



ABORIGINAL  
CARBON FOUNDATION

# Core Benefits Verification Framework

For the environmental, social and cultural  
values of Aboriginal carbon farming

March  
2019



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All photos taken by AbCF staff and Richard Wainwright



# Aboriginal Carbon Foundation

**The vision of the AbCF is to catalyse life-changing, community prosperity through carbon farming. In doing this, our aim is to build wealth for Traditional Owners and non-Aboriginal carbon farmers implementing carbon projects that demonstrate environmental, social and cultural core-benefits through the ethical trade of carbon credits.**

To meet this vision, AbCF was established in 2010 as a not-for profit company limited by guarantee. The founding Directors were Kumantjayi Tilmouth, David Ross and Allan Cooney. The primarily Aboriginal staff are passionate about working to build viable economies on Aboriginal lands and we are supported by a range of associates and project partners who are equally committed to supporting Indigenous people.

AbCF has a strong culture of innovation and collaboration, we take risks and invest in the development of carbon products and services that benefit Indigenous people and address climate change nationally and internationally. AbCF openly

seeks to collaborate with fellow Aboriginal organisations, carbon companies, non-government organisations (NGOs), conservation organisations, universities and government agencies.

AbCF operates on the cutting edge of ideas and community-based solutions. It brings together people with fresh ways of working, professional experience and a desire to achieve outcomes that tackle Indigenous poverty and climate change through a strengths-based approach.

Funding to develop the Core Benefits Verification Framework was secured through the Carbon Plus Fund established by the Queensland Government in December of 2016 for the purpose of providing greater support to Aboriginal communities in Queensland and enable the undertaking of carbon projects that could provide additional employment and economic participation, and cultural outcomes. The Carbon Plus Fund was designed, in part, to provide capacity building by a)

creating a methodology to value environmental, social and cultural core-benefits; b) providing training for Aboriginal communities to take up carbon farming opportunities; and c) directly developing a funding mechanism that facilitates a market for carbon credits that deliver environmental, social, and cultural benefits for Aboriginal communities. AbCF was contracted to undertake the initiatives under the Carbon Plus Fund including development of a methodology that values, and ultimately certifies, the core-benefits in carbon farming projects that achieve significant environmental, social, and cultural benefits. This framework has been developed with technical support from Caritas Australia.

**WARNING:** Readers are advised that this document contains images of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people who may be deceased.

## Part 1:

# Philosophy underpinning Core Benefits Verification Framework



**This verification process can be utilised by all Indigenous people globally. Indigenous people manage or have tenure rights over at least 38 million km<sup>2</sup> in 87 countries on all inhabited continents. This represents over a quarter of the world's land surface and intersects about 40% of all terrestrial protected areas and ecologically intact landscapes (Garnett et al, 2018; 369–374). Although Indigenous people hold considerable land tenure with high conservation values, disadvantage is still widespread, and it can be argued that policy and programming approaches continue to contribute to a variety of poverties.**

Research activities throughout the process of colonisation and post-colonisation have been, and can remain, tools used to justify the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands, as well as regular interventions into their lives by the

dominant non-Indigenous culture (Kawakami et al, 2007; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). In this context, evaluation is frequently used to investigate the extent to which externally designed services and programs have “closed the gaps” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. First Nations researchers and evaluators have drawn specific attention to the need to decolonise western research methodologies and evaluation practise by developing an evaluation approach that is “of, for, by and with us” (Kawakami et al, 2007; 222).

Paolo Freire and Frantz Fanon's<sup>1</sup> seminal premises from decades ago relating to the relationship between colonisers and the colonised and the associated exploitation inherent in that dynamic, unfortunately still hold true today. Freire (1968) states any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is an act of violence.

Furthermore, alienating people from making decisions that affect them is to change humans into objects.

First Nations from Canada use the term eco-colonialism. This describes the perpetuation of non-Indigenous people making decisions on behalf of Indigenous people, usually decisions that ‘lock up’ land and prevent Indigenous people from sustainable development of their natural resources.

The key principle of this framework, therefore, is Indigenous ownership of the verification process. This framework is unique in that it creates the opportunity for Indigenous people to become the experts in the verification of environmental, social and cultural values associated with community and economic development programs. The framework is built on evaluation best practice from the international development sector and provides a reputable, independent

This framework is unique in that it creates the opportunity for Indigenous people to become the experts in the verification of environmental, social and cultural values...

and transparent verification process. An accompanying training course provides the skills, confidence and tools to conduct verification. Agencies and individuals associated with communities such as NGOs, government departments, and academics can provide supplementary support to Indigenous verifiers, whilst confidence and verification skills are being honed.

The development of this framework has been tried and tested in the Australian Aboriginal carbon farming industry where buyers pay a premium price for Australian Carbon Credit Units (ACCUs) demonstrating environmental, social and cultural core-benefits. The research and development of the framework involved many conversations, community workshops, stakeholder consultations, formal peer review and the creation of an industry reference group for the associated training course.

As a first step the verification framework is designed to be used in Cape York Peninsula, Gulf of Carpentaria, Far North Queensland as well as the Top End and Kimberley regions with a savanna burning methodology. However, it is envisaged the Core Benefits

Verification Framework can be applied to other carbon farming methodologies and to other sectors in the future (i.e. agriculture, health and education).

AbCF has established relationships with Canadian and New Zealand First Nation groups and contributes to the development of Indigenous led products within those countries.

1. Paolo Freire's 1968 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' and Frantz Fanon's 1961 'Wretched of the Earth'



# Indigenous to Indigenous approach

This verification framework embraces the articles set forth in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which Australia became a signatory to in 2009. The following articles are considered especially relevant;

- **ARTICLE 4**  
The right to self-determination and autonomy or self-government in local affairs.
- **ARTICLE 8**  
The right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture.
  - » **ARTICLE 8 (J)**  
Traditional Knowledge, Innovations and Practices.
- **ARTICLE 20**  
The right to be secure in the enjoyment of their own means of subsistence and development.
- **ARTICLE 21**  
The right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions.
- **ARTICLE 23**  
The right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for exercising their right to development. Indigenous peoples have the right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other

economic and social programmes affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions.

- **ARTICLE 26**  
The right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired.

- **ARTICLE 32**  
The right to determine and develop priorities & strategies for the development or use of their lands or territories and other resources.

The verification process embraces a concept known within the international development sector as 'south to south'. This process challenges dominant international development paradigms that perpetuate dependency by privileging the knowledge of technical experts usually coming from the north (London, Geneva, Washington) and delivering services, often termed skills-transfer to the south (Asia, South America, Africa).

The 'south to south' model acknowledges the expertise and rich talent of human resources existent within the global south<sup>2</sup>. As a result, southern experts become the trainers, brokers and capacity builders within the development process. The model acknowledges the power differentials

at play between north and south entities. However, with the growing interest of Indigenous carbon farming internationally, the philosophy has been coined 'Indigenous to Indigenous' with the vision that cultural exchange will occur across countries, not just within regions of Australia.

In practice, this 'Indigenous to Indigenous' philosophy sees verification of core-benefits conducted by a team of trained Aboriginal experts, including rangers, Traditional Owners and community members from across the projects. This principle prevents the extraction of information by external agencies to be used and interpreted without the understanding of, or any required benefit to, the affected community. This approach safeguards Aboriginal data sovereignty and ensures the people verifying have strong cultural and project-based knowledge.

2. The global south is a term used to replace the derogatory terminology such as Third World, Developing Countries and Less Developed Countries. The global south assumes many of these countries have a shared history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and negative economic and social transformation through which large inequalities in living verification frameworks, life expectancy, and access to resources have been maintained.

# Guiding principles for core benefits verification

The Core Benefits Verification Framework approach to verification and data validity is built upon the following principles:

## 1.2.1 'INDIGENOUS TO INDIGENOUS' VERIFICATION

This principle challenges the dominant paradigm which sees experts from the dominant culture (usually the west) undertaking key technical responsibilities and making important decisions that affect the project and the people the project is to serve. In contrast, all external verification of information will be undertaken by a team of trained Aboriginal experts, including rangers, Traditional Owners and community members from across the projects.

## 1.2.2 ABORIGINAL OWNERSHIP

Aboriginal people involved in and effected by carbon projects in Australia, and other respective countries, must lead the process of development and prioritisation of project outcomes (core-benefits) that are of highest importance to them. It is essential through this process that rangers, Traditional Owners and the people directly affected have ownership over the data identified, collected and documented and the decisions over what data is shared.

This principle is founded upon the argument that data validity is enhanced

when the impact assessment of a program is responsive to the values and aspirations of the people who are affected by it. When program participants and other local citizens who are most familiar with the project contribute their wisdom and experience to the process, including data interpretation (Kirkhart, 2010), evidence validity is strengthened.

## 1.2.3 STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

A strengths-based approach to impact assessment recognises that "local people have themselves planned a project and placed it within a larger vision of what they hope their nation will be. Project evaluation can contribute to these nation-building efforts" (Robert, Jorgensen and Garrow in LaFrance and Nichols, 2010; 25).

The principle of strengths-based assessment has two important elements. The first is to identify and build upon the capacities, knowledge and assets that people already have regarding impact assessment. There are several Aboriginal communities, including communities with carbon projects that already have significant experience in different evaluation methods, for example SROI<sup>3</sup>. As well as supporting ownership of information and ensuring appropriate evaluation practice, the involvement of skilled Aboriginal people from communities implementing carbon projects can strengthen

the collection and interpretation of information in the following ways:

- 1 ensuring respect and knowledge of local research protocols when entering communities and gathering information;
- 2 having a strong understanding of the project context and demonstrated ability to build strong relationships with participants; and
- 3 communicating in local vernacular, ideally the languages that shape the participants and effected people's worldviews, so that respondents are comfortable and confident to converse on an intellectual level.

In addition, this principle of strengths-based approach ensures that impact monitoring and assessment is shaped around a desire to learn and improve over time, rather than to inform rapid decisions about funding allocation. Such an approach facilitates relationships of trust, understanding and respect between the project and the investors, which are the foundations of honest and open communication. >

3. Social Return on Investment is an approach for allocating financial proxies to non-financial outcomes.

Aboriginal people involved in and effected by carbon projects in Australia, and other respective countries, must lead the process of development and prioritisation of project outcomes.



#### 1.2.4 CAPACITY BUILDING

In addition to providing a rigorous and independent verification of the environmental, social and cultural values, the verification process enables capacity development of the people closest to the subject matter and their peers. Without measurement skills and ability, the participants and affected communities will remain dependent on the involvement of external people who are not as well placed to collect, interpret or communicate accurate and meaningful information about the project's core-benefits.

The framework invests in the training of Indigenous people in verification methodologies and a 4-day nationally accredited training course teaches rangers, Traditional Owners and community members how to identify, measure and analyse environmental, social and cultural values of carbon farming using customised tools. As a result, a cadre of verifiers rangers will be established in each region who understand best the context they are verifying.

This framework ensures the skills development and income generation opportunities available to Aboriginal rangers, Traditional Owners and community people through their role as verifiers. The verification process is not designed to build the verification skills of external third-party evaluation experts to undertake audits.

#### 1.2.5 DATA TRIANGULATION

As in all best practice impact assessment, data triangulation is essential to utilise the strengths of different approaches to data collection to promote data accuracy, verify the information and therefore build confidence in the results. Qualitative information is used to provide rich, detailed descriptions about core-benefits and their meaning for effected communities and to explore the processes through which they have been achieved.

Ultimately data triangulation will be built within this framework through a broad selection of qualitative data collection sources coupled with existing quantitative resources such as research findings (of which there are many within ranger stations).

#### 1.2.6 COST EFFECTIVENESS

Finally, the principle of cost effectiveness recognises that the expertise of external audit organisations, while less suitable for the context as described above, is also likely to be costlier. The principles outlined above not only provide for rigorous and culturally responsive practise but are likely to reduce the costs of verification to the carbon project owners, Traditional land owners and other bodies responsible for the funding of verification.





# International development principles underpinning the Core Benefits Verification Framework

Australian international development non-government organisations (ANGOs) are governed by sectoral standards to ensure accountability and credibility in their impact measurement. These standards detail processes to promote results validity and transparency to inform important funding and programming decisions. Key standards guiding the sector are:

- DFAT Monitoring and Evaluation Standard (April 2017)
- OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) codes (2000)
- Australian Evaluation Society (AES) 'Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluation'
- Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) 'Principles and Guidelines for Ethical Research and Evaluation in Development (April 2016)
- BOND UK 'Evidence Principle & Checklist'

DFAT and OECD DAC codes govern foci and process for ensuring credibility of data collected. However, AES, ACFID and Bond standards encourage best practice and

enhancement of empowerment processes for participants involved in the evaluation event. Core principles outlined in these standards are:

- integrity;
- beneficence;
- capacity building;
- empowerment;
- respect;
- awareness of power relations;
- informed consent;
- privacy and confidentiality;
- evaluation merit and credibility; and
- participatory methodology.

In 2014-15 financial year, ANGOs received 329 million in funding from the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)<sup>4</sup>. There is an expectation that ANGOs will adhere to the industry standards outlined above and implement evaluation either mid-way through programming or on the completion of funding (usually at the 3-5-year mark). Social research methodologies are the expected and mainstay

approach to impact verification of these DFAT ANGO programs.

These standards accept that many evaluations in the international development sector context present ethical issues, including at times, harm to participants. Evaluations also have strong ethical implications as they relate to policy and programming decisions that affect the lives of either participants or populations.

The R&D behind the Core Benefits Verification Framework draws on these existing measurement blueprints and the expertise of international development practitioners responsible for the verification of DFAT funded projects. The rigour mechanisms promoted by the standards detailed in this section and utilised in social research methodologies are central to the Core Benefits Verification Framework.

4. The Australian Council For International Development - Annual Report 2015-16

# What is savanna burning carbon farming?

Carbon farming refers to carbon accounting methodologies that reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and/or capture and hold carbon in vegetation and soils. Carbon farming adheres to the same principles of supply and demand found in all agribusiness however, the commodity produced are 'carbon credits'. In Australia this financial commodity is formally known as an Australian Carbon Credit Unit (ACCU).

The savannas in northern Australia burn predominantly in the late dry season, resulting in large, hot and intense fires. These fires produce more GHG emissions and burn a greater proportion of dead organic matter than

fires that occur under cooler, moister conditions in the early dry season.

Savanna fire management projects aim to reduce the frequency and extent of late dry season fires in savannas, resulting in fewer greenhouse gas emissions and more carbon being sequestered in dead organic matter.

Projects may undertake fire management activities throughout the year. Planned burning occurs primarily in the early dry season and may include igniting fires from aircraft, from vehicles along the sides of roads and tracks, from boats on waterways, or by walking across country. Other fire management activities include burning

firebreaks to prevent the spread of unplanned fire or undertaking fire suppression in the late dry season. The specific type and timing of fire management will depend on landscape features within the project area and local weather conditions.

In 2018, across Northern Australia, there are approximately 78 savanna burning projects of which approximately **one** third are managed by Aboriginal ranger groups. 4,078,963 ACCU have been produced to date, with 70% of these ACCU being produced by Aboriginal savanna burning projects.

Savanna fire management projects aim to reduce the frequency and extent of late dry season fires in savannas, resulting in fewer greenhouse gas emissions.

The Emissions Reduction Fund (ERF) is a national scheme introduced by the Australian Government in the Carbon Credits (Carbon Farming Initiative) Act 2011. The ERF places no financial value on the environmental, social or cultural core-benefits. The guiding principle is 'lowest cost abatement', i.e. to buy the maximum amount of ACCU as cheaply as possible. The Clean Energy Regulator (CER) has administered seven auctions commencing in April 2015 on a reverse auction basis with the last auction held in June 2018 and buying for a combined average price of \$11.97 per ACCU4.

The voluntary market enables corporations, institutions and government agencies interested in buying ACCU with environmental, social and cultural core-benefits the opportunity to meet their UN SDGs, Reconciliation Action Plans, Corporate Social Responsibility goals and carbon neutrality. ACCU with environmental, social and cultural values sell for a premium in the voluntary market which directly addresses poverty, local employment and the sustainable economic development of Aboriginal lands.



# Core Benefits examples from Aboriginal carbon farming

In the context of Australian Aboriginal carbon farming, ranger programs across Australia have been widely recognised as successful and innovative, contributing to a broad range of social, cultural, economic, environmental, health and political outcomes for Aboriginal peoples and Australian society (Country Needs People, 2015, 2017; DPMC, 2016; Ryan et al, 2012).

By providing a business model to extend the land management and conservation work of Aboriginal ranger teams, Aboriginal carbon projects directly contribute to the achievement of these outcomes, known as 'core-benefits' (Robinson et al, 2011).



## Core Benefits domains

### SOCIAL

- Increased social capital as community members work together on project
- Increased confidence, self-esteem and sense of purpose
- Increased pride in self and others
- Increased community harmony through enhanced relationships and reduction of drug and alcohol abuse
- Increased opportunities for women to participate and benefit from project outcomes

### CULTURAL

- Meaningful work that aligns with the interests and values of the Rangers
- Protection of sacred sites (men's and women's business)
- Maintenance and passing on of traditional ecological knowledge
- Education of children by Elders in traditional knowledge, especially caring for country
- Increased retention of language & identity

### ENVIRONMENTAL

- Decreased carbon emissions
- Decreased incidence and intensity of wildfires by burning country the right way
- Protection of life and property through reduction of wildfires
- Increased management of pests and weeds
- Recovery of biodiversity through the protection of native species of flora and fauna
- Increased management of tourists visiting country and reduction of their impacts

### ECONOMIC

- Secure employment for people living in remote communities
- Employment of men and women
- Career development opportunities
- Good salary and working conditions
- Supporting sustenance of outstations
- Reduced welfare dependence
- Strengthened community level economy
- Development of income generation projects

### HEALTH

- Improved spiritual wellbeing through the regular completion of cultural obligations to country
- Increased exercise and physical activity by working on the land
- Increased nutrition through access to and availability of traditional foods
- Increased nutrition through more regular sharing of traditional foods with family and others
- Decrease in drug and alcohol consumption

### POLITICAL/SELF DETERMINATION

- Increased control over finances through economic independence
- Increase in leadership skills
- Increased confidence to work with Government, Private Sector & NGOs
- Transfer of knowledge through working in partnerships and combining traditional knowledge with latest technologies
- Greater public awareness of the benefits from Land Rights
- Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals at local and national levels

# Existing research assessing the core-benefits of Aboriginal carbon farming

To date, several reports & methods have been used to measure or document the achievement of specific core-benefits of Aboriginal carbon farming at a local level. In many cases, Aboriginal rangers have been involved in this research, largely in data collection. Therefore, some familiarity and understanding of research methodologies exists within ranger groups.

## 1.6.1 ENVIRONMENTAL

Ranger programs routinely use fire mapping to demonstrate the reduced prevalence of wildfires. This data is easy to collect over time and enables an estimate of the proportion of hectares burnt over the period. Ranger teams are already doing this work and have significant capacity in this area. Conservation and Biodiversity projects often involve support from conservation organisations and research institutions to undertake scientific studies measuring the return of native animal species to managed country (Country Needs People, 2017). Rangers are actively involved in these research projects. Country Needs People have started to consolidate this research in their 'Protecting Nature for All of Us' 2017 report which involves the Kimberley Land Council.

## 1.6.2 ECONOMIC

Employment and remuneration related data disaggregated by gender and number of full-time positions is easy to track. 'Country Needs People' (2015) began consolidating some of this information in its 'Working for our Country' report. The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2016) and 'Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa' (Social Ventures Australia, 2014) have tried to take this research further by undertaking a 'Social Return on Investment' (SROI) study on the 'Working on Country' program. These studies have undertaken quantitative and qualitative research to identify program outcomes (i.e. core-benefits) and created financial proxies for achieving these outcomes if specialist services had been employed based on market rates. A 'value for money' figure estimating the value returned from the program, based on the investment amount, has been applied across the domains of environment, social and cultural outcomes. As a result of these research activities some ranger groups have experience with the SROI process that could be drawn on if SROI methodology was ever to be considered in the future, as a supplement to the verification process.

## 1.6.3 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL

Ryan et al (2012) undertook a qualitative study which provided some rich information about the variety of social and cultural outcomes being achieved by the 'Working on Country' program, which are highly valued by the rangers and within their communities. The most effective way of reporting on these outcomes to date has been through qualitative approaches. To promote reliability, selection bias was addressed by interviewing strategically and broadly to collect corroborating evidence from diverse and specialist sources. Social Ventures Australia (2016) make the comment that "The key limitations (of the SROI analysis) concern the lack of accurate data available to measure outcomes (i.e. the extent of impact), particularly for rangers and community members, and the involvement of other organisations in achieving the identified outcomes" (page 20).

Social and Cultural outcomes are always difficult to quantify, however there are some innovative recent examples of Aboriginal communities trialling quantitative approaches to data collection, utilising self-developed indicators that reflect outcomes of cultural importance (Yap and Yu, 2016; Fisher and Tait, 2016). Ultimately, attention to ethical design and data triangulation are paramount for ensuring the most appropriate approach to strong evidence collection.

## 1.6.4 HEALTH

A report in the Medical Journal of Australia in 2009 entitled 'Healthy country, healthy people: the relationship between Indigenous health status and "caring for country"' (Burgess et al (2009) used statistical analysis to investigate the link between working on country and health. The study found a "substantial association" between working on country and positive health outcomes such as BMI, blood pressure, type 2 diabetes status, cholesterol, cardiovascular risk and others.

There are some innovative recent examples of Aboriginal communities trialling quantitative approaches to data collection, utilising self-developed indicators that reflect outcomes of cultural importance.

## 1.6.5 SELF DETERMINATION

Core Benefits in this domain have been documented through qualitative research to a limited degree by Robinson (2011). The qualitative information suggests that these outcomes are highly valued for rangers and other respondents. Social ventures Australia (2016) also reported these outcomes through qualitative research and applied an economic value using the SROI analysis. In addition, the literature supporting 'social determinants of health' argues that perception of control over decisions that affect people is one of the most important contributors to emotional wellbeing (Marmot, 2011).

Therefore, it is evident that there is already a growing body of evidence for the achievement of core-benefits related to the work of Aboriginal rangers. This literature provides a window into the research methodologies that have been utilised in different locations to measure and document outcomes from working on country and highlights the existing capacity of ranger teams to undertake research in these specific areas.

# Core Benefits and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

One key benefit for the Australian government and other investors in Aboriginal carbon projects is the contribution these projects make towards the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Internationally, the United Nations Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators has established a guiding framework with objectives and indicators for all UN Member Countries (IAEG-SDGs, 2017).

It is noticeable that in many cases these indicators target very specific

areas within the SDGs. Therefore, despite the broad and relevant nature of the SDGs not many indicators fit neatly with carbon projects. There is also no identification of indicators relevant to cultural outcomes in the SDG framework.

At a national level an Australian consortium body has been working on how to progress the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. Watson et al (2014) developed a set of interim indicators from the Australian context to feed into the development of the final

goals. A recent summit (ACFID, ACROSS, GCNA and SDSN5 Australia/Pacific, 2016) has followed up on this process and recommends that 'Australia' needs to start baselining the SDGs domestically, developing indicators that are relevant to the local context. It is foreseeable that information about the core-benefits from Aboriginal Carbon Projects, if easily accessible, could contribute to reporting our national and local level achievements against many of the SDGs.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



# Model of rigour

## 1.8.1 PARTICIPATION & CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

Methodological validity is enhanced by high levels of participation and cultural responsiveness. For example, when outsider researchers without a solid grasp of the context enter a community to collect data they are immediately disadvantaged in several ways; they are far less likely to be understood or trusted with information about social and cultural outcomes, and they are unfamiliar with the local political context, power dynamics, cultural protocols and languages which will affect their abilities to collect accurate information and analyse it.

In the case of Aboriginal carbon projects, verification teams comprising independent Aboriginal rangers, Traditional Owners and community members<sup>5</sup> bring increased rigour to the process in the following ways: through their expertise in the subject matter; their familiarity with relevant cultural protocols; their understanding of how to navigate local politics and power dynamics to collect accurate information and triangulate data effectively; their familiarity with the patterns and rhythm of community life and in some cases their familiarity with languages and cultural expressions.



We do not have to teach Aboriginal people how to navigate being in another Aboriginal community. Regardless of where an Aboriginal ranger or Traditional Owner is from, desert or top end for example, their commonalities are considerable. People from remote communities, understand how to navigate the sensitivities of a community landscape. When people become skilled verifiers and feel confident in implementing the tools, they can assess any region.

## 1.8.2 'ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE, IN THE RIGHT WAY'

Within this verification framework triangulation involves a mixed-methods approach to data collection, however, essentially is defined as 'asking the right questions to the right people, in the right way'. The model recognises that the people closest

to the project (Aboriginal rangers, Traditional Owners and community members) are best placed to answer these questions, to identify what information needs to be collected, who the important people are to speak with to gather that information, and what protocols need to be considered to ensure the information collected is rich and accurate.

Qualitative data collection methods and analysis are coupled with referencing of quantitative data, readily available in existing reports (e.g. Land and Sea Management reports, turtle tags, fauna surveys, receipts, licenses, permits, employment contracts or Indigenous Land Use Agreements).

<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this document, these groups will be collectively titled verifiers.

# How does the Core Benefits Verification Framework differ from other existing approaches?

We are aware of several existing mechanisms for the verification of carbon core-benefits. One international standard applies an SDG lens to the core-benefits of carbon farming. This approach requires the drawing down of prescribed indicators and outcomes from the national and international level SDGs. Our approach, in contrast, sees core-benefits identified at the local level - without an externally prescribed indicator bank.

While there may be parallels between our framework and existing mechanisms, there are several reasons why we have created an alternative approach to the verification of environmental, social and cultural values of carbon projects:

- **All other approaches have prescribed indicator banks or refer to the SDG framework and request areas of measurement to be chosen from these.**

The Core Benefits Verification Framework is intentionally without prescribed indicator banks because indicators are written in English, French, Spanish and

Portuguese and require a fluency in those languages to understand the nuances of the indicator. Furthermore, we believe agency around measurement can only exist when ranger groups and community members decide themselves what is most important to measure.

- **Other approaches rely on external auditors, who have been accredited with the standards to drive the verification.**

As an Aboriginal NFP company, first and foremost we are looking to build the skill and capacity of Aboriginal people. The approach of using external auditors, therefore does not align with our guiding principles of Aboriginal Ownership, Strengths-Based Approach, Capacity Building or 'Indigenous to Indigenous' verification.

The term repeatability of metrics is applied to the collection of data determined by an externally developed and uniform indicator bank that is tested over numerous sites to determine accuracy of data collected. This concept is not relevant to our approach as we are

not aggregating information across projects nor making judgements against prescribed indicators.

Each project is a discrete activity with its own character and although core-benefits can fall within the three domains: environmental, social and cultural, the types of core-benefits within these domains are vast. It is not the purpose of this approach to measure the impact of a grant or the success of AbCF's programming, but to verify that claims relating to core-benefits, meet the requirements of the voluntary market and hence qualify for a premium price.

We believe agency around measurement can only exist when ranger groups and community members decide themselves what is most important to measure.



## Part 2:

# Application of the Core Benefits Verification Framework

**As outlined in Part 1, this verification process, built on international development sector impact measurement best practice provides accountability, independence and transparency of the verification of environmental, social and cultural values associated with Aboriginal carbon farming. It provides assurance to buyers of ACCUs that the core-benefits being purchased have been physically inspected, documented and independently verified.**

This section illustrates how the verification framework is applied and how rigour and independence is embedded within the approach. The verification of environmental, social and cultural values follows research and evaluation norms and this section explains what these rigour mechanisms look like in practice.

As explained above this Core Benefits Verification Framework has drawn on evaluation principles from the international development sector and as a result applies a community development lens to verification. In the case of Aboriginal carbon projects, Aboriginal people must have the decision-making power to identify the most valuable outcomes from their projects. To apply any alternative approach would re-enforce the dominant power relationships that limit the influence of Aboriginal people to determine their own futures and would lead to increased feelings of powerlessness and dependence.

We suggest that when Aboriginal people voice that their carbon projects are working for them, achieving the outcomes that they value most, and when they have the relevant evidence to support their claims, carbon core-benefits can be verified.



# Carbon farmer eligibility?

As mentioned in the section above, many ranger groups calculating carbon abatement are without the knowledge of the markets and particularly the interest of the voluntary market of core-benefits which can be sold for a premium price.

AbCF continues to promote the carbon industry as an opportunity for Aboriginal communities to build wealth especially where economic development is challenging due to the remote locations of communities. In the first instance ranger groups and communities need awareness of the voluntary market and the Core Benefits Verification Framework before a request for verification can be made.

## 2.1.1 REGISTRATION WITH EMISSIONS REDUCTION FUND

Projects requesting core-benefits verification must be registered with the Emissions Reduction Fund (ERF). In most cases communities are partnering with project developers in the creation of their projects and as a result have attained eligibility status by meeting the criteria and requirements of the ERF.

## 2.1.2 VERIFICATION REQUESTS AND PRE-WORK

The verification process of core-benefits will begin in the following ways:

<sup>1</sup> either the Aboriginal carbon farmers (rangers, Traditional Owners or community members) will have attended the training course and have the skills to identify and begin the

monitoring of their core-benefits that will be independently verified at a later stage<sup>6</sup>; or

<sup>2</sup> if rangers, Traditional Owners or community members haven't attended the training course, their carbon farming project can still be verified. Verifiers will work through the analytical tools together with the Aboriginal carbon farmers<sup>7</sup> to develop the verification tree (otherwise known as an evaluation plan) that provides the roadmap to the verification.

The verification is not self-assessment however does require commitment from a requesting Aboriginal carbon farmer to prepare for verification and to dedicate time for the verification itself. AbCF and other organisations and project developers working within communities can act as a screening mechanism and provide pre-verification support and guidance as to a community's readiness for verification. Just like the support given to a community to get a carbon farming project up and running, similar support will be required to ensure a community is ready for verification.

Aboriginal carbon farmers and/or project developers will notify AbCF of their intention for verification of a carbon project's core-benefits and conversations will take place as to the readiness and potential timeframe for a verification visit. The intention is for the verification to be a positive and mutually-beneficial learning event for Aboriginal carbon farmers and verifiers therefore carbon projects not

ready for verification will be advised to postpone<sup>8</sup>. If deemed ready verification logistics will be organised.

## 2.1.3 COSTS FOR ABORIGINAL CARBON FARMERS REQUESTING VERIFICATION

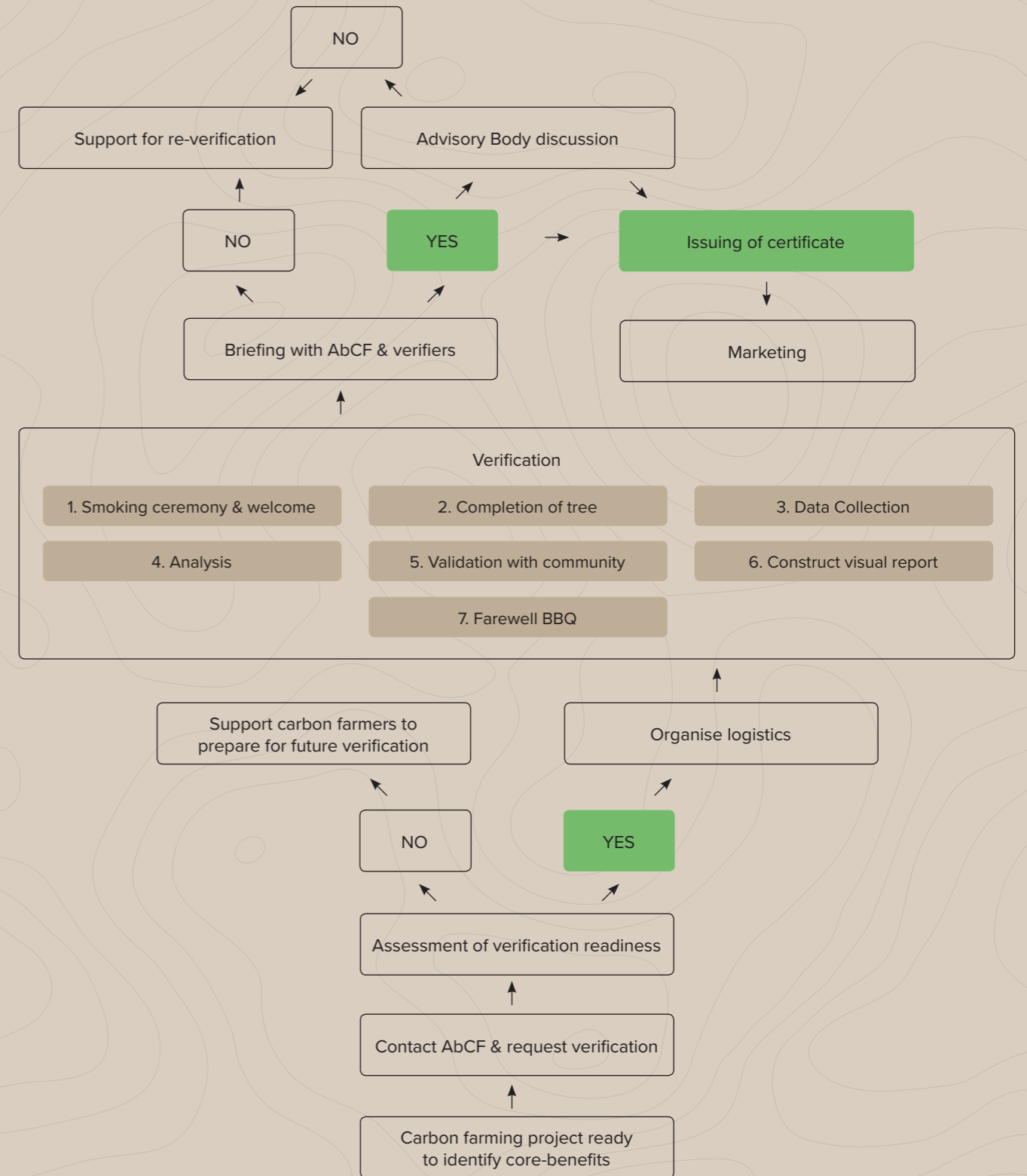
The intention is to keep costs to a minimum for Aboriginal carbon farmers, by subsidising this activity through other means. However Aboriginal carbon farmers will be asked for in-kind contribution towards:

- accommodation costs for verifiers,
- supply of venue,
- supply of car for data collection that may involve traveling to bush locations for recreational activities where people feel most comfortable for interviewing/focus groups, and
- day time meals when rangers are constructing verification tree, conducting analysis and preparing report.

6. Regular monitoring of core-benefits is not a requirement of the verification. In our experience, monitoring process and data collection is rarely done well and often seen as an imposed external requirement. As the Core Benefits Verification Framework is intended to be a living document and will continually be assessed and improved, there is scope to embed monitoring layers in the future, if deemed valuable.

7. Often the project owners are the Prescribed Body Corporate or the Shire Council, however the management of the project is usually the Land and Sea Office (the ranger team).

8. AbCF and project developers will continue to work with these communities until in a strong position to undertake verification.



## 2.1.4 Verification Cycle

# Verifier eligibility

## 2.2.1 ABORIGINAL CARBON FARMING AND CORE BENEFITS MANAGEMENT TRAINING COURSE

There are many Indigenous people and rangers actively involved in carbon farming in Australia that have minimal knowledge of the carbon industry and its markets.

AbCF partnered with the Centre for Appropriate Technology (a registered training organisation based in Alice Springs, Northern Territory) to develop the first 'Aboriginal Carbon Farming and Core Benefits Management' training course. This training is a CERT II level bolt-on for a Conservation Land Management course and is nationally accredited by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA). The purpose of the course is as follows;

- To enable the creation and implementation of carbon projects,
- To enable the measurement of environmental, social and cultural values, and
- To identify carbon markets.

The 4-day training course teaches: climate change; the management of a savanna burning carbon project

using the Australian government reporting tools for the methodology (NAFI and Savbat 3)<sup>9</sup>; government and voluntary markets; qualitative and quantitative evaluation measurement techniques; appreciative inquiry methods for data collection; and triangulation of data sources.

Customised core benefit verification tools facilitate decision making around: what core-benefits will be verified; what information do you wish to know about the core-benefits; who can you speak with (and in what ways) to attain this information; and what existing information is there to support the triangulation of the data collected<sup>10</sup>.

The training course teaches participants how to triangulate evidence through data diversity and where further evidence could be located to support core benefit claims. As a result of an Aboriginal carbon farming project the economic benefits of that project may be used within communities to enhance or increase existing environmental programs. These indirect environmental benefits can be quantified.

Many ranger programs with native

wildlife trapping or feral animal management components have existing partnerships with research institutions and universities that are tracking and measuring these outcomes. Where this information exists, it is easily incorporated into the verification process. Where this information does not exist, we are not proposing to train people in the methods required to collect this information (i.e. feral animal population dynamics) as this is not the purpose of the Core Benefit Verification Framework. Within our approach however, there is scope to triangulate existing fauna and flora survey results by documenting the knowledge and experiences of rangers, Traditional Owners, Elders, and other relevant community members in relation to any research.

It is not the purpose of the Core Benefits Verification Framework to scrutinise existing research activities. Instead the verification process will, however, affirm that research activities are being implemented and explore the benefits of these. The information attained through the customised analytical tools (see Part 3) informs the building of a verification tree



(evaluation plan) which becomes the roadmap for the verification.

Participants are taught how to store and log evidence, video and oral recording techniques and how to create a report (visual or written) to demonstrate the core-benefits associated with any carbon farming project. The requesting Aboriginal carbon project owners and verifiers determine what information will be shared relating to the core-benefits. Data sovereignty is an important principle that is respected within this approach.

## 2.2.2 WHO CAN BECOME A VERIFIER

Rangers, Traditional Owners and other community people, completing the training course and demonstrating interest and skill will be invited to join the team of verifiers. Verifiers will need to have a strong understanding of the activities implemented by community ranger programs particularly in relation to carbon farming.

Continued support to the verifiers as they gain confidence and skill will be available through AbCF, project developers and other regionally based

organisations such as land councils, NGOs, shire councils, universities and government departments. The role of the verification team is to: work with the Aboriginal carbon farmers to identify most significant core-benefits, collect and analyse data; and create a visual report to communicate the Aboriginal carbon farmer identified outcomes of carbon farming projects.

As the training course is rolled out throughout Australia, small teams of verifiers will exist from different regions. Independence and impartiality are crucial; therefore, verifiers will be engaged in the verification of outcomes from differing communities to their own.

Verifiers will be paid a fee in addition to their ranger salary to acknowledge their leadership and skill. The Advisory Body will advise as to appropriate remuneration which may change as the verification process continues to develop.

A small team of two or three verifiers will be engaged to lead a verification. Verifiers will be approved by the community in the first instance. AbCF will organise logistics between requesting Aboriginal carbon farmer

and verifiers. During the initial verification events of 2019 AbCF staff and/or project developer staff will be involved as observers. Once skills and confidence of verifiers have been developed to lead verification without support, AbCF will no longer attend.

An annual verifier 'forum' will take place for rangers and other community members to come together and share verification experiences and ideas for strengthening the process. Skills development will also be included in the annual forum so verifiers continue to develop capacity across a number of areas.

9. Version 3 of the Savanna Burning Abatement Tool (SavBAT 3) automates GIS processes and mathematical calculations required to estimate net abatement in accordance with two Emissions Reduction Fund (ERF) savanna fire management methodology determinations.

10. During the piloting of the training course in Mapoon QLD, the ranger group referred to 16 current research projects they were involved with from a variety of universities.

# What does verification look like in practice?

There are seven key steps in any five-day verification process.

## 1 Welcome and smoking ceremony (Day one)

Verification is a celebration of managing country the right way and showcasing the good work of the community and rangers.

## 2 Creation of verification tree (see Part 3 for tools) (Day one)

Working together, the verifiers and Aboriginal carbon farmers will determine key core-benefits and construct a plan (verification tree) outlining who to speak with, what data exists to draw on, what cultural protocols need to be followed, data sovereignty considerations, and protocols for data sharing.

## 3 Data collection (Days two and three)

Verifiers and Aboriginal carbon farmers will conduct interviews and focus groups<sup>11</sup> with key stakeholders and access existing qualitative and

quantitative data for triangulation purposes. Sites will also be visited to enable direct observation.

## 4 Data analysis (Day four)

Post data collection the verifiers and Aboriginal carbon farmers will make sense of the data and identify any further evidence required.

## 5 Validation with community (Day four)

An important (but often overlooked) step in verification is validating analysis with community and key stakeholders to make sure interpretation of findings is correct. This is an opportunity to fine tune messaging.

## 6 Construction of visual report (Day five)

Once interpretation of findings has been validated, the verifiers and Aboriginal carbon farmers and community members will utilise editing software to construct visual evaluation<sup>12</sup>. Data sovereignty will be acknowledged and only information

that has permission to be shared will be included in the report.

The report to buyers will include a visual summary of the verifiers and Aboriginal carbon farmers assessment, photographic records of observation, quantitative examples of evidence, as well as stories that reflect the core-benefits achieved.

## 7 Farewell BBQ (Day five)

A farewell BBQ will be hosted to thank both verifiers and Aboriginal carbon farmers for their time and investment in promotion of the carbon projects. The visual evaluation will be presented at the BBQ as a celebration and final safeguard to check approval of data included.

11. Interviews and focus groups will be conducted with informed consent to participate.

12. Funding is being sought for construction of an app to house all evidence collected, instructional videos for verification steps and visual evaluation. Until the app is created editing software will be utilized to construct the visual evaluation.





# Core Benefits Verification Framework governance

Clear levels of rigour and guidance influence the governance mechanisms of the Core Benefits Verification Framework, enabling confidence in the Indigenous owned approach. Governance of the verification framework is comprised of the following four tiers:

## 2.4.1 VERIFICATION TEAMS

Small teams, comprised of 2-3 independent verifiers, will draw on their expertise and knowledge of carbon farming to conduct verification. Using the analytical tools outlined in Part 3, rangers will conduct verification and based on the availability of evidence and validity of the core-benefits, verifiers will make an assessment as to existence of core-benefits. A visual report highlighting the key core-benefits and evidence supporting these outcomes, will then be created. Immediately following the verification, verifiers and AbCF staff will debrief and discuss the verification recommendations.

## 2.4.2 ABCF MANAGEMENT

AbCF will be responsible for: the management of Aboriginal carbon farmer requests; pre-verification assessments and support; verification logistics; and support to verifiers whilst skills and confidence are being developed. Additionally, a debrief will take place with verifiers immediately following a verification to assess the evidence and validity of a successful verification recommendation. Successful verifications will be recommended to the Core Benefits Verification Advisory Body. If evidence gaps exist, AbCF will work with Aboriginal carbon farmers to collect further data to support a successful verification<sup>13</sup>.

## 2.4.3 CORE BENEFITS VERIFICATION ADVISORY BODY

The Advisory Body is comprised of experienced Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal professionals with community development, natural resource management, monitoring

and evaluation and Indigenous affairs skills-sets (see Attachment 1 Advisory Body TOR). The Advisory Body will provide guidance and act as a platform for further development of procedures and practice. In keeping with other standards and verification frameworks (such as the Gold Standard) the Advisory Body considers verification recommendations from Independent verifiers and AbCF management and provides another independent layer of assurance to support verification recommendations. Advisory Body membership is voluntary.

## 2.4.4 ISEAL ALLIANCE<sup>14</sup> MEMBERSHIP

AbCF has joined the ISEAL Alliance community and has subscriber membership status<sup>15</sup>. This community provides the guidance to standards and frameworks developed to govern initiatives concerned with sustainability outcomes. An internationally accepted trade mark, ISEAL Alliance ensures exposure to quality verification process and



assists in the continued development of the verification framework. The Core Benefits Verification Framework adheres to the ISEAL Assurance Code in the following ways:

### Consistency:

All verifiers need to have completed core-benefits training and be proficient in the implementation of verification tools and processes. AbCF will provide refresher training and annual learning forums, bringing together verifiers to share experiences and providing opportunities for further skills development.

### Rigour:

Verification teams comprising independent Aboriginal rangers, Traditional Owners and community members bring increased rigour to the process in the following ways: through their expertise in the subject matter; their familiarity with relevant cultural protocols; their understanding of how to navigate local politics and power dynamics to collect accurate information and

triangulate data effectively; their familiarity with the patterns and rhythm of community life and in some cases their familiarity with languages and cultural expressions. The verification pathway that includes: independent verifiers, involvement in community organisations and project developers, AbCF management, Advisory Body and ISEAL guidance ensures a high level of rigour is maintained.

### Competence:

Participants who show talent and ability in the Aboriginal Carbon Farming and Core Benefits Management Course will be invited to join the verification team. Continued support will be offered in the development of new skills and confidence. Annual learning forums support continued skills development.

### Impartiality:

Independence and impartiality of verifiers is crucial; therefore, verifiers will be engaged in the verification of outcomes from differing communities to their own. Once teams of verifiers have been established, verifiers

will conduct verification without the support of AbCF. Verification recommendations are based on the evidence and analysis of verifiers.

### Transparency:

All verification information will be made available through a Core Benefits registry. In certain cases, materials may be withheld, in the case of sensitive information.

13. This is a safeguard measure only, as verifiers are trained to triangulate data and understand credible and valid evidence examples.

14. ISEAL Alliance is the global membership association for credible sustainability standards.

15. The Core Benefits Verification may seek to obtain ISEAL Alliance membership status in the future. Organisations start ISEAL membership by undergoing an evaluation against the baseline criteria of the Codes of Good Practice. After one year of being an associate member and demonstrating full compliance with the ISEAL Standard-setting Code, organisations become ISEAL full members. This includes a commitment to demonstrate full compliance with the ISEAL Assurance Code within two years, and full compliance with the ISEAL Impacts Code within three years.

# Validity of core-benefits verification

Once a verification certificate has been issued it is valid for two years. In 2019 verification will commence in communities in Cape York, Queensland. However, as verification

teams develop and availability of Core Benefits Verification Framework is socialised, verification can take place for any Aboriginal carbon farming project throughout Australia.

# Marketing of verified carbon

During the verification event a visual report will be produced discussing the key core-benefits and evidence supporting these. The report will be owned by the Aboriginal carbon farmer and their verified carbon can then be sold as carbon demonstrating environmental, social and cultural core-benefits. It is

the Aboriginal carbon farmer who is responsible for the sale of their carbon to a buyer of their choice.

A registry of Aboriginal carbon projects with verified core-benefits will be maintained by AbCF and a web page showcasing core-benefits will be established.

# Monitoring of core-benefits verification process

As the developer of the Core Benefits Verification Framework AbCF will be monitoring the implementation of the verification process and hosting an annual core-benefits forum to continually learn and improve. Verifiers and Aboriginal carbon farmers will be invited to share their experiences

and discuss areas that worked well and areas needing fine-tuning. The body of evidence on core-benefits of carbon farming is small. Therefore, AbCF will be tracking and aggregating core-benefits and stories to contribute to the understanding of Aboriginal Carbon Farming outcomes.



## Part 3:

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# Part 4: Attachments

## Attachment 1. Core Benefits Verification Framework advisory body TOR

### WHAT IS THE CORE BENEFITS VERIFICATION FRAMEWORK?

The Core Benefits Verification Framework is the first Australian mechanism, developed by Aboriginal Carbon Foundation, that acknowledges Indigenous rights and interests as well as the environmental, social and cultural benefits of a carbon farming project. The Queensland Government provided funding for the research and development of the Core Benefits Verification Framework.

The Core Benefits Verification Framework will be used to verify the environmental, social and cultural values associated with carbon farming, which attract a premium price in the voluntary market. Its application, however, is broader than the carbon industry, and a similar approach will be developed for Best Management Practices (BMP) in the primary industry sector. Unique to the Core Benefits

Verification Framework is an approach that see rangers and farmers assuming the role of verifiers in a peer to peer strengths-based approach.

### GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE OF CORE BENEFITS VERIFICATION FRAMEWORK

The Core Benefits Verification Framework has four levels of governance:

- The first level consists of verification teams implementing the Core Benefits Verification Framework. This level will be responsible for the measurement of values associated with any carbon farming project based on a physical inspection and collection of evidence;
- The second level consists of Aboriginal Carbon Foundation assessing the verification results and recommending these for the review of the Advisory Body;
- The third level consists of

the independent Advisory Body reviewing the recommended verifications.

- ISEAL Alliance subscriber status provides an overarching quality assurance drawn from the international community of standards and frameworks to guide the rigour and credibility of the framework.

### WHAT IS THE MEMBERSHIP AND ROLE OF THE CORE BENEFITS VERIFICATION ADVISORY BODY?

The Core Benefits Verification Framework is a new initiative and its implementation is to commence shortly. A voluntary Advisory Body is established to guide its role out. Skills and experience of its membership will be drawn from either environmental science, community development, Aboriginal Affairs or impact measurement. The Advisory Body will be small, comprising four to five members, for a two-year



renewable term.

The objectives of the Core Benefits Verification Framework Advisory Body are:

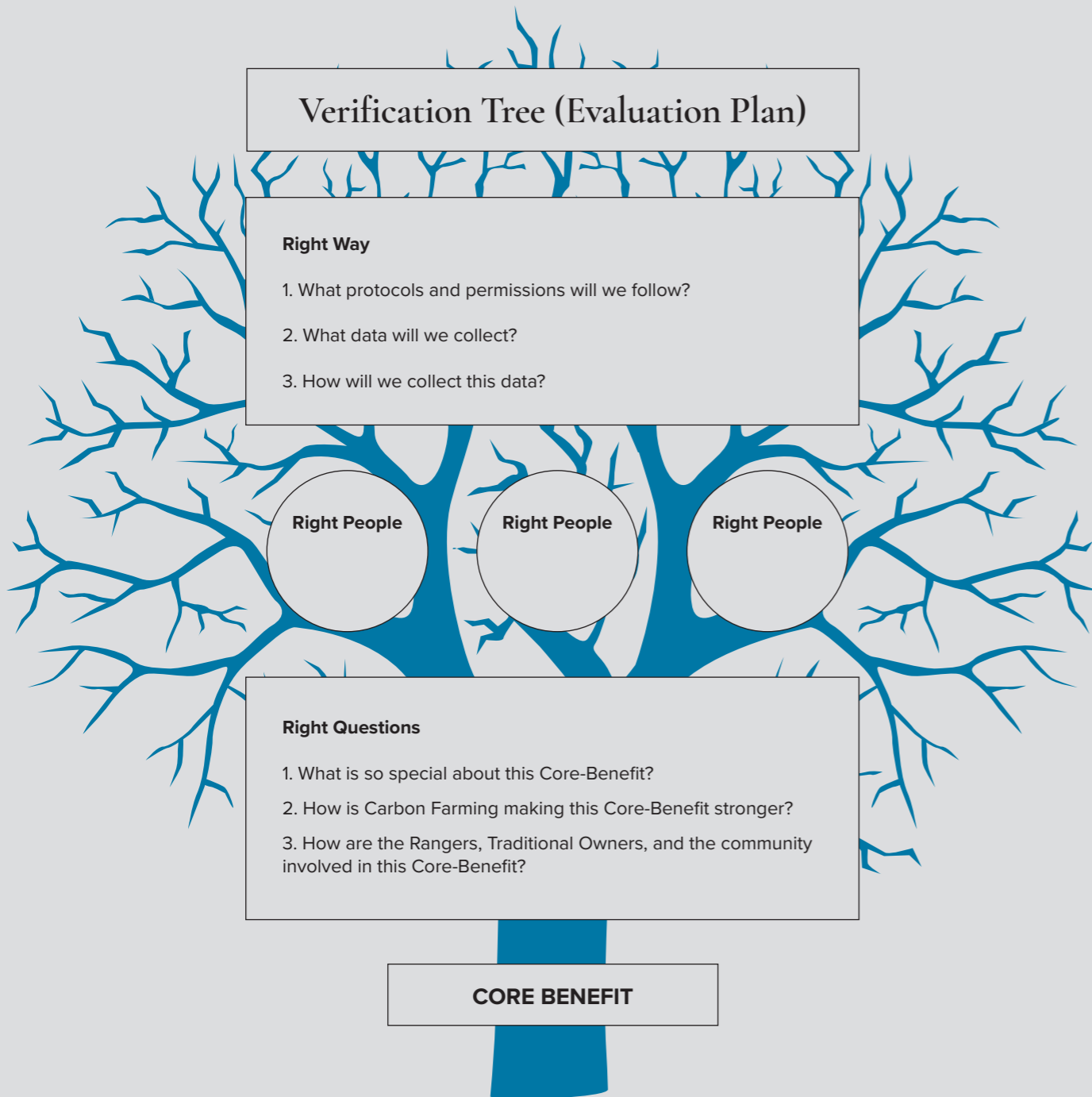
- To provide independent guidance in the establishment phase of the Core Benefits Verification Framework;
- To provide a forum to discuss learnings from implementation so as to continuously improve the Core Benefits Verification Framework;
- To review rigour and complexity of tools and methodologies and provide recommendations for amendments where relevant;
- To provide academic and practitioner insight relating to best-practice measurement approaches of environmental programs, Aboriginal community development or farming practice; and
- To provide a checking mechanism and review of verifiers and AbCF staff assessment of relevant values following a verification visit i.e. either environmental, social or cultural.

### COMMITMENTS OF ADVISORY BODY

To begin with the Advisory Body will meet twice a year for a half day meeting in Cairns. Video conferencing will be available for non-Cairns based members. As Core Benefits Verification Framework implementation becomes more frequent and teams of verifiers are established, the Advisory Body may need an additional meeting. In preparation for the meeting, some reading will be required, however time demands on membership will be kept to a minimum and meetings facilitated in an efficient manner. From time to time, support may be required on the phone or via email. However, AbCF is mindful of the many commitments of the membership and will avoid any superfluous demands of members' time.

Skills and experience of its membership will be drawn from either environmental science, community development, Aboriginal Affairs or impact measurement.

# Attachment 2. Examples of verification tools



Construction of verification tree.



Identification of core benefits.



Shortlisting to 3-4 key core benefits.

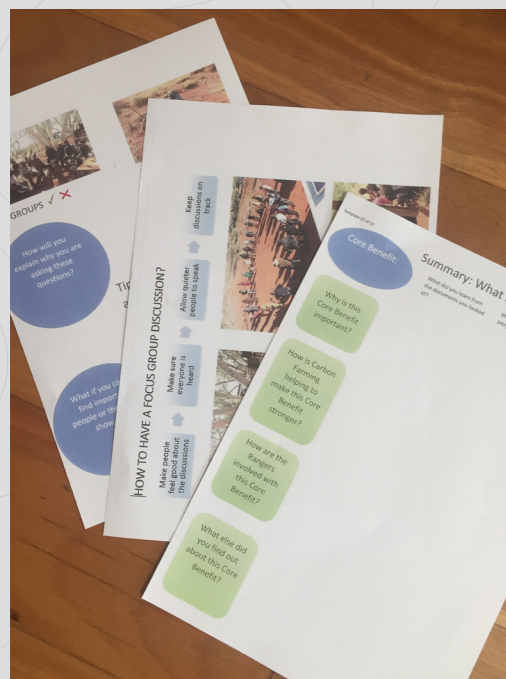


Determining the right questions, in the right way, to the right people.



## Attachment 2. Examples of verification tools

### Learning About Evidence





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