

Indicator 6.4a: Area of forest to which Indigenous people have use and rights that protect their special values and are recognised through formal and informal management regimes (2026)



This indicator monitors the degree to which land is placed under appropriate tenure classifications or management regimes to protect Indigenous peoples' values in forests. An acceptable level of accountability for the protection of Indigenous peoples' cultural, religious, social and spiritual needs and values is an essential part of forest management.

Context and definitions

The extent to which Indigenous people participate, have access to, or are recognised in, the management arrangements of Australia's forests is reported here.

The [Australia's Indigenous land and forest estate \(2024\)](#) dataset assembled in Australia's National Forest Inventory identifies and reports across four attributes of the Indigenous estate: Indigenous ownership, Indigenous management or Indigenous co-management, or Other special rights.

Preferences in terminology when referring to Australia's First Peoples can vary across Australia and can change over time. The term 'Indigenous' is used throughout *Australia's State of the Forests Report* to encompass all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Indigenous estate (land or forest): Land or forest over which Indigenous peoples and communities have ownership, management, or rights of use for customary purposes.

See [Australia's forests and forestry glossary](#) for definitions of other terms.

Key points

- The Indigenous forest estate is the forest over which Indigenous peoples and communities have ownership, management or co-management, and/or rights of use for customary purposes, and occurs across all public and private tenures.
- The Indigenous forest estate comprises 79.9 million hectares of forest, representing 60% of Australia's total forest area in 2023.
- The Indigenous forest estate area has increased by 10.4 million hectares since 2018, resulting mainly from new Indigenous Protected Areas, Indigenous Land Use Agreements and areas subject to Native Title.

Reporting the Indigenous estate

The Indigenous estate dataset captures the range of management arrangements between Indigenous peoples and land and forest across all public and private land tenures. The process for assembling and reporting Australia's Indigenous land and forest estate is described in [Jacobsen et al. \(2020\)](#), which applies an updated methodology to that used for [Australia's State of the Forests Report 2018](#). The updated methodology reports individually four Indigenous estate attributes:

Indigenous ownership

- **Indigenous owned** – Freehold land or forest that is owned by Indigenous communities, or land or forest for which ownership is vested through other mechanisms.

Indigenous management arrangement

- **Indigenous managed** – Land or forest that is managed by Indigenous communities, or
- **Indigenous co-managed** – Land or forest that has a formal, legally binding agreement in place to include input from Indigenous people in the process of developing and implementing a management plan.

Other special rights for Indigenous peoples and communities

- **Other special rights** – Land or forest subject to Native Title determinations, registered Indigenous Land Use Agreements and legislated special cultural use provisions.

Land and forest in the Indigenous estate will have one, and likely more, of these four attributes (except for the management attributes of 'managed' and 'co-managed' which are mutually exclusive). As such, the cumulative area of land with these attributes is greater than the total Indigenous estate. Spatial analysis is therefore required to calculate the total Indigenous estate to prevent double counting of areas subject to more than attribute.

Further information on the sources of data for Indigenous land and forest areas is provided below in the [Supporting Information for Indicator 6.4a – Area of forest to which Indigenous people have use and rights that protect their special values and are recognised through formal and informal management regimes](#).

Area of forest in the Indigenous estate

The Indigenous estate covers 536 million hectares of land, of which 79.9 million hectares is forest in 2023 (taken together and accounting for overlaps of areas that are in more than one attribute). This represents 60% of Australia's total forest area of 134 million hectares in 2023 (Table 6.4a-1).

By jurisdiction the largest areas in the Indigenous forest estate occur in Queensland (33.6 million hectares), the Northern Territory (19.3 million hectares) and Western Australia (15.4 million hectares) and together comprise 85% of the total Indigenous forest estate (Table 6.4a-1). Figure 6.4a-1 shows the distribution of the Indigenous forest estate across Australia.

The Indigenous forest estate in 2023 includes the following, noting that these areas should not be totalled as double counting will occur for areas having more than one attribute:

- 24.2 million hectares of forest attributed as **Indigenous owned**
- 31.4 million hectares of forest subject to an Indigenous management arrangement with
 - 20.7 million hectares attributed as **Indigenous managed** and
 - 10.6 million hectares attributed as **Indigenous co-managed**
- 62.4 million hectares of forest subject to **other special rights**.

Table 6.4a-1: Area of land and forest in the Indigenous estate, by Indigenous estate attribute and jurisdiction, 2023

Indigenous estate attribute	Land cover type	Area ('000 hectares)								
		ACT	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas.	Vic.	WA	Australia
Indigenous owned	All	0	539	65,691	10,092	22,126	70	18	55,124	153,660
	Forest	0	176	12,924	6,878	311	10	13	3,883	24,194
Indigenous managed	All	0	535	61,552	6,387	20,294	69	7	67,194	156,039
	Forest	0	169	11,113	4,820	269	9	3	4,358	20,740
Indigenous co-managed	All	107	3,858	4,479	5,204	14,935	1,559	1,085	4,417	35,643
	Forest	101	2,805	1,821	3,280	694	854	948	120	10,622
Other special rights	All	0	2,785	48,165	100,860	61,658	0	9,727	219,624	442,820
	Forest	0	1,770	6,641	32,424	2,306	0	4,069	15,163	62,372
Total Indigenous estate	All	107	6,321	111,316	102,392	82,635	1,628	9,801	221,683	535,883
	Forest	101	3,972	19,313	33,636	2,552	863	4,132	15,362	79,931
Total forest in jurisdiction		143	20,284	23,333	51,977	5,131	3,707	8,224	20,766	133,565
Proportion of total forest that is in the Indigenous estate		70%	20%	83%	65%	50%	23%	50%	74%	60%

Values for the 'Total Indigenous estate' account for overlap of areas with more than one attribute, except for the attributes of Indigenous managed and Indigenous co-managed which are mutually exclusive and thus will have no overlap.

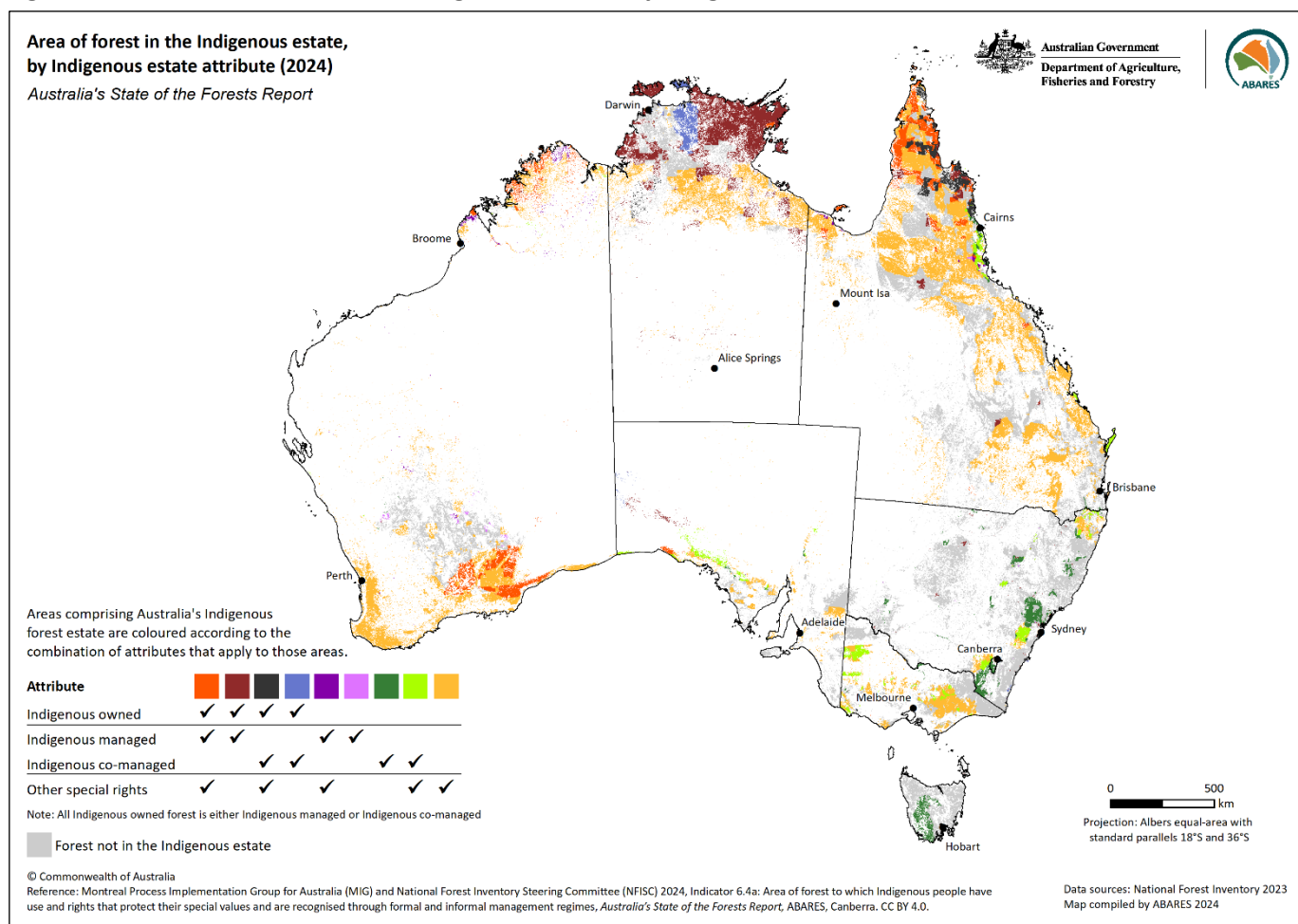
Total forest area from [Indicator 1.1a.i Forest area by forest type](#).

Totals may not tally due to rounding.

Source: ABARES, National Forest Inventory; national, state and territory government data and non-government data on Indigenous management arrangements.

[Click here for a Microsoft Excel workbook of the data for Table 6.4a-1.](#)

Figure 6.4a-1: Area of forest in the Indigenous estate, by Indigenous estate attribute



[Click here for a high-definition copy of Figure 6.4a-1.](#)

Changes in the area of the Indigenous estate

To report the change in the area of the Indigenous estate, the methodology described in [Jacobsen et al. \(2020\)](#) was applied to the data used to report the Indigenous estate in [Australia's State of the Forests Report 2018](#) and also to data current to 2023, thus providing for a direct comparison between the two time series and the Indigenous estate attributes therein.

The 536 million hectares of land in the Indigenous estate in 2023 is an increase of 98.2 million hectares from 2018. This change includes an increase in the area of land that is Indigenous owned, an increase in the area with an Indigenous management arrangement, and an increase in the area subject to other special rights. The 79.9 million hectares of forest in the Indigenous estate in 2023 is an increase of 10.4 million hectares from the 69.5 million hectares of forest in the Indigenous estate in 2018. As with the increase in the Indigenous land estate, the increase in the Indigenous forest estate includes an increase in the area of forest land that is Indigenous owned, an increase in the forest area with an Indigenous management arrangement, and an increase in the forest area subject to other special rights, rather than an expansion of forest on the Indigenous land estate.

The area of forest that is **Indigenous owned** increased by 2.2 million hectares between 2018 and 2023, and forest that is Indigenous managed (either **Indigenous managed** or **Indigenous co-managed**) increased by 2.7 million hectares. Both increases occur mostly through the expansion of the network of Indigenous Protected Areas.

The area of forest subject to **other special rights** increased by 12 million hectares between 2018 and 2023, through the registration of new Indigenous Land Use Agreements and recognition of Native Title claims.

These increases also include some areas previously reported in the Indigenous estate but under other attributes.

Changes to the main legislative instruments and policy reforms related to Indigenous land ownership, management and access are provided in [Indicator 6.4c – The extent to which Indigenous values are protected, maintained and enhanced through Indigenous participation in forest management](#).

Indigenous heritage protection

Indigenous cultural heritage comprises places, sites and objects of cultural value to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including middens, painting sites, gathering places, cultural dreaming places, burial sites, and sites of more recent historical significance. Indigenous cultural objects are items such as stone artefacts, grinding grooves, scarred or carved trees, stone tools and other created objects like baskets and necklaces. The process of learning, remembering, recording and potentially registering cultural heritage is important for maintaining and renewing Indigenous connection to land and culture, and also for non-Indigenous awareness and understanding of Indigenous cultural heritage. Indigenous heritage sites that are registered in national or state and territory heritage registers are then afforded protection from disturbance under the relevant jurisdictional Acts (see [Supporting Information for Indicator 6.4a](#) below). The study and registration of sites is ongoing with newly discovered sites subject to a process of assessment and verification prior to registration.

Using available data to 2025, a total of 1.3 million hectares of forest are within registered Indigenous heritage sites across Australia (Table 6.4a-2). This includes Indigenous heritage sites registered by the states and territories, and sites within the Commonwealth Heritage List and National Heritage List that are classed as Indigenous heritage sites.

Table 6.4a-2: Area of forest in registered Indigenous heritage sites, by state and territory ('000 hectares)

	ACT	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas.	Vic.	WA	Australia
Forest area	n.d.	25	7	1,176	n.d.	1	11	48	1,268

n.d., data not available

Notes on data sources for:

NSW: Includes sites within New South Wales's Forest Management Zoning with identified Indigenous heritage.

NT: A 100 metre radius buffer was applied to point data provided by the Northern Territory.

Qld: Includes sites in Queensland that are declared as Designated Landscape Areas recorded on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage register.

Totals may not tally due to rounding.

Source: ABARES, National Forest Inventory; national, state and territory government data on Indigenous heritage sites, where available.

These areas do not include the 2.1 million hectares of forest within Australia's World Heritage areas with significant Indigenous cultural heritage that are listed for cultural values with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):

- Budj Bim Cultural Landscape
- Kakadu National Park
- Murujuga Cultural Landscape
- Tasmanian Wilderness
- Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park
- Willandra Lakes Region.

Information on the count of individual Indigenous heritage sites within forest are not reported due to limited data availability or data being restricted.

Information on the Commonwealth, state and territory laws protecting Indigenous cultural heritage that also afford protection to all Indigenous cultural heritage sites, including those situated in forests, is provided in the [Supporting Information for Indicator 6.4a](#) below. Table 6.4a-4 lists all current legislation that protects Indigenous heritage and Table 6.4a-5 lists Indigenous heritage registers for each state and territory.

Supporting information for Indicator 6.4a Area of forest to which Indigenous people have use and rights that protect their special values and are recognised through formal and informal management regimes

Data on Indigenous land access, management or ownership

Data and information, including spatial data, on Indigenous land are available through Commonwealth, state and territory government agencies and associated government corporations. Table 6.4a-3 lists the datasets collected to inform the development of *Australia's Indigenous land and forest estate (2024)* spatial dataset and Indicator 6.4a. More detailed information on each attribute of land and the participation in forest management by Indigenous people is provided in [Indicator 6.4c – The extent to which Indigenous values are protected, maintained and enhanced through Indigenous participation in forest management](#).

Table 6.4a-3: Datasets compiled to inform land over which Indigenous peoples have ownership, management or other special rights

Jurisdiction	Data source	Source agency	Year of currency	Allocation to Indigenous land and forest estate attribute			
				Indigenous owned	Indigenous managed	Indigenous co-managed	Other special rights
Commonwealth							
	Indigenous Protected Areas (on freehold land titles)	Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water	2023	✓	✓	–	–
	Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation owned and transferred lands	Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation	2022	✓	✓	–	–
	Indigenous owned Commonwealth national parks	Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water	2023	✓	–	✓	–
	Indigenous Protected Areas (on Crown land)	Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water	2023	–	✓	–	–
	World Heritage areas with Indigenous advisory committees	Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water	2021	–	–	✓	–
	Native title determinations	National Native Title Tribunal	2023	–	–	–	✓
	Indigenous Land Use Agreements	National Native Title Tribunal	2023	–	–	–	✓
Australian Capital Territory							
	Indigenous co-managed parks ¹	Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (Commonwealth)	2023	–	–	✓	–
New South Wales							
	Freehold Aboriginal Land Council lands	NSW Land Registry Services	2022	✓	✓	–	–
	Aboriginal-owned parks with lease-back agreements	Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (New South Wales)	2022	✓	–	✓	–
	Aboriginal Land Council Indigenous managed lands	NSW Land Registry Services	2022	–	✓	–	–
Northern Territory							
	Aboriginal Lands Trust lands	Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics ²	2022	✓	✓	–	–
	Indigenous freehold parks with joint-management governance	Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics ²	2022	✓	–	✓	–

Jurisdiction	Data source	Source agency	Year of currency	Allocation to Indigenous land and forest estate attribute			
				Indigenous owned	Indigenous managed	Indigenous co-managed	Other special rights
Queensland							
	Deed of Grant in Trust	Department of Resources ²	2022	✓	✓	–	–
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land trusts	Department of Resources ²	2022	✓	✓	–	–
	Conservation reserves with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander co-management arrangements	Department of Resources ²	2022	✓	–	✓	–
South Australia							
	Indigenous land interest (on freehold land titles)	Land Services SA	2022	✓	✓	–	–
	Aboriginal Land Trust lands with Crown land tenure	Land Services SA	2022	–	✓	–	–
Tasmania							
	Aboriginal land	Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania	2022	✓	✓	–	–
Victoria							
	Land granted under Aboriginal Lands Act 1970	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning ²	2016	✓	✓	–	–
	Aboriginal Title joint management of parks and reserves within Recognition and Settlement Agreement (RSA) areas	Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action	2023	–	–	✓	–
	RSA Natural Resource Agreements and Land Use Activity Agreements	Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action	2023	–	–	–	✓
Western Australia							
	Freehold Aboriginal Community held	Western Australia Land Information Authority, trading as Landgate	2016	✓	✓	–	–
	Indigenous owned co-managed national parks	Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage	2022	✓	–	✓	–
	Aboriginal Lands Trusts estate	Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage	2022	–	✓	–	–
	Indigenous pastoral leases	Western Australia Land Information Authority, trading as Landgate	2016	–	✓	–	–
	Parks and reserves with joint management arrangements	Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions	2023	–	–	✓	–
Various							
	Other government owned co-managed nature conservation reserves ³	Various state and territory government agencies ³	Various	–	–	✓	–
	Other areas with customary practice rights, access or purposes for Indigenous peoples ⁴	Various state and territory government agencies ⁴	Various	–	–	–	✓

¹ Information on parks with Indigenous co-management arrangements in the Australian Capital Territory were sourced from the Collaborative Australian Protected Areas Database of the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water.

² Agency name at time of data supply.

³ Includes information derived from multiple spatial and non-spatial data sources identified from instruments that have formal or legally binding joint management agreements.

⁴ Includes information derived from multiple spatial and non-spatial data sources identified from instruments that have formal arrangements providing rights to access or use for Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous heritage legislation and registers

The Commonwealth, state and territory laws protecting Indigenous cultural heritage also afford protection to all Indigenous cultural heritage sites, including those situated in forests. Table 6.4a-4 lists all current legislation that protects Indigenous heritage.

Table 6.4a-4: Current key legislation that protects Indigenous heritage, by jurisdiction

Jurisdiction	Legislation title	Purpose
National		
	<i>Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999</i>	To provide a legal framework to protect and manage nationally and internationally important flora, fauna, ecological communities and heritage places – defined in the Act as matters of national environmental significance.
	<i>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984</i>	To provide for the preservation and protection from injury or desecration of areas and objects in Australia and in Australian waters, being areas and objects that are of particular significance to Aboriginals in accordance with Aboriginal tradition.
	<i>Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act 1986</i>	To protect Australia’s heritage of movable cultural objects.
Australian Capital Territory		
	<i>Heritage Act 2004</i>	To provide for the recognition, registration and conservation of places and objects of natural and cultural significance.
New South Wales		
	<i>National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974</i>	To conserve nature, including threatened species; conserve objects, places and features of cultural value; and foster public appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of nature and cultural heritage and their conservation. The Act prescribes management requirements for the majority of the New South Wales public reserve system and the protection and management of Aboriginal heritage.
Northern Territory		
	<i>Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act 1989</i>	The primary legislation for the protection of Indigenous heritage in the Northern Territory.
	<i>Heritage Act 2011</i>	Establishes a system for assessing, declaring and protecting heritage places in the Northern Territory.
Queensland		
	<i>Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2003 and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage Act 2003</i>	The primary legislation in Queensland to provide effective recognition, protection and conservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage.
South Australia		
	<i>Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988</i>	To provide for the protection and preservation of Aboriginal heritage.
	<i>Marine Parks Act 2007</i>	Includes consideration given to Aboriginal heritage, and to the interests of the traditional owners of any land or other natural resources
	<i>Wilderness Protection Act 1992</i>	Includes the preservation of Aboriginal sites and Aboriginal objects
Tasmania		
	<i>Aboriginal Heritage Act 1975</i>	To make provision for the preservation of Aboriginal relics.
Victoria		
	<i>Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006</i>	To provide for the protection of tangible and intangible Aboriginal cultural heritage in Victoria.
	<i>Aboriginal Heritage Amendment Act 2016</i>	To improve reporting requirements in relation to Aboriginal cultural heritage, to introduce provisions regarding Aboriginal intangible heritage, to establish an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Fund, and to provide for the further protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage.
Western Australia		
	<i>Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2021</i>	To provide a framework for the recognition, protection, conservation and preservation of Aboriginal cultural heritage.

All states and territories maintain registers as central repositories of Indigenous heritage, fundamental to the management and protection of heritage. Table 6.4a-5 lists the Indigenous heritage registers and the relevant organisations responsible for Indigenous heritage protection in each state and territory. All states and territories have regulatory instruments (regulations, codes of practice, management prescriptions etc.) that administer the management of Indigenous heritage sites. These instruments provide a level of protection for Indigenous heritage sites by minimising damage or disturbance to the sites, by imposing penalties for significant impacts, and by requiring prior consultation with the relevant Indigenous heritage representative body regarding actions that might affect the site.

Table 6.4a-5: Indigenous heritage registers in each state and territory

State/Territory	Name of register	Responsible agency
Australian Capital Territory	ACT Heritage Register	ACT Heritage Council, City and Environment Directorate
New South Wales	Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System	Environment and Heritage, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water
Northern Territory	NT Heritage Register	Department of Lands, Planning and Environment
	Register of Sacred Sites	Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority
Queensland	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage Database and Register	Department of Women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships and Multiculturalism
South Australia	Register of Aboriginal Sites and Objects	Attorney-General's Department
	Register of Recognised Aboriginal Representative Bodies	Attorney-General's Department
	Register of Agreements	Attorney-General's Department
Tasmania	Aboriginal Heritage Register	Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania
Victoria	Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register	First Peoples – State Relations, Department of Premier and Cabinet
Western Australia	Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Inquiry System	Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage

References

Jacobsen R, Howell C, Read SM (2020). *Australia's Indigenous land and forest estate: separate reporting of Indigenous ownership, management and other special rights*. ABARES technical report, Canberra, December. CC BY 4.0. doi.org/10.25814/bqr0-4m20

More information

Learn more about [Criterion 6 of Australia's State of the Forests Report](#).

Web agriculture.gov.au/abares/forestsaustralia/sofr/

Download a [Microsoft Excel workbook of the data presented in Indicator 6.4a](#).

Email Info.ABARES@aff.gov.au

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