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Experiences in a decade of developing ecosystem services markets on Indigenous lands in northern Australia

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Abstract:

Northern Australia contains the world's largest relatively intact tropical savannah, and Indigenous people own or have rights to over half of the land. This region has high biodiversity, Indigenous cultural diversity and highly valuable ecosystem services. Nevertheless, there are few options for sustainably financing the management of country. To address this challenge, The Nature Conservancy and several partners have been working to support Indigenous groups abate carbon emissions through early season fire management. Here we present a history of The Nature Conservancy's work across northern Australia, demonstrate the benefits of an emerging ecosystem service market, highlight the challenges and suggest the next steps to a sustainable conservation economy.

Fire is a major factor of the ecosystems, habitats and culture of northern Australia, is a key management tool available to land managers, and is a major challenge if not managed correctly. Fire management is then a prime entry point to ecosystem service markets. Over the past decade, The Nature Conservancy has supported the science work necessary to develop carbon abatement methodologies through fire and have these approved by the Government regulator. Alongside native title resolution, The Nature Conservancy supported capacity for indigenous groups to implement fire management activities – including working with ranger groups to improve governance, facilitate fire management planning and on-ground burning.

Receiving funds to enhance ecosystems and manage country provide important core benefits to the Indigenous communities, including improved governance, management capacity, cultural reinvigoration, reduction of other threatening processes and climate change adaptation. However, continuing large-scale environmental threats, management capacity and governance challenges are not overcome by the carbon payments alone. While new methods for carbon abatement and sequestration are being developed, networks across northern Australia are looking beyond this to tap into other environmental incentives and new options for payments for ecosystem services.