



# **N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park**

## **Joint Management Plan** October 2011

WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that the following document contains cultural information about Indigenous Men's sacred sites.

N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park Joint Management Plan

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Environment, The Arts and Sport

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### **Acknowledgements**

This plan was prepared by Parks and Wildlife and Traditional Owners with assistance from the Central Land Council. Planning for formal joint management began with a series of meetings between Traditional Owners, Parks and Wildlife staff and Central Land Council staff in 2007.

## Executive Summary

N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park is located in the East MacDonnell Ranges about 90 kilometres east of Alice Springs. The Gorge is a cultural treasure house, with thousands of rock carvings (petroglyphs) which express the art and stories of the Eastern Arrernte people. The Park is jointly managed between Traditional Owners and Parks and Wildlife.

N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park's primary values are that it contains Eastern Arrernte men's sacred sites which include approximately 6 000 stone engravings or petroglyphs. For Traditional Owners the area is called Ilwentje and is an important part of their living cultural landscape. The Park is also an important archaeological and heritage site. The abundance and diversity of engravings are unparalleled in the southern portion of the Northern Territory (NT) and is listed on the Northern Territory Heritage Register. The Park provides visitors with a rare opportunity to see a living art gallery in close proximity to Alice Springs, with low key camping and day-use facilities. The Park's contribution to conservation in the context of the NT Reserve system is minor however it contains several plants nationally listed as "vulnerable", including one species which is only protected in this Park.

The main objectives of Park management are to protect the petroglyphs, art sites and other sacred sites; to enable visitors to appreciate and understand the cultural significance of the Park; to protect specific habitat for three threatened plant species and to build effective governance which empowers Traditional Owners and successfully manages the Park.

To Traditional Owners the main gorge area poses spiritual danger to Aboriginal women, children and uninitiated men. For their safety, senior men want ensure that they do not enter past the first waterhole. Key threats to the petroglyphs include fire and human interference particularly graffiti, vandalism and souveniring. The main threat to the Park's natural values is wildfires encouraged by grassy weeds.

The Park will receive a low level of management from park operations and there is scope for the partners to consider removing the campground. However, there are opportunities to expand Indigenous employment associated with the district and foster collaboration with adjacent landowners.

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# Vision for the Park

## “Working together as one”

Both partners will work together to manage the Park, respecting and acknowledging each others’ skills and knowledge, and communicating clearly. A strong partnership will mean:

- The country and sacred sites are looked after properly for current and future generations;
- Traditional Owners are actively involved through jobs, training and business opportunities; and
- Visitors gain a deeper understanding of the country and its people.

## 1. Introduction

N’Dhala Gorge Nature Park (501.4 hectares) is set in a spectacular part of the East MacDonnell Ranges, 89 kilometres east of Alice Springs (Map 1) and located on the eastern portion of Australia’s Red Centre National Landscape.

The area was first reserved as ‘Green Valley Scenic Reserve’ under the National Parks and Gardens Ordinance on 21 May 1963 and committed to the care and control of the Northern Territory Reserves Board and on 30 June 1978 management of the Reserve was vested in the Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission. In 1975 the name was changed to N’Dhala Gorge Scenic Reserve (N’Dhala was believed to be an Eastern Arrernte name referring to a swamp near the gorge). On 21 September 1979, pursuant to the *Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act* (TPWC Act), the area was renamed N’Dhala Gorge Nature Park. The Eastern Arrernte name for the gorge is ‘Ilwentje’.

In 2003, N’Dhala Gorge Nature Park was included in Schedule 1 of the *Parks and Reserves (Framework for the Future) Act*, allowing the Northern Territory and Traditional Owners to enter into formal joint management of the park. In 2009, title was transferred to Irlwentye Aboriginal Land Trust to be held on trust for the Traditional Owners and was leased to the Northern Territory for a term of 99 years.

### 1.1 Purpose

#### 1.1.1 Values of the Park

The key values for the Park are:

**An Eastern Arrernte men’s sacred site** – The Park contains important men’s sacred sites including approximately 6 000 stone engravings or petroglyphs. For Traditional Owners, N’Dhala Gorge or Ilwentje is part of a broad complex landscape of spiritual significance.

**Archaeological sites and objects** -The engravings of N’Dhala Gorge are among the most valuable cultural sites in central Australia. The abundance and diversity of engravings are unparalleled in the southern portion of the NT. The site is listed in the

Northern Territory Heritage Register. In addition to the many thousands of individual petroglyphs other archaeological materials found within the Park include stone artefacts, charcoal and faunal remains, a stone arrangement, hunting hide and painting sites.

**Regionally significant biodiversity values** – The Park is set within the internationally significant MacDonnell Bioregion. It contains several plants of conservation significance; however its contribution to conservation is relatively minor.

### 1.1.2 Purpose of the Park

N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park (Map 2) will be managed to:

- Protect the Aboriginal sacred sites and sites of archaeological significance;
- Meet the needs of Traditional Owners to maintain their connection to country and be involved in management and on ground operations;
- Enable visitors to appreciate and understand the cultural significance of the Park; and
- Maintain the Park's significant vegetation communities.

### 1.1.3 Purpose of the Plan

This Plan gives direction to the day-to-day management of the Park. It also provides the primary source against which management performance will be measured. Management success will be defined by performance measures developed by the partners (see Appendix 1). They are specific, measurable, achievable and repeatable and will primarily be implemented through operational strategies and annual programs and reviewed by the Joint Management Committee.

This joint management plan supersedes the *1993 Plan of Management*. It will remain in effect until amended or replaced by a new plan. Further responsibilities regarding the joint management of the Park are set out in the Park Lease.

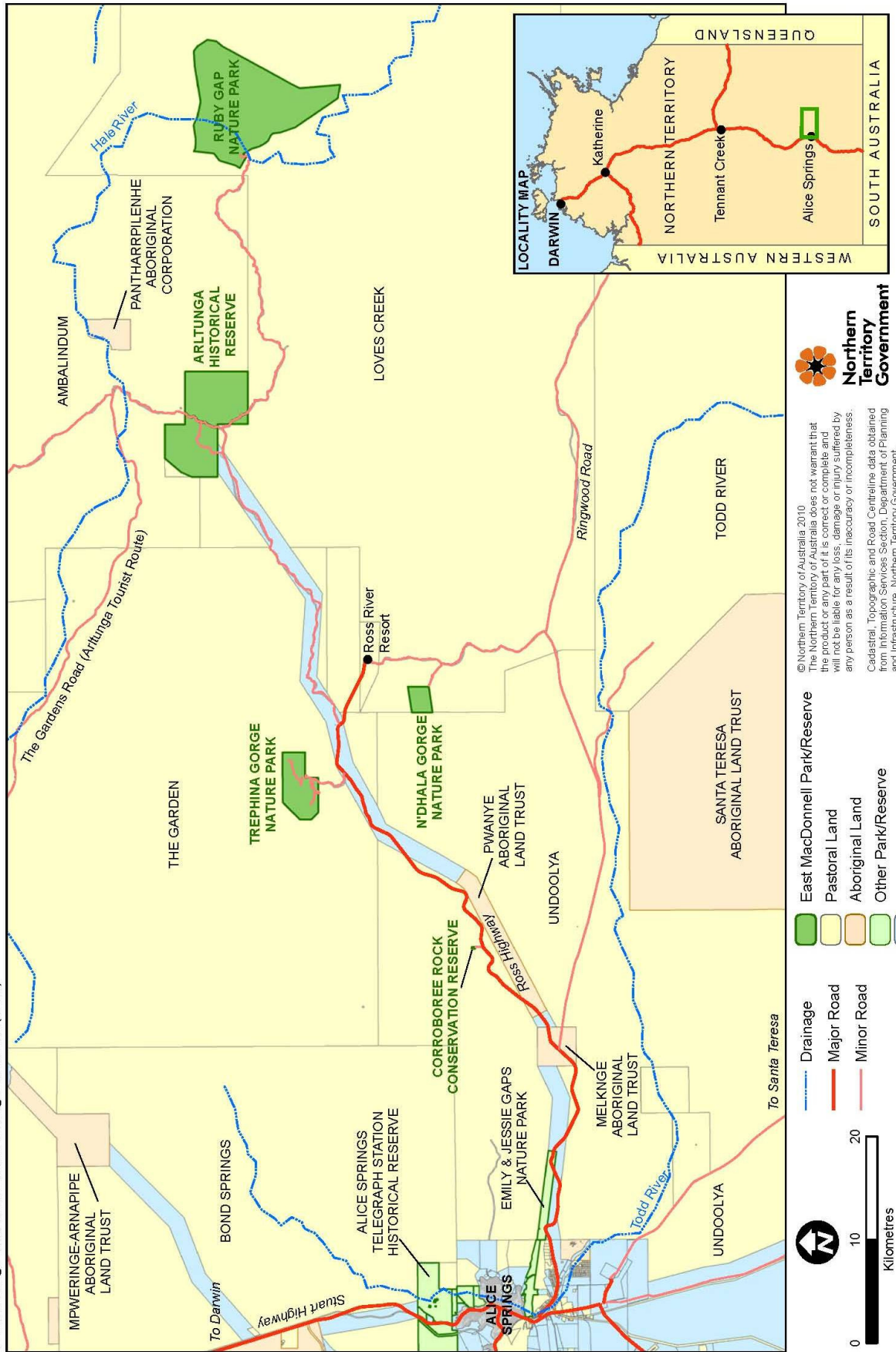
This Plan is closely linked to other joint management plans of the East MacDonnells district including Trepkina Gorge Nature Park, Corroboree Rock Conservation Reserve, Ruby Gap Nature Park and Arltunga Historical Reserve, and should be considered with them.

Similar Joint Management Plans are concurrently being prepared for Corroboree Rock Conservation Reserve and Trepkina Gorge Nature Park in the East MacDonnells district. These plans have been developed separately for practical and cultural reasons, including restrictions associated with Corroboree Rock Conservation Reserve and N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park. However, the joint management plans of the district will operate under the East MacDonnell Joint Management Committee.

This joint management plan was prepared in accordance with, and complies with, the TPWC Act, the Park Lease and an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) registered with the National Native Title Tribunal pursuant to the *Native Title Act 1993 (Cth)*. The Plan has force in law under the TPWC Act.

The land subject to this Joint Management Plan is Portion No. 784 that will be held by the Irlwentye Aboriginal Land Trust on behalf of Traditional Owners.

Map 1. Location Map, Parks and Reserves of the East MacDonnell Ranges  
N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park Joint Management Plan (Draft)

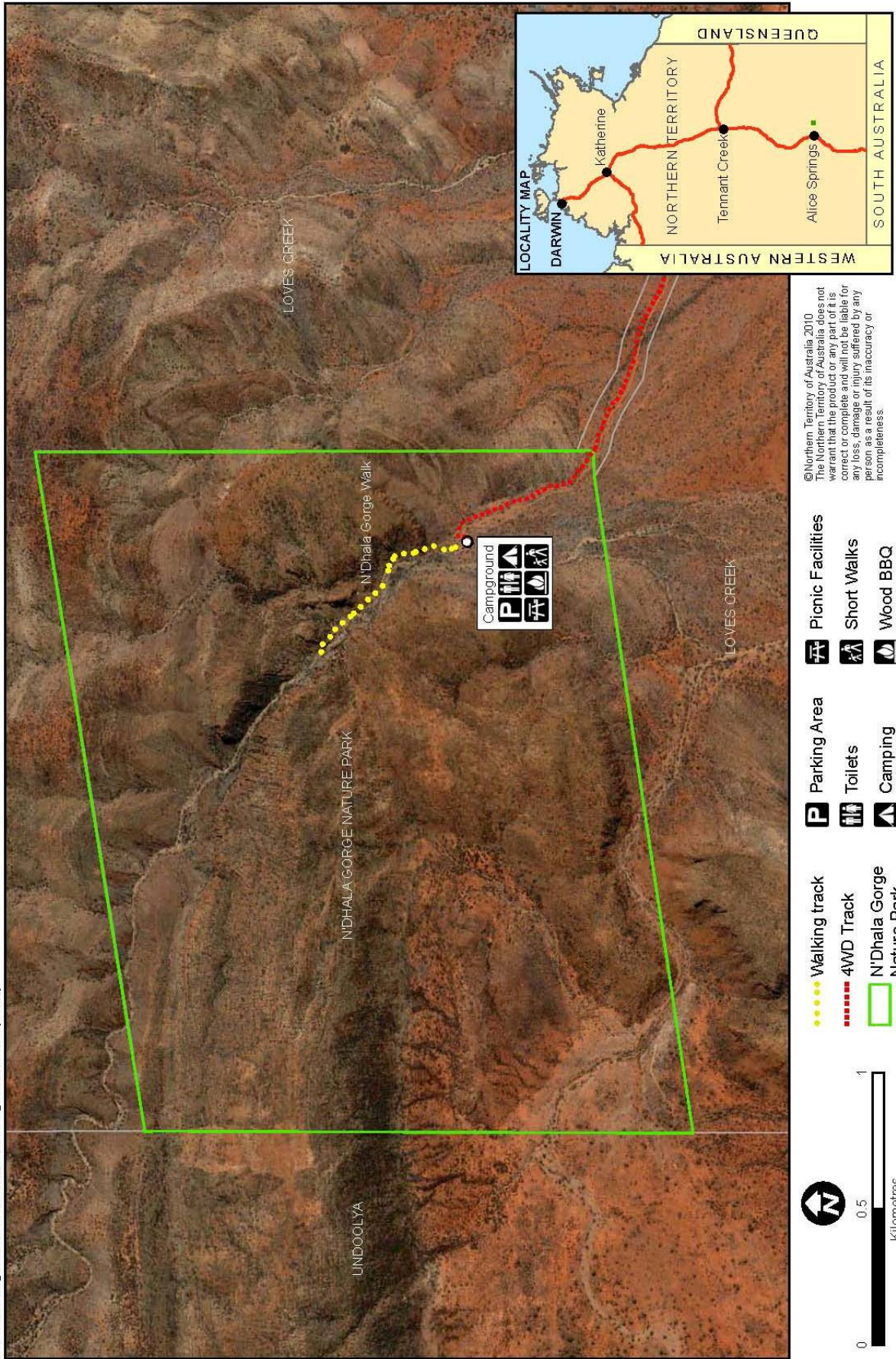


**Northern Territory Government**

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Cadastral, Topographic and Road Centreline data obtained from Information Services Section, Department of Planning and Infrastructure, Northern Territory Government.

Map 2. Park Map  
N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park Joint Management Plan (Draft)





## 1.2 Joint Management

Joint Management is about Traditional Owners and the Parks and Wildlife Service working together, exchanging their knowledge and expertise, solving problems and sharing decisions.

N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park is Aboriginal land under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act*. Traditional Owners have agreed to lease the land back to the Territory for 99 years and work together to manage the Park. The terms of joint management for the Park have authority in law under the TPWC Act, the N'Dhala Gorge Lease and an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) registered under the *Native Title Act*. This Plan complies with all of these legal instruments.

Under section 25AA of the TPWC Act the joint management partners for N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park are the Territory Government and the Traditional Owners of the park. The Territory will generally carry out its joint management obligations through the Parks and Wildlife Service. For the purposes of this Joint Management Plan, references to the Parks and Wildlife Service as a Joint Management Partner should be read as including a reference to the Territory.

### 1.2.1 Traditional Owners

Pwenye is the Eastern Arrernte name for the long hill south of the Ross Highway stretching east from the Numery Road turnoff to N'Dhala Gorge; it is also the name Traditional Owners use to refer to themselves as part of their country. Neighbouring 'countries' or 'estates' are Antulye to the west, Uytetye to the south, Ulpmer to the north, Uleralkwe to the east.

Ancestral tracks and song lines traverse these estates, linking Aboriginal people in the region and sometimes, right across the country. Arrernte kin relations, known as Anpernirrentye or 'skin names,' allow individuals to be placed in a social framework which guides every person's behaviour to others within that system. Anpernirrentye also incorporates a system of descent and inheritance, where children inherit a skin name in line with their father's anyenhenge (father / child skin names).

People descended from a paternal grandfather and his brothers are referred to as Apmereke-artweye. They are the recognised holders of an estate or country with the right to make decisions affecting the use of that country; the responsibility of looking after that country; and the accountability to the land itself and the spirits of their ancestors still present in the landscape. Traditionally, failure to comply with these responsibilities could result in sickness or death, so that when a person becomes sick, it is often attributed to neglecting their country.

Apmereke-artweye are assisted in their role as owners by their kwertengerle – people who hold a different connection to the same country, often through their mother's father or mother's brother. Kwertengerle can become the holders of knowledge with significant ritual responsibilities and are considered essential partners for discussing any issues affecting that country. Together the Apmereke-artweye and Kwertengerle care for the land, exercising complementary roles and responsibilities. Anthropologists will often refer to this group as the estate group.

There are a number of other factors that play a significant role in assuming positions of authority or seniority within a group related to an estate, principally residence and knowledge of country, aknganeme (conception or 'borning' place), gender and involvement in ritual activity. Personality and level of interest are also relevant factors for the exercise of authority over an estate. These factors are often played out in the secret/sacred arena of traditional ceremony. The recognition of seniority from the broader group is important to consider in the context of joint management.

Traditional Law is transmitted through the dreaming stories of the totemic ancestors, or the Altyerre. Layers of meaning encoded into the stories and songs are gradually revealed at various stages throughout a person's life. Sacred objects, songs, designs and dramatic acts have been left behind by the spirit ancestors to transmit this knowledge. Young children are taught the 'open' or public versions of these stories, and may attend certain stages of some ceremonies. Some men will eventually become Akgerrtye (senior men) - a status that is recognised by other members of the group and not one that a person can independently assume. Ceremony is traditionally the arena in which decision-making occurs. These ceremonies are usually held between October and March.

Most Traditional Owners for N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park live in Santa Teresa, Amoonguna and Alice Springs. The closest residential area to the Park is Williams Well Outstation, approximately 25 kilometres to the west off the Ross Highway.

### **1.2.2 The Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Service**

The Parks and Wildlife Service is dedicated to conserving the natural and cultural values of parks and reserves, while providing high-quality nature-based tourism and recreation opportunities for visitors. The Service is committed to engaging the public and working with the interests of the community. The Parks and Wildlife Service is committed to seeing that the joint management partnership grows and becomes truly equitable and that Traditional Owners benefit culturally, socially and economically from joint management.

This Plan has been developed by the joint management partners in a positive spirit. Like the Traditional Owners of the Park, the Parks and Wildlife Service is optimistic about the future.

## 2. Park Governance

Joint management is about Traditional Owners and the Parks and Wildlife Service working together to achieve their shared goals and aspirations, exchanging knowledge and expertise solving problems together and sharing decisions. A mutual understanding of country, Law, culture and Indigenous decision-making principles are fundamental to making good joint management decisions. For the purpose of joint management, the term governance is defined as “the way the partners organise themselves and the rules they put in place to realise their shared vision.” It includes all aspects of partnership, communication, planning and decision-making.

Making sure that the joint management partners have a clear structure and process for making decisions is essential for good joint management. The partners are optimistic that this new way of learning and working together will improve management equity. Both partners acknowledge that it will take time and support to build capacity and a strong working relationship.

### Principles for effective governance

- Decision-making and accountability should be equally shared.
- Time spent together on country is important for developing mutual trust, respect and understanding between the partners.
- Indigenous decision-making processes must be respected.
- Management priorities will be guided by the Park’s key values.
- Planning and decision-making must incorporate risk identification and minimisation.
- Engagement and employment of Traditional Owners in management operations is central to joint management success.
- Resources are limited and must be used effectively.
- Joint management has to be checked to see that it is working well. It is important to keep improving.
- Public support for joint management is very important.

## 2.1 Planning and decision-making

### 2.1.1 A partnership approach

Joint management provides exciting new opportunities to make better management decisions based on a combination of Indigenous and western approaches to land management. Successful joint management relies on meaningful engagement of Traditional Owners and will be measured against the achievement of the aims in this Plan and the satisfaction of the joint management partners.

For Traditional Owners of N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park it is essential that appropriate senior people are involved in making decisions related to their country. Across the East

MacDonnell district different groups of Traditional Owners maintain responsibility for different areas of country which includes the Park. Traditional Owners emphasise the importance of ensuring decision-making structures reflect the differing responsibility between different family groups. As N'Dhala Gorge contains important sacred sites it is essential that senior men are involved in decisions involving these areas.

Accordingly, decision-making will be structured so that the people whose country is affected are well-informed about park operations and are involved in decisions. Working in a cross-cultural environment requires mutual trust and respect as well as clear communication at all levels. A shared understanding of country, culture and indigenous decision-making principles are fundamental to making good joint management decisions.

### 2.1.2 Roles and responsibilities

Clear roles and responsibilities are essential for joint management and each of the partners have responsibilities for looking after the Park in accordance with traditional Aboriginal laws and laws applicable in the Northern Territory (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

- A **Joint Management Committee** is intended to be the principal governing body for parks and reserves of the East MacDonnells district, including N'Dhala Gorge and Trepina Gorge Nature Parks. The East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee's primary functions are to provide strategic direction to Park operations, determine local policy and procedures, and review progress against management directions in this plan. The Committee will be composed of representatives nominated by the main Traditional Owner families and senior Parks and Wildlife staff. It is hoped that centralising management between all reserves of the East MacDonnells to a single Joint Management Committee will increase management efficiency and effectiveness across the district.
- **Traditional Owners** are responsible to the land, law and culture. They retain special responsibilities for decision-making and oversee cultural protocols for the sacred sites. They are responsible for managing traditional knowledge and passing it onto the right people, maintaining and keeping the country alive. Senior men have further responsibilities and must be involved in any matters which affect sacred sites.
- The **Parks and Wildlife Service** is responsible for the day-to-day management of the Park under the direction of the East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee. The Parks and Wildlife Service is required to finance and resource the Park's ongoing management including administrative functions, staffing, infrastructure and services in accordance with the Park Lease, Indigenous Land Use Agreement and any relevant laws. Parks and Wildlife employees are responsible to the Minister for Parks and Wildlife and the Northern Territory Government.
- The **Central Land Council (CLC)** has an important role in assisting joint management. The TPWC Act defines the CLC's role as representing and protecting the interests of the Traditional Owners in relation to the Park's management. Specifically they are to represent and support Traditional Owners' interests, undertake consultations, assist with monitoring joint management processes, and help resolve differences between Traditional Owners, if needed.

All joint management decisions will be consistent with any relevant laws in force in the Northern Territory, with the Park Lease and Indigenous Land Use Agreement, and with any relevant Northern Territory Government policies or guidelines.

### 2.1.3 Building effective governance and continuous improvement

Joint management provides opportunities to make better management decisions based on a combination of indigenous and western approaches. A positive working relationship based on mutual understanding and respect is essential for joint management to work.

Working in a cross-cultural environment requires clear communication at all levels. Respecting differences and a commitment to understanding each other's views will make for a strong relationship and provide the basis for effective joint management and governance.

The partners recognise the need for training to build effective governance across the district. Traditional Owners are willing to teach Rangers and visitors cross-cultural skills, language and their understanding of country. Rangers are prepared to share their knowledge of planning, budgeting, organisational structures and resource management with Traditional Owners.

The partners are also committed to continuous learning and improvement. The process involves tracking progress against performance measures, evaluating results and purposely modifying management to reflect new knowledge and insights (see Appendix 1). It also involves monitoring to measure efficiencies, effectiveness and progress toward long-term aims.

**Table 1.** Decision-making framework.

East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee Representatives from Traditional Owners and Senior Parks and Wildlife Staff	Park Operations Parks Staff
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exercise executive authority and be accountable for the management of the Park.</li> <li>• Set strategic direction and park-specific policy and procedure for management programs and staff to implement.</li> <li>• Approve work programs and internal annual budgets.</li> <li>• Establish development directions and criteria to evaluate proposals.</li> <li>• Consult with senior men responsible for the sacred site.</li> <li>• Communicate with, and provide feedback from, the groups that members represent.</li> <li>• Provide a link with the key stakeholders and wider community for the East MacDonnell district.</li> <li>• Monitor and review management performance.</li> <li>• Consider other proposals not specified in this plan.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsible for day-to-day management of the Park.</li> <li>• Implement operational programs, policy and procedure as approved by the management committee.</li> <li>• Maximise on-ground participation of Traditional Owners in management of the Park.</li> <li>• Report progress to the management committee.</li> <li>• Liaise with stakeholders and neighbours.</li> <li>• Issue permits, contracts and licenses according to policy and procedures.</li> <li>• Monitor management effectiveness and adjust management according to new information, improved procedures, new technology and new threats or issues.</li> </ul>

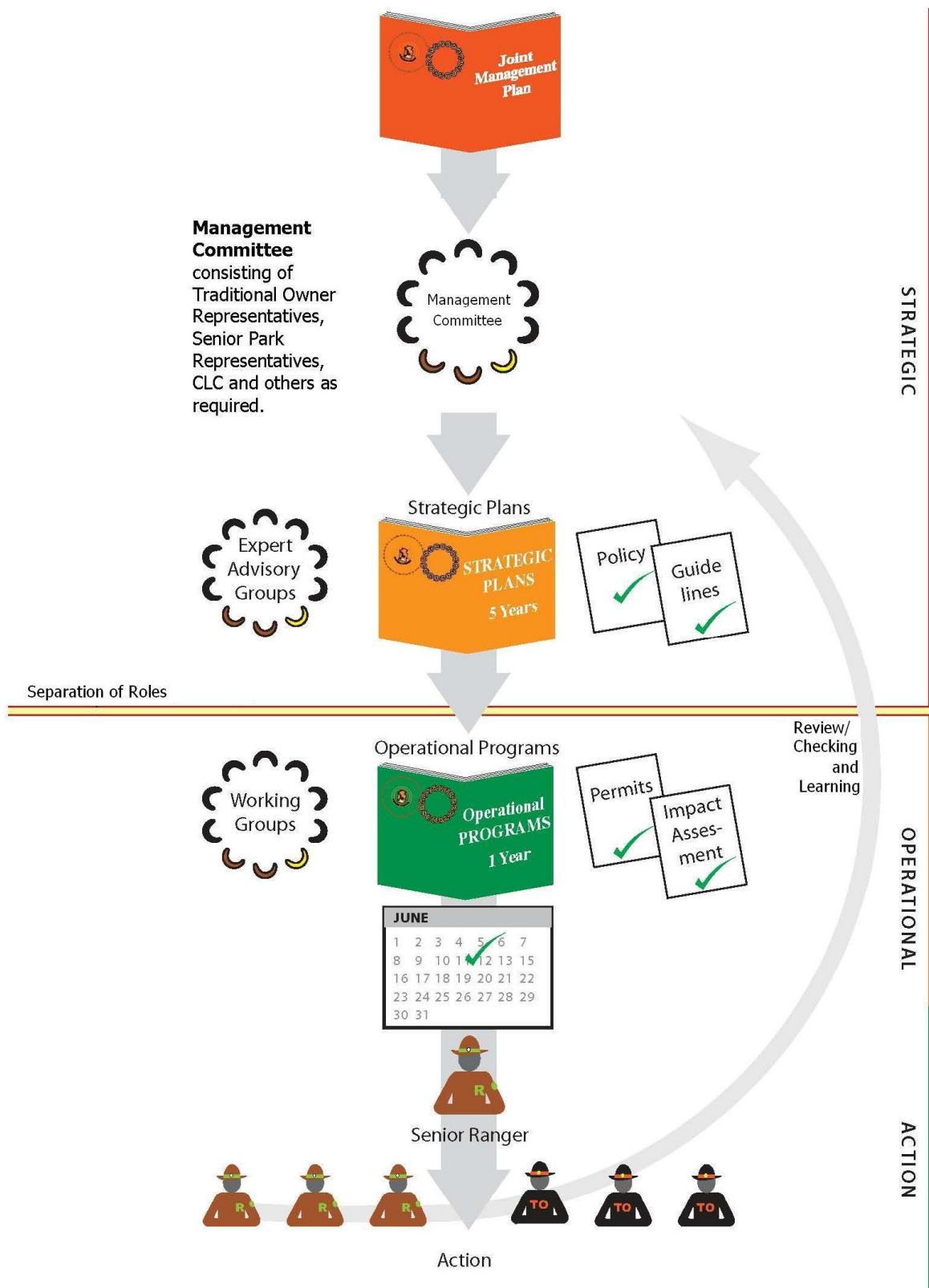
#### **2.1.4 Community engagement and participation**

Good working relationships with landholders situated between the parks and reserves of the East MacDonnells should increase management effectiveness across the district. Matters of mutual concern include fencing, boundary access, control of stock and feral animals, weed control, fire management, visitor access and safety.

While senior men are obligated to keep the stories for N'Dhala secret, they still want to promote the importance of the site and their culture.

There are no immediate proposals to expand the Park. The vision of a “greater park” linking the West MacDonnell National Park, Trepina Gorge Nature Park and N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park has been investigated from time to time over the last three decades. Such a vision may become a reality in time through co-operative arrangements with neighbouring landholders such as Loves Creek, Undoolya and The Garden Stations.

**Figure 1.** Park Management and Operations – Roles and Responsibilities



**Aim**

- Equitable partnership with effective governance.
- Management Directions

**2.1 Joint Management Committee** – A Joint Management Committee will oversee operational management of parks and reserves in the East MacDonnell district, including N'Dhala Gorge and Trepina Nature Parks. For matters that directly relate to men's sacred sites, the East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee must consult with senior men responsible for the site.

- **Role** - The role of the East MacDonnells Management Committee is to provide direction and policy. The Committee will not have a direct role in day-to-day operations. The Committee will represent the interests of Traditional Owners and Parks and Wildlife. As an initial priority, the partners will formally define and document all aspects of their roles, as well as the rules and processes to effectively govern the Park.
- **Meetings** - The East MacDonnells Management Committee will meet at least once a year.
- **Membership** – The Committee will consist of at least three Traditional Owners representing estate groups associated with nominated parks and reserves of the East MacDonnell district;
  - at least two Senior Government Officers;
  - at least one Land Council Officer, and
  - other persons invited by the partners to provide advice on particular issues or to represent community interests (for example the tourism industry).

**2.2 Making decisions** – Decisions will be made by consensus. The roles and decision-making responsibilities of the East MacDonnells Management Committee are summarised in Table 1.

**2.3 Expert advisory groups and working groups** – Working groups of Traditional Owners, Parks and Wildlife staff, CLC officers and specialists may be formed to support the Committee or address specific tasks, such as for fire management, interpretation or tourism.

**2.4 Supporting and building effective governance** - The partners and CLC recognise that joint management will be a process of continuous learning and improvement. In the future, other governance arrangements may be refined to increase effectiveness.

- **Representation** - The CLC will represent and support Traditional Owners' interests and facilitate consultations when required.
- **Governance training** – Governance training will be provided to the joint management partners to help them work effectively together, with attention given to needs identified by the participatory monitoring and evaluation program.
- **Professional development** – Professional standards and staff competencies will be supported by ongoing training in all aspects of Park management with special emphasis on cross-cultural training involving Traditional Owners.
- **Information exchange** – A key role of committee members will be to bring to the Committee the collective expertise, interests and concerns of their group. Committee members will be responsible for passing on information to the wider Traditional Owner group, local community and key stakeholders. The CLC will provide support if required. Park operations will be responsible for effectively communicating information about Park management programs to the East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee.



- **Continuous learning and improvement** – A monitoring and evaluation program will be developed to help develop effective governance. Performance will be measured annually using indicators (see Appendix 1) relating to:

- the satisfaction of the partners;
- the effectiveness of the partnership (including decision-making processes, participation and communication); and
- the implementation of this Plan.

- **Dispute resolution** – The partners will aim to resolve disputes through open discussion and communication, involving the CLC as required or requested by the Traditional Owners. However, should a dispute arise between the partners that cannot be resolved, the parties will follow the dispute resolution processes set out in the Lease.

**2.5 Community engagement and participation** – The partners will build partnerships and linkages with neighbouring landholders, non-Government organisations and the local community to improve conservation and nature-based visitor experiences both on- and off-park.

- **Neighbours** - The partners will work with neighbours and local community groups to address mutual interests. Such groups will be invited to work strategically with the partners on conservation and tourism planning, to resolve common issues and develop opportunities, including those that are linked to the Park but lie outside the boundary.
- **Informed Community** - The partners will keep the community and stakeholders informed about significant issues and proposed developments.
- **Aboriginal Employment** - The partners will be proactive in developing local solutions for Aboriginal employment. Aboriginal employment will remain a standing item at Committee meetings.
- **Tourism Industry** - The partners will be proactive in working with the tourism industry through established forums and organisations such as Tourism Central Australia and Tourism NT and development will remain a standing item at Committee meetings.

## 2.2 Business operations

### 2.2.1 Effective operations

Park operations are currently carried out by Park Rangers based at Trepina Gorge Nature Park with regular patrols to the Park. It is hoped that day-to-day management will be carried out by both Rangers and Traditional Owners in the future. At present almost all funding to manage the Park is provided by the Northern Territory Government from funding appropriated to manage the Northern Territory's Parks estate. Major works and ongoing programs are subject to Territory-wide government priorities.

On-ground work in parks and reserves across the East MacDonnells is directed by a hierarchy of strategies and operational programs that are developed to achieve the long-term aims included in this and related Plans. The East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee will be responsible for endorsing long-term strategies and overseeing operational programs implemented by Rangers, Traditional Owners, contractors and volunteers. The Committee's role will be to match priorities and new

information with available staff and budgets to best achieve the Park's long-term aims and vision.

### **2.2.2 Indigenous training, employment and enterprise development**

Joint management will promote opportunities for employment and business for Traditional Owners across the East MacDonnell district. Traditional Owners emphasise how important training and employment is for their families and acknowledge their responsibility to support young people.

Since the establishment of new joint management arrangements in the East MacDonnells, Traditional Owners have participated in paid management programs on a flexible basis. Such flexible, project-based employment provides many benefits including work experience, skills exchange and accredited training, and helps build positive working relationships between Traditional Owners and Park staff. Where necessary, it helps Traditional Owners become work-ready and local Aboriginal organisations, including community ranger groups, contract-ready.

Traditional Owners are keen to be involved in contract work. Preference will be given to Traditional Owners of the park to participate in any commercial activities approved under the lease, subject to any law in force in the Northern Territory. Where capacity is lacking, the partners will work with local Aboriginal people to build confidence, provide exposure, knowledge and opportunities to gain experience.

The East MacDonnells attracts many tourists, providing an excellent opportunity for Traditional Owners to present their living culture, from a personal perspective, to visitors from all over Australia and the world. Joint management and liaison with the tourism industry can help develop cultural tourism.

Access by Aboriginal Rangers, contractors and trainees to sacred sites should be carefully managed under the direction of senior men.

### **2.2.3 Research, survey and monitoring**

Effective management is very much about review and continuous improvement (see Appendix 1). Research, survey and monitoring programs associated with the Park should have clear objectives and be integrated with operational programs.

Research is strongly encouraged where it will benefit the Park or the wider region. Research or surveys undertaken by external organisations may require permits issued under the TPWC By-laws. Park-based guidelines for permits will be negotiated by the partners.

Traditional Owners have knowledge of the Park that may contribute to research outcomes. It is important that they are consulted and invited to participate in research, survey and monitoring projects and, where possible, employed in this work. It is important that the outcomes of research projects are communicated to the partners and for the intellectual property rights of Traditional Owners to be protected.

### **2.2.4 Regulated activities**

**Permits** – All commercial operations, tours, commercial film and photography, public events, public gatherings, interfere with or take wildlife, and special access are regulated within the Park and require a permit under the TPWC By-laws. Permit holders must abide by the conditions on each permit so that the values of the Park are not negatively affected.

**Permit approval** – An effective permit processing system is needed to assess permit applications submitted to Parks and Wildlife. The East MacDonnells Joint Management

Committee will establish local policy and guidelines for Park operations for the issue of permits, subject to the provisions of the TPWC Act and TPWC By-laws. The partners will need to have regard to timeliness of processing, the interests of Traditional Owners, the community, industry stakeholders and existing Parks and Wildlife policy. Such guidelines should also explicitly state when a proposed activity will, and will not, require consultation with Traditional Owners. The rights, obligations and conditions of permit holders are usually specified in the permit and will be consistent with conditions determined by the partners. Some permits may require paid supervision by Traditional Owners or Parks and Wildlife staff. The CLC will consult with Traditional Owners on permit applications that request any access or activity that would not normally be allowed to visitors until any necessary agreed guidelines and procedures are developed.

**Tour operator permits** – Tour companies visiting any Northern Territory park or reserve require a permit issued under the TPWC By-laws. Most tour operator permits are addressed through the Tour Operator Permit System. If special provisions are needed a separate permit is required, with the operators rights, obligations and conditions usually detailed in the permit. Traditional Owners and Parks and Wildlife want information presented by tour operators to be accurate and appropriate, particularly for cultural information.

**Promotion, commercial film and photography** – The key features of N'Dhala Gorge are associated with a men's sacred site. Images or representations of N'Dhala Gorge petroglyphs should not be publicly presented. Senior men have requested that commercial film and photography of the site should not be approved.

**Research** – External research is encouraged especially where the resulting knowledge will improve management of the Park and the Territory's park estate. Any research proposals should be developed in conjunction with Traditional Owners and Parks and Wildlife staff and be consistent with Park policies and guidelines including ICIP (see Management Direction 4.1). Also wildlife research requires a permit to interfere with, take or keep wildlife.

**Development proposals** – All development proposals need to be reviewed against guidelines and conditions prepared by the partners. Where development proposals, leases or activities may cause environmental, heritage or cultural impacts, the proponent will be required to demonstrate that the proposal complies with all relevant legislation. The proposal will also require the informed consent of Traditional Owners.

**Benefit sharing agreements** - With the consideration of the Committee and consent of all affected Traditional Owners, the Lease and this Plan allow the partners to enter into benefit-sharing arrangements with commercial partners.

**Licence or sub-lease** – In certain circumstances, including where a secure form of land tenure is needed, a licence or sub-lease may be entered into. Any licence or sublease entered into by the Northern Territory in respect of the Park must be consistent with the terms of the Park Lease and must have the prior written consent of the Irlwentye Aboriginal Land Trust on behalf of the Traditional Owners.

**Protecting sacred sites** – Protection for places of cultural significance to Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory is afforded under overlapping legislation. The *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (Cth)* (ALRA) gives legal recognition to areas which that Act terms 'sacred sites', defined as: "a site that is sacred to Aboriginals or is otherwise of significance according to Aboriginal tradition, and includes any land that, under a law of the Northern Territory, is declared to be sacred to Aboriginals or of significance according to Aboriginal tradition". The *Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act* (NTASSA) also provides protection for sites that fall within the scope of the ALRA definition of sacred site. Both the ALRA and NTASSA make it an offence to enter or remain on land that is a sacred site. It is also an offence

under the NTASSA to carry out work on, use or desecrate a sacred site. Further, the NTASSA provides protection for sacred sites by requiring a person who proposes to use or conduct work on land to apply for an Authority Certificate. An Authority Certificate will only be issued if the use of or work on the land can proceed without there being a substantive risk of damage to or interference with a sacred site on or in the vicinity of the land or if an agreement is reached between the applicant and the custodians of the sacred site. Subject to the terms of the NTASSA, this protection enables custodians of the sacred site to say who can enter the site and what can happen in or on the site.

Successful joint management will assist to ensure N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park is protected in accordance with the wishes of the traditional owners. Pursuant to the ALRA, the Central Land Council has a specific function to assist Aboriginals in the taking of measures likely to assist in the protection of sacred sites within the Park.

**Protecting heritage sites** - The *Heritage Conservation Act* provides protection for two categories of places and objects. Firstly, it provides for the protection of prescribed archaeological places and objects,' which include, among other things; places containing rock paintings or carvings, prehistoric or proto-historic occupation places; places containing human remains or burial artefacts; art sites, cultural objects and wood carvings. Under the *Heritage Conservation Act* consent of the Minister is required before work is carried out on or in relation to an archaeological place or object. Further, the *Heritage Conservation Act* also provides for the protection and conservation of declared heritage places and objects.

Under the *Heritage Conservation Regulations* a person who discovers an archaeological place or object must report the discovery and its location to the Director as soon as practicable after discovering it. In addition to this obligation, the Traditional Owners request that if any artefacts are uncovered they are not disturbed and are immediately reported to the senior men through the Central Land Council.

**Proposals for expansion of the Park** – There are no immediate proposals to expand the Park. The vision of a “greater park” linking the West MacDonnell National Park and parks and reserves of the East MacDonnell ranges has been investigated from time to time over several decades. There are opportunities to build links between protected areas of the East MacDonnells through cooperative arrangements with nearby landholders.

**Community living areas** in the district are an integral part of both the continuation of Aboriginal cultural practices in, and the natural and cultural resource management of the country. Through the *Pastoral Land Act*, Traditional Owners have achieved legal ownership of small land parcels in proximity of the Park.

**Mining** – The Park is small and any mining or extractive activities would adversely impact the sites cultural values. Under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (Cth)*, Traditional Owners have the right to control mining on Aboriginal Land. Currently, Traditional Owners feel strongly that mining is not consistent with the values of the Park and are unlikely to approve it.

**Dealing with proposals not in the Plan** – Any proposal not addressed in the Plan will be initially considered by the partners through the East MacDonnell Joint Management Committee. Any matter that may affect the interests of Traditional Owners will require the consent of affected Traditional Owners via a consultation process conducted by the CLC.

**Aim**

The Aims and Directions in this Plan achieved with resources used effectively on agreed priorities

**Management Directions**

**2.6 Management strategies and operational programs** – The partners will prepare and implement integrated management strategies and operational programs for parks and reserves of the East MacDonnells district, including Corroboree Rock and Trepkina Gorge Nature Parks.

**2.7 Day-to-day management** – Parks and Wildlife will be responsible for the day-to-day operations of the Park.

- **Financing** – Parks and Wildlife will finance and resource the Park's ongoing management including administrative functions, staff, infrastructure and services taking into account the funding available to the Service and the priorities determined across the NT. Opportunities to supplement the funding of Park operations and programs will be closely examined and could include revenue obtained from sub-leases, commercial agreements, permits etc. External funding may be sought for specific projects.

**2.8 Work experience, training and employment** – The partners will commit to building capacity, employment and career development opportunities for Traditional Owners of the East MacDonnells.

- **Indigenous training and employment strategy** - This strategy will be prepared at an agency level to maximise Aboriginal employment. This strategy will inform initiatives to increase the employment of Aboriginal people in the district. Aboriginal employment will remain a standing item at East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee meetings.

- **Indigenous employment opportunities in Parks and Wildlife** – Parks and Wildlife will continue to provide opportunities for work experience, training, casual work and direct employment of Aboriginal people from the east MacDonnell district where possible. Steps will be put in place to facilitate the uptake of higher level positions including Rangers, managers, technical, administrative and professional specialist positions subject to any applicable laws or policies in force in the Territory.

- **Partnerships with community-based Indigenous rangers and special interest groups** – Local Indigenous Community-based Rangers, community volunteers, and sponsored training and employment programs will be encouraged to assist with Park management.

- **Contract services** – Parks and Wildlife will encourage private sector participation to build the capacity of Aboriginal organisations to fulfil works and service contracts. Preference will be given to participation of Traditional Owners of the park in any commercial activities conducted under the lease subject to any law in force in the Territory. If other contractors are used, those providing training and employment to local Aboriginal people will be preferred.

**2.9 Tourism** – The partners will liaise with the tourism industry through established fora and organisations. Sustainable cultural and nature-based tourism will be fostered. Traditional Owners will be encouraged to take up commercial tourism opportunities including cultural tours or other viable enterprises the partners will actively seek assistance from agencies such as the CLC and Tourism NT.

**2.10 Cultural advice** – Traditional Owners will be paid for specialist cultural advice and supervision consistent with the Parks and Wildlife Indigenous Fee for Service Policy.

**2.11 Research, survey and monitoring** – Programs will be approved in operational strategies and subject to annual review. Participation by Traditional Owners and employment in research, survey and monitoring projects will be maximised. Indigenous knowledge components will be incorporated in project objectives and outcomes where appropriate.

**2.12 Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property** – Traditional Owners will retain ownership of their Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property and control the use of cultural information in keeping with standard policies developed and agreed by the CLC and Parks and Wildlife.

### **2.13 Regulated activities**

- **Permit policy and guidelines** – The East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee will establish local guidelines and conditions for the issue of permits, subject to the provisions of the TPWC Act and TPWC By-laws. These will consider the interests of Traditional Owners, industry needs and Parks and Wildlife policy. In the absence of guidelines, the CLC will consult with Traditional Owners over permit applications and advise Parks and Wildlife when appropriate.
- **Commercial film and photography** - Because of the high spiritual importance of N'Dhala Gorge the partners will not consent to any publication or broadcasting of images or film of any sacred site. Cultural restrictions will be communicated through site interpretation and commercial film and photography permit conditions.
- **Standard permit applications** – Delegated Parks and Wildlife staff can approve permit applications that involve activities or commercial concessions which comply with agreed guidelines and conditions, require no special access, and/or are of a nature or type that has already been considered by the East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee.
- **Non-standard permit applications** – Consultation with senior men may be required to provide direction to Park operations if a permit application involves special access or activities not addressed by agreed guidelines or conditions. A permit holder's rights, obligations and conditions will be detailed in conditions or operational agreements attached to the permit.
- **Routine commercial tours** – Permits for tour businesses making normal use of the Park will continue to be issued through the Tour Operator Permit System.
- **Remote area camping** - a permit will be required to camp outside a designated campground in accordance with TPWC By-laws.
- **Special events** – Because of the high spiritual importance of the site proposals for special events will not be encouraged.
- **Research** - Wildlife researchers require permits to interfere with, take or keep wildlife. Parks and Wildlife staff and Traditional Owners should be consulted in developing research proposals and proposals should be consistent with TPWC By-laws, Park policies and guidelines including ICIP (see Management Direction 4.1).

### **2.14 Research, survey and monitoring**

- **Research, survey and monitoring** – Programs will be approved in operational strategies and subject to annual review. Participation by Traditional Owners and employment in research, survey and monitoring projects will be maximised. Indigenous knowledge components will be incorporated in project objectives and outcomes where appropriate.
- **Visitor monitoring** – Visitor monitoring projects will be determined by the partners on an as needs basis.

**2.15 Development proposals** – Any proposal will require informed consent of affected Traditional Owners, consistent with the Lease and appropriate assessment processes.

- **Impact assessment** - The potential impacts of all proposed activities and developments will be considered and assessed commensurate with the scale of potential impact.
- **Commercial sublease** - To provide long-term security for commercial proponents the partners can provide long term sub-leases and operational arrangements and conditions for an enterprise.
- **Benefit-sharing agreements** – The partners may enter into benefit-sharing arrangements for commercial operations and developments within the Park.
- **Infrastructure sublease** – With approval of affected Traditional Owners, consistent with the Lease and appropriate assessment processes, this Plan provides the Territory Government the right to sub-lease or license portions of the Park for specific purposes, including public infrastructure.
- **Sacred sites clearances** –The Central Land Council will have sacred site clearance responsibility for all proposed work on the Park. However the joint management partners may agree from time to time that a proponent may require an Authority Certificate under the NTASSA, issued by the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority.
- **Heritage approvals** – Consent will be sought under the *Heritage Conservation Act* for works to prescribed Aboriginal Archaeological Places and Objects in the Park, historical sites and any significant development involving land disturbance. Sacred site clearances through the Central Land Council will also be sought for works to any archaeological sites on Park.
- **Cultural objects** - All archaeological materials are protected and must not be disturbed. A person who discovers an archaeological place or object must report the discovery to the NT Department responsible for environment and heritage. Traditional Owners also request that if any artefacts are immediately reported to the senior men through the Central Land Council.

**2.16 Extending the Park** – Any proposals to extend the Park by inclusion of adjoining land will be considered by the partners through the East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee.

**2.17 Establishing new community living areas** - Any proposal to create community living areas on the Park will be considered by the partners through the East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee.

**2.18 Mining and exploration** – Mining applications will be addressed through the ALRA. Fossicking will not be permitted. Nothing in the TPWC Act, limits the right of Traditional Owners to gather ochre within the Park.

**2.19 Dealing with proposals not in the Plan** – Any proposal not addressed in the Plan will be initially considered by the partners through the East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee. Any matter that may affect the interests of Traditional Owners will require the consent of affected Traditional Owners via a consultation process conducted by the CLC.

## 3. Zoning

The Park is managed for multiple purposes and different areas of the Park will be managed differently. The zoning plan is a general summary of the purpose and focus of management for all areas of the Park, based on the specific values of those areas and their level of visitor access and facility development.

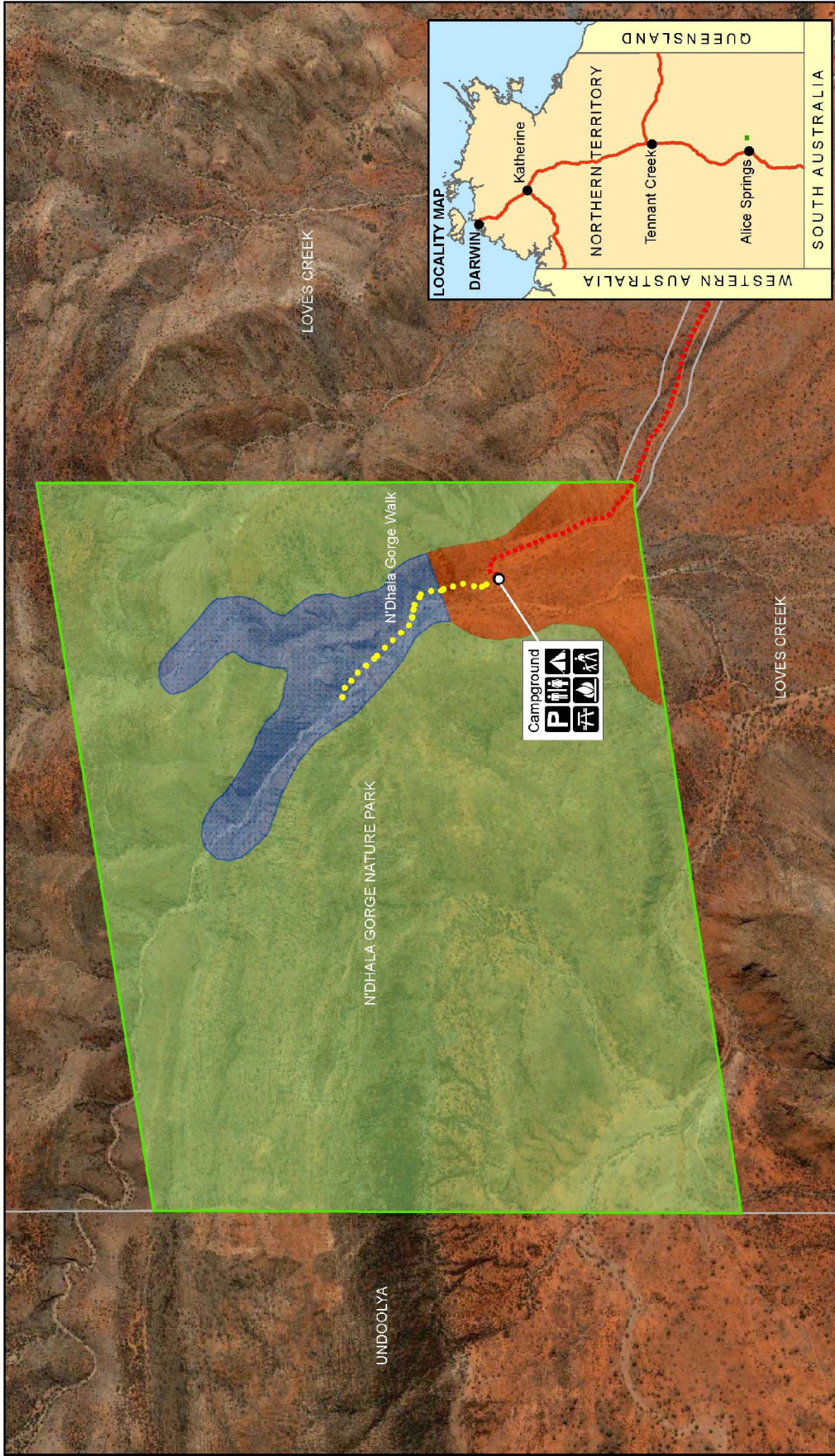
<p><b>Aim</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Park values protected whilst providing for public access and enjoyment.</li> </ul> <p><b>Management Directions</b></p> <p><b>3.1 Zoning</b> – Management of the Park will be in accordance with the zoning scheme (Table 2, Map 3).</p> <p><b>3.2 Development</b> - Regardless of the designated zone all management and development will maintain the Park’s natural character and conservation values. Any new development will be subject to approval of the partners and appropriate environmental, sacred site and cultural heritage protection legislation.</p> <p><b>3.3 Special protection zone</b> – To protect sites of exceptional conservation or cultural significance from threatening processes, special protection zones can be designated by the Committee in consultation with stakeholders.</p>
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**Table 2.** Zoning scheme.

	Visitor Zone	Conservation Zone	Special Protection Zone
Purpose	Concentrated visitor use whilst minimising negative impacts.	Protect natural and cultural values while allowing for personal nature/culturally based experiences.	Protect sacred and heritage sites.
Management Focus	Basic standard facilities and interpretation.	Conservation programs; fire, weed and feral animal management.	Protection of sacred and heritage sites.
Visitor Access	Basic standard access for conventional vehicles. Basic standard pedestrian access. Camping in approved campsites only.	Camping by permit only or in connection with approved concession.	No camping. Visitor access controlled if necessary.
Visitor Activity	Orientation and basic interpretation, picnicking, walking and cultural appreciation.	Overnight self-reliant bush walking, research and commercial tourism (including bush camping) under permit.	Cultural appreciation. Research, survey and monitoring under permit.
Facilities	Parking area, walking track, picnic facilities, shade shelter, interpretive signs, toilet and emergency facilities if needed.	Facilities necessary to ensure protection of values, ie. fences, vehicle barriers, interpretation.  Other developments are not precluded subject to good planning and protection.	Facilities necessary to ensure protection of values, ie. fences, vehicle barriers, interpretation.



Map 3. Zoning Map  
N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park Joint Management Plan (Draft)



**Zoning Scheme**

- Conservation Zone
- Visitor Zone
- Special Protection Zone
- Walking track
- 4WD Track
- N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park

**Facilities**

- Campground
- Parking Area
- Toilets
- Camping
- Picnic Facilities
- Short Walks
- Wood BBQ

**Scale**

0 0.5 1  
Kilometres

**LOCALITY MAP**

DARWIN KATHERINE TENNANT CREEK ALICE SPRINGS

WESTERN AUSTRALIA NORTHERN TERRITORY QUEENSLAND SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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Image © Google Earth, acquired Dec 2007

## 4 Managing Country

### Principles for managing country

The joint management partners of N'Dhala recognise that:

- Managing country means working together on country and managing natural and cultural values together;
- Management should protect and enhance Park values;
- Management of Indigenous cultural knowledge and sites is the responsibility of Traditional Owners; and
- Adverse impacts of wildfire, weeds, feral animals and erosion should be minimised.

### 4.1 Cultural heritage values

**4.1.1 Eastern Arrernte men's sacred site** - For Traditional Owners, N'Dhala Gorge or Ilwentje, has always been known as a dangerous place, visited only by senior men with special responsibilities. The site is part of a complex landscape of spiritual significance. Ilwentje consists of two gorges with approximately 6 000 individual stone engravings. Dreamings associated with the site include Utnerrengatye (Emu Bush caterpillars) that travel underground east from the Plenty River region, which emerge at a sacred site on Loves Creek where they are joined by Ayeparenye (Tar-vine caterpillars) and Ntyarlke (Elephant Grubs) and then travel to Ilwentye (N'Dhala Gorge). Some caterpillars continued east toward Anthwerrke (Emily Gap) which is the ampere akwetehe (the main and everlasting place) for the Caterpillar dreaming. Another very significant and highly restricted men's site occurs within Ilwentje and requires a high level of protection.

**Cultural restrictions** - The site poses spiritual danger to Aboriginal women, children and uninitiated men and senior men feel a strong responsibility to ensure observance of rules that keep forces in check. Visitors ignoring these concerns cause them alarm and distress.

Aboriginal women, children and uninitiated men should be warned about the cultural restrictions about the site. For their safety, senior men want ensure that they do not enter past the first waterhole. Park staff and visitors who enter Ilwentye past the first waterhole are required to remain on the marked track. Any work undertaken beyond the first waterhole must be accompanied by a senior male Traditional owner.

**Aboriginal knowledge** - Important knowledge is passed to the next generation through restricted ceremonies connected to this area. The need to transfer knowledge and practices from old to young people is one of the most important issues identified by Traditional Owners. They hold accumulated knowledge spanning thousands of years that will continue to inform and inspire future generations. Recording cultural heritage, particularly oral stories is a priority for Traditional Owners. They also want to incorporate Indigenous ecological knowledge, skills and experiences into on-ground operations for the Park, and ensure it is applied appropriately and in the right context.

There is great scope for Traditional Owners to interpret the significance of the Park to Park staff, commercial operators and visitors. Together the partners can promote an understanding and respect for the traditions, languages, cultures, customs and skills of Traditional Owners. The partners seek to ensure Traditional Owners are always recognised

as the owners of their knowledge and retain the right to control who can use their knowledge and how.

#### **4.1.2 Archaeological sites and objects (including art sites and artefacts)**

The abundance and diversity of engravings within the Park are among the most valuable cultural sites in central Australia. The site was listed in the Northern Territory Heritage Register in 1997.

The petroglyphs of N'Dhala Gorge are found on individually engraved boulders and clusters of engravings. The 6,000 individual petroglyphs are found in 438 engraved sites along the main gorge and 240 engraved sites in the side gorge. Two periods of engravings have been suggested, the first period of engraving possibly occurred around 10 000 years BP and second starting about 3 000 years BP.

A range of archaeological materials also occur within the Park including stone artefacts, charcoal and animal remains, a stone arrangement, hunting hide and painting sites. Such archaeological remains and artwork contribute to our understanding of human adaptations to the arid zone.

**Managing threatening processes** – Fire, plants and human interference are the main threats to the archaeological values of the Park. The petroglyphs can be irreparably damaged by visitors as they explore the gorges. It is also important to note that the Park has suffered from bouts of graffiti and vandalism in the past. Souveniring of artefacts is also a concern.

**Interpretation** - The 'in situ' protection of the park's petroglyphs and well considered removal of any graffiti will maintain the archaeological values of the Park. There is a need to promote the value of the petroglyphs to visitors and to build an awareness of their fragility.

#### **Aims**

- Traditional Owners satisfied with their involvement, fulfilment of their cultural responsibilities and protection of the sacred site.
- Archaeological sites are protected and monitored.

#### **Management Directions**

**4.1 District cultural heritage management strategy (five years) and annual operational programs (one year)** - A cultural heritage management strategy and annual operational program for the East MacDonnell district will be developed with Traditional Owners and consideration of advice provided by specialist groups such as NT Heritage. The partners and Central Land Council will work together to identify supporting resources if required.

- **“Back to country”** – With support from the Central Land Council the partners will spend time on country together, facilitating transmission of cultural knowledge and skills between Traditional Owner families, to the younger generation and to the rangers, as appropriate.
- **Aboriginal cultural business** – Parks and Wildlife will respect advice relating to cultural matters and customary obligations from Traditional Owners. Ample notice will be given to the public regarding temporary closures.
- **Recording of oral histories and Indigenous knowledge** – is a high priority to senior men to strengthen their responsibilities and continue their traditions. Due to the sensitive nature of this information CLC will be responsible for providing support.
- **Indigenous ecological knowledge** and priorities will be incorporated into park

management operations with active involvement of Traditional Owners in planning and implementation activities.

- **Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)** – Cultural knowledge will not be used, or permitted to be used without the prior consent of the Traditional Owners. Wherever possible, the partners will assist the Traditional Owners assert their intellectual property rights, consistent with standard policies developed and agreed by the CLC and Parks and Wildlife.

**4.2 Culturally sensitive areas** – Subject to any relevant laws in force in the Northern Territory, Park operations will uphold restrictions and guidelines for sacred sites or culturally sensitive areas of the Park as directed by senior men or the Central Land Council as their representative.

- **Warning signs** - Warning signs will be presented at the car park and at the first waterhole explaining the area is an important men's sacred site with significant cultural restrictions.

**4.3 Sacred site clearances** – see Management Direction 2.15.

**4.4 Cultural heritage approval** – see Management Direction 2.15.

**4.5 Cultural objects** - see Management Direction 2.15.

**4.6 Archaeological sites** - The 'in situ' protection and appropriate interpretation of the park's petroglyphs will be a high priority. The district cultural heritage management strategy will incorporate assessment, conservation, protection and monitoring of the petroglyphs and archaeological sites in collaboration other experts, including NT Heritage Officers. The Burra Charter principles and process will guide this assessment.

- **Training** - will be provided for Traditional Owners in cultural site management including rock art preservation techniques.
- **Interpretation** - will aim to increase visitors' awareness of the fragility of the petroglyphs and their help in protecting the petroglyphs.
- **Research** - research into conservation of the engravings will be encouraged.

## 4.2 Natural Heritage Values

### 4.2.1 Natural character

N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park is set in deeply dipping sandstone ranges which rise steeply above the surrounding area. The Gorge has been incised by a minor tributary of the nearby Ross River. The Park contains two gorges: a main gorge about 1.1 km long and a side gorge about 800m long. The creek through N'Dhala Gorge has a catchment which covers roughly 1,400 hectares, although much of this lies outside the Park.

**Native vegetation** - The Park protects a number of plant communities typical of the Eastern MacDonnell Ranges. The Park also provides protection for three plants listed as "vulnerable" nationally under the EPBC Act.

- Undoolya Wattle (*Acacia undoolyana*) is managed under a recovery plan (Nano et al 2007) and is currently only protected in N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park;
- MacDonnell Ranges Cycad (*Macrozamia macdonnellii*), endemic to the central Australian ranges and a relict from a wetter era; and
- Glory of the Centre Wedding Bush (*Ricinocarpos gloria-medii*), endemic to the MacDonnell Bioregion, having been found only in the East MacDonnell Ranges and at

### Simpsons Gap.

**Native animals** - The environment of the Gorge is considered a refuge for many native animals. Some of the larger mammals such as Euros (*Macropus robustus*), Black-footed Rock Wallabies (*Petrogale lateralis*) and Dingoes are commonly found within the Park and over 35 species of birds have been sighted within the Park.

**Managing threatening processes** - Major threats to the natural values of the Park are likely to result from the impact of stock, uncontrolled fire and the activities of people.

**Fire** - Fire has long been a part of the environment and has played a major part in shaping the district's vegetation. However recent, rapidly changed fire regimes fuelled by Buffel and Couch grasses, are damaging the petroglyphs, fire sensitive plant communities and the broader ecosystem. Fire-sensitive plants of the Park include *Acacia undoolyana* Native Figs (*Ficus platypoda*) and White Cypress Pine (*Callitris glaucophylla*).

Long-term management goals in the Park are protecting the sacred sites, petroglyphs, and fire-sensitive plant communities. It is important for senior men to be involved in all fire planning, burning and weed control associated with the sacred sites of the Park. Fire management requires strategic fire breaks and fuel reduction around cultural sites during cooler months, or after rain.

**Weeds and invasive plants** - Sixteen introduced plant species have been recorded within N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park. Buffel Grass and Couch Grass are the highest priority invasive plants for control as they increase the frequency and intensity of fires potentially damaging sacred sites, petroglyphs and fire sensitive vegetation. Buffel Grass extends well into the range country, whilst Couch Grass is found along waterways and the gorges.

**Feral animals** - Large introduced herbivores such as cattle and horses threaten the Park's values by disturbing the vegetation cover and encouraging weed infestation. Other introduced animals known to have occurred in the Park include Cats, Foxes, Rabbits, and European Honey Bees. The northern section of the Park is unfenced and allows stock into the Park. Approximately 3 kilometres of the southern perimeter of the Park is fenced and regularly maintained and as such is effective in excluding stock from the southern section of the Park.

#### **Aims**

- No significant wildfires.
- Low risk of wildfire to fire-sensitive vegetation
- No large introduced herbivores.

#### **Management Directions**

**4.7 District operational strategies (5 yr) and annual operational programs (1 yr)** - Any fire, weed, feral animal and erosion work carried out on the Park will be directed through district operational strategies. They will include all parks of the East MacDonnells district and be prepared approximately every 5 years. Annual operational programs implement the strategies and need only be brief documents specifying the inputs and outputs needed to meet defined strategic targets. Annual operational programs will take due consideration of available resources and priorities at a district and Territory level. Operational management strategies will:

- take an integrated approach between parks and reserves of the East MacDonnell district; and
- focus on key values and set clear 5-10 year targets to attain long-term aims (10-20 years) of this Plan and other Park Plans of the district;

Any management activity on or near sacred sites will be planned and implemented with

senior men. The partners will also work with adjoining landowners and local experts for district planning and management.

The operational management priorities for N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park are to protect the physical integrity of sacred and archaeological sites and fire sensitive vegetation communities.

**4.8 Biodiversity conservation** –will be addressed through district operational strategies and implemented through annual operational programs. Traditional Owners will be involved in biodiversity conservation activities where possible.

- **Conservation management links** - will be encouraged between Park and off-Park lands at a district scale through collaboration with nearby landholders, including Loves Creek and the Gardens pastoral stations to gain better conservation and employment outcomes.

**4.9 Fire management** - will aim to minimise the risk of large wildfires. Strategic fire breaks and fuel reduction burns in fire-tolerant communities may occur during cooler months, or after rain. Park staff who enter Ilwentye past the first waterhole must be accompanied by a senior male Traditional owner.

- **Fire Monitoring** - Fire history and ecological responses to fire will be recorded and entered into relevant, centrally-held databases.

**4.10 Invasive plant management**– Buffel and Couch grasses will be controlled to create breaks in otherwise continuous wildlife-carrying fuel. Park staff who enter Ilwentye past the first waterhole must be accompanied by a senior male Traditional owner.

- **Weed Monitoring** - The risk posed by new weed species outbreaks will be assessed as soon as possible following detection.

**4.11 Feral animal management** – will aim to exclude large introduced herbivores from the Park. Boundary fencing will be maintained and large introduced herbivores removed as soon as possible.

**4.12 Soil conservation** — will aim to minimise disturbance to Park soils.

- **Soil rehabilitation** - Degraded areas will be identified and progressively rehabilitated using specialist advice.

- **Extraction** - Soil, gravel or rocks will not be removed or disturbed except subject to conditions of a Sacred Site Clearance, Heritage approval and a permit issued under the TPWC By-laws as necessary.

## 5. Managing Visitors

The petroglyphs are the Park's principal attraction and the focus of visitor attention. Most of the 5,000 visitors each year enjoy the Park for a few hours only.

### Principles for managing visitor experiences

The joint management partners of N'Dhala recognise that:

- Positive experiences produce satisfied visitors, who may build a sense of connection and responsibility for the Park.
- Visitors' appreciation and respect for the Park is enhanced by sharing information about the Park's unique natural and cultural values.
- Well-designed facilities help protect Park values and promote safe, enjoyable visitor experiences.

### 5.1 Engaging with the Arrernte's living cultural landscape

N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park is a place of reverence and spiritual connection for Traditional Owners. There is an opportunity to promote greater awareness of the Eastern Arrernte's living cultural landscape across the wider East MacDonnell district. However some cultural information is restricted due to its living cultural values.

The partners are keen to improve the presentation of the Park while carefully managing information presented to the public. They hope that by encouraging visitors to the site that non-Aboriginal people will gain a better appreciation of its importance and respect for its traditions.

**Local tourism** - Traditional Owners seek the opportunity to develop niche tourism operations and share their stories with visitors. The East MacDonnells Joint Management Committee will help provide a consistent platform for the partners and the wider community to exchange ideas, develop tourism opportunities and reinforce progress.

The partners will actively seek the assistance from NT Government agencies associated with tourism, employment and training, as well as the CLC to support Traditional Owners who seek to develop tourism enterprises.

**Cultural restrictions** - Warning signs should be clearly presented on the access road and walking track to warn Aboriginal visitors that N'Dhala Gorge is an important men's sacred site and dangerous for Aboriginal women, children and uninitiated men.

**Park access** - Access to the Park is via a public track beginning near the Ross River Resort and passing along the Ross River valley through Loves Creek Station. The track terminates in a small unsealed car park and camp ground about ten kilometres from the Resort at the south-east end of the Park.

The vehicle track to the Park is unsealed and extremely sandy in places, especially where there are river crossings, and is therefore recommended for use by four-wheel-drive vehicles only. Visitors need to be forewarned of the difficulties involved in accessing the Park, particularly after local flooding.

The condition of these roads affects visitor access and limits visitor numbers. The Ross River may flow after heavy rains making the track impassable.

All vehicles should be restricted to the road and car park to avoid damage to the fragile environment at the site.

### **Facilities**

*Walking track* - Presently one marked walking track leads from the Visitor Zone for approximately one kilometre up the main gorge and returns along the same route. The definition of the track deteriorates along its length however there are regular directional markers. The track generally follows the path of the stream bed and walkers must negotiate rocky sections along the way.

Extreme care and vigilance must be taken when reforming tracks that rocks containing petroglyphs or fossils are not removed or damaged in any way. The track leads visitors through the Gorge avoiding hazardous areas, rocky sections, vulnerable plants, sacred sites and petroglyphs liable to be damaged.

*Camping and picnicking* – The Park provides limited overnight camping opportunities for visitors seeking an attractive and secluded alternative to the nearby Ross River Resort and Trephina Gorge camping grounds. Existing facilities include a few picnic tables with barbeques, toilet, and three individual campsites. The facilities are basic but adequate for current visitation. Any upgraded facilities should be designed to only require low maintenance.

Out of respect for the sacred sites and to protect the petroglyphs Traditional Owners require visitors to stay on the walking track and not drink alcohol beyond the campground. Camping and camp fires are restricted to designated sites in the visitor zone.

**Interpretation** - Public knowledge helps promote appreciation and respect, and reduces the risk of unintentional damage. The walking track leads visitors to two rock engravings where the sacred site begins. An unmarked track continues through the sacred area, however, visitors are left with no information about its importance to Traditional Owners.

Traditional Owners are interested in promoting the Park as a place of cultural and spiritual importance. However, given the spiritual significance of the site senior men will not consent to any publication or broadcasting of images or film associated with sacred sites.

Within N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park interpretation should:

- Be integrated with other parks and reserves of the East MacDonnell Ranges;
- Remain focused on the Park's living cultural values and petroglyphs; and
- Carefully manage information and images to ensure Aboriginal women, children and uninitiated men do not see explicit images or photographs of the petroglyphs.

**Safety** - All visitor activity on the Park carries some risk of injury. Rangers are trained in emergency response and first aid, and regularly patrol to monitor facilities and visitor behaviour. Facilities are maintained to the highest practicable standards for visitor safety. A district Emergency Response Plan, which is reviewed annually provides Rangers with clear direction in an emergency.

### **Aims**

- Traditional Owners participating in the local tourism industry.
- Visitors enjoy themselves, are safe and highly satisfied.

### **Management Directions**

**5.1 Park presentation** - The joint management partners will actively seek the assistance of Tourism NT, Tourism Central Australia and other agencies to ensure N'Dhala Gorge is promoted consistent with its values as a sacred site.



**5.2 Indigenous tourism** – At a district level, the partners will work with the tourism industry, Central Land Council and local operators to foster Aboriginal employment in tourism and assist development of local Indigenous tourism enterprise.

**5.3 Visitor interpretation** – The Partners will develop an interpretation strategy and annual operational program for the East MacDonnell district. They will invest in moderate levels of interpretation in the Park and deliver community education where possible.

- **Visitor Information** – will encourage petroglyphs protection and understanding of the sites cultural importance. Orientation material will be used to guide visitors to the main viewing sites and away from fragile or vulnerable petroglyphs.
- **Image restrictions** - To the best of their ability, the partners will manage information and images of N'Dhala Gorge to ensure Aboriginal women, children and uninitiated men do not read about or see images of the petroglyphs from the site. The partners will not consent to any publication or broadcasting of images or film of sacred sites.
- **Tour operator and tour guide support** – Material will be provided to tour operators, so they can provide accurate and appropriate information about the Park's values. Opportunities to Traditional Owners to train operators will also be explored.
- **Monitoring** - Information shared with the public will be monitored by senior men and through consultations with the CLC.

**5.4 Visitor access** - The road will be maintained to reduce the risk of erosion. All vehicle and foot traffic will be restricted to the formed road and walking path.

- **Cultural warnings** – will be established at the Park entrance on the access road to warn visitors that N'Dhala Gorge is an important men's sacred site with significant cultural restrictions with penalties for infringement.
- **Four-wheel-drive access** - The track will be retained as a four-wheel-drive standard. Visitors will be advised of the standard of access at the Ross River Junction by a cautionary sign. All vehicle traffic will be restricted to formed roads which will be constructed to appropriate standards to minimise undesirable impacts.
- **Road closures** - In the event of flooding of the Ross River, the track may be closed to public access by agencies responsible for roads and infrastructure until safely passable. The Park or areas within it may also be temporarily closed to the public for fire, rehabilitation works and important ceremonies. These infrequent events will be appropriately publicised.
- **Road maintenance** - The partners will actively seek the assistance from the relevant road management and soil conservation advisory branches within the Northern Territory Government, to determine the most appropriate techniques to upgrade and maintain road access, reduce erosion and minimise the impact of flooding on visitor access.
- **Pets** - Entry of pets will be consistent with existing Parks and Wildlife policy.

**5.5 Visitor facilities** – Current facilities will be maintained to provide a moderate standard of service to visitors, and subject to resources upgrades will be to a general design standard. Management and maintenance of the campground and picnic area may be outsourced.

- **Future development** – The East MacDonnell's Joint Management Committee will annually endorse rolling five-year works plans and site development for parks and reserves for the district. Decisions will be made in accordance with structures and processes outlined in section 2.
- **Walking track** – Visitors will be encouraged to keep to the walking track. The track may be rehabilitated and maintained to a Class 4 standard (AS 2156.1-2001), depending on available resources. This standard enables visitors to walk in a slightly modified natural environment where interpretation and facilities are not common. Off-track exploration of the

Park will be discouraged.

- **Camping and campfires** – Due to low-use the partners will review the provision of camping facilities in the Park. In the interim the camping area will be maintained to provide 'bush style' camping. Camping and open fires are only permitted in designated sites. The collection of firewood inside the Park is not permitted. Signs will inform visitors of regulations concerning the use of fires within the Park. Private generators will not be permitted in the campground.
- **Rubbish** – No bins will be provided and visitors will be encouraged to take their rubbish with them.

#### **5.6 Other activities**

- **Rock climbing, abseiling and mountain-bike riding** – will not be permitted in the Park.
- **Alcohol** – Signs will be placed asking visitors not to drink alcohol outside the campground.

**5.7 Visitor safety** – The Emergency Response Plan for parks and reserves of the district will be reviewed annually. Identified risks will be rectified on a priority basis and rangers will receive appropriate training. Tour operators will be encouraged to report incidents and safety issues to Park Operations.

## Appendix 1. Selected performance indicators

These performance indicators are an additional tool to assist the joint management partners to measure the success of management. They are not the only measures of success and other measures may be developed over time. There is a reasonable expectation that they will be achieved, if not year by year, then over the longer term of this plan. When indicators are not achieved, the reasons need to be established and steps taken to improve outcomes.

Aims	Performance Indicators	Targets	Means
<b>Managing Visitors</b>			
Visitors enjoy themselves; be safe and highly satisfied.	Visitor satisfaction Number of safety related incidents	90% Low	Visitor surveys for specific requirements
Traditional Owners participating in the tourism industry.	Traditional Owner satisfaction	High	Partner satisfaction monitoring (see Mgt. Dir. 2.4).
<b>Managing Country</b>			
Traditional Owners satisfied with the protection of cultural sites.	Traditional Owner satisfaction.	High	Partner satisfaction monitoring.
Archaeological sites protected and monitored.	Conservation standards (to be determined with Heritage Branch).	High	Ongoing record-keeping, reporting and review.
No significant wildfires and low risk to fire-sensitive vegetation.	Area burnt in fire-tolerant vegetation communities Area burnt in fire-sensitive vegetation	> 5% annually < 10% over 10 years in total	Fire mapping, ongoing data management and review.
No large introduced herbivores	Presence of large introduced herbivores Existing boundary fence maintained	Nil Stock proof	Opportunistic sightings.
<b>Park Governance</b>			
Equitable partnership with effective governance.	Joint Management Partners Satisfied with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communication and Engagement</li> <li>- Representation and Decision-making processes</li> <li>- Building capacity</li> </ul>	High	Partner satisfaction monitoring. Ongoing record-keeping, reporting and review.
The Aims and Directions in this Plan are achieved with resources used effectively on agreed priorities.	Achievement of Aims and Management Directions in this plan Implementation of strategies and annual operational programs	Outcomes realised % of priority actions completed	Partner satisfaction monitoring. Ongoing record-keeping, reporting and review.