
Country Report

**Indigenous Protected Areas in Australia
– A Role to Play in the UN’s Decade for Sustainable Development –**

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Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) are lands provided to and managed by Indigenous groups to promote biodiversity and cultural resource conservation in Australia. In November 1999 Victoria’s first IPA was declared. Deen Maar occupies 453 ha in the State’s south-west and was previously seriously degraded pastoral land that had been over-grazed and had many weeds and pests. However, Deen Maar also has extensive wetlands and saltmarshes that are of international conservation significance. The land also has deep cultural significance for local Indigenous peoples. Deen Maar is undergoing extensive revegetation. A biodiversity audit of the property has been conducted; this showed the property’s importance for conservation of many threatened species. Bird hides have been built and accommodation for visitors established. IPAs must generate income; accordingly 12 wind turbines have been erected. As well, cropping occurs and cattle are grazed on improved pasture that has been fenced. The Indigenous owners of the land are keen for Deen Maar to be an educational resource and will be encouraging student visits and research projects. It thus represents a resource for environmental education within a culturally significant context. The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development aims to “encourage changes in behaviour that will create a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society for present and future generations.” Deen Maar’ goals are certainly in line with these sentiments.

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The UNDESD aims to “encourage changes in behaviour that will create a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society for present and future generations” (UNESCO, 2009). Thus the focus is on education that will bring about behavioral change that will, in turn, produce effective environmental outcomes, economic certainty and adjust society.

In this paper I describe UNDESD’s relevance to Australia’s Indigenous population and a scheme that aims to provide Indigenous communities – who are regarded as disadvantaged in many respects – with the opportunity to contribute significantly to biodiversity conservation, environmental improvement, cultural conservation while at the same time, generating valuable income.

Indigenous Protected Areas in Australia

Europeans settled in Australia relatively recently; it is widely held that the first European contact with Aborigines was by Englishman William Dampier in 1688 (Flannery, 1994). Settlement occurred in Sydney Cove in 1788. However, Aborigines have lived in Australia for around 50,000 years with some estimates suggesting 60-70,000 (Flannery, 1994). While conventional view has it that Aborigines lived in harmony with their environment, carefully managing its natural resources through fire management and migratory activities (e.g. DEWHA, 2008), there is a growing view that Indigenous peoples had a significant effect on the megafauna and habitats through hunting and fire that changed landscapes significantly (e.g. Flannery, 1994).

There is strong recognition that Aboriginal communities are some of the most disadvantaged in Australia, especially in terms of health (their life expectancy is far below that of other groups), employment and living conditions. In the 1990s there was a strong push to acknowledge not only Aboriginal's great understanding of natural lands and biodiversity, but also acknowledgement that they were entitled to ownership of crown lands in which they had experienced a long and continuous association. There thus emerged pressure to provide Indigenous Australians with lands they could manage in their own way to 'care for their country' and thus protect the natural and cultural assets. In the late 1990s a new category of protected lands was thus established by the Australian Government, called *Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs)* which became an important addition to Australia's National Reserve System (see <http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/nrs/index.html>).

The goals of the Indigenous Protected Areas element of the Caring for our Country initiative are to:

1. Support Indigenous land owners to develop,

declare and manage IPAs on their lands as part of Australia's National Reserve System.

2. Support Indigenous interests to develop cooperative management arrangements with Government agencies managing protected areas.
3. Support the integration of Indigenous ecological and cultural knowledge with contemporary protected area management practices (DEWHA, 2008).

In 1997 a conference of Indigenous people described IPAs as follows:

- An Indigenous Protected Area is governed by the continuing responsibilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to care for and protect lands and waters for present and future generations.
- Indigenous Protected Areas may include areas of land and waters over which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are custodians, and which shall be managed for cultural biodiversity and conservation, permitting customary sustainable resource use and sharing of benefit.
- This definition includes land that is within the existing conservation estate, that is or has the ability to be cooperatively managed by the current management agency and the traditional owners (DEWHA, 2009).

A 2006 review of the IPA program by the Director of New South Wales National Parks & Wildlife Service, Brian Gilligan, described the IPA program as the nation's "most successful innovation in Indigenous conservation" (Gilligan, 2006). To celebrate the decade of achievements of the IPA program, the Commonwealth's Department of Environment & Water Resources published *Growing Up Strong*, which includes discussion of Victoria's first IPA, Deen Maar (DEWR, 2006).

Deen Maar – a Case Study of an IPA

Deen Maar is a 453 ha property in south west Victoria that was purchased by the Framlingham Aboriginal Trust in 1993. The land has

deep cultural significance for the local Indigenous people (the Gunditjmarra). Firstly, it is believed that when Bunjil, the Creator, had completed his tasks in making the world, he ascended from Deen Maar Island (Lady Julia Percy is) nearby. Secondary, on Deen Maar mainland, it is also possible to have direct visual contact with many important sites – the Island, as well as volcanic mountains/ hills such as Mt Eccles, Gariwerd and Tower Hill. Such high spots were important for communication between Aboriginal groups who would signal to each other using smoke from fires. Thirdly, Deen Maar is the site of the infamous Eumerella wars in which many Aboriginals were killed by white settlers. Finally, there is evidence that local Aboriginals spent much time on the coast at Deen Maar, collecting and eating shellfish, birds and fish from the productive shoreline and estuary.

There is a diversity of habitats at Deen Maar, including sand dune communities, limestone ridges, a river, lakes and extensive wetlands and saltmarshes.

From the mid 1800s the property was used for grazing. The wetlands were drained and native vegetation cleared. Overgrazing by stock was exacerbated by rabbit grazing and weeds became abundant. Productivity was very low.

Since its purchase by the Framlingham Aboriginal Trust, the land has slowly undergone an amazing transformation. There has been extensive weed removal and planting of native vegetation to recreate original habitats.

In 2008 I conducted an audit of flora and fauna at Deen Maar. The site contains species of conservation significance, such as the Orange-bellied Parrot *Neophyma chrysogaster* which is critically endangered at both a state and national level. It also has numerous species of waterbirds of conservation significance, especially Magpie Geese (*Anseranas semipalmata*) and Egrets (3 species). One frog and several fish species are also of conservation significance.

Over 110 species of birds have been recorded at the site.

Even though the property is not large, Murphy (1999) described 10 vegetation communities at the site. Importantly, a native shrub is expanding rapidly and has been declared an ‘environmental weed’.

The declaration of Deen Maar IPA in July 1999 was made under World Conservation Union (IUCN) Category VI – Managed Resource Protected Areas: Protected Area managed mainly for the sustainable use of natural ecosystems (see <http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/ucn.html> for a description of the categories). Murphy (1999) noted that the IUCN defines such a category as an “area containing predominantly unmodified natural systems, managed to ensure long term protection and maintenance of biological diversity, while providing at the same time a sustainable flow of natural products and services to meet community needs” (HORSCERA, 1993). Objectives of management for these areas outlined by the IUCN are to:

- protect and maintain the biological diversity and other natural values of the area in the long term,
- promote sound management practices for sustainable production purposes,
- protect the natural resource base from being alienated for other land-use purposes that would be detrimental to the area’s biodiversity; and contribute to regional and national development (HORSCERA, 1993, p26).

Such a categorization enables the land owners to undertake activities that can generate income which, in turn, can be used to finance the conservation management actions that are required. There are three main ways the owners currently generate income:

- i) cropping on improved pasture and some cattle grazing,
- ii) leasing land for wind-turbines to generate electricity,
- iii) ecotourism and cultural tourism.

Deen Maar represents an excellent educational resource. The Framlingham Aboriginal Trust recently purchased a former primary school in nearby Yambuck and have converted the building to a 'backpackers' hostel. Students and community members can enjoy kayak trips along the Eumerella River and bird watching (using hides built by the Trust), learn about Aboriginal history and culture, study the effects of weed and pest removal, study succession, and enjoy beach activities. In terms of the UN-DESD, Deen Maar meets the requirements as a venture that aims to improve environmental quality while at the same time generating sufficient income for the property's objectives to be realized in the long-term. Certainly, by supporting economic independence of a severely disadvantaged part of the community and helping preserve their cultural heritage, Deen Maar is making a positive contribution toward achieving a just society for present and future generations.

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Figure 1 View of Deen Maar looking south towards coastal secondary dunes bearing wind turbines. Between the foreground of tussocks and grasses and the dunes is a dried out wetland that fills during winter.



Figure 2 Magpie Geese at Deen Maar. These birds had been lost from southern Australia because of overhunting and habitat loss, but have been successfully re-introduced into areas such as Deen Maar.



Figure 3 Wetland view from one of the recently constructed bird hides.



Figure 4 Extensive erosion caused by introduced European Rabbits.



Figure 5 Successful revegetation with plants that are indigenous to the area. This site was once overgrazed, cleared pasture.



Figure 6 A group of university students studying Environmental Planning at Deen Maar, being addressed by Framlingham Aboriginal Community members, including distinguished Elder, Lionel Harradine, second from left.