

**Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner
Land Management Board**

Reconnecting to Ancestral Homelands



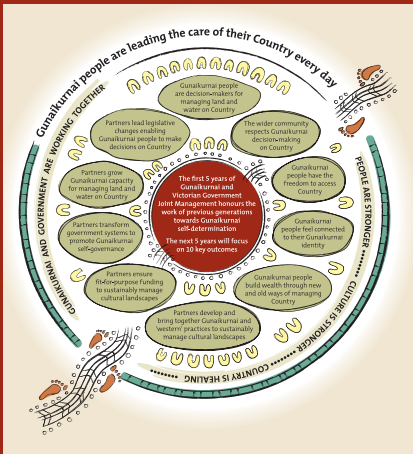
***The Social Value of Joint Management
on Gunaikurnai Country***

Front cover photography by Olivia Bowman.

Artworks featured in this document:



Bataluk Dreaming, Ian Harrison



Storyline artwork, Robbie Farnham

© 2025 Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner Land Management Board. This publication and all artwork and photography in this publication is protected by copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process, nor may any other exclusive right be exercised, without the permission. For more information contact the GKTOLM Board, 75 McLeod Street, Bairnsdale VIC 3875.

Photography provided courtesy of Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation.



Commons Attribution 4.0 Australia licence. You are free to re-use the work for non-commercial purposes under that licence, on the condition that you credit the Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner Land Management Board as author.

If the work is re-mixed, transformed, and/or added to, those modifications must not be distributed. The licence does not apply to any images, photographs or branding, including the Victorian Government logo and the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action logo and the logo of any agency or business used in the work. To view a copy of this licence, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>




Reconnecting to Ancestral Homelands

The Social Value of Joint Management on Gunaikurnai Country



Energy,
Environment
and Climate Action





> Corey Jack applies “Right fire, Right time, Right way, Right Place” to heal Country at the Knob Reserve, Stratford.
Photo Olivia Bowman.

Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge Gunaikurnai people as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Country at the heart of this report and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Gunaikurnai people have one of the oldest living cultures in the world, with that culture being passed down the generations. Gunaikurnai culture is embedded in Country, which is vital to Gunaikurnai identity. Caring for Country is at the heart of feeling connected to Country. We give our thanks for the tens of thousands of years that Gunaikurnai people have cared for the beautiful forests, rivers, beaches, plants, and animals that make up Gunaikurnai Country.

We recognise that this caring for Country, and Gunaikurnai connection to Country, was traumatically disrupted through colonisation. Gunaikurnai people were dispossessed of their lands, waters and natural resources, with many massacred, forcibly removed from their communities, or denied the right to speak their language and practise the ways of their ancestors. This has created deep and lasting inequities. Many Gunaikurnai people today continue to experience systemic marginalisation, poverty, and exclusion from political and economic power.

Gunaikurnai people have never ceded their sovereignty.

Contents

Joint Management: two perspectives	3
In brief...	6
The Social Value of Joint Management	9
Gunaikurnai people feel more connected to their Gunaikurnai identity.	10
Gunaikurnai people increase their economic wealth.	12
Gunaikurnai people increase their capacity to manage land and water on Country.	14
People in government increasingly value Gunaikurnai ways of managing Country.	16
People in government feel more empowered to promote Gunaikurnai self-determination.	19
Gunaikurnai people have more of a say in what happens on Country.	20
The wider community increasingly values the importance of caring for Country together.	22
Gunaikurnai Country is healthier.	24
A short story about Joint Management	28
The beginning of Joint Management	30
The five-year review	32
Acknowledgements	34
Appendix	35
Endnotes	39

JOINT MANAGEMENT

is about the holistic approach of our people finding self-determination – really having a voice and really being heard.

It's about finding ourselves, reconnecting to Country, like our ancestors did, and making things better for future generations.

It's about working together, sharing our knowledge, learning from each other.

It's about understanding the cultural landscape as it is today and working with it – not working on it or exploiting it for political reasons.

It's about making Country whole again so that people can feel whole again.

– Gunaikurnai Elder and member of the Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner Land Management Board¹

JOINT MANAGEMENT

recognises the ongoing connection of Traditional Owners to the land. It is about ensuring that the knowledge and culture of Traditional Owners are recognised in the management of that land...

Joint Management is a legal agreement between the State and Traditional Owners.

– Parks Victoria website²

Joint Management: two perspectives

Defining Joint Management can be hard, as these two perspectives illustrate. This is because, at its core, Joint Management aspires to bridge two fundamentally different worldviews – each with its own understanding of the relationship between people and the natural world.

For many Indigenous peoples, humans are deeply interdependent with nature. Lands, waters, skies, and all living and non-living things are regarded with reverence and care. Human wellbeing is inseparable from the health of the rest of nature. Knowledge is holistic and relational, rooted in cultural, ecological, and spiritual connections to place. It is passed down through generations as part of a shared responsibility to care for Country, a place that gives and receives life.

In contrast, the dominant 'western' approach to natural resource management views humans as separate from, or even superior to, nature. Nature is seen as a resource to be managed, regulated, and conserved for human benefit, using legal and scientific frameworks. Knowledge is valued for its objectivity and universality, with nature treated as an object of study rather than kin.

Bridging these two worldviews is a significant challenge. This challenge is made more complex by entrenched power imbalances and systemic inequities stemming from colonisation. These barriers limit the participation of Indigenous communities as equal decision-makers, preventing Joint Management from becoming, as one Gunaikurnai Elder put it, "proper joint"³

In south-eastern Victoria, Gunaikurnai people and the Victorian Government have been wrestling with this challenge for many years. A major milestone was achieved in 2018, when the Joint Management Plan for ten parks and reserves, handed back to Gunaikurnai people, was formally approved.⁴ A review of the first five years was published in late 2024.⁵

Alongside the many frustrations expressed by people working in Joint Management, there is a real sense of pride about what has been achieved so far. There are tangible things, like getting more Gunaikurnai people into jobs and increasing their economic wealth. But they have just as often highlighted the less tangible: the growing self-confidence in Gunaikurnai people working on Country, the two-way learning of skills and culture, the increasing sense of agency among government employees to promote Gunaikurnai self-determination. The overwhelming consensus is that Joint Management is about much more than managing the cultural landscape together.

This report describes the social value – the societal benefits beyond monetary worth – that Joint Management contributes to Gunaikurnai people, the Victorian Government, the wider community living on Gunaikurnai Country, and Gunaikurnai Country itself. The analysis used for this report draws primarily on the extensive work conducted to produce the five-year review, and is guided by the Principles of Social Value, a methodology that prioritises the voices of those experiencing the changes to their wellbeing. Social value is best accounted for through a combination of qualitative and quantitative information. This report accordingly uses contextual narrative about the changes experienced by people in their lives and what those changes mean to them, alongside quantitative metrics where appropriate, to attempt to capture the full essence of the social value of Joint Management.

Many readers of this report will have a good understanding of Joint Management and how it came about and will want to get straight into our findings. Readers less familiar with the history, or looking for a refresher, will find the “Short story of Joint Management” section in the second part of this report on page 28.

Left to right:

> GLaWAC and Parks Victoria Rangers gathered around the 5 clan posts at Sperm Whale Head.

> Buchan Munji – Krauatungulung Country. Gunaikurnai rangers are updating park signage across JM Country to clearly identify this as Gunaikurnai Country.



In brief...

Joint Management has been, and continues to be, a foundational driver towards Gunaikurnai self-determination and, ultimately, towards reconciliation. In this report we show how Joint Management does this through analysing the eight interconnected changes experienced by those who work in Joint Management.

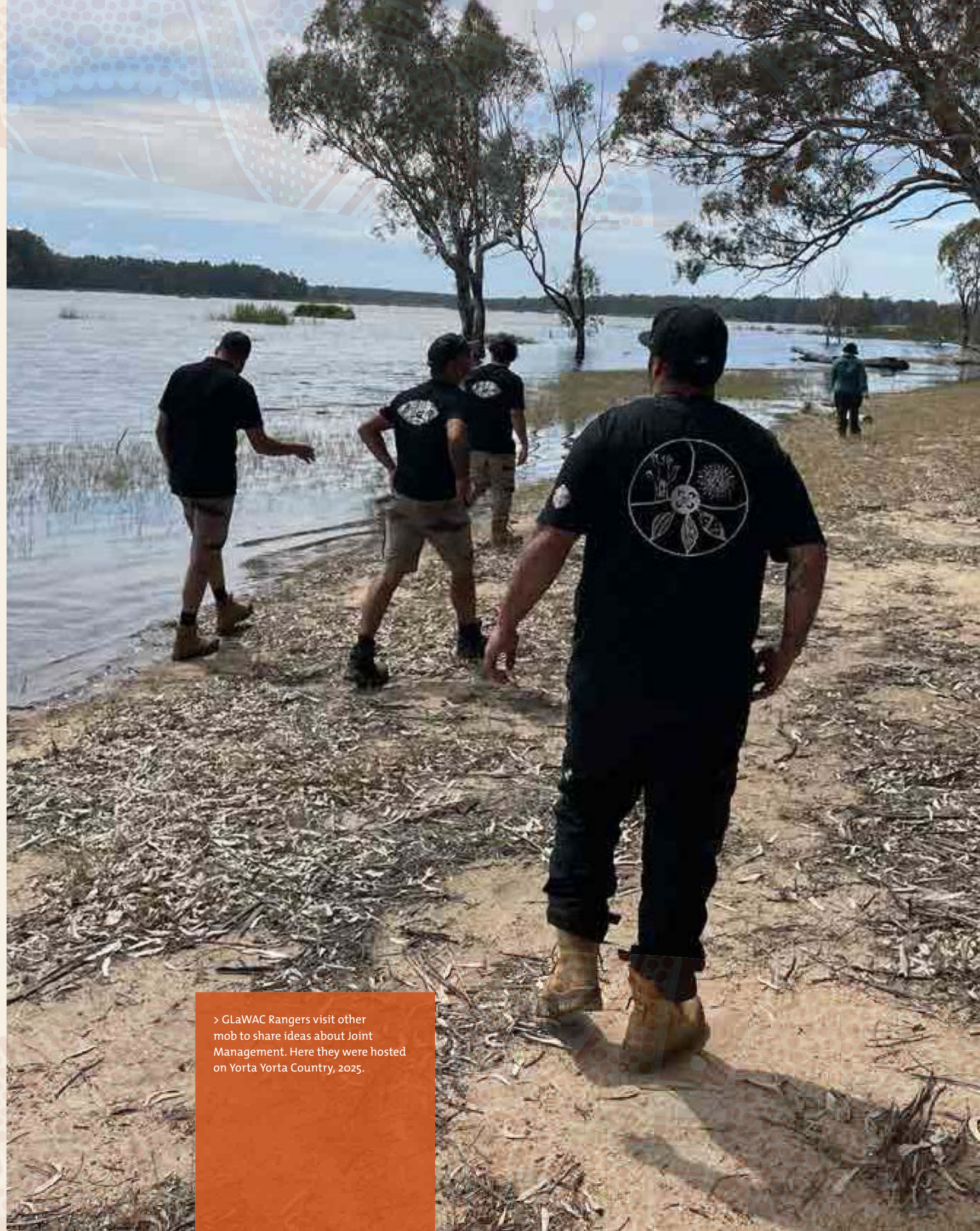
Reclaiming Ancestral Homelands is a process of redressing lost connections with Culture and Country, through which Gunaikurnai people feel more connected to their cultural identity. Connection to Country increases pride, confidence, and autonomy, especially for those directly involved in Joint Management activities. Joint Management provides a stable core of funding and jobs for Gunaikurnai people, around which other innovative economic opportunities can be grown. Gunaikurnai people feel that they develop more through working in Joint Management, due to the scope it offers and the multiple opportunities for two-way learning. This two-way learning applies equally to people in government, who with this deepened understanding increasingly value Gunaikurnai ways of managing Country, weaving these together with 'western' ways of managing Country, contributing towards Country becoming healthier. People in government also feel increasingly empowered to promote Gunaikurnai self-determination, whether in an operational, management, or policy role in Joint Management.

The statutory intention of Joint Management is to genuinely introduce power sharing arrangements between the Victorian Government to Gunaikurnai people, so that Gunaikurnai people have more of a say in what happens on Country. While there is frustration expressed on both sides about how long this change is taking, there is recognition by those directly involved that there is goodwill on both sides, that progress is being made, and that putting the theory into practice is complex. This complexity is in part due to the systemic inequities created through colonisation meaning that Gunaikurnai people need to significantly increase their capacity to take on the work, and in part due to the difficulty in navigating profoundly different worldviews while working together on Country.

The support of the wider community for First Peoples' self-determination and reconciliation provides the social licence for Joint Management. At the same time, Joint Management increases awareness, understanding, and valuing by the wider community of Gunaikurnai culture and ways of caring for Country, which leads to increasing their support for Gunaikurnai self-determination and reconciliation.

We leave the final words to the storyline that emerged from the five-year review, representing how people working in Joint Management see its social value:

People are stronger. Culture is stronger. Country is healing.
Gunaikurnai and Government are working together.
Gunaikurnai people are leading the care of their
Country every day.



> GLaWAC Rangers visit other mob to share ideas about Joint Management. Here they were hosted on Yorta Yorta Country, 2025.

The Social Value of Joint Management

The right to self-determination. The right to participate in decision-making. The right to lands, territories, and resources. The right to revitalise language and culture. The right to the improvement of economic and social conditions.

These are among the many rights set out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. They “constitute the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world”.⁶

In many countries with colonial histories, some form of power-sharing in the management of national parks has emerged as a practical, place-based response that can make a unique and significant contribution towards affirming these rights and, ultimately, towards achieving genuine reconciliation.⁷

This section examines how Joint Management with the Victorian Government has contributed so far towards upholding these rights for Gunaikurnai people, and towards the broader aspiration of reconciliation. We do this through applying the Principles of Social Value to eight interconnected changes experienced by key stakeholders in the storyline of Joint Management (Figure 1) that emerged from the five-year review: Gunaikurnai people, people in government, the wider community, and Gunaikurnai Country itself (see Appendix for details on our approach to the analysis).

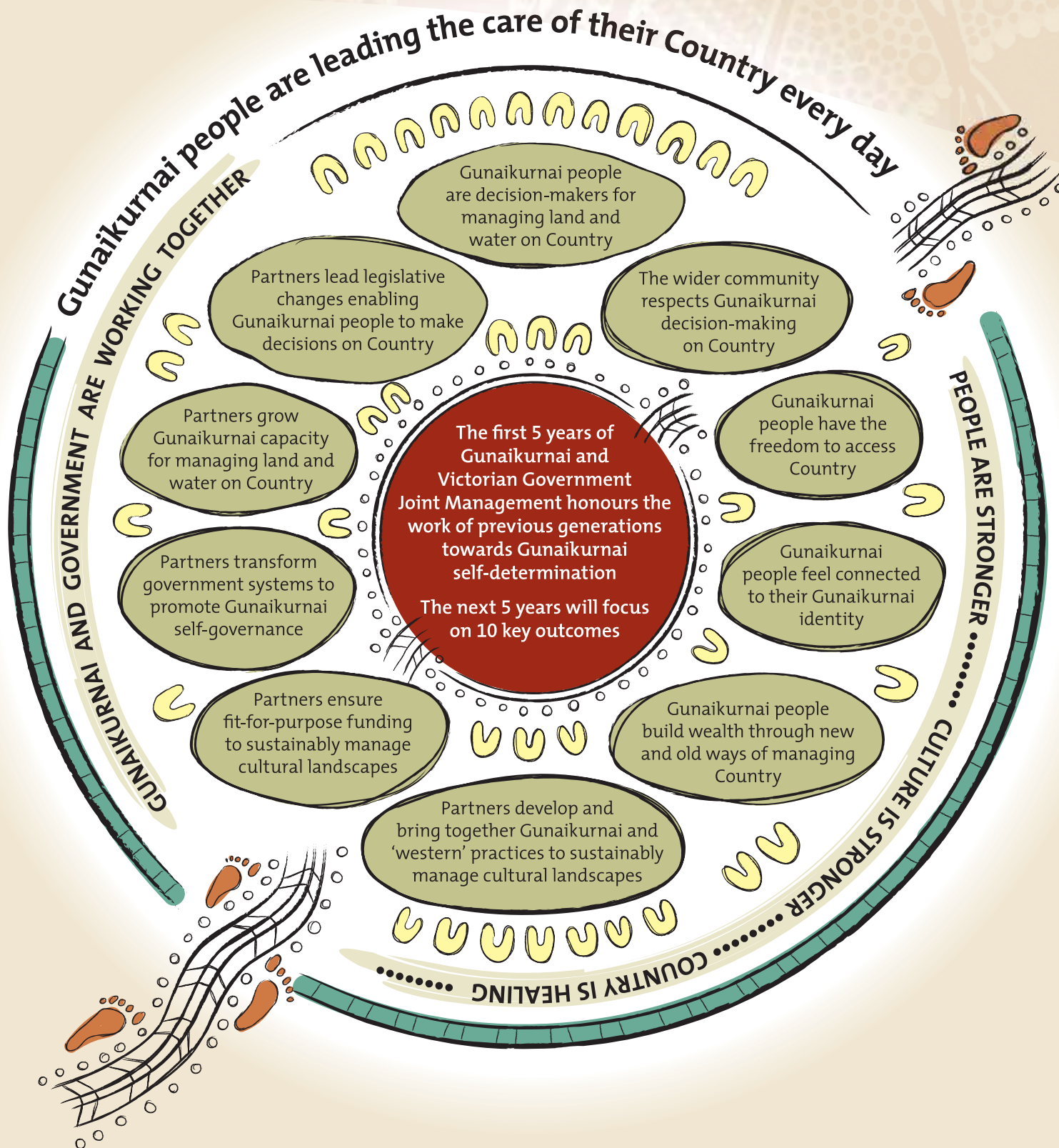


Figure 1: The storyline of Joint Management for the next five years.

Gunaikurnai people feel more connected to their Gunaikurnai identity.

“The biggest thing is being connected to Country, connected to Community.”⁸

Joint Management includes many activities that align with ‘western’ land and water management approaches, such as revegetation of native species, controlled use of fire, managing invasive plants and animals, and monitoring and protecting threatened species. It also involves protecting sacred areas, conducting ceremonies, and sharing traditional knowledge with younger generations. These activities are foundational for deepening cultural and spiritual connections to Country and are a vital expression of Indigenous identity.⁹

“People are learning culture, connecting with mob through events on Country... Joint Management fosters this connection.”¹⁰

For Gunaikurnai people directly involved in Joint Management activities, this connection with their Gunaikurnai identity enhances their pride, confidence and sense of autonomy.¹¹

“I started out as a ranger, now I’m a coordinator, a team leader, it’s about the bigger picture. Just getting to work on Country is honouring. Makes you feel proud of what you’re doing. Gives you a bit of purpose.”¹²

“Feeling connected leads to more confidence and more courage... Joint Management has given some focus so that we can make changes in our own lives... It’s given us freedom to think, freedom to have a bit of an attitude.”¹³

Joint Management is not the only way for Gunaikurnai people to feel more connected to their Gunaikurnai identity. Engaging in cultural practices such as dance, song, painting, weaving, or learning language in urban settings also supports this connection.¹⁴ However, the research literature supports what Gunaikurnai people have shared: accessing and being on Country is one of the most effective ways to feel connection to their Gunaikurnai identity, a key determinant in improving holistic health and wellbeing.¹⁵

> GLaWAC Ranger Kevin Hood carries out cultural work at Tarra Bulga National Park.

“

To heal Country,
we need to heal people.
And to heal people,
we need to get them
out here.”¹⁶

Gunaikurnai people increase their economic wealth.

Joint Management is a significant direct financial contributor to the Gunaikurnai community. In the 2023-2024 financial year, in addition to GKTOLMB's \$1 million annual operating income, over \$3 million, or one quarter of GLaWAC's \$12 million annual operating income, was attributed to Joint Management. As a comparison, GLaWAC's total annual operating income in the 2018-2019 financial year – the year that the Joint Management Plan was officially launched – was just over \$5 million.¹⁷

This growth in GLaWAC's income cannot be solely attributed to Joint Management. GLaWAC has proactively engaged in many

economic development initiatives, from providing natural resource management services, developing cultural tourism, and growing a bush foods enterprise, to negotiating agreements with renewable energy developers. What Joint Management has offered, and continues to offer, is a steady core around which this innovation and entrepreneurship can grow.¹⁸

An important part of that core is the provision of financial certainty for GLaWAC, leading to the ability to provide more jobs, especially for Gunaikurnai and other people of Aboriginal heritage living on Gunaikurnai Country. The number of people of Aboriginal

heritage employed at GLaWAC grew from 40 (out of 53) in 2018-2019 to 74 (out of 99) in the 2023-2024 financial year.¹⁹

However, there are opportunities to do much more. One is to create more entry-level pathways to reduce employment barriers for other community members.

“We need to get more young ones into jobs. It starts with motivating them: if you want to work, you will. One way is to have more opportunities in GLaWAC.”²⁰

Another is to prioritise ‘circular income’ wherever possible. This includes ensuring that procurement policies such as the First Right of Refusal for Traditional Owner groups are consistently implemented by government partner organisations such as PV or DEECA.

“If we want stuff done in our Joint Management parks, we should give the contract to the Natural Resource Management team. Keep everything in-house, all money stays here. If we contract out to someone else, we need to have a crew person work there.”²¹

Far left:

> GLaWAC crew install bollards at Tarra Bulga National Park.

This page:

> GLaWAC Joint Management team visited Yorta Yorta Country to share different approaches to Joint Management.

> Jordy Harrison, Harley Wanganeen. Tarra-Bulga track clearing.



Gunaikurnai people increase their capacity to manage land and water on Country.



Inset: > Buchan Caves Reserve
Main: > Walking track, Buchan Caves Reserve.
Jess Shapiro.



Compared to other ways of working on Country, working in Joint Management is viewed by Gunaikurnai people as providing more opportunities for professional development. One reason for this is the scope that Joint Management offers.

“ We have more freedom in Joint Management... we get to do track clearing on one end of the scale. On the other end, we get to do new buildings and projects like Buchan Caves – these are huge projects.”²²

Another reason is the deepening of two-way understanding and learning that can come from working together with government partners, including through secondments in both directions.

“ You see this in the working bees in parks between PV and Gunaikurnai: laughing together, a relaxed feeling. Gunaikurnai rangers want to learn how to do emails,

PV staff are willing to sit side-by-side with them, without embarrassment. These small things are really important.”²³

There is much more that can be done to further this, though, with government partners recognising that they have a critical role to play.

“ There needs to be a real willingness from our teams to understand the role we need to play to provide support and foster capacity for Gunaikurnai people involved in Joint Management. We need to be proactively creating the right kind of opportunities and having respectful conversations, and this needs to happen right down to the works programming and planning level. There needs to be a real effort to make time and space in our incredibly busy schedules to spend time together on Country, to reinforce that mutual understanding and learning.”²⁴



People in government increasingly value Gunaikurnai ways of managing Country.

The two-way learning mentioned above also has a powerful impact on government staff working in Joint Management.

“There was an incident a few years ago when a few hundred wedge-tailed eagles were poisoned by a private landowner... I was talking to an Elder down the street, he was a big imposing fella, to see him quivering in tears, saying “they were my Elders that they killed”. It gave me a real sense of his loss, a very raw sense of the intangible notion of culture. When we think about the cultural landscape, we need to understand that it’s not just about an artefact that may or may not be recorded on ACHRIS, it’s about the stories and history that goes with it.”²⁵

Working together side by side on Country with Gunaikurnai people on shared projects deepens government staff’s understanding of Gunaikurnai culture. This leads to government staff increasingly valuing Gunaikurnai ways of managing Country, and ultimately to Gunaikurnai ways being woven together with ‘western’ practices to manage Country.²⁶

An example of leading practice in this is the journey of mutual understanding in managing fire on Gunaikurnai Country.


A GLaWAC fire crew was established, trained, and deployed during the 2019-2020 bushfires, and continues to grow in capacity. At the same time, the Gunaikurnai Cultural Fire Strategy was developed and is being implemented through the delivery of cultural burns on Country.²⁷ Out of 12 cultural burns delivered since the launch of the Joint Management Plan, 10 have taken place since mid-2023.²⁸ In late 2024, a partnership agreement was finalised between GLaWAC and DEECA to move towards the vision of Gunaikurnai people applying the right fire at the right time in the right way.²⁹

“I had the opportunity to go on Country and talk about different views of what fire management looks like... we had a really enriching discussion that happened quite organically... I came away with a much better understanding of just how intricate the use of fire for cultural objectives is and how it could be applied very practically to effectively manage Country.”³⁰

Left to right:

- > Harley Wanganeen, GLaWAC Ranger, Knob Reserve, Right Fire, Right Place.
- > GLaWAC are part of a project to improve outcomes for the endangered Mountain Pygmy Possum.
- > GLaWAC Towera (fire) Crew applying right fire to Country.





> Gunaikurnai Rangers are bringing traditional knowledge and methods back to the way Country is managed.

People in government feel more empowered to promote Gunaikurnai self-determination.

Another critical change experienced by people in government working together with Gunaikurnai people in Joint Management is that they feel an increasing sense of agency in promoting Gunaikurnai self-determination.

“A big part of it is changing the way people think. This happens slowly. With Treaty, Yoorrook, I hope the speed of change will increase. We can embed these things on the horizon in our Joint Management narrative to help our people become early adopters of this way of thinking.”³¹

This change cannot be fully attributed to Joint Management. The steadfast advocacy by Victoria’s First Peoples together with the Victorian Government’s response in enabling the Yoorrook Justice Commission and the Treaty process contribute significantly to nudging societal norms towards promoting self-determination for First Peoples. This in turn strengthens the authorising environment for government staff to proactively move in this direction.³²

Joint Management nonetheless offers a special context in which people in government deepen their understanding of the importance of self-determination for Gunaikurnai people they work together with, and of the power they possess to facilitate this.³³ Practically, this takes place through operational decisions, alongside advocating for funding, policy, or legislative changes.

“For the first time we are providing funding on an ongoing multi-year basis for both GLaWAC and GKTOLMB for the implementation of the Joint Management Plan... we are trying to initiate degrees of self-determination as much as we can, for example, by shifting to funding agreements being about outcomes achieved rather than activities performed.”³⁴

“The reform of the Crown Land Act will provide more opportunity for Traditional Owners to be involved in direct or sole management... They will be fully empowered to manage land in their own right when they have the capacity and capability to do so... We want to have the systems and legislation in place on our side for when the Gunaikurnai are ready to move further in that direction.”³⁵

“We need to work with GLaWAC to get to shared positions on objectives for any given park... Those bits that are important to GLaWAC, we can share the planning, split the accountabilities. This is where we work together, this is how we work together, right down to how are we going to manage these tracks. GLaWAC might not want to do it all, but they want to say how it’s done. We could have a situation where PV is effectively the contractor.”³⁶

Gunaikurnai people have more of a say in what happens on Country.



“

The biggest thing is having a say about what happens.

I don't want to be told I should go do stuff. I know what I want to do.³⁷

For Gunaikurnai people, self-determination is ultimately what Joint Management is for.

Joint Management is just one way that Gunaikurnai people are having more of a say in what happens on Country. The Yoorrook truth-telling process and Treaty negotiations alongside important work led on the ground by other Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations all contribute towards increasing Gunaikurnai self-determination.

What makes Joint Management special is the constant feedback loop between theory and practice. The power-sharing comes to life at a human scale through working together on Country power-sharing comes to life at a human scale through working together on Country. In this way, people working in Joint Management develop a nuanced, real-world understanding of the complexities involved in redressing colonial power imbalances while navigating profoundly different worldviews.³⁸

“ *It seems like we still just have that lip service. They say yes and everyone goes away feeling fluffy and good, but then nothing changes... You have to start changing legislation so we can make Joint Management real, so that we can set the parameters on how we want to manage Country. It's come a long way, don't get me wrong, but it's still a dictatorship.³⁹*

“ *We haven't been able to transition decision-making authority to the Gunaikurnai, there is still a reluctance from us to let go and allow Traditional Owners more decision-making capacity. From that a lot of other things flow – resourcing, capability-building, economic opportunities. We haven't been able to give them that seat at the table. There are people still trying to hang on to decision-making authority, there are still trust issues. There is lots of good intent, but I'm not sure we have the governance structures set up to allow true Joint Management to exist, I'm not sure we communicate well enough across all of the agency, from where on-the-ground decisions are being made to the strategic space.⁴⁰*



> Working with community on Country protects places of cultural significance and improves our parks for all visitors.

The wider community increasingly values the importance of caring for Country together.

Support from the wider community for reconciliation is critical to the ongoing success of Joint Management. While public sentiment has taken a setback following the failed 2023 Voice Referendum, recent polling shows that the majority of Australians still believe that the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is important for our nation.⁴¹

The success of Joint Management in turn influences support for reconciliation, through increasing awareness, then understanding, and then valuing by the wider community of Gunaikurnai culture and ways of caring for Country.⁴²

Two types of Joint Management activities contribute directly towards this. The first is the level of visibility of the Gunaikurnai cultural landscape, including the presence of Joint Management rangers in Joint Managed areas. This can take the form of installing totem poles, the recently completed Buchan Munji interpretation plan, or the joint badging of GLaWAC and Parks Victoria ranger uniforms. This leads to a richer cultural experience for visitors to the parks.

“Visitors now know they are stepping onto Gunaikurnai Country and this demands a greater level of respect.”⁴³

“When the Gunaikurnai rangers speak, kids listen, everyone loves it.”⁴⁴

The second type of activity is a project that, because of Joint Management, leads to the wider community being able to better enjoy and access the natural and cultural values of a park. One example is the award-winning Bung Yarnda (Lake Tyers) Camping and Access Strategy, developed jointly by GLaWAC and PV in 2022.⁴⁵ Another is the delivery in 2024 by GLaWAC of the first stage of infrastructure upgrades at Angusvale campground in Mitchell River National Park.⁴⁶



Above:

> The Knob Reserve – Brayakaulung Country. GLaWAC Rangers have been placing “5 poles” at each of the JM parks. Each pole represents one of the 5 clans of the Gunaikurnai and in time will include cultural interpretation relevant to that park.

Far Left:

> GLaWAC crew work with Ecology Links to monitor Mountain Pygmy Possums.

Left:

> GKTOLMB and GLaWAC work closely together to ensure Joint Management Plans reflect cultural priorities.

Gunaikurnai Country is healthier.

Finally, we consider the contribution that Joint Management makes towards Gunaikurnai Country itself becoming healthier.

Assessing the contribution of any one initiative or phenomenon to the health of nature is incredibly challenging. This is due to the complexity and interconnectedness of ecological systems, multiple overlapping initiatives, the lack of consensus on metrics, and the relatively slow and non-linear impacts of initiatives on nature. In addition, in the context of Joint Management, we are navigating across worldviews that have a fundamentally different relationship to nature. Existing ways of assessing the health of nature tend to focus on measures that align with the typical western 'living from' nature worldview.⁴⁷

There are signs though, including in Australia, that typical indigenous 'living with' or 'living as' nature worldviews are increasingly valued as we face the enormity

of the deterioration of our environment. In Victoria, the 2023 State of the Environment Report points towards the intention to report on cultural landscape health and management, alongside more standard categories such as climate change and biodiversity. This will primarily be informed by biocultural indicators being developed through Joint Management activities.⁴⁸

In the meantime, we rely on the 'logic model' of the change to assert this contribution: that through the Joint Management process, people in government increasingly value Gunaikurnai ways of managing Country, and feel more empowered to promote Gunaikurnai self-determination, which leads to Gunaikurnai people having more of a say in what happens on Country, which leads to best practice from both western and Gunaikurnai ways of caring for Country being combined, leading ultimately to healthier parks now and for future generations.

> GLaWAC Ranger Rob Baxter working on the Mountain Pygmy Possum program.



“To heal Country, we need to heal people.

And to heal people, we need to get them out here.”

“Visitors now know they are stepping onto Gunaikurnai Country and this demands a greater level of respect.”

The biggest thing is having a say about what happens.

I don't want to be told

I should go do stuff.

I know what I want to do.

“For the first time we are providing funding on an ongoing multi-year basis for both GLaWAC and GKTOLMB for the implementation of the Joint Management Plan...”

We need to get more young ones into jobs.

It starts with motivating them:

if you want to work, you will.

One way is to have more opportunities in GLaWAC.

“A big part of it is changing the way people think.

This happens slowly.

With Treaty, Yoorrook, I hope the speed of change will increase...”

“When the

Gunaikurnai rangers

speak, kids listen, everyone loves it.”

A short story about Joint Management

Gunaikurnai people have lived for thousands of years as custodians of an area covering around one tenth of Victoria, stretching from Warragul in the west to the Snowy River in the east, and from the Great Divide in the north to the coast in the south. Their story begins with Borun the pelican and Tuk the musk duck, the ancestors who shaped their world and gave rise to the five Gunaikurnai clans: Brataualung, Brayakaulung, Tatungalung, Brabralung, and Krauatungalung (see Figure 2).⁴⁹

The arrival of European settlers in the 1830s marked a significant turning point. Frontier conflict and the introduction of new diseases soon decimated the Gunaikurnai population. Colonial policies in the 1860s forced many of those who had survived onto missions, imposing European language, culture, and religion. This fractured families, fragmented communities, and severed many Gunaikurnai people from their language, culture, spirituality, and Country. Land clearing and European land management practices began the unsustainable exploitation of the region's natural resources, destroying or damaging many important Gunaikurnai cultural sites in the process.

Despite this, Gunaikurnai people have endured, maintaining connection to their Country across the generations, continuing to practice their lore and law. Gunaikurnai people number around three thousand today, with some thriving in this 'new' society. Many do not. The traumatic legacy of colonisation has led to systemic barriers and inequities for many Gunaikurnai people, manifesting in poor health, low education levels, poverty, welfare dependence, and little access to political or economic power.



Figure 2: The five Gunaikurnai clan areas. Sketch Map of Gippsland from Alfred Howitt's 1886 notes.

The beginning of Joint Management

Following the historic recognition of native title for the Meriam people of the Torres Strait in 1992 and the subsequent passing of the Native Title Act in 1993, Gunaikurnai people began preparing their native title claim, submitting it in 1997. It took another thirteen years before this was finally recognised by the Federal Court in 2010. On the same day, the Victorian Government entered into a Recognition and Settlement Agreement (RSA) with Gunaikurnai people, represented by the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC).

One of the outcomes of the RSA was the handing back of ten public parks and reserves to Gunaikurnai people, to be jointly managed with the Victorian Government, through Parks Victoria (PV) and the Department of Energy, Environment, and Climate Action (DEECA).⁵⁰ The Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner Land Management Board (GKTOLMB) was established to guide the development of Joint Management plans for these areas and to coordinate the monitoring and evaluation of their implementation.

After several years of development and consultation, the Gunaikurnai and Victorian Government Joint Management Plan – the first of its kind in Victoria – was approved by the Victorian Minister for Energy, Environment, and Climate Change in 2018. The Joint Management Plan included several pictures that were called the ‘theory of change’ (see Figure 3).⁵¹ It reflected the commitment between Gunaikurnai people and the Victorian Government to work together to manage the designated areas on Gunaikurnai Country over the following 25 years. It identified the most important changes, or outcomes, that partners wanted to see Joint Management achieve for People, Culture, and Country, through working together. It also recognised that the plan and the theory of change itself would evolve over time, incorporating knowledge gained through implementing the plan, as well as adapting to changes in the broader context. With this in mind, the plan called for a comprehensive review every five years.

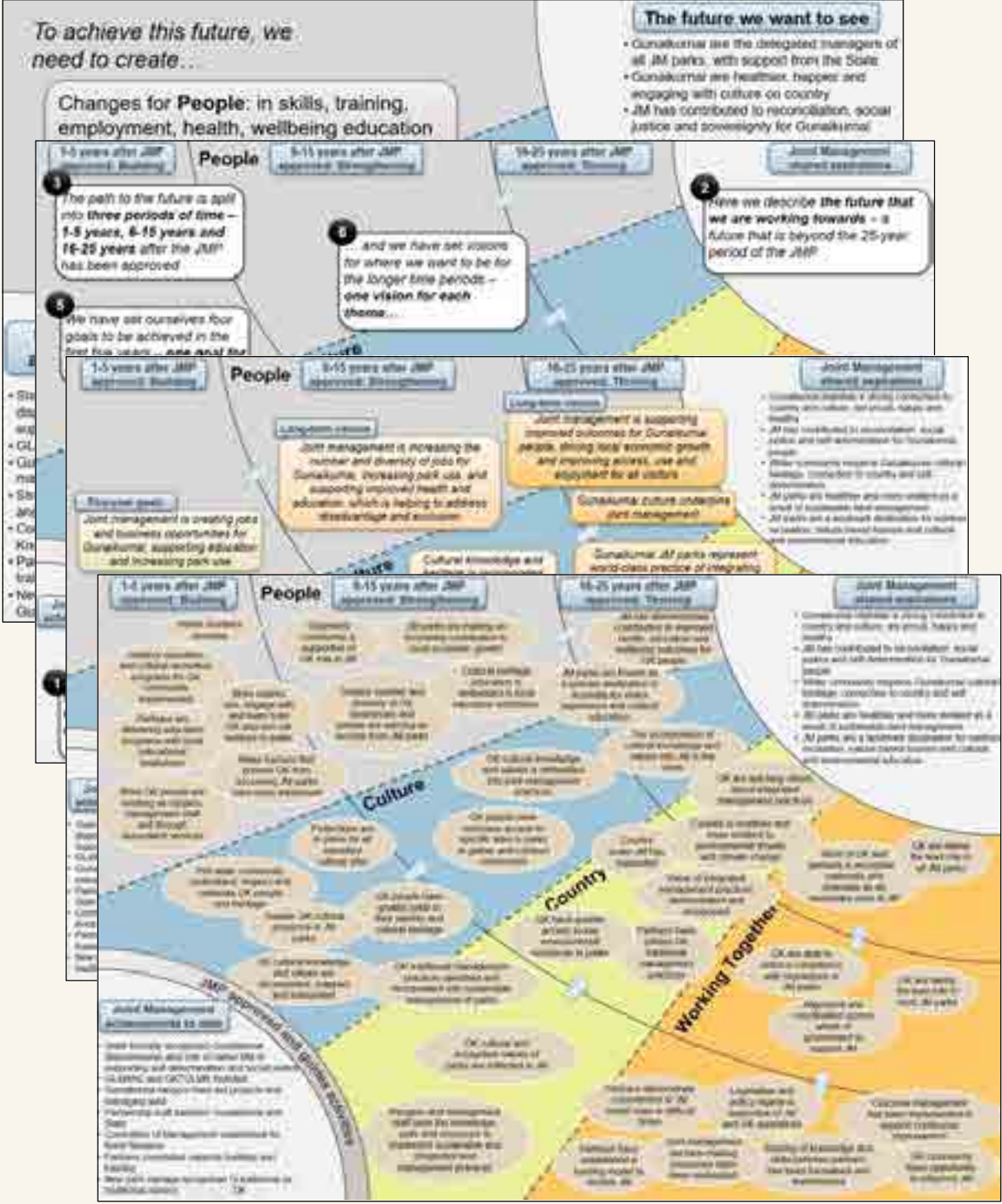


Figure 3: Snapshots of the comprehensive theory of change developed for the Joint Management Plan.

The five-year review

Five years on, a lot had happened in Joint Management. Despite the devastation of the 2019-2020 bushfires, followed by the pandemic, the Joint Management partners had together done a lot of what they said they would do in the plan, although demonstrating their progress was a challenge with too many outcomes and indicators to track.

A lot had happened more broadly too. The Yoorrook Justice Commission had started its work. Legislation advancing Treaty had been enacted by the Victorian Parliament. The Federal Government had committed to implement the Uluru Statement from the Heart. The Victorian Government had started handing back water to the Gunaikurnai community. Work had begun with the Federal Government to establish a Sea Country Indigenous Protection Area, together with other Traditional Owners. And the RSA that marked the beginning of the journey towards Gunaikurnai self-determination was re-opened for negotiation, with an early outcome being the transfer of four new parks to Joint Management in 2023 (see Figure 4).⁵²



Figure 4: The fourteen parks and reserves on Gunaikurnai Country that are now under Joint Management.

The five-year review involved listening to the distinct voices of almost sixty people from all levels of Joint Management and community members. This broad consultation revealed a picture of what has changed, and what has not, over the past five years, alongside what matters most for the future. What became clear was that this picture needed to honour the many different perspectives that had been heard, recognising that each person would interpret it through their own unique lens. The result was a new guiding ‘storyline’ – rather than a single story – for the next five years of Joint Management (see Figure 5).⁵³

Comparing this to the original theory of change is one way of understanding what Joint Management has achieved so far. The most notable shift is its circular design, reflecting the

gradual bridging between Gunaikurnai and ‘western’ worldviews. This form highlights the interdependence of People, Culture, Country, and working together, as well as the non-linear nature of change.

The centre honours the work of previous generations and points to the ten key outcomes for the next five years, working towards the vision of Gunaikurnai leading the care of their Country every day. The streamlined design reflects the maturity of the partnership, helping all partners focus on the most important changes, even as their work continues to cover a wide range of activities.

Finally, the language used reflects a deeper, shared understanding among partners of the evolving boundaries of Joint Management. This evolution points towards the decolonisation of how Country is managed, and the bigger change of Gunaikurnai self-determination, for which Joint Management is one vehicle.⁵⁴

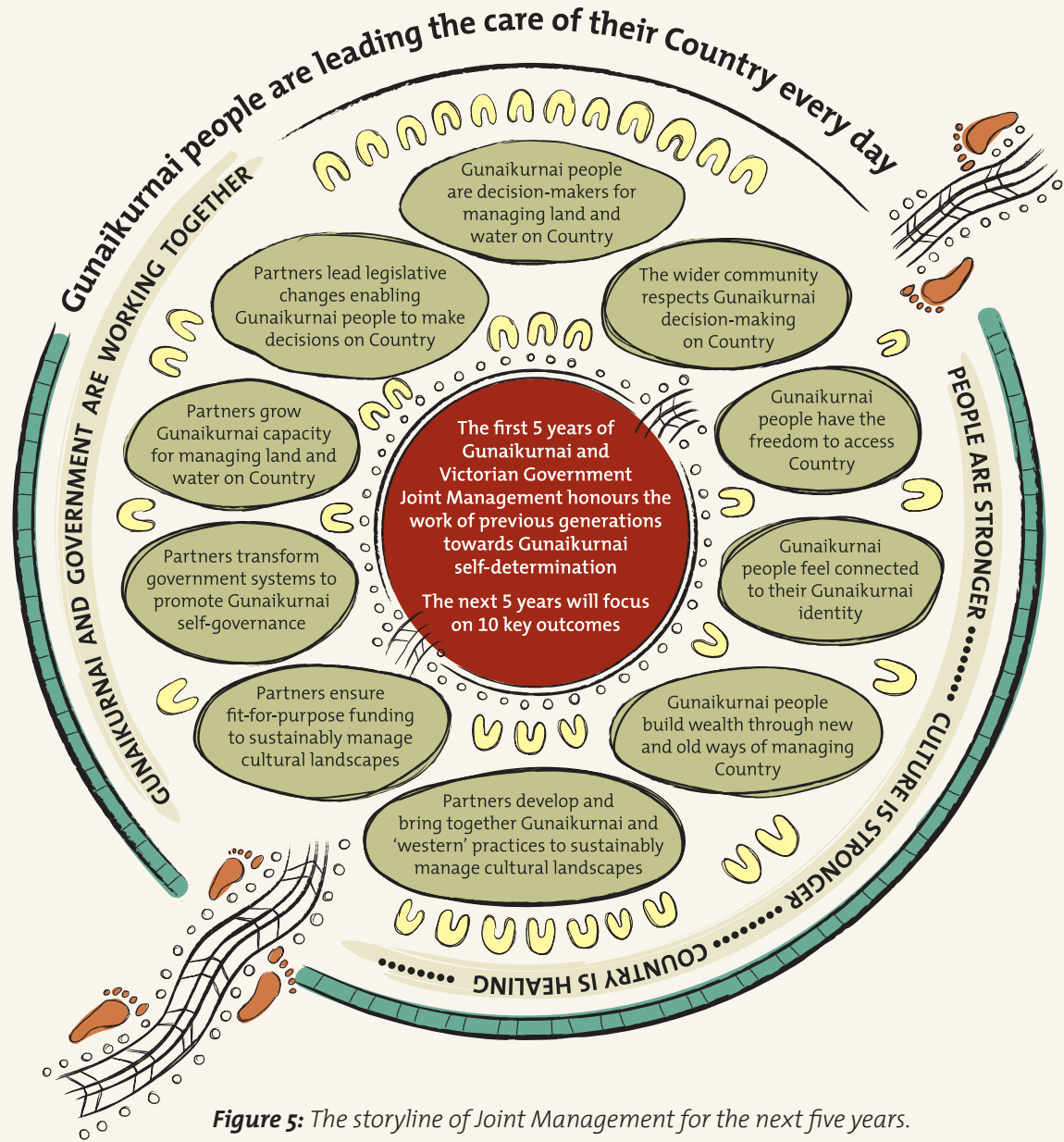


Figure 5: The storyline of Joint Management for the next five years.

Acknowledgements

Project acknowledgements

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) would like to acknowledge the members of community, the Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner Land Management Board, the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation, Parks Victoria, and the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, who have shared their thoughts with us to inform the five-year review of Joint Management, as well as this report.

Legal disclosure statement

SVA has prepared this report in good faith on the basis of the research and information available to SVA at the date of publication.

Information has been obtained from sources that SVA believes to be reliable and up to date. SVA does not give any representation, warranty, express or implied, assurance or guarantee as to the accuracy, adequacy, completeness, currency or reliability of any of the information.

This report was prepared by SVA for the use and benefit of its client and for the purpose for which it was provided.

To the extent permitted by the law, SVA disclaims all liability and responsibility for any loss or damage which may be suffered by any third party through the use of, or reliance on, anything contained in, or implied by, or omitted from this report.

This report has been prepared by SVA Consulting

SVA is a not-for-profit organisation that works with partners to alleviate disadvantage – towards a society where all people and communities thrive.

We influence systems to deliver better social outcomes for people by learning about what works in communities, helping organisations be more effective, sharing our perspectives and advocating for change.

SVA Consulting is Australia’s leading not-for-profit consultancy. We focus solely on social impact and work with partners to increase their capacity to create positive change. Thanks to more than 15 years of working with not-for-profits, government and funders, we have developed a deep understanding of the sector and ‘what works’.

Our team is passionate about what they do and use their diverse experience to work together to solve our society’s most pressing challenges.

This report has been authored by SVA Consulting by Selena Ng and Simon Faivel (a Level 3 Advanced Social Value & Social Return On Investment practitioner and trainer).

For more information contact us:
consulting@socialventures.org.au

Appendix

Defining and accounting for social value

Social value refers to the broader societal benefit of actions or policies, beyond monetary worth. It captures the positive changes experienced by individuals, communities, and the environment, addressing aspects such as societal well-being, environmental sustainability, and economic equity. Unlike traditional financial metrics such as profit, social value emphasises what truly matters to people, measuring outcomes that enhance their quality of life and create meaningful, long-term impact for present and future generations.

Measuring the social value or social impact of policies and programs is a movement that has grown rapidly around the world over the past decade. Most people understand the importance of doing it, and acknowledge that it is hard to do. There are a number of challenges.

First, unlike financial value, social value is **not an objective or fixed concept**. It depends on the specific societal, cultural, and individual priorities within the context in which the value is being measured. These can often only be discerned through a deep understanding of that context from multiple perspectives. An additional complication is that many of the social outcomes we are most interested in are those experienced by people who have little or no power in decision-making.

Second, unlike most financial metrics, many social outcomes have **complex non-linear cause-and-effect relationships**, making it difficult to isolate and quantify specific impacts.

Third, many of the social outcomes we are interested in **often require a longer timeframe to measure the change**, which means that we may need to make more assumptions about what broader changes might happen over that period that could influence the outcome.

Accompanying the growing interest in measuring social value is a proliferation of tools and standards, which can sometimes add to the confusion. There are ongoing initiatives within the social value measurement community to standardise how social value is measured. At SVA, we are closely aligned with Social Value International, the global network for social value and impact measurement, whose approach is centred around the **Principles of Social Value** (see Figure 6).⁵⁵

The Principles are a combination of accounting principles, for measurement, and management principles, for decision-making. They are drawn from existing disciplines such as financial accounting, sustainability reporting, evaluation, and social research. What distinguishes the Principles from other approaches is their explicit focus on ensuring that **the people who experience the changes to their wellbeing are informing the measurement and management of those changes**.

The Principles are deliberately designed to be flexible, so that they can be applied to any scope of activities, large or small, dependent upon the decisions they are designed to inform. Key to the approach is understanding clearly why the analysis of social value is being conducted, who the audience is, and then determining the appropriate level of rigour of the analysis required for the purpose and audience. **Analysing social value inherently relies on**

human judgment and requires discernment on what is appropriate to include and how far to go at every stage. The Principles aim to guide this process of discernment.

Social value is best accounted for through a combination of qualitative and quantitative information. While quantitative metrics such as financial proxies offer concrete measurements that can be easily compared and analysed, these metrics alone can fall short in capturing the full essence of social value, which is often nuanced and intangible. Those aspects of social value can be better understood through qualitative information, in the form of contextual narrative about the changes experienced by people in their lives, and what those changes mean to them. This holistic understanding of the social value of an organisation’s activities or government’s policies can then be used to intentionally inform future decisions in a way that benefits society.



Figure 6: The Principles of Social Value.

Our approach to the analysis

There are three main steps in any social value analysis that we undertake. We start by **understanding the change**: identifying the outcomes that matter most to key stakeholders, and developing ‘logic models’ that illustrate how the organisation’s activities lead to the changes experienced by stakeholders. Next, we **measure the change**, determining appropriate indicators and collecting evidence, ideally directly from the stakeholders, to demonstrate that the changes have occurred. Finally, we **value the change**, assigning a relative importance to different outcomes based on stakeholders’ preferences.

In this analysis of the social value of Gunaikurnai and Victorian Government Joint Management, we leverage the extensive work conducted to produce the five-year review.

For the purpose of this analysis, we have drawn on the ten outcomes from the guiding storyline (Figure 5) to define eight interconnected changes experienced by key stakeholders in Joint Management, as summarised in Table 1 (understanding the change).

Table 1: Changes experienced by Joint Management stakeholders and how they correspond to the storyline outcomes

Change experienced by Joint Management stakeholder	How this corresponds to the storyline outcomes
Gunaikurnai people feel more connected to their Gunaikurnai identity	Direct correspondence to this outcome in the storyline, and includes the outcome ‘Gunaikurnai people have the freedom to access Country’
Gunaikurnai people increase their economic wealth	Narrows the scope in ‘Gunaikurnai people build wealth through new and old ways of managing Country’ to focus on economic aspects of wealth
Gunaikurnai people increase their capacity to manage land and water on Country	Modifies ‘Partners grow Gunaikurnai capacity to manage land and water on Country’ to centre on the people experiencing the change, and includes the two-way learning for Gunaikurnai people from the outcome ‘Partners develop and bring together Gunaikurnai and ‘western’ practices to sustainably manage cultural landscapes’
People in government increasingly value Gunaikurnai ways of managing Country	Modifies ‘Partners develop and bring together Gunaikurnai and ‘western’ practices to sustainably manage cultural landscapes’ to focus on the two-way learning for people in government
People in government feel more empowered to promote Gunaikurnai self-determination	Brings together the following three outcomes: ‘Partners transform government systems to promote Gunaikurnai self-governance’, ‘Partners ensure fit-for-purpose funding to sustainably manage cultural landscapes’, and ‘Partners lead legislative changes enabling Gunaikurnai people to make decisions on Country’, focusing on people in government
Gunaikurnai people have more of a say in what happens on Country	Rewording of ‘Gunaikurnai people are decision-makers for managing land and water on Country’
The wider community increasingly values the importance of caring for Country together	Shifts the focus slightly from ‘The wider community respects Gunaikurnai decision-making on Country’
Gunaikurnai Country is healthier	Rewording of the aspiration ‘Country is healing’

For each of these changes, we identify evidence that indicates how important the change is for the stakeholder (measuring the change). We draw primarily on the rich qualitative data collected through the consultations conducted in 2023 for the five-year review, in which we spoke with almost sixty people from all levels of Joint Management and across all Joint Management partners, as well as community members. We also draw on the data collected through additional targeted consultations in May 2025 with senior executives from each of the Joint Management partners.

Having understood the change and measured the change, the final step is to value the change. One limitation of this analysis is that, aside from the change related to increasing economic wealth, there was little quantitative data available to measure or value the extent of the changes. Due to this, we have not used financial proxies to translate social value into monetary terms. We do not consider this as detracting from the findings of this report, given that its purpose is not to make the case for a specific investment, but rather to articulate the social value of Joint Management in a way that can be understood by a policymaker who is not directly involved in Joint Management.

Even if using financial proxies had been appropriate, our professional judgment is **that calculating a Social Return On Investment (SROI) ratio – a single monetary figure claiming to represent the overall social value of Joint Management – would not be appropriate** for several reasons.

First, Joint Management works towards a wide range of interdependent cultural, social, political, and environmental outcomes that are deeply intertwined with self-determination, reconciliation, and environmental initiatives. Reducing these complex and nuanced outcomes to a single monetary figure would oversimplify the real-world impact and fail to capture the depth of the changes experienced by stakeholders. This is true for any analysis that uses ratios, as described in the previous section, but the oversimplification for Joint Management is more pronounced than, for example, a program that delivers a specific service or program to a targeted stakeholder group.

Second, the dynamic and evolving political and operating environment in which Joint Management takes place adds another layer of complexity. An SROI ratio would require defining a discrete investment period and understanding changes relative to that investment, which is challenging given the nature of Joint Management activities and the diverse outcomes experienced by various stakeholders that grow and compound over a long time.

Third, many of the outcomes valued by Joint Management stakeholders do not have existing marketplace values. Applying economic valuation techniques to ascertain their value using financial proxies is an emerging practice globally. Simply adding these valuations together and dividing by the investment would give a false sense of precision and rigour, misleading the reader. In addition, given the scope and reach of Joint Management, there are likely further material outcomes experienced by stakeholders than the eight identified above.

Another consideration is attribution and deadweight. To arrive at a fair value that does not overclaim would require an understanding of what portion of the impact can be reasonably linked to Joint Management activities and what would have happened anyway – and this is complex. Where appropriate, and where available, we have instead drawn in this report on qualitative findings from the Australian and international research literature to provide a well-grounded perspective on the specific contribution of Joint Management to a given change.

This balanced, evidence-informed approach ensures that the social value of Joint Management is communicated in a way that is both credible and actionable – offering insight beyond numbers.

Endnotes

- 1 From phone interview conducted with author on 22 May 2025
- 2 Parks Victoria website, [Joint Management](#), accessed 24 May 2025
- 3 GKTOLMB (2024) [Gunaikurnai and Victorian Government Joint Management Plan: The next five years 2025-2030](#), p.71
- 4 GKTOLMB and State of Victoria (2018) [Gunaikurnai and Victorian Government Joint Management Plan](#)
- 5 GKTOLMB (2024) op. cit.
- 6 United Nations (2007) [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (A/RES/61/295). Article 43.
- 7 See, for example, Moore, M. (2020) [Decolonizing Park Management: A Framework for the Co-management of National Parks and Protected Areas](#), Simon Fraser University, Chapter 2; Environmental Justice Australia (2022) [Submission in response to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee Inquiry into the Application of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Australia](#)
- 8 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.21
- 9 See, for example, Weir J. et al (2011) [The benefits associated with caring for Country: Literature Review](#). Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies; Fatima Y. et al (2022) [Connecting the health of country with the health of people: Application of “caring for country” in improving the social and emotional well-being of Indigenous people in Australia and New Zealand](#). The Lancet Regional Health Western Pacific. 31. 100648.
- 10 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.21
- 11 This is supported by the research literature. See, for example, Weir J. et al (2011) op.cit. p.6
- 12 Quote from video produced by GKTOLMB and shared with author in December 2024.
- 13 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.21
- 14 Fatima Y. et al (2022) op.cit. p.8
- 15 Weir J. et al (2011) op.cit. p.6
- 16 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.17
- 17 GKTOLMB [Annual report 2023-2024](#), p.20; GLaWAC [Annual report 2023-2024](#), p.31; GLaWAC [Annual report 2018-2019](#), p.21
- 18 This is supported by the research literature. See, for example, Weir J. et al (2011) op.cit. p.11
- 19 GLaWAC Annual report 2018-2019 op.cit. p.6; GLaWAC Annual report 2023-2024 op.cit. p.6
- 20 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.24
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Quote from author’s consultation with GLaWAC rangers conducted on 25 July 2023 for the five-year review.
- 23 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.39
- 24 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. pp.38-39
- 25 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.29. ACHRIS is the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Register and Information System, the online portal of the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register.
- 26 The idea that working together is one of the best ways to deepen mutual understanding of each other’s cultures is supported by the research literature. See, for example, Weir J. et al (2011) op.cit. p.10 in the context of caring for Country and, more broadly, Durazo, Y. et al. (2015) [Effective Training for International Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Leadership](#). In N. Erbe & A. Normore (Eds.), Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Leadership in Modern Organizations (pp. 63-82). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
- 27 GLaWAC (2021) [Cultural Fire Strategy](#)
- 28 Communicated to the author by GLaWAC representative on 26 June 2025.
- 29 Communication by DEECA and GLaWAC representatives at the Joint Management annual reflection workshop on 3 December 2024.
- 30 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.29

- 31 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.47
- 32 This feedback loop between social norms, policies, and behaviours is supported by the research literature. See, for example, in the context of addressing environmental problems, Kinzig A. et al (2013) [Social Norms and Global Environmental Challenges: The Complex Interaction of Behaviors, Values, and Policy](#), BioScience, 63(3) 164–175
- 33 This link between critical consciousness – the awareness of systemic inequities – and critical agency – the belief in one’s capacity to effect change – is supported by the research literature. See, for example, Bergkamp, J. et al. (2022). [Before allyship: A model of integrating awareness of a privileged social identity](#). Frontiers in psychology, 13, 993610.
- 34 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.32
- 35 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.43
- 36 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.47
- 37 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.46
- 38 Joint Management is an example of a practical mechanism that enacts Indigenous people’s self-determination, thus contributing towards genuine decolonisation and reconciliation. For further discussion, see, for example, Bradfield A. (2024) [Decolonising consciousness: Confronting and living with colonial truths in Australia](#). Journal of Sociology, 60(4), 778-797.
- 39 From phone interview conducted by author with a Gunaikurnai Elder and GKTOLMB member on 22 May 2025.
- 40 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.35
- 41 The [2024 Australian Reconciliation Barometer](#) reports that 85% of Australians surveyed believe the relationship between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is important.
- 42 The logic used here is the link between critical consciousness and critical agency (endnote 33).
- 43 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.13
- 44 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.95
- 45 GKTOLMB (2024) op.cit. p.29
- 46 GLaWAC communication at the Joint Management annual workshop on 3 December 2024.
- 47 See Pascual, U. et al. (2023) [Diverse values of nature for sustainability](#). Nature 620, 813–823 for an overview of the different ways of valuing nature.
- 48 See Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria (2023) [Victorian State of the Environment 2023 Report](#), Scientific Assessments Volume 1 pp.25-33
- 49 GKTOLMB and State of Victoria (2018) op.cit., p.19
- 50 Then called the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
- 51 GKTOLMB and State of Victoria (2018) op.cit., Figures 6-8 on pp.31-33, and the figure on p.47
- 52 GLaWAC website, [Joint Management](#), accessed 27 May 2025
- 53 GKTOLMB (2024) op. cit., Figure 1 on p.6
- 54 This is echoed in the findings of the Yoorrook Justice Commission: “Joint management is a step towards recognising First Peoples’ rights and authority to care for Country. However. . . it does not achieve land justice.” ([Yoorrook for Transformation: Summary Report](#), p.33, accessed 7 July 2025).
- 55 See Social Value International, [The Principles of Social Value](#), for more details. Accessed 3 June 2025.

> Buchan Munji – Krauatungalung Country. GLaWAC and Parks Victoria rangers share knowledge and work closely with each other.





GUNAIKURNAI

Traditional Owner Land Management Board

www.gktolmb.org.au