

Overview

The Northern Territory Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program has distributed \$11.4m since it was established in 2017 to Aboriginal Ranger groups and organisations. The grants have been made for both the purchase of capital items (Capital Funding) and for the funding of project activities (Land Management and Conservation Fund) conducted by the Ranger groups. While a diverse range of items and programs have been funded the key outcome sought has been improved land management across the Northern Territory.

In February 2020 the Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security initiated an independent review of the Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program. The central evaluation question was:

'Have real land management outcomes been achieved?'

During October to December 2020 Ninti One reviewed the funding guidelines, applications and reports provided by Aboriginal Ranger groups related to the NT Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program. In addition, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with around 40 stakeholders in the program to seek their views on its effectiveness and the outcomes achieved.

NT Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program

The review has found that the Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program has made a considerable and profound contribution to land management across the Northern Territory. This has been achieved through the very focussed provision of resources and project funding to Aboriginal Ranger groups that has allowed for ongoing benefit beyond the program. The land management outcomes and financial benefit achieved has been substantial.

Grants made to groups for capital items provided the resources for carrying out direct land or sea management activities. More than 75% of the successful Aboriginal Ranger groups used capital grants to purchase 4WD vehicles, ATV (All Terrain Vehicles) and spray equipment that provided access to country and the necessary equipment for land management activities. This included monitoring, mapping, weed control, feral animal removal and fire mitigation planning.

The project grants made through the program funded diverse and varied activities. Direct land management activities included fire, weed and feral animal management planning. Projects focussed on wildlife management and awareness were also funded along with cultural management activities. These activities were the key focus of over 75% of the projects funded.



Review Findings

Information provided by the stakeholders during consultations demonstrated that the projects and resources that were funded through the NT Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program had increased the capacity of groups and had an enduring value.

Multiple examples of the equipment or projects funded through the NT Aboriginal Grant Program being used for Fee for Service work or to attract ongoing, external funding were identified during the review. Stakeholders were able to link this to increased employment opportunities for rangers and highlighted the contribution this could make to the sustainability of ranger groups. Examples included:

- A grant of less than \$40,000 allowed ranger group to undertake a study that acted as a pre-cursor to establishing an Indigenous Protected Area. This will attract ongoing federal funding of \$350,000-\$400,000 annually.
- The purchase of a vehicle and additional spray equipment allowed a ranger group to meet the necessary conditions of an external tender process and were successful in winning a contract. An initial contract for \$120,000 worth of work has now grown to over \$200,000 per annum.
- A ranger group that purchased scientific monitoring equipment (<\$20,000) and provided training in its use has now been able to partner with Universities and external agencies to provide data on a fee for service basis. This generates an income for the ranger group and a saving in time and expense for the research organisations. It has also allowed the ranger organisation to have meaningful input into the focus and direction of research.
- The purchase of a boat has allowed a ranger group to sign multi-year contracts marine monitoring activities. In addition to generating an income this has also provided a regular training opportunity for rangers to develop their maritime skills and formal qualifications that have led to external employment opportunities for some Aboriginal Rangers.



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Key Findings and Recommendations

The following recommendations have been provided based on the findings of the review.

Policy

1. The NT Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program has successfully delivered capital and project funding and no major changes to the program should occur if future objectives remain the same.
2. Scaling up the program through increased funding (20%-80%) could be achieved while maintaining the current structures and processes.
3. The broad guidelines are beneficial and have allowed for investments in innovation. The proactive approach of Departmental staff in discussing potential applications with ranger groups prior to submission should be maintained.

Governance

4. The NT Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program should consider focussed funding rounds for activities that have been shown to produce high economic and environmental returns and provide the anticipated schedule to groups in advance (12-24 months).

Administration

5. Aligning reporting frameworks to the financial year would potentially streamline administrative functions.
6. The type of reporting that is required for projects could be increasingly varied based on scale and scope of funding provided. The purchase of capital items could require reduced reporting compared with the project work.

Governance structure – This one is different. It seems to have more meaning – this one is listened to. If the same structure stayed, I wouldn't have a problem.

The online application system is really good tool, and it is great finding previous applications and is a great resource.

Early assessments were tricky and needed a lot of work to get the process right. There was a lot of support for the expert group and ALMAG to get it all working right.

Key

- Indigenous Protected Area
- National Park
- Other Conservation Area
- Private Conservation



Benefits

7. The investments made have produced significant social and community benefits. Wellbeing metrics could be included as an outcome for the program and included within the funding guidelines.
8. Sharing of information about the success of the ranger program grants between groups could increase the wellbeing outcomes that are reported.

Sustainability

9. The opportunity for groups to provide fee for service activities and training to other organisations should be explored (ranger to ranger exchange).
10. Collecting data about gender/age profile could further identify gaps in ranger groups for use within the program and more broadly by Northern Territory Government.
11. The significant list of successful and unsuccessful projects is a resource for future activities. This could be mined for opportunities and also tested against Northern Territory land management future aims and plans.
12. The successes of the NT Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program could be more widely reported and highlighted within Government and to the community to help the ongoing sustainability and support of the program.



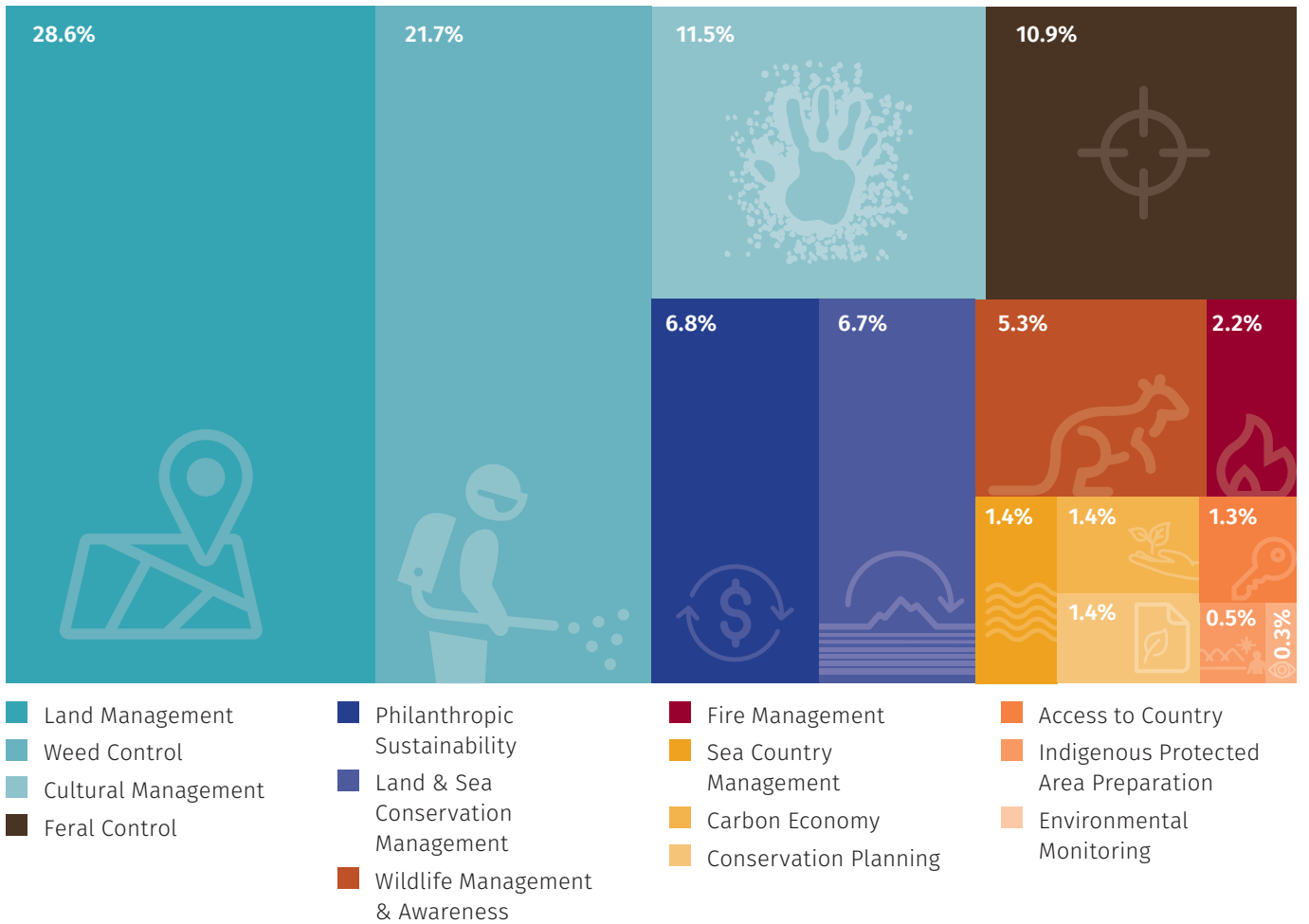


Figure 5: Total number of projects classified by key activities. The figure represents 100% of the projects with the size of the rectangle represents the number of projects within a category.

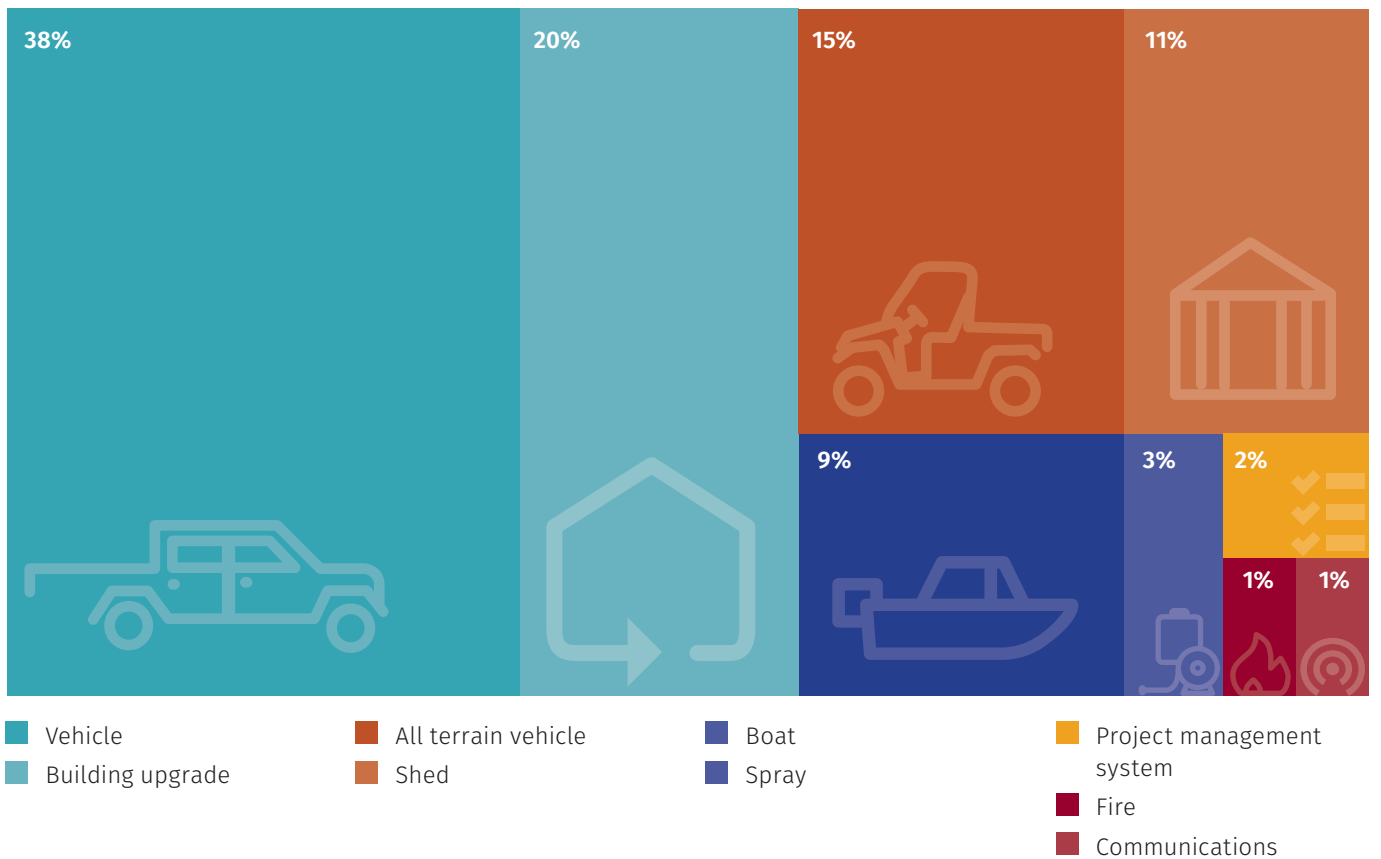


Figure 4: Capital funding grants distribution. The figure represents 100% of grants provided with the size of each rectangle indicating the number of grants investing in each activity.

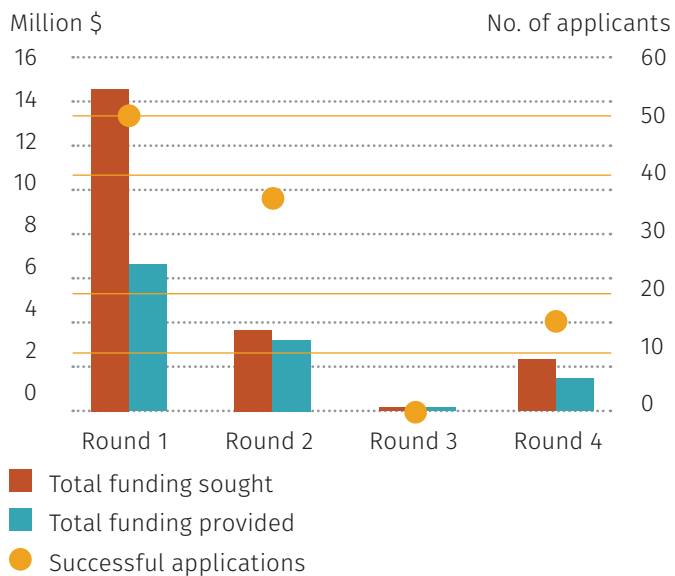


Figure 3: The total funding sought through applications was \$20.5m with over \$14m applied for in the first round of funding. The actual amount of funding provided, and the total number of applications is also shown (secondary axis).

The boat has been empowering, everyone wants to go out in the boat.

The vehicle and spray rig contracts have allowed the group to put in for more contracts. Other commercial contracts were using the old rig that had problems.

Reviewers findings on Projects and Funding

Through the consultation process the NT Ranger Grant Program was positively described by two groups as ‘gap-filler’. This concept was expressed throughout the face-to-face consultations and was described as the project funding and capital items addressing a critical need and providing the resources to do something that was far beyond the financial value of the grant.

The profile of ranger groups also increased, and they were more easily identifiable within the community when working with new vehicles, boats and all-terrain vehicles. Importantly, this was a catalyst for other people in the community to want to engage with the ranger groups and find out more. This included new individuals being recruited to the program and in other instances people returning to ranger programs after external employment.

Respondents identified many benefits that were additional to the land management and financial outcomes. Improved well-being and the feeling of doing something that is worthwhile and beneficial to the community was regularly mentioned by rangers and ranger coordinators. This included citing the excitement and enthusiasm of staff to ‘get out and use the new equipment’ and the sense of pride that came with having ‘proper equipment to work with’.

Evaluative Judgement of Program

The NT Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program has been successfully delivered resulting in improved land management across the Northern Territory. These benefits have been realised on both Aboriginal owned land, through direct activity and on non-Aboriginal land through increased capacity and resources for fee for service work.

The unique design of the NT Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program has fostered collaboration between the Northern Territory Government, Land Councils and a diverse group of Aboriginal land management organisations. This has been achieved by creating clearly identified program objectives and then consulting with relevant stakeholders to ensure that they are appropriate, suitable and achievable.

The governance structure for the Program was comprehensive requiring a significant investment to establish, although once operational proved to be an efficient mechanism for reviewing guidelines, applications and reports. While creating a broad group of stakeholders who were involved in the program the Northern Territory Government did not cede or devolve any decision-making processes.

Increasing the awareness of the NT Aboriginal Ranger Grant Program across the Northern Territory represents an opportunity to strengthen the program and celebrate its successes. Awareness of the factors that have contributed to this program’s achievements should also be understood in order to be protected and maintained.

