



Report Card 2014

About the park

Watarrka National Park is mid-way between Alice Springs and Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and is one of Australia's most stunning natural and cultural environments. The 105 000 hectare park contributes significantly to biodiversity conservation and the Territory economy.

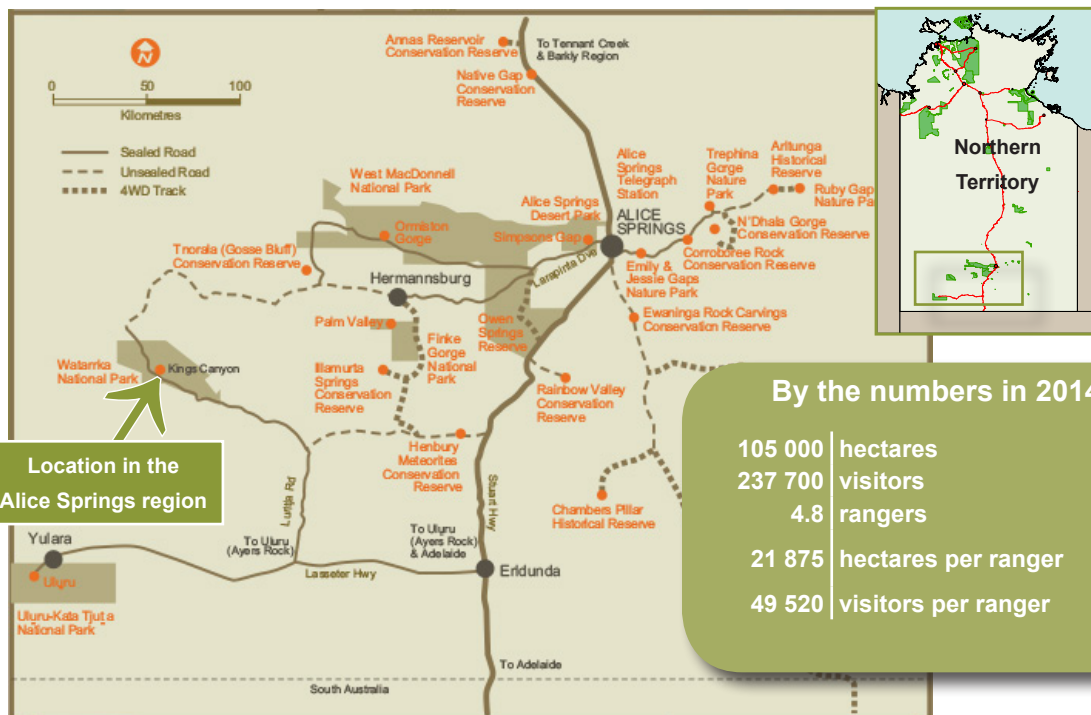
The rugged landscape, deep gorges and secluded rockholes of the western George Gill Range provide refuge for many rare plants and animals. Ancient sandstone features, including the spectacular Kings Canyon, make the park an important conservation area and major tourist attraction of Australia's Red Centre. The park contains many places of spiritual significance and a number of dreaming trails, linking the area culturally to places far away.

The park is jointly managed by the Traditional Owners and the Parks and Wildlife Commission of

the Northern Territory, who work in an equitable partnership. Responsibility for decision making is shared, guided by a joint management plan and jointly developed policies and guidelines.

Visitor attractions include spectacular scenery, high quality nature based tourism activities and opportunities to experience Indigenous culture. The 6 km walk around the canyon rim is one of Central Australia's best, exposing visitors to a range of habitats including waterholes, intriguing rock formations and stunning views.

NT parks and reserves have been assessed and classified for their visitor and biodiversity values. The park is rated as one of the Territory's most valuable being classified as a Class 1 Visitor and Class 1 Biodiversity park.



The most significant changes in the past 2 years

- Title to the park was granted to Traditional Owners on 25 July 2012.
- The Kings Canyon Heat Strategy was trialled in the summer of 2013–14 with great success and support from stakeholders. The strategy resulted in a significant reduction in risk to visitor safety posed by extreme heat.
- A number of casual workers from local Aboriginal communities were employed in 2013.
- Areas such as Kathleen Springs that were closed due to fire damage in 2012–13 have been rehabilitated and new facilities have been installed.
- Maintenance has been undertaken to improve the walking track and refurbish toilet blocks.

The most important actions in the next 2 years

- Continue to build capacity within the ranger team and wider community groups including volunteers, participants in flexible employment programs, universities and residents.
- Continue to implement on-ground park management programs to improve the condition of natural, cultural and built assets.
- Work with stakeholders to develop an integrated conservation strategy to help guide management, protect natural values and better manage and monitor threats from fire, weeds and feral animals.
- Work with stakeholders to develop a visitor experience development plan to provide direction in visitor management and enhance the visitor experience.
- Work with stakeholders to develop a cultural heritage plan to guide cultural management programs with Traditional Owners.
- Investigate, develop and provide new experiences for visitors.
- Increase opportunities for casual employment of Traditional Owners.
- Collaborate with the Department of Land Resource Management to implement a biodiversity monitoring program.

How to interpret our tables

Situation	
	Great with no need to improve
	Acceptable with room to improve
	Unacceptable with improvement needed
	Critical with improvement urgent

Trend	
↑	Improving
↔	Stable / No change
↓	Declining
N/A	Not rated / Not applicable
✓	Occurred / In place
✗	Did not occur / Not in place
?	Unknown



Watarrka National Park

Report Card 2014

Planning for the park

The Watarrka National Park Draft Joint Management Plan 2014 guides the general management of the park. The draft plan should be released for public comment in 2015.

The Joint Management Committee, which directs the park's overall management, met 4 times in the past 2 years.

Traditional Owner working groups met 3 times in the past 2 years to provide advice and information for park interpretive signage and other matters.

Rangers use annual operational action plans to assist them to manage fire, weeds and feral animals and to support visitor enjoyment.

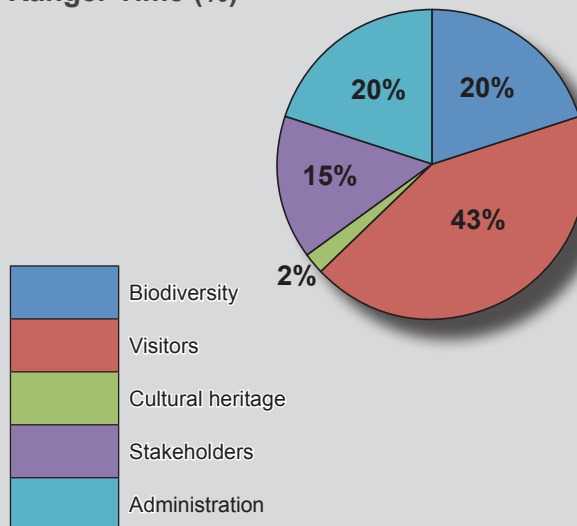
How is ranger time invested in park programs?

The rangers are responsible for the care and management of the park. They have a responsibility to protect the park's diverse landscapes and significant sites from threats, including fire, feral animals and weeds. They are responsible for overseeing much of the park's visitor facilities and activities and administrative functions. There is also a commitment to engaging with stakeholders and working with the interests of the broader community.

Joint management and planning at a glance

Governance, planning and decision-making processes are established	✓
Effectiveness of the joint management processes	↑

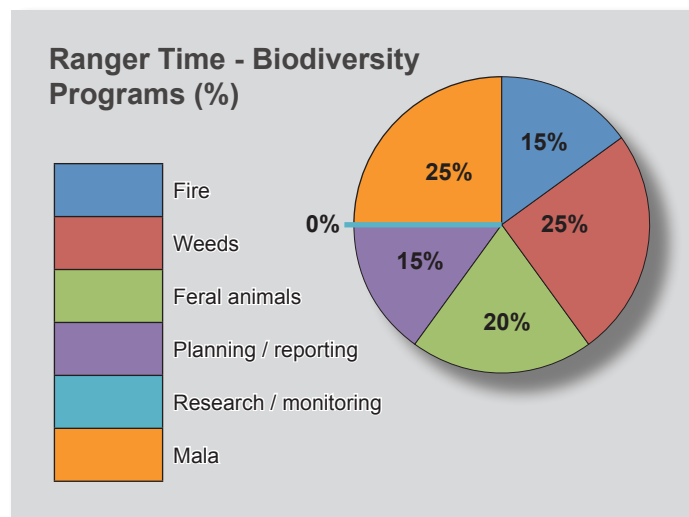
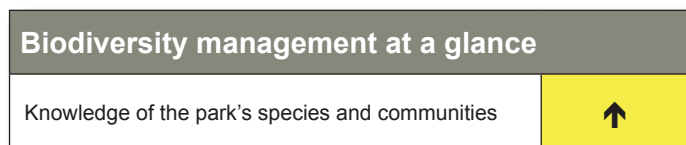
Ranger Time (%)



Knowledge of the park's flora and fauna

Watarrka National Park is one of 3 parks in the southern NT with the highest biodiversity values. It is an internationally significant conservation area providing refuge for over 600 species of plants and many native animals, including important populations of aquatic invertebrates. The park is also important for threatened species management and potential reintroduction of species such as the mala. The main threats to biodiversity in the park are fire, weeds and feral animals. There was almost an equal effort between all biodiversity management programs, including maintenance of the captive mala population in the past year.

Various research and surveys have been undertaken in the past; however, these have been species-specific rather than detecting changes in ecological trends. There is therefore good understanding of flora and fauna location rather than broad-scale biodiversity patterns. The last park-scale vegetation surveys were completed over 10 years ago. They will need to be repeated in some areas because of massive fire events in recent years that may have changed vegetation structure. Watarrka will be included in the Department of Land Resource Management parks monitoring program, with surveys to be conducted in late summer 2014. Park rangers will assist and results will be reported to improve knowledge of the park's biodiversity and ecological trends.



Managing fire

The frequency and impact of wildfire in Central Australia is extremely variable depending on rainfall and the levels of grassy fuel that result. Most years there is insufficient fuel to support extensive wildfire, and landscape-scale wildfires only occur after widespread above-average rainfall. This relationship has changed significantly with the spread of buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*), which has increased the need for fire management and fuel reduction activities, even in the driest years. The Southern Region Fire Task Group provides rangers with direction, guidance and administrative support for planning, delivering and reporting on fire management.

An annual fire action plan was completed for Watarrka to guide on-ground work such as fire breaks, fuel load reduction and protection of infrastructure. However, very little fire management was needed in 2013–14 due to low fuel loads resulting from the significant fires of January 2013 and below-average rainfall for much of the year. Fire breaks had been maintained earlier in 2013 but are starting to grow over and require maintenance. Rainfall in 2014 has caused an eruption of buffel grass in some areas, which will increase fuel loads. A new plan, which incorporates current conditions and fuel loads, is being implemented now that the team is fully functional. A major emphasis will be protecting remaining quandong populations from wildfire.

Watarrka National Park

Report Card 2014

Fire management at a glance	
The park has an annual action plan for fire management that effectively directs action	✓
The achievement of high priority actions in the annual fire action plan (%)	70-90%
Change in team capacity to manage fire programs over the past 2 years	↑
The level of threat to the park's biodiversity values presented by wildfire this year / now	↔

Managing weeds

Management has largely been in response to rainfall and the resulting infestation of buffel grass. This is the major weed threat due to the potential for increased fuel loads in sensitive areas and competition with native flora. The large and destructive fires of 2012–13 enabled buffel grass to colonise new areas. It was not possible to mitigate the spread at the critical time after the fires.

Watarrka now has a well-established ranger team. New staff members are learning fast and their skills will improve with more exposure to local weed management. Experienced staff members have been combining fire and weed management to maximise outcomes for both. Planning is underway to conduct a number of small control burns in areas heavily affected by buffel grass.

Weed management at a glance	
The park has an annual action plan for weed management that effectively directs action	✓
The achievement of high priority actions stated in the annual weed action plan (%)	N/A
Capacity of the park's ranger team to manage weed programs effectively	↑
Change in team capacity to manage weed programs over the past 2 years	↑
The level of threat to the park's biodiversity values presented by weeds this year / now	↑



Managing feral animals

Feral animal species that affect the park include camels, horses, cattle, rabbits, cats and foxes. Feral fox and cat management at Watarrka centres on the Mala Paddock, a predator-proof enclosure that protects a population of the endangered rufous hare-wallaby, also known as mala (*Laorchestes hirsutus*). Management includes cat trapping, which has met with little success, and fence checks to ensure the enclosure is maintained.

On-ground work has improved through staff recruitment and has been assisted through external funding programs including Australian Feral Camel Management Project and the Red Centre Biodiversity Fund.

The external programs have focussed on camels and horses, with large-scale culling programs on adjoining land and some areas of the park. Feral herbivore numbers are generally low on the park. The permanent springs sites that are ecologically and culturally significant are in good condition due to ongoing feral herbivore management. Some camels on the park have been removed through these programs, which has been beneficial as there is limited firearms capacity within the team.

Rabbit numbers have increased in the past few years and a number of measures have been implemented this year to control rabbits in the Mala Paddock. This includes the release of Calicivirus, rabbit warren gassing and some opportunistic shooting.

Feral animal management at a glance	
The park has an annual action plan for feral animal management that effectively directs action	✓
The achievement of high priority actions stated in the feral animal action plan (%)	70-90%
Capacity of the park's ranger team to manage feral animal programs effectively	↔
Change in team capacity to manage feral animal programs over the past 2 years	↑
The level of threat to the park's biodiversity values presented by feral animals this year / now	↔



Watarrka National Park

Report Card 2014

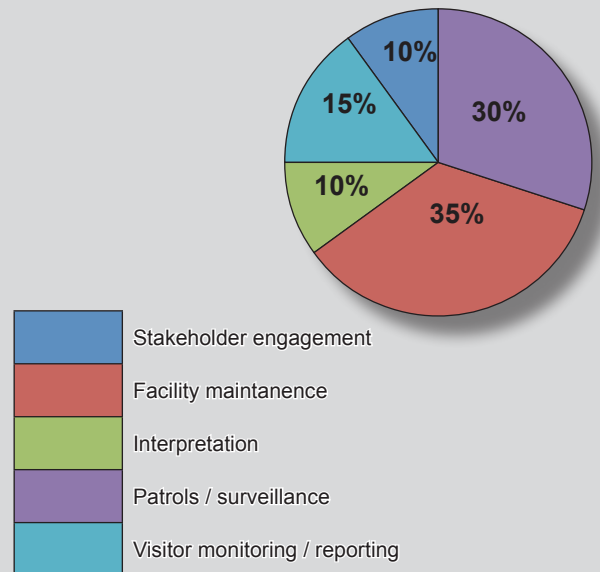
Managing for visitor safety and enjoyment

Watarrka continues to be a highly popular park, receiving more than 237 000 visitors over the past year. Such high visitation requires intensive management. Visitor satisfaction with the park is high: 98% of the 256 respondents in the shoulder season survey (January 2013) were satisfied or very satisfied with their experience. Visitors have commented that the facilities are in good condition and the main canyon walking trail is a well-made 'natural' track that is well immersed into the landscape. Although there is no specific visitor action plan, the joint management plan guides management of visitor experiences.

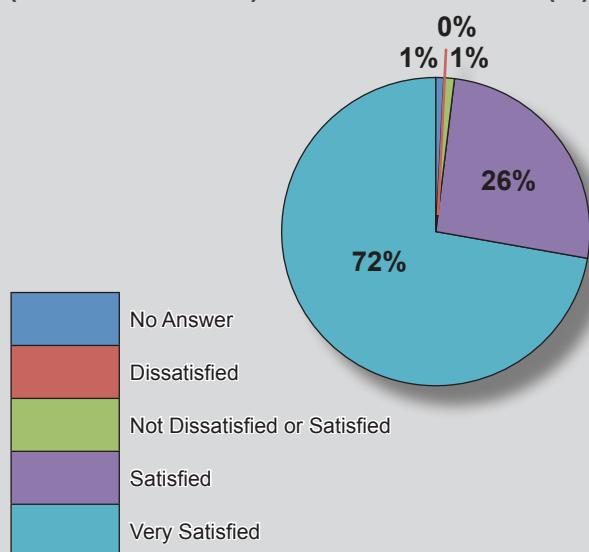
Feeling close to nature and the amazing views, friendly rangers, and the quality of walking trails were common sentiments. Suggestions for improvement included more signage about wildlife, flora and geology, clearer information about walks and more water access along the trail.

A formalised heat strategy was trialled during the year with successful results. In general visitors responded positively to the policy despite changes to walking track access. Most visitors started the rim walk within the designated hours, with 78% of visitors starting the walk before 9am.

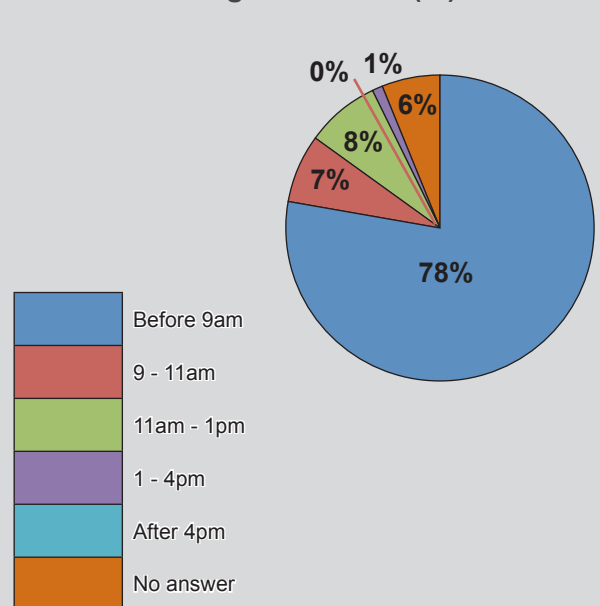
Ranger Time - Visitor Programs (%)



Results of visitor survey (shoulder season): visitor satisfaction (%)



Results of heat strategy visitor survey: time visitors began rim walk (%)



Watarrka National Park

Report Card 2014

Over the past 2 years about \$203 000 worth of facility maintenance and new works were completed including:

- rehabilitation of Kathleen Springs infrastructure (\$160 000)
- annual maintenance of Rim Walk track (\$30 000)
- refurbishment of 2 main toilet blocks (\$13 000).

The new works and upgrades have improved the quality of services and access to the park. The new infrastructure and facilities at Kathleen Springs will be more suitable for a wider user group including tour groups.

Changes over the next 2 years will include:

- a development plan to enhance visitors' experience of the park
- formalisation of the heat strategy.



Visitor management at a glance	
The park has an annual action plan to support visitor safety and enjoyment	✓
The achievement of high priority actions stated in the annual visitor action plan (%)	>90%
The capacity of the park's ranger team to manage visitor programs effectively	↑
Change in team capacity to manage visitor programs over the past 2 years	↑
Knowledge of visitor numbers, profiles, behaviours, expectations and satisfaction levels	↑
Estimated visitor satisfaction with access, facilities and services	↑

Heat strategy trial improves visitor safety in 2013–14

During the summer of 2012–13, extreme and prolonged heat led to a sharp increase in the number of visitors suffering from heat related illness while undertaking the Kings Canyon Rim Walk at Watarrka National Park.

In the 2013 winter, the Parks and Wildlife Commission undertook extensive consultation with the tourism industry with the aim of developing a strategy supported by stakeholders that addressed heat related safety concerns.

Under this strategy, on days forecast to be 36°C or above:

- the Rim Walk is closed to everyone at 9am
- the South Wall is closed to the general public at 11 am
- the South Wall is closed to tour operators at 12 noon.

These measures proved to be successful with no visitor heat related incidents in the summer of 2013–14 following the closures despite continuing extreme temperatures.

Engaging with the community

Community events have been very effective and have received positive feedback from visitors. The events have provided an opportunity for rangers to engage with visitors and exchange information. A great deal of effort has been put into building and maintaining relationships with local operators as part of the heat strategy trial. More staff on park means more of a presence in the community and more time for engagement. Tourism NT has been very active in promoting Watarrka and rangers have received positive feedback about the value of the relationships that have been built.

Community events included:

- 57 Territory Parks Alive events attracting over 1300 visitors over the past 2 years
- Junior ranger activities with the local school
- ongoing relationship building with the local community including Traditional Owners, local business operators and the Counter Disaster Committee
- talks for Parks Week
- work with Traditional Owners to develop a sign asking visitors not to damage sacred trees along the Kings Creek Walk

- new entry signage to welcome visitors
- work tourism operators to develop a strategy to minimise heat-related incidents safety signage and web updates regarding the Rim Walk, explaining walk closures and offering alternative options on days the Walk was closed because of high heat
- surveys relating to the heat strategy and for general information gathering
- a visitor comments book at the safety shelter
- volunteering opportunities over the summer including advertising on university forums to attract suitable volunteers
- 27 permits were issued for various activities, predominantly nature photography and filming.

Community and stakeholder engagement at a glance

Level of engagement and support from the community / stakeholders



Managing cultural values

The cultural values of the park are highly significant. They include a number of sacred sites, culturally significant areas and archaeological sites. Watarrka has some of the most comprehensive cultural information of all parks. A large amount of information has been summarised in a cultural values report, prepared by the Central Land Council and the draft joint management plan. A cultural heritage management plan will be developed with the Traditional Owners.

A quandong survey was undertaken in collaboration with the Department of Land Resource Management and Traditional Owners as part of a long term Indigenous ecological knowledge project. This provided an opportunity for Traditional Owners to access country, transfer knowledge and collect important monitoring data.



Cultural values at a glance	
The park has an annual action plan for cultural management that effectively directs action	x
Knowledge of the park's cultural values	↔

External funding assists park management

The Red Centre Biodiversity Fund is a 5 year project funded by the Australian Government. The project aims to protect and improve biodiversity for Australia's Red Centre region through strategic fire, weed and feral animal management. The area incorporates West MacDonnell, Owen Springs, Watarrka and Finke Gorge national parks, many other reserve areas and Aboriginal Land Trusts that adjoin the Park boundaries. The project aims to reduce the number of hot fires at a landscape scale while promoting the use of small, strategic cool season fires to protect key biodiversity values. Feral animal control aims to reduce grazing pressure and reduce the spread of weeds to new areas. Control of Weeds of National Significance (WONS) in key areas is also part of the project. This integrated approach will improve the strength of native habitat and improve connections between ecosystems across land tenures at a landscape scale.

