

Case Study

Improving the safety and skills of Indigenous rangers in the Kimberley



Background

The Kimberley Land Council (KLC) works with Aboriginal people to secure native title recognition, carry out conservation and land management activities, and develop cultural business enterprises. Among KLC's 130 staff are around 80 Indigenous rangers, in a network of 13 groups responsible for looking after land and sea across 378,704 square kilometres of the Kimberley.

Ranger programs offer employment opportunities for local Indigenous people, and also generate significant social, economic, cultural and environmental outcomes for individuals, communities and government. Among these is self-esteem for rangers, many of whom are in their first formal job. Having a paid role and a career pathway ahead of them is directly linked to rangers' improved health and wellbeing, and in communities they often become role models for young people by promoting cultural pride and a professional work ethic. Given this, ranger programs are considered by government to demonstrate "a successful lateral approach to tackling systemic social, health and justice issues – from unemployment to violence and dependence on alcohol and other drugs"¹.

In 2015 safety became a focus of the Kimberley Ranger Network (KRN), after KLC prioritised meeting national risk management and Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) standards. Since then Jawun has supported this capacity building, while also matching KRN with secondees who contribute to an equally important area: rangers' professional development and skills.

Approach

In 2014, NAB secondee Owen Thorpe supported KLC to develop SOPs for ranger use of firearms for feral animal control. As a senior risk analyst, he was well placed to deliver the technical side of his secondment. As someone who had progressed through increasing responsibilities in the banking sector, he was also able to help rangers with professional skills, and advise them about job performance and career pathways. Speaking of his secondment in the West Kimberley, Owen said: "The highlight for me was the opportunity to travel 2,800km in six days to visit remote Indigenous communities and Ranger Bases. It gave me a real understanding of the challenges facing communities, and rangers, which cannot be easily grasped by reading. I helped a number of rangers with IT skills – particularly Excel and Word – but also had valuable discussions with them on how to consider the strategic impact of their decisions and plan for the future."

In the same year, Jeff Hansen was seconded from Wesfarmers to develop a KLC Marine Operations Policy and a Safety Management System for the Bardi Jawi ranger group. Their Coordinator Bibido McCarthy remembers: "The rangers really appreciated Jeff's technical expertise and professional

¹ [Social Return on Investment \(SROI\) analyses](#) of five Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) and associated ranger programs, commissioned in 2015 by the department of Prime Minister & Cabinet

skills. Marine operations are core business for our ranger team, but were a real gap in the KLC's risk management system that we didn't have staff in-house to address. Without Jeff's work, we wouldn't be able to continue important work like turtle and dugong monitoring". Bibido felt Jeff was able to create meaningful, relevant outcomes because he worked closely with the rangers at their remote base: "Having Jeff on site, working on the ground with the rangers, was key to the success of the project. It meant he really understood our needs and could create documents that work for our team".

A year later John Bursill from Qantas helped KLC finalise a single Field Manual of risk procedures and roll it out across the Rangers Network. John had a long career as an aircraft engineer, was a seasoned manager, and had served in the army. Posted with rangers in remote areas, he implemented SOPs, trained safety representatives and led risk management workshops. Based on experience at Qantas, an industry leader in safety, John communicated key tenets of organisational safety culture, which were also core principles for the rangers' workplace success in general: participation and learning, personal commitment and accountability, co-worker support and management leadership. Meanwhile the rangers learned but also taught, hosting John 'on country' in an experience that left a deep impression on him. At the end of the secondment, his reflection was, *"That is arguably the most satisfying work I've ever done in nearly 30 years of full time employment."*

Outcomes

Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) at KRN now includes a comprehensive risk management system and protocols for high risk activities including marine operations, use of firearms for feral animal control, chemical and chainsaw use, and strategic burning operations. Accommodating cultural references and low literacy skills, simple, visual guidelines have been developed by successive secondments, and brought together in a ranger-appropriate Field Safety Field Manual. Nominated safety rangers, active OSH committees, and a dedicated OSH position support exist, and all levels of the organisation have come together around a strong safety culture.

As KRN continues to progress towards meeting Australian Standards for safety, KRN is more able to meet OSH conditions linked to fee-for-service contracts, government funding, partnerships and stakeholder relationships. It has won safety awards, and actively shares information about its work in high risk areas such as strategic burning². All of which supports Indigenous-led conservation, where Aboriginal people are sole managers of protected areas, and which has been seen to have tangible economic, environmental and cultural outcomes.

KRN equips rangers with skills and knowledge to not only manage the cultural and biodiversity assets of Aboriginal lands across the region, but also engage in other employment opportunities in conservation or other sectors. It identifies education and training opportunities for rangers' development, and helps them access income management advice and other support. With a focus on professional skills transfer to rangers, Jawun secondees have complemented and strengthened this.

Next Steps

KLC Deputy CEO Tyrone Garstone acknowledges the critical contribution to OSH made by secondees, and looks forward to further strengthening this: *"Secondees really built the foundations for the KLC to develop a strong safety culture. We still have a way to go, but our partnership with Jawun has got us to the point where we have a safety management system in place, have invested resources in a dedicated OSH position, and prioritised safety across the KRN. We're proud of how far we've come and look forward to working with Jawun into the future as we grow as an organisation."*

Future secondees will support the KLC's risk management system as it matures, including SOPs for high risk activities like expanded marine or burning operations. It is likely that they will also play a role in skills development for a group of Indigenous employees whose professional success is linked to a broad range of benefits, for the environment but also for individuals and communities.

² KLC's Savannah Fire Management Initiative was presented at COP22 Climate Change Conference in Morocco, Nov 2016