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In Australia, Bush Heritage and Traditional Owners are leading the way by integrating Indigenous stewardship practices

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Australian land conservation organizations are on a complicated journey as they strive to learn and implement more sustainable and just stewardship practices. They are guided by those who have cared for the continent's unique landscape and biodiversity for over 60,000 years. The trajectory of one organization illustrates this process.

Land conservation across Australia is undergoing an evolution as more organizations embrace the knowledge of First Nations and move away from Western stewardship models. While some organizations are adopting government tools for reconciliation, the national conservancy Bush Heritage is breaking away from these systems. Instead, it is focusing on a network of traditional landowners that has been integral to its business model for over thirty years.



The first cultural burn takes place on Tarcutta Hills Reserve, Wiradjuri Country, NSW. Photo by Vikki Parsley

Bush Heritage was born in 1991 when environmental activist Bob Brown purchased two Tasmanian rainforest blocks marketed as “ideal for wood chipping.” The organization’s nascent years were mainly taken up by active land management and fundraising. A small team, including a board and several supporters began building staff and acquiring new parcels for protection using a strategy built on

partnerships and an understanding that the power of the purse was not enough to meaningfully protect Australia's most vital natural resources.

"Sometimes in conservation there's this feeling that you need to grab the land. You need to lock it up and just let it be and it will be completely fine," said Bush Heritage CEO, Heather Campbell. Campbell said this has never been Bush Heritage's strategy. From the beginning, its staff recognized that the concept translates poorly to Australian landscapes where active land management, intentional burning, and other traditional management practices are key to biodiversity resiliency.

"Yes, there was that desire to protect land from being destroyed," said Campbell. "But there was also a recognition that: one, we can never buy enough land; two, should we actually be buying it in some areas? And, three, this is Aboriginal land, always has been, always will be."

Additional questions about the potential for shared land stewardship arose from this conversation: How could Bush Heritage work together with traditional landowners? How could it build its capacity to have effective conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups and engage in mutually beneficial partnerships?

This dialogue, led by then CEO, Doug Humann, guided the work of two influential personalities who joined the Bush Heritage board in its second decade. Rick Farley and Phillip Toyne were each high-powered environmentalists and advocates for Aboriginal land rights and justice. Alongside a dedicated board and staff, the two cemented Aboriginal partnerships and engagement as key tenets of Bush Heritage's work, rejecting European and American models of conservation in favor of practices that centered Australia's unique needs.



Former Bush Heritage Board member Leanne Liddle, SA Aboriginal Partnerships Manager Bruce Hammond, WA Aboriginal Partnerships Manager Chontarle Bellottie and NSW Aboriginal Partnerships Manager Vikki Parsley at Garma Festival 2022. Credit: Bruce Hammond

Aboriginal and Torres-Strait-Islander staff were also integral to Bush Heritage's trajectory. The organization sought to build a diverse workforce and, in 2006, Sarah Eccles, a Wathaurong person from the Bellarine Peninsula in Victoria, joined the team. Campbell said the organization now has 16

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees who have formed a working group to spearhead many of the organization's recent cultural competency initiatives.

Bush Heritage Aboriginal Partnerships Manager — South Australia, Bruce Hammond—who has ancestral connection to South Australia and the Eastern Arrernte people of Central Australia—said that he does not know of another conservancy with equivalent representation. Still, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up only about 10 percent of Bush Heritage's staff and expanding this number remains a priority for the organization.

Today, land purchases are only one of the mechanisms Bush Heritage uses to conserve land. Much of its resources go into collaborating with Traditional Owners to provide the resources they need to continue to manage their land sustainably.

One way Bush Heritage supports its partners is through its Healthy Country Plans. In 2011, the organization [worked](#) alongside the Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation to create a roadmap for managing land over which the corporation had recently secured native title and declared as an Indigenous Protected Area. The plan laid out priorities for nature-based conservation solutions, cultural preservation, and ecosystem monitoring. The success of this partnership, which was the first of its kind in Australia, became a model for Bush Heritage and peer organizations going forward.

Today, Bush Heritage's 25 Aboriginal partnerships are supported by an Aboriginal engagement committee of its board and a staff of Aboriginal partners from across the country.

Additionally, all the organization's operations are guided by a concept it calls the right-way approach. This approach asks practitioners to reject the idea that there is only one form of science and to embrace the myriad knowledge sets that can guide relationships between people and land. Campbell said the process is centered around a deep respect for Aboriginal knowledge and priorities. Each project at Bush Heritage begins with time set aside to truly understand the needs and priorities of everyone involved.

Hammond said that this method is unique to Bush Heritage. "Most organizations don't listen," he said. But Bush Heritage approaches these conversations "with its ears on." It steps into projects without a preconceived agenda or ideals and is, instead, driven by people on the ground.

"We, as Aboriginal people, were already astrologers, were already ecologists," said Hammond. "Our whole culture is built around how we manage country and water."

He stressed that part of Bush Heritage's success comes from its ability to let go of rigidity. Each of its partnerships with traditional landowners is unique and built on respect for the complex needs and aspirations of different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups across the country.

While Bush Heritage has created a strong foundation for cultural awareness and partnership, there are still areas where work is needed. Its Aboriginal staff have stepped forward to call for greater understanding of the trauma and injustice caused by colonialism, much of which remains fresh for the people who suffered from it. In the late 2010s, Bush Heritage staff identified a need for a formal document to guide that journey and establish written standards for cultural competency in the workplace.

Similar documents were gaining popularity across sectors in Australia and many organizations were taking advantage of an emerging government tool called a [Reconciliation Action Plan](#) (RAP). RAPs are documents meant to guide cultural awareness in the workplace to create better opportunities and safer environments for First Nations people. Organizations create their own RAP, then submit it to the non-profit organization Reconciliation Australia for approval.

Though the process is flexible and allows organizations to create an individualized plan, Campbell said that a RAP did not feel like the right choice for Bush Heritage. RAPs must abide by clear, established criteria defined by the government and Bush Heritage wanted to develop a document based on its own internal needs and priorities as well as those of its partners.

Several Aboriginal staff at Bush Heritage took the lead on that initiative and, in 2019, the organization published its [Aboriginal Cultural Competency Framework](#), formalizing expectations that safety and justice be embedded in all aspects of its work. Foregoing formal accreditation also allows Bush Heritage to treat the framework as a living document that can grow and evolve along with its network.

The framework sets out specific action items that allow the organization to measure progress at the systemic, organizational, professional, and individual level. It calls for staff training and cultural awareness sessions and tracks Aboriginal representation among its governing bodies. It also establishes indicators for progress such as resource allocation, retention of Aboriginal staff and representatives, and participation in educational sessions and training.

Hammond said that the document itself has not significantly changed the organization's internal culture, partly because Bush Heritage already embraced many of the values outlined in its pages. Rather, it serves as a reference for existing staff and an important onboarding resource for new hires. He said that it gives employees the confidence to ask questions that promote cultural competency and safety in the workplace.

In coming years, the framework will support Bush Heritage as it strives to further relinquish autonomy over Australia and put the nation's history and future back into the hands of its traditional owners.

"This is Aboriginal land," said Hammond. "This was always Aboriginal land and always will be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land." Placing that ideal at the forefront of its work and growing its Aboriginal workforce will allow Bush Heritage to blossom. "Ultimately, our success will be measured by how Aboriginal people succeed in this space. Our success is driven by the success of our partners."