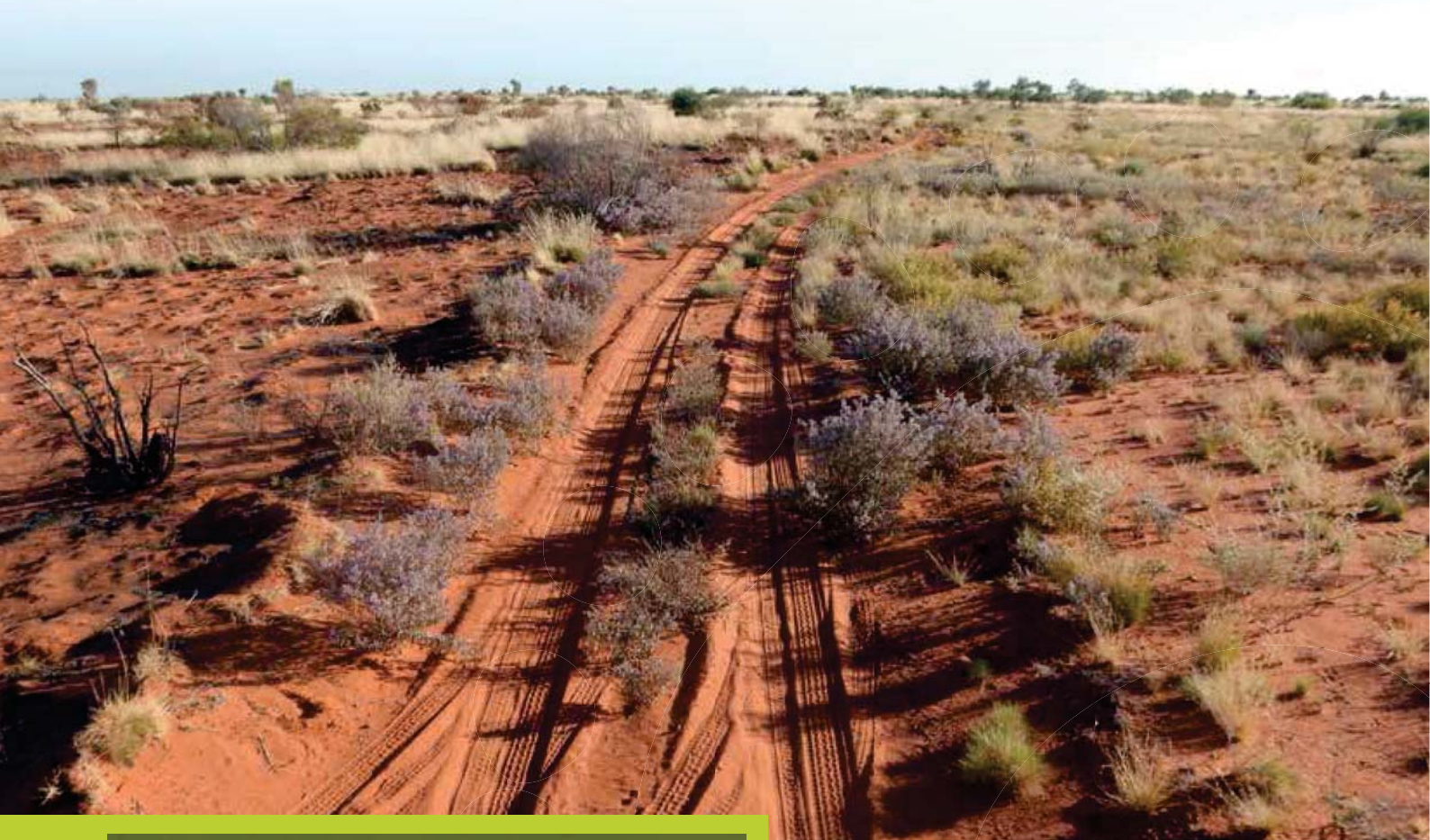


WHAT DO CATS, BILBIES & NATIVE TITLE HAVE IN COMMON?



KATE CROSSING & ROD THOMAS, CENTRAL DESERT LAND COUNCIL

VISITORS TO THE REMOTE Aboriginal community of Kiwirrkurra, Western Australia, often find that the person they are looking for has 'gone hunting', especially on weekends. Kiwirrkurra is home to about 150 mainly Pintupi people, many of whom grew up living in the desert and only made contact with non-Aboriginal people in the 1960s and 70s.

In October 2001 Kiwirrkurra traditional owners gained recognition of their native title rights and interests over 4.2 million hectares of their ancestral lands in the Gibson and Great Sandy Deserts of Western Australia. The native title rights and interests recognised in the 2001 determination include, amongst others:

1. the right to make decisions about the use and enjoyment of the land and waters of the Determination Area, and
2. the right to hunt and gather... for the purpose of satisfying their (native title holders) personal, domestic, social, cultural, religious, spiritual and communal needs.

These days the 30kms or so around Kiwirrkurra community form a regular hunting ground where young and old alike search for favoured bush tucker foods, such as goanna, bush turkey, kangaroo and even feral cat. Cats are thought to have reached this remote desert country at least 100 years ago and became an important food source for the people living here. Although Toyotas, rifles and metal digging sticks have

replaced more traditional tools, people still follow the old ways. As they move they burn small patches of vegetation: to flush out game, to make it easier to see goanna burrows, to encourage green pick and bush tucker plants, and just to 'clean up' country.

These same hunting grounds are home to two iconic threatened species, the bilby (*ninu* or *Macrotis lagotis*) and great desert skink (*tjalapa*, or *Liopholis kintorei*). The presence of *ninu* and *tjalapa* is unlikely to be a coincidence. Ecologist Rachel Paltridge points out that the fine mosaic of mature spinifex interspersed with different-aged patches of soft grasses, herbs and small shrubs that results from hunting fires provides an ideal mix of shelter and food resources for many native animals. She also suspects

Above: Bilby habitat showing at least 3 different fire ages.
Credit: Kate Crossing.

that the strong overlap in food preferences (bush onions, witchetty grubs and certain grass seeds) for both the bilby and Aboriginal people in the western deserts goes a long way towards explaining the survival of bilbies in these areas where people hunt regularly (*pers comm* 2015).

Analysis of satellite imagery shows that the pattern of fire scars in these hunting grounds is remarkably similar to that from the 1950s, as seen in aerial photos taken for the Blue Streak rocket launch. Further afield, where the lack of access tracks mean people are no longer walking and burning, the fire scars tell a different story: unchecked wildfires leaving large tracts of land burnt and other areas building up a dangerous load of old spinifex.

Assisting the survival of the *ninu* and *tjalapa* is the remarkable cat hunting skills of a core group of Kiwirrkurra hunters, a skill which is fast disappearing across the western deserts. Feral cats are recognised as a key threat to the survival of both the bilby and great desert skink in the wild. While the number of cats captured is only one or two per month, the ongoing removal of individual cats from the hunting grounds over many years is likely to be reducing predation pressure on these iconic species.

Kiwirrkurra traditional owners recently dedicated the whole of their native title determination as an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA), entering into a partnership with the



Feral cat and Yukultji Napangarti Kiwirrkurra.

Credit: Kate Crossing.

Australian Government to manage their country for both cultural and environmental conservation. Key priorities identified in the management plan¹ include looking after both culture and country, keeping people strong, and building a strong economic base.

Protection of threatened species is one key area where the IPA is helping people to meet their aspirations. Through the IPA and additional funding from Rangelands NRM WA, Kiwirrkurra rangers are extending their traditional burning and hunting activities to other priority *ninu* habitats within the IPA. Building on a strong basis of local knowledge and skills, they are starting to incorporate new

methods and technologies. Satellite imagery and fire scar maps help the elders and rangers decide on priorities for burning, especially in more remote or inaccessible areas away from roads. And an incentive scheme for hunting cats has both helped raise awareness of the value of this important skill in protecting threatened species, as well as encouraged more young people to take it up.

The IPA and hunting activity is not just about mobilising the rights and interests recognised in the 2001 determination today, it is also about ensuring that these rights and interests are sustained well into the future by engaging the younger generation in a modern cultural

Yukultji Napangarti Ward burning country with goanna in hand.
Credit: Kate Crossing.





Yakari Napaltjari digging
goanna in burnt patch.
Credit: Kate Crossing.

economy. The combination of the IPA and the remarkable knowledge and skills of Kiwirrkurra elders provide the foundation for the younger generation to learn, while undertaking important cultural and natural management of Kiwirrkurra lands for the benefit of all Australians.

The Kiwirrkurra approach is in stark contrast with some alternative approaches to threatened species management in Australia where the focus is on building and maintaining expensive exclusion fences to keep feral animals at bay and threatened species cocooned in predator free compounds. One is an investment in people and community while the other an investment in posts and wire! Which approach will be more cost-effective and/or successful in the longer term, time will tell.

1 Kiwirrkurra IPA - Plan for Country, <http://www.centraldesert.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/140613-Kiwirrkurra-IPA-Plan-for-Country-v1.1-CRO-small.pdf>



Above: Matthew West lighting fire Kiwirrkurra.

Below: Young women working with elders to sort bilby scats.

Credit: Kate Crossing.

