Bilby Blitz fact sheet

What is the Bilby Blitz?

The Bilby Blitz is a ground breaking threatened species program hosted by the Central Land Council, a member of the Indigenous Desert Alliance (IDA), with funding from the Commonwealth. The cross-border program, which kicks off over Easter, will provide the first up-to-date snapshot of how the vulnerable mammal is faring. The program allows Aboriginal rangers and other conservationists to speak the same language for the first time when recording the distribution of bilbies and other species.

Why do it?

Australia has the highest recorded rates of mammalian extinction in the world. It has lost more than 50 animal and 60 plant species and sub-species in the past 200 years. More than 1,800 plant and animal species and ecological communities are at risk of extinction right now. The bilby is still surviving. A century ago, bilbies occupied almost all the dry areas of Australia, more than three quarters of the continent. Their range has shrunk by more than 80 percent and today they mostly survive on Aboriginal managed land in the Northern Territory and Western Australia (from western NT across the central deserts of WA to the Dampier Peninsula). There are also isolated populations in south-west Queensland.

Bilbies are threatened by feral foxes and cats, changed fire regimes and the impact of feral horses, donkeys, camels, rabbits and cattle. They are important to Aboriginal people who know them by many different names, for example they are called ninu in Pintupi. They have been a source of food and adornments and feature in song lines and ceremonies. In 2016, concerned traditional owners, Aboriginal rangers, NGOs and government representatives met with researchers for the first Ninu Festival at Kiwirrkurra in WA and conceived the Bilby Blitz. The partners of the IDA (http://indigenousdesertalliance.com) aim to co-ordinate concurrent surveys of bilbies across the NT and WA in March and April 2018 with one-off funding from the Commonwealth.

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How will it be done?

The CLC has designed a cutting edge threatened species data collection, storage and management system with its Aboriginal rangers for the Bilby Blitz. The system's centrepiece is an app that allows rangers to collect information about threatened species in a standardised way, across borders and languages for the first time. The bilingual Tracks app allows users to switch between English and Warlpiri and is ready to be translated into other Aboriginal languages.

Aboriginal rangers will use the app to conduct an initial series of cross border base line surveys of bilby tracks, scats, diggings and burrows across the mammal's range in the NT and WA – an area of millions of hectares. The app tracks any animal whose signs can be read from track plot surveys (a method using the tracking skills of Aboriginal people who search areas of two hectares for signs of the animal and record them on their phones or mobile devices). Because the data is collected in a standardised way the results can be compared across sites and time and more thoroughly analysed.

What are these base line surveys and how will they be used?

The surveys combine digital technology with Aboriginal knowledge and tracking expertise and provide a two-way ecological case study that will raise awareness of the critical role Aboriginal people play in the conservation of our deserts through data collection, fire, weed and feral animal management activities.

The CLC's threatened species system links to the CSIRO's Atlas of Living Australia where the data is stored, managed and analysed. It allows a ranger group's data to be analysed in isolation, for example to detect local changes to biodiversity.

The data can also be analysed more broadly across all app users in the desert, for example to monitor the impact of feral animals, weeds or climate change on native animals. Rangers and researchers can analyse the data, but the rangers who collect it will need to be   acknowledged for their work. In the past that has not always been the case.

More than a dozen Aboriginal ranger groups will conduct hundreds of cross-border surveys of bilbies, other threatened species and their predators. The initial series of surveys on bilby distribution will form the baseline for future surveys. The data collected through the surveys will be compared with the little existing data, which is very much out of date. It will inform a national bilby recovery plan the Department of Environment and Energy is developing with significant input from Aboriginal groups and individuals. It will also be used to source funding without which these surveys cannot continue.

Will the national bilby recovery plan make a difference?

Threatened species recovery plans are often not fully funded and there is a general lack of political will to implement them (https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/feb/20/fantasy-documents-recovery-plans-failing-australias-endangered-species).

The national bilby recovery plan, though, is not business as usual. Instead of following the common practice of adopting state and territory plans the Commonwealth is investing in developing its own plan with Aboriginal land managers. The CLC is part of the bilby recovery team implementing the plan and its rangers participate in the team's bilby indigenous subcommittee – the first such indigenous advisory committee at a national level. The Commonwealth supports the CLC's conservation approach of combining Aboriginal knowledge and management practices with Western scientific methods and tools and so far has genuinely engaged with Aboriginal land managers.

CLC rangers field test the Tracks app under the guidance of Arrernte elder Veronica Dobson near Titjikala in February 2018

However, Aboriginal people are not waiting to find out whether government inaction will lead to further extinctions. As with other community-driven programs of the CLC, small groups of Aboriginal rangers are already proactively protecting the biodiversity of their land under the guidance of traditional owners. This includes four vast indigenous protected areas they manage on the smell of an oily rag. In recent years remote communities have contributed their mining compensation income and sourced corporate funding to progress this work.

When and where will the Bilby Blitz happen?

Following some field testing of the Tracks app and the Bilby Blitz launch on 20 March, during the CLC's annual ranger camp near Alice Springs, Aboriginal ranger groups in the NT and WA will carry out the surveys. The rangers are from the CLC, the Kimberley Land Council, Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa, Central Desert Native Title Services, the Ngaanyatjarra Council and other land management organisations.

The surveys will continue until the end of April and will cover areas inside the known distribution of the bilby as well as some places outside. Surveying areas where the bilby was once found (for example around the Katiti-Peterman Indigenous Protected Area, Kintore and south-east of Alice Springs) allows the rangers to compare the country to current bilby habitats and to identify changes that may have caused the decline.

Why do Aboriginal rangers like to use the app?

The Tracks app is bilingual and highly visual, which is great for users with low literacy and numeracy and people who have Warlpiri as their first language. It also gives Aboriginal rangers power over the data they collect and ensures that they are acknowledged for their work. Rangers can embargo sensitive data in order to prevent poaching or unauthorised entry on Aboriginal land.

Who else will be able to use the app?

Android users can download the Tracks app from the Google Play store and an iOS version will be released in April 2018. App users need significant tracking skills. The CLC plans to explore with its IDA partners how other interested participants can contribute and how to supported and resource this.