

The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team Project - Building Indigenous knowledge and skills to improve urban waterways in Sydney's Georges River Catchment

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Key Points

- Since 2014 the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Project has been employing Aboriginal trainees to undertake bush regeneration and to strengthen traditional ecological knowledge locally
- Working on the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team delivers significant cultural outcomes for its participants
- Caring for country is important for Aboriginal people working in the Georges River catchment.
- The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team encourages partnerships between local government and Land Councils

Abstract

Indigenous Ranger programs, which are predominantly located in regional and remote areas, are commendable for their jobs creation, for strengthening of livelihoods of individuals and communities, and for the cultural and environmental outcomes they engender. However, can similar outcomes be attained in a highly urban setting? This paper is a case study of a current project, the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team in the Georges River in Sydney's south-west. Through the narrative of the Aboriginal trainees who have been members of the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team ('the Team'), this paper will illustrate how an environmental project has been successful in delivering significant cultural outcomes for its participants, and how through this culture-rich traineeship, the project is continuing the concept of Indigenous caring for Country in a highly urbanised setting.

Keywords

Riverkeeper, Aboriginal, caring for Country, Urban waterway, Georges River, trainee, Indigenous, cultural development

Background - Caring for Country and cultural outcomes

Weir *et al.* (2011, 3-4) distinguish between Indigenous and non-Indigenous natural resource management ('NRM') styles within the conservation paradigm. To them, Indigenous NRM engagement is inclusive of the human presence, actions and outcomes are reciprocal meaning there is no separation between humans, the surrounding environment and culture. Alternatively, with non-Indigenous NRM the human/nature separation is present, nature is perceived as a resource or objectified. The term 'caring for Country' has been used to explain Indigenous environmental action within the Australian formal conservation discourse since the late 1980s (Young, 1987), however as a practice caring for Country, that is human enacted management of natural

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resources, has been occurring since time immemorial (Weir *et al.*, 2011, 4). The concept of caring for Country has been formalised through lands made available via land rights, native title and Indigenous Land Corporation land acquisitions, and through government interaction (Weir *et al.*, 2011, 4). Caring for Country encompasses water as well as terrestrial environments, indeed, good water management has been a crucial priority for the first peoples in the driest inhabited continent on Earth. Some Indigenous communities are highly engaged in water Country management (e.g. the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations and The North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance Ltd). There has been a recent promotion of the importance of caring for Country through the ‘Country Needs People’ campaigns and Indigenous Ranger programs (see www.countryneedspeople.org.au for more information). Weir *et al.* (2011) and Urbis (2012) have reviewed these, and *Working on Country* (‘WoC’) programs, and note the diverse and intensely personal ways that this type of work is important to the Indigenous participants. *‘[C]aring for [C]ountry is intricately linked to maintaining cultural life, identity, autonomy and health’* (Weir *et al.*, 2011, 1). *‘WoC is a highly valued program that delivers capacity building, cultural, economic and health and wellbeing outcomes for individuals and entire communities’* (Urbis, 2012, 73). They report that the benefits fit within four clear categories: Health and Wellbeing Benefits; Cultural and Socio-Political Benefits; Economic Benefits; and Environmental Benefits (Weir *et al.*, 2011). These outcomes filter from the employed individual, to their families, communities and ultimately benefit all Australians. Urbis found that they created significant and diverse personal, family and community benefits (2012, 38-71), and acted as a vehicle to foster relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and organisations (2012, 73). We find many of the outcomes and benefits they listed present in the outcomes of the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project.

The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team Project

The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project has been operating along the Georges River catchment since July 2014. The project is a federally funded fixed term project supported by the Georges River Combined Councils Committee (GRCCC). The Aboriginal Riverkeeper project is being delivered by Eco Logical Australia (ELA) who employs the team and manages the project. The Aboriginal Riverkeeper project employs Aboriginal people to undertake bush regeneration traineeships where they gain mainstream qualifications through a Registered Training Organisation, the Northern Sydney Institute while also building on Aboriginal cultural education through the regular involvement of Aboriginal Elders, knowledge holders and Local Aboriginal Land Councils within the catchment.

The need for an urban Indigenous NRM program

The Georges River catchment is home to over 1 million people, making it one of Australia’s most highly urbanised catchments (www.georgesriver.org.au/). The catchment forms part of the lands of the Dharawal, Gandangarra, Eora and Darug peoples, however Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from right across the continent now call the catchment home. The catchment includes lands within the boundaries of five Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALC): Metropolitan, La Perouse, Tharawal, Gandangarra and Deerubbin. In 2011 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of the Greater Sydney Region (though this is a broader area than just the Georges River catchment) was 54,746 people out of total GSR population of 4,391,673 people, less than 1.3% of the population (ABS, 2011).

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The national Indigenous population is 686,800, of these 79% live in non-remote (urban or regional) areas (ABS, 2016a). Currently 35% of Indigenous people live in major cities (ABS, 2016a). The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports Indigenous populations are becoming increasingly urbanised (ABS, 2016a). The majority of Indigenous Ranger programs currently exist in regional and remote areas, whereas the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team focuses on the Indigenous population in Australia's biggest city. Thus programs like the urban Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team are useful models of how Indigenous people, particularly Indigenous youth, can be engaged in employment, culture and social development. This is of significance given that this is an expanding and often socially disadvantaged sector of the community (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014) as well as a very young demographic with 63% of the total Indigenous population being under 30 years old (ABS, 2016a).

Closing the gap in Indigenous unemployment is one of the six targets listed in Council of Australian Governments' Close the Gap initiative (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014), yet the national unemployment rate for Indigenous people was 20.6% (ABS, 2016a). In comparison the national unemployment rate for the same period which was 5.7% (ABS, 2016b) Indigenous Ranger programs are heralded as a successful way to combat unemployment (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014, section 4.48). The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team addresses both employment (for the period of the traineeship) and vocational qualification attainment with the trainees gaining at least a Certificate II level qualification.

Connection to Country

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2014-15 conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found around 74% of Indigenous people are able to identify their Country (ABS, 2016a), this statistic is reflected in the first cohort of Aboriginal Riverkeeper trainees, with three out of four being able to identify and having active links to their Country either by personal experience (i.e. trainee has lived on/visited their Country and is a member of that community) or through family connection (i.e. trainee has not lived/visited Country but knows of it and identifies with it through intergenerational association). The ABS Survey defined 'maintaining Aboriginal culture' as involving: regular learning from Elders and knowledge sharing, protecting cultural sites and cultural materials, and for individuals being able to identify links to specific homelands or Country (ABS, 2016a). Each of these elements are enacted in the Aboriginal Riverkeeper program and were considered the most significant outcomes of their traineeship by past participants. The afore mentioned elements of maintaining culture also feature in the Australian Bureau of Statistics' *Framework for Measuring Wellbeing: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (ABS, 2010). Of the nine domains listed in the Framework, against which Indigenous wellbeing can be mapped, participation in the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team contributes directly to seven: Culture, Heritage and Leisure; Family, Kinship and Community; Health; Education, Learning and Skills; Customary, Voluntary and Paid Work; Income and Economic Resources; and Citizenship and Governance. And indirectly to a further two: Housing, Infrastructure and Services; and Law and Justice (ABS, 2010). Indeed, Weir *et al.* (2011) argue that *[n]atural resource management programs that do not allow participants to fully express or satisfy their connection to [C]ountry will affect the realization of the benefits of caring for [C]ountry, including Indigenous wellbeing. This must be recognised when investigating the relationship between participation in natural resource management and health and wellbeing* (Weir *et al.*, 2011, 4). Thus the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team program provides a more holistic approach to Indigenous employment and wellbeing than other standard employment programs.

The outputs of the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team

The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team involves up to four trainees at any one time working on a bush regeneration team in a full-time capacity. The trainees receive formal training and qualifications from the Northern Sydney Institute (TAFE) in Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management and can go on to complete a Certificate III in Indigenous Land Management. The TAFE teacher comes to the worksite every fortnight to deliver training in the field. The team's supervisor also delivers day-to-day training, work-readiness, digital data collection, engaging with stakeholders and the fundamentals of bush regeneration among other skills. Over the life of the project, The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team will engage two groups of four trainees who will work as part of the team for a period of 18 months each. At the time of writing (July 2016), the project is entering its final year and will have seen at least 4 trainees complete their traineeships with another four mid-way through their traineeships.

The team undertake work on 14 different Local Government Area (LGA) reserves within the GRCCC area. There are nine member LGAs on the GRCCC, and the team have work sites across eight of these. The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team is one component of a larger Georges Riverkeeper Program that has been operating since 1997. Through this project the Riverkeeper trainees are brought into contact with local Aboriginal Elders, knowledge holders and four of the LALCs within whose boundaries the catchment resides. This engagement with the Aboriginal community contributes to the attainment of the formal qualification in Indigenous Land Management.

To date the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team is achieving a wide range of positive outcomes. Environmental outcomes include: restoring approximately 30 hectares of bushland; increasing habitat, protecting flora and fauna diversity, controlling invasive weeds and planting over 39,000 plants. Social outcomes include: new partnerships between Local Government and Aboriginal Land Councils, knowledge sharing amongst Aboriginal people and with government agencies. The most important outcomes have been cultural, and include engaging young urban and suburban Aboriginal people with their Aboriginal heritage in an intensely personal and identity-affirming way. Cultural outcomes were achieved by interacting with and learning about the tangible and intangible Aboriginal heritage values of the reserves. During this project the team have walked each work site with officers from the LALCs to establish where the Aboriginal values are present in the landscape and to address the types of physical work in bush regeneration that is permissible where values are present. For the trainees this is often the first time that they have been taught about Aboriginal heritage values in the landscape, for some it is the first time that they are learning about their Aboriginal heritage beyond the understanding that they are Aboriginal people. With the involvement of LALCs in the team's work the importance of cultural and Aboriginal knowledge exchange has become evident to the young trainees. They learn what a midden is and how it can be identified and protected during weed removal works. They have been shown Aboriginal sites (shelters with art, axe grinding grooves, middens and scar trees) and have been told the stories associated with these places by Aboriginal Elders and knowledge holders, as can be seen in Figure 1. They have been taught Aboriginal cultural protocol; made their own wooden implements such as tap sticks, boomerangs and digging sticks and have been moulded into confident, competent and keen protectors of Aboriginal Country. Through this process a change was witnessed in the trainees with their increased confidence in discussing Aboriginal culture a their personal knowledge developed.

Trainee experiences and comparison with other Indigenous Ranger Programs

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Like Indigenous Rangers and other Indigenous focussed NRM programs, the Aboriginal Riverkeeper trainees are active in preserving and celebrating culture, developing leaderships skills and becoming role models for others in their communities. There are also clear personal significant experiences for the participants. The program has contributed to the personal and cultural development of the trainees who express increased confidence after holding stalls at several community events and leading tours of the worksites *“[I] had conversations with the public and spoke about the Riverkeeper project also some of the issues. At first it made me feel nervous but after a few conversations I felt more comfortable”* (Aboriginal Riverkeeper trainee, 2015) and *“I feel more confident speaking with large groups of people older than me, and I feel as though my sense of leadership has established a more powerful approach”* (Aboriginal Riverkeeper trainee, 2015). Trainees have stepped out of their comfort zone experienced new things and developed their skills in the process.

Other Indigenous Ranger and NRM programs show similar outcomes *“Most Aboriginal people are shy, can’t get up in a classroom and talk... The first time I did I had tears coming out of my eyes, the emotion and feeling was there”* (Mapoon Land and Sea Centre, ranger cited in Urbis, 2012, 44) and *“It taught me that I could still learn at the age I am at and further that more if I want, I know that if I want to there is opportunities out there for me”* (Raukkan Natural Resource Management, ranger cited in Urbis, 2012, 45).

As identified earlier in this paper, the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team is different to Indigenous Rangers in numerous ways, *“Indigenous Rangers are highly-skilled, professional land managers...They use traditional practices and modern science to protect, nurture and restore the landscape”* (www.countryneedspeople.org.au/). Whereas the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team are young, Aboriginal people working in Sydney but who have connections to Aboriginal Country elsewhere, such as Gummeroi, Wonnarua, Wiradjuri, Ngiyampaa Badtjala as well as descendants of Stolen Generations whose connections to ancestral Country have been disrupted. The Riverkeeper trainees are relatively isolated from their Aboriginal land and to an extent culture. Indigenous Ranger programs in regional and remote areas engage communities where cultural connection to land, people, culture and spirit are very much intact, where languages and customs are maintained, and where less acculturation has taken place. The Riverkeeper Trainees are more acculturated, only fragments of language are known and less are used, people are living and working far from their traditional lands and education, apart from any foundational cultural education that has been maintained through individual families, has predominantly been through mainstream Western schooling. The trainees acknowledge this gap and show a strong desire to develop their cultural knowledge *“Before I started the Aboriginal Riverkeeper traineeship I didn’t really know much about Aboriginal culture and I wasn’t that comfortable talking about Aboriginal heritage”* (Aboriginal Riverkeeper trainee, 2015) and *“I am very lucky to learn what I have, and given that I am still young, I want to learn more so that we can keep our cultural knowledge which is very important to me”* (Aboriginal Riverkeeper trainee, 2015).

These reflect similar statements from within the Indigenous Ranger program, acknowledging the gap in cultural knowledge: *“I got four boys. I take them out into the bush and teach them about plants. I can teach them traditional Aboriginal knowledge. I didn’t know this before”* (Riverland Rangers, ranger cited in Urbis, 2012, 53). However, individuals within the Indigenous Ranger and NRM programs predominantly display a higher confidence in cultural knowledge such as *“We are the Wanjina Wunggurr Wilinggin clan and our law and culture is strong. We are keeping it alive by working with both old and young people to look after our country for future generations”* (Wunggurr Ranger Storybook Report 2010 cited in Urbis, 2012, 35).

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For the Indigenous individuals involved in both program types the work presents an opportunity to engage with and strengthen culture as well as develop leadership qualities, personal pride and a sense of achievement. Riverkeeper trainees note *“As I did Aboriginal Studies I knew things about our culture, but this job has given me a better connection to it through meeting face to face with Elders and learning things that are not written in books or found anywhere else. 100/100”* (Aboriginal Riverkeeper trainee, 2015) and *“I feel very confident and very connected to my culture due to this Riverkeeper traineeship and not only [that, I’m] creating cultural career path for myself”* (Aboriginal Riverkeeper trainee, 2015). Similarly, Indigenous Rangers note: *“Being able to work here has made my life. Coming back to my grass roots, I am proud of what I have done”* (Raukkan ranger and Elder) (www.countryneedspeople.org.au/) and *“In the Warddeken IPA we have created a space for younger generations to engage in meaningful work, to feel valued and to connect with their cultural heritage. The effects of this will be felt through generations”* (Fred Hunter, Warddeken) (www.countryneedspeople.org.au/).

Awards

In addition to personal cultural fulfillment the project has also led to positive academic outcomes, reflected in the awards and nominations that the trainees have attracted. These include the Northern Sydney Institute 2015 Indigenous Student of the year award (nominated), the inaugural Cliff Daylight Encouragement Award for Indigenous Students (2015 Winner, Larissa Cooper), The Northern Sydney Institute 2016 Sustainability Students of the Year Award (winners: Nick Arends, Stacey Gilbert, Shannon Beale-Bogg and Larissa Cooper), and a TAFE NSW Gili Achievement Award 2016 (Winner, Larissa Cooper).

Conclusion

Similar to the Indigenous Ranger programs based in regional and remote areas of Australia, The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project in Sydney’s Georges River is creating positive outcomes for its Aboriginal trainees by providing training and employment, as well as developing and strengthening their individual cultural identities and their leadership skills. Throughout this paper the narrative of the Aboriginal Riverkeeper trainees illustrate their passion for learning about their Aboriginal heritage while also creating environmental outcomes. Given the increase in Indigenous populations in urban regions and the socio-economic challenges that Indigenous people face we promote the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team as a valid model to respond to these challenges.

Figure 1: The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Trainees visit a sandstone overhang to learn about Aboriginal culture with Aunty Glenda Chalker, March 2015 (Photo Credit: Vanessa Cavanagh)



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