



# How can First Nations people buy the farm?

## The re-establishing the First Nations agrarian economy

By Waluwin Foundation

### 1. The current post-colonisation reality

According to Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES) report “Snapshot of Australian Agriculture 2023”, the gross value of agricultural production reached a record \$90 billion for 2022–23. This wealth is derived from around 55% of Australian land use (excluding timber production), with the productive farmlands across Murray Darling Basin region accounting for a significant proportion of this value.

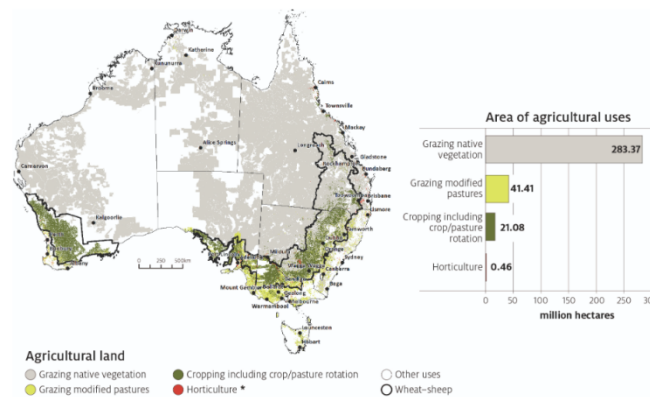
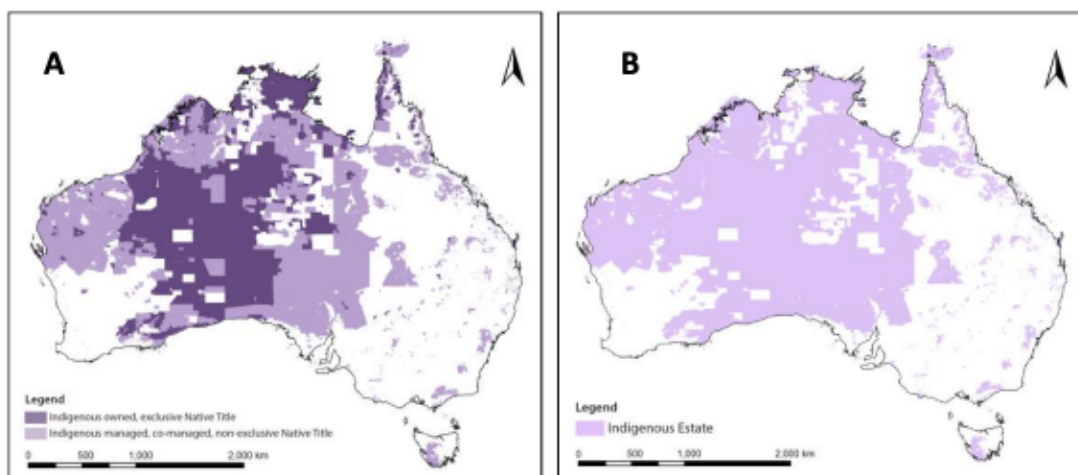


Figure 1 – ABARES Snapshot of Australian Agriculture (2023)

By contrast, the Baseline study - Agricultural capacity of the Indigenous Estate (2022) the Indigenous Estate accounts for almost 57% of the Australian land mass. Noticeably, there is very little cross over between Australia’s prime agricultural region, the Murray Darling Basin, and the Indigenous Estate. Moreover, the nature of “ownership” of the Indigenous Estate is primarily based on “communal” rather than individual freehold. That is, these are an aggregation of Native Title rights, lands held by trusts and legislative vehicles, lands acquired and granted by the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation, and Indigenous Protected Areas that are committed to the National Reserve System (and thus not available for farming).



Map 3 (A) and (B) – The First Nations Estate derived by this study: (A) by recognised rights and (B) cumulative First Nations Estate

Figure 2 – Baseline study - Agricultural capacity of the Indigenous Estate (2022)

For Indigenous individuals and families wishing to farm, the cumulative impact of colonisation – racism, dispossession, theft, violence, disconnection – have excluded them from effectively participating in, contributing to, and benefiting from Australia's agrarian economy for the past 250 years. This has directly denied Indigenous people the opportunity to accumulate intergenerational wealth from the land and prevented them from building the financial resilience necessary to undertake farming ventures in modern Australia – a business now directly impacted by the challenges of a damaged landscaped and increasingly changing climate.

#### 2016 Census – Indigenous involvement in Australian agriculture industry

- Almost 40 per cent of the Indigenous people who worked in the agriculture industry in 2016 worked in sheep, beef cattle and grain farming – by far the largest sector in Australia by turnover.
- Most Indigenous agriculture industry workers were employed as:
  - labourers (53 per cent; 1,731 people), or
  - managers (26 per cent; 850 people).
    - Between 2011 and 2016, the number of Indigenous managers increased by 18 per cent (129 people).

Unfortunately, Census does not capture how many Indigenous farmers work on their own freehold property, but arguably the figure is statistically negligible especially across the productive Murray Darling Basin.

The situation makes it virtually impossible for Indigenous individuals and families to acquire productive farmland. Without the backstop of intergenerational wealth, Indigenous people are at an extreme disadvantage when competing for available productive farmland and critically limits any capacity to assume reasonable levels of debt funding for acquiring a farm given the type and scale of business risk posed by the agricultural sector. While lending has increased to Australian agribusinesses, fueling recent record production, effectively no



capital has gone into the hands of Indigenous people to participate in the agricultural economy.

Bank lending to agribusiness rose from \$77b to \$93b during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has since risen to \$104.7b as at September 2022.



Figure 3 – Australian Banking Association (2023)

The uncomfortable reality is that Australia has established a system of agricultural apartheid, whereby Indigenous people may be allowed to work on the farm, but they will never own the farm.

## 2. Introducing the Mother Earth loan – First Nations designed finance for Country

*The Mother Earth loan is designed to support the purchase of freehold title farmlands by First Nations farmers to revive traditional practices. It's based on similar modelling to HECS, where repayments are due when Mother Earth is 'healthy and able to share' and payments are paused or significantly reduced when 'Mother is struggling and needs time to heal'. Paul Girrawah House, the founder of the Waluwin Foundation, explains how it can work and its benefits. (Extract from [Philanthropy Weekly](#) – 9<sup>th</sup> February 2024)*

*Waluwin mayiny – healthy people.*

*Waluwin ngurambang – healthy country.*

*Yuwindhu Paul Girrawah House, baladhu Ngambri-Kamberri Wiradyuri Gibirr. My name is [Paul Girrawah House](#). I am a Ngambri-Kamberri, Wiradyuri man.*

*Yindyamarra bala Biyaami walumarra marramaldhaany umbe yukembruuk, yibay Maliyan. Respecting Biyaami, our creator and protector and key totems, the Crow and Eagle.*

In the early 1800s, our ancestors first heard about whitefellas through their trading partners. They heard whitefellas wanted land, women and children. Our ancestors fled to the mountains. Many died of introduced diseases. Our men, women and children were shot on sight. Others were treated with untold brutality.



'Lest we forget'.

I am a survivor and descendant of my old people.  
 I want to become a farmer again.  
 I want to return home to Country.  
 I want to bring back connection and provenance stories.  
 I want to create genuine intergenerational wealth for our children.

But I am currently excluded from borrowing money that will let me farm the way of my old people.

If I take out a whitefella loan, I am expected to farm like a whitefella. It's on whitefella terms, with no connection to Country, no understanding of *gandaywarra*, the long grow.

The current whitefella loan demands a farmer to run half dead animals across dust trying to hold onto the farm.

This is financing that forces a farmer to despair, and worse.

This is financing that expects the Government to bail farmers out during drought or floods.

This is financing offered by people who don't understand *Country*. People who've never really listened to blackfellas.

I have delivered hundreds of Welcome to Country ceremonies. Contained in the words of our Ancestors is the roadmap to financing a better way, financing a blackfella way for a land that blackfellas have looked after for over 60,000 years.

Finance that is *wudhadhuray*. Clever finance that has ears and listens to the Ancestors story.

Yet no one has ever invited me, or any other blackfellas, into the room to listen to these stories and talk finance.

For that I offer the *Waluwin* story.

Waluwin was created to show a new/old way for Indigenous nation-building, starting with re-establishing the Indigenous agrarian economy.

It's an economy built on *yindyamarra*, an economy that respects Mother Earth.

An economy that operated for tens of thousands of years.

But for blackfellas that want to buy the farm freehold, they need a new approach that allows them to farm like a blackfella.

They need *Ngama bangalnarranarra*, a Mother Earth loan.

The Mother Earth loan is finance based on our ancient traditional knowledge of managing an unpredictable and varying climate.

A loan that allows Indigenous farmers to respect, and not hurt, Mother Earth.



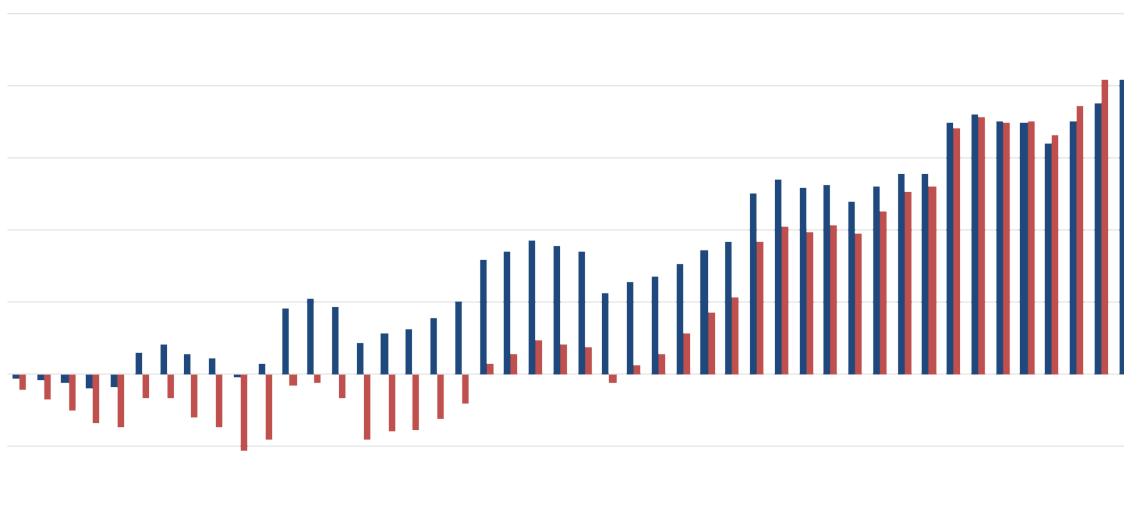
A loan that cares for Country – for farming, for environment, for people.

A loan that repays when Mother is healthy and able to share.

A loan that rests when Mother is struggling and needs time to heal.

For most Australians to understand, it's a loan that works a lot like HECS. You pay when Country is healthy and receive relief when Country is stressed.

Helping with the financial modelling, we have a team at the Australian National University leading the analysis. The graph below details the loan dynamics as a function of cumulative profit. It is based on a simple cattle operation with only a mild drought shock included in the early years of operation. The Red bars illustrate cumulative profit under a standard loan - constant repayment required no matter the prevailing drought conditions. Whereas the blue bars detail the operation under a Mother Earth loan, where repayments are only required when the operation is not in drought. (This is modelled as a "revenue contingent loan" based on the extensive works of [Emeritus Professor Bruce Chapman](#)).



The financial mathematics underpinning the Mother Earth loan has been around for years. What is new is that this knowledge has now been paired with 60,000 years of understanding. Indigenous people led the design approach for the loan, developing a way to finance a better way to farming in the face of an increasingly unpredictable climate.

It is a farm finance that can deliver Indigenous economic development and self-determination; improved soil health, biodiversity and animal welfare; reduce loan anxiety and bankruptcy. It's also financing that doesn't rely on government assistance for taxpayer-supported loan relief.

The Mother Earth loan is not only a way for blackfellas to buy freehold title land and farm the way of our Ancestors, but it's a loan for all Australian farmers that want to respect Country.



The Mother Earth loan is a rare example Indigenous people's contribution to the financial conversation in this country. It is a way for Indigenous people to regain the intergenerational wealth that was stolen.

That is the *Waluwun* story.

## References

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