

**Evaluation of NRC's On-Country
Planning Pilot: Banbai Country**

Final Report



Acknowledgement

Kowa respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the Banbai Nation who have and continue to care for Country. We acknowledge the Awabakal peoples, the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which Kowa is located. We acknowledge Elders, past, present and emerging; and all First Nations peoples whose wisdom contributes to our future. Kowa is deeply committed to honouring and amplifying First Nations peoples' unique Cultural and spiritual relationship to the lands, waters, and skies and transforming measurement, evaluation, and learning practices to uphold and reflect First Nations voices and values.

We wish to extend our deepest gratitude to Oumoula McKenzie, whose artistic vision has graced the cover of our publication. Oumoula's remarkable talent has not only captured the essence of our work but has also provided a visual narrative that speaks to the heart of our mission.

Oumoula's ability to convey complex themes through art has given our project a face that is both engaging and inspiring. Oumoula's artwork is a testament to his skill and dedication to Cultural expression. It is with sincere appreciation that we acknowledge Oumoula's contribution, which has undoubtedly enriched our publication and captivated our audience.

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Contact Details

Kowa	Natural Resource Commission
Chad Trudgett	Marcus Leslie
chad@kowacollaboration.com	Marcus.Leslie@nrc.nsw.gov.au

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Executive Summary

The On-Country Planning Pilot, led by the Banbai Rangers and commissioned by the Natural Resource Commission (NRC), represents a groundbreaking initiative aimed at integrating Aboriginal knowledge and values into natural resource management. This report provides a comprehensive evaluation of the pilot's effectiveness and outlines strategic insights and recommendations for future initiatives.

Objectives

The pilot program had multiple objectives:

- To establish a model for Aboriginal-led, on-country planning that could be replicated or expanded across similar landscapes in Australia.
- To develop a country-based plan that reflects Banbai values and attracts investment.
- To promote Aboriginal knowledge and practice as central elements in natural resource management decision-making.

Methodology

The evaluation methodology was robust, involving:

- Engagements and interviews with a broad range of stakeholders.
- Thematic analysis of qualitative data collected through field visits and document reviews.
- An iterative review process ensuring alignment with the pilot's core objectives and stakeholder expectations.

Findings

Key findings from the evaluation include:

- **Community Engagement and Leadership:** The pilot was highly effective in engaging the Banbai community and leveraging Aboriginal leadership in natural resource management. It fostered a strong sense of ownership and empowerment among community members.
- **Cultural Revitalisation:** There was a significant focus on cultural revitalisation, with the pilot providing opportunities for the Banbai to renew cultural practices and values, enhancing community resilience and cultural integrity.
- **Innovative Methodologies:** The use of innovative, culturally-adapted methodologies was a hallmark of the pilot, enhancing its effectiveness and responsiveness to community needs.
- **Environmental Stewardship:** The pilot underscored the importance of environmental stewardship, utilizing traditional ecological knowledge to manage land and resources sustainably.

- **Policy Advocacy:** It successfully advocated for policies that support Aboriginal-led natural resource management, influencing broader governmental and agency frameworks.

Achieving Objectives and KPI's

This groundbreaking initiative, led by the Banbai Rangers and supported by the Natural Resources Commission and other partners, has achieved significant milestones in Aboriginal-led land management. The pilot's multifaceted objectives have not only been met but have also facilitated a range of additional benefits, including:

- **Empowerment and Leadership Development:** Through active involvement in the pilot, the Banbai Community has seen notable growth in empowerment and leadership capabilities.
- **Cultural Revitalisation and Enhanced Relations:** The initiative has been instrumental in reviving cultural practices and strengthening community bonds.
- **Innovation in Knowledge and Methodologies:** New approaches and methodologies developed during the pilot have increased the visibility of Aboriginal environmental stewardship and provided new socio-economic opportunities.
- **Resilience and Environmental Adaptation:** The pilot has contributed to Community's resilience and ability to adapt to environmental changes, underscored by the effective use of cultural burning practices.

The pilot's structured approach to creating and implementing the Banbai Whole of Country Plan has positioned the Banbai Rangers as leaders in sustainable land management, capable of influencing broader natural resource management strategies across Australia.

Pilot Objectives

Based on the evidence available, the Commission has made significant progress towards achieving its objectives with the Aboriginal-led, on-Country pilot:

1. **Delivering an Aboriginal-led, on-Country pilot as a leading example:** The pilot has been led by the Banbai Rangers, with the engagement of the Guyra Local Aboriginal Land Council and the support of an expert consultant. It has involved establishing relationships with local agencies and landholders, engaging an advisory group, and forming an interagency working group. Workshops have been conducted to identify Banbai values and engage stakeholders. These efforts indicate the pilot could serve as a leading example that could be applied or scaled up in other contexts.
2. **Delivering an on-Country investment plan:** The pilot aimed to deliver an on-Country plan to attract public and private investment. The content indicates that the pilot includes the development of such a plan, which is tailored to identify and target Banbai values. However, specific evidence of investment attracted as a result of the plan would be needed to fully confirm this objective's attainment.
3. **Promoting Aboriginal knowledge and practice to support decision-making:** The pilot showcases Aboriginal-led land management, particularly Cultural burning practices used to care for the Country. It emphasises the importance of Aboriginal knowledge

and practice in land management decisions and policies. The investigation into the impact of Cultural burning and the development of the Banbai Fire and Seasons Calendar exemplify how the pilot promotes Aboriginal knowledge and practice as an evidence base for decision-making and improved natural resource management outcomes.

Pilot KPIs

Based on the evidence available, there are indications that the pilot program has achieved progress toward the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). However, a complete confirmation of attainment would require more specific data and feedback directly from the involved parties. Here is an analysis based on the provided content:

Lead KPIs

1. **The Banbai Rangers and other parties are satisfied with the Pilot outcomes. The Rangers' comprehensive engagement** in various activities, such as workshops and the establishment of working groups, suggests positive involvement.
2. **The pilot is recognised by Aboriginal leaders as an excellent showcase of Country-based land management initiatives.** The evidence base includes a completed communication strategy to promote the outcomes, which is an essential step toward gaining recognition. Some Aboriginal leaders have expressed their recognition of the pilot as a showcase of excellence; however, broader engagement is required to determine if this is shared by others less involved with the pilot.

Lag KPIs

1. **The investment plan guides and attracts funding to support identified Banbai values and priorities for Country across tenures:** The content indicates that the pilot aims to deliver a Country-based plan that attracts public and private investment. However, specific evidence of funding being secured as a result of the investment plan would be needed to confirm this KPI has been attained.
 2. **Government and agencies actively support the on-Country Plan and take steps to scale up or initiate new on-Country processes:** There is mention of various government agencies providing in-kind support and the development of relationships with key stakeholders, which indicates active support. However, concrete steps to scale up or initiate new on-Country processes would require detailed reporting on the actions taken by these bodies following the pilot's implementation.
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Challenges and Opportunities

- **Challenges:** Key challenges included navigating funding mechanisms, addressing legal and bureaucratic constraints, and expanding the reach and impact of pilot outcomes.
- **Opportunities:** The pilot highlighted numerous opportunities to scale up the model and apply similar approaches across different Aboriginal communities and landscapes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance future on-Country planning initiatives:

- **Expand Community Involvement:** Further increase Community involvement in all stages of project planning and implementation to enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of outcomes.
- **Increase Investment in Cultural Practices:** Invest in the regeneration and institutionalisation of Cultural practices as a cornerstone of natural resource management.
- **Replicate and Scale the Model:** Use the Barbai pilot as a template for other regions, adapting the approach to local contexts and scaling it to enhance its impact.
- **Enhance Policy Support:** Strengthen policy frameworks to support Aboriginal-led natural resource management initiatives more robustly and sustainably.
- **Strengthen Evaluation Mechanisms:** Develop comprehensive evaluation strategies to continuously assess and refine on-Country planning processes.

The on-Country Planning Pilot has demonstrated significant potential as a model for integrating Aboriginal knowledge and leadership in natural resource management effectively. With targeted support and replication of this model, there is a tremendous opportunity to promote sustainable management and conservation practices across Australia, led by and for Aboriginal communities.

About this document

This final report represents a pivotal document encapsulating the pilot program evaluation conducted in partnership with the Banbai Rangers. It serves as a cornerstone for communication, detailing the findings, methodologies, scope, and ultimate evaluation goals to the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) and all partners involved in the program's implementation.

The purpose of this report is multi-faceted. Primarily, it is designed to empower informed decision-making by providing stakeholders with an analysis of the program's performance. It is a vehicle for transparency and knowledge-sharing that underscores the program's effectiveness, reveals areas needing improvement, and offers evidence-based recommendations for future endeavours in natural resource management.

In this evaluation, we have taken a light-touch approach to examining the successes and the challenges encountered throughout the on-Country Planning pilot. By doing so, we aim to illuminate the pathways that lead to sustainable management and stewardship of natural resources. The insights gained from this evaluation are intended to guide the NRC and its partners in identifying robust strategies for natural resource management that are Culturally sensitive, environmentally sound, and economically viable.

Furthermore, this report is a testament to the value of collaborative approaches that integrate Aboriginal knowledge and practices into land management. The experiences of the Banbai Rangers, as documented in this evaluation, stand as a testament to the potential for Aboriginal-led initiatives to shape the future of land management in innovative ways grounded in traditional stewardship.

The findings within these pages are not merely a reflection of past efforts but are also a blueprint for the future. They aim to inform the allocation of resources, ensuring that investments are made strategically to support the most impactful and sustainable outcomes. As we present this report, we invite our readers to engage with the findings critically, draw lessons from the Banbai Rangers' lived experiences, and consider how these lessons can be applied more broadly to enhance natural resource management practices across the state and beyond.

This final report will serve as a record of what has been achieved and an inspiration for what can be accomplished when communities, governments, and organisations work together to pursue a shared vision for the land that sustains us all.

Pilot Background and Introduction

About the On-Country Planning Pilot

The on-Country Planning Pilot represents a groundbreaking approach to incorporating Aboriginal knowledge and values into land management practices, particularly in the context of forest environments. This pilot is a concerted effort to bridge the gap between traditional Aboriginal forest values and contemporary land management strategies, especially in light of the challenges posed by wildfires.

At the heart of this initiative is a collaboration between Aboriginal Communities, including the Banbai Rangers, and the NSW Forest Monitoring and Improvement Program. The project has been meticulously designed and implemented with the active participation of Aboriginal communities, ensuring that their values are central to the understanding and management of forest lands.

The outcomes of this partnership have been enlightening, revealing the intricate relationship between Aboriginal communities and their forested environments and the critical importance of Cultural values in the management and recovery of these areas post-wildfires. The project has provided valuable insights and underscored the effectiveness of Aboriginal-led approaches in fire planning, management, recovery, and monitoring.

A vital outcome of the project is the advocacy for greater Aboriginal involvement in their lands' management and decision-making processes. The recommendation for whole-of-country planning is a testament to the power of this approach in enabling Aboriginal communities to define their management strategies, establish meaningful partnerships, and influence decision-making.

The Banbai Rangers have embraced this recommendation, proposing an on-Country planning pilot that aligns with their aspirations to manage and protect their Country and Cultural values. This initiative is a proactive step toward empowering the Banbai people to engage with various stakeholders, including government and private landholders, to realise their vision for their Country.

The enthusiasm and support from land management agencies and experts for the Banbai Rangers' proposal indicate a shared commitment to enhancing Aboriginal participation in land management. This collaborative effort is consistent with broader initiatives, such as Closing the Gap and Cultural Heritage reforms, aimed at recognising and advancing Aboriginal rights and interests across NSW. The on-Country Planning Pilot is more than a project; it is a movement towards a future where Aboriginal communities are at the forefront of caring for their lands, informed by their deep-rooted values and centuries-old wisdom.

Pilot Objectives

The Commission is committed to achieving several critical objectives through this pilot:

- To spearhead an Aboriginal-led, on-Country pilot that sets a benchmark for replication or expansion.

- To formulate a Country-based investment plan, conceived and executed by the Banbai Rangers, which pinpoints Banbai values and possesses the potential to draw investment.
- To underscore and promote Aboriginal knowledge and practices as fundamental inputs and evidence to guide decision-making for policy formulation and enhancement of natural resource management outcomes.

The Banbai Rangers are set to define specific and bespoke objectives for their on-Country plan, tailoring it to the unique context of their Country.

Key Performance Indicators

To measure the success of this pilot, the following key performance indicators have been established:

Lead KPIs

- Satisfaction of the Banbai Rangers and associated parties with the outcomes of the Pilot.
- Recognition by Aboriginal leaders of the pilot as an exemplary model of Country-based land management.

Lag KPIs

- The investment plan's ability to direct and secure funding to support identified Banbai values and priorities for Country across various land tenures.
- Active backing from the government and agencies for the on-Country Plan, with efforts to expand this model or initiate new on-Country planning processes.

Pilot Approach

The pilot approach led by the Banbai Rangers is a comprehensive initiative aimed at integrating Aboriginal knowledge and practice into land management and policy decision-making. This approach addresses significant knowledge gaps around Aboriginal Cultural values, particularly in areas where Aboriginal people have historically needed access or involvement in governance and custodianship.

The pilot encompasses several vital activities:

1. **Administrative and Leadership Engagement:** The Guyra Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) serves as the administrative body, with the Banbai Rangers taking the lead on the pilot. Expert consultants are engaged to provide local support, ensuring the pilot is grounded in local knowledge and expertise.
2. **Relationship Building:** Strengthening existing relationships with local land management agencies, landholders, and partners is a cornerstone of the pilot. This includes forming a coalition of support and identifying champions across various organisations to promote Aboriginal natural resource management (NRM) and whole-of-Country initiatives.
3. **Advisory Group Engagement:** A trusted Aboriginal advisory group is engaged in providing high-level advice and government support, ensuring the pilot is backed by solid governance structures and principles.

4. **Interagency Working Group Establishment:** A local interagency working group supports the Banbai Rangers by facilitating access to critical data and research, advising on Culturally appropriate processes, and building ownership of the on-Country plan.
5. **Workshop Delivery:** Workshops are conducted to identify Banbai values, engage stakeholders in mapping and planning, and develop investment strategies. These workshops are instrumental in capturing Community's vision and priorities.
6. **Scalability and Endurance:** Mechanisms are identified to ensure the pilot's processes and systems can be scaled up and made enduring. This includes the development of measurable Cultural indicators to monitor Cultural values on Banbai Country.
7. **Outcome Promotion:** The outcomes and advice of the on-Country pilot are promoted to strengthen Aboriginal-led NRM within the government, showcasing the pilot as a model for land management practices that could be applied more broadly.

Evaluation Purpose and Approach

Evaluation Purpose

This evaluation aims to conduct a process evaluation of the On-Country Planning Pilot with the Banbai Rangers, as commissioned by the Natural Resource Commission (NRC). The review aims to assess the implementation and outcomes of the pilot program, with two primary objectives: first, To identify the extent to which the pilot achieves its goals, and second, to identify opportunities for improvement and further investment by NSW Government (and others) in on-Country planning.

Methodology

In preparing the final report, our evaluation methodology was comprehensive, engaging stakeholders, scrutinising documents, and analysing data provided by the NRC. The approach was structured to address the Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) with rigour and depth.

We initiated our evaluation process with a visit to Banbai Country, followed by a desktop review and a series of online interviews, engaging a diverse group of stakeholders to capture a spectrum of perspectives and experiences. These conversations yielded rich qualitative insights essential to understanding the multifaceted nature of the program's implementation and its outcomes.

Complementing the interviews, our desktop research was exhaustive, closely examining program-related documents such as meeting minutes, communication strategies, and previous evaluation reports. The NRC provided documentation. This review allowed us to construct a narrative of the pilot's implementation and understand the strategic approaches employed.

To conduct analysis, Kowa crafted an evidence matrix as a categorical map for organising our qualitative findings, ensuring alignment with the KEQs while remaining open to emergent themes. This preparatory step was crucial for a systematic and thorough thematic analysis.

Our thematic analysis delved into the organised data to unearth patterns and distil findings that addressed the KEQs. We interpreted these patterns to reveal the program's impact, identifying areas of success and opportunities for improvement.

Finally, we synthesised our findings into a cohesive narrative. We chose a mixed presentation style, incorporating narrative summaries and visual representations to convey our findings clearly and effectively. The aim was to craft a report that was informative and accessible to a broad audience, ensuring that the insights gained could readily inform future actions and strategies.

This holistic approach to evaluation reflects our commitment to providing a nuanced understanding of the pilot's efficacy, challenges, and potential. Through careful consideration of stakeholder voices, diligent document analysis, and meticulous data interpretation, we have aimed to deliver a report that serves as a robust foundation for guiding future program directions and strategies.

Evaluation Limitations

As we present the findings of our evaluation, it is essential to approach the results with an understanding of the inherent limitations accompanying this project. In this section, we outline the constraints that have shaped the scope and depth of our analysis. By recognising these limitations, we maintain transparency and provide additional detail to contextualise our conclusions and provide a clear understanding of the factors that may have influenced the evaluation outcomes. This reflection is not intended to diminish the value of the work undertaken or the insights gained but rather to enhance the credibility of our evaluation by setting appropriate boundaries for the interpretation of our findings.

1. The data collected may cover only some aspects of the program or may omit perspectives from specific stakeholders. This could be due to limited access to particular groups, time constraints, or resource limitations preventing comprehensive data gathering. It's important to acknowledge that while the evaluation sought to be as inclusive as possible, there may be gaps in the data that could influence the findings.
2. The quality and reliability of data used in the evaluation could be affected by several issues, such as respondent bias, inaccuracies in self-reported information, or incomplete documentation. It's critical to consider how these factors might impact the analysis and to what extent the conclusions drawn can be trusted to represent the program's performance.
3. The timing of the evaluation may not align with the full realisation of the program's outcomes. Some impacts may only become apparent after an extended period.
4. Constraints on resources such as budget limited the evaluation's scope and depth. This limitation may affect the thoroughness of the data analysis, the extent of stakeholder engagement, and the overall comprehensiveness of the review.
5. The evaluation landscape is one of government, mainstream practice. The previous limitations speak to the undervaluing of Culturally appropriate evaluation practices. A MEL strategy should be developed to support NRC and others operating in a mainstream evaluation landscape to reconsider the purpose of evaluation and how it is conducted. MEL would support a practice of learning and reflection in real time as opposed to top down, desktop evaluation at the conclusion of a program.

Findings

This report synthesises the most critical findings from examining the NRC's on-Country approach, particularly within the context of the Banbai Rangers initiative. The following findings reflect on collective insights from interviews and document analysis, exploring the transformative impact of Aboriginal-led natural resource management. These findings are actionable insights that can inform policy, practice, and investment strategies to ensure such initiatives' sustained success and expansion.

"The whole journey is inspiring"¹

"There's lots of on-Country learning exercises going on around the country, and what's novel about this is it's been done in collaboration with a wide range of government agencies"²

The paramount findings from this report underscore the profound significance of Aboriginal knowledge and leadership in shaping sustainable and Culturally appropriate approaches to land management. Key among these is the critical role of agency building and confidence acceleration, ensuring Aboriginal communities are supported and authorised to lead, manage, and sustain their Country and initiatives. The pilot's approach to agency building and confidence acceleration is deeply tied to preserving Cultural heritage, as Cultural practices and traditional ecological knowledge are integral to the on-Country approach.

"... it's deeply embedded in history and knowledge of Country and that existing connection, that remnant connection that's left when Banbai has title and are looking after land that they own... I think it's a fantastic testament to their openness, their willingness to collaborate, their interest in building a future for their kids"³

Objective 1: The Pilot Approach

The on-Country planning pilot approach for Banbai Country represents a pioneering effort in Aboriginal-led land management and planning. The initiative, supported by a collaborative partnership including the Banbai Rangers, Guyra Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC), the Natural Resources Commission, Aboriginal Affairs NSW, NSW Local Land Services, NSW Forestry Corp, NPWS and the Department of Planning and Environment, has been designed to inform and raise awareness of traditional land management best practices. The pilot aims to create a Country-based plan that aligns with Banbai values and can attract public and private investment, addressing the aspirations of the Banbai people to manage their Country and Cultural values.

The pilot also focused on integrating Aboriginal knowledge in Cultural land management, drawing on practices honed since time immemorial. This approach not only manages the land effectively but also bridges significant knowledge gaps due to the historical lack of Aboriginal involvement in land custodianship and decision-making. The pilot model can be replicated

¹ Interview 5

² Interview 4

³ Interview 3

across Australia, demonstrating how Aboriginal knowledge and practice can be a critical input for policy and improved natural resource management outcomes.

Workshops and collaborative meetings have been vital components of the pilot, with stakeholders mapping out relationships, opportunities, and a vision for the future, including a 10-year plan with guiding principles to maintain relationships. The Banbai Rangers have actively participated in vision-setting exercises, crucial for creating a living document that reflects the Community's aspirations for their Country.

The pilot's progress is marked by completed tasks such as establishing on-Country administration and governance, engaging in mentoring and advisory group meetings, and developing project management systems. The planned outcomes include the presentation of a Whole of Country Plan, a film, and an artwork, aiming to encapsulate the journey and the achievements of the pilot project. Through these efforts, the pilot has laid the groundwork for a sustainable and Culturally informed approach to land management that can empower Aboriginal communities and influence broader environmental policies.

“..we can sort of help with that sort of advice. Really our aim is to make sure [Banbai] are in the driving seat and that they are comfortable with that”⁴”

An Aboriginal-led Paradigm in on-Country Management

The on-Country planning pilot was Aboriginal-led, with the Banbai Rangers partnering with the Guyra Local Aboriginal Council to deliver the pilot in northern NSW. It was designed to be carried out on-Country, which refers to the land to which Aboriginal peoples belong and their place of Dreaming. The approach enabled Aboriginal groups to express their vision, values, strategies, and actions for their Country. The Banbai Rangers managed two Aboriginal-owned properties, which are Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) in the northern NSW tablelands, where they could autonomously access, manage, protect, and share knowledge about their Cultural values in a Culturally safe environment. The pilot aimed to showcase how Aboriginal knowledge and practice could be used as a critical input for policy decision-making and improved natural resource management outcomes, providing a model that could be further applied or scaled up in the region or other areas of NSW.

“Every time they're involved. There was one particular instance where one of the kids was coming and drawing on the vision map. He drew the Granite Hills [that] are such a part of Banbai Country. And that triggered a whole conversation [and the child learnt] about weather and their altitude and the granite country. And so every time you bring that Cultural perspective to the process, all these other things open up”⁵”

The pilot was grounded in strong Aboriginal leadership, delivering outcomes reflective of the deep understanding of land and Cultural significance. The pilot represents a pioneering approach to an Aboriginal-led, on-Country natural resource management paradigm rooted in the rich tapestry of Aboriginal knowledge systems and the sovereign right to self-determination on traditional lands. Through stewardship, the integration of traditional knowledges, collaborative governance, recognition of sovereignty, and an open approach to challenges and

⁴ Interview 3

⁵ Interview 5

opportunities, the pilot has set a precedent for Aboriginal-led, on-Country natural resource management that is both empowering and sustainable.

“...it's getting us back out on Banbai Country that we could never get onto. Years ago, mate if you even looked over the fence, [landowners] would have had you up for trespassing. [Now, landowners] know that we want to protect Country; and for us to protect Country we need to get out on Country that we don't live on or work on every day, and they're actually opening the gates.”⁶

Stewardship and Cultural Custodianship

At the heart of the pilot was the Banbai Rangers' unwavering commitment to the custodianship of their Country. As managers of two Indigenous Protected Areas in the northern NSW tablelands, the Banbai Rangers have demonstrated their capacity to autonomously access, manage, and protect their Cultural values within a Culturally safe environment. This independent management approach is emblematic of the pilot's Aboriginal-led ethos, which was further reinforced by the involvement of Traditional Owners in crafting a Country-based plan. This plan, underpinned by the Banbai values, was designed to attract investment and address the aspirations of the Banbai people to manage their Country and Cultural values.

“The most significant [change] for me is the shift in some of the rangers and people connected with the program at Banbai, the Banbai people started to imagine what their Cultural future could be. This allowed them to go, how does managing Country connect with [our] vision of healthy Banbai Culture? And that's bigger than just the properties”⁷

Integration of Traditional Ecological Knowledge

A crucial component of the pilot's Aboriginal-led narrative was integrating Aboriginal knowledge into land management practices. The Banbai Rangers, through the Whole of Country Planning Pilot, showcased their deep-rooted Cultural land management practices, including Cultural burning, which have been honed over generations. The significance of these practices was brought to the forefront in the context of the 2019 fires, underscoring the necessity of Aboriginal leadership in managing Cultural values and protecting the environment.

“...a lot of people want us to go out surveying around their properties for sacred sites and endangered species and all those sorts of stuff. Which we already sort of do, but having people like that around our community who want to work with us to protect the environment, you know, like the animals, and to save our history, you know, it gives you that sense of pride in what you're doing.”⁸

Collaborative Governance and Agency Involvement

While the pilot was fundamentally Aboriginal-led, it was also characterised by a collaborative governance structure that included a cross-agency advisory group. This group, which included Aboriginal representatives from the Commission, NSW Aboriginal Affairs, Forestry Corporation of NSW, National Parks and Wildlife Services, and Local Land Services, provided a support

⁶ Interview 6

⁷ Interview 5

⁸ Interview 6

system for the Banbai Rangers. The presence of Euahlayi man and Research Fellow, Bhiemie Williamson, as the group chair further solidified the pilot's Aboriginal leadership.

"...one of the biggest changes is the understanding from different agencies about where Banbai is and what their goals are moving forward are... previously with the little amount of state forests that we do have in the Banbai area, NSW Forestry hasn't had a great deal to do with Banbai in that area but I think with the pilot program and working in with those and our leaseholders in certain areas in their Country, we have started to close those gaps of getting back on country..."⁹

Recognition of Sovereignty and Self-Determination

A pivotal theme throughout the pilot was the recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination. The pilot was not just about managing natural resources; it demonstrated the Banbai people's right to govern their lands, make decisions, and engage with stakeholders on their terms. The decision-making processes were reflective of a whole-of-Country planning and management approach, which allowed the Banbai people to express their vision and strategies for their land.

"...Aboriginal people, we have a completely different connection to Country than a lot of other people, spiritually and socially. {Having} Aboriginal people leading [the pilot and agencies collaborating have made a significant difference] because Aboriginal people and especially older Aboriginal people [are cautious] to pass their knowledge to a lot of other people, especially non-Aboriginal people. And I think that's a big barrier in the past but having an Aboriginal-led [approach], there's been a lot more of that sharing involved."¹⁰

Challenges and Opportunities

The pilot illuminated significant challenges encountered by the Banbai Rangers, highlighting the need for improved funding mechanisms for Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) and more robust succession planning. These challenges not only underscored critical areas for support but also opened avenues for learning and adaptation. The experiences and solutions identified throughout the pilot have been documented meticulously, providing invaluable insights that could enhance future Aboriginal-led initiatives.

Implementing Aboriginal-led management across government properties, IPAs, and private lands introduces a series of distinct challenges—ranging from bureaucratic obstacles and financial constraints to cultural misunderstandings. To overcome these issues effectively:

- **Regulatory Simplification:** It is essential to streamline complex regulatory frameworks to provide clearer, more accessible paths for Aboriginal initiatives to flourish.
- **Sustainable Funding:** Establishing consistent and diverse funding sources, including government grants and private donations, is crucial to support sustained management efforts.

⁹ Interview 4

¹⁰ Interview 4

- Cultural Integration: Promoting mutual understanding through comprehensive cultural sensitivity training can alleviate potential conflicts and foster cooperation between Aboriginal communities and other stakeholders.
- Knowledge Integration: Combining Aboriginal traditional knowledge with scientific methods in land management is vital. This can be achieved by forming interdisciplinary teams that respect and synthesise diverse perspectives, ensuring that management practices are both Culturally sensitive and scientifically sound.

Objective 2: The Banbai Investment Plan

The Banbai investment plan is integral to a broader initiative to empower the Banbai Community through Aboriginal-led land management. The plan is part of a pilot project funded by the Natural Resources Commission, designed to develop an on-Country plan for the entire Banbai clan estate. The Banbai Rangers, recognised for their successful management of the first Indigenous Protected Area in New South Wales, are driving this project with the support of Aboriginal leaders and various stakeholders.

Still, in its draft form, the investment plan is pivotal for building relationships and trust, which are foundational to the project's success. The Banbai Community has been engaged in a visioning process to articulate their long-term aspirations for their country and people. This process has involved the development of an artwork and a written vision that can be shared widely, ensuring that others understand the direction in which the Banbai are heading.

The Banbai investment plan is a critical step toward self-determination and reconciliation, aiming to increase Aboriginal involvement in land management decisions. It is anticipated that the effectiveness of this plan will serve as a model for other Aboriginal groups seeking to manage their lands and Cultural heritage. The plan's focus on Cultural authority, protocols, and aspirations significantly departs from government-led initiatives, offering a new pathway for community-driven land management.

Integration of Values and Management

Creating an investment plan that reflects the Banbai Community's values and management is essential to their environmental stewardship's long-term success and sustainability. The pilot produced an investment plan that was deeply informed by Banbai values and the management of these values. The plan's development was characterised by a strong emphasis on Cultural stewardship, collaborative design, long-term aspirations, responsiveness to Community needs, the potential for attracting support, and a commitment to future-focused evaluation. Integrating these themes into the investment plan demonstrates the pilot's success in creating a blueprint that reflects the Banbai Community's values and equips it to manage them effectively through strategic investment.

"[the whole approach] is rooted in Cultural values and knowledge of Country"¹¹

Prospects for Attracting Investment to the on-Country Plan

The investment plan for the on-Country plan has been designed to create resilience by offering more avenues for Banbai Community, allowing them to navigate the peaks and troughs of individual funding cycles. This approach suggests that the investment plan is comprehensive

¹¹ Interview 3

and forward-thinking, which could indeed make it attractive to potential investors and funding bodies but this is yet to be realised in the early stages.

Furthermore, the project emphasises the importance of working collaboratively with various stakeholders, including government agencies, private landholders, and other Aboriginal communities. This collaborative approach and the establishment of two-way relationships are likely to foster trust and shared responsibility, which could also appeal to investors who are looking for projects with strong Community engagement and partnership potential.

“It is too early [to demonstrate success of the investment plan]. But what it's done [is the] forge of different relationships between Banbai and various stakeholders. And those relationships are what will lead to practical outcomes.”¹²

The project's innovative methodologies, which are Culturally led and focused on engaging feelings as much as the mind, may also draw attention to their unique approach to environmental stewardship and Cultural revitalisation. The emphasis on Cultural values, emotional engagement, and the integration of Aboriginal knowledge into the project's objectives is a unique selling point to attract further investment. Additionally, the project's connection to broader issues, such as climate change and its potential role as a beacon of light for sustainable practices and reconciliation, could resonate with investors interested in funding initiatives with a positive environmental and social impact.

Overall, the investment plan's alignment with the Banbai Community's aspirations, its innovative approach to on-Country planning, and its potential to provide a model for other communities could make it an attractive opportunity for further investment to support the implementation of the on-Country plan. However, there is no explicit confirmation regarding the success of the investment plan in attracting additional investment.

Objective 3: Promoting Aboriginal Knowledge and Practice in Natural Resource Management

The pilot has effectively promoted and demonstrated Aboriginal knowledge and practice in natural resource management. Through the visible leadership of the Banbai Rangers, inclusive and participatory processes, careful documentation and dissemination of knowledge, addressing of knowledge gaps, focus on Cultural and socioeconomic outcomes, and a commitment to long-term sustainability, the pilot stands as an exemplary model. The pilot provided an opportunity to highlight a model that can be applied or scaled up across New South Wales, emphasising the importance of Aboriginal-led initiatives.

“[Aboriginal leadership has] been strong. [The] key change here is a power shift, because previously, we'd have different government stakeholders saying here's our business, this is the kind of stuff we do, what can you plug into and here's an opportunity for you. So it was Government dictating to Banbai. This is turning things around, and Banbai going out to all those stakeholders and even out to private landholders and saying, here's who we are; we want to work with you. We've got something in common, which is Banbai Country. And actually the powershift is saying we need you to come and fit with our vision¹³”

¹² Interview 2

¹³ Interview 5

The pilot was built upon previous case studies that explored Cultural values in forests with the Banbai Rangers and addressed significant knowledge gaps around Aboriginal Cultural values, notably where Aboriginal people needed access or involvement in management and custodianship. It aimed to increase Aboriginal participation in land management through whole-of-Country planning and management approaches, which was a key recommendation from the studies.

Furthermore, the pilot facilitated new partnerships and information exchange between Aboriginal people, government land management agencies, and experts. It also provided new opportunities for local Aboriginal people to manage and renew Cultural values throughout their Country and continue Cultural obligations.

The Banbai Rangers, as part of the pilot, were involved in Cultural burning practices, which are Traditional Aboriginal land management practices. This protected the land and served as a living Cultural practice with significant meaning for the Banbai peoples.

In terms of communication, a Communication Strategy was developed to convey messages regarding on-Country management and project outcomes to work with various stakeholders to protect Country for the future. The pilot also emphasised the reawakening of generations of Aboriginal land management knowledge through the program.

However, while the project demonstrated effective communication of Aboriginal values at the local level, there was an acknowledgment that showcasing these values and the pilot as a case study at a state level could have been better achieved. This suggests that while there were successes in communication and protection of values at the Community level, there was room for improvement in elevating this to a broader audience.

Communication Strategies and Cultural Narratives

One of the pilot's central achievements was developing and implementing a Communications Strategy to articulate and disseminate the Banbai messages concerning on-Country management and project outcomes. This strategy was a deliberate effort to ensure that the values and aspirations of the Banbai people were clearly understood and respected by all stakeholders involved. Aboriginal Affairs' collaboration with the Banbai Community in developing a press release was indicative of an active and thoughtful approach to communication that aimed to amplify the voice of the Banbai people.

Country-based Planning as Cultural Expression

The pilot fundamentally supported the Babai in meaningfully expressing their vision and values for their country through country-based planning and management. This approach provided a framework for Community to articulate their values in relation to the land, water, and biodiversity, irrespective of the legislative and ownership constraints that have been imposed since European arrival. The delivery of a Country-based plan was a testament to the Banbai people's leadership in communicating Cultural values in a structured and impactful manner.

...at two levels I've seen [Aboriginal leadership and Cultural expression]. At... state level with Aboriginal Affairs... i've seen them really driving some of those conversations... and putting forward their views on how to take it forward. But the thing I've really seen that's been... a real winning part of the program to see... is more reserved [people] actually putting forward some of their views

about the things that they're doing and that authenticity [in sharing stories about Culture and Country]. That's a really strong form of leadership"¹⁴

Decision-making for Policy and Natural Resource Management

The pilot's focus on decision-making underscored the Banbai Community's desire to take an active role in policy and natural resource management outcomes. The pilot highlighted Community's readiness and aspirations to influence and guide decision-making that aligns with Cultural values and environmental stewardship goals by demonstrating how Aboriginal knowledge and practice can be used as a critical input in these processes. This was evident in the pilot's rationale for involving Aboriginal people in land management to achieve better environmental, Cultural, and socioeconomic outcomes.

Protection through Active Land Management

The Banbai Rangers manage Indigenous Protected Areas autonomously, which allows them to protect and share knowledge about their Cultural values. This hands-on approach to land management serves as a direct method of value protection, ensuring that the Banbai can maintain their Cultural practices, such as traditional ecological knowledge and Cultural burning, on their terms. This protects the area's biodiversity and safeguards the Cultural heritage intricately linked to the land.

Involvement and Empowerment

The pilot illuminated the importance of involving Aboriginal people in the custodianship of their land and knowledges. By highlighting the knowledge gaps that exist when Aboriginal access, involvement or wisdom is limited, the pilot emphasised the need for increased Aboriginal leadership in land management, decision making and knowledge protection. The participation of the Banbai Rangers in the pilot, supported by a cross-agency advisory group, was a powerful example of how Aboriginal communities can be empowered to manage their lands effectively and protect their knowledges and values.

"Having the right people from the right groups is the key. That understand and have a vision... and everybody working together."¹⁵

Pilot Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the On-Country planning pilot is evidenced through several distinct yet interconnected facets that highlight its dynamic and holistic approach to Aboriginal-led land management:

Aboriginal-led Practice

The pilot is characterised by its flexible and natural progression, which allows for an Aboriginal-led and Culturally informed process. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and engagement in Community, emphasising the importance of incorporating Cultural elements into the planning process. This method is crucial for building a future that is both accountable to and reflective of Community values and aspirations. An Aboriginal-led approach has been

¹⁴ Interview 2

¹⁵ Interview 4

identified as acritical in ensuring that approaches remain on track and aligned with the values and intent as determined by Community.

Through an Aboriginal-led approach, the pilot successfully developed comprehensive on-Country plans encompassing the entire Community and their environmental context. The Banbai Rangers have been pivotal in effectively communicating Aboriginal values, ensuring these are interwoven throughout the Community's fabric. Although there is an opportunity to enhance visibility and impact at the state level, the foundational work within Community has been robust.

“...it's been a project where the outcomes for Community and the outcomes for government., at the start they wanted them to be quite the same but in reality, they're quite different. It's been positive throughout the project, particularly from [Aboriginal agency leads] who've always steered it back towards Community outcomes and focusing on what Banbai want from it and the opportunities that arise for them.”¹⁶

Scalability for Transformation

The pilot's framework and objectives are designed to be scalable and replicable, a testament to its foundational strength and adaptability. It is important to note that opportunity is evident in various regions around the state, suggesting the pilot's potential as a model for broader application. One of the pilot's significant achievements has been its ability to break down bureaucratic silos and foster a unified approach to support Aboriginal aspirations. By aligning various government departments around a shared vision, the pilot has facilitated a more integrated and cooperative framework for policy and action.

The scalability and transformation opportunity lies with government agencies, which now have a guide on how to partner differently with the Community.

“It's best practice for government and how government can support Community groups and organisations facilitate. and broker new partnerships. The emphasis is on the transformation of government rather than supporting outcomes for Community because they already had runs on the board; they had a track record with this stuff. There's new stuff as government that needed to change”¹⁷

Barriers and Enablers

The pilot project, led by the Banbai Rangers, has sought to embed Aboriginal knowledge and practices within the framework of natural resource management. The project has harnessed a range of enablers that have significantly contributed to achieving its objectives. Engaging a broad coalition of stakeholders, incorporating Aboriginal knowledge, coordinating across agencies, and maintaining a long-term sustainability focus has been pivotal in the pilot's advancement. Yet, the journey has not been without its challenges. Funding constraints, knowledge and access gaps, and complexities in monitoring and evaluation have emerged as barriers, providing lessons for future projects.

¹⁶ Interview 8

¹⁷ Interview 8

Enablers to Achieving the Objectives

Engagement and Collaboration The project has successfully engaged a diverse group of stakeholders, including Aboriginal communities, private landowners, government agencies, and NGOs. This collaborative effort has been fundamental to the pilot's progress, with evidence of participation seen in workshop attendance, meeting minutes, and feedback from stakeholders. Such engagement has fostered a spirit of cooperation, which has driven the project forward.

A significant enabler for the pilot has been the deliberate inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge and practices in decision-making processes. Through discussions, workshops, and interviews, Aboriginal perspectives have been actively sought and integrated into project plans, emphasising the value and importance of this knowledge in managing natural resources.

The pilot has facilitated coordination between multiple government agencies involved in natural resource management. This enabler is evident in the creation of joint project reports and coordination plans, which underscore the effectiveness of inter-agency collaboration and the project's ability to bring together various stakeholders towards a common goal.

“one of the main things that I've seen is it's been an opportunity [for] people at various agencies at that State level to refine some of those opportunities to share and the other thing is hearing from the Rangers themselves about some of the things that they've been doing and driving on Country which helps inform how we do things better”¹⁸

“at more of state level what it has done is it's got people to reconnect and start talking about those opportunities at a senior level again. Now, that's a bit broad and it's not very specific but that's one of the things I have seen people who perhaps haven't spoken together for a while and thought about how they might progress some of these and make those connections again”¹⁹

Focusing on long-term sustainability strategies has proven to be a crucial enabler for the pilot. The development of project documents that outline plans for securing investment and sustainable revenue streams, such as advocacy materials and partnership agreements, has contributed to the robustness and future-proofing of the pilot.

Barriers to Undertaking the Pilot

Despite the presence of enablers, the pilot faced challenges that included funding issues for Indigenous Protected Areas and the need for better succession planning. These barriers have been documented through project reports, budget reviews, and stakeholder interviews, providing valuable lessons for future initiatives.

The pilot identified significant knowledge gaps (in the mainstream setting) around Aboriginal Cultural values, especially in areas where Aboriginal people had limited access or involvement in management. These gaps have led to suboptimal environmental, Cultural, and socioeconomic outcomes, underscoring the need to increase Aboriginal involvement through whole-of-Country planning.

¹⁸ Interview 2

¹⁹ Interview 2

Assessing the pilot's monitoring and evaluation plans to track progress and outcomes over time presented a barrier. The challenge lay in ensuring that monitoring tools, evaluation frameworks, and data collection methods were appropriately designed, resourced and implemented to capture the pilot's impact effectively.

...the KPIs at the start [have] changed throughout the project. [Would be better if] evaluation methodology was outlined from the start..."²⁰

Recommendations

Recommendations for Transforming NRC Practice

Based on the experiences and outcomes from the Banbai On-Country Planning Pilot, we have identified key areas where strategic adjustments could enhance the efficiency and impact of similar projects undertaken by the Natural Resource Commission (NRC) in the future. The following recommendations come with the foundation that there is immediate opportunity for simply shifting approach and transforming the existing way of working for many government and non-Aboriginal agencies and organisation.

“...you bring in Environment NSW, you're bringing in Local Land Services, you're bringing in Parks NSW and whatnot, it's like trying to get them in the room to have a conversation with Banbai Mob about how they can support them. Nothing stops those government agencies not doing that anyway. You don't need a project for government agencies to come knocking on Ranger or Communities door and say, how can we work together? what support can we provide you? The whole [pilot] exposes that mentality of government [and this way of working] not being not the usual way.”

Expand Community Involvement

Greater Community engagement throughout the project lifecycle enhances both the legitimacy and the sustainability of outcomes. Future initiatives should consider the following:

- Early Involvement: Engage Community members from the conceptual stages of the project to ensure that their perspectives and needs shape the project objectives.
- Continuous Feedback: Establish a structured feedback mechanism that operates throughout the project lifecycle to integrate ongoing community insights and adapt the project dynamically.

Increase Investment in Cultural Practices

Cultural practices are vital for the authenticity and depth of natural resource management; increased investment can strengthen these elements. Future initiatives should consider the following:

- Dedicated Funding: Allocate a specific percentage of the project budget to the preservation and integration of cultural practices.
- Cultural Officers: Employ cultural officers within the NRC to oversee and implement cultural aspects of on-Country projects effectively.

Enhance Policy Support

Enhanced policy backing can provide stronger support frameworks for Aboriginal-led initiatives.

- Policy Advocacy: Actively pursue modifications in national conservation policies to include provisions for Aboriginal-led management.

- Policy Workshops: Organise workshops between policymakers and Aboriginal leaders to facilitate better understanding and integration of community-led strategies.

Strengthen Evaluation Mechanisms

Robust evaluation frameworks are crucial for assessing effectiveness and guiding ongoing improvements. Future evaluation requires a detailed UMEL strategy and should be conducted and led by local organisations and peoples.

- UMEL Tools: Develop and utilise advanced UMEL approaches that provide real-time data on project progress and Community satisfaction, allowing for rapid adaptation and implementation
- Iterative Learning: Implement a systematic approach for iterative learning based on evaluation results, ensuring continuous project refinement.

The lessons learned from the Banbai On-Country Planning Pilot provide the NRC with a valuable foundation for improving future Aboriginal-led natural resource management projects. By implementing these enhanced strategies, focusing on proactive community involvement, and strengthening support systems, the NRC can significantly boost the effectiveness and reach of these initiatives. These improvements will not only foster better environmental outcomes but also build stronger, more resilient Aboriginal communities through enhanced cultural and resource stewardship.