

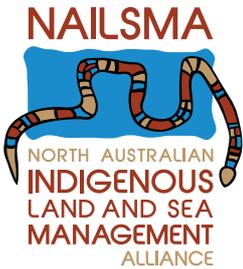


National Environmental
Research Program

NORTHERN AUSTRALIA HUB

Partnerships help wetland health

RESEARCHERS ARE WORKING ALONGSIDE INDIGENOUS RANGERS TO
ACHIEVE HEALTHY COUNTRY OUTCOMES IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA.



Peter Liddy is a Traditional Owner on Lama Lama country in far north Queensland. He has a long spiritual connection with his country and brings a wealth of knowledge to his role as a ranger. His work allows him to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, who is buried on the land.

“I get visits from him now and then, he sort of encouraged me to stay down here, you know, be part of the country like he is,” he said.

“They were, sort of, really strong in their way. You know, they didn’t know about pest plants and that, but now we know about it we start doing something about it, looking after the land...”

Special places

Northern Australia is home to enormously diverse and plentiful wetlands, many of which have thankfully escaped the impacts of large-scale developments. These freshwater habitats in Cape York are of high cultural significance to the Lama Lama people; providing a connection to country.

“A lot of our lagoons around here are sacred sites ... and all of our bush tucker comes from around this place too, even the medicines we’ve got around lagoons,” Peter Liddy said.

The ecological health of wetlands is, however, being put at risk by threats including feral mammals, weeds, grazing and historical small-scale mining activities. Managing these threats is a high priority for the Lama Lama Rangers.

Unique opportunities

The growing workforce of Indigenous land and sea rangers represents an unprecedented opportunity to better manage and monitor biodiversity across northern Australia. While rangers across the north undertake critical on-ground management actions such as feral animal control, often there is little or no baseline data against which they can measure their success.

Valuable data is now being generated through ongoing freshwater monitoring. For over three years, the Yintjingga Aboriginal Corporation’s Lama Lama Rangers have been working together with researchers and other experts to develop new tools to keep track of, and better manage wetland health.

This has been an opportunity not only for the rangers to gain valuable expertise, but for the researchers to learn about freshwater places from local people who have relied on these sites for food, clean drinking water, and spiritual fulfilment for thousands of years.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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“It’s just like, you’re learning my way and I’m learning your way.”

PETER LIDDY

PREVIOUS PAGE: A HEALTHY WETLAND ON LAMA LAMA COUNTRY.
 ABOVE: RESEARCHER CHRISTY DAVIES WORKS WITH RANGERS JOHN GRAHAM AND BRYAN KULKA TO MONITOR WETLAND HEALTH.
 BELOW: RESEARCHER JESSIE PRICE SITS WITH RANGERS LEON AND PETER LIDDY (RIGHT) WHO TAKE PRIDE IN MANAGING THEIR TRADITIONAL COUNTRY.
 ALL PHOTOS MICHAEL LAWRENCE-TAYLOR.

Tradition meets science

The rangers have partnered with the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance Ltd (NAILSMA), local natural resource management group South Cape York Catchments, and experts from Griffith University, with funding under the Australian Government’s National Environmental Research Program, to better meet their wetland management needs, primarily through an improved capacity to monitor wetland condition.

The result has been the development of a rapid assessment technique to assess the condition of their wetlands, which is supported by a customised ‘I-Tracker’ application created using world-renowned CyberTracker software.

Short for Indigenous Tracker, the I-Tracker program is an initiative of NAILSMA that was developed in response to requests from Indigenous land and sea managers for culturally appropriate and scientifically robust tools to record, analyse and map data.

NAILSMA Executive Chair Peter Yu says too often in the past, data was collected about Indigenous people and their land, but remained inaccessible to them.

“The I-Tracker program is a commitment to ensuring that knowledge and data remain in Indigenous hands and can be used to address their priorities,” he said.

The software is coupled with field-tough hardware, ideal for use in remote areas.

“These tools improve the way people can collect and manage both natural and cultural information. Looking ahead, it will allow rangers to continue to monitor their wetlands, without scientists or experts coming out to help them,” Peter Yu said.



Positive signs

Feral pigs are especially problematic to the health of wetlands on Lama Lama country. They dig up soil in their hunt for food and damage large areas in the process. Wetlands that used to hold water most of the year were drying up much more quickly due to substrate disturbance. Wildfires, grazing and water extraction for road maintenance were also impacting some areas.

To combat these impacts, the rangers have been fencing off some wetland areas from pigs and other feral animals, and have been monitoring the changes since. Peter Liddy says the results have been encouraging.

“When we first did our assessment, we were doing it in the middle of the lagoon, because it was bone dry. But it’s real good now, there’s water holding every year.”

Looking ahead

Long-term results from this freshwater case study, as well as another case study on Nyul Nyul country in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, will help shape and inform local freshwater policy and allow for more informed management of these resources.

Through this collaborative work, the rangers have become more skilled in scientific monitoring and data management. Ongoing work will generate baseline data which can then be used to detect changes resulting from future management actions such as feral animal control.

Peter Yu says the Lama Lama case study is a fine example of Western science and traditional knowledge systems working hand in hand to achieve sustainable conservation and management outcomes across northern Australia.

“By working together, we can build on our contributions to a resilient and thriving future that benefits the entire community.”

