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## Lessons from the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team Project, Georges River, Sydney

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## Lessons from the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team Project, Georges River, Sydney

### Abstract

The Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team (ART) project operated within Sydney's Georges River catchment between 2014-2017. The project employed an Aboriginal project manager, and a team supervisor (non-Indigenous) to lead a small, full-time team of Aboriginal trainees. The eight trainees gained qualified in Certificate II Conservation and Land Management (CLM), and four of these trainees completed Cert. III Indigenous Land Management (ILM). The project incorporated strong Aboriginal cultural components through engagement with Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs), Elders and knowledge holders. The project involved numerous partners and was funded by the Australian Government. The project was delivered by consultants Eco Logical Australia (ELA), facilitated by the Georges River Combined Councils Committee (GRCCC), and TAFE NSW was the registered training organisation that provided the formal qualifications. The project produced environmental outcomes such as bush regeneration and ecological restoration; as well as socio-cultural outcomes such as, strengthening the cultural identities of the trainees by engaging them with Aboriginal Elders and knowledge holders while they gained formal qualifications and practical skills during paid employment. Positive relationships were also built between the project's partners. This paper outlines the project and highlights some of the lessons learnt, the aim is to provide proponents of similar projects (including Indigenous specific or mainstream projects) with take-home messages that they can use in developing and delivering similar projects and initiatives in the future.

### Keywords

georges, river, team, aboriginal, project, sydney, lessons, riverkeeper

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# Lessons from the Aboriginal Riverkeeper Team Project, Georges River, Sydney

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## Abstract

The Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> Riverkeeper Team (ART) project operated within Sydney's Georges River catchment between 2014–2017. The project employed an Aboriginal project manager, and a team supervisor (non-Indigenous) to lead a small, full-time team of Aboriginal trainees. The eight trainees gained qualified in Certificate II Conservation and Land Management (CLM), and four of these trainees completed Cert. III Indigenous Land Management (ILM). The project incorporated strong Aboriginal cultural components through engagement with Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs), Elders and knowledge holders. The project involved numerous partners and was funded by the Australian Government. The project was delivered by consultants Eco Logical Australia (ELA), facilitated by the Georges River Combined Councils Committee (GRCCC), and TAFE NSW was the registered training organisation that provided the formal qualifications. The project produced environmental outcomes such as bush regeneration and ecological restoration; as well as socio-cultural outcomes such as, strengthening the cultural identities of the trainees by engaging them with Aboriginal Elders and knowledge holders while they gained formal qualifications and practical skills during paid employment. Positive relationships were also built between the project's partners. This paper outlines the project and highlights some of the lessons learnt, the aim is to provide proponents of similar projects (including Indigenous specific or mainstream projects) with take-home messages that they can use in developing and delivering similar projects and initiatives in the future.

## Introduction

The ART project engaged eight Aboriginal trainees who completed Conservation and Land Management work-based traineeships. The project ran for three years, during which time the team worked across 17 locations in the Georges River catchment, primarily undertaking bush regeneration. The trainees received formal training from TAFE NSW and participated in a wide range of Aboriginal cultural activities as part of the traineeship. The Georges River catchment is 960 km<sup>2</sup>, and with over 1 million residents, it is predominantly urban (GRCCC 2017). There are approximately 14 000 Australian Indigenous people living in the catchment (ABS 2012a, b)<sup>ii</sup>. By combining science and culture over the course of the traineeships, the trainees strengthened their own personal Aboriginal identities as well as gaining formal qualifications and practical skills. Through this culture-rich approach, the project continued the concept of Indigenous Caring for Country in a modern, highly urbanised setting, south-western Sydney. This paper describes five lessons that were crucial to the project's success, and briefly mentions other lessons that are worthy of sharing with those undertaking or considering similar projects.

## Lessons learnt

### *Lesson One – Training occurred at the worksites rather than the classroom wherever possible*

The ART trainees learnt the fundamentals of bush regeneration through daily on-the-job training from the team supervisor, as well as regular engagement with TAFE NSW. The TAFE teachers visited the worksites to train the team in Cert. II CLM or Cert. III ILM. Undertaking training at their worksites was successful as the trainees engaged theory and practice *in situ*, learning about nature in nature, rather than contemplating how theory and practice apply remotely from a classroom. It also meant that the trainees were not required to travel to the TAFE campus weekly to attend class; their training was incorporated into their normal working day.

### *Lesson Two – Aboriginal culture and cultural education was a prominent feature of the project*

In addition to western scientific training, the project incorporated strong Aboriginal cultural components. This was achieved through the involvement of LALCs in the conception of the project, as well as ongoing LALC involvement throughout the project delivery via an Aboriginal Steering Committee. This emphasis on the incorporation of Aboriginal perspectives resulted in the trainees attending regular cultural days where they spent time with Elders and knowledge holders to learn local Aboriginal culture and history. Through these cultural activities, the trainees learnt about Aboriginal values and sites in their worksites and how to adapt their bush regeneration work to avoid damaging these values. The team participated at local Aboriginal community events such as holding stalls at NAIDOC celebrations and at Sydney Living Museum's Eel Festival at Elizabeth Farm, as well as attending commemorative events such as Appin Massacre Memorial and the repatriation of ancestral remains within Gandangara LALC.

### *Lesson Three – The importance of a stable, flexible, supportive employer organisation*

Before winning the ART project contract, ELA had many years of experience operating restoration ecology teams, including trainees, in south-western Sydney. Throughout the project, ELA invested many hours of support to maintain the successful operation of the team. This included providing human resource (HR) services beyond the usual recruitment, induction and development capacity. The additional HR contribution involved working closely with the team to explore and expand the trainees' basic work readiness, to provide early career advice and development, and to explore post-traineeship employment and ongoing support.

### *Lesson Four – The team supervisor role is key to the success of the team*

Initially the project's goal was to have an all-Aboriginal team including project manager and team supervisor. When no suitable Indigenous team supervisor was identified during recruitment, approval was granted through the

funding body and project steering committee (including Aboriginal members) to modify this goal and recruit a non-Indigenous team supervisor. This was by no means ideal; however, due to this alteration, the project was able to progress and produce eight qualified and experienced Aboriginal people. The team supervisor had to be a confident, experienced and qualified bush regenerator given the types of work and sites being managed. They needed to be flexible, pragmatic and able to relate to trainees. They also must be able to negotiate at the interface of engaging with trainees, Aboriginal project partners such as LALCs, Elders and knowledge holders, and with local council staff, contractors, TAFE teachers and members of the public. A replacement for the team supervisor role was also needed, to cover annual leave breaks and unforeseen leave; this person must have a similar skill set. Due to the company's land management business ELA had a bank of substitute team supervisors.

#### *Lesson Five – What worked well with recruiting and maintaining the trainees*

Ideally, employ trainees who are 'work ready' and have adequate stable support at home. Our experience of employing trainees who had to relocate presented many challenges, such as the expense of living away from home, which was difficult on a trainee wage. We assisted in finding accommodation for trainees within Aboriginal hostels. However, homesickness and unaffordability was a significant issue and despite significant support and cultural engagement many of these trainees left. From our experience those living at home with family who could support and motivate them to complete the traineeship were more likely to succeed, as were those who had already participated in work readiness or environmental programs such as Green Army Teams. For some trainees, this was their first employment and ELA assisted them to set-up superannuation accounts, and to obtain tax file numbers, Opal travel concession cards and indentured employee concession identification, as well as engaging the trainees with government support through the New Careers for Aboriginal People and Industry NSW services. All these factors were helpful in assisting the trainee both financially and practically, during their traineeships.

#### *Other lessons – lessons that were not explored in this paper*

Additional lessons worthy of consideration include: (1) allowing for alterations from the original project design - initially tenders were sought only from Indigenous organisations and companies. When this process failed, tenders were open to mainstream non-Indigenous organisations, which allowed the project to proceed and achieve positive outcomes – however, there is a space for increased cross-company collaboration to improve Indigenous organisations' success in winning these contracts as per the original design; (2) planned wet-weather options for the team included arrangements with council nurseries, education centres and local national parks offices where the team could undertake training or work; (3) preplanning basic logistics for the team (such as access to toilets during work hours in relatively inaccessible areas); (4) communication of the company's bereavement leave policy, acceptable mobile phone use during work hours policy and social media policy with the trainees as part of their induction and, followed-up as needed; (5) fair partnerships with Aboriginal organisations – the project partners were prepared to reciprocate time, effort, knowledge and generosity with Aboriginal project partners so that the relationship was fair (i.e. meaning a genuine engagement with Aboriginal project partners to encourage that they could achieve some of their organisation's priorities); (6) facilitate trainee engagement with mentors who have industry experience where the trainee wishes to work in the future (mentoring assistance can be provided by Industry NSW &/or arranged by the project staff); (7) be prepared and be proactive in maintaining communication with trainees after the traineeship has been completed; their onward journey may benefit from your ongoing support; (8) ensure your workplace is culturally competent and has a good understanding of the local and generic issues faced by Indigenous Australians and our shared history; be aware of casual and institutional racism, and be prepared to educate and reform to eradicate prejudice.

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<sup>i</sup>In this paper the word 'Aboriginal' is used as a proper noun and in referring to First Nations people from the Australian mainland. Where 'Indigenous' appears, it relates to a formal name of the qualification and where Australian First Nations peoples are being discussed inclusively (i.e. includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples).

<sup>ii</sup>This statistic was obtained by comparing the ABS 2011 Census data, specifically the Indigenous Profile data to the total populations within the ABS 2011 Census Community Profiles for each LGA in the Georges River catchment.