



Figure 1: Spinifex Ranger Matthew “Campbell” Watson burning around Wanari (Mulga) to Protect Ngan̩amara (Malleefowl) habitat

GREAT VICTORIA DESERT INDIGENOUS FIRE PROJECT

PROGRESS REPORT

November 2024

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1. Introduction

1.1. Document overview

This document outlines the activities and outcomes of the Great Victoria Desert Indigenous Fire Project (GVDIF) from January 2024 to November 2024. A grant agreement between the Indigenous Desert Alliance (IDA) and the Great Victoria Desert Biodiversity Trust (GVDBT) forms the basis for the report's content. In accordance with this agreement, this Progress Report provides:

- A brief background of the project.
- An overview of:
 - The groups that participated in fire management and training activities.
 - Fire management activities undertaken.
 - Some specific outcomes/findings, including but not limited to:
 - Location and size of burns conducted.
 - Maps of fire management actions.
- A discussion, including but not limited to:
 - Successes and accomplishments.
 - Issues and knowledge gaps identified.
 - Lessons learnt.

1.2. Project background

Indigenous led landscape-scale fire management is critical to the health and resilience of biodiversity and threatened species in the Great Victoria Desert (GVD). The IDA is a member-based organisation made up of Indigenous Land Management Organisations (ILMOs) representing desert ranger groups. IDA supports Indigenous land managers working on desert country through advocacy, capacity building and the establishment of a ranger network and is therefore well-positioned to develop an Indigenous-led fire management program in the GVD. Since 2021, the GVDIF has been building Indigenous desert rangers' long-term ability to restore threatened species habitat in the bioregion through collaborative, ecosystem appropriate, landscape-scale fire management.

1.3. Objectives

The objective of the GVDIF Project are as follows:

- An increase in the extent of threatened species habitat managed with "right-way" fire in the GVD
 - An increase in the number and cumulative extent of cool season burns in targeted management areas
 - An increase in the number of Traditional Owners trained and engaged in fire management in the GVD
 - Elders engaged with, and supervising, all fire management activities.
 - Maintain or increase the number of ranger groups consistently undertaking planned burning activities in the GVD.
 - All activities comply with regulatory requirements.
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2. Project delivery

So far in 2024, IDA has engaged in On Country fire management activities with 2 x ILMOs in the GVD:

- Spinifex Land Management (representing Spinifex and Pilki Traditional Owners)
- Ngaanyatjarra Council (representing Ngaanyatjarra Traditional Owners)

2.1. Spinifex

IDA was able to facilitate 2 weeks of landscape-scale fire management workshops with Spinifex Land Management Rangers in the area surrounding Ilkurlka in the Anangu Tjutaku IPA during August. This provided the opportunity for Rangers to develop and use the ground burning skills they've obtained through the previous year of training.

The first week of activities saw 17 Men and Women Rangers and Traditional Owners participate in a workshop preparing for the following weeks burning. Rangers were able to discuss how fire had been used traditionally, how fire is used currently and why fire is used in a culturally informed manner. The rangers then discussed and planned for the following week of conducting burns, this included identifying Malleefowl nests and habitat, cultural sites and old fire scars.

The second week of activities brought 21 Men and Women Spinifex Land Management Rangers and Traditional Owners to lead and participate in burning. The Spinifex Rangers and Traditional Owners used a helicopter for assessing the remote areas of the IPA, locating cultural sites and to therefore decide where to conduct fire work. Ground burning was also carried out using both vehicles to travel out to sites and the helicopter, dropping people off at harder to access areas.

Due to Malleefowl populations in the area, the group chose to burn around and next to Wanari (Mulga) stands to protect known and potential Malleefowl habitats and nests for the future.

The group also attempted to link up fire scars throughout the week to attempt to provide breaks against some of the large bushfires that have happened previously from occurring again and posing a threat.

Throughout this activity the female rangers were able to lead their own burning activities, starting with ground truthing the provided maps as to what the landscape looked like and did the fire scars and current vegetation match what was provided. The women were able to test their skills and build confidence through a small-scale roadside burn before utilising the helicopter to be dropped off for their first ever ground burning on a larger scale.

For SLM it was evident it was important to have the older people around to lead and advise on the fire land management activities happening on country. Their biggest concerns were ensuring that it all happened in culturally appropriate areas where they were also able to break up the vegetation and provide protection from bushfires for both wildlife and vegetation.

Towards the end of the week the Tjuntjuntjarra school and Womens centre joined the camp, where rangers were excited to talk about and show the fire management work they'd been doing. The enthusiasm to teach the next generation about land management reiterates the importance of the ability to continue the work. Whilst the size of the burns throughout the week were not significant (less than 20 hectares), it was seen as a major success as more area was able to be productively burnt than in previous years.

2.2. Ngaanyatjarra

Multiple training and burning activities in 2024 saw ranger teams in the Ngaanyatjarra lands continue to build their capacity to implement landscape scale fire management in the GVD. IDA provided support for these ranger teams by facilitating an on Country training event in May, that saw 12 rangers complete their accreditation to operate an aerial incendiary machine and work safely around aircraft. This training is essential for rangers seeking to implement aerial burning on the Country they manage, thus ensuring that future activities can be Traditional Owner led and implemented by rangers, while complying with regulatory requirements.

This training event was followed up by 2 ranger and Traditional Owner and ranger led fire activities On Ngaanyatjarra Country, both involving aerial planned burning.

The first of these activities took place at a site near Tjukurla Community, in the Northeast section of the Ngaanyatjarra IPA, in the Central Ranges bioregion. This activity engaged 35 rangers and Traditional Owners (including Elders) from the communities of Tjukurla, Warburton and Warakurna in culturally informed, landscape scale fire management activities.

Recognising the mild weather conditions, high level of moisture in the landscape caused by recent rain, and aerial fuel load assessments undertaken with the helicopter, rangers and TOs identified an area of 15+ year old fuel where they could implement some test burns to see how fires would behave. The largest burn implemented in this activity was approximately 40 hectares (*see Figure 7.*). The scale of this APB (aerial planned burn) was quite small due to still limited fuel loads and connectivity on the ground, the activity provided the very rare opportunity for rangers to develop their capacity in landscape scale fire management techniques with a low degree of risk that fires would get out of hand. Despite the small size of the burns, the activity was deemed a success in allowing ranger, Craig Jackson, to develop his aerial burning skills, practically reinforcing what was learnt at the training event in Warakurna earlier in the.

Another ranger and TO led fire activity for Ngaanyatjarra took at a place south of Papulankutja (Blackstone) Community in the GVD during the following week in June. This activity engaged an additional 18 rangers and Traditional Owners (including Elders) from the Papulankutja (Blackstone), Mantamaru (Jameson) and Warburton communities. Activities included cultural mapping and inspection of significant cultural sites in the area. This resulted in another opportunity to implement culturally led aerial burning with another recently qualified ranger operating the incendiary machine from the helicopter. Again, the scale of burns implemented were quite small, the largest burn was less than 80 hectares.

Again, ignitions from these aerial burning activities failed to result in broadscale burns, although the activity was seen as another great opportunity for rangers to develop skill and increase understanding of landscape scale fire management techniques.

The burning activities undertaken with Ngaanyatjarra rangers in 2024 have been broadly viewed as a success, in that they have contribute to:

- An increase in the number of Traditional Owners trained and engaged in fire management in the GVD
- Elders engaged with, and supervising, all fire management activities.
- Maintain or increase the number of ranger groups consistently undertaking planned burning activities in the GVD.

In November 2024, Ngaanyatjarra rangers from Waburton, Papulankutja and Warakurna attended the IDA Conference in Yulara where they participated in a fire planning workshop. This workshop resulted in the identification if areas for aerial burning in 2 areas on the Ngaanyatjarra IPA. The leadership of rangers and TOs in planning landscape fire management activities on yearly basis is strong indicator that the GVDIF is having a significant influence on the future capacity of the sector.

3. Discussion

The increase in ranger and TO lead, landscape-scale fire management activities demonstrate a marked growth and development of GVDIF in 2024. The knowledge of fire and knowledge of Country in the GVD is safely held by TOs who can put this knowledge into practice through ranger programs. This makes TO leadership and guidance the most important driver of this work, and a core component of the GVDIF project's success to date.

The long-term sustainability of landscape scale fire management approaches in the GVD has been given further promise through the recent training of Indigenous rangers to undertake aerial burning. Participants in this training were given multiple opportunities to develop their skills on the Country they manage under the direction of Elders and the guidance of fire management professionals within IDA fire team.

Undertaking two fire management focused, On-Country trips, and doing it back-to-back in two remote locations required a high level of organisation, logistics and planning. IDA supported the Ngaanyatjarra staff in doing this complex preparation, with emphasis on maintaining a high level of participation from rangers and TOs along the way. This process has helped Ngaanyatjarra to build their capacity for future trips of this kind and will hopefully lead to more ranger and TO led fire management activities in the future.

The engagement of more female rangers and Traditional Owners, particularly in the case of the Spinifex rangers, is another significant development for the project. Beyond the obvious social and economic benefit resulting from broader inclusivity, there are tangible benefits to the quality of land management that can be implemented through increased female participation. The GVDIF project recognises that cultural authority for managing certain sites and resources is often held exclusively by women, making their involvement in activities critical to managing the desert landscape in a holistic manner.

Another positive sign from the project was highlighted at the recent IDA Conference, held in Yulara in November 2024. Ngaanyatjarra rangers and Spinifex Rangers both presented in the plenary session on ranger lead fire management to an audience of around 400 people, most of whom were also rangers who work in the Australian deserts. Both groups demonstrated a high degree of pride in what they had achieved through the activities mentioned in this report.

Finally, Yilka Heritage and Land Care is another Indigenous land management organisation in the GVD that has previously shown interest in undertaking landscape-scale fire management and been involved in previous work supported by GVDIF. The success of this work has been highlighted in previous GVDIF reports. Due to an already full work schedule, Yilka were unable to find time in 2024 to undertake fire management activities. Yilka have expressed interest in continuing their fire management program in the future and have requested support from IDA when the opportunity arises.