

Case study

Martu Living Deserts Project



Minyawe Miller, Punmu elder and ranger, teaches the younger generations about right way waru (fire). 'Right-way' waru is important in keeping Martu country healthy. Traditional Martu burning practices are an essential part of Martu management of their ngurra (country).

Photographer: Ben Deslandes, KJ

A highly significant area

Martu lands in Western Australia are part of the most intact arid ecosystem anywhere on Earth. Spanning 13.6 million hectares, an area larger than England, these lands are home to many of Australia's most threatened species, including the greater bilby, the black-flanked rock wallaby and the brush-tailed mulgara. Martu lands extend across parts of three deserts – the Great Sandy Desert, Little Sandy Desert and Gibson Desert. The remoteness of the lands means that there has been little development and the country remains largely pristine.

Martu are among the last of Australia's Indigenous people to make contact with the European world, with many coming in from a completely traditional desert life in the 1950s and 1960s. Martu lands hold immense cultural significance with extensive rock art, significant Jukurrpa (dreaming) sites and stories.

Management by Martu of their country is central to the ongoing survival of this vast and important arid landscape. For Martu, healthy lands is achieved through a process that begins with *yaninpa ngurrarakarti* (going to country), continues with *ngurraku ninti* (knowledge of country) and completes the cycle with *kanyirninpa ngurrara* (holding/caring for country).

What is the Martu Living Deserts Project?

The Martu Living Deserts Project is an innovative partnership between Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa (KJ), The Nature Conservancy and BHP Billiton, which aims to support Martu to conserve and protect the significant natural and cultural values of their country through an integrated suite of programs and activities.

The project assists Martu to continue their remarkable connection to country, combining modern scientific land management with Indigenous ecological knowledge. The project's partners are working together to ensure effective conservation, while balancing Martu aspirations to look after their country, culture and harness economic development.

What does the project involve?

The Martu Living Deserts Project supports an integrated suite of programs and activities including Martu ranger program, other on-country land management, culture and heritage programs and a leadership program for young Martu.

KJ provides significant employment opportunities for Martu primarily through the Martu ranger program, which supports both permanent and casual ranger teams operating out of five communities.

The land management program manages the conservation of the natural and cultural assets on Martu lands. Rangers work on country to reinstate a burning regime with outcomes more in keeping with traditional fire management, controlling feral animals, rehabilitating waterholes and protecting threatened species.

The culture and heritage program is central to KJ's work. It informs all other programs, and has responsibility for preserving cultural data, repatriating old images and footage, mapping waterholes, providing cultural and waterhole information to KJ rangers and staff, ensuring accessibility of collections to Martu, and providing information and products to other program areas within KJ. It incorporates the Kalyuku Ninti (return to country) program, which enables elders to take young adults back out into their country so that they can pass on their cultural knowledge to the young people.

The Martu leadership program targets young men and women eager to learn more about mainstream structures, processes and governance, and to improve their ability to communicate their ideas and aspirations to the broader community.

A range of benefits

In addition to the conservation benefits, the Martu Living Deserts Project has generated transformative change across the Martu communities. The project has produced a wide range of social, economic and cultural benefits to Martu and other stakeholders. The project provides significant employment opportunities for Martu to look after their culture and country. KJ is the single largest employer of Martu people and provides permanent and casual employment opportunities for more than 300 Martu.

The strong connections that remain between Martu and their country provide a unique opportunity to preserve comprehensive traditional knowledge of Martu culture and heritage so as to provide a legacy of sustainability in Australia, and achieve conservation success on a truly global scale.

With support from BHP Billiton and conservation and capacity-building expertise from TNC, this collaboration has provided a model that can be replicated around the world. As opportunities for creating sustainable landscapes within Indigenous communities and elsewhere continue to arise, this model is successfully demonstrating that leveraging private investment in conservation can lead to favourable outcomes for all parties.
