INCA CONSULTING

EVALUATION OF THE PROTECTING OUR PLACES PROGRAM

Final report

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Protecting Our Places (POP) program was established by the Trust in 2002, to specifically fund Aboriginal organisations to deliver projects to:

- restore or rehabilitate Aboriginal land or land that is culturally significant to Aboriginal people

- educate Aboriginal and other communities about the local environment and the value Aboriginal communities place on their natural environment.

Applications are open to Aboriginal community groups, incorporated Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal Corporations, registered with the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC). Unincorporated Aboriginal community groups must partner with an organisation that is able to administer the grant – usually an Aboriginal Land Council, Aboriginal Corporation or Local Government organisation.

The establishment of the POP fund was a response to concern that Aboriginal community organisations were not pursuing or being successful in applying for 'mainstream' grants available through other NSW Environmental Trust programs. It is important to note that the POP program was established at the discretion of the Trust – there is no specific requirement in the Act to make grants to any particular types of organisations or communities.

Evaluation objectives

The Trust engaged Inca Consulting to undertake an evaluation of the POP program, from 2009 to 2014, in order to:

- examine the effectiveness and suitability of the POP program in achieving the objectives of the NSW Environmental Trust

- examine the effectiveness and efficiency of the current POP program funding and administrative models in achieving its program objectives

- identify strengths and/or weaknesses in the delivery of the POP program in both Trust administration and grantees

- identify constraints and opportunities within grant target groups in relation to applying for and implementing POP grants and suggest better ways for the Trust to manage these

- identify potential improvements to program design, delivery and/or administration.

The evaluation featured, among other things, an analysis of program data and documentation, the review of 40 projects and wide-ranging consultation with grantees, Trust staff and other stakeholders.

Evaluation results

The Protecting Our Places (POP) program has, since 2009, provided small grants for 79 projects. The projects have featured a variety of activities including weeding, bush regeneration, provision of walking trails, fencing and other protection of environmentally and culturally sensitive sites, bush tucker gardens, interpretive signage, community education and engagement activities, the production of educational and cultural resources and so forth.

The projects have been associated with a host of environmental outcomes. For example, for grants awarded in the year of 2011, the following outcomes were measured:

- At least 135 hectares were weeded

- At least 119 hectares of bush was regenerated

- Nearly 9,000 new plants were established

- At least 183 educational events were run, engaging at over 1,500 participants

- Other education and engagement activities reached over 111,000 people

- At least 745 school students were engaged through the projects in some way.

In addition, a host of ancillary outcomes have been seen, most notably the provision of employment and work experience opportunities for Aboriginal people, enhancement of the viability of Aboriginal bush regeneration teams and the like, the strengthening of relationships between Aboriginal community and other local organisations, the engagement of non-Aboriginal people and the showcasing of the ability of Aboriginal community organisations to carry out worthwhile projects.

The POP program is important to Aboriginal community organisations for a host of reasons but is of increased importance in the context of diminishing funding being available to these organisations for projects of an environmental nature. It is important to note that in addition to the funds provided by the Trust, grantees and partner organisations contribute a significant amount of in-kind support in the form of staff hours. Across projects, this in-kind contribution is far greater than originally anticipated by grantees. There are a number of explanations for this, but it needs to be acknowledged that there is a risk of projects becoming a financial drain on grantees particularly if they are not well supported throughout.
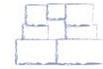
The program provides some benefit to the Trust in meeting its aims and obligations. More importantly, it provides an opportunity to support environmental works on Aboriginal lands in NSW and provides a conduit to Aboriginal communities for the delivery of culturally appropriate environmental education. It is a program that the Trust has pride in and contributes to the NSW Government's effort to support Aboriginal communities.

Grant recipients are generally not well-resourced organisations and they may lack capacity, particularly in terms of project management skills, project budgeting and the methods for reporting on environmental outcomes. In addition to organisational capacity, grantees often face various external challenges that impact on the success of projects. The Trust carries this understanding into its interactions with grantees and provides support to the degree that it can. It should be noted though that the Trust has experienced some serious difficulties in managing poor grantee performance and obtaining information about project outcomes. The program has an administrative cost that is much higher (proportionally) than other Trust grant programs.

However, many projects are well implemented and documented and show good outcomes that at times exceed the targets that were set. Other projects appear to have achieved some good outcomes but a lack of clarity in reporting makes this a little unclear. There is evidence of better grantee performance and more timely provision of information to the Trust, observed in the last few years (since 2011). It is likely that stronger outcomes will be seen from the pool of projects that are currently in progress (but for which outcomes data is not yet available).

The evaluation makes a number of recommendations relating to the way the program is promoted, the selection of successful applications and the support provided to grantees.
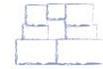
1. INTRODUCTION AND EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

1.1 The NSW Environmental Trust

The NSW Environmental Trust (the Trust) was established by the Environmental Trust Act 1998 to, among other things:

- encourage and support restoration and rehabilitation projects in both the public and the private sectors that will or are likely to prevent or reduce pollution, the waste-stream or environmental degradation, of any kind, within any part of New South Wales

- promote environmental education and, in particular, to encourage the development of educational programs in both the public and the private sectors that will increase public awareness of environmental issues of any kind.

Section 8 of the Act states that the Trust may, for the purpose of promoting its objects above:

- make grants (either unconditionally or subject to conditions) for projects

- supervise the expenditure of money so granted.

The Trust has five members, chaired by the Minister for the Environment, NSW. The Act also specifies that the Trust shall appoint Technical Review Committees, including industry and community representatives, to assist the Trust in the exercise of its functions. The Trust is supported by a staff, currently administered by the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage.

Since its establishment, the NSW Environmental Trust has operated grants programs in various streams and under a variety of program names.

1.2 The Protecting Our Places program

The Protecting Our Places (POP) program was established by the Trust in 2002, to specifically fund Aboriginal organisations to deliver projects to:

- restore or rehabilitate Aboriginal land or land that is culturally significant to Aboriginal people

- educate Aboriginal and other communities about the local environment and the value Aboriginal communities place on their natural environment.

Applications are open to Aboriginal community groups, incorporated Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal Corporations, registered with the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC). Unincorporated Aboriginal community groups

must partner with an organisation that is able to administer the grant – usually an Aboriginal Land Council, Aboriginal Corporation or Local Government organisation.

The establishment of the POP fund was a response to concern on the part of the Trust that Aboriginal community organisations were not pursuing or being successful in applying for 'mainstream' grants available through other NSW Environmental Trust programs. It is important to note that the POP program was established at the discretion of the Trust – there is no specific requirement in the Act to make grants to any particular types of organisations or communities.

Support is provided to potential applicants through the delivery of regional workshops to encourage participation and to assist with the framing of grant applications. Further assistance is available to applicants on an ad-hoc basis via the Trust's Aboriginal program's officer (a position designated for Aboriginal employees). In response to a recommendation made in the 2009 review of the POP program, a contractor was engaged by the Trust's Administration to assist grant recipients to develop monitoring and evaluation plans for their projects, particularly in instances where grantee capacity to plan for evaluation was limited.

Since 2002, nearly $4 million has been used to fund over 125 projects. Grantees have included Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs), Aboriginal Corporations, elders groups and unincorporated local community groups (under the auspices of an eligible administrator). Funded projects have included a wide variety of activities, including revegetation and restoration projects, waste management projects, cultural education activities, provision of bush food trails and the like, provision of interpretive signage and protection of sites or cultural significance. It is hoped that, apart from delivering a worthwhile project, grantees will be in a better position to successfully apply for larger grants available through other NSW Environmental Trust programs.

1.3 Evaluation of the Protecting Our Places program

The NSW Environmental Trust evaluates its grant programs (approximately every five years) to assess achieved outcomes. This evaluation work informs decision-making and guides ongoing improvements in program design and management. The POP program was last evaluated in 2009.

The Trust engaged Inca Consulting to undertake an evaluation of the POP program, from 2009 to 2014, in order to:

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- examine the effectiveness and efficiency of the current POP program funding and administrative models in achieving its program objectives

- identify strengths and/or weaknesses in the delivery of the POP program in both Trust administration and grantees

- identify constraints and opportunities within grant target groups in relation to applying for and implementing POP grants and suggest better ways for the Trust to manage these

- identify potential improvements to program design, delivery and/or administration.

An evaluation framework was developed as part of the project and is included at Appendix A. It sets out a hierarchy of outcomes for the program and the research questions that were developed for the evaluation.
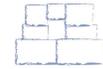
2. EVALUATION METHODS

The evaluation made use of the following research methods:

- Initial briefings provided by representatives of the NSW Environmental Trust

- A review of program documentation including Technical Committee meeting papers, past evaluation reports, program guidelines, application forms, reporting templates etc

- A review of the project documentation available on file for a selection of 40 POP projects between 2009 and 2014

- A review of outcomes data provided by grant recipients and aggregated by the Trust.

- Interviews with grantees, administrators, project partners and other stakeholders associated with eight POP projects (noting that some difficulty was experienced in obtaining responses from all stakeholders associated with all of the selected projects)

- Interviews with Trust representatives, including past and present grant administrators and members of the POP Technical Committee (ten interviews in total)

- A desktop review of a number of comparable grants programs from Australia and overseas.
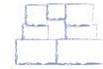
3. OUTCOMES OF PROTECTING OUR PLACES

This section of the report sets out the evaluation findings, as they relate to the *outcomes* of the POP program. Section 4 of this report sets out the findings as they relate to the administrative *processes* associated with the program.

### 3.1 Overview of POP grants 2009-2014

The following table sets out the number of successful and unsuccessful grant applications received each year since 2009.

Table 1. Successful and unsuccessful POP grant applications 2009-2015

Year	Successful – recommended by Technical Committee	Unsuccessful	Total applications received
2009	15	12	27
2010	12	9	21
2011	16	9	25
2012	10+2[*]	4	14+4[*]
2013	16	23	39
2014	22[+]	26	48
Total	**93**	**83**	**178**

It needs to be noted that, between 2009 and 2014, five approved applications were subsequently withdrawn and two grants were revoked by the Trust. It also needs to be noted (*) that in 2012, a supplementary round of grants was offered by invitation to four select Local Aboriginal Land Councils, resulting in two additional grants being awarded. Also of note (+) is that in 2014, 15 projects were initially recommended by the Trust and an additional seven 'reserve' projects were identified and awarded grants on 2015. **In summary, between 2009 and 2014, there were 79 projects funded through the POP program and which have either been fully acquitted or are currently active.**

Of note in the table above is the sharp increase in application numbers since 2013. This may be a result of growing awareness of and/or interest in the availability of POP grants but may also be related to other factors including government demands on LALC
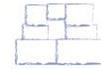
services, the availability of other types of funding, the operation of local Aboriginal community employment programs) etc. Whatever the reason, the growth in applications is clearly advantageous from the point of view of the Trust. A larger field of applications (theoretically at least) increases the likelihood that a larger number of good quality applications are received. This in turn allows the Trust to select a more diverse set of projects to fund. Prior to 2013, more than half of grant applications were successful. In 2013 and 2014, only about one in three grant applications was successful.

Recommendation: Through continued promotion of the POP program, the Trust should aim to always attract a sufficient number of applications to allow the selection of a diverse set of high quality projects. Should the number of quality applications received grow further, some consideration should be given to an increase in the total fund set aside for POP projects.

Of the 74 projects commenced since 2009, 30 projects have been fully acquitted and the remainder remain active. POP grants are generally provided over a two-year period, however, at June 2015 there were five projects from 2009 that remained active and six from 2010. There are various reasons for this, discussed in detail in section 3.6.

The files associated with 40 randomly-selected POP projects (between 2009 and 2014) were interrogated as a part of the evaluation. This process provided a good overview of the nature of POP projects and highlighted a range of issues associated with the program, that are discussed in more detail later in this report, but summarised as follows:

- The nature of projects was quite diverse. There was a strong focus, across projects, on bush restoration and regeneration but there was a variety of other innovative projects

- Most projects included a community education and engagement (CEE) component, whether through the process of developing and implementing the project or through a 'celebration' process. Many projects featured strong engagement with local schools, using the opportunity to educate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people about Aboriginal cultural heritage and connections with the land

- Many projects provided employment or work experience opportunities for Aboriginal people and provided many Aboriginal people with the opportunity to work 'on country' and maintain their connection with the land

- Many projects reported ancillary outcomes, in particular the strengthening of relationships between local stakeholders, for example between the LALC, local Council, NPWS, local schools
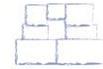
- Several projects helped to leverage funds and other resources from various sources, for example local council, NPWS, other grant programs. Often this resulted in an extension or augmentation of works carried out using POP funds

- For some projects, strong environmental outcomes were clear to see through the reporting provided to the Trust. For other projects, the information provided by the grantee provided some confidence that good outcomes were achieved, but the standard of reporting was fairly basic, making it difficult to see the extent of the outcomes achieved. For other projects, it was plain to see that the project had not gone smoothly and that the intended outcomes were not fully realised. This is discussed more fully in section 3.6.

- Many grantees had difficulties in meeting the timelines and there were many instances of M&E plans, interim and final reports and audited financial statements being provided well after the due date. Extensions were granted for a fairly large proportion of projects. Again, the reasons for these difficulties are discussed in section 3.6.

- A considerable amount of correspondence was exchanged between the Trust and grantees in establishing the status of projects. There were many examples of correspondence being unanswered by grantees.

- Many projects encountered significant challenges brought about by a variety of organisational and external factors. These challenges impacted on timelines but were 'worked through' by the grantee, sometimes with the assistance of the Trust.

- There was some evidence of capacity being built within communities and community organisations to deliver environmental projects.

- Projects that were delivered by an Aboriginal community organisation in association with a Local Council or some other organisation tended to be better documented and to show stronger outcomes.

- Projects commenced in more recent years (in particular 2013 and 2014) were documented with more clarity and appeared likely to demonstrate clearer outcomes.

The above observations are substantiated through stakeholder consultation and, to reiterate, are discussed in more detail later in this report.

3.2 Measurable POP project outcomes

The information provided to the Trust by recipients of grants across all the Trust's programs makes its way into a database that is used to demonstrate the environmental and other outcomes associated with grant funded projects. The database allows comparisons between the projected and actual outcomes across a variety of measures – land area regenerated, number of plantings, number of CEE events, number of

volunteers etc. Of course, the data set has some limitations. The accuracy and completeness of the data is contingent on the information being properly reported to the Trust and the effect of project delays means that the more recent data, the less complete the dataset.

In the case of POP, it is most useful then to consider the data in relation to the 16 grants awarded in 2011. Data from 2011 is the most complete and therefore most illustrative of the annual outcomes associated with the program. As is discussed in section 4.4 of this report, the performance of grant recipients prior to 2011 in reporting to the Trust was relatively poor, making the data fairly unreliable. Many later projects are also still current, again making that data less reliable in indicating the extent of environmental outcomes.

The table below sets out the projected vs actual outcomes of the POP program, for a selection of measures associated with 16 projects funded in 2011.

Table 2. Reported outcomes associated with POP projects awarded in 2011

	Projected	Actual	+/-
Area regenerated (Hectares)	110	119	+8%
Number of plantings	8,125	8,977	+10%
Area weeded (Hectares)	127	135	+6%
CEE events	255	183	-28%
Event participants	759	1,524	+50%
Reach of CEE activities (individuals)	90,250	111,860	+24%
Trust-funded staff	36	45	+25%
Trust-funded staff hours	4,517	4,333	-4%
Non Trust-funded staff	44	58	+32%
Non Trust-funded staff hours	893	2,302	+158%
Volunteers engaged	107	225	+110%
Volunteer hours	3,533	3,179	-10%
Students engaged	356	745	+109%
Student hours	1,369	4,065	+197%
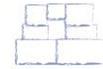
There are a number of things to note from Table 2. In terms of the area weeded, area regenerated and the number of new plantings, the pool of 2011 POP projects over-delivered (planned versus actual). This is a particularly pleasing result, especially given that actual figures are under-reported due to some outstanding interim and final reports. There were fewer CEE events conducted than planned but a far greater number of participants and overall reach than what was anticipated. There were also more students engaged than expected and far more time spent with them – equally pleasing results.

There were more paid personnel involved in projects than what was projected, and a greater-than-expected proportion of total hours was worked by non Trust-funded staff. The projected ratio of Trust-funded to non-Trust funded staff was approximately 5:1 but in actuality was less than 2:1. Based on the reported results, there was clearly a greater-than-expected in-kind contribution by grantees – more than two and a half times the expected number of hours. There are a few possible explanations for this finding:

- The projects put forward by grantees may have been overly ambitious and/or that did not fully take into consideration project risks and challenges

- There may simply have been an under-estimation of the work involved in delivering projects

- The work required to satisfy the Trust's reporting requirements may have been more than expected, particularly given the modest size of the grants

- Projects may have been approached in an inefficient way or without good budgetary management practices

- Grantees may have voluntarily contributed additional time to projects in order to deliver better outcomes.

Of course, all above the above may be true, though the consultation with grantees (see sections 3.6, 4.2 and 4.4) suggests that the reporting burden and unforseen project challenges were the more likely explanations. Either way, the data reported on hours worked suggests that significant 'slack' is being picked up by grantees and suggests that POP projects could potentially be a financial drain on grantees. While the larger in-kind contribution may be a good outcome for the Trust, it is not necessarily a good outcome for grantees. The Trust should consider the following recommendations:

> **Recommendation:** The Trust should always acknowledge the significant in-kind contribution of grantees but explore ways of shielding grantees from unexpected financial impacts, for example by:
>
> - providing larger grants or access to additional 'emergency' funds
>
> - providing some cautionary tips to POP applicants via the POP website, application forms etc
> - assessing successful applications in order to identify potential over-runs or risks to grantees and to bring this to the attention of grantees, encouraging them to scale down projects as required
> - openly communicating with grantees from the outset and throughout projects to help identify and work through issues that may be financially burdensome on grantees.

3.3 Value of POP in helping Trust to meet its objectives

The Trust's objectives (as set out in the Act) are purely environmental. As already noted, there is no requirement to provide grants or other assistance to particular types of organisations or demographic groups. In this context, it was noted by some informants that, while environmental outcomes were being seen, the POP program was not a particularly cost-effective way of meeting the Trust's obligations under the Act. The costs of administering the program are high compared with other Trust-funded programs (due to the high level of support that is provided to grantees) and the environmental outcomes generally not as strong.

However, it was also noted that the Trust operated within the wider NSW Government context where support for Aboriginal communities is a priority. It is also recognised that a 'triple bottom line' approach is required in maximising lasting environmental outcomes. In this regard, the POP program was thought to be a valuable inclusion in the suite of programs managed by the Trust. It was clear from the discussions with Trust staff that there is a high degree of pride in the program. Following are some illustrative comments made by key informants:

> *"Our philosophy is to engage all communities and to not leave people behind."*

> *"It's a less effective investment mechanism for getting the environmental outcomes we are after but these projects [are still worthwhile]."*

> *"We clearly want environmental outcomes but also to see skills development, fostering of relationships, project management experience etc."*
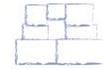
"It's not something we have to do but we want to do. It's pretty consistent with the NSW Government's overarching approach."

"There's a government-wide mandate, or a policy to facilitate, encourage, promote, assist Aboriginal organisations to do things, especially around cultural heritage and protection of lands. There's nothing in the Act, but the Trust decided on POP to align with that."

Some other informants saw that the POP program played a more substantive role in helping the Trust to achieve its objectives. In particular, it was noted that Aboriginal community organisations – Local Aboriginal Land Councils in particular - were the custodians or managers of a significant amount of land. Working with and supporting these organisations was seen as an important means of getting positive environmental outcomes for these lands:

"Aboriginal organisations are really key players in terms of land management – that's why it's important – to protect and maintain their land."

"A lot of land is in the hands of Aboriginal Land Councils - it seems only logical that Aboriginal organisations are a key player in delivering projects using Trust funds – it's fundamental."

"Land Councils are big land owners. It gives access to that land."

In addition, it was noted that Aboriginal community organisations provided a conduit to Aboriginal communities – to allow access to environmental and cultural knowledge and to allow this to be shared within the community. In terms of community education and engagement in Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal community organisations are naturally central to the process and can augment the work done by Aboriginal people working in government:

"Aboriginal organisations can bring the concept of connecting to country – it's very powerful and strong. Non-Aboriginal organisations can't add value to the same extent. Heightened cultural values can be brought to environmental education."

"In terms of building awareness in Aboriginal communities of environmental protection principles, Aboriginal organisations are the best to deliver (though some government organisations have good Aboriginal staff too)."

In summary, the view of stakeholders was that the POP program provided a means of satisfying some of the Trust's unstated objectives and was a worthy inclusion in the suite of grant programs administered by the Trust. Furthermore, it was commonly perceived
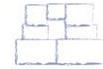
by stakeholders that in recent years, better quality applications were being received, grantee performance had improved and stronger environmental outcomes were being observed. In short, the effectiveness of the program was thought to be improving or, as a couple of informants put it:

> *"I'm happy with the trajectory of POP."*

> *"We're raising the bar on other grant programs. With POP, it's just happening a bit slower."*

> *"It's rare to have an utter failure anymore."*

While the program is thought to be functioning more effectively, it somewhat difficult to demonstrate this in empirical terms due to the lack of complete outcomes data. It was noted by stakeholders that the program had experienced significant difficulties in its early years, particularly in relation to grantee performance. Some of those earlier projects created an administrative burden on the Trust that has endured through until 2015. However, the view of a number of stakeholders was that 2011 was something of a 'transition year' brought about by the measures put in place by the Trust in response to the 2009 evaluation. These measures included: the wider promotion of the program; the improvement of information and advice provided to potential applicants; the engagement of a contractor to assist with the preparation of M&E plans; more proactive day-to-day grant administration; and the simplification of reporting frameworks. Further detail is provided in Section 4 – Administrative and Process Issues.

3.4 Importance of POP to Aboriginal Community Organisations

Consultation with grant recipients and unsuccessful applicants revealed that the POP grants are recognised as a useful source of funding. It was noted that the grants are modest in size and therefore not hugely important from a financial sustainability point of view. However, POP has reportedly allowed Aboriginal organisations to pursue environmental projects that would otherwise have to 'remain on the shelf'. Several of those consulted said that the past few years had seen the diminishing availability of funds from other sources for environmental projects. For example, it was noted that funds that had been available to Aboriginal community organisations through the Australian Government Caring for Country program had been instead funnelled into the National Landcare program. While this program encourages Indigenous participation and partnerships it does not generally provide funds directly to Aboriginal community organisations.
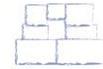
More specifically, representatives of Aboriginal community organisations reported that POP was of value because it allowed Local Land Councils, groups of elders and other community members to do a range of things that could otherwise not necessarily be pursued, for example:

- Identifying land that was of environmental and cultural importance to the local Aboriginal community and to learn more about the significance of that land

- Undertaking works to rehabilitate and/or protect land of significance

- Finding ways to *"reinvigorate the cultural elements of the land"*

- Engaging the local Aboriginal community, young people in particular, and encouraging them to learn about the local area

- Engaging non-Aboriginal people and providing opportunities for them to work alongside Aboriginal people and to learn more about local Aboriginal culture

- Providing an opportunity to generate and demonstrate pride in the Aboriginal community's cultural and environmental knowledge and the community's ability to manage worthwhile projects

- Providing employment, work experience and skills development opportunities, particularly for young Aboriginal people in regional areas, and providing opportunities to 'work on country'

- Supporting existing work teams (eg bush regeneration teams) and adding to their ongoing viability

- Providing opportunities for collaboration and positive working relationships with other organisations – schools, local Council, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Local Land Services etc.

A number of grant recipients and other stakeholders noted that there was value in the POP program in allowing existing or past projects to be extended or augmented. For example, the POP grant provided to the Dharriwaa Elders Group in Walgett allowed for the installation of signs and the completion of other works on the 'Caring for Country Walk' that had been initiated, but not completed using other funds. Conversely it was also said that POP grants allowed for the establishment or first stage of a project that could be continued or expanded upon in future using other funds or in-kind resources. In particular, it was noted that a project that had been initiated with a POP grant often resulted in the provision of local council or NPWS funds or other resources to 'see the project through'.

It was clear from the project documentation and consultations that POP grants helped to leverage other resources and to consolidate or amplify environmental and cultural outcomes. Another example could be seen in the grant provided to the Coffs Harbour
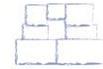
Local Aboriginal Land Council to undertake rehabilitation of a mangrove area and to provide a walk with interpretive signage for locals and tourists. The project – undertaken with a lot of support from Coffs Harbour City Council – was extended using a separate $20K grant from the NSW Regional Arts Fund to commission a sculpture to be placed at the entry point to the walk, designed through community consultation and engagement with local school children.

> **Recommendation:** In assessing grant applications, the Trust should give particular consideration to projects that are an extension of an existing (successful) project or a precursor to an ongoing program of work. Grantees should be mentored and encouraged to think about projects in the context of an ongoing program of environmental work and to use POP as a catalyst for leveraging other sources of funds. At the completion of projects, the Trust should initiate a dialogue about 'next steps' and encourage grantees to submit proposals for further funding, whether through the Environmental Trust or other sources.

3.5 Building capacity in Aboriginal organisations and communities

It is a stated, though ancillary objective of the POP program to build capacity within Aboriginal Community organisations to manage environmental projects. It is hoped that through a positive experience in delivering a POP project that some capacity and confidence (as well as a track-record) can be built to enable organisations to pursue other, larger Trust grants. There is some evidence that this is occurring. For example, the Ashford Local Aboriginal Land Council was successful in 2011 in seeking a POP grant to undertake a project to fence and protect an area of bushland. In 2014, the organisation was successful in seeking a grant of nearly $100,000 through the Restoration and Rehabilitation community grants program to improve land management and reduce feral animal numbers along riparian zones of the Severn River. However, it must be said that this outcome is not typical - there are only a handful of other examples of this outcome. Nonetheless, there is *some* evidence of POP contributing to stronger capacity in at least some Aboriginal community organisations and this should be regarded as a positive outcome of the program.

Some informants were of the view that it was possibly not a realistic expectation that capacity would simply be built by offering a small grant without much else support. As one informant said "*We don't see many POP recipients go on to apply for other programs. $30K grants don't do much – there would be better ways to build capacity.*" In fact, there was a view expressed that it could be counter-productive for an organisation to experience
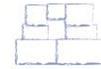
difficulties in meeting the requirements of the Trust, as one informant put it *"We don't want to be setting up any failures – that does more damage than good."*

A couple of informants noted that the idea of capacity building needed to be thought about more carefully and that if the Trust considered it a priority, that a more proactive approach could be taken. As one informant noted: *"We haven't really identified what their [Aboriginal community organisations'] needs are. We've made an assessment that capacity needs to be built, but in what areas? We're not sure what other organisations are doing out there to help."* Supporting activities to build particular capacities in Aboriginal community organisations (through whatever means) takes the Trust a fair way away from its 'core business'. However, it could be regarded as an enabling step, to help derive stronger outcomes from POP and other grants secured by Aboriginal community organisations. One informant summed it as follows: *"It's not the Trust's job to solve all the problems of Aboriginal organisations in NSW. But we could find a niche and provide some assistance where we can."*

Recommendation: The Trust should develop a better understanding of the capacity needs of Aboriginal community organisations and the available services and agencies that can help or are helping to build capacity. The Trust could offer, for example, better access to advice or resources to assist with project management techniques, book-keeping and budget management, evaluation and monitoring, report writing and sustainability leadership.

Recommendation: The Trust should establish a mechanism for allowing grantees to signal their support needs at the outset, so that appropriate support can be provided or brokered. For example, grantees should be asked to indicate their level of comfort in preparing reports on the environmental outcomes achieved through their projects. A grantee interview or survey could be administered soon after a grant is awarded and grantees referred to sources of assistance that are identified.

Some informants saw that, particularly for organisations that had not previously managed a grant-funded project, the exposure to government reporting requirements was a form of capacity building. As one informant said *"A lot of the capacity building comes in the form of helping organisations to write grant applications, to think about M&E."* While some grantees may not have *enjoyed* the experience of responding to these requirements, it was seen as beneficial nonetheless.

It is noteworthy that many of the grant recipients consulted were hesitant to say that the capacity of their organisation had been boosted through the experience of managing a
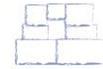
POP grant, at least in terms of satisfying the Trust's reporting requirements. However, grant recipients did report that the grant had helped to build the capacity of the individuals involved with the project and/or to bolster the capabilities of an existing team or volunteers or employees (bush regeneration teams, for example). Grant recipients also made mention of the capacity that was built within communities, to learn about the importance of caring for the land and to learn how to do it. It was thought that the program supported a natural interest within communities to pursue work opportunities in land management, as one grantee said "*the funding helps to build those futures.*" The development of individuals, as well as communities, was something that was seen by some Trust staff as a pleasing outcome, as evidenced by the following quotes:

> *"I've enjoyed seeing that people get experience and have moved on to roles in National Parks, for example."*

> *"It's good to support people to work on country – it's something that a lot of people want to do and it benefits communities."*

Recommendation: The effort to build *organisational capacity* should be understood as a process of building *individual capacities*. Any dialogue with POP applicants and grantees about 'capacity' would be usefully and perhaps more clearly framed around 'individual training needs'.

An important component of the effort to build capacity of Aboriginal community organisations has been the provision of a contractor to assist grantees to prepare their M&E plan. It was clear from the consultations that grantees were thankful for the assistance provided, particularly given the perceived complexity of the task. It is important to note that the Trust's contractor made significant efforts to engage and consult with the grantees but often ended up preparing the document on their behalf. Often, the limited human resources within the organisation meant that it was easier for all concerned for the contractor to 'just do it'. It was also noted that often there was no-one associated with the project with the skills to use Excel and therefore to complete the template. The following quote sums up the practical realities at play: *"There's often just one kind soul who is overworked and having to do all this stuff. Some of these people just don't have time to scratch themselves."*

Some questions were raised as whether this process did indeed help to build capacity or whether it simply helped grantees meet the Trust's requirements before receiving their first payment. It was noted that once the M&E plan was accepted, there was little if any further involvement from the contractor. There was some doubt as to whether the M&E
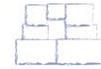
plan was genuinely useful to grantees and used a central feature of the project's management as intended. As the contractor noted *"I don't think that what I do can hurt in terms of building capacity, but there's more to it than just that."*

> **Recommendation:** The Trust should discuss with the M&E contractor the strategies that could be employed to ensure that there is a higher degree of engagement from grantees with regards to monitoring and evaluation. There should be some agreement reached on the amount of assistance that should be provided and the responses to a lack of engagement on the part of grantees.

> **Recommendation**: A mechanism should be created for providing monitoring and evaluation advice and mentoring *throughout the project*, at least for those grantees that need it. The aim would be to ensure that the M&E plan remains central to the project and that grantees develop some real M&E skills and capacity. This could be achieved through an expansion of the role of the M&E contractor and/or the grants administrator function.

3.6 Reasons for projects experiencing difficulties

The review of project documentation and consultation with grantees and other stakeholders highlighted a number of factors that impinged on the ability of grantees to successfully manage projects and meet the Trust's requirements. It must be noted, however, that there is a clear acknowledgement of the fact that many Aboriginal community organisations lack capacity or stability. While there is a need to hold these organisations to account like any other grantee, there is also an acknowledgement that they may require additional support and understanding. As one informant noted *"There are lots of factors impacting on their [Aboriginal organisations'] ability to work with us."*

Some of the factors that were identified include the following:

- Organisations are often small and poorly resourced, relying on the input of volunteers

- Staff turnover is high - *"There's a strong obligation to look after the land, but there's high staff turnover in Aboriginal organisations."*

- Project management skills are often lacking, or reside with one person who is overworked or who leaves the job mid-project - *"They [Aboriginal community organisations] sometimes know the end goal but not how to manage the project. The passion is there but often not the on-ground skills in project management, report writing etc."*
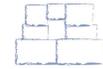
- Organisations can suffer from instability and the withdrawal of community support.

While the organisational capacity of the grantees to deliver outcomes was often a factor, there were other external factors that could be observed that impacted on outcomes and the timeliness of delivery. These included the following:

- Disagreement within the community over the ownership of the cultural knowledge to be used as an input to the project

- Disagreement within the organisation or wider community about how funds are used, in particular who might get paid to perform certain tasks

- Poor relationships between the Aboriginal community organisation and other stakeholder organisations, for example the local council

- Withdrawal of in-kind support provided by community members or other organisations

- Deaths in the community and periods of 'sorry business'

- Inclement weather that interrupts planned works, causes erosion or damages new plantings

- Protracted community consultation processes

- Un-anticipated planning or zoning issues that introduce unforseen delays and complexity.

A couple of stakeholders suggested that an issue that may impact on the success of projects, and the preparedness to discuss problems openly with the Trust, was a concern on the part of grantees that they will be poorly viewed if the project is not going well. It was thought that loss of face or 'shame' could be felt by those associated with projects that were experiencing difficulties, resulting in a lack of communication with the Trust and/or avoidance of reporting tasks. As one stakeholder said: *"People fret that they'll be black-marked if they don't deliver and have to give the money back."*

Recommendation: Formal communications from the Trust and informal communications from the grants administrator should always carry an understanding tone and acknowledge the constraints faced by Aboriginal community organisations. Clearly, the grants administrator needs to have a deep understanding of the operating environment of these organisations and have the ability to work collaboratively. The aim should be to present the grant agreement as a *partnership* and to avoid a perception of a paternal or 'us and them' relationship. This relationship should be cemented from the outset and every effort should be made to let grantees know that the Trust is 'here to help'.
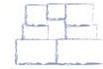
4. ADMINISTRATIVE AND PROCESS ISSUES

4.1 Assessing applications and selecting worthy projects

As already noted, prior to 2013 the Trust received a relatively small number of POP grant applications, providing a limited pool from which to select worthwhile projects. In 2010 and 2012, only about two-thirds of the available fund was allocated to projects. Members of the Technical Committee and others involved in assessing applications noted that, even given the preparedness to *not* allocate the entire fund, there was an eagerness to find innovative or meritorious ideas *within* applications. Often, these applicants were 'helped across the line' by placing conditions on the grants. As one informant said *"We often see something that has real potential rather than a well-thought-through project plan."* Another informant said *"Often you can see there's a great idea in there somewhere."* The difficulty in assessing applications was also noted given that, at times, worthy projects were described through poorly-written applications while, at other times, less worthy projects were well articulated in the application. As one informant said *"It's hard to tell the crap from the gold."*

> **Recommendation:** The Trust should continue to provide workshops to assist potential grantees with their applications and to recommend sources of available assistance.

> **Recommendation:** The Trust should continue to assess applications carefully and to work with applicants to help shape projects that contribute to the Trust's objectives and that reduce risks for both the Trust and grantees.

There were also some examples of project proposals that addressed root causes of environmental degradation that may not have at first appeared obvious, or that required some lateral thinking in order to accept it as an 'environmental project'. One funded project – Who Let the Dogs Out - presented a particular conundrum for the Trust. The application was made by the Moree LALC and Moree Local Council. The parties had identified that environmental degradation in urban and peri-urban areas was being caused by the large and growing number of feral dogs and cats. The project entailed a program of trapping and euthanasing feral animals, a community education campaign and the engagement of local vets to de-sex animals at a nominal rate (paid for using program funds). The project was regarded as innovative and – based on the interim report - appears to have been a success. However, demonstrating the environmental benefits of the project was always going to be challenging and it required careful thinking on the part of the Trust before approving the use of POP funds for these activities.
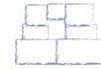
Some informants were a little critical of the recommendations made by the Technical Committee, particularly prior to 2011, seeing that that some successful applications carried a degree of risk that was too high. Others saw that applications were recommended when there was not a clear enough rationale (environmental or community need). Following are some illustrative quotes:

> *"It's a recipe for disaster when organisations are just chasing the money, starting with the money and working backwards to dream up a project. Ideally, we'd be funding projects that where there is an identified need."*

> *"Some projects are just bad ideas. They're funded because of the need to spend the money but it devalues the cultural emphasis of the program."*

> *"Too many of them were just 'playing in the sandpit' type projects."*

> *"We persevered when we shouldn't have."*

Recommendation: The POP Technical Committee should be dissuaded from approving projects that lack merit or which carry too much risk. It should be emphasised that it is preferable to not allocate the entire funding pool than to create risk and an ongoing burden for both the Trust and Aboriginal community organisations.

It was reported that there was some reliance on the corporate knowledge of the Technical Committee to identify the risks that might be associated with a certain applicant. However, it was suggested that more could be done to verify the assurances provided in applications and to determine, if possible, the past performance of the applicant in managing projects. As one informant said *"We should invest more in checking references rather than dealing with delinquent projects."* It was thought that this would not only aid in the selection of projects, but also in directing support to grantees. As another informant suggested:

> *"We need to do a risk assessment, try to identify which projects will need support. If we see there's a risk but the project is still worthwhile, we need to make sure we provide the support that's required."*

Recommendation: The Trust should develop a grantee risk assessment and management framework and ensure that appropriate referee checks are completed.

Ideally, however, the Trust would receive a larger number of high quality applications from which to choose. To a degree, the above problems 'go away' if there is a stronger pool of applications to choose from. As a couple of informants suggested:
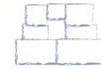
"It would be good to get some quality assurance into the projects before they come to us."

*"The program certainly has its place. We just need to keep striving for better projects."*

There are a couple of mechanisms for introducing this higher degree of 'quality control' One is to provide better direction and support to applicants (noting that considerable effort is already directed to doing this). The other is to encourage the involvement of partner organisations with stronger capacity to identify needs, scope out a program of works, measure outcomes and to articulate all this in a grant application.

4.2 The application process from the grantee perspective

It was evident from the discussions with grantees that the application process, in particular the application form, was regarded as overly detailed and complex. Aboriginal community organisations that had completed the application form without assistance were particularly critical of the process. Others reported that another organisation (a consultant or local council) had completed the application on their behalf and that this assistance was greatly appreciated. It should be noted here that improvements and simplifications have been made to the application process in recent rounds and that many of the frustrations expressed related to the 'old process'.

Some grantees reported that they found it difficult to orient their application around environmental outcomes (as is required by the Trust), as opposed to achieving outcomes of a cultural heritage nature. One grantee made the point that separating culture from 'the land' was, for an Aboriginal person, anathematic. While there is invariably an environmental dimension to the protection of cultural heritage, it was reported that the connection made in the application was not strong enough in the view of the Trust. It was reported by some grantees that they had to 'shoe horn' their project proposal into an environmental framework in order to meet the Trust's requirements and that this was time consuming.

Recommendation: In assessing POP applications, the Trust should take a broader view of 'environmental outcomes' and acknowledge that 'environment' and 'culture' are inextricable in the context of Aboriginal land. The Trust should avoid insisting that grantees revise their proposals in order to fit within a non-Aboriginal paradigm.
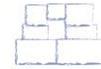
There were no particular suggestions for how the application process could be streamlined, other than it should be 'made easier'. The Trust obviously needs information about the applicant and a clear sense of what the project entails. Furthermore, the application process establishes a deliberate hurdle; in itself a means of gauging whether an applicant has the capacity to manage the project using public funds. Nonetheless, the Trust should continue to find ways to simplify the application form where it can, for example, by omitting any questions/data items that are not used in the compliance/decision-making process.

> **Recommendation:** Periodically review the application form and associated materials in light of grantee feedback and continue to strive for an application form that is as simple as possible while meeting the information needs of the Trust.

4.3 Partnership applications

While not all Aboriginal community organisations struggle to successfully manage projects and meet the Trust's requirements, some do. There is generally a higher likelihood of success where there is some involvement from another organisation as a grant administrator or project partner. As one stakeholder said *"It definitely all goes more smoothly when there's a partnership."* Several stakeholders raised the possibility of introducing some mechanism for attracting applications from partnerships or consortia, in order to provide a stronger basis for seeing good outcomes flow from the projects. It was noted that this was consistent with a broader effort on the part of the Trust – across its other programs - to encourage collaboration and to seek grant applications from partnerships rather than single entities.

There were, however, several words of caution that were expressed. Firstly, it was noted that there should not be an assumption, nor should it be suggested that Aboriginal community organisations cannot successfully manage POP grants – there are many examples to the contrary. While partnership applications could be encouraged and viewed favourably, it should not be made a requirement that Aboriginal community organisations seeking a grant need to appoint an administrator or partner with another organisation.

Secondly, it was noted that there was not always a good relationship between, say, LALCs and local councils and that it would be undesirable to put these LALCs at a disadvantage. It was also noted by a couple of respondents that 'forcing' partners together could be counterproductive and result in poorer outcomes. As one person said *"You can't force partners together – it can make things worse. It can go either way."* And as one
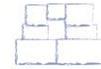
grantee said of their efforts to partner with the local Council *"[Council] is notoriously difficult, sacked a couple of times and in administration...they were sceptical… racist, didn't want to do it."*

Thirdly, it was noted that there would need to be a mechanism to ensure that partnerships were genuine and that the Aboriginal community organisation was not used in name only, to secure a grant for a non-Aboriginal organisation. It was stressed that, in any grant awarded to a partnership, there needed to be a substantial role for the Aboriginal community organisation and preferably for it to be 'lead agency'. As a couple of people said:

> *"We'd need to think about whether local councils or whatever are using the LALC to get the project. Is the original applicant still involved? Are they true partners? You still need to make sure there's meaningful involvement from Aboriginal people."*

> *"We'd need to find ways to ensure the project has meaning for Aboriginal communities…to make sure they have some ownership"*

> *"Working in partnership is great, but you need to make sure it's not tokenistic."*

A number of stakeholders pointed to the experience of the Aboriginal Lands Clean Up and Prevention Program (ALCUP, managed by the NSW EPA) that had trialled a policy of only receiving joint applications from a LALC and a Local Council. The trial indicated that while the partnership arrangement worked very well in some instances, there was discontent on the part of some LALCs. There was also a lower number of applications, reports of reduced involvement of, and work opportunities for Aboriginal people. Some projects reportedly ended in conflict. For these and other reasons, the EPA has reverted to offering grants directly to LALCs. Other grant programs also take the approach of encouraging partners to work with Aboriginal community organisations, for example, The National Landcare Program Regional Funding for Natural Resource Management program expects Indigenous participation in all projects. The program guidelines state that regional NRM organisations should investigate and identify opportunities in conjunction with Indigenous communities and either include these as a part of their projects or provide a satisfactory reason for not doing so.

On balance, the view was that there was merit in more strongly *encouraging* partnership applications for POP grants but not making it mandatory. It was thought that joint applicants should be required to demonstrate:

- past experiences of working together
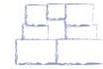
- the governance and management arrangements that would see an appropriate level of involvement from Aboriginal people

- an approach to managing conflict if it arose

- methods for evaluating the effectiveness of the partnership.

It is important to note here that there needs to be an advantage perceived by Aboriginal community organisations to pursue a partnership or respond to an approach by a potential partner. The Trust can make it clear that partnership applications will be more positively viewed (the advantage therefore being that the applicants are more likely to receive the funds). However, the Trust could also outline the advantages of working in partnership and highlight, for example, the support that could be provided in preparing the application, M&E plans and interim and final reports.

> **Recommendation:** The Trust should more strongly encourage grant applications from consortia that feature an Aboriginal community organisation *in partnership* with one or more other organisations. The program's supporting materials should make it clear that the Trust will have high regard for applications that – as well as satisfying the program's guidelines – set out partnerships arrangements and the roles to be played by project partners. Eligibility should not, however, be entirely contingent on Aboriginal community organisations partnering with another organisation. The advantages of working in partnership should be promoted to Aboriginal community organisations.

4.4 Developing M&E plans and preparing interim and final reports

M&E plans

The Trust has a need to monitor the environmental and CEE outcomes that are delivered through all of its grant programs, and POP is no different. In order to reduce the burden on applicants, the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) plan is only required of successful applicants before the first grant payment is made (rather than as part of the application). The Trust provides an Excel-based template to allow grantees to set out the project measures, targets and data collection methods. The 'Project Measures' spread-sheet was implemented in 2014 and replaced the more detailed and complex 'Schedule C' that was used previously. As already noted, the Trust has also engaged a contractor to assist grantees with preparing the M&E plan (in particular, completing the Project Measures table). There was acknowledgement on the part of the Trust that small, community-based organisations could struggle with the M&E requirements of grants and this provides the rationale for the level of support available. However, it was also noted that there was hope that some capacity would be built in Aboriginal community organisations in evaluating environmental projects. While acknowledging that there was
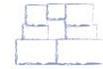
still a degree of complexity, representatives of the Trust were generally confident that the requirement had been made as straight-forward as possible:

"What we're doing and how we're supporting grantees is not bad in terms of other programs. Other agencies have been asking if they can use our templates."

"The tools are meant to be mutually supportive."

"We're encouraging the more skilled measurement of environmental change."

It was clear from the review of past project documentation, and the interviews conducted with grant recipients, that many grantees had struggled with developing and using the M&E plan, particularly prior to the introduction of the simplified Project Measures table. In fact, several grantees complained vociferously about the requirement and said that it would deter them from applying for future POP grants. Following are some indicative quotes from grantees:

"We just want to get on with the project. It's hard to find the time to think about filling in all these boxes. Sometimes you're just sticking a number in."

"There's so much red tape, jargon and paperwork".

"Perhaps it was because our project was a bit different. Or maybe because the application form aims to fit everything, it has become too complex. Often it's opinion rather than science when you're judging if something is successful."

"A crazy form with clunky paperwork. There needs to be a more appropriate form of accountability, not less accountability, but something that is more community friendly."

"A very complex spread-sheet, time consuming measuring the walking track etc…a confusing process, even with support of the consultant they hired. We had limited capacity and time to do a lot of this work."

Recommendation: There should be an effort to reposition M&E as a tool for helping grantees to better deliver projects and to allow successes to be celebrated, rather than simply being a means of 'reporting to the funding body'. This could be a key message delivered by the M&E contractor and one that is emphasised in communications with applicants and grantees.
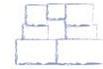
Interim and final reporting

Similarly, providing the required interim and final report to the Trust was regarded as burdensome by grantees. As already noted, there was highly variable clarity and quality in terms of the reports that have been provided to the Trust. It was noted by stakeholders that while there would always remain an expectation that grantees report outcomes to the Trust, there was an understanding that capacity was often limited and that many reports would not be of an exemplary standard. As one stakeholder said *"Our grantees are great at doing the work on the ground but not so great at reporting, building in the measurement and evaluation."*

It was noted that the reporting requirements did not just test the capacity of grantees but often resulted in real anxiety. It was thought that the reporting requirement was one area where the confidence of community organisations could be deflated rather than built. As one stakeholder put it:

"It's not just that it's boring, it's a real barrier…intimidating for a lot of people."

Stakeholders and grantees alike thought that the reporting process needed to be made *"as painless as possible",* whilst ensuring accountability and allowing the Trust to obtain a sense of the outcomes achieved. A few suggestions were made by informants. Firstly, it was suggested that grantees should be given more opportunity at the outset to indicate if they would like some support or assistance in reporting. This would allow an early conversation to take place about the type of support that could be provided or brokered by the Trust.

Secondly, it was suggested that alternate reporting formats could be provided. The point was made that while the reporting template was designed to assist with the reporting process, it could in fact alienate or intimidate people who did not think in the same structured way. It was suggested that grantees – rather than being asked to complete the template – should be encouraged to 'tell the story' of the project in their own way – with words, photos, drawings, video etc. Positioning the task as a 'celebration of the project' rather than a 'report to government' was thought to have some advantages. It was also suggested that, as an alternative, grantees could be invited to deliver their report verbally through an interview with a Trust representative.

These possibilities were 'road tested' with various stakeholders and it was generally thought that there was some potential to explore the ideas further and perhaps to trial the approach. It was however questioned by some as to whether verbal reporting, for example, was *"a bit of a cop out"* and/or setting different expectations for Aboriginal people. There was a fairly common view that it should be 'a last resort'; reserved for
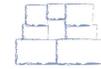
those organisations that indicate that they do not feel comfortable preparing a written report or those that do not provide their report in a timely fashion.

It was also noted that eliciting verbal reports from grantees would be resource intensive for the Trust. However, it was conceded that this would need to be balanced against the cost of relentlessly pursuing reports that are not forthcoming. It should also be reiterated here that a verbal reporting format would be needed only for some grants.

The difficulty experienced by some grantees in providing written reports and/or the intimidation that they might feel may in part explain the fact that many POP reports are not provided on time (or at all). One informant wondered whether this might also explain the lack of communication with the Trust; that people sometimes 'hide' from the task rather than to do 'just do their best'.

Recommendation: The Trust should establish a mechanism for allowing grantees to signal their support needs at the outset, so that appropriate support can be provided or brokered. For example, grantees should be asked to indicate their level of comfort in preparing reports on the environmental outcomes achieved through their projects. As appropriate, suggestions could be made for finding the necessary skills, whether through a partner organisation or an external party.

Recommendation: The Trust should trial a process that allows grantees to use alternate means to report on the outcomes of their projects. For example, grantees who may struggle with preparing written reports could be allowed to provide a verbal report through an interview with the grant administrator or other Trust representative. There would obviously remain a requirement for grantees to provide an audited financial report and this option should be exercised only when an acceptable written report may not be forthcoming.

4.5 Trust administration of grants

The POP program requires a higher degree of administrative support than compared other Trust programs. It was noted that one full time administrator was required to manage a relatively small number of grants compared with administrators of other programs who may have hundreds of grants 'on their books'. Program administrators, past and present, highlighted the many administrative challenges of the program. One thing that was clear was that a great deal of time had to be spent following up on 'delinquent' projects and trying to get responses from grantee representatives. Following are some illustrative quotes:
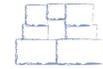
"With POP you have to chase them up for information, but it's getting better."

"You have more of an issue with tardiness. The level of commitment is not always there."

"Unfortunately, we have to focus all our energy on the problem projects, not the successful ones."

"If the LALC is having problems, we'd be one of about 30 people chasing them."

It was noted that, particularly in more recent years, a greater effort to support grantees and to be proactive in terms of helping to predict or resolve problems had resulted in more satisfactory outcomes. As one person said *"As we've got better at supporting, they've got better at delivering."* The program administrator (and wider Trust team) reported that they invested a lot of time in helping grantees to overcome barriers, to broker relationships with organisations that could lend support and to advocate on behalf of the grantee in dealings with government agencies and others.

There is obviously a limit to the amount of outreach work that can be done and it is not feasible for the program administrator to personally visit every project location. The human resources dedicated to the program also need to be reflective of the environmental outcomes achieved through the program. However, the value of doing more outreach work was noted and it was seen as an investment, not simply a cost:

"It's better to stay in touch, chip in and help if you can. I'd rather do that than just be chasing up reports that are a year overdue."

"There's an expectation to do outreach, not just have a transactional focus. But if we're going to play that role, we need to resource it properly."

Grantees also reported that they valued the proactive approaches of the Trust, in particular, personal visits. As one grantee said:

"She came to see us and have a look at what we were doing. That personal contact is important for Aboriginal people…not just someone on the other end of the phone. She helped us think about a few things. I know they can't visit everyone, so I'm glad she came to see us. It would have given her some good cultural awareness too."

It was noted that there had not always been a consistent approach to following up grantees regarding project progress. It could be seen in the project files that situations had arisen where there had been no correspondence between the Trust and the grantee
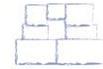
for a period of months, despite there being some matter outstanding. It was suggested that more regular communication from the Trust from the outset and earlier follow up of grantees would help to avoid problems and o reduce the administrative burden:

> *"The longer you leave it, the harder it is."*

> *"We don't put our follow-up procedures in place well."*

> *"The follow-up procedure just doesn't work. There are situations where you just can't get hold of anyone."*

It was consistently acknowledged that the personality of the grant administrator was very important and that they needed to strike the right balance between being understanding and authoritative. In short, they needed to be 'firm but fair'. As one grant administrator said:

> *"There needs to be some assertiveness. We can't treat them like children. Why should a LALC be treated any differently to any other grantee? It's quite offensive to set the bar lower."*

Recommendation: The Trust should continue to acknowledge the high support needs and administrative cost of the program and ensure that person with appropriate background and work style is selected to fill the position of grant administrator. The selection criteria for the POP grants administrator should ensure that they, among other things:

1. Identify as an Aboriginal person
2. Have experience in working with Aboriginal community organisations and have an understanding of the cultural and operational context of Aboriginal community organisations
3. Have good problem-solving skills and like to work in a collaborative way
4. Have good interpersonal skills and conflict resolution skills.

Recommendation: There should be an effort to be more proactive in following up with grantees, to obtain verbal updates on the progress of projects. Making personal visits to a selection of project locations should be a part of the duties of the grant administrator. The POP grant administrator should have a work plan that ensures:

1. All grantees are contacted on a regular basis and that grantee relationships are monitored
2. A risk management plan for each project is maintained
3. Support and other 'interventions' are provided in a timely fashion
4. A register of available support/capacity building service providers is maintained.
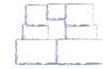
4.6 Promotion of the Program

The Trust promotes the program via Aboriginal media, the POP website and via email to a database of Local Land Councils and other Aboriginal community organisations (many past applicants), NPWS, Local Land Services and OEH regional offices. There was some uncertainty among informants as to the effectiveness of this approach, though it was noted that more applications were being received than in the past and it was thought that was in part due to the wider promotion of the program recommended by the POP Technical Committee.

In addition to direct promotion, the Trust runs a series of workshop each year to promote the program and to provide some guidance to potential applicants. Each year, workshop locations are selected so as to ensure that there is some equity across the State from year to year. Approximately ten workshops are held each year and attract, on average, about seven people in each location. While this may seem a relatively small number, it is broadly reflective of the number of eligible organisations in any given location (particularly regional towns). Some workshops attracted larger numbers of participants (up to 14 in Dubbo in 2011) while on some occasions there was a fairly disappointing turnout (only two people at Narooma in 2012 where the workshop clashed with a local funeral).

The workshops were generally thought to be worthwhile. As one person said *"The workshops seem to be well-received. People feel more confident in applying. We see better quality applications from workshop participants."* One grantee was encountered who had attended one of the workshops – the feedback was that the workshop *"helped us to think about what we could do and how we needed to go about it."* Some informants were however less certain about the value of the workshops and thought that they were generally poorly attended. It was noted that *"lots of people book then don't turn up and vice versa."*

The workshops attract not only Aboriginal community organisations but also other organisations looking to partner with someone. One informant noted that this mix of people was beneficial and mentioned an example of where a representative from a Catchment Management Authority had taken an interest in the proposed project of an Aboriginal organisation and then offered to provide assistance in writing the application.

> **Recommendation:** The methods used to promote the POP program should be continued. While the regional workshops may at times be poorly attended, they clearly provide benefit. There may be an opportunity to provide some training or other capacity building activities to coincide with the workshops, that may help to boost attendance as well as provide a further benefit to potential grantees.
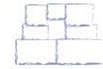
4.7 POP governance

The terms of reference for the evaluation did not require a thorough examination of the governance of the program, beyond the day-to-day administrative issues already discussed. However, it is worth making note of an issue raised by one stakeholder in relation to the composition of the Technical Committee and the tenure of its members. The question was asked as to whether the long period of involvement of a small number of people had necessarily benefited the program. It was suggested that the program would benefit from some "fresh eyes" and that perhaps Technical Members should be limited to a single three-year term.

Recommendation: The Trust should consider the advantages and disadvantages of a Technical Committee comprised of experienced, long-serving members. Some consideration should be given to the suggestion for *refreshing* the committee on a regular basis.
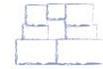
5. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The NSW Environmental Trust (the Trust), through the Protecting Our Places (POP) program has, since 2009, provided small grants for 79 projects, undertaken by Aboriginal community organisations. The projects have featured a variety of activities including weeding, bush regeneration, provision of walking trails, fencing and other protection of environmentally and culturally sensitive sites, bush tucker gardens, interpretive signage, community education and engagement activities, the production of educational and cultural resources and so forth.

The projects have been associated with a host of environmental outcomes. For example, for grants awarded in the year of 2011, the following outcomes were measured:

- At least 135 hectares were weeded

- At least 119 hectares of bush was regenerated

- Nearly 9,000 new plants were established

- At least 183 educational events were run, engaging at over 1,500 participants

- Other education and engagement activities reached over 111,000 people

- At least 745 school students were engaged through the projects in some way.

In addition, a host of ancillary outcomes have been seen, most notably the provision of employment and work experience opportunities for Aboriginal people, enhancement of the viability of Aboriginal bush regeneration teams and the like, the strengthening of relationships between Aboriginal community and other local organisations, the engagement of non-Aboriginal people and the showcasing of the ability of Aboriginal community organisations to carry out worthwhile projects.

The POP program is important to Aboriginal community organisations for a host of reasons but is of increased importance in the context of diminishing funding being available to these organisations for projects of an environmental nature.

The program provides some benefit to the Trust in meeting its aims and obligations. More importantly, it provides a mechanism for supporting environmental works on Aboriginal lands in NSW and provides a conduit to Aboriginal communities for the delivery of culturally appropriate environmental education. It is a program that the Trust has pride in and contributes to the NSW Government's effort to support Aboriginal communities.

Grant recipients are generally not well-resourced organisations and they may lack capacity, particularly in terms of project management skills, project budgeting and the

methods for reporting on environmental outcomes. In addition to organisational capacity, grantees often face various external challenges that impact on the success of projects. The Trust carries this understanding into its interactions with grantees and provides support to the degree that it can. It needs to be emphasised that there have been serious difficulties faced by the Trust in managing the poor performance of some grantees and obtaining information about the outcomes achieved by funded projects.

Although 'poor performance' has been a feature of the program, many projects are well implemented and documented and show good outcomes that at times exceed the targets that were set. Other projects appear to have achieved some good outcomes but a lack of clarity in reporting makes this a little unclear. It was clear from the evaluation that projects benefited when a partner organisation was involved, particularly in drawing together the reports and other materials required by the Trust. It was also clear that, in more recent years, projects appear to be less 'trouble-prone' and that it is likely that stronger outcomes will be seen from the pool of projects that are currently in progress.

The difficulties faced by POP grantees results in a significant administrative burden for the Trust, though benefit is seen in proactively supporting grantees rather than dealing with under-performance or non-compliance. There is also obvious merit in attracting a larger number of high quality grant applications from which to choose.

The support provided to grantees in various ways – through workshops, providing access to an M&E contractor, brokerage and advocacy – all make things easier for grantees and help to deliver better program outcomes. Nonetheless, some further supports and administrative actions may help to ensure stronger program outcomes. The Trust should consider the following recommendations:

1. Through continued promotion of the POP program, the Trust should aim to always attract a sufficient number of applications to allow the selection of a diverse set of high quality projects. Should the number of quality applications received grow further, some consideration should be given to an increase in the total fund set aside for POP projects.

2. The Trust should always acknowledge the significant in-kind contribution of grantees but explore ways of shielding grantees from unexpected financial impacts, for example by:
- providing larger grants or access to additional 'emergency' funds
- providing some cautionary tips to POP applicants via the POP website, application forms etc
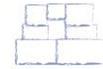
- assessing successful applications in order to identify potential over-runs or risks to grantees and to bring this to the attention of grantees, encouraging them to scale down projects as required
- openly communicating with grantees from the outset and throughout projects to help identify and work through issues that may be financially burdensome on grantees.

3. In assessing grant applications, the Trust should give particular consideration to projects that are an extension of an existing (successful) project or a precursor to an ongoing program of work. Grantees should be mentored and encouraged to think about projects in the context of an ongoing program of environmental work and to use POP as a catalyst for leveraging other sources of funds. At the completion of projects, the Trust should initiate a dialogue about 'next steps' and encourage grantees to submit proposals for further funding, whether through the Environmental Trust or other sources.

4. The Trust should develop a better understanding of the capacity needs of Aboriginal community organisations and the available services and agencies that can help or are helping to build capacity. The Trust could offer, for example, better access to advice or resources to assist with project management techniques, book-keeping and budget management, evaluation and monitoring, report writing and sustainability leadership.

5. The Trust should establish a mechanism for allowing grantees to signal their support needs at the outset, so that appropriate support can be provided or brokered. For example, grantees should be asked to indicate their level of comfort in preparing reports on the environmental outcomes achieved through their projects. A grantee interview or survey could be administered soon after a grant is awarded and grantees referred to sources of assistance that are identified.

6. The effort to build *organisational capacity* should be understood as a process of building *individual capacities*. Any dialogue with POP applicants and grantees about 'capacity' would be usefully and perhaps more clearly framed around 'individual training needs'.

7. The Trust should discuss with the M&E contractor the strategies that could be employed to ensure that there is a higher degree of engagement from grantees with regards to monitoring and evaluation. There should be some agreement reached on the amount of assistance that should be provided and the responses to a lack of engagement on the part of grantees.

8. A mechanism should be created for providing monitoring and evaluation advice and mentoring *throughout the project*, at least for those grantees that need it. The aim would be
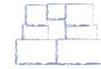
to ensure that the M&E plan remains central to the project and that grantees develop some real M&E skills and capacity. This could be achieved through an expansion of the role of the M&E contractor and/or the grants administrator function.

9. Formal communications from the Trust and informal communications from the grants administrator should always carry an understanding tone and acknowledge the constraints faced by Aboriginal community organisations. Clearly, the grants administrator needs to have a deep understanding of the operating environment of these organisations and have the ability to work collaboratively. The aim should be to present the grant agreement as a *partnership* and to avoid a perception of a paternal or 'us and them' relationship. This relationship should be cemented from the outset and every effort should be made to let grantees know that the Trust is 'here to help'.

10. The Trust should continue to provide workshops to assist potential grantees with their applications and to recommend sources of available assistance.

11. The Trust should continue to assess applications carefully and to work with applicants to help shape projects that contribute to the Trust's objectives and that reduce risks for both the Trust and grantees.

12. The POP Technical Committee should be dissuaded from approving projects that lack merit or which carry too much risk. It should be emphasised that it is preferable to not allocate the entire funding pool than to create risk and an ongoing burden for both the Trust and Aboriginal community organisations.

13. The Trust should develop a grantee risk assessment and management framework and ensure that appropriate referee checks are completed.

14. In assessing POP applications, the Trust should take a broader view of 'environmental outcomes' and acknowledge that 'environment' and 'culture' are inextricable in the context of Aboriginal land. The Trust should avoid insisting that grantees revise their proposals in order to fit within a non-Aboriginal paradigm.

15. Periodically review the application form and associated materials in light of grantee feedback and continue to strive for an application form that is as simple as possible while meeting the information needs of the Trust.

16. The Trust should more strongly encourage grant applications from consortia that feature an Aboriginal community organisation *in partnership* with one or more other organisations. The program's supporting materials should make it clear that the Trust will have high regard for applications that – as well as satisfying the program's guidelines
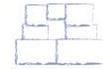
– set out partnerships arrangements and the roles to be played by project partners. Eligibility should not, however, be entirely contingent on Aboriginal community organisations partnering with another organisation. The advantages of working in partnership should be promoted to Aboriginal community organisations.

17. There should be an effort to reposition M&E as a tool for helping grantees to better deliver projects and to allow successes to be celebrated, rather than simply being a means of 'reporting to the funding body'. This could be a key message delivered by the M&E contractor and one that is emphasised in communications with applicants and grantees.

18. The Trust should establish a mechanism for allowing grantees to signal their support needs at the outset, so that appropriate support can be provided or brokered. For example, grantees should be asked to indicate their level of comfort in preparing reports on the environmental outcomes achieved through their projects. As appropriate, suggestions could be made for finding the necessary skills, whether through a partner organisation or an external party.

19. The Trust should trial a process that allows grantees to use alternate means to report on the outcomes of their projects. For example, grantees who may struggle with preparing written reports could be allowed to provide a verbal report through an interview with the grant administrator or other Trust representative. There would obviously remain a requirement for grantees to provide an audited financial report and this option should be exercised only when an acceptable written report may not be forthcoming.

20. The Trust should continue to acknowledge the high support needs and administrative cost of the program and ensure that person with appropriate background and work style is selected to fill the position of grant administrator. The selection criteria for the POP grants administrator should ensure that they, among other things:
1. Identify as an Aboriginal person
2. Have experience in working with Aboriginal community organisations and have an understanding of the cultural and operational context of Aboriginal community organisations
3. Have good problem-solving skills and like to work in a collaborative way
4. Have good interpersonal skills and conflict resolution skills.

21. There should be an effort to be more proactive in following up with grantees, to obtain verbal updates on the progress of projects. Making personal visits to a selection of project locations should be a part of the duties of the grant administrator. The POP grant administrator should have a work plan that ensures:

1. All grantees are contacted on a regular basis and that grantee relationships are monitored
2. A risk management plan for each project is maintained
3. Support and other 'interventions' are provided in a timely fashion
4. A register of available support/capacity building service providers is maintained.

22. The methods used to promote the POP program should be continued. While the regional workshops may at times be poorly attended, they clearly provide benefit. There may be an opportunity to provide some training or other capacity building activities to coincide with the workshops, that may help to boost attendance as well as provide a further benefit to potential grantees.

23. The Trust should consider the advantages and disadvantages of a Technical Committee comprised of experienced, long-serving members. Some consideration should be given to the suggestion for *refreshing* the committee on a regular basis.
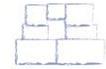
APPENDIX A: EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

OUTCOMES HIERARCHY AND EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

POP program hierarchy of outcomes

Following is a draft hierarchy of outcomes, to establish the basis for the evaluation framework set out in section 2.2

Ultimate outcomes
1. Aboriginal land or land of significance to Aboriginal people is restored or rehabilitated.
2. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are educated about the local environment and the value Aboriginal communities place on the natural environment.
3. Aboriginal community organisations are supported to undertake environmental projects.
Intermediate outcomes
4. The stated objectives for funded projects are met.
5. Grantees meet their reporting and other obligations to the Trust.
6. Projects are delivered using grant funds and in accordance with the approved project work plan.
7. Suitable projects are approved and grants are awarded to successful applicants.
Immediate outcomes
8. Grant applications are received for projects that meet the objectives of POP.
9. Relevant Aboriginal organisations and communities are aware of the availability of POP grants and assistance.
Activities
10. Assessment of grant applications and monitoring of successful projects.
11. Development of program guidelines, application forms and processes, reporting templates.
12. Assistance provided to applicants and grantees.
13. Promotion of the POP program to Aboriginal community organisations.
Needs
Prior to 2002, NSW Environment Trust grant programs were not attracting large numbers of successful applications from Aboriginal organisations.

Aboriginal community organisations have the potential to contribute to the goals of the Trust but may benefit from capacity building grants and other assistance. |
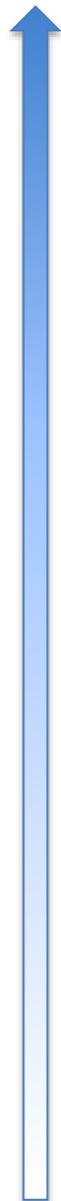
Evaluation framework

Following is a draft evaluation framework that builds on the draft hierarchy of outcomes but that also sets out the research questions, key indicators and data sources. The specified data sources are discussed in section 3 – Methodology.

Ultimate outcomes	Research questions	Key indicators	Data sources
1. Aboriginal land or land of significance to Aboriginal people is restored or rehabilitated	Overall, to what extent has the POP program contributed to improvement in the NSW environment (at a local, regional or state-wide level)? What environmental outcomes have been achieved as a result of program?	Examples of environmental outcomes Cumulative environmental outcomes across all projects	Document review Grantee interviews Stakeholder interviews
2. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are educated about the local environment and the value Aboriginal communities place on the natural environment	Overall, to what extent does the program support a strengthening of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people's understanding and care for the natural environment, particularly that of significance to Aboriginal people? What education outcomes have been achieved as a result of the program and what has this resulted in?	Examples of educational outcomes Impact of educational activity	Document review Grantee interviews Stakeholder interviews
3. Aboriginal community organisations are supported to undertake environmental projects.	How has the POP program supported Aboriginal communities in NSW to undertake environmental projects?	Further projects undertaken Further applications for Trust grants (including through mainstream programs)	Grantee interviews Stakeholder interviews

Intermediate outcomes	Research questions	Key indicators	Data sources
4. The stated objectives for funded projects are met.	How successful are the funded projects in meeting their objectives? What are the factors or barriers to successful project delivery? How successful are projects funded under the POP program in delivering long-term environmental benefits? Do projects continue beyond the life of the project? What elements are needed for this to successfully occur?	Proportion of projects to meet stated outcomes Status of projects post grant period, ongoing project outcomes Characteristics of more/less successful projects	Document review Grantee interviews Stakeholder interviews
5. Grantees meet their reporting and other obligations to the Trust.	How compliant are grantees with Trust requirements? How do the monitoring and evaluation requirements assist with or detract from grantees' ability to deliver quality projects/project outcomes?	Proportion of fully acquitted grants Quality of reporting to the Trust	Document review Stakeholder interviews
6. Projects are delivered using grant funds and in accordance with the approved project work plan.	To what degree are projects implemented in line with grant agreements? What barriers are encountered?	Proportion of projects to have achieved all activities set out in work plan	Document review Grantee interviews Stakeholder interviews
7. Suitable projects are approved and grants are awarded to successful applicants.	What types of projects are funded? What types of organisations are funded? To what extent have the funded projects met the POP objectives and the objectives of the Environmental Trust?	Number and type of projects and project activities	Document review Stakeholder interviews

Immediate outcomes	Research questions	Key indicators	Data sources
8. Grant applications are received for projects that meet the objectives of POP.	How many applications are received? How many satisfy POP guidelines? Where do applications come from? What are the common deficiencies in applications?	Number of applications by year Profile of applicants	Document review Stakeholder consultation
9. Relevant Aboriginal organisations and communities are aware of the availability of POP grants and assistance.	Are Aboriginal organisations and communities aware of, and interested in the assistance available through POP? How did they find out about the program? What is the demand for grants for these types of projects? Is the grant funding model appropriate? What 'value' is placed on the program – what gaps does it fill? Are there more appropriate, efficient and effective funding models available? How would this benefit Aboriginal organisations and the Environmental Trust?	Awareness of POP Sources of awareness Likelihood of future applications Demand for alternate funding arrangements	Grantee interviews Stakeholder interviews Survey of past applicants Review of alternative models

Activities			
10. Assessment of grant applications and monitoring of successful projects.	Are the monitoring and evaluation requirements giving the Trust enough information to manage the program better in relation to overall outcomes and value for money? What are the benefits and barriers to the current report reviewing process (consider both scope and depth)? How cost efficient and effective is the day-to-day management of the program in terms of outcomes and Trust resources? How consistent is it with other Trust contestable grants? What areas can be improved or strengthened in the management and administration of POP?	Time to review applications Time to review reports and monitor projects Time costs relative to other Trust programs	Stakeholder interviews
11. Development of program guidelines, application forms and processes, reporting templates.	What is the nature of the program guidelines and processes? What is the rationale for these? How appropriate and accessible is the application process for the range of grants offered (considering scale of project, monetary value and feedback on project ideas)? Are the program guidelines, application process and reporting frameworks workable for applicants and grantees? What improvements could be made?	Perceived suitability of guidelines and processes	Stakeholder interviews Grantee interviews Survey of past applicants
12. Assistance provided to applicants and grantees.	What assistance is provided to applicants and grantees? Is this assistance valued? What other assistance would be helpful?	Extent of assistance provided Satisfaction with assistance provided	Stakeholder interviews Grantee interviews Survey of past applicants
13. Promotion of the POP program to Aboriginal community organisations.	How is the POP program promoted? Are the methods used appropriate?	Amount of 'outreach' promotion Perceived suitability of promotional activity	Stakeholder interviews Grantee interviews Survey of past applicants