

Comanaging Parks with Aboriginal Communities: Improving Outcomes for Conservation and Cultural Heritage

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Introduction

SOUTH AUSTRALIA IS ONE OF EIGHT AUSTRALIAN STATES AND TERRITORIES. It covers approximately 98 million hectares and has a population of 1.65 million, of which about 1.8 percent are Aboriginal people. The South Australian formal protected area system includes over 400 parks and reserves, encompassing over 21 million hectares, or more than 21 percent of the state. Many of these areas are significant to Aboriginal people. A similar area of the state is Aboriginal freehold land. Due to its size, remoteness, and relatively intact and undeveloped condition, much of the Aboriginal freehold land can make a significant contribution to the conservation of biological diversity and natural systems in South Australia.

This paper provides a brief overview of South Australia's approach to comanagement of parks. Governance arrangements, management effectiveness, community engagement, and equity considerations are discussed, using the Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park as a case study.

Comanagement framework

In July 2004, the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972 was amended to enable establishment of cooperative management arrangements for national parks and conservation parks in South Australia, through statutory comanagement agreements between the minister for environment and conservation, and the relevant Aboriginal group. The amendments also enabled national and conservation parks in South Australia to be constituted over Aboriginal-owned lands (Figure 1).

The changes to the National Parks and Wildlife Act created a three-tiered framework for the comanagement of Aboriginal-owned, or government-held, national parks and conservation parks:

- **Aboriginal-owned parks:** Aboriginal-owned national parks and conservation parks are under the control of, and managed by, comanagement boards. A comanagement board for an Ab-

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Figure 1. Comanagement arrangements enable the Australian government to hand back the freehold title to traditional lands to the traditional owners for management as parks and reserves.



original-owned park has a majority of members from the relevant Aboriginal group, and is chaired by a person nominated by the Aboriginal owners.

- Crown-owned parks managed by a comanagement board: comanagement boards may be established for Crown-owned national parks and conservation parks, in which case the board has management control of the park. Membership of a comanagement board for a Crown-owned park is determined by agreement between the minister and the traditional owners.
- Crown-owned parks with a comanagement advisory structure: a statutory advisory structure may be established for a Crown-owned national park or conservation park to provide management advice. However, it does not have management control. The functions and membership structure of an advisory committee are determined by agreement between the minister and the relevant Aboriginal group.

Ten comanagement agreements are now in place under the new arrangements. These encompass approximately 8.9 million hectares, or around 42 percent of the formal reserve system in South Australia (Figure 2).

Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park: A case study

The Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park provides a useful case study for examining the governance arrangements, management effectiveness, stakeholder involvement, and equity considerations associated with a Crown-owned park comanaged by a board under the South Australian framework. The park is located in the visually spectacular northern Flinders Ranges, approximately 750 kilometers north of Adelaide (Figure 2). It incorporates a range of arid ecosystems and habitats, supports a number of species of conservation significance, and is popular with bushwalkers and those who enjoy outdoor recreation in South Australia's distinctive "outback"

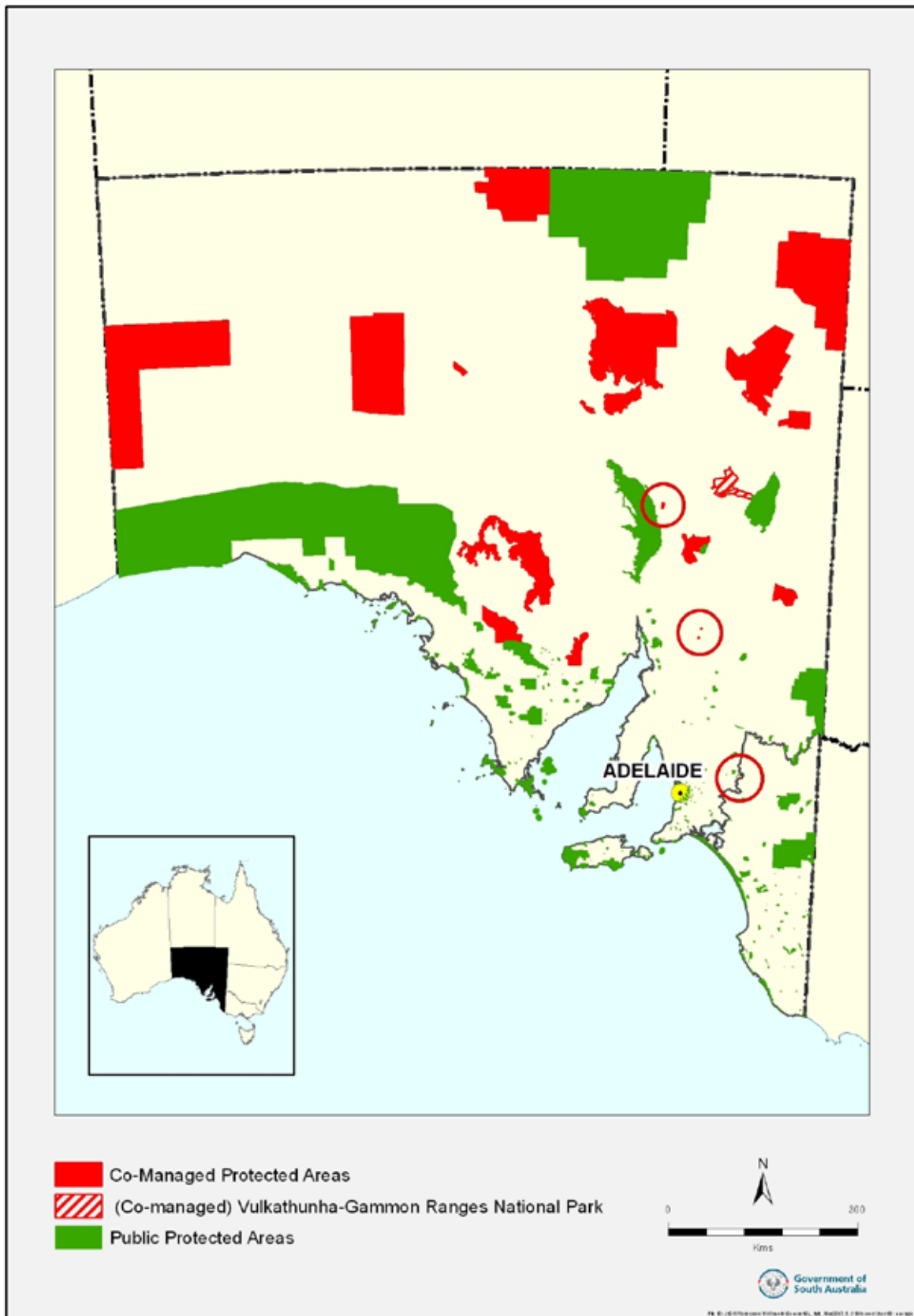


Figure 2. Comanaged protected areas in South Australia.

environment. The park is part of the traditional country of the Adnyamathanha people for whom it is of special cultural significance. It contains evidence of their past occupation, and a wide range of important cultural features, and continues to be used for traditional purposes.

Governance and institutional setting

A comanagement agreement over the Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park was signed by the state and the Adnyamathanha Traditional Lands Association in 2005. Management responsibility for the park transferred from the director of National Parks and Wildlife to the Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park Comanagement Board. Management of the park is undertaken in accordance with the National Parks and Wildlife Act, the National Parks and Wildlife (Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park) Regulations 2005, the comanagement agreement, and the park management plan.

The comanagement agreement explicitly recognizes that the quality of the natural environment in the park is due to a combination of the traditional care it has received from Aboriginal people for many thousands of years, its history as grazing land under a pastoral lease, and conservation measures applied by the state since its dedication as a park in 1970. The agreement sets out how the park will be managed, and provides for the use of the park by Adnyamathanha people in such a way that their cultural, economic, social, and environmental aspirations are enhanced in a manner consistent with the management objectives for the area. The agreement seeks to ensure that the quality of the park's natural environment is enhanced, and its cultural significance to Aboriginal people is recognized and protected (Figure 3).

The comanagement agreement is based on four principles:

- to ensure the continued enjoyment of the park by the Adnyamathanha people for cultural, spiritual, and traditional uses

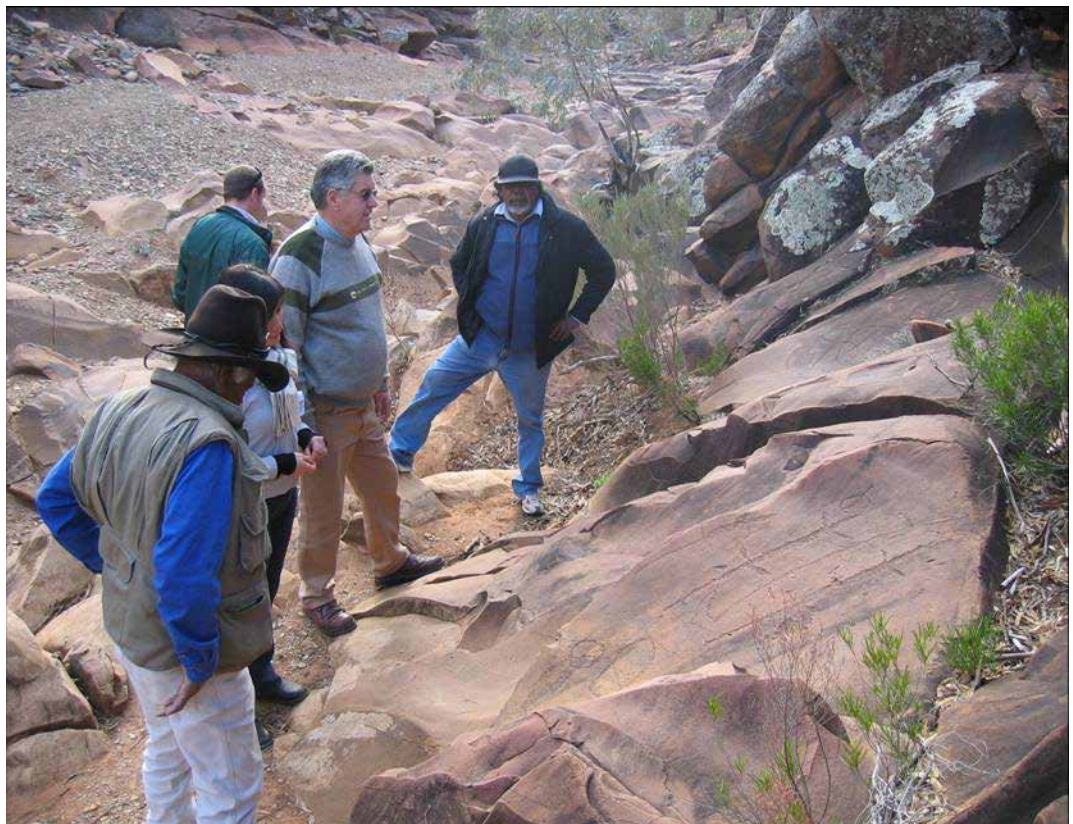


Figure 3. Comanagement arrangements have increased the focus on cultural site management in the Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park.

- to ensure the continued enjoyment of the park by members of the public
- to ensure the preservation and protection of Aboriginal sites, features, objects, and structures of spiritual or cultural significance within the park
- to provide protection for the natural resources, wildlife, vegetation, and other environmental features of the park

The comanagement board comprises eight members (plus deputies) appointed for a four-year term, with four representatives from the Adnyamathanha Traditional Lands Association, three from the Department of Environment, Water, and Natural Resources, and one other nominated by the minister. The minister appoints the chairperson from the members. The board is currently chaired by an Adnyamathanha representative. Decisions of the board are by majority, and all members, including the chair, have one vote. In the event that the board is unable to reach a decision, the matter is referred to the minister, although this situation has not arisen to date.

The board meets quarterly. Agendas are set by the chair, and all board members are encouraged to contribute to the agenda. Strategic planning is undertaken by the board on a two-year cycle to identify priorities and set forward agendas. The functions and powers of the board are set out in the National Parks and Wildlife Act and the regulations. The powers may be delegated, and many have been delegated to department staff, who undertake the day-to-day operations of the park on behalf of the board. The board is required to submit an annual budget as part of the department's budget development process each year. Funding is at the discretion of the minister and the department. However, the board may seek and apply for funds from other sources.

The comanagement agreement must be reviewed, by the minister and the Adnyamathanha Traditional Lands Association, every five years, and may be amended or varied by agreement of the parties at any time. The agreement may be terminated by the parties under certain conditions, in which case the park ceases to be comanaged, and reverts to a park under the control of the minister, and under the management of the director of National Parks and Wildlife. The minister must consult the board before introducing any new legislation into Parliament that would apply solely to the park, or significantly affect the rights or powers of the board.

Management effectiveness and evaluation

Under the National Parks and Wildlife Act, the minister must prepare a management plan for all national parks and conservation parks. The management plan must "set forth proposals in relation to the management and improvement of the reserve and the methods by which it is intended to accomplish the objectives of the Act in relation to that reserve." Once adopted, the provisions of a management plan must be carried out and no management actions may be undertaken unless they are in accordance with the management plan. In the case of a comanaged park managed by a board, the minister must prepare the management plan in collaboration with the comanagement board.

A management plan for the Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park was prepared by the comanagement board and adopted by the minister in 2006. The board must implement the management plan and prepare an annual report to the minister which addresses matters specified in the act, regulations and comanagement agreement. The minister is required to table the annual report in State Parliament.

Community engagement

The comanagement agreement for the Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park is between the minister (on behalf of the state) and the Adnyamathanha Traditional Lands Association (representing the traditional Aboriginal owners). The comanagement arrangements were developed

over an 18-month period. This was preceded by a long period, over 30 years, where the department and local park rangers developed working relationships with the traditional Adnyamathanha owners. The agreement was then signed, with the support of the local Adnyamathanha community. The comanagement agreement recognizes “that the Adnyamathanha people and the State wish to make a significant contribution towards the reconciliation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people,” and that “the Adnyamathanha people have an acknowledged aspiration that the park be granted to them in freehold and continue to be managed as a national park.”

The National Parks and Wildlife Act requires public consultation on management plans. The broader community and stakeholders were actively engaged in developing the 2006 management plan for the park. The consultation process involved public input at the early stages, including targeted consultation with special interest groups within and outside government, followed by a statutory three-month public exhibition and consultation phase. Prior to its finalization and adoption, the plan was also reviewed by the South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Council (a statutory advisory committee to the minister representing a range of statewide interests).

The management plan includes objectives and strategies specifically aimed at involving the community in the management of the park, including neighbors, nearby communities, Adnyamathanha groups, volunteer groups, scientific institutions and researchers, and special-interest community and business groups. An important priority for the board has been developing partnerships with neighboring landholders to achieve broader landscape-scale conservation as well as cultural, tourism, and recreation outcomes. Park neighbors and the Adnyamathanha community are regularly invited to attend board meetings, and meet with the board in the park, to discuss issues of mutual interest and encourage community relationships. “Open days” are also held in the park to showcase the work of the board and engage the community. The comanagement arrangements for the park appear to have strong support from the wider community.

Equity

Funding for management of comanaged parks is provided by the South Australian government. Some costs are recouped through fees for entry, camping, and other services, commercial tourism operators, and leases and licenses. However the Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park has relatively low levels of visitation and use, so revenue is very limited. This would be the case whether or not the park was comanaged. Under the comanagement agreement, the Aboriginal owners are not required to pay entry, camping, or any other fees for the use of or access to comanaged parks for cultural purposes.

Our experience to date indicates that comanagement adds to the cost of managing a park. These costs relate to payment of (very modest) sitting fees to nongovernmental board and committee members, meeting costs (including travel and accommodation), provision of administrative and executive support to boards and committees, governance training for board members, and cultural awareness training for all board members and management staff. These costs represent a positive investment in capacity-building for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal board members and staff, and in relationship-building between the comanagement partners.

The comanagement agreement for the park requires that preference be given to Adnyamathanha people in park employment. The board must be consulted on the number and classification levels of employees required for the park, as well as membership of selection panels. Currently all staff who are based at and work in the park are Adnyamathanha people.

The comanagement agreement requires that all non-Adnyamathanha board members and staff who work in the park undertake cultural awareness training, as determined by the board, in consultation with the Adnyamathanha people. The minister and the board must also give preference to Adnyamathanha people when contracting for the provision of works and services

in the park. The comanagement agreement provides for access to traditional resources by the Adnyamathanha community (for example hunting and the taking of plants and eggs), subject to conservation considerations. This provides an opportunity for traditional hunting and gathering practices to continue, which can contribute to better economic, social, and health outcomes for the Adnyamathanha community.

The comanagement agreement contains specific provisions to protect Adnyamathanha culture, traditional knowledge, and intellectual property. For example, all promotional material for the park that includes Adnyamathanha cultural information must be approved by the Adnyamathanha representatives on the board prior to publication. The interpretation of Adnyamathanha culture in the park by licensed commercial tour operators also requires board approval.

The board may also make recommendations to the relevant minister with respect to the naming or renaming of features of the park, and must consider the Adnyamathanha names for features when making such recommendations. This has been an area of keen interest for the board, and further contributes to equitable management arrangements.

Summary and conclusions

The relationship to land (“country”) is central to Aboriginal culture, identity, spiritual beliefs, and well-being. Access to country is critical to maintaining this relationship, and can provide additional social, health, and economic benefits for Aboriginal people. Traditional knowledge and land management practices can also inform and improve contemporary approaches to science and park management, and enhance park visitor experiences. The innovative comanagement framework established in South Australia provides the opportunity to further the reconciliation agenda, contribute to Indigenous self-determination, and help address Aboriginal disadvantage. Comanagement also provides a range of potential benefits for conservation and improved park management.

The Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park in South Australia provides a useful case study of governance, community engagement, and management and equity considerations under a successful comanagement arrangement. The South Australian Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources is continuing to work closely with Aboriginal people to identify further opportunities and consider how the framework can be improved and applied to other areas of the state.