Fighting Fire with Fire
Indigenous management in the Kimberley
The Kimberley Context

Located in the north-west corner of Australia, Kimberley Aboriginal people have an intrinsic connection to country. Our relationship with country and our culture dates back more than 50,000 years.

The recognition, value and protection of our culture and connection to country is at the heart of what we actively achieve to deliver through our role as the peak Aboriginal organisation in the region.

Protection and recognition of our native title rights to traditional country and the ability to participate in the modern economy is our focus. Our right to free, prior and informed consent is vital in ensuring that governance and decision making about our native title lands is led by Kimberley Aboriginal people. These rights are enshrined in international agreements, like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

In our region we have a commitment to Indigenous led conservation, in which Aboriginal people are sole managers of protected areas. This model combines strategies, such as biodiversity management and traditional burning practices, to enhance country, generate carbon credits and build wholly owned Indigenous businesses.

Achieving these outcomes has not been easy. The Kimberley Land Council has encountered resistance from local agencies and the Western Australian Government who have not supported our model of Indigenous led business and sole management of native title lands. However, with sustained effort we have persevered, and in many cases overcome these challenges, which deliver local solutions to global problems.
We aspire to share our knowledge internationally and have participated in UNPFII, World Parks Congress, COP21 and COP22, engaged with the Indigenous People’s Global Network on Climate Change and Sustainable Development (IPCCSD) and our leadership with the International Savanna Fire Management Initiative.

We are energised by the opportunity to share experiences with Indigenous peoples, particularly about our fire management practices, which have the potential to benefit future generations across the world.

Nolan Hunter
Chief Executive Officer
Kimberley Land Council
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<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Indigenous Land Management Facilitator employed at the KLC</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Healthy Country Project</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>Fish and freshwater research</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Saltwater Country Project</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kimberley Appropriate Economies Forum</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>First Kimberley Ranger forum</td>
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<td>Kimberley Ranger Initiative</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>850m for rangers, IPA and Kimberley projects secured</td>
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<td>West Kimberley National Heritage listing</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>World Indigenous Network Conference</td>
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<td></td>
<td>UNPFII side event on Cultural Economies</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Kimberley International Ranger Forum</td>
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<td>Enterprise Hub workshops and business plan</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Cop21 showcase savanna fire initiatives</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Increase the number of women rangers</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Enterprise Hub partnerships established</td>
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Kimberley Aboriginal people have been looking after and managing their land and sea country for thousands of years, and continue this relationship with country today.

Indigenous law, culture, language, knowledge, traditions, stories and people are embedded in the landscape. They are interconnected and dependant on each other.

The Kimberley Land Council land and sea unit started in 1998. Our work has always been diverse and has covered all aspects of cultural and natural resource management. All activities have been underpinned by Indigenous cultural values which provide a strong foundation for governance.

Today the work of the land and sea unit is far reaching, generating significant cultural and environmental benefits for the region. We have developed a network of 13 ranger groups who look after land and sea across 378,704 square kilometres of the Kimberley. These land managers work to achieve the cultural and environmental management outcomes that our elders and cultural advisors want to see happen on the ground.

Fire management, wildlife and biodiversity monitoring, and the passing on of traditional knowledge and cultural practices from old people to young people, are key priorities that we work hard to achieve.

Our connection to country is strong and we continue to grow programs and initiatives that help us reinforce these ties for the benefit of our future generations and the health of our country.
Climate change stands to be one of the biggest global threats to the survival of Indigenous people in modern times.

Global climate trends indicate that temperatures will continue to rise resulting in more extreme weather conditions, such as increased floods and droughts, changes to seasonal indicators, extinction of plants and animals, higher levels of disease and health issues.

Indigenous people are more likely to be affected by climate change impacts due to their dependence on and interconnected relationship with country. In the Kimberley the lower socio-economic circumstances of our people make it more difficult for us to adapt to and respond to the impacts of climate change.

One way Kimberley Aboriginal people are tackling this issue is through the reinvigoration of traditional fire management practices and participation in the carbon market.

Our fire management projects combine traditional burning methods with modern science to reduce the amount of greenhouse gas emissions released into the atmosphere from unmanaged dangerous wildfires.

If adopted in other parts of the world, these methods have the potential to significantly reduce global greenhouse gas emissions and the impacts of climate change.
Indigenous people have a cultural responsibility and obligation to protect country, people and our diverse ecosystems.
Reinvigorating traditional methods of managing savanna country is improving environmental outcomes in the Kimberley, an internationally recognised biodiversity hot spot.
The North Kimberley Fire Abatement Project is a partnership between the Wunambal Gaambera, Balanggarra, Wilinggin and Dambimangari Native Title holders that represent the Traditional Owners responsible for looking after and managing country in the far North West Kimberley.

The project provides a sustainable means of looking after natural and cultural values of country, while achieving real progress towards economic independence, reversing socio-economic disadvantage and improving livelihoods.

Aboriginal rangers and Traditional Owners conduct strategic burns on country in the early dry season, in order to avoid and control large, late season wildfires.

This method of traditional fire management reduces greenhouse gas emissions, and has already successfully abated over 350,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent. It also generates carbon credits, providing north Kimberley communities with the economic means to continue traditional fire management operations into the future.

By participating in this project, Traditional Owners are able to spend more time on country, looking after important cultural sites, facilitating the sharing of traditional knowledge across generations and caring for country.

Indigenous fire management presents a win-win opportunity for Traditional Owners, government and businesses as it reduces carbon emissions, delivers positive healthy country outcomes and supports the development of sustainable employment opportunities in remote Aboriginal communities.
Challenges

Despite the many benefits and the success of Indigenous Savanna Fire Management projects so far, the industry is facing a unique set of challenges.

Indigenous Savanna Fire Management projects generally have high operating costs, particularly for projects in remote locations. Many project areas have limited road and vehicle access and require annual fire operations to be undertaken in a helicopter or light aircraft. Fire operations employ numerous rangers and cultural elders during the fire season, however supporting these people to work in remote conditions increases costs considerably.

Due to the Australian Government commitment to purchasing lowest cost abatement, via the Emission Reduction Fund, the price of Australian carbon credits continues to decrease. This is coupled with a lack of available start-up capital which has put the viability of current Indigenous carbon projects at risk and slowed the rate of new project development.

Locally, Kimberley Aboriginal landowners have also faced political challenges that have threatened to undermine their ability to continue traditional burning and Indigenous Savanna Fire Management projects.

The Western Australian Government has repeatedly tried to obstruct the ability of Traditional Owners to undertake burning activities. Most recently, the State Government has asserted that Native Title holders must enter into onerous agreements in relation to carbon projects – a requirement not placed on any other land holder.

In order to overcome these challenges and secure the long-term viability of Indigenous savanna fire management industry, the Kimberley Land Council is working with the corporate sector to increase the demand and value paid for the biodiversity, social and cultural benefits generated with each carbon credit. We are also working with our partner organisations to improve the short term viability of the Indigenous savanna fire management industry and to open these opportunities for more Aboriginal people in the Kimberley.
With destructive wildfires releasing 2 gigatonnes of carbon, causing loss of life, deaths and destroying billions of dollars of property across the world every year, it is clear that modern methods of controlling fire are not working.

In northern Australia traditional fire management has already proven to deliver a 50 per cent reduction in wildfires, reduced emissions by 8 million tonnes, enriched biodiversity and generated more than $85 million for Indigenous communities.

If these methods were to be used in other parts of the world it is predicted they could reduce carbon emissions by around 750 million tonnes per annum, at the same time as generating income for remote communities and creating employment for thousands of the poorest people in the world.

This means that traditional burning provides a very real solution to a global problem.

The International Savanna Fire Management Initiative is a United Nations University project highlighting how people across the world may be able to benefit from these burning methods.

The experiences and knowledge of the Kimberley Land Council have contributed to the development of the initiative, already resulting in positive developments in other countries, such as Brazil, which has begun the process of compiling Indigenous fire knowledge and fire use in two pilot areas.

The Kimberley Land Council is working with the United Nations University to explore opportunities for the expansion of the International Savanna Fire Management Initiative, so that we are able to appreciate the cumulative effect that this project can have on mitigating climate change and protecting the environment on a global scale.
The International Savanna Fire Management Initiative identified many sites with the right conditions to undertake traditional fire management. The twenty-five sites with critical factors for success are identified in the map below:

The use of traditional burning in northern Australia has already proven to deliver a 50 per cent reduction in wildfires.
The Kimberley Land Council is sponsored by Qantas, OXFAM and Australian Conservation Foundation to participate in the COP22 and side events.

Our partners that have invested in the development of the Kimberley Savanna Fire Management Initiative: