

# YIRRALKA RANGERS SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES



National Environmental  
Research Program

NORTHERN AUSTRALIA HUB

CSIRO RESEARCHER **MARCUS BARBER** HAS BEEN INVESTIGATING THE WIDER COMMUNITY BENEFITS OF THE YIRRALKA RANGER PROGRAM IN BLUE MUD BAY, NORTH EAST ARNHEM LAND.

Travel about 1000 kilometres in an easterly direction by road from Darwin and you'll find the homeland community Baniyala, situated in Blue Mud Bay, in north east Arnhem Land. The extremely remote homeland was established in the early 1970s as the home of the Maḍarrpa clan of the Yolngu people. As well as a school and shop, the community also has a ranger station, which is the base for the 10 Indigenous rangers employed by the Yirralka Ranger program. On any given day, you might find a group of women rangers grinding leaves from native trees to make bush soap while at the same time a group of men is keeping a close eye on the coast, looking out for illegal fishing activity. Though distinctively different activities, these groups not only share a uniform, but a goal: looking after their country.

The Indigenous Cultural and Natural Resource Management (ICNRM) sector is continuing to grow rapidly in Australia. The Yirralka Rangers deliver essential services to their community by managing and protecting environmental and cultural values on their homeland. These programs have been mostly supported for their environmental outcomes, however, the ranger program brings multiple benefits such as improved health and well-being which will be of interest to policy makers.

The full extent of the wider social, cultural, and economic benefits to the local community of rangers living in their homelands has not been assessed, until now. For the past three years CSIRO researchers, funded under the Australian Government's National Environmental Research Program have been working with the Yirralka Rangers, in an effort to understand the wider benefits of their activities. The results of the research are found in a report called 'Rangers in Place', as well as in a community-generated documentary called 'Let's care for this country'.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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Previous page: Rangers on sea patrol and removing ghost nets. Photos throughout Marcus Barber and Ishmael Marika.

## Origins of the rangers

The Yirralka Rangers were established in 2003 as one of a series of initiatives developed by Blue Mud Bay communities (particularly Baniyala) to better protect their country, especially against commercial fishing activities. A second initiative was a court case, which in 2008 saw Blue Mud Bay Traditional Owners awarded formal High Court recognition of their rights to the intertidal zone. This set a precedent for Indigenous coastal land across the entire Northern Territory. One Baniyala resident and Traditional Owner explained how the struggle for coastal rights and coastal management responsibilities are intertwined.

“[The court case] was launched here because of the fishermen going in to kill all the totems for Yolngu people, or to enter the sacred areas without knowing or without permission. That is why we need to protect the country with this [ranger] program. It is coming from the sea rights, following on from that.”

The Yirralka Rangers now have over 50 staff living in 17 homeland communities, of which Baniyala is just one. Collectively, these rangers manage the 17,000 square kilometres of the Laynhapuy Indigenous Protected Area (IPA). Caring for the landscape and its people is an enormous and admirable task. The activities are diverse: coastal and sea country patrols, removing ghost nets, biodiversity monitoring, weed management and fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer are all among the key goals.

## The community's experience

Previous work has already pointed to a number of significant benefits associated with ICNRM, including: improved physical and mental health outcomes; social benefits such as improved family structures; the mitigation of racism; and economic and livelihood benefits. While these benefits are clearly identifiable through existing studies, the evidence remains small, and is classified in different ways by different studies. To build a better picture of the wider outcomes produced by ranger activities, the researchers interviewed not only ranger staff, but their families and wider-community residents.

From the outset, there were a number of obvious benefits including; physical health from increased exercise, as well as economic benefits such as additional income and employment

stability. Although significant, increased income came second to the primary goal of caring for country as the key benefit of the program for those interviewed.

“When I got that job, my family was proud. The money was second. They were really happy someone was looking after Gurkawuy,” said one Yirralka-based Ranger.

“They [the rangers] are doing it for the future. Because those young ones who are coming, they will learn about this country, they will learn about the sea and the patterns and the designs, all the stories, it is all written here. I think it is really important—we are doing it for the future,” said a homeland community elder.

Psychological benefits, such as increased confidence and pride, also took precedence over physical ones.

“Being a ranger, working as a ranger has been very enjoyable, I enjoy it very much, being a ranger, I suppose, you are feeling you are giving something back to the community, to the people of this country,” said one homeland-based Yirralka Ranger.

## Keeping culture alive

The Yirralka Ranger program is largely compatible with Indigenous cultural principles of landscape management and protection. This includes the ability for rangers to acquire and share important cultural and customary knowledge. One homeland-based Yirralka Ranger explained that the program is essential to ensuring cultural continuity.

“That is the most important—the ranger program as a structure for learning, for passing on the cultural values.”

The program also reinforces key social and community principles by distinguishing both gender roles and aged-based ones, thereby reflecting existing cultural conventions. At its inception, the program was staffed by male rangers, but the role of female rangers has grown considerably since then.

“In terms of the men and women, some of the projects are together, some are separate. It is good to have both. They worked together doing lots of work around the ranger station—the women doing the nursery and cleaning up, the men doing other jobs like cutting the lawn,” said one homeland-based Yirralka Ranger.



### Living in the homeland

Many of the rangers work in the homelands where they are also Traditional Owners. Community elders say that to be truly settled in one place, you also need to work there. This allows rangers to not only look after their home, but to fulfil ongoing cultural obligations and foster relationships with family.

“I have a purpose to stay here. My family is here, I have a good job, a good environment,” said one homeland-based Yirralka Ranger.

“When you are living in the big townships, there are a lot of negative things happening, and personally I prefer living here in the homeland. Living in the homeland gives us more freedom, and a healthy country is a healthy life,” said another homeland-based Yirralka Ranger.

A key aspect of the benefits the ranger program brings comes from this local residence. Formal education and training, opportunities to travel, and future employment opportunities also broaden social skills, including the ability to interact cross-culturally.

“We need to know how to work with people who are not respecting the Yolngu law. We have to look at visitors, what they need, what kind of people they are,” said a former Head Ranger.

### Governance and cooperation

Contemporary Yolngu political life reflects both local autonomy and regional cooperation. A ranger steering committee provides opportunities for locals to gain experience in governance, planning and strategic decision making, while governance by elders in homeland communities reflects local independence. The benefits of improved confidence and pride, as well as the origins of the program, help cement local feelings of independence.

“Whoever—people, community, leaders—they see and support it [the program]. Wherever the rangers come up with ideas, the facilitators help us. They help us, but we built it,” said one homeland-based Yirralka Ranger.

### Future implications

It’s clear the benefits derived from the Yirralka Rangers, though often interconnected, are far-reaching. Maintaining and improving these benefits will help the rangers to continue their valuable work and keep their communities happy and healthy. A full understanding of the values of Indigenous ranger programs can also help governments to better design policy and make smarter investments in Indigenous communities in future.

Female Yirralka Rangers making soap at Baniyala ranger station.

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A day in the life of Yirralka Rangers and their love for the job is highlighted in a new documentary, ‘Let’s care for this country’. The film is co-directed and co-written by the Yirralka Rangers and the Blue Mud Bay community of Baniyala and is intended for a wider audience. It highlights the importance of the ranger program to the community, the diversity of Ranger roles, participation in traditional Yolngu practices, and the beauty of the country they live and work in. The film is free from <https://vimeo.com/133308877>