



UTS
ePRESS

Cosmopolitan
Civil Societies: An
Interdisciplinary
Journal

Vol. 17, No. 2
2025



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Citation: Norman, H. 2025. Local Aboriginal Land Councils as Environmental Managers: Practices and Opportunities. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 17:2, 54–70. <https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v17.i2.9585>

ISSN 1837-5391 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/mcs>

ARTICLE (REFEREED)

Local Aboriginal Land Councils as Environmental Managers: Practices and Opportunities

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v17.i2.9585>

Article History: Received 30/01/2025; Revised 23/06/2025; Accepted 23/06/2025; Published 26/07/2025

Abstract

The NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 created a network of Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) to receive returned lands and establish Aboriginal enterprises that bolstered economic security for Aboriginal people. The restituted Aboriginal land estate has enabled Aboriginal communities to pursue ways to be back on Country, protect sites, and regenerate landscapes but their land is often overlaid with environmental and biodiversity covenants. While engaged in a larger study of the benefits of NSW Aboriginal land rights, a research team led by the author, [Heidi Norman \(2025\)](#), explored the ways LALCs conduct environmental management on their restituted lands, as well as public and private lands. LALCs are more than willing to care for their Country. Although they face barriers, LALCs have developed innovative environmental enterprises to carry out wide ranging work to regenerate Country and protect and care for cultural heritage and environmentally sensitive sites. This paper presents the results of a survey of LALC environmental enterprises. It discusses limitations and challenges and enabling policies that could support LALCs in NSW to expand their work.

Keywords

Land Rights; Indigenous Knowledge; Cultural Burning; Indigenous Rangers; Aboriginal Cultural Heritage

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST Heidi Norman is Guest Editor of this Special Issue of *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies*. She was not involved in the peer review process for this submission. **FUNDING** This research was made possible with funding from the Australian Research Council. Research included in this article was part funded by iPart and has informed their independent monitoring report on the NSW biodiversity credits markets and Aboriginal landholder participation.

The Context of Land Management by Local Aboriginal Land Councils

The struggle for Aboriginal land rights and justice in New South Wales has always been driven by Aboriginal aspirations to care for and maintain connections to country and protect cultural heritage ([Goodall 2008](#), [Norman 2015](#); [2025](#)). The Aboriginal Land Rights Act (ALRA) was gazetted by the NSW Government in 1983 to recognise the loss of the Aboriginal land estate under colonisation and created a straightforward mechanism for Aboriginal people to reclaim limited areas of Crown land. The Act acknowledged that colonial history had shaped Aboriginal people's lives and that new patterns of historical attachment and movement of people were hallmarks of Aboriginal survival. The Act recognised the political authority of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSW ALC), which was formed in 1977 to lobby for land rights and was anchored in local level organising to exercise Aboriginal political power. Under the ALRA, NSWALC became a statutory authority that was entitled to receive NSW Government compensation for the loss of land. This compensation was calculated at 7.5 per cent of the state's land tax revenue for a period of 15 years, with half of the fund to be set aside to fund the network into the future and the rest to fund Aboriginal enterprises (enterprise funding). NSWALC remains the peak representative body for Aboriginal people in NSW.

Enterprise funding from the NSWALC is devolved through Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs). LALCs were also created under the ALRA and formed a space for Aboriginal people to regather and regroup and devise the terms on which to negotiate their enduring presence in towns and in the life of the nation. Today they are the fundamental organising units of the land council network; Regional Aboriginal Land Councils (RALCs) were created in 1983 but were abolished under amendments to the Act in 1990.

LALC members are Aboriginal people who live in, or have ties to, specific land council areas. The ALRA sets out that the objective of each LALC is 'to improve, protect and foster the best interests of all Aboriginal persons within the Council's area and other persons who are members of the Council' (s 51). These functions (s 52) include land acquisition, land use and management, culture and heritage protection, and financial stewardship. The purpose of the ALRA is to provide land rights for Aboriginal people in NSW and, in turn, the land base is intended to support Aboriginal people, organising through their LALC, to carry out a range of activities in service for their people. These include realising economic autonomy, social uplift and political power and protecting culture and heritage.

All land councils take responsibility for culture and heritage care and support their communities at times of Sorry Business¹, and most provide some housing for their members. Several land councils, mostly along the east coast, lead successful enterprises and are leading service providers. They run successful tourism and hospitality ventures and have developed their land for housing and other enterprises. A few are the largest non-government landholders in their local government areas. Despite this heavy responsibility, most LALCs are staffed with one CEO, who juggles multiple functions and requests, and community expectations, all on a modest financial allocation from the NSWALC.

Land rights were configured as the architecture to address the injustice Aboriginal people had experienced since the colonial settlement. Then Aboriginal Affairs Minister Frank Walker QC envisioned the land claims process would be 'simple, quick and inexpensive' and with the promise that 'vast tracts of Crown land will be available for claim and will go some way to redress the injustices of dispossession' ([Walker 1983](#), p 5095). However, as NSWALC Chair Dr Ray Kelly observed in 2025, 'It was always an enormous task to turn the tide on the impact of dispossession' ([Kelly 2025](#), pp. vii–viii). Kelly's comments remind us that the passing of Aboriginal land rights laws in 1983 was only the beginning of a process of restitution that has needed to evolve and change to meet community needs and aspirations and respond to broader changes.

¹ Sorry Business refers to the expression of grief in Aboriginal societies in response to death and loss.

Yuwaalaraay man and land rights lawyer Jason Behrendt argues, ‘the promise of land rights through a claim process is an empty gesture if it is not matched by the political will to see it fairly implemented’ ([Behrendt 2025](#), pp. 3–4). The benefits of the ALRA have been limited by the Act’s own land claims process. Claims are limited to certain categories of available Crown Land deemed not to be lawfully used or occupied; and not needed, nor likely to be needed, for an essential public purpose. Land claims are also limited by slow bureaucratic processes. Between the enactment of the ALRA in 1983 and 2024, land councils have lodged 56,157 land claims; of these, 4741 have been granted and 1050 have been granted in part, covering approximately 170,000 hectares of land. Some 10,671 land claims have been refused by Crown Lands. At the time of writing, 39,939 land claims were yet to be processed by the NSW Government ([NSW, Crown Lands 2021](#)). Seventy per cent of land claims lodged over the last 42 years, covering approximately 1.12 million hectares of Crown land, remain in limbo.

The reality is that less than one per cent of the state of NSW has been returned to collective Aboriginal ownership under the ALRA.

The Nature of Land owned by LALCs

The Aboriginal land estate that has been restituted over the four decades since the passage of the ALRA includes a range of land holdings that are of social, cultural, conservation, economic and biodiversity significance. As much as 80 per cent of the ALC estate has some form of conservation or environmental zoning ([NSW Aboriginal Affairs 2017](#)). Land that has been recovered along the east coast is of higher economic value, because of its proximity to urban settlements, and this enables some capitalisation to support environmental and cultural heritage goals. In general, land that is returned to LALCs has often been neglected during the period preceding the determination of LALC ownership and can be burdened with waste and derelict infrastructure. In the western third of the state, where land recovery options are limited by long-term pastoral and irrigation ventures, LALCs have coordinated at a regional level to purchase properties, but such properties are often degraded ([Norman 2025](#); [Ridge et al. 2025](#)). As a result, when LALCs repossess their land, they lack the resources to manage their new assets ([Norman 2025](#), p. 143).

This is a scenario reflected across the four million square kilometres of the Australian continent where Indigenous peoples’ land rights have been recognised (more is under claim). Much of this estate is of high biodiversity value and regeneration value and therefore highly significant for both conservation and in climate-change mitigation ([Altman 2012](#)). Most of this land is in remote areas of Northern and Central Australia, far from population centres. The national story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land restitution is spatially uneven and recognises different rights and interests (Markham & Norman 2025). Even so, the small and fragmented NSW land estate – covering urban areas, coastal regions, the inland and the sea – is significant and the burden of caring for this land falls to the communities who have regained it.

The Australian Government has declared 91 dedicated Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) since 1997, with 15 in NSW. These support First Nations peoples to care for their Country through voluntary agreements with the government. As of 2025, IPAs cover 104 million hectares of land and 6 million hectares of sea ([Commonwealth Government, DCCEEW 2025](#)) and make up half of Australia’s conservation estate. This reality is testimony to the environmental significance of Aboriginal land holdings. As this research reveals, and others have documented ([Jackson & Altman 2009](#); [Woodward et al. 2020](#)), there is a strong body of existing and recovering Indigenous knowledges about caring for the restituted land estate, but limited financial and administrative resources.

There are signs Indigenous knowledges are being accepted by Australian governments. In 2021, Indigenous perspectives were, for the first time, centred in the Australian Government-mandated five-yearly State of the Environment (SOE). In twelve chapters and a summary totalling over 2500 pages, the SOE

2021 draws attention to the rapid and continued decline of Australia's environment. Indigenous knowledges are embedded in this report, which opens with the statement that the 'health and wellbeing of Country and people are connected' and brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors and standpoints to create the first 'holistic assessment of the current state of Australia's environment'. A 200-page chapter titled 'Indigenous' highlights the present and likely future impacts for Indigenous peoples from climate change and environmental degradation, which also draws attention to the role Indigenous people currently play in responding to the worst effects of climate change and other threats ([Australia, SOE 2021](#)). Government inquiries into climate emergencies have taken Indigenous knowledges and land management practices into consideration ([Owens & O'Kane 2020](#)).

Indigenous knowledges are critical to environmental and cultural heritage management, particularly on LALC lands. Aboriginal communities in NSW have worked to develop their skills – Tranby Aboriginal College began training LALC members to read, protect and record sites as an early and critical part of land justice ([Cook 2013](#)). There has been some scholarly attention to government policies and programs that support and enable 'caring for country' ([NSW Aboriginal Affairs 2017](#); [Collings 2007](#)) and studies of Aboriginal engagement in environmental and natural resource management in NSW ([Hunt 2012](#)). Researchers have examined Aboriginal perspectives on place-based environmental change ([Lane 1997](#)) and place-based learning ([Heckenberg 2019](#); [Rey 2018](#); [Dickson et. al. 2019](#)), as well as explored alliances between environmental concerns and Indigenous rights and interests ([Woods 2009](#)). Ecologists and Traditional Owner groups in the south-west of New South Wales are collaborating across scientific traditions to regenerate water and land scapes ([Fitzsimons 2025](#)), while fire is being reintroduced for land management ([Williamson 2017](#); [Thomassin 2022](#)). However, there is no central archive of the work LALCs have been pursuing over the last 40 years in land care and conservation, or the difficulties they face in achieving their aspirations to manage their Country and realise the enterprise or income generation that was a unique aspect of the NSW land justice package.

This paper focuses on the role of LALCs in environmental management. The approach seeks to document and understand what LALCs have been able to pursue and how this body of work reveals Aboriginal-led intentions and aspirations in landscapes that have only recently allowed the return of human relationships and which, in many cases, have been deeply impacted by colonisation.

Methodology

This study was led by the author, with the assistance of researchers in the Indigenous Land and Justice Research Group (ILJ) based at the University of New South Wales. While engaged in a larger study of the benefits of NSW Aboriginal land rights, the research team became aware that LALCs faced obstacles in managing lands affected by environmental and biodiversity legislative overlays ([Norman 2019](#); [2024](#); [2025](#)). It was also apparent that LALCs were developing innovative environmental enterprises to carry out wide ranging work to regenerate country and protect and care for sites on both Aboriginal land and public and private lands.

Drawing on an earlier model for conducting research devised during the restrictions of the COVID pandemic ([Norman 2024](#)), the research team conducted telephone interviews with LALCs in a specified period and according to the availability of those LALCs to participate, paying attention to geographic location and population distributions of LALCs. The author and research assistant, Therese Apolonio, undertook a series of interviews with focused questions about the work of LALCs (past, present, and future) that improve the environment and generate (or have the potential to generate) income and other benefits for LALCs and their members. All LALCs were sent an introductory letter that detailed the questions and indicated that we would follow up with a phone-call interview.

For the telephone interview component of this project, an introductory email was sent to all LALCs (n = 117) that shared information about the study, the indicative interview questions and background information on relevant government policies, programs and funding, and requesting an interview about their environmental work; the contact details for researcher Norman were also included and LALCs were invited to make direct contact if desired. We included background that provided a preliminary definition of 'environmental work' and relevant information about government policies, programs and funding. The indicative questions were checked with several contacts in the NSWALC and LALC network. The research was conducted with the support of NSWALC, who were interested in the findings to inform their advocacy, and NSWALC published a network message with information on the research study that was shared with all LALCs.

During each interview, we made extensive notes. We recorded interviews where permission was granted and returned summary notes to participating LALCs with the opportunity to make any corrections. We thematically coded the interviews.

Participating LALCs were Bathurst, Bahtabah, Brewarrina, Corowa, Dorriggo, Jubullum, La Perouse, Merrimans, Moama, Mogo, Moree, Murrin Bridge, Narrabri, Tamworth, Ulladulla, Unkya, Wee Waa, Weilwan, Young. One LALC elected to be anonymous. We also interviewed the NSW Aboriginal Land Council. Of the 20 interviews, 16 were with CEOs, two with acting CEOs, one senior ranger, and one NSWALC senior policy officer.

Research Findings

The interviews with LALCs revealed they all undertake land management work on their land estates and operate strategically to expand their environmental service enterprises. This work is enormously diverse and includes the necessary maintenance of their land estate, caring for country, and cultural heritage site survey work. The work extends beyond LALC estates and includes contract-based regeneration work, sea and freshwater country management, and managing invasive species. LALCs are also involved in education and introducing culturally informed practices to mainstream management. LALCs often undertake site survey work for proposed developments, where members are casually employed to work alongside archaeologists, walking their country and recording sites. Ranger Teams expand on this work. The desire of LALCs to protect and care for sites, always a feature of the land rights movement, is now expressed by a wide range of environmental enterprises.

MEANINGFUL, CULTURALLY AFFIRMING WORK: RANGER PROGRAMS

Nearly all the interviewed LALCs conduct ranger programs that support existing activities and aspirations for the future. LALCs use three overlapping approaches to fund and develop them. Some LALCs use the National Indigenous Australians Agency ([Commonwealth Government, NIAA n.d.a](#)) Indigenous Ranger Program. Others have a ranger program that is funded on a fee-for-service basis, and some LALC members work as rangers on co-managed National Parks ([Commonwealth Government, NIAA, n.d.b, n.d.c](#)).

All these models aim to grow an income stream from land management work. They seek to foreground cultural knowledge in land management, which requires the development of extensive networks and partnerships with scientific researchers.

The Indigenous Rangers Program (ISP) was originally founded by the Australian Government in 2007 under the Department of the Environment. Since 2018, it has been managed by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (Commonwealth Government, NIAA), with the stated intention of supporting First Nations peoples' unique, critical and continuing role in managing and protecting Australia's natural and cultural heritage ([Commonwealth Government, NIAA 2025](#)). In October 2024, the Australian

Government expanded the ISP and agreed to fund 21 new projects in NSW (out of a total of 115 new projects nationally). As of February 2025, there were 129 Indigenous Ranger groups across Australia, managing over 54 per cent of Australia's reserves on land, including Indigenous Protected Areas, which are lands dedicated as part of the national conservation estate ([McCarthy 2025](#)).

LALCs that were interested in starting ranger programs indicated this was not an easy process: one LALC said they were 'most definitely' interested in a ranger program and lamented they had 'tried and tried' to set one up. We interviewed LALCs who had applied and were eagerly anticipating the funding outcome; some that wanted to apply but did not have capacity to complete the application, and some who were ineligible. There was a group of LALCs who had funded ranger programs through other income streams, such as fee for service contracts, joint management, Indigenous Protected Areas ([Commonwealth Government, NIAA 2025](#)) and two more worked in partnership with Traditional Owner groups.

Tamworth LALC is an example of an LALC operating a NIAA-funded ranger program. Their Walaaybaa Rangers Program is funded until 2028, which gives them a critical time period in which to build up the work of the rangers to be sustainable beyond the funding period ([Snape and Whitton 2024](#)). They also have a Junior Ranger Group that operates in five high schools and one primary school in Tamworth. They have three school-based junior ranger trainees, in Years 9–11. Some of these young rangers are doing their Certificate II (Cert 2) in Conservation and Ecosystem Management as part of their year 11 and 12 studies towards their Higher School Certificate. The school-based coordinator has been able to run the Cert 2 for 10 high school students at what is known as a 'connected communities' school ([Snape 2024](#)). The Walaaybaa Rangers will also do some work with the program coordinator, taking school children out on Country. Tamworth LALC is hopeful the 'junior ranger program' will create a pipeline of new Ranger employees and interest in the Walaaybaa Rangers.

In addition to land recovered under the ALRA, Tamworth LALC has a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Local Land Services (LLS) and with Crown Lands to work on several Travelling Stock Reserves (TSRs) and Crown Land parcels that have high cultural heritage importance and biodiversity significance. Tamworth LALC CEO Fiona Snape said, as several LALCs also cautioned, 'it's baby steps' ([2024](#)).

Some other examples of work the Walaaybaa Rangers have underway include seed collection and propagation to regenerate Country as a dam is constructed, and contracts from Water NSW and Transport NSW to regenerate land impacted by road widening. The funding from the contract will allow the LALC to employ another ranger full time for 12 months. The LALC anticipates future contract work doing pest and weed control.

Other work Tamworth LALC's rangers do includes Aboriginal waterway assessment with the Department of Fisheries. Rangers also participate in a Water NSW-led project on the Peel River which aims to provide habitats for endangered native fish species. At important cultural sites, such as Boundary Rock in the Moonbi Ranges, LALC Rangers have been working to improve the access road and the walkway up to the rock art and upgrading a ceremony circle. The LALC owns Trelawney Station and has a land regeneration grant that includes tree planting, erosion control and habitat creation. The LALC also works with Landcare to replant trees on a TSR.

The Rangers also work with the Tamworth Regional Council on the 'Gamilaroi Garden', located in the Regional Botanic Gardens. The rangers constructed the garden, which is home to a public display of Aboriginal artefacts, including some salvaged in 2020 from works on the Chaffey Dam on the Peel River. The garden provides a space for cultural education experiences for school groups and visitors.

Tamworth LALC is pursuing a strategic goal to grow 'fee for service' work that will resource the ranger program over the long term. This will, in turn, allow them to employ more Aboriginal rangers and expand their operations. The rangers are increasingly taking on the cultural heritage site survey work that all LALCs

undertake on a fee-for-service basis. In the past, such work was undertaken on a casual basis by community members, but rangers constitute a permanent trained workforce.

The staffing profile of the ranger program enables capacity-building through training and secure employment, rather than piecemeal and occasional work, across the LALC network. However, LALCs caution that abundant training is provided to Aboriginal people, but it does not necessarily translate to ongoing paid employment: ‘we are the most qualified unemployed people in town’ ([Davies2024](#); [Brook 2024](#)). Linda Carlson, CEO at Mogo LALC, explained that at one point she had a team of 14 fully trained adult and junior rangers, with various on-site land and water management and maintenance certifications ([2024](#)). She was able to secure work for her rangers that enabled them to specialise in care for midden and mangrove sites. However, funding has dried up and this has reduced the ranger team to ‘approximately four people’ ([2024](#)). This example demonstrates the overwhelming interest on the part of LALC members to build up ranger skills and work, but a lack of demand and consistent funding to continue environmental enterprise work.

Tamworth LALC sees the Ranger group as critical to what they can achieve in the future and the grant for the ranger program ‘lifts them off the ground’. Instead of ‘starting from scratch’, the ranger grant is enabling them to expand ([Snape 2024](#)). The NIAA funding, locked in until 2028, provides a strong foundation to access further contracts, negotiate MOUs and other agreements, and to ‘be involved in a whole heap of small pieces of work and then build up our fee for service work and apply for other grants’ ([Snape 2024](#)).

[Snape \(2024\)](#) believes rangers are critical to networking to address ‘a barrier, or block, between the farming community and Aboriginal community’. The Walaaybaa Rangers have run stalls at the annual AgQuip, Australia’s largest primary industry field day ([ACM Agri 2025](#)) at Gunnedah, NSW. The rangers distributed pamphlets promoting their fee-for-service environmental work to the farming industry. Snape said the LALC tests the effectiveness of the stall by asking farmers who contact them for work where they received the information from.

Not every LALC interviewed framed their environmental work in terms of rangers. The CEO of Ulladulla LALC, which has several environmental projects underway, emphasised economic development and meaningful employment, starting with young people: ‘Working with our young ones, that’s where they’re the happiest ... outdoors [and] providing meaningful work for them to be able to do that ... that’s really important’ ([Brook 2024](#)).

NETWORKS THROUGH ABORIGINAL CULTURAL BURNING PRACTICE

Cultural burning was cited by most interviewees as an activity their LALC had been involved in. This has ranged from one-off training and small-scale demonstration exercises facilitated by Firestick Alliance, to working with the Rural Fire Service (RFS) and Local Land Services (LLS).

LALCs described this work as ‘mainstreaming’ Indigenous knowledges in fire responses, and five of those interviewed noted a greater level of involvement with the RFS ([Bathurst LALC 2024](#); [Brook 2024](#); [Carlson 2024](#); [Cooley 2024](#); [Freeman 2024](#)).

La Perouse LALC emphasised listening to and working with country, plants and animals in the burn practice, and translating this to the RFS as fire ‘designed by country’. La Perouse LALC members were optimistic about the growing willingness of partners, including NPWS and RFS, to value Aboriginal cultural heritage and cultural knowledge. Cooley said members have been able to talk to government fire management officers about the burn plans:

‘We have put into NSW NPWS and RFS fire plans, information to protect our cultural sites within their planned hazard reduction burns, advising them of ways to better protect them rather than let

the hot fire go through, which potentially could damage ... middens and engraving sites' ([Cooley 2024](#)).

This information exchange broadens knowledge about how to protect cultural heritage.

The level of interest in cultural burning was underlined by Young LALC, which reported it had the opportunity to offer 15 places to their members to participate in cultural burning. CEO [Norma Freeman \(2024\)](#) explained they sent out a notice inviting members to apply on a 'first in' basis, and expressed her amazement when 'everyone got back in less than half an hour ... there was big interest in learning about cultural burning'. Freeman said the cultural burning training was '... the best thing that we could ever put on for [our community members]' and they are identifying funding sources 'so we can get more people trained up' in cultural burning practice.

Urayne Warraweena, Acting CEO at Brewarrina LALC, emphasises the importance of cultural identity, which is integral to the fire reduction work that the LALC supports:

We have guys that come out and work with our community to do fire reduction and the cultural burning side of it. We also work with our local fire brigade, but generally, the people that come out and assist us with the fire and burning management are a group of Aboriginal men that come from Bourke and Brewarrina. We want to keep that cultural identity central to burning ([Warraweena 2024](#)).

LALC COMMUNITIES OF KNOWLEDGE-EXCHANGE AND PRACTICE

A number of the LALC CEOs we interviewed report feeling isolated as a 'one-person outfit' but environmental work has given rise to opportunities for learning and coming together across the land council network to share practice and knowledge. [Tamworth LALC \(2024\)](#) explained that it benefited from training and learning from Batemans Bay and Eden LALCs. [Snape \(2024\)](#) says, 'we went down to Batemans Bay to their ranger group down there ... because they've been burning for about 20 years'. This is an unusual example, as there have been few collaborations between LALCs. The success of the Batemans Bay LALC's long established ranger program and cultural burning has been a source of inspiration for other LALCs and of significant experience-based learning ([Brook 2024](#); [Carlson 2024](#), [Snape 2024](#)). Many of the programs that LALCs engage with show a level of peer exchange about what works and what does not, as well as suitable refinements. This sharing of experiences among LALCs is an important and unrecognised dimension. Cultural burning is an example where positive experiences are shared across the network and inspire further uptake. At the time of writing, Tamworth LALC had developed this networking further. In June 2025, it hosted a gathering of Indigenous Rangers at the property they have repossessed, Trelawney station. Described as 'a powerful gathering of cultural and environmental leadership', more than 150 rangers from across NSW, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory gathered 'to share Aboriginal cultural knowledge in the fields of ecology and land management' ([NSWALC 2025](#)).

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES IN FORMAL PARTNERSHIPS

La Perouse LALC has several environmental projects underway that, in part, stem from its agreement under the ALRA for joint management of Gamay National Park with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Management (NPWS). As part of the joint management agreement, they have negotiated NSW and Commonwealth funding for their ranger program, which comprises five permanent full-time rangers and two trainee Junior rangers who participate two days a week as part of their school week.

Like most LALCs we interviewed, La Perouse has multiple conservation-focused projects underway on its managed lands. Its approach, as the lead ranger Robert Cooley explains, is to bring together 'Western science and our cultural knowledge' ([2024](#)). The LALC emphasises that culture is 'our living history', and,

like many LALCs, builds strategic partnerships and relies on wide networks to achieve multiple outcomes. The LALC is working with scientists to find better ways to manage its environmental outputs. This is what they describe as a 'two-way conservation approach' where they work with NPWS to identify suitable areas to do:

some cultural burns ... basically identifying a few strategic areas, small patches, to see how [cultural burning] fares in comparison to normal hazard-reduction burns which [aim to reduce] fuel loads in those areas ([Cooley 2024](#)).

The LALC is also restoring endangered seagrass meadows, and determining 'what's going on, why they're declining', and identifying solutions to 'halt that decline and start the process of regenerating some of those lost seagrass meadows'. They are also working with the Sydney Institute of Marine Science, NSW Department of Primary Industries, and the University of Technology Sydney on a recovery project for the endangered Sydney White's seahorse ([NSW Government 2025](#)).

La Perouse Rangers have an impressive number of environmental projects underway. In their account, the key to what they are doing is building strategic partnerships, making agreements, and power-sharing 'with councils and government and the industry'. This advances their authority as knowledge holders.

LALCS AS BROKERS IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECTS

LALCs described playing the role of a 'broker' between Aboriginal community members and government agencies involved in land management. Bathurst LALC was recently involved in a community day to educate landholders about local koala habitats. The CEO explained:

We're trying to get into [the environmental] space. It's hard when you're not working in that sector constantly ... that's why we like doing partnerships with people that lead that project, and we come onboard to support them and to bring our community along to engage and to educate ([Bathurst LALC 2024](#)).

One positive outcome of these partnerships is that LALC members can find employment with the LALC's project partners. [Linda Morgan \(2024\)](#) explained that Moama LALC has supported members to get appropriate certification, which has allowed them to find employment in land care and regeneration. Through Moama LALC's networks and partnerships, LALC members have successfully taken up positions and contracts with organisations such as NPWS, LLS, and local government.

Some LALCs work as a broker between organisations and Aboriginal businesses. Urayne Warraweena stated that the LALCs 'auspice' four community members to run cultural camps, language programs, dance groups and the Baiame Ngunnhu Festival. Warraweena explains that LALC staff will give up their own time:

... because we can't afford to do much more than that. If we can loan the LALC bus, if we can provide some water, if we can just support, help set up, we will. We will be there ([Warraweena 2024](#)).

The LALC space is also made available: 'If they want to host it here [in Brewarrina LALC's Office], come here, just use the space, use our shed ...' ([Warraweena 2024](#)). [Cathy Thomas \(2024\)](#) from Dorrigo LALC echoes this convening role of LALCs when it comes to environmental work, explaining that they are an initial contact for government agencies and businesses wanting environmental services. She explains the LALC is a 'conduit' and plays a 'networking' role, in that they 'direct [requests] to members of the community who do that work' ([Thomas 2024](#)).

ENVIRONMENTAL WORK AS COMPLEMENTARY TO THE FUNCTION AND ACTIVITIES OF LALCS

Many LALCs see environmental work as complementary to the responsibilities of the LALC and as drawing on similar skillsets and networks. LALCs say they are currently active in a range of work, including management of returned land, training and upskilling of Aboriginal community, on-Country tourism and education experiences, care and restoration of cultural sites, and repatriation of ancestral remains returned from institutions. As [Cathy Thomas \(2024\)](#) at Dorrigo LALC explained:

We really basically need funding to do more work because the more land you get, the more conservation and land management you need to do. When you're a small land council like we are and you've really only got your allocation from NSWALC, it doesn't go very far ([Thomas 2024](#)).

Michelle Nagas at Jubullum LALC ([2024](#)) explained that her LALC is motivated to be involved in environmental work so they can care for sites and have a say in land access and plans of management over important sites. [Dwayne Hammond \(2024\)](#) at Weilwan LALC explained the need for the LALC to be doing more to maintain their land:

We cleaned our mission up because we wanted to restore it, put some plaques down there because a lot of people, when they come home, they just want to go down to the mission and reminisce and ... just be back on country ([Hammond 2024](#)).

Most LALCs raised school education as a key part of their conservation work. Several ranger programs are embedded in schools. Wee Waa LALC hosts students each week and a LALC board member and visiting scientist work with students on a curriculum that covers bush tucker and propagation ([Keefe 2024](#)). La Perouse LALC's Gamay Rangers also see education as an important part of their environmental work. They increasingly host on-Country experiences to combine learning from country with immersive cultural awareness. Cooley says:

We attend lots of public forums and events promoting who we are and what we're doing – raising awareness around the environmental issues. That goes from our pre-schools to the primary schools, high schools, to government, to industry, and all the way up to the corporate and the senior government ([Cooley 2024](#)).

GROWING A SUSTAINABLE LALC ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICE ENTERPRISE

Several LALCs explained environmental and conservation labour can be a stepping stone for other complementary economic enterprises and learning from country. For example, one LALC explained they do carry out maintenance and care for publicly accessible cultural sites so that they can run tourism ventures and to make them suitable for non-Aboriginal visitors. Carol Proctor explained that Bahtahbah has a full-time conservation land management and cultural heritage officer. Along with maintaining their land estate, the LALC has been able to do fee-for-service conservation and land management, bush regeneration, cultural burning, marine waste management, and cultural immersion programs for students and educators. It is hoping to expand into tourism, and the LALC sees the ranger program as an opportunity to scale up, employ more workers and diversify activities.

Linda Carlson discussed some of the difficulties for LALCs in establishing an environmental enterprise. She observed that organisations offering environmental contracts are likely to use environmental consultants they are already familiar with, and it is difficult for relatively new Aboriginal environmental enterprises to compete in open tender processes. Davies explained the difficulties faced by Merriman LALC in setting up an environmental enterprise: 'Our biggest opponents are local governments and environmental agencies that are doing the work and therefore prevent us being on country doing the cultural and traditional stewardship

of our land'. For Fiona [Snape \(2024\)](#) at Tamworth LALC, establishing a fee-for-service environmental enterprise requires the LALC to 'break some of those barriers' with the farming community, who may require services but are hesitant to employ Aboriginal community members.

La Perouse LALC has been strategic and has managed to seize multiple opportunities as they arise. It is thinking about how to complement environmental work already underway, nominating carbon offsetting and carbon markets as opportunities. They feel the conservation work they have underway 'can potentially be consistent with that market, approach or system' ([Cooley 2024](#)).

Many LALCs raised the possibility of engaging with carbon markets and carbon trading. This will be the focus of future research, including how LALCs might participate in these markets.

LALCs feel they are in the early stages of relationship building with government, finding it a slow process. Still, they are generally optimistic about possibilities and hopeful that Aboriginal community aspirations will also be valued. Strategically using land is a central part of LALCs' partnership building.

SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

All the LALCs interviewed for this study have environmental and conservation work underway and aspire to further develop their expertise and capacity. Most were keen to highlight that environmental enterprise work is in the early stages; that they are slowly and steadily growing capacity and capability in this area. This approach is, in part, driven by the reality that the title to a parcel of land that has been under claim for several years may arrive in the post and often without prior notice, resources or plans of management. LALCs find themselves with the responsibility of caring for land that often requires maintenance and work to ensure it complies with environmental, and health and safety laws.

LALCs need a suitable business model to meet the costs of this land management work and enable them to build local capacity to undertake the work in the long-term. While residential land development has been the most lucrative type of enterprise in the last 20 years, this opportunity is largely confined to coastal areas and urban land in Greater Sydney, but LALC environmental work extends to all corners of NSW, and provides opportunities for all LALCs across the restituted Aboriginal land estate. The character of LALC environmental enterprise is diverse: the work takes place on multiple land parcels with different tenures, sites and contexts. The intention and purpose of the work is also diverse. There is a distinct cultural affirmation dimension for participating rangers and desire to align cultural practices with land, sea, freshwater and habitat management practices. However, a scan of the Indigenous business directory Supply Nation reveals only five LALCs – Coffs Harbour, Tamworth, Orange, Illawarra and Biraban – are registered as offering environmental and land management services ([Supply Nation 2024](#)). More research is needed to explain this gap.

Enabling LALCs to expand their environmental enterprises to manage private conservation lands, through mechanisms like Biodiversity Stewardship Agreements, should be considered. This aligns with the NSW Government's Implementation Plan for Closing the Gap 2022–2024, and specifically with Priority 5: Employment, Business Growth and Economic Prosperity.

Most LALCs have limited resources to undertake mapping of their land, even though they identify this as an area of interest and as a key element of undertaking their work. Few have been able to engage in mapping to determine the environmental value of their estate in terms of flora and fauna or biodiversity. Only one LALC we interviewed was able to say with any certainty what proportion, or which land parcels, are zoned conservation and have biodiversity value. La Perouse LALC has conducted extensive mapping of sites and surveyed flora and fauna on its estate, including the area covered by a Joint Management Agreement with NPWS. They recited the exact amount of conservation land in their estate, including 96 hectares of conservation lands between Kurnell and Cronulla, which they described as 'pure conservation land which will never be built on'. Robert Cooley, Senior Ranger for La Perouse LALC's Gamay Ranger

team, explained that they have conducted surveying to identify the conservation values on their estate: they have ‘documented sites in our cultural area’ and recorded sites within the National Parks and Wildlife Estate. They have conducted flora and fauna surveys that have identified areas with high conservation values, including threatened vegetation communities, freshwater wetlands and Aboriginal cultural heritage. La Perouse LALC’s mapping is in part driven by their agreement with the NSW Government to jointly manage Gamay National Park. This agreement provides infrastructure and the impetus, along with their own ingenuity, for this activity.

Darkinjung LALC is the only LALC we could identify that has surveyed its land estate and identified the zoning of its land in order to progress to an application for development. Darkinjung LALC covers an area extending from Catherine Hill Bay south along the Pacific Coast to the Hawkesbury River and west to the Watagan Mountains. Much of the LALC is within the boundary of the Central Coast Local Government Area. Darkinjung LALC has repossessed and holds freehold 3,700 ha of land, of which more than half is zoned for conservation. Less than 10 per cent is currently zoned for development and almost the entire estate is mapped as supporting native vegetation. The zoning and vegetation profile of Darkinjung LALC land is the result of the interplay of local government planning assumptions about how Aboriginal land ought to be used (for conservation rather than development), the limited nature and character of land available for recovery under the ALRA and the history of those land parcels.

Darkinjung LALC members described their experience of biodiversity assessment and certification as they progressed to a development application as ‘very difficult and challenging’. Darkinjung LALC has sought to lodge development applications for some 31 projects on their land estate, which has necessitated addressing biodiversity offsets to progress in line with the State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP).

NSWALC Senior Policy Officer Adonna See explained that, in her experience, LALCs are more engaged in the Biodiversity Conservation Act when they are planning development on their lands ([See 2024](#)). This includes mechanisms such as the Development Delivery Plan (DDP), an alternate land development pathway, created for the LALC.

The interviews with LALCs showed that most LALC CEOs have deep knowledge of their land and can refer to areas that are significant for different reasons but few LALCs have data available or have been able to undertake mapping to ascertain how much of their land is zoned environmental or has biodiversity values. They have not had the opportunity to create a plan for their lands and do not know how much they could dedicate to conservation, in balance with multiple community needs.

Conclusion

Interviews with LALCs reveal an incredible dedication to working with their restituted land estate to strengthen their people and create a better future. There is extensive land management and environmental work underway across the Aboriginal Land Council network and an overwhelming aspiration to grow this work in the future but LALCs are under resourced to undertake the extent of work required to manage their existing estate. Most LALCs have very little understanding of programs and funding that can enable and progress their environmental and land management aspirations. Those which have managed to access funding draw on ‘pockets’ and piecemeal funding and rely on diverse and disparate programs to advance this work. The majority of LALCs have no readily available or accessible information about their land zoning and have been unable to independently map their estate with regards to biodiversity. Despite these constraints, LALCs maintain ambitions to be more active in the broad scope of work to care for Country, including land outside the Aboriginal-owned land estate. They work in collaboration with community, industry and government as they undertake environmental work. Establishing Ranger Programs is a leading aspiration for all LALCs interviewed, along with expanding ‘fee for service’ environmental enterprises.

This breadth of activity undertaken by Aboriginal communities through their LALCs is rich and inspiring (cf. [NSWALC 2024](#); [Norman 2025](#)), yet poorly understood or misunderstood by the wider community ([NSW Aboriginal Affairs 2017](#)). LALCs yearn for enduring funding to meet their responsibility to care for country and grow an income stream from this work. The ALRA was enacted to compensate Aboriginal people for land loss and to support the regeneration of our society and culture, enable Aboriginal people to pursue self-reliance, and secure our economic futures. The actions needed to address climate stability and arrest species loss cannot be at the expense of the rights and interests of Aboriginal peoples.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Therese Apolonio for research assistance on this project. Therese undertook some of the interviews with LALCs and reviewed drafts of the report. Thanks to Nghaeria Roberts who provided administrative support, the two anonymous referees who provided advice on an early draft of this paper, and Naomi Parry Duncan for editorial assistance.

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Acronyms

ALC – Aboriginal Land Council

ALRA – Aboriginal Land Rights Act (1983) NSW

BCA – Biodiversity Conservation Act (2016) NSW

CLBP – Community Land and Business Plan

DDP – Development Delivery Plan

IPA – Indigenous Protected Areas

LALC – Local Aboriginal Land Council

LEP – Local Environmental Plan

LLS – Local Land Services

RALC – Regional Aboriginal Land Councils

NIAA – National Indigenous Australians Agency

NPWS – National Parks and Wildlife Services

NSWALC – New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council

MoU – Memorandum of Understanding

SEPP – State Environmental Planning Policy

TEC – Threatened Ecological Communities

TSR – Travelling Stock Reserves