

## Are Indigenous Ranger Jobs real jobs?

Russell. Irving, 2016 - article for the Guardian Australia in 2016 when the Australian Government was threatening to defund its national Indigenous ranger program.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/22/are-indigenous-rangers-engaged-in-real-jobs-the-answer-is-simple>

*As well as protecting the land, Indigenous rangers play an undervalued role as leaders in their communities. It's never been more important to protect these jobs*

Many conservative politicians and commentators argue Indigenous ranger jobs are not “real jobs”. This is perfectly illustrated by the recent [leaking to Crikey](#) of a secret federal Coalition government plan to radically change this successful Indigenous ranger program in order to “get participants into employment”. While the minister for Indigenous affairs, Nigel Scullion [has denied he is planning an overhaul of the program](#), his government has not made a commitment to fund the program beyond 2018.

This question of whether ranger jobs are “real jobs” can easily be put to rest.

The Numbulwar ranger group in Arnhem Land was re-established in November 2015, having been forced into abeyance for the previous three years due to a lack of infrastructure funding to provide a ranger base and ranger coordinator accommodation. The Northern Land Council (NLC) manages and employs the rangers (along with 16 other ranger groups) and receives commonwealth working on country program funding for wages and operational funding but nothing for the provision of essential infrastructure (unlike most other government-funded regional service providers operating in remote communities).

An application to fill infrastructure gaps at Numbulwar and other places was lodged by the NLC in March 2015, assessed by Department Prime Minister and Cabinet in October 2015, recommended by them in November the same year and has been with the minister for Indigenous affairs ever since.

The community has been continuously agitating and lobbying for the re-establishment of their ranger group as it provided much sought-after jobs in the community and helped them to look after their traditional lands.

In November last year, the NLC managed to negotiate some temporary accommodation with the commonwealth government engagement officer and Numbulwar Homelands Association and convince a retired biodynamic dairy farmer from Margaret River in Western Australia to accept the challenge of taking up the ranger coordinator position on a short-term casual basis.

All four of the previously employed rangers immediately signed up again. Another two part-time positions and six seasonal casual positions were offered, equally for men and women. In a community with precious few jobs there were another 12 real jobs created, the only depressing aspect being the 20 or so applicants who were turned away.

Eventually the local community would like to establish their own local corporation to employ the rangers and care for their country directly and are slowly building their governance, organisation capacity and resources to achieve this. The NLC plays an important role in helping communities build their governance structures and organisation capacity to achieve these goals.

In the meantime, the rangers work program and priorities are overseen by the senior traditional owners of the area to leverage their traditional knowledge about how to best care for country. Central

to this is the preservation of their language, traditional knowledge and cultural practices and a core part of the rangers work program is to assist with providing cross-cultural education and capacity building within their communities. This is no different to the work of social workers and community liaison officers employed by state and local government authorities to support large ethnic communities throughout Australia.

Environmental works include patrolling hundreds of miles of shoreline along the western Gulf of Carpentaria monitoring marine debris for invasive pests and removing drift nets that entrap and kill marine turtles, fish and other animals. This is fee for service work. No delivery – no pay.

Rangers take traditional owners on country in the early dry season to conduct landscape scale ground and aerial burning operations to protect outstations and sacred sites, conserve biodiversity and earn carbon credits through the Arnhem Land carbon abatement project to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (the irony of traditional land management practices being re-applied to help stop global warming is not lost on anyone). This work is conducted in an open market environment which pays on results.

A new vessel is being purchased to conduct fisheries surveillance and compliance patrols under a commercial contract arrangement with the Northern Territory Department of Fisheries.

Preliminary planning is underway to establish a small crocodile farm and feral buffalo meat supply company to supply the local community, similar to other ranger groups in Arnhem Land (less the grand scale of development the Coalition's "Develop the North" envisages and more a community-led social enterprise supporting local aspirations and needs).

These rangers have completed industry-accredited workplace health and safety skills and certificate training (such as Coxswains grade 2 certificates, radio operators certificate and first aid certificate) to safely complete their work.

These are some examples of the rangers gaining the essential workplace skills and accreditations to undertaking the same work their national park, council reserve and small business operator colleagues do.

If these aren't real jobs then the the ideologues and commentators will need to tell that to social workers, community liaison officers, national park rangers, local shire workers maintaining council reserves (and Anzac memorial shrines) or private contractors fulfilling government contracts. Or is it really more about whose development agenda is being fulfilled, whose memorials, historic events and celebrations are being honoured and maintained and whose land is being cared for? Until they're all of ours we remain a divided and, dare I say, racially divided country.

Indigenous rangers play a silent and undervalued role as leaders and educators in their communities, role models for how to progress in both worlds. It's important to provide local, challenging, culturally relevant, real jobs to keep these leaders embedded within the fabric of their families and communities.

They need a commitment beyond 2018 that their real jobs will still exist.