

We respectfully acknowledge the Kabi Kabi and Jinibara peoples, and their Elders both past and present, who are the Traditional Owners and custodians of the country on which this research took place.

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## Notes

# In this sense, "country" means the family origins and associations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and particular areas of Australia.

^ A "Welcome to Country" is a ceremony performed by Traditional Owners or custodians, usually at the beginning of a special event or meeting, to welcome visitors to their traditional land. Welcome to Country ceremonies should always be paid.

\* "Sorry business" is a term used to refer to the death of a family or group member and the mourning process. Attending funerals and other mourning activities are important for maintaining relationships and ensuring that the spirit of the person that has passed away is put to rest.

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Bunya Bunya Country  
Aboriginal Corporation



# Indigenous land management in Australia: Bunya Bunya Country Aboriginal Corporation

## Background

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been "caring for country"<sup>#</sup> for thousands of years and continue to do so through Indigenous land and sea management (ILM)<sup>1,2</sup>. There are several hundred ILM groups operating across Australia. These groups are the key providers of land management services in remote and regional areas. Until recently, less was known about ILM in urban landscapes such as the Sunshine Coast. Bunya Bunya Country Aboriginal Corporation (BBCAC) is an award winning group of Kabi Kabi Traditional Owners, Australian South Sea Islanders and historically-connected Aboriginal people who live and work on Kabi Kabi country, the Sunshine Coast, which is a place of rapid population growth and environmental change. In 2014-15, researchers from the University of the Sunshine Coast together with BBCAC examined the roles, challenges, and opportunities for ILM on the Sunshine Coast.

## Key findings

BBCAC work in a variety of roles, particularly when partnering with other land user groups to manage complex environmental issues. Significant challenges to their work include poor cross-cultural engagement with decision-makers and barriers to appropriate, long-term funding and resources. There are opportunities to overcome these challenges including Indigenous-driven approaches to land management, hybrid economies, and new decision-making tools.

### Challenges:

- Urban development and rapid population growth such as development on cultural heritage sites, problems with pollution and erosion
- Limited access to funding and resources, particularly access to land and infrastructure, and high competition for public funding
- Poor governance mechanisms such as limited action on ILM issues that require collaboration, or decision-makers not talking to the right people
- Lack of cultural and environmental awareness, from poor recognition and respect for Traditional Owners to a lack of environmental stewardship among society

### Opportunities:

- Supporting Indigenous-driven approaches to land management through Indigenous Ranger groups
- Communicating Indigenous knowledge and values in decision-making processes through "boundary objects"
- Developing more sustainable economies through eco-cultural tourism, beginning with the establishment of an eco-cultural education centre





## Challenges and opportunities for Indigenous land management on the Sunshine Coast

### Eco-cultural tourism

BBCAC use a “hybrid economy” approach to overcome funding and resource barriers when managing erosion and water quality in the Maroochy River. A hybrid economy means a combination of customary, private and public economies to obtain funding and resources to support projects<sup>3</sup>. For example, BBCAC share equipment with another local community group to monitor water quality, and they complement public grants for their revegetation work with private funding from their plant nursery sales.

Other hybrid economies could be developed through eco-cultural tourism on the Sunshine Coast. Eco-cultural tourism involves drawing tourists to places for their ecological and cultural values, for educational, entertainment, and community development purposes. There are several benefits to this opportunity such as increased cultural and environmental awareness in the community, ongoing employment opportunities, and intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge and skills. Some forms of eco-cultural tourism already exist on the Sunshine Coast such as places with interpretive signage, guided cultural landscape tours and river cruises. However, more support is needed to help Aboriginal groups operate such activities on a regular basis in terms of land tenure, training, education and infrastructure. One way to address these barriers is to establish a cultural education centre and central keeping-place for Kabi Kabi artefacts. Many community-based organisations already recognise the need for a cultural education centre on the Sunshine Coast as a place to deliver youth leadership and cultural awareness programs, and address issues such as social isolation and unemployment<sup>4, 5</sup>. Open discussions between BBCAC, other local Aboriginal groups, tourism operators and agencies are needed to explore the ways in which such an industry can be developed sustainably.

### Indigenous Rangers

BBCAC are supportive of opportunities for local Aboriginal peoples to plan and implement land management strategies on country. One approach is to utilise the national Working on Country program to establish groups of Indigenous Rangers across the Sunshine Coast. Research is needed to explore how best to establish Indigenous Ranger groups on the Sunshine Coast, including analysis of factors such as the appropriate number of groups, wages, cross-cultural engagement and operational costs, infrastructure and resource needs. There are six funded Indigenous Ranger groups in SE Qld and northern NSW, lessons learned from these groups may be able to assist with this research.

### Improved cross-cultural communication

Between 2014 and 2015 BBCAC volunteered over 1200 hours in meetings with other community groups and Government agencies to plan cultural and environmental projects. Members also regularly perform Welcome to Country<sup>6</sup> ceremonies and have participated in cultural awareness tours for reconciliation. Throughout this work, BBCAC have experienced a general lack of cultural and environmental awareness among stakeholders, which is a key challenge to communicating their needs as land managers.

Aboriginal peoples’ knowledge, values and responsibilities to country are often marginalised from decision-making processes<sup>7</sup>. A shift in the mindset and approaches of non-Indigenous Australians is required to enable increased involvement of Aboriginal peoples, knowledge and methods in land management decisions<sup>8</sup>. Such a shift can be facilitated through the use of a “boundary object<sup>9</sup>”, a tool to communicate Aboriginal knowledge and values in decision-making processes with other groups and non-Indigenous agencies. A boundary object could be a document (such as that being developed by BBCAC), an artwork, map or some other object. Development of boundary objects, by and for Aboriginal peoples, presents an opportunity to reverse and decolonise decision-making processes, enabling a more Indigenous-driven approach to engagement<sup>10</sup>.

### How can we better support Indigenous land managers?

Australia is internationally obligated to acknowledge Indigenous peoples right to their traditional lands, territories and resources, to maintain and strengthen their spiritual relationships to such areas, and uphold this responsibility to future generations. Individuals and groups can do this by:

- Including local Traditional Owners and custodians in all decision-making processes that have the potential to impact their traditional lands, waters and connection to country – beyond identifying and protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage
- Engaging all partners in land management in a way that fosters cross-cultural awareness, by acknowledging and respecting the moral economies of Aboriginal societies (e.g. Sorry Business<sup>\*</sup>), their Lore, values and knowledge

Indigenous land management groups are diverse, so it is best to ask them in what way they would like to be supported. Support may be financial or other means such as sharing resources like equipment or administrative assistance.



Photo credit: Helen Jones and Norm Morwood