In 1997, the Australian Government and Indigenous groups co-designed the Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) Program. The program aims to ensure that land and sea areas are managed by Indigenous people for biodiversity conservation and the protection of cultural values through voluntary agreements with the Australian Government.

There are currently 82 IPAs covering more than 87 million hectares of land, representing more than 50 per cent of Australia’s National Reserve System, and 5 million hectares of sea.

An additional 25 million hectares of IPAs are expected to be established in coming years.

Funding for Indigenous rangers to conduct management activities on IPAs comes from the Australian and sub-national governments as well as the private sector.

Around 720 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are employed in full-time, part-time and casual jobs under the IPA Program.

IPAs safeguard biodiversity

Indigenous Australians have managed Australia’s megadiverse land and sea country for at least 65,000 years.

Many IPAs include habitats of threatened species and ecological communities.

Common activities undertaken on IPAs by Indigenous rangers include threatened species monitoring and protection, habitat restoration, biodiversity surveys, marine debris monitoring and removal, weed and pest animal management, ‘right-way’ fire management, tourism and visitor management and cultural site management.

These Indigenous-led management actions support the protection and conservation of Australia’s unique natural and cultural heritage.
Economic and community outcomes

Every $1 invested in IPAs by the Australian Government generates $2.74 worth of social, economic, cultural and environmental outcomes.

In conjunction with the Indigenous Rangers Program, the IPA Program contributes to positive outcomes for Indigenous Australians including higher school attendance rates, better health, and increased well-being and confidence.

Many IPAs have partnerships with universities, conservation organisations, mining companies and government agencies to undertake research and conservation projects.

Tourism is encouraged in IPA management plans where appropriate, giving all Australians the opportunity to learn about biodiversity and Indigenous cultures.

Establishment and management

The IPA Program allows Indigenous Australians to lead biodiversity conservation work on their traditional land and sea country, incorporating Indigenous ecological knowledge as a central component of their work. IPAs are initiated with Indigenous-led consultation and planning. Participation in the IPA Program is voluntary and doesn’t change ownership or control of land.

Management plans are developed to protect natural and cultural values, applying Indigenous ecological knowledge alongside western science.

Most IPAs are dedicated under International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Categories V and VI, which promote a balance between conservation and other sustainable uses to deliver social, cultural and economic benefits for local Indigenous communities.