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LOOKING AFTER COUNTRY  
IN NEW SOUTH WALES:  
IMPLEMENTING A LAND &  
SEA COUNTRY PLAN  
ON THE FAR SOUTH COAST

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Centre for  
Aboriginal Economic  
Policy Research  
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Arts & Social  
Sciences

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# Looking after country in New South Wales: Implementing a Land & Sea Country Plan on the far south coast

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## Abstract

This case study is about the Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council's (LALC) engagement in cultural and natural resource management and the organisation's recent efforts to enhance these through development of a Land & Sea Country Plan. The paper outlines the early involvement and gradual exclusion of Aboriginal people from the natural resource industries of the Eden region and their efforts to negotiate agreements for access to and co-management of the considerable public lands in their region. The Land & Sea Country Plan, which is their latest effort to build greater opportunity for employment in cultural and natural resource management, is described. Unlike Indigenous land and sea country plans in northern Australia, in this case the Eden LALC is seeking opportunities to work on and be involved in the management of public and even private lands within the Land Council's boundaries, as well as on its own land. This necessitates negotiating arrangements and opportunities with a number of regional natural resource management agencies at all levels of government. These have come together to form a Steering Committee for the Land & Sea Country Plan to support its development and implementation. After just two years of implementation, the emerging benefits and challenges are discussed.

**Keywords:** natural resource management, cultural resource management, land and sea country plan, New South Wales

## Acknowledgments

This paper was only possible because of the active participation of the members and staff of the Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC), on the far south coast of New South Wales. This paper is about the benefits which have emerged to date from their determined efforts to create opportunities for culturally significant employment on country within their Land Council boundaries. I appreciate enormously the time they and others working with them in a variety of ways have put in to the research and what they have collectively taught me in the process.

In particular I would like to especially thank Pastor Ossie Cruse and B.J. Cruse, Chairs of the Eden LALC Board during the period of the study, as well as other Board members who supported it going ahead, and Land Council staff Penny Stewart and Les Kosez for their enormous assistance with this study. Other members of the Land Council were also generous with their time and insights, among them Bobby Maher, Serina Maher and Darren Mongta. I would also like to thank the members of the Steering Committee for the Land & Sea Country Plan from different government agencies that have also generously participated in this study and enabled me to join their deliberations. In particular I would like to thank Brett Miners and Michell Scott from the Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority (SRCMA), Danny Chapman from the Office of Aboriginal Affairs (in Department of Premier and Cabinet, NSW), Rob McKinnon from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Matt Proctor from Fisheries NSW, and Paul Carriage from Forestry NSW, as well as Susan Dale Donaldson and Sonya Bazzacco, the consultants who worked on the Plan, and John Blay from the Bundian Way project.

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## Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CALM	Conservation and Land Management
CRA	Comprehensive Regional Assessment
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DEEWR	Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (Commonwealth)
IPA	Indigenous Protected Area
LALC	Local Aboriginal Land Council
MPs	Members of Parliament
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NPWS	National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW)
NRM	Natural Resource Management
NSW	New South Wales
RFA	Regional Forest Agreement
SRCMA	Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority
TAFE	Technical and Further Education

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## Introduction

This case study is about the Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council's (LALC) engagement in cultural and natural resource management and the organisation's recent efforts to enhance these through development of a Land & Sea Country Plan.

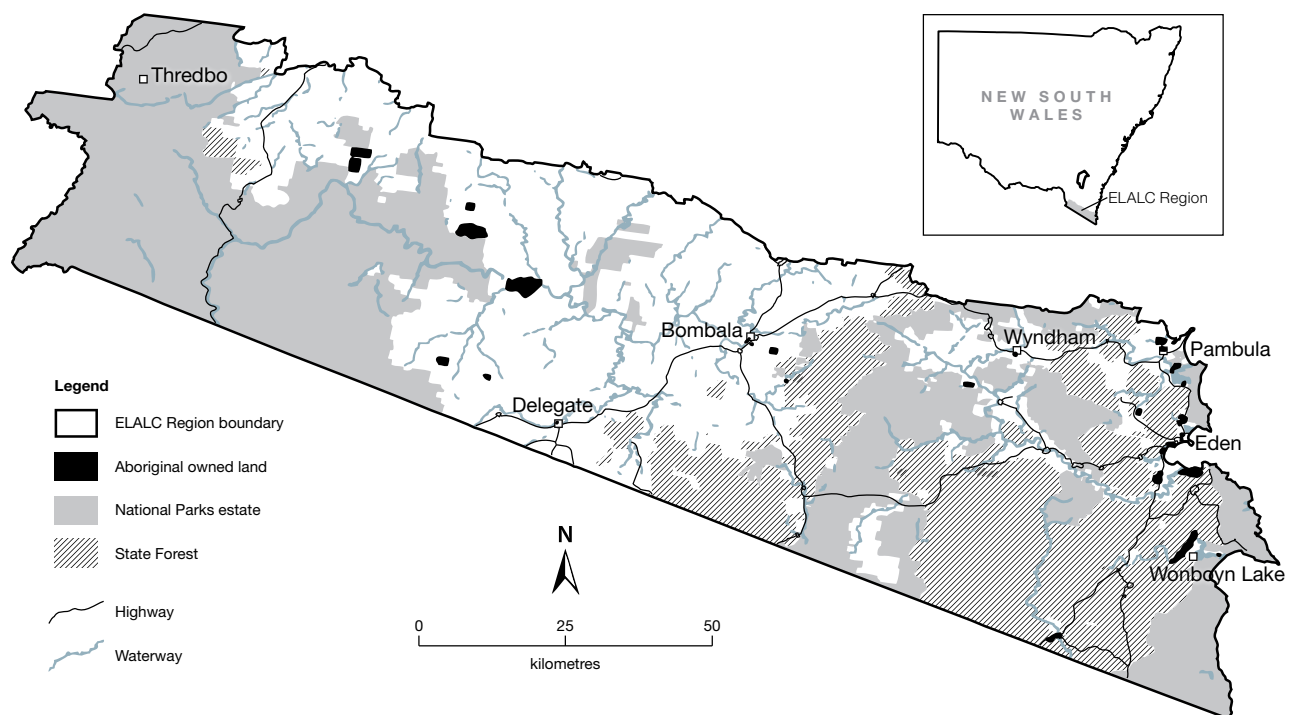
It is the third and final case study in a series of studies being undertaken in NSW to investigate the socioeconomic benefits which may emerge when Aboriginal people have the opportunity to engage in management of the natural and cultural environment. In this case, the benefits to individuals are still emerging, so the focus is more on the institutional benefits and the potentials that changes in relationships between the Aboriginal organisation and other natural resource management agencies may bring in the future.

This case study research began in August 2010, and involved participation in meetings of the Steering Committee for the Land & Sea Country Plan over two years, as well as interviews with key members of the LALC, the consultants who worked with them to devise the plan, and officials from agencies supporting the process. The researcher also provided limited support to the Eden LALC in the early stages of the Plan's implementation.

## Background

Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council was incorporated in April 1984 under the New South Wales (NSW) *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983*. This Act enables Aboriginal land councils to claim Crown land which is not required for essential public purposes. Eden is a fishing, tourism and timber town on the far south coast of NSW, but the LALC region extends inland from the coast between Pambula and Cape Howe to Mount Kosciusko and the Murray River in the Snowy Mountains. The southern boundary of the LALC is the NSW/Victorian border (see Fig 1). The LALC has its own land and a Keeping Place, known as Jigamy Farm, on the Princes Highway between Pambula and Eden. The Keeping Place is a large building which the LALC developed using much of its own trainee labour. It now houses an outstanding collection of documentary records and artefacts from the region—Monaroo Bobberrer Gudu—maintained by voluntary archival experts, as well as meeting rooms, a stage area, kitchen facilities and the LALC's small office.

**FIG. 1.** Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council region



Map: CAEPR Publications

The Eden LALC 'Community, land and business plan 2008–2013' notes some of the major achievements of the LALC since its formation (Eden LALC 2008). The LALC was a participant in the Bega, Eden and Merrimans Aboriginal Forest Management Committee which negotiated the Eden Regional Forest Agreements in 1999 with a range of benefits relating to cultural and natural resource management (for details see below). In 2001, Eden LALC also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Bega Valley Shire Council that recognised Aboriginal people as 'the original inhabitants, custodians and native title holders of all land and water in the Shire' (Bega Valley Shire Council 2008c).

Furthermore, Eden LALC has over 80 granted land claims valued conservatively at almost \$19 million. This includes freehold title to town and industrial lots, and a number of rental properties, as well as several more extensive areas of land of greater interest to this study:

- land at Wonboyn Lake, East Kiah, West Kiah and Bilgalera (Fisheries Beach) totalling 960 hectares
- Green Cape Plantation of 16 hectares in Ben Boyd National Park.

Eden LALC has joint management of Haycock Point Cultural Camp in Ben Boyd National Park. The LALC has established a number of partnerships to enable community members to access land for resources, and in order to promote culture and enterprise development, such as with the Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and the Marine Discovery Centre at Eden.

The 'Community, land and business plan 2008–2013' notes:

Since 1984, Eden LALC has moved through a number of phases, from the enthusiasm of its initial creation and the excitement of the first successful land claim to the building of capacity to pursue business opportunities, and the difficulties involved in turning the wealth locked in Eden LALC's land assets into sustainable economic benefits for the members (Eden LALC 2008b: 6).

Many of the agreements made with the Eden LALC since 1998 have not been fully honoured by the signatory agencies, as is documented in the Land & Sea Country Plan that was developed in 2010 and publicly launched in April 2011 (Donaldson, Bazzacco & Cruse 2011). By then, some of the community members clearly felt that expectations for widespread sustainable economic

opportunities were not being met, and this was fuelling some dissent and disappointment. There was a widespread feeling that the community had heard many promises but it's been a case of 'all talk but no action'.

## The Aboriginal people of the Eden LALC region

The Aboriginal people of the Eden LALC region include coastal people of the southern Yuin (Murring) people and Ngarigo-speaking people of the Moneroo (Monaro) cultural landscape (Wesson 2000; Young 2005).

The Katungal people are the main sub-group of coastal fishing people, within which there are smaller groups identified (Mallokotan-mitter people in Cape Howe area; Nallerkor-mitter people in Green Cape area; Wiacon people in Twofold Bay area, and Panbula people in the Pambula area (Wesson 2000: 13)). The languages associated with the coastal region are the Thawa and Bidjall language groups. Across the Moneroo several localised groups were identified in the early period of contact, for example, the Kyerkong-mittong people south of Delegate, the Mowenbar people on the Mowamba area south west of Jindabyne, the Mutong people at Matong south east of Jindabyne, the Pundeang-mittong people in the Bombala area and the Wakeruk people near the Snowy River (Wesson 2000: 103).

The former Chair of Eden LALC emphasises that the land was shared country among the Monaro and Yuin; that tribes moved from the mountains to the coast to stay in winter, and coastal people moved to the mountains in late summer and early autumn. Thus he emphasises that there are strong kinship connections among the coastal and inland people of the LALC region. However, in recognition that not all the Aboriginal people in the Eden LALC boundaries can claim 'traditional ownership' (as is the case in all LALCs which have residential membership qualifications), the Land & Sea Country Plan explicitly states in its title that it is 'For Aboriginal people with traditional, historical and contemporary connections to land & sea country within the Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council region, Southeast NSW' (Donaldson, Bazzacco & Cruse 2011). The former Chair himself suggests that in fact 'ownership' is an inappropriate term in any case as Aboriginal people are custodians of the country, not owners.

It is difficult to estimate the total size of the Aboriginal population that the Eden LALC serves. The town of Eden itself has approximately 3,000 residents, of whom 206 were recorded as Indigenous in the 2006 Census, 6.9 per cent of the population (Bega Valley Shire Council



2008b: 33). Much of the LALC region, including Eden, is within the Bega Valley Shire Council, which counts over 700 Aboriginal people within its boundaries (Bega Valley Shire Council 2008a: A12).<sup>1</sup> But other LALCs, such as Merrimans LALC and Wagonga LALC, which have worked closely with Eden LALC on a number of issues, also operate within the Bega Valley Shire Council region. In addition, a small number of Aboriginal people (165 in 2006) live in the Cooma-Monaro Shire, some of whom live in the Eden LALC region (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006). Thus it is likely the total Aboriginal population in the area covered by the Eden LALC is around 250–300 people.

The Community, Land and Business Plan records that Eden LALC has 70 members, who tend to be the older members of the community, and efforts are being made to encourage younger people to participate. High unemployment among the 42 members who responded to a LALC survey undertaken in 2007 is the reason the LALC wants to pursue economic development opportunities. It is notable that the Bega Valley Shire Council Social Profile records unemployment rates for Aboriginal people in their Shire at 25 per cent compared to 9 per cent among non-Aboriginal people. Education levels are relatively low,<sup>2</sup> although the situation has been changing since the 2007 survey, with more young people now completing Year 12 and a small number going on to tertiary education (although they have to leave Eden to do so). The non-Indigenous population of the area also has relatively low levels of education, and there are very limited tertiary education opportunities in the region.

## A long engagement in natural resource industries

The Land & Sea Country Plan builds on a long involvement of Aboriginal people in natural resource management in the region. The earliest industry in Eden after colonisation was whaling, and Aboriginal people were employed as crewmen on the whaling boats (McKenzie n.d.: 11–13). One record shows 34 Aboriginal crewmen whose labour was highly valued at a time when workers were in short supply, particularly due to their excellent eyesight. These early Aboriginal natural resource management workers were paid and treated

equally with others, a rather unusual situation at the time, in the early–mid 1800s. Whaling work continued until about 1930 (Wellings n.d.: 37). As late as the 1920s, McKenna (2002: 166) notes that ‘Aboriginal families would move each year to Eden from Wallaga Lake for the whaling season’.<sup>3</sup>

As whaling started to decline, a commercial fishing industry developed in the early twentieth century and, although interrupted by World War 2, Eden soon became the largest supplier of fish to markets in Sydney and Melbourne (McKenzie n.d.: 94–5). A small number of Aboriginal men were employed in this industry but by the 1980s bluefin tuna were getting harder to find and restrictions were imposed around 1984. The major tuna cannery (by then owned by Heinz) closed in 1999, laying off the 150 workers who remained there, among them a small number of Aboriginal workers (McKenna 2002: 150–51).

In the mid-1960s abalone, or mutton fish, became popular for export to Asia. Abalone had long been a traditional food of Aboriginal people on the south coast, and they soon began to enter the commercial abalone market as abalone divers. B.J. Cruse describes selling abalone to middlemen until SAFCOL arrived and initially refused to take their haul, forcing them to sell directly into Sydney. Soon, abalone diving, which had reached a commercial peak in the early 1970s, started to be affected by over-exploitation. As Beryl Cruse records, ‘the NSW abalone fishery, which had grown from 18 tonnes in 1964–65 to a peak of 1,200 tonnes in 1971’ dropped to only 300 tonnes in 1977. This stimulated the introduction in 1980 of restricted fisheries licenses for abalone diving (Cruse, Stewart & Norman 2005: 64; McKenzie n.d.: 97), but ‘most of the Koories missed out on getting licenses as they hadn’t worked as consistently as other more organised and better capitalized divers’ (Cruse, Stewart & Norman 2005: 64), or they did not necessarily have the evidence recorded to meet the requirements for licenses. Worse still, as Uncle Ossie Cruse (Cruse, Stewart & Norman 2005: 75–6) explained:

... in the process of making an industry of abalone the NSW government took away from Aboriginal people

1. According to Bega Valley Shire Council’s Community Profile, the ABS ‘experimental estimate’ from the 2001 Census is 724 Indigenous people (Bega Valley Shire Council 2008a). There is no data for the 2006 Census.
2. None of those surveyed had completed the Higher School Certificate, although five had a trade certificate and three a Diploma or Associate Diploma.

3. Wallaga Lake was the first Aboriginal reserve established by the NSW Aborigines Protection Board in 1891 (McKenna 2002: 162). Although north of the contemporary Eden LALC’s region, its important role in the history of south coast Aborigines in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is clear. The state exercised almost total control over Aboriginal lives, with cultural practices and languages officially disallowed (though secretly maintained). Yet in the twentieth century people who had been forcibly gathered there became radicalised and became engaged in political activist networks along the coast of NSW (Chittick & Fox 1997; McKenna 2002).

traditional rights of gathering our traditional foods. And also made it illegal for us to process our food the way we've processed it for thousands of years. As a result people are being fined for what they call shucking the abalone on the rocks which was the traditional way where you took it out of the shell and then tenderized it by taking a smooth rock and pounding the flesh and washing it clean and bringing it home that way.

The conflict between Aboriginal people and Fisheries NSW (a division of the NSW Department of Primary Industries) over abalone has continued on the south coast. The policy now allows an increased take of abalone (from 2–10 abalone per fisher, where the purpose is to provide for elders, the incapacitated or others who cannot fish themselves) in recognition of its cultural significance to Aboriginal people. Shucking has been allowed, but only if the abalone is consumed within 20 metres of the high tide mark. This means that Aboriginal people cannot take the shucked abalone home to old people or others unable to access the beach. Other provisions also allow for small groups (up to 15 people) and for larger cultural events for which a permit is required (NSW Aboriginal Land Council 2010a, 2010b). However, leaders in the Eden LALC consider this is still inadequate. They want the rights to harvest and catch marine produce—such as bimbaldas, oysters and mutton fish—on the intertidal zone and inshore area, and to restock these species so that they are plentiful, whilst accepting that commercial fishers will continue to utilise offshore marine environments.

From the late nineteenth century, and particularly from the 1920s to 1975, south coast Aboriginal people were also casually employed in a range of seasonal agricultural pursuits, such as 'bark-stripping, clearing land, corn-pulling, potato-digging, pea-picking' usually living in humpies along rivers or on farms (McKenna 2002: 168; White 2010). Hundreds of south coast Aboriginal people were drafted to the farms of the Bega Valley region to harvest vegetables, but were required to leave when the harvesting was finished. Whilst Bega Valley farmers were keen to remove Aboriginal families from their land when the seasonal work was done, Bega townspeople were openly racist and hostile to Aboriginal people living in the town as late as 1967–1970, leaving many Aboriginal people with nowhere to go. The arrival of a woodchip mill provided one solution.

Forestry had begun in the early twentieth century, initially to provide railway sleepers, but this industry started to decline after 1955 when the timber trade to New Zealand ceased, until Harris-Daishowa opened a woodchip mill in 1967. Forestry remains a large part of the Eden region's economy, although considerably reduced since the Regional Forest Agreements of 1999. Aboriginal people have had a long association with these forest industries and—following the hostility to Aboriginal people living in Bega town—when a chip mill was established near Eden in the 1960s, the Bega Valley Aborigines' Advancement Association lobbied to obtain accommodation to enable Aboriginal people to 'take advantage of employment opportunities in the local timber industry' (NSW CRA/RFA Steering Committee 1998: 2). The Kiah accommodation and employment project resulted, providing accommodation from 1968 to July 1972 in six caravans, for a total of 76 people from 16 families over the life of the project. The men were engaged as sub-contractors through the Bega Valley Aborigines' Advancement Association to the Harris-Daishowa timber company, but the scheme ended when training funds dried up (McKenna 2002: 189).<sup>4</sup> The first supervisor of the crew was the Chair of the Eden LALC when this research began.

Some Aboriginal people have also been engaged in other aspects of the timber industry, such as 'cutting sleepers, poles, collecting firewood as well as working in the sawmills as benchmen and general hands' (NSW CRA/RFA Steering Committee 1998: 3). However, as the timber industry increasingly mechanised and then declined, Aboriginal people were the first to lose their jobs. By 1998, there was minimal Aboriginal employment in forest industries. A small number were employed in forest management and a licensed firewood team was supported by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program. Aboriginal people had lost opportunities to access forests, manage cultural heritage and use forest resources for bush tucker, traditional craft, and cultural tourism. Women had lost access to traditional birthing places, and to plant species and bush tucker. As Feary (2007: 276) noted, Aboriginal people see different values in forests than non-Aboriginal foresters. At that time Aboriginal communities wanted the right to access and use forests both for economic reasons and to revitalise culture, and particularly wanted to control the management of cultural sites and flora and fauna protection (NSW CRA/RFA Steering Committee 1998). B.J. Cruse had himself defied the law on several

4. McKenna records the start of this scheme as March 1970, but B.J. Cruse remembers moving there in 1968.

occasions to access land and assert his cultural rights (Cruse n.d.). By December 1997 no Aboriginal community members were employed in the forest industries and although some 20 people had undergone 6–12 month training programs, no permanent jobs had been available on completion of the training (NSW CRA/RFA Steering Committee 1998).

Thus the story up until 1998 was one of initial engagement followed by gradual exclusion of Aboriginal people from access to their now over-exploited and depleted traditional marine resources. They were also gradually excluded from commercial opportunities in natural resource industries in which they had played significant roles in the earlier period. Aboriginal people however worked hard to bring agencies to the negotiating table when opportunities arose, to try to win back some of the opportunities lost.

## **Regional Forest Agreements— an opportunity grasped**

The 1999 Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) presented one such opportunity for Aboriginal people on the far south coast to advance their goals. They were extremely active in this highly politicised process designed to preserve old growth forests and progressively restructure forest industries in the region. There were two agreements: one with the NSW Government, the other with the Commonwealth and NSW Governments, and each remains valid until 2019. Through these agreements, Eden LALC gained four areas of East Boyd State Forest as freehold land. Green Cape Plantation in Ben Boyd National Park was subsequently granted to Eden LALC, also as freehold land. Both agreements were also supposed to entail co-operative management of national parks and state forests in the Eden region. Further, the NSW Government agreed to recognise and respect in law and policy Aboriginal hunting, gathering and cultural activities in these areas. The NSW agreement required the NPWS and Forests NSW to prepare a joint strategy ‘providing Aboriginal peoples with access to natural resources for food, medicine, art and craft, firewood and opportunities for traditional use and cultural activities’ (Donaldson, Bazzacco & Cruse 2010: 19). The Commonwealth and NSW Governments’ agreement included reference to employment of Aboriginal people in land management, and ‘increased opportunities to pursue traditional cultural activities, cultural heritage management and new economic ventures such as aquaculture at Fisheries Beach and Wonboyn Lake; ecological and cultural tourism on joint management areas suitable for cultural camps and guided tours’

(Donaldson, Bazzacco & Cruse 2010: 19). These were significant achievements from the negotiations, although they have not all been honoured.

Rangan and Lane (2001) highlighted the unique position and role of Aboriginal people in the Eden Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) compared to other regional forest agreement processes, pointing out they had native title claims lodged over most of the crown forest lands at the time. They viewed the agreements reached as innovative, and suggested that,

Timber companies operating in Eden have supported demands for comanagement of public forests in the region and have agreed to collaborate with indigenous and local communities in expanding employment in forest-based industries (NSW CRA/ RFA 1998) (Rangan & Lane 2001: 152).

In January 2004, State Forests of NSW signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Eden LALC covering State forest areas ‘to allow the two parties to progress co-operative arrangements for the management of Aboriginal cultural heritage and Aboriginal interests on State Forest’, and for ‘Aboriginal involvement in joint management of identified areas of State Forest at Eden’ (Department of Primary Industries 2004: 1). B.J. Cruse, at that time Chair of the Eden LALC, indicated that the Aboriginal community wanted to develop ‘forest-based enterprise opportunities that were culturally appropriate and complemented existing industries’ (Department of Primary Industries 2004: 1).<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, however, the Defence Department had moved its armaments wharf from Sydney to the recently acquired Bilgalera (Fisheries Beach) land. As this area was subject to a native title claim, and the land was simply resumed, the Aboriginal people sought compensation from the Navy for loss of cultural rights due to the presence of the wharf and the explosion zones that came with it (Cruse n.d.). That compensation case was eventually settled in early 2011. Today, from the perspective of the Eden LALC, the RFA and the subsequent MOU have delivered less than they had hoped for.<sup>6</sup>

5. The media release indicated that Aboriginal people would ‘gain valuable land management training’, have ‘strategic involvement in management of traditional country’ and as well as access to forests for cultural purposes, possibly develop commercial areas (Department of Primary Industries 2004: 2).

6. This view is consistently expressed by Eden LALC informants.

## Current employment and economic context

At the time of the LALC member survey for the 'Community, land and business plan 2008–2013', employment and housing were identified as the two greatest needs for the Aboriginal members of the LALC. Of the 42 adults who responded, 28 were in the labour force; of this group, nine had full-time permanent work but most had part-time or casual work in agriculture, health and community services (Eden LALC 2008). The Bega Valley Shire and Eden township have a low labour force participation rate overall, with relatively high unemployment rates compared to the rest of NSW, and a high proportion of people in part-time, rather than full-time work (Bega Valley Shire Council 2008a, 2008b). The average household incomes of both Eden and the Bega Valley Shire are relatively low compared to NSW as a whole, particularly for women, and most work is found in retail, food and accommodation, manufacturing, rural industries and health and social care (Bega Valley Shire Council 2008b).

In the past, the LALC has employed a Senior Sites Officer to undertake cultural heritage assessments (especially for Forests NSW—a major program which has been self-funding). The LALC has also held short-term contracts for particular tasks such as Green Shore Crab collection for the Marine Discovery Centre at Eden, weed and willow removal, erosion control and similar activities. Much of this work is short term, or very intermittent, such as Green Shore Crab collection (which was undertaken on only two days per month and has now concluded). While a number of individuals may be involved from time to time, there is insufficient funding to provide for a strong core of natural resource management workers.

## Development of the Land & Sea Country Plan

It is in this context of gradual exclusion from employment in natural resource-based industries, and in light of frustration over weak implementation of earlier natural resource management agreements, that the Land & Sea Country Plan was conceived. It also responded to frustration at attempts to get funding for land management projects which the LALC wanted to undertake: they were told there was no long-term plan into which these fitted, and that they did not have enough land of their own to sustain a broader employment program. They had been unsuccessful in getting a Working on Country grant from the Commonwealth Government. Subsequently, the regional Indigenous

Coordination Centre proposed development of a Land & Sea Country Plan for the south coast region from Batemans Bay to the Victorian border, but was unable to find the necessary funds. The Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority (SRCMA) had a number of Aboriginal staff who could see the need to develop a Land and Sea Country Plan for a region in its catchment. The Eden LALC had been active in natural resource management work and was keen to develop further in this direction and to involve a range of agencies in an interagency body to help them. Funding for the planning work in the Eden LALC region was provided by the SRCMA and the then Commonwealth Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts.

Two consultants worked with B.J. Cruse on developing the plan. The six-month process in early 2010 involved 'desk-top' research to bring together all the existing plans and agreements that were relevant, as well as identifying possible program and funding opportunities that could support such a plan. Thus the plan is very much based on a synthesis of all earlier plans which have not been fully implemented. Considerable time was also spent clarifying the extent of the LALC's own landholdings, and mapping them accurately, a valuable process for the LALC. Some Aboriginal community consultation occurred at Eden and on the Monaro, but the community voice was often overshadowed by natural resource agency representatives who also participated in consultation meetings (Bazacco & Donaldson 2010). The process may have educated agency staff about agreements with Aboriginal people that had long been overlooked, but it also revealed the limited capacity of the LALC itself. With only one full-time staff member with a host of statutory responsibilities and a pivotal community role, the ability of the LALC to drive the governance and implementation of a plan, once developed, was limited.

A Steering Committee was established to oversee the completion of the plan and to support its implementation. It was chaired by a staff member of the SRCMA and included regular participation from the main agencies likely to be engaged with the plan (NPWS, Forests NSW, Fisheries NSW, Bega Valley Shire Council, etc.) and intermittent participation from other agencies. The LALC Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and then board member, now Chair, B.J. Cruse are also members. The plan was completed and endorsed by this Steering Committee by August 2010 but after this issues continued to arise from members of the Aboriginal community who wanted changes or additions, and the consultants added an addendum to their 'final' version. The somewhat fractured nature of the Aboriginal community within the LALC boundaries (particularly between the coast and the

'high country') meant that the plan needed to be a living document, with the possibility of regular review and amendment. Eventually the Plan was launched in April 2011 at a well-attended community event at Jigamy Farm, the LALC's centre.

## What is in the Plan?

Unlike Land & Sea Country Plans developed on Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory, this plan is not confined to the limited Aboriginal land holdings of the region. It also refers to the far greater areas of public lands managed by a range of government agencies, and even includes projects which involve private lands.

The Land & Sea Country Plan describes the traditional walking routes, and relationships the coastal people had with the people of the inland, with large gatherings for bogong moth harvests in the mountains and at the coast in the whaling season. It explains that traditional fishing and shellfish collection continue today. It also lists the Aboriginal place names in the region. It explains how the landscape contains cultural linkages and dependencies between places, resources and people and describes some of these.

The next part of the Land & Sea Country Plan explains that Eden LALC region's boundaries cover various government department regions and zones, and different types of land tenure. It lists the main bodies relevant to the Eden LALC region at the time (2008): two Catchment Management Authorities; four local government shires; two sections of the then Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water;<sup>7</sup> Forests NSW; and the Department of Industry and Investment (Fisheries NSW). There are also various other non-government groups and projects active in the area. The most significant is the Bundian Way project, which is aiming to develop an old Aboriginal pathway connecting Targangal (Kosciuszko) and Bilgalera (Fisheries Beach) on Tullemuller (Twofold Bay) into a major walking track from the mountains to the coast, and has involved Aboriginal people in surveying cultural heritage along the route (Blay and Eden LALC 2011).

The Land & Sea Country Plan then sets out all the different policy frameworks and agreements that Eden LALC and/or other Aboriginal organisations in the region

have with many of the above organisations in relation to natural resource management. For example these agreements include the two RFAs already referred to, as well as:

- Forests NSW and Eden LALC Memorandum of Understanding (2004)
- Twofold Bay Indigenous Land Use Agreement (2001)
- Eden LALC/NPWS Statement of Joint Intent 2003 (with NPWS)
- MOU between Bega, Eden and Merrimans LALCs, native title holders and Bega Valley Shire Council (2008c).

It summarises the relevant parts of the Plans of Management of 11 National Parks and Reserves in the region, particularly where these include commitments relating to cultural heritage surveying and management, naming, interpretation, cultural activities, protocols for consultation and engagement of Aboriginal people in relation to the parks, and cultural tourism. This summary indicates that there are many opportunities for Aboriginal participation in natural resource management. But implementation of these plans is limited, and particularly there is concern about the lack of implementation of projects in Kosciuszko National Park.

Other relevant plans summarised in the Land & Sea Country Plan include:

- Eden LALC 'Community, land and business plan 2008–2013'
- Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority Catchment Action Plan 2007
- local government Local Environmental Plans
- Twofold Bay and Hinterland Strategy
- The NSW Indigenous Fishing Strategy 2002
- The South East Regional Marine Plan Assessment report *Sea Country, an Indigenous Perspective*, and
- the Regional Ecological Sustainable Forest Management Plan: Eden

All of these plans include commitments or goals relating to Aboriginal cultural and natural resource issues. Overall, the introductory sections of the Land & Sea Country Plan illustrate how complex the governance of natural resources is in this part of NSW, and how many different plans and existing strategies shape the priorities and actions of the natural resource agencies with responsibility for managing the large tracts of public land in the region. Though many of these

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7. This Department was restructured following a change of government in NSW in March 2011. Its responsibilities have now been shared between the Office of Environment and Heritage and the Department of Primary Industries.



plans may incorporate aspects relating to Aboriginal engagement, it is clear that in a number of the agencies the implementation of these activities has been weak or under-resourced. There may also be different interpretations and expectations within the agencies and among the Aboriginal community about what some of these agreements mean. Often, where Aboriginal engagement occurs, it is due to the efforts of committed individuals, who struggle to gain and direct resources to this purpose.

## Goals and strategies of the Land & Sea Country Plan

According to the Land & Sea Country Plan, the Aboriginal community wants to:

- actively contribute to improvement and maintenance of the biodiversity and cultural values of the land and sea.
- be involved at all levels and in all spheres of government decision making and management about the land and sea.
- share in the wealth and benefits derived from the environment and natural resources.
- be employed via government finance in all of the ground earth care works.
- be involved in policing and patrolling of the environment and natural resources.

It wants to develop its capacity to achieve these goals through small achievable steps and work towards more complex projects in the longer term. It has three major strategies or areas of interest: a sustainable land and sea ranger program; working on LALC-owned lands; and enterprises with economic and cultural outcomes.

### *A Sustainable Land and Sea Ranger Program*

The LALC wants to have a continuing Ranger group, initially funded by a grant, but ultimately able to be self-supporting through contract work with various partners. It wants a team of eight rangers (4 men and 4 women), with half of them working on land management and the other half on sea country issues. The Land & Sea Country Plan outlines the opportunities for work these Rangers could do on and off Aboriginal land. These opportunities include: site interpretation, protection and monitoring; firefighting and hazard reduction; pest control; annual maintenance of public areas in state forests, national parks and for local government; coastal debris collection; and cultural mapping. Whether these opportunities would

be sufficient to sustain a Ranger group in the long term is highly dependent on resourcing available for contract work within the relevant public agencies.

### *Working on LALC-owned lands*

On the six significant holdings (in terms of size and ecosystems they represent) of LALC land, there are several opportunities. The aim of the LALC is to establish and implement land management plans; identify and manage known issues on Aboriginal land; and reserve areas of significance and manage them. One opportunity to manage Aboriginal land is to explore whether any of the LALC land could be reserved for conservation as an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA). Some land in the Snowy Mountain region or at Wonboyn may be eligible, and public conservation land could also be incorporated into an IPA, although the Plan itself is silent on this (see, e.g., Mandingalbay Yidinji IPA in Queensland (Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities 2011)).

### *Enterprises with economic and cultural outcomes*

The community also has ideas involving economic and cultural outcomes such as development of an aquaculture enterprise. There is some in-principle support for this from the SRCMA, and Fisheries NSW. Another proposal is development of a cultural tourism enterprise by the Aboriginal Culture Centre, and camping and keeping places across the Monaro; in particular, development of the Bundian Way with tourist camping grounds being established, and a historical and cultural survey already completed. The Bundian Way could provide employment for a variety of different people, from ranger guides to dancers and cultural performers—all of whom could generate income associated with this tourism. The LALC also wants to maintain and transmit cultural knowledge, through development of culture camps and day use areas across a variety of ecological systems to enable the sharing and passing on of cultural knowledge among Aboriginal people. It also wants economic and cultural use of state forests. There are opportunities in state forests to collect firewood, wild flowers, reeds, seeds, and other materials for various uses. There is potential on forested LALC-owned land for selective logging, firewood collection, silviculture (the cultivation of forest trees) and even carbon trading.



## Implementation of the Land & Sea Country Plan

Until early 2011 the Land & Sea Country Plan Steering Committee was chaired by an officer of the SRCMA, who worked hard to encourage agencies to come to the table with commitments to implement certain parts of the Plan. Following the launch of the Plan, the Steering Committee did not meet for most of the year, due largely to loss of key staff and restructuring in the SRCMA, and progress in implementation seemed very slow. In late November 2011 the Committee eventually met again, with the Chair apparently moved to an official from the Office of Aboriginal Affairs (in Department of Premier and Cabinet, NSW) and co-ordination of agencies led by an officer of the Department of Premier and Cabinet, NSW. This move may have presaged more whole-of-government support from the NSW Government and its agencies for the Land & Sea Country Plan. After the launch, the SRCMA had also provided some funding to the LALC for a part-time Land & Sea Country Coordinator for 12 months, but the LALC's own appointment process was slow and the person given the job did not commence until September 2011. This position has subsequently been extended by additional funding from the SRCMA for another two years, giving the LALC real additional capacity to help drive the implementation of the Land & Sea Country Plan.

Some initiatives identified in the Plan have begun but others may be much more difficult to achieve. The three most significant areas are the Land and Sea Country Rangers, working on Aboriginal land, and enterprises with economic and cultural outcomes.

### *Land and Sea Country Rangers*

The NPWS has made strong efforts to support the Plan. From as early as November 2008, before the Plan was developed, the NPWS had obtained funding to employ four Aboriginal men as 'summer crew' for the fire season (one had been intermittently employed by NPSW since April 2008). These four, previously members of the Eden LALC work crew (one as supervisor), were employed by the NPWS and fully trained as fire fighters and in fire mitigation using several tranches of short term funding, until May 2011. During this period, one went on to a permanent job with the local shire. However NPWS funding expired and the remaining three were temporarily employed by the LALC as contracts arose, pending Enhanced Bushfire Management Program funding which NPWS eventually secured in late 2011 for employment of three Aboriginal staff in 2012. These Aboriginal-identified positions were for a three-year period, and were subject to standard NPWS merit selection processes. By this

stage, two of the previously trained 'summer crew' had left the Eden district, and initially only two positions were filled on the first round of advertising, and the last position was filled by an Aboriginal person from north of the Eden LALC region.

This strategy of NPWS employing the Aboriginal staff goes back to an Options Paper about the Land and Sea Rangers presented to the Steering Committee in late 2010 by an NPWS officer. This paper laid out the needs of the various natural resource management agencies for teams of highly skilled workers, with continuous access to a four-wheel-drive vehicle, adequate leadership and meeting all technical requirements (e.g. occupational health and safety). It outlined two models whereby these needs, as well as the needs of the LALC and the employees themselves, could be met.

- Model 1 involved a four-person team, auspiced by the LALC and overseen by a committee chaired by the LALC, with agency and community representatives. In this model the team would actually be employed by a host agency and their work co-ordinated by that agency, in a vehicle provided either by that agency or the LALC.
- Model 2 differed from this in that the LALC would employ the team, co-ordinate their work and provide the vehicle, while agencies would contribute funds to a pool managed by the LALC.

In both models a team of casuals who could assist at busy times was also envisaged. Whilst the second model was favoured by the LALC itself, and was seen as having the potential to build its capacity more quickly, the Options Paper suggested that Model 1 would be more sustainable financially and free up the Land and Sea Country Coordinator's time to 'focus on attracting funds and new partners'. Due to limited available funding, the paper recommended a phased process of development, in which Model 1 be adopted for between two and four years, building up the amount of work secured for the team and casuals. In the second phase, expected to last one to two years, this team would be complemented by a part-time crew which could be hosted by Eden LALC, thereby building its capacity to host and manage a full-time crew. Phase three would involve assessing whether the LALC would by then have the capacity to host and manage the two teams themselves.

Whilst NPWS has trained and employed four men, some of whom could form the basis of a strengthened and more permanent ranger group for the LALC, there are a number of issues which arise. Firstly, the stop-start NPWS funding may have contributed to the loss of two

of the four trained men from the region. Secondly, the wages, conditions and equipment available at the NPWS are superior to those the LALC has ever been able to offer, so given the choice the workers would prefer to remain with NPWS. In this case, Aboriginal workers have secure jobs for three years in natural resource management in a mainstream agency, but the LALC's own Ranger team, comprising three people by mid 2012, remains reliant on short-term contracts and has lost some capacity as their most senior workers are no longer available to supervise and help train others. Whether the strategy outlined in the Options Paper will eventually enable the LALC to regain its capacity to manage a team of workers such as it had during the CDEP period is as yet unclear. There is clearly a tension, at least in the short-term, between the LALC's aspirations to have a Ranger team, individual decisions about work opportunities and the NPWS's own Aboriginal employment strategy. On the positive side, as part of their Certificate III in Conservation and Land Management (CALM) training, the Aboriginal Rangers employed by NPWS have developed Plans of Management for three areas of LALC land, with support from NPWS (see below).<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, Eden LALC is developing a new Ranger crew to continue the type of work previously undertaken by the four men who originally moved to the NPWS. Currently the Ranger crew of three individuals needs further training and experience to reach the skill levels of the team they are replacing. In particular they need a new supervisor. However, in the meantime they continue the existing short-term work which has been available over several years. For example Eden LALC, along with the Merrimans and Bega LALCs, provides teams of three people each for two weeks, every six months, to manage weed infestations along coastal beaches—a total of a month's work per year. This work is funded by the SRCMA and is managed by a local botanist. Over the last four years the botanist has worked with these Aboriginal crews, achieving remarkable reductions in coastal weeds, especially sea spurge. The Towamba Landcare group has also employed the Eden LALC crew for two to three months per year over the last five years, working to reduce weeds in the river (such as African lovegrass, serrated tussock and willow trees), and at times working on private farm land managing weeds and doing general environmental management work. A member of the Towamba Landcare group provides supervision for the crew at the present time, and tries to find contract work which will give them further employment opportunities

whenever he can. The coastal weeds work has recently been refunded for another five years, while the work in the Towamba Valley has another funding application in to continue its efforts. The work to date has been funded by the SRCMA and through the Commonwealth Government's Community Action Grants.

Some agencies are trying to identify more opportunities to contract Eden LALC Rangers to do natural resource management work, along with supervisors for them. The SRCMA has contracted the team to do further weed clearing, while the Fisheries NSW is working with the SRCMA to develop a project on marine debris clean-up as well as Pacific Oyster eradication—a total of about three weeks' work. The marine clean-up work will be the first of its kind in this region and priority areas have first to be identified. The Pacific Oyster eradication has to be timed for late winter/early spring, when newly-spawned oysters have grown large enough to identify and remove. Other agencies are working with the LALC to develop major projects and access major environmental grants which will provide work opportunities for the Eden LALC team over several years. These include two successful applications to the Biodiversity Fund by the SRCMA, and a pending application to the Indigenous Heritage Fund relating to the effects of sea level rise on cultural heritage on Pambula Lake. Thus there are significant efforts underway towards gaining enough employment to provide continuous work for the new Ranger crew. But this will require a constant effort by the LALC in partnership with, or by environmental agencies, to renew funding as grants conclude. It will require the LALC to strengthen its business management capacities, as managing such an enterprise requires a great deal of skill and determination.

### *Working on Aboriginal land*

In 2010–11 the SRCMA, which has been highly supportive of the Land and Sea Country Plan, provided some funds to assist in the development of Plans of Management for three parcels of LALC land of strategic importance, and for rehabilitation of land at Bilgalera (Fisheries Beach), which will provide one campsite on the Bundian Way. Funding for a number of small projects, such as to remove weeds and restore the Bilgalera (Fisheries Beach) area, has been granted. Other specific weed eradication or conservation projects funded by the SRCMA over a period are also involving Aboriginal workers on Aboriginal or other lands. But the SRCMA is cautious about the capacities of the Eden LALC and seems to be only funding relatively small projects which it feels confident can be completed.

8. However, in August 2012 these Plans of Management had not yet been shared with Eden LALC.

The possibility of declaring an Indigenous Protected Area looks unlikely at present, since all available Indigenous Protected Areas Program funding has now been committed. The potential for this avenue is pending government budget and program decisions scheduled in 2013.

### *Enterprises with economic and cultural outcomes*

Good progress is being made on the Bundian Way project. This project is driven by the Eden LALC with a determined and visionary individual, John Blay, who has worked with Bega Valley and Eden Aboriginal people since 2002. It is the most promising venture in 2012, and has developed quite independently of the Land & Sea Country Plan. The cultural heritage survey of the 265 kilometre heritage trail, funded by the Indigenous Heritage Program in 2010–11, has been completed and there is strong enthusiasm for the project at Delegate, the only town along the Bundian Way route.<sup>9</sup> Aboriginal people from Eden LALC involved in the cultural heritage survey have enjoyed the process and gained at least some short-term employment from it, which has had benefits particularly in mental health and wellbeing. Longer term, these people want to benefit from explaining their culture to visitors, and keep control of the intellectual property that cultural knowledge represents. They appreciate the value of sharing western and Koori knowledge about the landscape, the species and the whole ecology and want both perspectives included in ecotourism and cultural tourism opportunities.

Two campsites are being developed along the Bundian Way route (with support from Forests NSW) and further development is proposed for the basic campsite at Bilgalera. Renowned architect Glenn Murcutt is working on design for an educational centre there, to provide a focus for educational aspects of the Bundian Way. Funds were granted by the Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) for a feasibility study of the Bundian Way and it is proposed that DEEWR fund a series of business plans for the operations of the culture centre, Bundian Way and LALC operations including the Land & Sea Country Plan. Investigations are underway for funding an interpreted section of the touring pathway between Boydtown and Eden. Partnership arrangements are being eagerly sought by groups such as the Delegate Progress Association and the Department of Corrective Services (NSW) due to perceived benefits, especially in promoting Aboriginal

cultural values. The educational value of the Bundian Way is a high priority for the primary and high schools of the region. To incorporate such a diversity of potential interests in the Bundian Way project is beyond the capacity of volunteer and part-time officers of the LALC. Many of the roles currently being undertaken by Eden LALC have been undertaken by fully paid and equipped public servants in other States such as Western Australia (the Bibbulman Track). The former Chair of the LALC is skeptical about the need for further studies, preferring to 'get on with it' in implementing these long-held ideas. Eden LALC successfully nominated the entire Bundian Way for NSW Heritage listing in 2012, and is progressively nominating about 20 'Aboriginal Places' along the Bundian Way.<sup>10</sup> The first Aboriginal Place nomination was submitted to the NSW Government in mid 2012. The Bundian Way project, initially guided by a Steering Committee for the heritage survey, now has the Bundian Way Management Advisory Committee 'to keep the project going and provide adequate liaison' (Blay & Eden LALC 2011: 5). One day per week of the Land & Sea Country Plan Coordinator's time is now allocated specifically to this project. It is envisaged that the entire project will eventually be managed by a yet-to-be established Bundian Way Aboriginal Corporation, which will oversee culture, tourism, natural resource management and employment associated with it. But none of it has been easy, as the Chair's report (Blay & Eden LALC 2011: 6) states:

To do things the Aboriginal way can meet terrible difficulties with the bureaucracies, who want things done their very own way. Each agency has different, often extremely onerous requirements. There are in my experience with this project, always new people in each new agency who produce new levels of requirement to be dealt with. Too many of them appear to believe Aboriginal people are incapable of managing their own affairs and hence not to be trusted.

The larger vision of a cultural tourism enterprise at Jigamy Farm has been restricted to date, as the turn-off from the Princes Highway to the Cultural Centre is deemed dangerous by the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority. For this reason, commercial ventures are currently not permitted at the Centre. After many years of advocacy, this road upgrade is about to begin, and once completed will open up considerably more opportunities for arts, culturally-based tourism and education enterprise.

9. Delegate (NSW) was the site of an Aboriginal reserve until around 1920, when most of the residents left and went to Wallaga Lake, Lake Tyers (Victoria) or the far south coast of NSW (Blay pers. comm., 8 August 2012; McKenna 2002).

10. The declaration of such Aboriginal Places by the New South Wales Government acknowledges their cultural value, whether on public or private land, but provides little or no resources for their protection.

In late 2011–early 2012 research commenced on the possibilities of an aquaculture enterprise, something B.J. Cruse has advocated for around 30 years. Various efforts to develop such ventures along the south coast in the last decade have not been very successful. Whether this idea will come to fruition is an open question. A ‘desk-top’ study by an expert has identified oysters, mussels, yabbies, fin fish or abalone as possible ventures but each has its own challenges and issues. Use of Aboriginal land at Bilgalera (Fisheries Beach) has been ruled out, as the aquatic environment is unsuitable. An earlier native title agreement with the Australian Navy to enable the LALC to harvest mussels from the wharf near Bilgalera (Fisheries Beach) has come to nothing as the Navy will not allow mussels to grow to a marketable size because of the risk of the wharf piers becoming unstable due to the weight. One possibility is to take over some local mussel leases but funding would be required to purchase them. Another possibility is to develop a yabbie farm on land at Jigamy Farm, but further expert advice is needed. Investigations are still underway to identify a suitable initiative which might succeed, given the LALC’s environment and capacities. Fisheries NSW arranged for B.J. Cruse to go out on a tour with a leading Eden oyster and mussel farmer in March 2012 to show him what is required to establish and maintain such an enterprise. Clearly the LALC needs further expert help to identify the best initial venture, to plan it carefully, and raise the necessary capital to get started. Although there seem to be many opportunities, putting together the opportunities with the limited pockets of funding available and the right people is a challenging task.

## Benefits to date

Approximately two-and-a-half years since the Land and Sea Country planning process began, what benefits have arisen so far? It is too soon to properly assess benefits to individuals arising from the Plan, so this section will largely discuss benefits to the LALC itself, in terms of its ability to meet the aspirations of its members and the wider community. Firstly, the Plan brings together for the first time all the agreements and commitments that governments have made to the local Aboriginal people and gives them renewed profile. As the Chair of the Steering Committee said at the Plan’s launch, the Plan is like a ‘Keeping Place’ for all the commitments and that is its power. It is designed to prevail upon governments to honour those commitments over the next 5–20 years. It also appears that the process has reminded or informed officials in some of the agencies about the commitments that were made over a decade ago in agreements that are still current, and which may have

been inadequately implemented to date. Thus the Plan may bring benefits as an advocacy tool for the LALC and has the potential to hold government agencies with good intentions but many competing pressures to account, through the Steering Committee process.

Secondly, the Steering Committee is actively exploring how some of the Plan can be implemented. The process has brought together a range of agencies to work together in complementary ways towards some goals set by the Eden LALC. Some government officials feel that this is a valuable achievement, as they are co-ordinating better with each other, and with the LALC. They know what each other is doing, they aren’t competing with each other, and they are working towards the outcomes the LALC wants. The face to face connections made at the Steering Committee meetings are viewed as important in all this.

A third benefit has been strengthened relationships between the agencies and the Aboriginal organisation and community members. Both government officials and the LALC leadership recognise this as a clear benefit to date. Relationships are stronger, mutual understanding is greater, and in particular, various agencies suggest they now have a much better appreciation than before of the aspirations, needs and capacities of the Eden LALC and the Aboriginal community—and are therefore in a better position to assist them to realise their goals, at least those they feel are achievable. Some Steering Committee members feel this has generated considerably more interest and support from government agencies, while others feel that there is still a need to move beyond the talk to achieve greater action.

From the Aboriginal perspective, they feel that as well as stronger relationships with agencies, more support is there for what they want to achieve—although they know that getting the money to make it all happen remains difficult. Examples of that include the NPWS support for employment of Rangers and the Office of Aboriginal Affairs (NSW) mobilisation of expert help to investigate aquaculture options. SRCMA officers are also investigating projects which could be implemented on Aboriginal land or by LALC Rangers on public land. The fact that the LALC has been able to do some rehabilitation work at Bilgalera (Fisheries Beach) is particularly appreciated and that area is now to be developed further as part of the Bundian Way project. Thus working partnerships between the LALC and various natural resource agencies have been strengthened through the Steering Committee process. The advocacy value of the Plan may also be assessed by the recent action on the Jigamy Farm road turn-off,

advocated by local Members of Parliament (MPs) after representations by the Eden LALC and support from local churches.

Fourthly, funding provided by the SRCMA has increased capacity in the Eden LALC, through the employment of a part-time Land & Sea Country Plan Coordinator. This should enable the LALC to work more effectively with the various agencies towards implementation of the Plan.

Finally, the Land & Sea Country Plan may also have supported or stimulated other initiatives in some of the natural resource management agencies which, while not strictly part of the Plan, indicate complementary movements in the right direction. For example, four school-based traineeships have been created jointly by the NPWS and Forests NSW, and Fisheries NSW has overturned a long standing ban on work experience students, hosting two Aboriginal students for a week each in 2011. Fisheries NSW has gained permission to engage an Aboriginal school-based trainee in 2013, a significant innovation. Fisheries NSW has also run the first of what will become an annual Koori Kids Fishing Clinic and Fisheries NSW officers have participated in a 'Deadly Dads' camp at Fisheries Beach, and plan to attend more. Overall, Fisheries NSW staff say that the Plan was useful in advocating internally for these developments, which are contributing to a much improved relationship between Fisheries NSW and members of the Aboriginal community. This is particularly notable considering earlier hostility towards Fisheries NSW by some Aboriginal people because of its role in enforcing fisheries laws which prevented them from maintaining cultural practices. In addition, Forests NSW is open to exploring support for private forestry by the Eden LALC, along the lines of support it has recently provided at Batemans Bay LALC, as well as running a canoe-making workshop.

The greatest hope Aboriginal people see is probably the Bundian Way project, which is undoubtedly gaining more traction due to the existence of the Land & Sea Country Plan. In particular, Forests NSW support for the development of two campsites en route and DEEWR support for the feasibility study for the first stage of the pathway are clearly related to the fact that the wider Plan exists. There have been wellbeing benefits for the Aboriginal team that surveyed the route, and one member indicated that some property owners they met along the way changed their initially somewhat hostile attitude to the team when the shared history of Aboriginal people and colonial pioneers was explained to them. For example, some property owners invited Aboriginal team members on to their land to find out the Aboriginal

history, thus generating reconciliation outcomes at the local level. Community feedback sessions along or near the route have also generated interest and mutual knowledge sharing.

There clearly have been socioeconomic benefits of the work undertaken to date by the Rangers, including the move of at least two of the original four-person crew into long-term jobs, one with the Shire, the other with NPWS.<sup>11</sup> The increased income into the families makes a big difference to their quality of life; as one of these men said, 'you feel like you are living life', whereas when you have no regular income you are 'back in a hole'. The ability to buy a car or a boat to go fishing—these are some of the very tangible benefits, but there is also a reduction in stress, as they know they can pay the bills, and a sense of self-esteem when they wear the NPWS uniform and people treat them with respect.

There have been training benefits for all the Rangers. The three Rangers who worked with NPWS until May 2011 completed their CALM Certificate III course. For others, training in specific skills is provided, such as chainsaw and chemical certificates. The new Ranger crew has to build their skill levels to gain CALM Certificates but already have some of the elements required. That crew is developing confidence in its work and gaining positive feedback from local community members for their valuable environmental contribution. Older Aboriginal crew members have expressed enormous satisfaction that they are able to care for their land, while younger ones, who may not have had the opportunities to get onto parts of their land before, start to really appreciate it. Doing the work builds confidence, particularly when they see how successful they have been over the years in weed control. It is also extremely physical, so contributes to improved health and fitness, with smoking usually reducing over the weeks of work. The work in the Towamba Valley has contributed to significant shifts in attitude among conservative farmers towards Aboriginal people. Initially untrusting, they now see the quality of work the crew undertakes. In just two days the Aboriginal crew may do half the weed control work required on a property for the year, and stressed farmers genuinely appreciate this. To be so recognised for their work is extremely good for the crew's self-esteem. And this work provides rare opportunities for non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people to mix with each other, with evident reconciliation benefits.

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11. Because the other two have left the region, it is unclear whether they remain in work, but they have had the benefit of around three years' full-time paid employment in the NPWS.



## Challenges

At this stage the benefits are limited although the potential for more to be achieved is clearly evident. The major goal of more stable employment for a larger Land and Sea Country Ranger team remains some way off. In fact, since the closure of the CDEP program in most of NSW in mid 2009, the task of maintaining a work crew has become considerably more difficult. As B.J. Cruse (n.d.: s23) explains,

We was able to keep a steady team in place and able to pay them on a weekly basis because we was treating the CDEP as a retainer wage so that we could retain people in those positions knowing that they would get at least two hundred and twenty dollars a week and when contracts came in it would make people's wages a little bit more attractive.... And so since the CDEP was abolished a lot of our programs have come to a standstill.

One of the problems which arises now that work crew members are otherwise on Centrelink payments, rather than CDEP, is that casual work—if not very carefully scheduled in small amounts—can jeopardise their Centrelink payment arrangements and leave them worse off (with a considerable amount of paperwork to do in order to get payments reinstated). This acts as a disincentive to individuals taking up some work opportunities. This was not a problem when CDEP underpinned the contract work as it simply continued when contracts weren't available.

The idea that the Plan could generate collaboration among the various natural resource management agencies to co-ordinate their funding and provide an annual schedule of contract work to support long-term Ranger employment has not been realised at present. And the initiative by the NPWS to employ Aboriginal staff, while giving more job security to them, has depleted the LALC's own capacity by taking away their most experienced supervisor. In the short term, co-operative arrangements may allow for an agency to provide a supervisor and the LALC to provide a work crew for some of the work which is emerging. Meanwhile, considerable training of the new, younger crew is necessary. A skills audit of interested members of the Aboriginal community is being undertaken, to understand exactly what certificates various community members hold or need if they are to be offered work in the future.<sup>12</sup> This must

be undertaken without raising unrealistic expectations about the amount of work likely to be available in the immediate future and hence causing community unrest. Furthermore, when training needs are identified it is not always simple to meet them if the required minimum number of participants are not available for TAFE or other providers to offer courses locally. Indeed, a lack of training in cultural heritage assessment for people able to work caused the LALC to miss a number of contract opportunities in early 2012. Other capacity issues also make developing the Ranger crew difficult; for example, access to reliable transport and equipment, lack of driver licences, and the difficulties natural resource management agencies have communicating with the LALC at times.

Essentially, the challenge for the Eden LALC is that, while its senior members have aspirations for a self-reliant Ranger group as an expression of the LALC's ability to be self-determining, the context in which younger LALC members make decisions about work does not always support this aspiration. This is the institutional challenge facing the LALC, and it may require an agreement between the LALC and some of its partner agencies to really focus on building the Ranger crew capacity over a few years, so that the LALC can withstand the loss of individual crew members from time to time.

The capacities of the LALC to engage effectively with multiple government agencies, and of government agencies to engage Aboriginal people, are constrained for various reasons. Until the appointment of the Land & Sea Country Plan Coordinator in late 2011, any work on the Plan fell to the CEO of the LALC who was the only full-time employee. Her workload was already high, and she was concerned about proper management and accounting for existing natural resource management projects. She could not manage any significant expansion of funding, projects or personnel. The SRCMA Chair of the Steering Committee was well aware of these limitations and funding of the part-time Land & Sea Country Plan Coordinator has certainly strengthened the LALC's capacity (an Aboriginal man who previously worked for the SRCMA has been appointed). But other work on the Plan (such as by B.J. Cruse or other LALC Board members) is done in an entirely voluntary capacity. Governments look to the LALC to drive the processes forward, but their capacity to do so is clearly limited.

In the background, there remains the issue of the LALC as an organisation comprising Aboriginal residents and its role and relationships to traditional owners in relation to land and sea country. Whilst the Eden LALC's relations with an Eden traditional owner group appears reasonably

12. For example, to be employed workers need certificates in such things as chemicals handling, chainsaw handling, first aid, and these certificates must be up-to-date.



good, with considerable cross-over of membership, the Plan has generated certain tensions, particularly with Ngarigo people from the upland area of the LALC's region. Whilst these tensions may not be new, the SRCMA has learned that natural resource management planning within statutory LALC boundaries, rather than catchment boundaries, may not be the best approach to Land & Sea Country initiatives in the future.

On the government side, capacities are also constrained and funding uncertainties are common. Staff of agencies who attend Steering Committee meetings do not all have the necessary decision-making authority to commit to projects; some have to go to their agencies and win support at higher levels, in a context of tight competition for funds. While some are themselves Aboriginal, and keen to get things moving, they are frequently overloaded, trying to respond to the expectations of their communities over a large region. Internal departmental processes can be slow and the resources limited. Coordination, even within government agencies, is sometimes a problem. For example, for some time different Bega Valley Shire Council representatives attended the Steering Committee from different departments of the Council often with no knowledge of what was happening elsewhere within it, making progress slow—until a single contact person was designated. Furthermore, the 2011 attempt by the SRCMA to handover the leadership of the Steering Committee to the Department of Premier and Cabinet (NSW) or the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, and to thereby leverage wider State government support, has not really succeeded. Instead the LALC now seems to be taking the lead in organising the Steering Committee meetings.

The challenge for the LALC of finding sufficient funds to adequately manage its own landholdings is not an isolated one. This is a problem faced by many of those LALCs who hold extensive tracts of rural or conservation land where the spread of weeds and pests and the risks of fire exist. LALCs may also not have the income to pay charges related to the land, such as to the Livestock Health and Pests Authority of NSW.<sup>13</sup> As Crown Land, public funds were available for its management, but once transferred to a LALC it is the LALC's responsibility to undertake this work at its own expense. Whilst wealthier LALCs may be able to generate income from their other lands or investments to cover these costs, many LALCs like Eden are unable to do so.

13. See <<http://www.lhpa.org.au/rates>>. All rural landowners with properties over 10 hectares have to contribute to these rates whether or not they have livestock, based on the notional carrying capacity of the land.

A further regional development is creating some dilemmas for the LALC. Following the Regional Partnership Agreement in the Many Rivers Region on the north coast of NSW, which established the Green Teams Alliance in that region, DEEWR has begun exploring whether a similar scheme could be developed on the south coast of NSW. In late 2010 DEEWR began meeting with the seven LALCs of the south coast region to discuss this idea.<sup>14</sup> The proposal was to establish a not-for-profit business unit, by forming a regional Aboriginal corporation, which could then negotiate a Regional Partnership Agreement with the Commonwealth and possibly NSW Governments to support the development of 'Green Teams' or related businesses in this region. Like the Many Rivers example, the idea was that such a corporation would then be in a position to tender for larger contracts which might be available in the region, for which individual LALCs may not have the capacity. For Eden LALC this potential development raises many questions: the LALC is anxious about its implications and whether they should participate if it goes ahead, but they remain involved at this stage in order to make an informed decision for the future. On the one hand, if this idea were successful it may generate work; on the other hand, it may direct Commonwealth government resourcing away from the implementation of the Land & Sea Country Plan. Whether this top-down business development initiative could support Eden LALC aspirations or undermine them is unclear. In the first half of 2012 a feasibility study was being conducted and it remains to be seen what direction this initiative will take.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

The current Chair of Eden LALC, B.J. Cruse, who invested a lot of time and energy into the development and implementation of the Land & Sea Country Plan to date, said in mid 2012 he was 'feeling pretty good' about the Plan so far. He realises that without the CDEP program the LALC has no funds and the organization is considering whether to sell some LALC land to finish the development of Bilgelara (Fisheries Beach) campsite at

14. These LALCs are: Batemans Bay, Bega, Eden, Merrimans (Wallaga Lake), Mogo, Moruya, and Narooma.

15. The feasibility study has to explore the business viability through examining what types of work may be available. In the meantime, the Many Rivers model is struggling somewhat and the Green Teams Alliance has decided to focus its efforts in the Hunter Valley region where the greatest amount of contract work is available. This suggests that in the south coast region the challenges may be even greater as there are few major projects compared to the central and north coast of NSW. At the time of going to press it seems this initiative has been put on hold for the time being.

the start of the Bundian Way. This is a trade-off only the LALC itself can determine.

The Land & Sea Country Plan has undoubtedly strengthened a whole range of relationships between various natural resource management agencies and the Aboriginal land council, and some of the projects proposed in the Plan are occurring as a result. However, the exercise has illustrated how time-consuming and difficult it is for a small local Aboriginal organisation to negotiate the complexities of the many natural resource agencies and funding streams to realise their dream of being able to sustain Aboriginal livelihoods by working on land and sea country. There is no shortage of ideas, but distinct difficulties in turning them into practical projects, finding the funding to resource them, and then having the human capacity to undertake them. The Land & Sea Country Steering Committee has decided to review the Land & Sea Country Plan. It will be valuable to bring together the various initiatives that it has generated, and refocus on changing circumstances and opportunities. It will be important to recognise what may or may not be achievable, at least in the foreseeable future, so that the LALC's limited energies and resources can be directed to the projects most likely to succeed.

The benefits emerging from the Plan itself are mainly around strengthened institutional relationships which may help the Eden LALC realise at least some of its aspirations over time. For the individuals who gain the limited work opportunities presently available, the benefits are similar to those identified in earlier research (Hunt 2010): employment and, in some cases, the security it offers, training and qualifications, self-esteem and confidence, health and wellbeing benefits, and reconciliation achievements.

Whilst this type of NRM work may present a perfect opportunity for truly innovative public sector partnerships, under current institutional arrangements this does not happen. If governments' expenditures on Aboriginal people were restructured more holistically to support Aboriginal aspirations, a great deal more could be achieved. Welfare expenditure could be redirected to subsidise workers (as CDEP originally did); various small amounts of environmental funds could be packaged and targeted to support continuing Aboriginal employment in environmental management; even training, education and health funding could be included to support positive local initiatives that promote Aboriginal wellbeing through this type of work. More holistic funding arrangements, while perhaps a pipe-dream at this juncture, could tackle the Aboriginal disadvantage and respond to the capacity weaknesses whilst building on the evident strengths. In the meantime, good people on the ground in many agencies struggle to 'join the dots' when the lines between them are hard to draw.

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