healthy country plans

- following respectful and culturally appropriate processes and protocols when negotiating joint management and all conservation management with Indigenous communities
- effecting conceptual shifts so that western knowledge systems are incorporated into long-established Indigenous management practices, rather than western conservation management "bringing in" Indigenous knowledge.

Aligning with the above ways of working will help to increase participation of Indigenous communities and help to resolve potential points of conflict that may occur in co-governance partnerships. Both parties need to come together to understand views on conservation actions that are considered appropriate by Indigenous and agency conservation managers, even in cases where there is consensus between both parties about which species are priorities for management.