



**Australian Government**

# Aboriginal Engagement Case Study

## Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team Project

Prepared for  
**Georges River Combined Councils Committee Inc. (GRCCC)**

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# Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Description
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CLM	Conservation and Land Management
ELA	Eco Logical Australia Pty Ltd
GLALC	Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council
GRCCC	Georges River Combined Councils Committee
GSLLS	Greater Sydney Local Land Services
LALC	Local Aboriginal Land Council
LLS	Local Land Services
MLALC	Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council
NRM	Natural Resource Management
OEH	Office of Environment and Heritage
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
TAFE NSI	The Northern Sydney Institute (Ryde Campus) of TAFE NSW
TEK	Traditional Ecological Knowledge

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose of this case study

This case study has been developed by Eco Logical Australia (ELA) on behalf of the Georges River Combined Councils Committee Inc. (GRCCC) to review Aboriginal engagement processes in the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project. It includes contributions from Aboriginal and non-Indigenous project partners and participants, such as the Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council (GLALC), Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council (MLALC), an Aboriginal community member and respected Elder, the Northern Sydney Institute (TAFE NSW), the GRCCC and some of its member Councils, Aboriginal trainees, as well as ELA's project manager. The case study is intended to provide inspiration and guidance to other organisations working toward Aboriginal self-determination.

## 1.2 Terminology

The case study makes use of Aboriginal English. For example, 'Country' in the Aboriginal context means more than just the land or rural landscapes. To learn more about Aboriginal English and a glossary of terms see:

- Creative Spirits Glossary of Aboriginal Australian Terms  
<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/glossary-of-aboriginal-australia-terms#axzz4oOCC40UX>
- Australian Museum Glossary of Indigenous Australia Terms  
<https://australianmuseum.net.au/glossary-indigenous-australia-terms>.

Additionally, this case study uses the term *Indigenous Australians* to refer inclusively to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the term *Aboriginal* to refer to the First Australians from the mainland. As this case study is relevant to the George River catchment area in south-western Sydney, some local cultural groups are referred to by their cultural names (e.g. the Dharawal people). To learn more about terminology and capitalisation see:

- University of NSW Indigenous Terminology website:  
<https://teaching.unsw.edu.au/indigenous-terminology>
- AIATSIS Aboriginal Australia map: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aiatsis-map-indigenous-australia>

Terms such as *Aboriginal*, *Indigenous* and distinct cultural names (e.g. the *Dharawal* people) are capitalised as these are the proper names of nations of people, or collective groups of nations. Thus, they are written as proper nouns in the same way that capitals are used for other nationalities (e.g. Italian, Greek, Māori etc).

## 2 Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project

### 2.1 Urban context

A common misconception is that most Indigenous Australians live in the outback, in remote and regional areas of Australia, however the Australian Bureau of Statistics reports Indigenous populations are becoming increasingly urbanised (ABS 2016a). Currently, 35% of Indigenous people live in major cities (ABS 2016a). A large proportion of Indigenous Ranger and Caring for Country programs occur in regional and remote areas, whereas the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project was centred on the Indigenous population in Australia's biggest city, Sydney. The Georges River catchment is home to over one million people, making it one of Australia's most highly urbanised catchments ([www.georgesriver.org.au/](http://www.georgesriver.org.au/)).

### 2.2 Project overview

The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project operated within Sydney's Georges River catchment from April 2014 to June 2017. The project employed an Aboriginal project manager and a team supervisor (non-Indigenous) to lead a small, full-time team of Aboriginal people in conservation and land management traineeships. The Aboriginal Riverkeeper project incorporated strong Aboriginal cultural components through engagement with Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs), Elders and knowledge holders. The purpose of this engagement was to acknowledge the continuity of Aboriginal culture, community and Country within the urban landscape of Sydney.

The project was funded by the Australian Government through a grant titled '*Building Indigenous knowledge and skills to restore urban waterways*' (BF14-00212) that was awarded to the Georges River Combined Councils Committee Inc. (GRCCC). The GRCCC is a regional grouping of eight member local councils in south-west Sydney.

The project fostered partnerships between government, private sector, the Aboriginal community and a registered training organisation (RTO). The project was delivered by consultants Eco Logical Australia (ELA). The project engaged directly with Metropolitan LALC, La Perouse LALC, Gandangara LALC and Tharawal LALC as well as members of the wider Aboriginal community. The Northern Sydney Institute (TAFE NSI) of TAFE NSW provided the formal qualifications to the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team trainees.

The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team conducted ecological restoration at 17 sites across the catchment, and included saltwater and freshwater Country. During this time the employees developed valuable bush regeneration skills and experiences, and gained formal qualifications. The team engaged in Aboriginal cultural activities that strengthened their identities through time with Aboriginal Elders and knowledge holders from the Sydney region learning about culture and managing Country.

The project successfully integrated on-ground ecological works, professional and career development for participants, and community engagement. There has been a legacy of ongoing employment in the environmental conservation sector post-traineeship. In addition, the team supervisor and project manager gained valuable team leadership, mentoring, and project delivery and management skills.

Further details of the project are available in the Summary Report (ELA 2017).

### 2.3 Aboriginal self-determination goal

As a requirement of funding the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project, the Australian Government approved a Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) plan. This identified project goals and targets, and how these would be measured. Aboriginal self-determination was identified as one of the long-term goals (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Aboriginal self-determination factors in the GRCCC program logic**

Long-term goals	Biodiversity Fund Theme	Intermediate outcomes	Immediate project outcomes
Aboriginal self-determination	Increased Aboriginal Community capacity to protect biodiversity in urban areas	Aboriginal management of Aboriginal staff and project components  Aboriginal business and economic development  Increase Aboriginal capacity to manage Country in urban areas  Protect Aboriginal heritage  Cross reference TEK with contemporary land management practices  Increased community awareness of Aboriginal culture and TEK	Aboriginal Program Manager  Aboriginal Bush Regeneration Team  Education & Training CLM, TEK WHS & Chemical Use accreditation  Awareness raising of Aboriginal Culture & TEK

## 3 Engagement principles

The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project was modelled on the following principles of Aboriginal engagement as highlighted in the stakeholder feedback:

- Include a wide range of stakeholders
- Engage with the community from the concept phase of the project
- Have a goal that is shared by stakeholders
- Value Aboriginal culture
- Prioritise Aboriginal participation
- Empower Aboriginal leadership

Selected feedback from key stakeholders in the Riverkeeper project is included below to illustrate these principles.

### 3.1 Be inclusive

In comparison to the Indigenous Ranger programs and Caring for Country programs in remote and regional areas where the appropriate Indigenous project partners, Elders and spokesperson(s) for areas of Country may be easily identified, the Indigenous population in south-western Sydney is layered with dynamic community and political complexity. The Georges River catchment forms part of the lands of the Dharawal, Gandangara, Eora and Darug peoples, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from numerous Indigenous nations reside in the catchment alongside non-Indigenous residents. To maintain progress in engagement with the Aboriginal proponents for the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project, a decision was made early in the project to engage with LALCs within the catchment (Metropolitan, La Perouse, Tharawal, Gandangara and Deerubbin).

This decision avoided potential delays from disputes being played out over who from the Aboriginal communities should or shouldn't be involved in the project if an open invitation to Aboriginal communities for involvement in the project was put forth.

“The Aboriginal Riverkeeper project worked well because it included everyone...how can you go wrong when the project is designed to be inclusive and involve everyone from the start?”

Brad Maybury, Cultural Heritage Officer, Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council

“I would attribute a great deal of the success down to the great collaboration of Local Government with Local Aboriginal Land Councils and engagement of the expertise of Eco Logical Australia to establish the Aboriginal Riverkeeper project to address a common theme to all parties, the health of the Georges River. The project has allowed us the ability to protect & preserve a valuable community resource such as the Georges River and through the project provide training, education and employment of Aboriginal people. A great success on many levels.”

Nathan Moran, CEO, Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council



### 3.2 Engage early

Any project that does not develop from within the Aboriginal community, needs to engage with the Aboriginal community from the early phases of the project, as Aboriginal people will have valid and unique insights into the possibilities and potential outcomes of the project.

In early 2013, Tony Wales of the GRCCC initiated development of a concept design for a project to involve Aboriginal people in the management of lands within the Georges River catchment. Ideas were presented and revised in discussion with Local Land Service's Aboriginal Land Services Officer John Lennis and Gandangara and Deerubbin LALCs. From these discussions, the project concept was developed further.

"The planning from concept to execution plus the sharing of the plan through the Steering Committees and having everybody with the same vision and goals ensured the project stayed true to the planned outcomes and outputs."

Tony Wales, GRCCC Riverkeeper

### 3.3 Share the goal

The concept for the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project was formally developed within the GRCCC, however, Aboriginal people within the Sydney region have been advocating for Aboriginal management of Country for many generations.

Indigenous people of Australia are the longest continuous surviving culture on Earth, and this endurance is directly related to spiritual and custodial relationships with Country. It is because of these relationships that the Aboriginal community in Sydney has actively sought to be involved in the management of Country for a sustained period of time. For example, in 1933 at Salt Pan Creek within the Georges River catchment Joe Anderson as 'King Burruga' was filmed advocating a petition to the King calling for Aboriginal 'representation in federal parliament' while also identifying Aboriginal custodial ownership of the land and concerns for environmental resources.

Preliminary meetings between the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous project partners experienced flux and negotiation as the two differing cultural groups worked through the interface of competing worldviews and the power dynamics of Australia's colonial history before a resolution formed. A succinct summary of this resolution was that 'the project would uphold and promote Aboriginal values and worldviews in its operation as an Aboriginal focused caring for Country activity'.

With this resolution in place, the on-ground work of the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project commenced with enthusiastic support from the LALCs through an Aboriginal Steering Committee that was established at the start of the project including representatives from the four LALCs, GRCCC and ELA. The LALCs also participated in the Project Steering Committee together with representatives from GRCCC, local councils, LLS, ELA and other project partners.

The LALCs conducted Aboriginal site inspections of each Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project worksite to investigate what Aboriginal heritage values were present, and how the Team's work practices would be modified to preserve and conserve those heritage values. Working from within this resolution fostered an opportunity for the non-Indigenous project partners to review their understandings of NRM to be more inclusive of Aboriginal perspectives and relationships with Country.

Beyond the differing worldviews, power dynamics and the urban implications, the project’s primary intent was caring for Country. This goal corresponded across all the project partners. This is not surprising given caring for Country is part of Aboriginal people’s custodial practice; and environmental management is a statutory obligation for local government; and the consultants are environmental specialists; and that the RTO was engaged to deliver Conservation and Land Management qualifications. This common goal resulted in a willingness to engage in the project as well as streamlining interactions.

“I believe the ART Project was successful because it involved many different stakeholders all working towards a common goal.”

Mitchell Clarke, Campbelltown City Council

“it had a specific task to focus on which was to look after the Georges River. It also worked because it was independent and wasn’t connected to any one specific person or organisation; it wasn’t Land Councils, and it wasn’t the local councils, it was separate, which meant that there was no political influence in the project it was able to run its course without interference.”

Dave Ingrey, Aboriginal community member, La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council

### 3.4 Value Aboriginal culture

The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project experienced success because it aligned with existing strong Aboriginal core values. Aboriginal approaches to caring for Country incorporate reciprocal relationships which, when fostered, nurture and strengthen the resilience and wellbeing of Aboriginal individuals, family and community groups, peoples and Aboriginal culture as well as for Country itself. The benefits that are created through involvement of Indigenous people (more broadly across the continent) in the management of Country has been well documented and understood. As identified by Weir et al (2011) ‘[C]aring for [C]ountry is intricately linked to maintaining cultural life, identity, autonomy and health’ (Weir et al., 2011, 1).

Aboriginal culture was a core component of the project and highly valued by all project partners. This was demonstrated in the grant application for the project:

...manage an Indigenous bush regeneration team over 3 years and provide pathways toward advanced accreditation and future employment for Indigenous trainees. The project will request Indigenous communities to assess an ecosystems services approach against their understanding of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).

“Aboriginal people and Country are inextricably linked. Aboriginal people caring for Country creates healthy people, healthy communities and healthy Country”

Vanessa Cavanagh, Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team Project Manager, Eco Logical Australia

“Being a part of the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team, it has given us the opportunity to learn ecological & cultural knowledge, gain qualifications but most importantly has helped us all connect to our culture. This traineeship has helped us truly understand our identity of being Aboriginal...”

Larissa Cooper, Aboriginal Riverkeeper Trainee 2014-2015

### 3.5 Prioritise Aboriginal participation

Priority was given to having Aboriginal participants at all levels. The project design called for an Aboriginal team. This worked well but some adaptations were required. Initially the project’s goal was to have an all Aboriginal team including project manager and team supervisor. When no suitable Indigenous team supervisor was identified during the recruitment phase, approval was granted through the funding body and project steering committee (including Aboriginal members) to adapt this requirement to allow for a non-Indigenous team supervisor.

Complementary to the positive spiritual and cultural outcomes that occur between Aboriginal people engaged in caring for Country, this project also experienced success because it created direct employment outcomes as well as capacity and career development for Aboriginal people. Over the three years the project employed an Aboriginal project manager (part-time) and eight Aboriginal trainees (full-time for up to a maximum of 18 months). While the trainees completed Conservation and Land Management traineeships they also developed valuable bush regeneration work skills and experiences and gained other formal qualifications.

Engagement with stakeholders was ongoing and reciprocal. Engagement was facilitated via Aboriginal Steering committee meetings; project manager and LALC interactions; project manager and Elder, knowledge holder, and community interactions.

As expected over a three year project, there were changes in the governance of various LALCs which resulted in the priorities of some LALCs shifting. However, each of the six Aboriginal positions on the Project Steering Committee was given equal power and respect despite any changes in personnel during the project, and this was accepted by all project partners. Further, knowledge sharing about the project between old and new committee members maintained stability and achieved efficiencies in managing the project.

“The project held Aboriginal culture as central, like the team is Aboriginal, me as the manager I’m Aboriginal, the work the team is doing is Aboriginal cultural activities, not just the cultural days either I mean the day-to-day work caring for Country...then everything else was able to operate around it. And I believe people get it, they are starting to understand more and more why getting Aboriginal people into these types of jobs works”

Vanessa Cavanagh, Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team Project Manager, Eco Logical Australia

“The (Aboriginal Riverkeeper) project worked well because it included everyone...[it] helped me to build relationships with the other land councils and keep in touch. It is a good initiative all round, not only builds relationships but it brings organisation together to help each other like when the Aboriginal Riverkeeper team helped with the GLALC repatriation project. It was because of the [Aboriginal Riverkeeper] project that we got to build more networks between GRCCC and LALC.”

Brad Maybury, Cultural Heritage Officer, Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council

### **3.6 Empower Aboriginal leadership**

The project leadership was empowered by the host organisation who provided comprehensive corporate support and a strong governance framework. Eco Logical Australia (ELA) is an environmental consultancy that was awarded the tender for the delivery of the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team. ELA had been involved in numerous projects engaging with Aboriginal communities and had experience operating restoration ecology teams, including trainees, in Sydney prior to being awarded the tender for the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team project.

“The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team component of the grant project worked because of two factors: People and Planning. Having people who believed and were committed to the project was important as was finding the right people to manage the team and the project champions within the Local Aboriginal Land Councils was crucial.”

Tony Wales, GRCCC Riverkeeper

## 4 Future projects

This chapter identifies additional considerations for future projects.

“Only recommendation could offer is on how we can or could continue this in perpetuity.”

Nathan Moran, CEO, Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council

### 4.1 Cultural competency

All three tiers of government in Australia have policies and targets relating to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage and encouraging reconciliation between Australia’s Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations (see the Prime Minister and Cabinet’s Closing of the Gap initiative <http://closingthegap.pmc.gov.au/> and the Council of Australian Governments targets <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage>). To assist with reaching these goals a plethora of educational resources are available to the general public. Additionally, professional development opportunities are also available to government staff, often in the form of cultural awareness or cultural competency or cultural safety training.

An example of one such resource is made available through the federally funded body, Reconciliation Australia. Reconciliation Australia’s online educational resource called *Share our Pride*, includes a specific module directed at developing respectful relationships between organisations or departments and Australian Indigenous peoples. This module lists tips, advice, detailed steps, definitions, explanations and examples useful for encouraging respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous parties: <http://shareourpride.reconciliation.org.au/sections/respectful-relationships/>

Local Councils and departments often have their own materials relating to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage and encouraging reconciliation.

As a bare minimum, these resources and opportunities must be reviewed, understood and agreed to before government officers approach Indigenous peoples seeking engagement in government programs. It is not acceptable for government staff to be ignorant to these issues or for their managers to treat this competency with ambivalence especially when these officers are going to be engaging with Indigenous people. As stated by the Hon. Fred Chaney AO and Reconciliation Australia Board Member “...the answers, while complex, are now known. And that means... governments, and all of us involved, have no excuses left for failure” (<http://shareourpride.reconciliation.org.au/sections/respectful-relationships/>).

“Local councils and any organisation that approaches a Land Council need to be culturally appropriate, they need to understand Aboriginal culture, and make sure their staff do too.”

Brad Maybury, Cultural Heritage Officer, Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council

“The LGA need to trust our teachings and our ways and need to go along with Aboriginal cultural lessons. They need to not just do the white teachings but there needs to be balance so they need to get on board and accept our Aboriginal cultural teachings and practices. For this to happen they need to trust the Aboriginal way of doing it rather than dismiss it.”

Dave Ingrey, Aboriginal community member, La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council

#### **4.2 Engage internally**

Government departments and councils employ Indigenous officers in a variety of roles, some of these roles are designed to assist in engagement with Indigenous peoples. Find out who is the Indigenous officer within the department or council whose role includes assisting with Indigenous engagement and seek out their involvement. Do not assume that any Indigenous person employed in the department can or should provide this service. In some cases there may be an Indigenous committee in place instead of, or in addition to an engagement Indigenous officer, that committee may need to be involved as well.

“ensure your workplace is culturally competent and has a good understanding of the local and generic issues faced by Indigenous Australians and our shared history, be aware of casual and institutional racism and be prepared to educate and reform to eradicate prejudice.”

Vanessa Cavanagh in Restore, Revegetate and Renew conference proceedings (forthcoming)

## 5 Other feedback

This chapter provides additional feedback about the project from some of the key stakeholders. It is provided as further insights into what made the program successful.

“I was involved in many things along the way that I wouldn’t normally get the privilege of attending in my role at Council for example the TEK days that were held at Oatley Point Reserve. The knowledge, insight and chance to work in partnership with the indigenous community and other stakeholders on this program was something that will be very valuable for future projects.”

Mitchell Clarke, Campbelltown City Council

“Consistent, realistic expectations and loads of support for the students from the Eco Logical Team together with the TAFE curriculum helped students to adjust their behaviour and goals throughout the program so that they are now better placed to apply for a job and enter the workforce...The students were treated with respect and in turn were expected to behave respectfully. Teamwork skills and the onerous task of managing themselves were practiced and improved. Lex (team supervisor) played a critical role in this regard. Workplace communication and basic report writing were undertaken. The students were given fabulous opportunities to hear, feel and experience a realistic and functional version of their culture from people well regarded in the community. The students were given fabulous opportunities to meet and interact with good role models. During the program each student selected a specific role model and undertook some work with them. This is an invaluable experience for any young person. During the program the successful students, developed a genuine interest in ecology and plants.”

Diana Smit, TAFE teacher

And in a speech delivered at the end of Riverkeeper event, trainee Harry articulated his appreciation for the strong leadership from team supervisor Lex:

“...but in particular, I'd like to thank our supervisor Lex, without his consistent passion, kind hearted nature, his incredible patience, his eagerness to take on any task and go out of his way to teach us his vast knowledge that inspires anyone that is lucky enough to know him, although we do not always give you the appreciation you deserve, never forget that your hard work during and after work doesn't go unnoticed, the boys and I can all agree that you really are a person we all aspire to be like, Thanks mate and Thankyou everybody”

Harry Cotterall, Aboriginal Riverkeeper trainee 2016-17

“It has been a terrific opportunity for me. I learned a great deal from the students and the team.”

Diana Smit, TAFE teacher

“Having the technical expertise of the various Councils, GRCCC and Eco Logical staff provided the participants with a wide range of learning opportunities and to see them all having moved onto post project employment is great. I think the structure of the project was great also as it allowed the teams see and experience working in a wide range of vegetation communities across the diverse Georges River Catchment.”

Mitchell Clark, Campbelltown City Council

“There were lessons learned along the way and we found ourselves having to adapt but always staying true to the project’s Aboriginal cultural and capacity goals as well as planned environmental outcomes.”

Tony Wales, GRCCC Riverkeeper

“This traineeship has helped ...many doors opening to employment...Thanks to this traineeship I have had job offers and gained experience working in the [NSW] Office of Environment and Heritage Repatriation & Conservation Team, Royal Botanic Gardens as Aboriginal Education Officer and my current position as the Culture & Land Officer for MLALC.”

Larissa Cooper, Aboriginal Riverkeeper Trainee 2014-2015



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Vanessa Cavanagh in Restore, Revegetate and Renew conference proceedings (forthcoming)

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