



# Connection to Boodja

## a healing process

After Native Title was recognised for an area of about 27,000 square kilometres of land surrounding Esperance, the Esperance Nyungar community is coming together to continue to care for country. The Tjaltjraak Ranger Group was established as part of WA's Aboriginal Ranger Program and is encouraging the sharing of knowledge, allowing for culture and language to be strengthened and conserved.

by Dr Kate Rodger and Dr Amanda Smith



The Esperance Nyungar community has a strong connection to place and country. Connection to Boodja (our land) provides identity and a sense of belonging.

A central component of this is the concept of belonging to land rather than owning land and having a shared responsibility to care for land and sea.

For many years the Esperance Nyungar community has aspired to renew and uphold links with its ancestral lands. On 14 March 2014, after 18 years of negotiations, the Federal Court of Australia recognised the Native Title rights and interests for an area of about 27,000 square kilometres of land surrounding Esperance to the Esperance Nyungars (see map on page 15).

Following this, on 6 September 2016, Esperance Tjaltjraak Native Title Aboriginal Corporation (ETNTAC) was registered as an agent by the Federal Court of Australia as the Native Title Body Corporate for the Esperance Nyungars.

With the legalities in place, the Esperance Tjaltjraak Nyungar community was able to exercise its traditional rights over their land. As part of this process, the Tjaltjraak Elders saw the need for a ranger program to provide a secure future for its people and culture, and allow for healing of country.

“They had secured their Native Title rights but then it was a bit empty until they had their family out fulfilling their obligations as custodians and managing country and caring for it,” the ETNTAC CEO Peter Bednall said.

## MANAGING COUNTRY

The need for rangers on country coincided with the launch of WA’s Aboriginal Ranger Program in 2017–18, a five-year, \$20 million initiative to support Aboriginal organisations to manage country with support from the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA).

The Tjaltjraak Ranger Program commenced in April 2018 after receiving funding through the program, allowing



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**Main** Tjaltjraak Rangers undertaking cultural dig at Duke of Orleans Bay.

Photo – Shem Bisluk/DBCA

**Inset top right** Tjaltjraak (*Eucalyptus pleurocarpa*).

Photo – Jiri Lochman

**Inset centre right** Quandong nuts.

**Right** Water sampling at Lake Windabout.

**Above** Dempster Head.

Photos – Shem Bisluk/DBCA

**Right** Tjaltjraak (*Eucalyptus pleurocarpa*).

Photo – Jiri Lochman

the Esperance Tjaltjraak Elders the opportunity to see their wish come true.

“I worked with all these fellas (rangers) grandfathers and great grandfathers and old fellas,” the Tjaltjraak Senior Cultural Advisor said. “I lodged that Native Title claim so I did a lot of work with the old fellas back in the early days.”

“It has been a long time coming, this ranger program, and we have been very privileged and honoured to be chosen to be able to carry out this program. It is just humbling to see after many years of fighting I can say to the old fellas now that our journey is just starting to

### Where the tjaltjraak grows...

The tjaltjraak is a traditional Nyungar name for a culturally significant eucalypt. The Esperance Nyungar people believe the distribution of the tjaltjraak corresponds closely to their territory and as far as the tjaltjraak grows to the east and north, so extends their country.

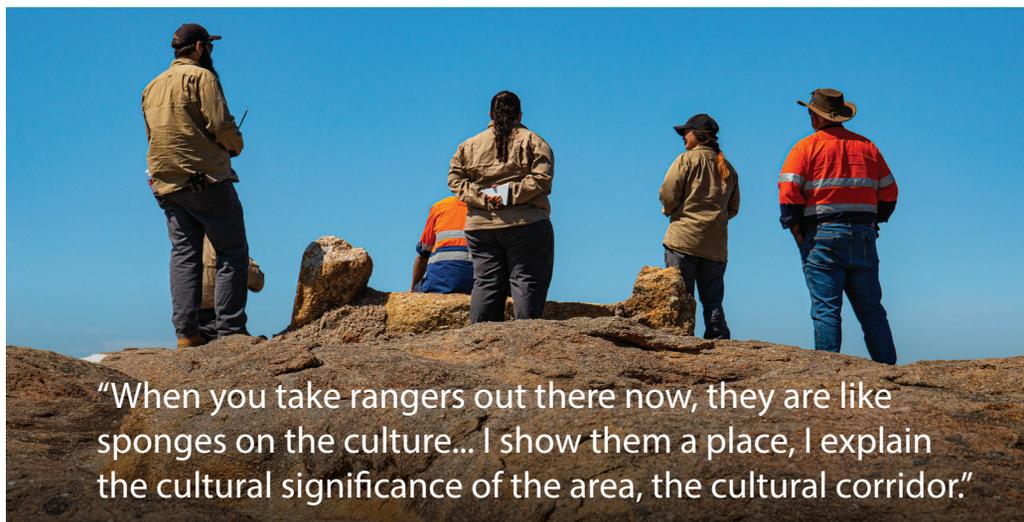
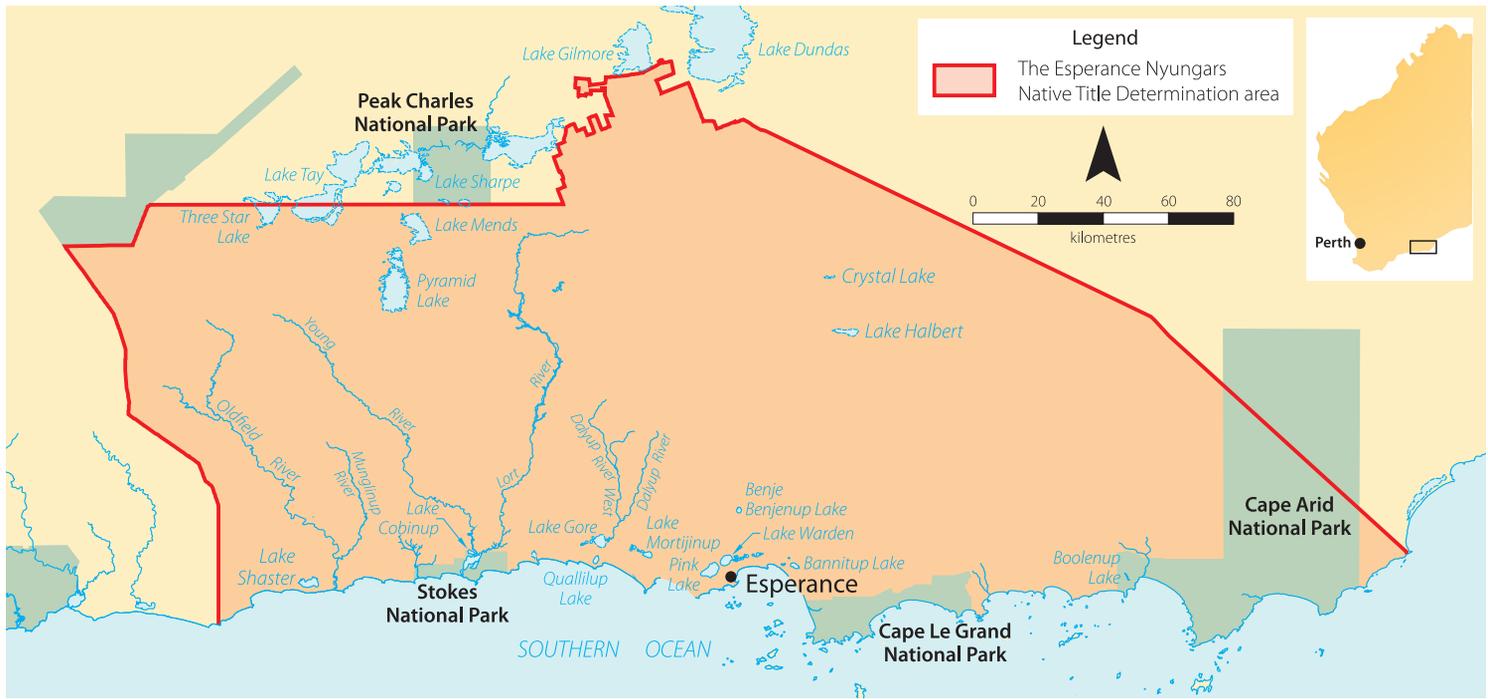


begin through the employment of our rangers.”

## WHAT’S OLD IS NEW

“Today’s ranger program that we have got continues the aspirations of the old people for looking after and caring for country and done in a way that the cultural values are embedded and protected,” a Tjaltjraak Elder said.

“Sharing of knowledge, allowing for culture and language to be strengthened and conserved is possible through the Aboriginal Ranger Program. Culture and knowledge are shared across the generations.”



“When you take rangers out there now, they are like sponges on the culture... I show them a place, I explain the cultural significance of the area, the cultural corridor.”

“When you take rangers out there now, they are like sponges on the culture. When we take them out and I show them a place, I explain the cultural significance of the area, the cultural corridor,” the Senior Cultural Advisor said.

“A lot of them know a lot of the places, they just don’t know the importance so my role is to start to embed, inform, teach or guide the rangers and their leaders into following the aspirations because in the culture we have an honour, we are duty bound to pass our knowledge down to our kids and our grandkids and our great grandkids. So, I am actually fulfilling that for a lot of the old people who aren’t here today.”

Through the sharing of knowledge comes the reconnection to culture and country, and the program provides the younger generation with the opportunity to reconnect with country.

“Specially all my grandies and children, it is like they are connected back to country when you pass on your knowledge and language. Otherwise, if I don’t pass it on, my kids wouldn’t know and their children wouldn’t know, and it would be just ‘yeah we are from Esperance and that’s it’ but you need to know the country you are part of, the country and the stories and the song lines,” another Tjaltjraak Elder said.



**Above left** Tjaltjraak Rangers viewing the Archipelago of the Recherche.

**Above** Identifying freshwater fauna at Lake Windabout.

*Photos – Shem Bisluk/DBCA*

Learn more about the Tjaltjraak Ranger Group

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service’s ‘LANDSCOPE’ playlist on YouTube.



## HEALING PROCESS

The increased access to country and opportunity to work on country through the program is part of the healing process by allowing the younger generation to connect to Boodja.

“The funding that we have gotten from the State allows us to go back out there and connect back on country. That spiritual connection to country is a very important part of the healing process,” ETNTAC Chairperson said.

“When you are back on country and caring for country, you are reconnecting with country that is where that healing will also come from, from our people.”

“Esperance holds a special place for a lot of us rangers,” a Tjaltjraak Ranger said.

“We’ve all got a significant site or place where we have grown up with

our elders or we’ve got a dreaming or a story that our family has told us and every time we go past that certain place we feel overwhelmed and overjoyed knowing that we are doing our ancestors proud.”

Connection to Boodja provides identity and a sense of belonging.

“I suppose it is like we are empowering our young ones,” a Tjaltjraak Elder said.

“Before they might have been lost, don’t know who they are, don’t know where they come from. Whereas now it is like ‘oh, I belong somewhere, this is my home’. It grounds them.”

## LOOKING FORWARD

The ETNTAC is aiming to form a legacy to empower and support future generations.

“The ranger program allows us to look at and protect cultural values, cultural sites and is also an opportunity for young rangers to learn more about the culture and go out to places that they only hear about but they can’t access,” the Tjaltjraak Senior Cultural Advisor said.

“What I’m trying to do now is impart a lot of that knowledge and aspirations to rangers. A transitional process so that we will continue to grow.”

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**Above** Undertaking interviews on country.

**Below left** Water sampling at Lake Windabout.

**Below** Identifying aquatic fauna at Lake Windabout.

*Photos – Shem Bisluk/DBCA*

### **Continuing commitment**

A further \$50 million over four years has been committed to expand the Aboriginal Ranger Program so that more Aboriginal organisations can employ and train rangers to manage country and build community leadership, wellbeing and resilience. Visit [dbca.wa.gov.au/aboriginalrangerprogram](http://dbca.wa.gov.au/aboriginalrangerprogram)



# In their words...

DBCA research staff visited the Esperance Tjaltjraak Rangers and spoke to them about the program. These are some of the many social outcomes that have been identified:

## CONSERVING LANGUAGE

“We’re still learning about our language. It sort of died out with a lot of the elders. So now we’re trying to learn from some of the elders that still remember it. Got time to spend with family out on country learning about culture and language. Wouldn’t have happened without the Aboriginal Ranger Program.”

*Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger*



“This corporation without cultural rangers is just a corporation, so having the Aboriginal Ranger Program provides that solid career opportunity for the region here. Taking that away...I just don’t know what we would do. Being able to work under a culturally-guided, culturally-led organisation is important for everyone.”

*Healthy Country Plan Coordinator  
Esperance Tjaltjraak*

## STRENGTHENING CULTURE

“It makes community think that we are out there, gives us respect and more awareness about our culture. They believed that there was no Aboriginal people here. Now we are looking after country.”

*Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger*

“We all love doing this, coming out on country. If the program stopped it would be very hard ‘cause it is things that our grandfathers and our great grandfathers have done, walked on this country and we’re doing it now and for it to stop then it would be not a nice feeling.”

*Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger*

## CONNECTION TO COUNTRY

“Personally it makes me feel good and a sense of being somewhere, sense of place. Got a lot of connection, as you come into Esperance you come past where one of our great grandmothers was born, I’ve always known about that story and it feels humble and good that I’m actually out protecting and caring for country that my grandmother and pops fought hard to get back. Makes me feel sense of belonging and that I’m accomplishing something.” *Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger*

“There is a lot of things but just being out there on country and feel at home and in your heart feel good. Just love being out on country everywhere. Everything, the ocean, the land is a part of me.” *Esperance Tjaltjraak Ranger*



From top Sandy Bight, Cape Arid National Park. Photo – Marie Lochman; Traditional tools; Duke of Orleans Bay. Photos – Shem Bisluk/DBCA

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The authors thank the **Tjaltjraak Rangers** for contributing to this research, sharing their knowledge and taking them out on country.

*Anonymity of those quoted has been maintained in line with social research best practice.*