

# 2019-2020 OPERATIONS REPORT



*Promoting the interests of Ngarinyin people and their country*



***WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are warned that this report may contain images of deceased persons.***

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Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation would like to acknowledge Annette Ruzicka whose images are featured throughout the report, as well as other contributors.

Front cover: Wungurr Ranger  
Dean Wungundin  
Image credit: Annette Ruzicka

For further information:  
Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation  
Phone: 08 9191 1332  
Website: [www.wilinggin.com.au](http://www.wilinggin.com.au)  
Email: [admin@wilinggin.com.au](mailto:admin@wilinggin.com.au)

# Message from the Chairperson

**On behalf of the Wilinggin Board and as the Chair it is my pleasure to bring you the 2019-20 Wilinggin Annual Operations Report. It has been a huge year for Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation, with many achievements realised and challenges overcome.**

I am happy to report that in the past 12 months Wilinggin has taken a number of significant steps forward on our ongoing goal to becoming a stronger organisation for future generations of Ngarinyin people.

We have achieved major outcomes that have led to Wilinggin gaining greater control of our country and we continue to work towards exercising the full enjoyment of our native title rights. This includes the handing back of Bachsten Camp, as well as the start of a process to resolve all land tenure and compensation issues that were not included in the Wilinggin native title determination more than 15 years ago.

As a Board we are continuing to focus on the future of Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation, developing

projects that are set to sustain us as a corporation and look after the interests of our people.

We have maintained our work on country with the Wunggurr Rangers and the newly established Nyaliga Rangers. We have worked collaboratively with our partners Australian Wildlife Conservancy and the Kimberley Land Council to deliver our land management programs and to ensure Ngarinyin people are looking after Wilinggin country.

We have also remained focused on looking after our members, dedicating significant assistance to Ngallagunda community to help it recover from insolvency and administration.

Another major milestone was the renaming of the King Leopold Ranges to the Wunaamin-Miliwundi Range - a combination of the Ngarinyin and Bunuba traditional names. This was a significant moment for Traditional Owners and signals a shift in the way non-Indigenous Australia thinks about the history of major landmarks and the importance of respecting the legacy of Aboriginal people and culture.

For me personally, I have seen a huge change at Wilinggin during my time as Chairperson and I would like to acknowledge the Board for driving the direction of our organisation, with the support of the wonderful Wilinggin staff. I believe that now is the time for all of us to remain focused, and to support each other as we take the next major step to becoming a more mature and impactful organisation for our people.

I thank the Directors for allowing me to be a part of this corporation and for having faith in me as Chairperson. It has been a privilege to be in this position and I feel very passionate about the past, present and future direction of Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation.

**Rosie Sahanna  
Chairperson**



# *Ngarinyin people regain control of the Bachsten Camp*

## **Bachsten Camp and the Munja Track are finally back in the control of the Ngarinyin people.**

Previously run by a non-Indigenous tourism operation, the camp together with the 220km Munja Track access road to Bachsten, have been an issue for more than two decades for the Ngarinyin people.

For many years, the culturally significant area had been impacted by uncontrolled visitation by tourists, and an inability for rangers and Traditional Owners to adequately manage the area due to the pre-existing lease arrangements.

The issue was finally resolved through negotiation with the lease holders and the State Government, with the State recognising the illegitimate nature of the previous lease arrangement. The outcome was made possible thanks to the co-operation of all parties involved, including the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage, the previous leaseholders and financial assistance from the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC).

For the Ngarinyin People the long-awaited handing back of Bachsten Camp was a huge achievement and highlighted the persistence of the Ngarinyin people to take control of their country.

The Bachsten Camp outcome is very significant and now paves the way for further negotiations between Ngarinyin and Government that will lead to Ngarinyin people gaining control over even more of their country.

Wilinggin Chairperson Rosie Sahanna said taking back control of Bachsten Camp was a major highlight of the year and would provide many opportunities for future generations.

“Bachsten and the surrounding areas are very important to the Ngarinyin people and it is right that it should be back in the hands of Traditional Owners,” Rosie said.

“Wilinggin now has the ability to manage

visitation and protect the cultural and environmental values of the area. There is also the potential for Wilinggin to grow bigger and better thanks to this outcome and the opportunities it will provide.”

Bachsten Camp will serve as an interim biodiversity hub for the Wunggurr Rangers to conduct land management activities, while planning for other future uses is underway. Wilinggin is investigating a number of opportunities, including cultural enterprises and Indigenous tourism.



# Historic Wilinggin negotiation

**Wilinggin has begun work on one of its most important negotiations since native title was determined in 2004 – the settlement of all outstanding land issues across Wilinggin country.**

Kickstarted by the Bachsten Camp negotiation, the process will work towards the resolution of all outstanding land matters that were not part of the original Wilinggin native title determination.

Wilinggin Chairperson Rosie Sahanna said resolving the remaining land issues would allow Ngarinyin people to take on more responsibility for the caretaking of their land and had the potential to significantly expand Wilinggin as an organisation.

“Our aim throughout this process is to ensure we build and maintain a solid economic foundation in line with our values that will continue to support Ngarinyin people in the future,” she said.

The negotiation process will include matters, such as the return of all Aboriginal Lands Trust (ALT) leases to Traditional Owners through Wilinggin, the Wood River lease, the normalisation of the community living area at Ngallagunda and the settlement of outstanding compensation claims based on the Timber Creek compensation case in the Northern Territory.

Discussions with Ngarinyin people and Wilinggin will be held in the coming weeks to agree the

composition of a negotiation team including Board members and cultural advisors to help lead the process of negotiation.

Before any agreements are finalised with Government, the content of the agreements will be brought back to the entire Ngarinyin community for discussion and then final authorisation. The negotiation process between Wilinggin and the State Government to negotiate the agreement will take place over what is expected to be an 18-month period.

The negotiation will be a whole of State Government negotiation and is significant because the only other settlements with native title groups have been in relation to similar native title issues in major cities or towns. The Yawuru in Broome, Miriuwung Gajerrong in Kununurra, the Noongar settlement in the south and Yamatji in the midwest have all previously negotiated similar agreements – it is now Ngarinyin’s turn to negotiate a final settlement.

Wilinggin is also exploring the possibility of Dambimangari and Wunambal Gaambera joining the process to resolve the remaining land issues on a regional scale for the benefit of all Wanjinna Wunggurr people.

Wilinggin will continue to provide regular updates to our members as the negotiation progresses, including holding a series of community meetings, engagement opportunities and on country negotiations.





# ***Bright future for Ngallagunda***

**Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation has invested significant time and resources into assisting Ngallagunda Aboriginal Corporation to work its way out of administration and regain control of its community and station.**

With a new Board soon to be elected, a recently conditionally registered carbon project and a new pastoral sub-lease in place, the future is looking bright.

The Ngallagunda carbon project is a significant achievement and we would like to acknowledge the hard work of the Kimberley Land Council, particularly Program Manager, Carbon and Enterprise Development, Kristina Koenig, for making this happen. We now await Minister Ben Wyatt's approval on the project.

The new project means Ngallagunda will have two major forms of income to assist the sustainability

of the corporation – one being the pastoral lease agreement with Kimberley pastoralist Nigel Westlake and the other being the Ngallagunda carbon project, as well as potential tourism opportunities.

Wilinggin is also working hard to ensure that a Community Living Area is excised from the Gibb River Pastoral Lease. This will protect and secure the housing and community infrastructure of Ngallagunda, alongside the delivery of Government services such as housing, power, water and sewerage, all of which are services that the Government is obliged to provide for established communities and townships. This issue is expected to be resolved in the next 18 months.

Wilinggin will continue to support Ngallagunda in other ways, including taking on responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of the Ngallagunda School, with the hope that education will return to the community soon.

# Wilinggin and AWC forge strong partnership

**Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation's partnership with Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) continues to grow stronger after two years working together.**

The partnership, which started in 2018, is a collaboration which sees the Wunggurr Rangers and other Ngarinyin people work with AWC staff on key conservation and land management projects, such as fire, feral animals, weeds and biodiversity surveys.

Both Wilinggin and AWC bring important skills and knowledge to the partnership, with an overall aim of expanding and improving our land management and biodiversity programs.

Wilinggin Fire and Biodiversity Officer Luke Russ said the partnership was helping to build a scientific knowledge base across Wilinggin country.

"We've been working with AWC Ecologist Karen Young to survey different areas to build an inventory of wildlife on Wilinggin country," Luke said. "By partnering with experienced ecologists at AWC we



**Key achievements of the Wilinggin and AWC partnership for 2019-20 include:**

- Working together to deliver an effective fire program despite the impacts of COVID-19.
- Major on country ecological surveys at Pantijan and Mitchell blocks.
- Identification of rare small mammals on Wilinggin country, including a Black-footed Tree-rat and a Kimberley Brush-tailed Phascogale, as well as other environmentally and culturally important species such as emus and large goannas.

are seeing how what we record on country can become usable data and turned into good science."

AWC Wildlife Ecologist Karen Young conducted surveys across two major sites in 2019-20, including the Pantijan blocks, as well as the east and west Mitchell blocks. The work was undertaken with Ngarinyin Traditional Owners Liam Bear and Cassidy Charles at Pantijan and Deanne Bidd, and Rosanna Mungulu at Mitchell.

The surveys included the deployment of camera traps to better understand what animals are on Wilinggin country, as well as other methods such as live trapping and bird watching. Both trips resulted in good sightings of many animals, including some threatened and vulnerable mammals.

Karen said working with Traditional Owners provided a valuable and different perspective.

"It's been wonderful to have the TOs tell stories and explain the significance of certain places where we have undertaken this work," Karen said.

"It's really exciting to be able to share the discoveries we are making as this is Ngarinyin people's land and their animals."

# Luke's fire and biodiversity focus

**Long-time Wunggurr Ranger Luke Russ has taken on a new role this year stepping up as the Wilinggin Fire and Biodiversity Officer.**

The role sees Luke working alongside other land managers from partner organisations to drive Wilinggin's fire and biodiversity programs.

This year Luke took on the navigator role for Wilinggin's early season fire program, directing where and how country should be burnt to help reduce the likelihood of late season fire and to look after Wilinggin's carbon project. He said the new role was a learning experience, but his confidence throughout the year, especially in the front seat of the chopper, had grown significantly.

"I have really developed my understanding of the technical aspects of fire mitigation thanks to the help of some key people like Rhys Swain (formerly of the KLC), Richard Whatley (KLC), Toby Barton, Jonas Klein and the rest of the AWC crew," he said. "This year I want to focus more on the logistics and the organisation of the early season fire program, as well as some of my technical biodiversity knowledge."

Luke said his aim was to continue to build the land management expertise within the rangers and Ngarinyin Traditional Owners, and to continuously improve Wilinggin's fire and biodiversity work programs. He also has a strong curiosity about how modern technology such as drones, satellite data and software can assist in the wide array of tasks required in his role.

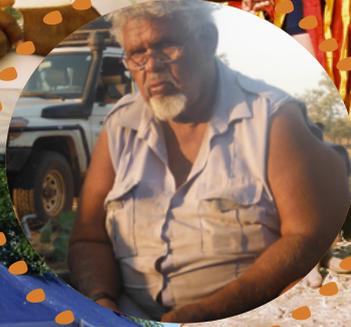
"I'd like to be at a point where other ranger groups are asking us for assistance, and to get more Ngarinyin Traditional Owners involved next year and out on country," he said.







# Wilinggin looking back...





# Fire and carbon year in review

## Wilinggin Fire Project

**For the first time Wilinggin isolated a team of rangers and specialist AWC staff at Charnley River to ensure this year’s early season prescribed burning could occur despite the significant impacts of COVID-19.**

Wilinggin’s team consisted of Luke Russ and Dean Wungundin, who worked with the AWC crew to effectively complete the early burning program over eight weeks, lighting small, cool fires strategically to create fire breaks across the country.

With Luke in the front seat as navigator and Dean working as incendiary machine operator, Wilinggin had an all Indigenous fire management team in the air conducting aerial burning.

Fire and Biodiversity Officer Luke Russ said fire and carbon are an important way of generating income at the same time as looking after country.

To this date there have been few major late season fires and if this continues, we will be on track for a successful year. This comes after a difficult fire season in 2019, which saw some major areas of Wilinggin country impacted by wildfire late in the year.

While these fires caused damage, the result was not as bad as first thought and with an expected good wet season on the way, the country should begin

to recover. The Wilinggin Fire Project is located on the Wilinggin Indigenous Protected Area, and its complex administration and compliance is achieved through contracted support from Kimberley Land Council specialists.

Funds generated by the project, through the sale of carbon credits, is reinvested into ongoing management of country.

The Wilinggin Fire Project has been, and continues to be, critical to the growth of our organisation and allows Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation to conduct important work across country for the benefit of all Traditional Owners.





## Ngallagunda and Nyaliga fire projects

We are pleased to announce that a carbon project has now officially been registered at Ngallagunda - and is now awaiting final approval from the State Minister for Lands.

We hope the project will officially begin generating carbon credits next year, and thereby increase the ability of Ngallagunda to look after country, at the same time as producing an income through the sale of carbon credits.

Meanwhile, the Nyaliga Fire Project is in its third year of operation on Karunjie Durack Station in partnership with the Nyaliga Rangers and the KLC.

Despite the difficulties of COVID-19, the team led by KLC Strategic Fire Operations Manager Richard Whatley in trying conditions and with limited support, was able to deliver good early season burning, and we hope will record another effective year.



## *Wunggurr Rangers' solid season*

**The Wunggurr Rangers have had another solid year looking after Wilinggin country.**

After seven years as the Ranger Coordinator for the Wunggurr Rangers, Danyel Wolff has moved on, heading to Queensland to be closer to his family.

This change coincided with Kat Mitchell departing after many years as the IPA Coordinator - their hard work and dedication to the rangers and the Indigenous Protected Area over this period has been invaluable and they were well respected by the rangers and locals alike.

Jacob Charters took on the role as Ranger

Coordinator in March 2020, just in time for the initial COVID-19 lockdown. Despite the lockdown the team consisting of Robin Dann, Kane Nenowatt, Dean Wungundin, and assisted by casual rangers Sherwin Nulgit and Craig Rastus, has remained busy. The support of staff in Derby and Broome, and the co-operation of the KLC and Wilinggin, has been invaluable.

Throughout the year, the rangers have been acting in a supportive on ground role to the regional fire program headed by Luke Russ and Toby Barton from AWC, while another important part of the work program this year was weed control. The team was busy spraying and manually removing



grader grass, rubber bush, coffee bush, sickle pod, neem trees and yellow oleander. This is an enormous job, particularly for grader grass, which covers vast areas, and has multiple germination periods throughout the year.

The team has started to re-map infestations to return to these patches and spray them before the seeds have appeared to help stop the further spread. As well as looking after the surrounding environment, the rangers also need to maintain equipment, improve base facilities and continue with ranger training.

Over the past two months, the team has been diligently working on projects, improving skills in

concreting, welding and vehicle maintenance. Ranger Coordinator Jacob has a background in landscape and civil construction and enjoys passing on his skills to the rangers.

“The team has concreted a large section around the workshop and also designed and built a stand for the recently purchased fire-fighting unit,” he said.

“The rangers also got to practice and improve their welding skills, which will become increasingly useful as they endeavour to become more self-sufficient, including the planned building of a new covered, double car parking area for the ranger vehicles.”



## *On the road to independence*

**Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation will take on full responsibility for the Wungurr Rangers from next year.**

This major step towards independence came after Wilinggin took on the Indigenous Protected Area funding agreement for the first-time earlier this year.

The transition from KLC management to Wilinggin control has been achieved with the co-operation and significant input of the KLC's Land and Sea Management team, who have made the transition positive and productive for all involved.

Fire and Biodiversity Officer Luke Russ said the transition was a "big step".

"This will allow Wilinggin to expand and have more say over where the ranger program funding can

be spent," he said. "We will remain a part of the Kimberley Ranger Network and will continue to attend regional events where we can to network and share knowledge with other Kimberley ranger groups."

Wilinggin has also recently recruited Ngarinyin woman Rachel Treacy to the position of Healthy Country Project Officer.

Business Development Manager Peter Saunders said the appointment was another exciting development for Ngarinyin people managing and looking after country.

"With Rachel and Luke, we will now have two Ngarinyin people looking after the management of the Wilinggin Indigenous Protected Area, which has been a long time coming and is very significant," Peter said.



## *Nyaliga Rangers out on country*

**In 2020, Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation began hosting a new ranger program on Karunjie Durack Station in partnership with Nyaliga Aboriginal Corporation.**

With funding from multiple partners, including the State Government, WWF, ILSC and the KLC, the program has the capacity to employ six Ngarinyin people as rangers to work on country.

Nyaliga Aboriginal Corporation Chairperson John Campbell has played an instrumental role in the set-up of the ranger group, while Ranger Coordinator Rodney Freeman has done a stellar job conducting a work program in often difficult conditions, with the valuable assistance of Project Officer Gerald Mills.

Nyaliga Aboriginal Corporation is responsible for the strategic direction of the Nyaliga Rangers, while Wilinggin provides administrative resourcing and support.

Plans are continuing to progress for the construction of an essential ranger base, funded by ILSC, at the station.



# Caring for language and culture

**Wilinggin is undertaking key language and culture projects to ensure the preservation and maintenance of Ngarinyin culture.**

The projects have been requested by Ngarinyin Traditional Owners and take place under the direction of Elders and senior Ngarinyin people.

“We are facilitating key cultural projects, with a focus on recording and preserving Ngarinyin and Wurla language, with the assistance of linguist Tom Saunders,” Business Development Manager Peter Saunders said.

“Ensuring the language of Ngarinyin people is recorded for future generations remains a major priority and will continue throughout next year.”

Wilinggin is also dedicating resources to the repatriation of cultural items and information from various individuals, organisations and institutions around the world.

“This is important so that Ngarinyin people have ownership over their cultural information presently held by others,” Peter said. “We will continue to work towards the development of a cultural database that can be accessed by Traditional Owners to view and listen to these records of Ngarinyin history and culture.”





# Tourism and visitor management

**Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation has started a project aimed at better managing tourism across Wilinggin country, with more work to occur throughout 2020-21.**

We have started working with the Kimberley Land Council on a tourism project that will develop a visitor management strategy to help protect important sites, manage visitation, including the impact of camping and accidental fires, and create employment opportunities on Wilinggin country.

“Looking at how we can better understand and manage visitation and tourism across Wilinggin country is important, especially after regaining Bachsten Camp, as well as the annual influx of tourists travelling the Gibb River Road,” Business Development Manager Peter Saunders said.

“This is a significant project and will assist Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation to better look after country and understand how we can best generate opportunities for Ngarinyin people to work on country. “

## Looking forward to next year

**In 2020-21 Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation will continue with its main purpose of promoting the interests of Ngarinyin people and their country.**

We will focus on several new and ongoing projects that will see Wilinggin continue to grow, such as the registration of our concluding carbon projects, as well as key decision making around the potential of carbon sequestration.

We will have a renewed focus on land management activities, with the aim of getting more Traditional Owners back out on country and raising our fire and biodiversity expertise to the next level.

The huge task of beginning the negotiation process for all remaining land issues will undoubtedly be challenging for all of us. We encourage any Ngarinyin people interested or concerned about this issue to get

in contact with our team. This is a big project and will be a major focus of the General Manager and the Wilinggin Board moving forward.

Finally, we would like to thank you, our members, for supporting Wilinggin to become better each day.

We look forward to working in your interests for many years to come.



Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation  
P.O Box 453  
1 Swain St, Derby, W.A. 6728  
Australia  
Phone: 08 9191 1332  
Website: [www.wilinggin.com.au](http://www.wilinggin.com.au)  
Email: [admin@wilinggin.com.au](mailto:admin@wilinggin.com.au)