

People, Land, Opportunity: Marrying Indigenous Land Management and Economic Development in the Rangelands

Sam Jeffries

Deputy Chairperson, Indigenous Land Corporation

Keywords: land management; indigenous; economic development

Abstract

The Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC) is an independent Australian Government statutory authority, established to provide social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits to Indigenous people by assisting them to acquire and manage land. The ILC Board understands that land not only provides opportunities for training and employment, but provides social, cultural, environmental and economic benefits for the whole community. In this presentation I will present several case studies that reflect the ILC's practical approach to assisting economic development of indigenous communities through land management projects. These case studies focus on the socio-economic benefits being delivered through long-term land management of rangelands in the Brewarrina region of NSW, in Australia's Top End.

Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be here this morning and I would like to thank the Australian Rangeland Society for the opportunity to address this session.

I am a proud Mooraworri man, born and raised in Brewarrina in New South Wales and out of respect for cultural protocols I recognise and thank the Traditional Owners of the country on whose land we are meeting today in Bourke.

We must never forget that the Traditional Owners have had responsibility for looking after this country for thousands of years and I pay my respects to current day descendents.

While I wear many hats, such as being chairperson of the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly and a Board member of our conference host the Western Catchment Management Authority, my address today is centred around my role as the deputy Chairperson of the Indigenous Land Corporation or ILC.

The ILC is an Australian Government independent statutory authority established to provide social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits to Indigenous people by assisting them to acquire land and manage Indigenous-held land.

In acquiring land and managing Indigenous-held land the ILC Board has made it clear that these areas of general benefit – social, cultural, environmental and economic - have two key factors which link them – the ability of land to also provide training and employment outcomes and in doing so encourage sustainable economic development.

Unfortunately for Indigenous people, there is a belief in some sectors that simple acquisition of land is the only outcome which is required.

The ILC does not agree with this view.

The ILC Board, and indeed many other Indigenous organizations and communities, takes a more holistic view of land ownership and land management and believes that sustainable economic outcomes are not mutually exclusive from the need to protect culturally or environmentally significant areas.

An example of this are the concerns that many Indigenous people in Northern Queensland hold about moves to protect wild rivers without properly consulting them about what effect this would have on socio-economic development opportunities into the future.

The whole issue of Indigenous enterprise and conservation was summed up perfectly in the recent Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce Report and I quote:

“Across northern Australia a wide range of economic opportunities exist for Indigenous people to build on their comparative advantage in providing customary and commercial services on the vast Indigenous estate.

“Examples of this are environmental and resource management services, such as the land and sea ranger programs; fresh water management and weed eradication; eco-tourism; and Indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants and bush foods.

“A range of new opportunities also exist for Indigenous people in the emerging carbon market. Carbon abatement through managed savannah burning and sequestration through land and forest management are two possible options.

“Key initiatives that governments might consider in a northern Australian strategy for Indigenous enterprises include: northern business incubation and innovation hubs; business mentoring and training; the trial of market-based instruments in emerging economies, such as environmental services or carbon abatement or sequestration; and furthering development of the Indigenous pastoral industry.”

While these comments related specifically to the Top End, they are also pertinent to much of Indigenous-held land in the Rangelands across Australia.

In my presentation today, I have chosen to present several case studies which reflect the ILC’s practical approach to assisting Indigenous economic development through land management projects.

These case studies focus on the socio-economic benefits being delivered through long-term land management projects which are developing sustainable businesses.

I have included an overview of an ILC project in my own Indigenous community in the Brewarrina region in NSW, two others at Gunbalanya and Miniyerri in the Top End and, nationally, through our Indigenous Protected Area collaboration with the Department for the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts.

Methods

Case Study 1

The ILC bought Merriman Station near Brewarrina in late 2006 so local Indigenous community organisation Canbac could run an Indigenous shearing training school to get Indigenous people jobs in the pastoral industry.

Brewarrina is a town steeped in sheep history but in recent years the region lost 95 per cent of its stock in the worst drought in 100 years—then floods saw it declared a disaster area.

Given that the theme of this conference is *“Rain on the Rangelands”*, I am sure the irony of that is not lost on anyone here.

However, I am pleased to say that the rain has revitalised the country and now confidence in the sheep industry is returning and job prospects are up.

As producers look to quickly rebuild their flocks the Merriman Shearing School, built by the ILC, is getting young Indigenous people ready for work.

The ILC has built 10-bed shearers’ quarters as well as an amenities block with kitchen and dining and recreation room.

The shearing shed and manager’s house has been refurbished and water points added to handle a larger flock.

The project is supported by a major contract with Fletcher International, Australia’s largest sheep production company, to shear 27,000 sheep in 2010.

Merriman’s trainees live at the station, earning full wages while they receive accredited training under the watchful eyes of Indigenous trainers and mentors who have had a long association with the shearing and pastoral industry.

The first batch of trainees in 2009 were snapped up by employers across the region and up to 20 young Indigenous people will qualify as shearers in 2010.

I think this partnership between the ILC, Canbac and a leading industry player is a great example of the benefits which can accrue not only to Indigenous people but also to the

wider community when we break down barriers and provide real employment and training opportunities.

Case Study 2

At Waliburru Station in the NT, formerly known as Hodgson Downs, the ILC has assisted the local Minyerri community, Traditional Owners and Rangers to develop a new pastoral enterprise which is successfully marrying economic, cultural and environmental needs.

The ILC has signed a grazing licence agreement on Waliburru with Traditional Owners and the NLC, training and employing people living at Minyerri community, located on the station.

In 1995, Hodgson Downs was granted to Alawa 1 Aboriginal Land Trust under the NT Land Rights Act.

The peoples' historical connections with pastoralism was a key driver for people to acquire the 323,000 hectare station, but their enthusiasm also stemmed from their need to protect and maintain the land's cultural landscape.

Over the years the station's infrastructure had become rundown and only a small cattle herd had been maintained to supply meat to the local community.

The ILC, employing people from Miniyerri, has now established essential infrastructure, including over 375km of new fencing, sheds, dams, water points, access roads and a homestead precinct including staff and visitor accommodation and a training centre.

In 2008-09 the Waliburru Indigenous workforce had risen to 25 and the property was carrying over 10,000 head of cattle.

While the project is about economic development and training, community members strongly support their ranger program, and see that as growing as the station develops.

The clearances for station infrastructure were facilitated by senior Traditional Owners working with an Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (NT) anthropologist.

This work resulted in significant protection of sacred country, and perhaps as importantly, the transfer of important cultural knowledge from senior custodians to younger custodians.

Traditional owners have also formulated a land management plan with the Miniyerri Rangers, and now there is the capacity to implement a cooperative set of arrangements for weed, feral animal and fire management with rangers and stockmen working together.

A key part of the project is the succession arrangements that are incorporated into the Waliburru Development Plan, where Traditional Owners are taking on the capacity building tasks that will support them taking control of their business by 2018.

This model of using land sustainably to create a new enterprise to provide new training and employment opportunities while at the same building the capacity of the community, is also being adopted at Gunbalanya.

Case Study 3

At Gunbalanya in remote western Arnhem Land, the ILC is working with an existing Indigenous business to create new jobs and improve the supply of fresh, more affordable food to nearby communities.

In an agreement with Gunbalanya Meat Supply Pty Ltd (GMS) and the Northern Land Council (NLC), the ILC will spend \$3.1 million over 15 years to upgrade and manage the community-owned meatworks business and floodplain grazing enterprises at Gunbalanya, 320 kilometres east of Darwin.

The enterprise will be managed by the ILC as Gunbalanya Meats and Gunbalanya Station under a 15-year sub-lease from GMS, which holds a 20-year land use agreement.

The injection of ILC funding will see the Gunbalanya cattle herd grow from 1,000 to 7,000 head, employment increase from 8 to 28 pastoral and abattoir jobs and active involvement by the Gunbalanya community in the live export cattle trade.

The abattoir at Gunbalanya has a long history as part of the local economy.

In the late 1960s, the Kunwinjku people of the Gunbalanya community (also known as Oenpelli) in western Arnhem Land established a meatworks business to service local demand.

Gunbalanya Meat Supply was registered in 1974, and since then has had varying success in its operations.

Gunbalanya is one of only two Indigenous community-run meatworks in operation in the Northern Territory.

Presently, Gunbalanya Station has around 75 km² of land fenced for cattle agistment, capable of holding approximately 3,000 head. The abattoir is developing facilities for up to 25 kills per week, but the current slaughter rate is four to six animals per week.

Under the new agreement, the ILC will fund significant building and infrastructure works, including construction of a larger, modern abattoir, accommodation quarters, new water infrastructure, and 178 kilometres of new fencing.

The ILC will also finance development of the cattle herd and capacity building to ensure the enterprise can be managed viably and sustainably once ownership and operation of the business is divested to GMS.

With ILC assistance, a total of 800 km² of land, including 250 km² of black soil floodplain, will be fenced off as grazing pasture, with the overall stock carrying capacity of the property to increase to 9,400 head over a twelve month period.

Young stock, mainly weaner steers, will be sourced from other Indigenous properties at Strangways/East Elsey and Waliburru, and grown and finished at Gunbalanya.

Much of this stock will be sold for live export, but abattoir production will increase to approximately 25 animals (15 beef cattle and 10 buffalo) per week to fill local demand.

The positive outcomes of this project for the local community extend far beyond the profits generated by its commercial business.

The Gunbalanya pastoral and meatworks operations will provide job-ready training for local people and will, at full capacity, employ 28 Indigenous people.

The flow-on social and community benefits that these opportunities for employment and skill development will bring will be wide-reaching.

Gunbalanya Meats has a key role to play in improving the supply of fresh, more affordable food to remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

The meatworks' aim is to supply inexpensive, quality beef and buffalo meat to community stores servicing around 11,000 Indigenous people in Arnhem Land and the island communities east of Darwin.

The proximity of the meatworks to these markets means that meat can be provided at a much cheaper cost as most meat products are currently transported long distances from interstate.

The meatworks is a valuable asset to the community at Gunbalanya.

With input and development from the ILC, it will take on an even more important function as a centre for Indigenous employment and training for decades to come.

Case Study 4

My final case study in this presentation has many parts but it focuses on one word – collaboration.

In today's world, no one agency has the physical and financial resources to support large-scale, regional projects on its own, so collaboration becomes a key consideration if sustainable socio-economic benefits are to be achieved on Indigenous land.

An example of how collaborations are shaping much of the ILC's land management work is the NT Ranger Project.

This is a joint initiative between key Northern Territory and Australian Government agencies, the Northern Land Council, the Central Land Council and the ILC to address invasive weed, fire and feral animal issues, animal disease monitoring and degraded site rehabilitation while building local Indigenous landholders' capacity through training and job creation.

The project involves a number of NT Indigenous communities with a focus on natural resource management training.

Utilising the skills acquired through this training, some Indigenous land management groups established under the strategy have now developed their own enterprises.

This has included winning contracts for environmental management work and Indigenous people have derived full or part-time contract employment from these enterprise activities.

Similarly, the Indigenous Protected Areas program is helping Indigenous communities throughout Australia to develop low scale, environmentally sustainable creative enterprises.

The ILC has provided \$7 million over three years in a major collaboration with DEWHA to support IPAs.

IN 2008/09 the IPA program nationally produced 79 full-time jobs, 350 part-time jobs and 18 declared IPAs received *Working on Country* funding which provided a further 135 Indigenous positions.

Valuable work is being done in exploring complementary avenues for economic development through ecotourism, traditional economies such as controlled wildlife harvesting, bush food collection and general public visitation.

More generally, since 2003 the ILC has had an MoU with DEWHA to work collaboratively and strategically to achieve land management and environmental benefits for Indigenous landholders.

The agreement is delivering social, cultural, and environmental benefits to Aboriginal landowners in priority bioregions, including the protection of country and sites of significance while at the same time providing badly-needed training and employment opportunities and meaningful social activities.

Indigenous landholders want to pursue cultural and natural resource opportunities and utilise their land as a viable environmental resource.

This is especially important where the land has historically provided limited conventional business opportunities.

The ILC actively supports the program because it agrees with the aim of meshing Indigenous cultural values with mainstream biodiversity conservation objectives and economic development.

Conclusion

The case studies I have just outlined are but a few examples of the diversity of the more than 150 land management projects the ILC has underway across Australia, that are delivering long term, socio-economic benefits to Indigenous communities and groups. While land management projects may be geographically different, and offer different opportunities to communities, they share significant common factors. They are about developing a sustainable Indigenous economic base on Indigenous-held land. They are about developing Indigenous capacity, self-reliance and pride. They are about providing increased employment, training and skills development opportunities. They are about protecting cultural and environmental values. The ILC believes these are critical elements if land ownership and land management projects are to deliver long-term benefits to Indigenous people. This work is not easy and we face many challenges. Those challenges include issues of governance and capacity development, training and employment, infrastructure and ongoing support to name a few. But, we should never let those challenges overwhelm us. The ILC believes there are no quick-fix solutions and that, to assist in developing Indigenous capacity and thereby achieve lasting outcomes, there must be long term commitment. That is why some of the agreements the ILC have entered into with Indigenous communities and Traditional Owners have a span of 15 years or more. The work we are all doing to maintain and strengthen culture, connection to country and sustainable economic development through employment and training, is vital to this generation and generations to come. In closing, I would like to thank everyone who is working with Indigenous people to build a brighter and more sustainable future.

Jeffries, S. (2010). People, land, opportunity: marrying indigenous land management and economic development in the rangelands. In: *Proceedings of the 16th Biennial Conference of the Australian Rangeland Society, Bourke* (Eds D.J. Eldridge and C. Waters) (Australian Rangeland Society: Perth).