

We dodged bullets to win land rights. It's time for the next generation to take up the fight

Ahead of this weekend's land council elections, @IndigenousX host Sol Bellear reminds us why these councils are integral to the future of Aboriginal Australia



'Worimi Local Aboriginal Land Council's Sand Dune Adventures have turned a land claim into an Aboriginal-owned quad bike experience that attracts international tourists and tourism industry awards.' Photograph: Sand Dune Adventures

[Sol Bellear](#) for IndigenousX

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When land rights were first won for Aboriginal people, it was about asserting our rights and traditions. Today it's about continuing that legacy and ensuring future generations can benefit from the land.

In our fight for land rights in the 1970s and 1980s, we dodged bullets, we got beat up and locked up. But we kept turning up and we won the day. In [New South Wales](#) the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 was enacted and we had the power to make our own decisions and elect our own representatives to make these decisions on our behalf.

The act was progressive legislation that recognised, and attempted to remedy the ongoing effects of, Aboriginal people being dispossessed of their land in New South Wales.

Through the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983, Local Aboriginal land councils and the peak body, the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, can claim crown land that is unused or unneeded.

This has allowed Aboriginal people to create and manage a wealth base and to further empower our mob culturally and spiritually. Like any owner of freehold land, we can sell, lease and own our land.

Over the past 32 years, we've worked hard to build the best land rights system in Australia. It's something everyone should be proud of and it's been lauded by the likes of former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples James Anaya and former high court justice Michael Kirby.

Since 1998, the land rights network has been self-funded and in recent years, local Aboriginal land councils have taken huge strides in governance and delivered for not just Aboriginal people, but the broader community.

Land rights is an evolving movement and with that comes change through the generations.

For example, in the Hunter region, Worimi Local Aboriginal Land Council's Sand Dune Adventures have turned a land claim into an Aboriginal-owned quad bike experience that attracts international tourists and tourism industry awards.

West of Sydney, the Orange Local Aboriginal Land Council's proposed Yugaway development will see the construction of an \$18m, 110-room motel with the potential to employ 80 people.

And north of Sydney, Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council is now the largest private land holder on the Central Coast who are undertaking residential development projects to deliver better outcomes for the local community.

Today, the NSW Aboriginal Land Council network is the largest Aboriginal organisation in Australia with more than 23,000 members.

This Saturday, 31 October, eligible voting members of 120 local Aboriginal land councils will elect a governing body of nine councillors. The councillors – representing Central, Mid-North Coast, North Coast, North Western, Northern, Sydney/Newcastle, Western and Wiradjuri – will be elected and for the next four years will be tasked with realising the full potential of land to protect and promote culture and drive economic development and jobs for our people.

A lot of our young people seem to think we have land rights because it's in the legislation. But we can't take that for granted.

Our land rights legends marched in the 1970s and 1980s to lay the platform. But we still need the fight to continue. We still need the advocacy to fight for our political and social rights and our economic future.

[Land rights](#) is an evolving movement and with that comes change through the generations. The next generation need to ask themselves, what are they going to do with the land? Set it up as an economic base?

Future generations will continue to fight for land rights but it will be focused on how we can leverage land for cultural, social and economic benefit.

We're hoping for a big voter turn-out on Saturday to ensure the best land rights system in Australia stays strong.

- *“Our stories, our way” – each week, a new guest hosts the [@IndigenousX Twitter account](#) to discuss topics of interest to them as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Produced with assistance of Guardian Australia staff.*