



Boola Boornap Tree Farm seedlings ready for sale, Noongar Country, WA
Image credit: Jesse Collins

Noongar Land Enterprise Group – Australia’s first Aboriginal grower group

The Noongar Land Enterprise (NLE) Group is a social enterprise, not-for-profit alliance of Noongar* landholders based on Noongar Boodja Country, WA’s south-west region.

Australia’s first Aboriginal grower group, since 2014, the group has been leveraging its skills and knowledge in running land-based enterprises to create opportunities for local Noongar people that promote economic independence and strengthen Noongar connection to Country and culture.

NLE Group members boast an array of innovative Aboriginal-led enterprises – including a native tree farm, honey, cattle, bushfoods, sandalwood, carbon farming and cultural tourism – and employ over 30 Aboriginal people.

NLE’s new Strategic Plan identifies five impact areas that it will focus on to 2029:

First Nations agriculture – bush produce which can also be processed to improve positioning in the value chain

Regenerative agriculture – livestock, aquaculture, crops, viticulture and other farm produce produced in a way that is healthy for Country

Land restoration and conservation – restoring and conserving sea/water/ landscapes and bringing back biodiversity

Agri-cultural tourism – linking agriculture with Aboriginal culture and tourism

Building natural assets – carbon farming, nature repair market, natural capital accounting, renewable energy and ESG

Initially supported by the WA Government and ILSC, the NLE were incorporated in 2017.

*An Aboriginal person from south-west WA



PATHWAYS

Growing the value of Country

Owning and managing Country sustainably

Preserving and protecting culture

Driving policy and opportunity

Aboriginal-owned tree farm puts down roots in carbon industry, WA

Purchasing the native tree farm (Boola Boornap) was NLE’s first foray into having a major business that was truly culturally appropriate and commercially sustainable and in doing so allowed us to heal boodja and heal people.

Madeline Anderson, Chairperson, Noongar Land Enterprise Group

In November 2020, the Noongar Land Enterprise (NLE) Group purchased a two-hectare tree farm located about 100 kilometres north-east of Perth, outside the town of Northam in the Avon Valley. Three years later, we talk to its Chief Executive Officer, Alan Beattie, about how the farm is faring in becoming a commercially sustainable business and the broader benefits to the Noongar and Aboriginal community in WA.

In 2020, NLE was exploring avenues for extending its land restoration efforts and taking advantage of carbon farming – an industry where First Nations’ people’s interests are under-represented.

Finding a decommissioned tree farm on the market in Noongar Boodja Country proved fortuitous.

The previous owners had been trying to sell the property for several years and were in the process of selling off equipment.

“NLE have two mottos the tree farm fitted with – ‘Heal Country, Heal People’ and ‘culturally appropriate, commercially sustainable,” explained Alan.

“We could get commercially involved in land restoration but also heal Country by providing our members and the broader community with seedlings to restore their land.”

Cautious that this was a niche new area for the group, NLE engaged consultants to conduct a commercial analysis and due diligence.

The resulting recommendation to proceed with the property purchase was primarily based on its potential for tapping into carbon farming opportunities.

But the NLE was also mindful it would need expertise to run a tree farm.

“Our chairperson at the time, Oral McGuire, had done extensive land restoration on his property – over 600,000 seedlings – but he wasn’t a botanist.

“We were fortunate to find a local Northam person with extensive experience working with Greening Australia, and Dave Collins is still our Operations Manager today.”

So, with the help of funding sourced from philanthropic organisations based in Europe (COMON and Commonland), the Group became the new owners – rebranding the farm ‘Boola Boornap or ‘place of many trees’ in Noongar language – and very quickly set about bringing the farm back into operation.

With the purchase of the business taking place in the middle of growing season, and the farm in desperate need of repairs, there was a lot to do.

Alan reflects on that first planting season:

“Normally seeds go into trays between September and December, but seeding was delayed while we upgraded basic infrastructure.

“That first season, we planted about 500,000 seedlings using manual seeding and an unreliable semi-pneumatic seeder.”

When NLE approached the ILSC, it had been operating the tree farm for 10 months.

The philanthropic organisations had provided some working capital to support the growing business; Boola Boornap’s customer base was building, with projected orders of up to two million seedlings by 2024-25, generating income of around \$2 million; and NLE had also applied for a WA Regional Economic

Development (RED) Grant to upgrade the property’s fixed infrastructure and expand the tree farm.

In December 2021, the ILSC funded a new delivery truck, fitted out so it could carry seedlings; a drum pump seeder; a tractor for maintaining the property roads and transporting composted soil which also included a forklift for moving palettes; and a 4WD ute for seed collection, customer liaison, small deliveries and general transport.

The new drum seeder proved a game-changer – once it finally arrived from Italy:

“COVID meant it took eight months to get here but it made a huge difference – we now had the capacity to do in half a day what would previously take a week.”

A few months later, a successful RED Grant saw NLE commence replacing the entire watering and reticulation system – much of it leaking or in danger of failing – and growing the capacity of the farm to around 1.5-2 million seedlings.

And this increased capacity is driving the NLE to further grow its customer base.

The tree farm produces plants that are native to Noongar Boodja Country – from shrubs and ground covers, through to large trees like salmon gums and other eucalypts.

Its customer base started with a sandalwood producer inherited from the previous owner, and grew to include landcare clients like Greening Australia and local farmers doing revegetation.



Nursery equipment maintenance
Image credit: NLE Group



Ready to plant the seedlings
on a NLE member property
Image credit: NLE Group

But now NLE is seeing the carbon farming opportunities it was seeking start to emerge.

“In year one, we didn’t have one carbon-related customer; by year two it was roughly 20 per cent and now it’s about 70 per cent.

“That’s a reflection of the large carbon industry developing on Noongar Boodja Country.

“Next we want Noongar people involved in the entire supply chain: collecting the seed, growing and planting the seedlings, and overseeing the maintenance of those carbon plantings.”

Meanwhile, Boola Boornap’s other major customer – the local sandalwood industry – is throwing up both opportunities and challenges with its variable seedling requirements.

“Sandalwood organisations are few but their projects are large scale – from 500,000 to 1,000,000 seedlings.

“Some years they place a huge order; other years, nothing.

“A few large clients ordering large quantities is great because it fills your book up, but if some of those clients pull out at the last minute – which we’ve experienced – it has a massive cash flow impact.

“So it’s about striking a balance of both customers, and those larger and smaller orders.”

And there is plenty of opportunity on Noongar Boodja Country emerging from the new enterprise – including for local Aboriginal people.

NLE is committed to creating local employment opportunities through its various enterprises – and Boola Boornap is no different with the business currently employing 20 people, with about 65 per cent of them Aboriginal.

“Over our three seasons, we’ve employed roughly 50/50 Aboriginal people and sometimes greater than 70 per cent.

“Young people might work with us for three months, a year, or a season, build their skills, expertise and confidence, and then gain further employment – and we’re happy to provide that pathway.”

And it seems that word is spreading amongst the local community with Aboriginal females increasingly taking up roles on the farm.

“Initially the local Aboriginal people we employed were largely male but now we’ve a 50/50 male/female split and that’s mostly due to word of mouth.

“If our female Aboriginal workers have a good experience, and they’re feeling both culturally and workplace safe, they’re doing our promotion for us.

“If we weren’t viewed as an organisation that’s good to work with people wouldn’t work with us – we’re not a mining company offering 30-50 per cent more wages than other local employers.”

Another early plan the NLE had for Boola Boornap – to take on work release prisoners from a nearby low-security prison – is also bearing fruit.

“Several inmates have worked with us during their last six-months of incarceration, pre-release work program and we’re planning to hire our first Aboriginal employee from this process; he’s exceptional.

“So again, we are providing a pathway for people who may not have a pathway into employment.”

Alan puts this down to the NLE’s ‘Heal Country, Heal People’ motto.

“Working on Country heals Country, and it heals people.

“We’ve got several staff who have been able to get (or regain) a driver’s licence, or own a vehicle – another has bought a house – things much of society take for granted.

“This is a huge motivator for those of us in management, the NLE Board and NLE members; to know you’re healing Country while also making real changes to people’s lives.”

It’s clear that in three short years, NLE is well on the way to making Boola Boornap a profitable commercial enterprise generating positive outcomes for Noongar people.

And the future is looking bright.

The NLE have received a WA Government grant to trial five different native grasses – a key traditional Noongar food source – on several member properties over the next three years.

If it proves successful, it could both be the start of getting native grasses back onto Noongar Boodja, and a commercial crop and bushfood supply chain that connects Noongar landholders with culture and their traditional harvesting practises.

Meanwhile, additional WA Government funds to establish an Aboriginal ranger team, will see NLE take the next step in positioning Aboriginal people as a major player in the carbon farming supply chain.

“This funding for three rangers will allow us to take on other contracts and build our workforce so that, in three years, we might have a ranger team – or teams – working on projects across Noongar Boodja.

“And not just establishing and maintaining carbon plantings; we currently have three contracts with Main Roads WA out of Northam to keep areas clean and tidy, and other local shires have indicated they’ve work for us too.”

With NLE being the first Aboriginal grower group and the first Aboriginal owned and led tree farm, it’s no surprise that other communities are looking to learn from their experience with Boola Boornap.

“We don’t see ourselves as being the sole player in this area – we might see Indigenous owned and controlled tree farms popping up all over the state.

“Last week we had a conversation with a Kimberley Aboriginal organisation looking to establish a small nursery – about 2,000 seedlings a year – associated with a mine rehabilitation project.

“And we’ve spoken with Aboriginal organisations in New South Wales and Queensland.

“We’re happy to share the expertise we have gained to help others get started.”

Alan leaves his final word for the Board.

“Taking on something like this requires courage and leadership, and the NLE Board should be commended for its vision and willingness to go down this path.

“When NLE took on the native tree farm there was scepticism from a lot of people who said ‘wonder how long that will last’.

“But I think we’ve demonstrated our capacity to do these enterprises and we’re now seeing the benefits in growing our ranger program and the native grasses trials.

“And the other huge thank you is to the local staff and their willingness to pitch in and use it as an opportunity to grow as individuals.

“In particular, Dave Collins, but also Genevieve Russ, an Aboriginal woman who is one of our supervisors; she will end up managing the place.”

ILSC investment \$277,195

Partners Allens; Commonland Foundation; COMON Foundation; Stul Family Foundation; WA Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development



Seedling delivery
Image credit: NLE Group



David Collins, Boola Boornap
Operations Manager with the
nursery’s first seedling delivery
Image credit: NLE Group