SoE21 Indigenous Facilitator Report

Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

Date: 14 September 2021

Contact:

Carol Vale, Managing Director

E | carol@murawin.com.au

M | 0400 294 331

www.murawin.com.au

ABN 91 167 803 830

CONTENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2021 State of the Environment (SoE) Report brings together a mix of traditional and scientific knowledge to inform decision making for better environmental outcomes in caring for Country. Indigenous Authors co-authored ten of the twelve themes, delivering traditional knowledge and Indigenous content for the thematic reports. The SoE Indigenous Facilitator was engaged to ensure Indigenous voices and cultural perspectives about environmental conditions and change underpin the 2021 national report, facilitate opportunities for advice on traditional knowledge and cultural protocols to be captured in the report, and validate author research and findings.

Murawin was engaged as the Indigenous Facilitator and worked with Indigenous Authors to develop a facilitation and engagement approach for Indigenous participation and contribution to the report. The use of storytelling and culturally appropriate communication mediums ensured the engagement was effectively communicated to Indigenous audiences. The Indigenous Facilitator embedded Indigenous voices through genuine engagement with Indigenous stakeholders to ensure traditional knowledge and processes and systems relating to caring for Country shapes practical outcomes for environmental policy development in Australia. Working with Indigenous communities to gather their views contributed to ensuring cultural sensitivity, inclusion and meaningfulness to Indigenous peoples, groups, and communities is articulated in the report.

It was agreed early on that support from the Indigenous Facilitator would be on a flexible and as needs basis for each co-author, as they were at varying stages of drafting and consultation when the Indigenous Facilitator commenced. The scope was revised to facilitate the following activities including supporting Dr Terri Janke, the Chief Indigenous Co-Author, in developing the content for the Indigenous and Heritage themes, to support the Climate Change Co-Authors by facilitating seminars, identifying and developing case studies, to facilitate a Traditional Ecological Knowledge Peer Review process, and to provide other support and stakeholder engagement advice as needed by the SoE Taskforce and Indigenous Co-Authors. All activities were developed with recognition of key principles of cultural safety, Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property. Specifically, this ensured that Indigenous peoples rights to the recognition of the full ownership, control, and protection of their cultural and intellectual property is fulfilled.

This report outlines the facilitation approach, methodology and activities, and the key outcomes that emerged from engagement. These outcomes formed the basis for Indigenous content across the Indigenous and Heritage themes, as well as contributed to case studies in the report more broadly. The Indigenous Facilitator has also provided recommendations as a separate document.

The approach to facilitation and data collection was grounded in Indigenous ways of thinking and being underpinned with cultural understanding and insights. Data was collected across a range of engagement activities, including interviews, focus groups both online and face to face, an online survey carried out in support of the Indigenous and Heritage themes, and Yarning Circle at the Indigenous Climate Change Summit held in Cairns to support Damien Morgan-Bulled and Sonia Cooper on the Climate theme. Engagement activities were also undertaken across remote, rural, regional and urban locations in all states and territories of Australia. This data was then analysed thematically. 88 case studies were also identified and developed across ten themes.

The findings of the engagement activities are summarised into four themes:

- Holistic nature of Country
- Observed changes to Country
- Caring for Country

- Solutions for change

The meaning of Country was described unanimously across all participants as holistic and interconnected physically, spiritually, and culturally. It is this interconnectedness that was universally described by participants as being critical to Indigenous people wellbeing and ongoing connection to Country. All participants described the changes they have observed to Country and the changes they witnessed over the years in relation to ongoing climatic and human influences was having on the state of the environment. Participants discussed the impact these interventions were having on sustaining culture, the timeliness of things happening within the natural environment and the interaction between flora and fauna and how climatic changes and human development had negative impacts on the natural flow of things, how to care for Country and solutions for change.

The changes to Country observed by participants were strongly aligned, regardless of geographic location. While most described changes were overwhelmingly negative and damaging, many positive examples were provided in relation to rehabilitation and protection of the environment. Changes that have been observed to Country included fire reduction and water mismanagement and changes to the ecological balance including flora and fauna, weather and seasonal patterns, and changes specific to island and remote communities. Changes as a result of development and tourism were described across remote, rural and urban locations, and the concept of 'solastalgia' and the fact that Indigenous Australians are living through and continually witnessing the detrimental changes to the environment is causing emotional and cultural distress resulting in adverse impacts on health and wellbeing of communities across the country.

It was broadly felt that there were barriers to practicing traditional caring for Country techniques and appropriation of traditional lands, and the creation of a land management system that fails to recognise traditional ecological knowledge excludings Indigenous peoples and their cultural and environmental knowledge. A wide range of structural barriers that prevent Indigenous people from caring for Country were identified, including lack of access to Country impacting on cultural connections and practices, legislation, planning regimes and issues with funding, governance and appropriate consultation.

It was seen that addressing these issues requires not only a greater understanding by both government and the private sectors of the strong connection Indigenous people have to the environment, it also means an unlearning and unpacking of the systemic racism, bias and superiority built into Australian structures by government, and the recognition that Indigenous peoples and the more than 60,000 years of environment care and land and waters management knowledge they bring with them need to be part of the decision making processes in legislative reform, planning, development and implementation.

All participants agreed that Indigenous people need to have high expectations of the Federal Government out of the SoE Report. Key themes emerged around what Indigenous stakeholders expect from the Federal government and the SoE over the intervening period between reports. These themes relate to early and ongoing Indigenous participation, extensive and genuine engagement, community-led solutions, the use of appropriate language and communications and self-determination and decision making in the environment space.

As the 2021 SoE Report was the first to have an Indigenous lens applied, key learnings have been identified for to help guide future SoE taskforces and planning. Key to this is the expectations of Indigenous communities and organisations that there is an ongoing engagement process during the intervening years between SoE reports. This should be Indigenous-led and include meaningful engagement with Indigenous stakeholders by creating a framework for genuine and active participation - nationwide.

The SoE process provides real opportunities for supporting the involvement of Indigenous stakeholders ensuring their voices are included in strategic decision-making and deliberations over

environmental policy development and action. The engagement of an Indigenous Facilitator and inclusion of Indigenous voices from across the nation, recognises that Indigenous peoples are the rightful spokespeople for their Country and stewards for the Australian environment.

2. INTRODUCTION

Every five years since 1996 the Australian Government has conducted a comprehensive review of the state of the Australian environment. Under Section 516B of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act), national State of the Environment (SoE) reports are provided to the Minister every five years, with the next report due by December 2021.

The SoE Reports provide information on environmental and heritage conditions, trends and pressures. The purpose of the SoE reports is to:

- provide a strategic view to shape policy and action
- engage with users to influence behaviour
- assist with assessing our interventions as stewards for the Australian environment using the principles of collaborative partnerships to combine science, traditional and local knowledge.[1]

For the first time in twenty-five years, the SoE Report will have co-chief authors with one of them being Indigenous which establishes an Indigenous leadership profile. Additionally, a team of Indigenous co-authors have been assembled contributing and integrating Indigenous knowledge and content, and western science systems across ten of the twelve themes: Biodiversity, Climate, Coasts, Extreme events, Heritage, Indigenous, Inland water, Land, Marine and Urban. The aim is to ensure Indigenous views, values and knowledges are used to inform decision making for better environmental outcomes in protecting, advocating and caring for Country.

Leading the way in preparing the national Report is co-chief author, Dr Terri Janke, a Wuthathi/Meriam woman and an international authority on Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property. Dr Janke has a pivotal role working with fellow co-chief authors, Professor Emma Johnston and Dr Ian Cresswell, to strengthen the link between traditional and western science.

Dr Janke was supported by the Indigenous co-author team:

- Zena Cumpston, Indigenous
- Dr Stephen van Leeuwen, Biodiversity
- Mr Damian Morgan-Bulled and Ms Sonia Cooper, Climate
- Dr Cass Hunter and Ms Mibu Fischer, Coasts and Marine
- Mr Oliver Costello, Extreme events
- Associate Professor Brad Moggridge, Inland water
- Mr Barry Hunter, Land
- Ms Tanya Koeneman, Urban environments.

Dr Janke also co-authored the Heritage and Indigenous knowledge thematic chapters, and was additionally supported by authors Rosemary Hill, Dr Emma Woodward, Dr Pia Harkness and Stephanie von Gavel for the Indigenous chapter.

Indigenous consultancy, Murawin, was engaged by the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (the Department) to act as the Indigenous Facilitator and support the Indigenous authors during the SoE drafting phase This engagement privileged Indigenous voices, ensuring over

[1] Australian Government, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (2021) *State of the Environment (SoE) Reporting* https://www.environment.gov.au/science/soe accessed 30/06/2021

60,000 years of traditional knowledge and caring for Country practices are recognised in environmental research, strategic decision-making and policy development, and respected Indigenous peoples as the rightful spokespeople for their Country.

Bringing an Indigenous Facilitator into the process enabled the following engagement outcomes:

- effective engagement with Indigenous audiences and knowledge holders
- authentic and culturally responsive
- strongly representative of the Indigenous voice across ten SoE reports
- a holistic perspective of Indigenous knowledge and western science systems.

The Indigenous Facilitator was engaged to:

- Assist in the design of a culturally appropriate processes to ensure authoritative Indigenous voices and cultural perspectives about environmental condition and change underpin the 2021 national report.
- Identify key Indigenous stakeholder groups that have significant influence or impact on environmental outcomes.
- Ensure effective engagement with the intended audiences of the SoE through a well-connected Indigenous facilitation.
- Develop and maintain a relationship with key stakeholders as members of a core user reference group.
- Support Indigenous Co-Authors to:
    - share and validate author research and findings
    - gather Indigenous user needs to inform the development of the SoE Report and associated products to ensure it is fit-for-purpose in informing environmental decision-making
    - support the identification and development of Indigenous case studies to be included in the SoE 2021 report.
- Provide advice on traditional knowledge, cultural and data protocols, and how to ensure report content (including images) is culturally sensitive and used appropriately.
- Coordinate a Traditional Ecological Knowledge review (similar to a peer review) of the report.

Purpose of this report

This report outlines the facilitation approach, methodology and activities, and the key outcomes that emerged from engagement. The link between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultures and the state of the environment is clear among Indigenous peoples across the nation. Collectively they share a spiritual, cultural, social and economic relationship with their Country. Traditional laws, customs and practices reflect both an attachment to Country and a responsibility for preserving these places and practices for use by future generations and it is these issues and Indigenous stakeholders concern for the poor health of their Country that continued to emerge during the consultations undertaken as part of this project.

This report is the amalgamation of two previous engagement reports provided by Murawin to Dr. Janke on the engagement outcomes. It integrates the findings into a centralised report. The purpose of this report is to articulate the advice, opinions and comments provided by the broad range of stakeholders who participated in the consultations in relation to how governments at all levels can play a role in protecting the environment and enabling caring for Country.

The report also identifies expectations of the Indigenous community in between SoE reports, as well as the Department more broadly. These lessons have been translated into recommendations and are provided as a standalone document.

3. PROJECT OVERVIEW

Qualitative data was collected across the various engagement activities as outlined in the methodology. It was analysed thematically. Engagement activities were designed largely to support Dr Janke's delivery of the Indigenous and Heritage themes. Yarning Circles convened at the Indigenous Climate Change Summit supported Damien Morgan-Bulled and Sonia Cooper on the Climate theme.

The engagement process allowed for the identification of Indigenous users to inform the SoE report and associated products to guarantee the products were fit for purpose in informing environmental decision-making and targeted to an Indigenous audience. It also allowed co-authors to share information and validate research and findings.

All aspects of the process reflected the principles of free and informed consent and was underpinned by best practice Indigenous research practices such as Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) and Data Sovereignty. This ensures the traditional and cultural knowledge within the content of the SoE reports (including images) is culturally sensitive, used appropriately and is used within the parameters of respect for and protection of. Further information on our recognition of these protocols is provided in the sections below.

Engagement approach

The approach to facilitation and data collection is grounded in Indigenous ways of thinking and cultural respect, underpinned with cultural understanding and insights. To allow for meaningful contribution, Murawin ensured that engagement was centred around the following principles:

- **Clear and consistent** – messages communicated with clarity, accuracy, and consistency
- **User-specific and person centred** – community approaches tailored to the unique needs of each stakeholder group
- **Culturally sound and rigorous** - Indigenous insights and perspectives at the centre of the project
- **Engaging and inclusive** – accessible and interactive communication using a range of formats to meet different needs
- **Collaborative** – approaches developed jointly with key stakeholders
- **Respectful and culturally appropriate** – cultural safety prioritised by ensuring the use of appropriate language and strategies to encourage participation

While incorporating a national online survey, the approach is primarily qualitative in method, acknowledging the passing on of information in Indigenous Culture as traditionally an oral one and ensuring opportunities for stakeholders to engage in discussion-style engagement aligns with the tradition of 'yarning and storytelling' to pass on important lessons and knowledge. The basis of all engagement with Indigenous stakeholders was participatory, allowing for everyone involved to share their stories, visions, and experiences in a culturally safe environment, using a range of techniques that are tailored to the needs of the participants. This means the process incorporated Indigenous research methods based on traditional processes of 'Yarning' – social yarning to establish trust, research topic yarning to gather information specifically related to the topic/s and collaborative yarning to both share information and explore ideas leading to new insights and understandings.

Seminars and focus groups also drew on the participatory engagement technique of the Art of Hosting which specifically instructs the establishment of an inclusive style of conversations and

dialogue amongst participants aimed at capturing the wealth of information often exchanged within a group setting.

A range of technology solutions were employed to respond to the impacts of COVID-19, with an understanding of the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable communities and Elders. Special attention was be given to interviews and engagement with Traditional Owners and local Indigenous community groups to ensure a level of comfort with the process and, therefore, an assurance of validity of the data collected.

Engagement methodology

The methodology undertaken was primarily qualitative in nature and supported by a small-scale quantitative data element to ensure that the consultation wass as broad as possible. Utilising a predominantly qualitative approach ensured that engagement could occur according to the approach and principles outlined above and ensured that the data collected rich, contextual, and provided a deep understanding of the Indigenous perspective.

The following activities were delivered by the Indigenous Facilitator with further details provided in Appendix A and Chapter 5.

- 14 face-to-face seminars held across each State and Territory, with 51 participants
- national online survey, yielding 172 responses
- 3 focus groups (online and face to face) with 42 participants
- 40 individual depth interviews
- 4 group interviews with a collective total of 20 participants
- research and development of case studies for inclusion in 10 identified reports
- consent process for case studies developed by co-authors
- advice and supports for co-authors undertaking own facilitation
- Traditional Ecological Knowledge Review process
- outcomes reporting of the SoE Engagement.

In addition, the Indigenous Facilitator worked with the Taskforce, the Indigenous Lead Author, and the Chair of the User Reference Group to recruit URG members as well as the members for the Traditional Ecological Knowledge Review (the Peers).

A Facilitation Plan was developed at the completion of the planning and co-design phase and provided to the Taskforce. The Plan outlined the activities to be conducted and a point in time update on discussions with co-authors to that point (19 March 2021).

An initial database of Indigenous stakeholders was provided by the User Reference Group Chair, Mr Peter Cochrane. Murawin developed a final Indigenous Stakeholder Database. This database was used to identify participants involved across engagement activities. Due to the timeframes and lack of additional stakeholder lists provided by NIAA and the Department, there were difficulties in identifying relevant stakeholders.

Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property

Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) describes the ‘rights of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to their languages, stories, songs, knowledge (including spiritual and ecological), knowledge systems, cultural practices, land, waterways, sacred sites, ceremony, objects and ancestral remains, literary, performing, musical and artistic works, and documentation and recordings of or about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and peoples’(Janke, 2021).

ICIP differs from Intellectual Property (IP) in that it continues indefinitely without expiration dates. ICIP within engagement includes:

- authentically representing and incorporating Indigenous stories, cultural heritage and knowledge references
- citing Indigenous iconography, design or artwork
- acknowledging resources or research materials that contain ICIP or refer to Indigenous peoples
- recognising culturally sensitive information, knowledge or practices and seeking community consent to use.

We recognise and respect that ICIP is strongly connected to place, belongs to communities or groups collectively and differs from community to community, and place to place. We also recognise that because of the physical and spiritual inter-connectedness of Country that ICIP is often inter-linked.

We recognise that Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights refer to the rights of Indigenous people to own, control and maintain their ICIP, authorise and refuse the use of ICIP, maintain the secrecy of Indigenous knowledge and control the recording of expressions and knowledge that are intrinsic to identity and culture.

Current generations have custodial obligations to nurture, maintain and pass ICIP onto future generations. Part of this is the acknowledgement that only certain people within each community hold the authority to '*know, hold and share knowledge, or give permission to use and share certain ICIP*'.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Indigenous data sovereignty is the '*rights that Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples have over the collection, use and storage of data (e.g., information, statistics, reports, articles, e-books, catalogues, datasets etc) that include their personal and community information and their ICIP*'[2].

Murawin recognises that Indigenous data sovereignty refers to the use of historical records and the collection, management, interpretation and storage of contemporary data. Murawin does not store hard copy documents and ensures that soft copy files are restricted to the researchers involved in the project only. Murawin ensured that all participants are informed how and by whom the data will be stored, who has access to the data, who can use the data and for what purpose, how it will benefit Indigenous participants, and how long the data will stay active.

Indigenous data sovereignty is embedded through collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination, potential future use and storage. This includes ensuring that Indigenous people's data genuinely reflects their priorities, values, cultures, worldviews and diversity.

We understand that all pieces of information relating to Country is Sovereign Data and should be respected as such. Any information shared through consultation relating to ceremonies, events or other significant cultural data by an Indigenous person is their intellectual property by right and researchers are required to seek permission to use it. In some cases, discussion with Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders of that nation and with Local Aboriginal Land Councils and Traditional Owners is also required.

[2] Curtis, L, Janke, T and Valenti, A (2021) *More Than Words: Writing, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture and Copyright in Australia*, Terri Janke and Company (Solicitors and Consultants), page 13

Data analysis

Data outcomes were analysed using a coding framework, which was developed based on the key research questions agreed with the Taskforce. Murawin analysed each transcript in-depth through a rigorous qualitative thematic coding process using NVivo13 software as well as Excel. The higher-level codes correspond directly to the questions, while the lower-level codes comprise of emerging themes. Where possible Murawin, cross-analysed the data sources in relation to each other, identifying the cross-cutting themes that have emerged as the most salient.

As per the AIATSIS requirements on Indigenous-led research, the coding framework was reviewed by the Murawin team which includes Indigenous researchers, and then examined by Murawin's Managing Director Carol Vale to ensure it is culturally contextual and meets Murawin's stringent quality assurance standards.

Quotes and case studies were agreed on with the lead co-author to create depth and context and integrated into the Report.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge Peer Review

Each chapter underwent a Traditional Ecological Knowledge Review. The Traditional Ecological Knowledge Review consisted of an examination of content within 10 SoE chapters by independent Indigenous experts. The purpose is to:

- ensure the traditional cultural credibility and high quality of the SoE 2021
- allow the Minister, the Department, the authors and users of the SoE to have confidence in the cultural knowledge
- identify information that is not broadly agreed upon across the Indigenous community, Indigenous academics and experts
- identify information that is unsuitable for Indigenous readers.

Murawin facilitated four workshops, each covering two-three chapters, to form the Traditional Ecological Knowledge Review process. Murawin then collated an outcomes report and provided feedback from participants. The Indigenous co-authors for each chapter are to consider the feedback and incorporate into the chapters where appropriate.

Collaboration with Co-Authors

In March 2021 when the Indigenous Facilitator commenced, the Indigenous co-authors were at varying stages of both engagement and writing. Many of the initial drafts of thematic chapters were underway, and in some cases an ethics application had already been submitted which prevented any opportunity to assist. It was therefore agreed that support from the Indigenous Facilitator would be on a flexible and as needs basis for each Indigenous co-author. Murawin then met separately with each Indigenous co-author to ascertain their needs and requirements. The following table provides an overview of outcomes with co-author discussions.

Table 1: Co-author engagement discussions

Theme	Co-author/s	Outcome
Climate	Damian Morgan-Bulled / Sonia Cooper	Mr Morgan-Bulled and Ms Cooper were both due to attend the First Peoples Climate Change Gathering (the Gathering) in Cairns during the week commencing 22 March 2021. Approximately 120 Traditional Owners and 20 scientists were in attendance.

		Two of Murawin's team attended the Gathering for two days to support a Yarning Circle on climate change. Mr Morgan-Bulled and Ms Cooper advised participants of the event and Ms Cooper acted as facilitator. Murawin provided advice on the agenda, support for the facilitator, logistics, comprehensive note taking and the provision of an outcomes report. In addition, Murawin developed a questionnaire for Gathering participants and supported Mr Morgan-Bulled and Ms Cooper with dissemination and assisting participants to complete the survey.
Coasts and Marine	Dr Cass Hunter And Mibu Fisher	As CSIRO staff, Dr Hunter and Ms Fisher were required to apply internally for ethics approval to run a stakeholder engagement process for the Coasts and Marine chapters. This was organised prior to the Indigenous Facilitator commencing, and Murawin was therefore not listed on the ethics application. The Murawin team was therefore unable to assist with the engagement activities planned for these chapters. Murawin did however provide introduction to several known contacts for Dr Hunter and Ms Fisher in NSW and Victoria to enhance their reach for their consultations.
Extreme Events	Oliver Costello	Mr Costello requested the Indigenous Facilitator arrange, conduct and report on outcomes from an online focus group of key stakeholders, including depth interviews. However, the timeframe did not allow for the online focus group to occur Murawin had several conversations with Mr Costello in relation to assisting with scoping out engagement and potential stakeholders to interview, which did occur.
Land	Barry Hunter	Mr Hunter sought assistance with the development and facilitation of a Yarning Circle, support to develop case studies, and depth interviews with key stakeholders. Mr Hunter was in regular contact with the Murawin team. Mr Hunter provided a list of stakeholders for the Murawin team to contact which was undertaken including face to face individual meetings in Cairns, participation in the Cairns Forum and online discussions with stakeholders in various locations.
Urban	Tanya Koeneman	Ms Koeneman initially indicated utilising the Indigenous Facilitator to run national online focus groups. However, despite regular attempts, the Murawin team was not able to speak with Ms Koeneman and was unable to provide any support.
Heritage	Assoc Professor Michael-Shawn Fletcher / Dr Terri Janke	Associate Professor Fletcher withdrew from the Co-author group and Dr Janke assumed responsibility for the Heritage theme. Murawin worked closely with Dr Janke and her team on this theme, including the development of an online survey that was circulated by the Alliance secretariat.

Inland Water	Assoc Prof Brad Moggridge	Associate Professor Moggridge had initial discussions with the Indigenous Facilitator. Rather than facilitate focus groups, Associate Professor Moggridge provided a list of stakeholders for the Murawin team to contact in relation to Inland Water discussions which occurred as part of the depth interview process.
Biodiversity	Dr Stephen van Leuwan	Dr van Leeuwan initially requested assistance with a formal consent process for case studies, and potentially for workshops. This evolved into Murawin working with Dr Janke and her team on collecting and developing case studies across all themes as well as formal and informal consents for narrative and case studies to be used in report content. Dr van Leuwan provided an extensive list of stakeholders for the Murawin team to speak with which did occur and again the information is captured in the data collection.
Antarctica	Andrew Klekociuk And Barbara Wienecke	Work was underway (prior to the engagement of the Indigenous Facilitator) to identify any potential songlines around migratory patterns between the two land masses and whether consent could be gained for publication. The Departmental staff retained responsibility for this piece of work.
Indigenous	Dr Terri Janke	Dr Janke acted in her role as Lead Author and author of the Indigenous theme holistically throughout the process. This included ongoing work with the Indigenous Facilitator and Murawin team to collaborative develop guiding documents, and the delivery and reporting of all engagement activities. Engagement outcomes were provided to Dr Janke in real time, and through delivery of two outcomes report.
Air Quality		Murawin were not requested to facilitate engagement for this chapter as no specific content related to Antarctica and Air Quality was identified during the engagement process.

4. ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES

The findings of the engagement activities are summarised into four themes:

- Holistic nature of Country
- Observed changes to Country
- Caring for Country
- Solutions for change.

Country

The meaning of Country was described unanimously across all participants as holistic and interconnected physically, spiritually and culturally. It is this interconnectedness that was universally described by participants as being critical to Indigenous peoples' wellbeing and ongoing connection to Country. Participants spoke of the relationship between themselves, their families and communities advising how their environment (within their Country) has been eroded because of dispossession and development. Development projects, mining and forestry activities, and agricultural programmes continue to disrupt Indigenous Australians connections to the environment in the context of cultural practices, responsibilities and obligations. Environmental damage has been substantial: flora and fauna species have become extinct or endangered, unique ecosystems have been altered or even destroyed, and rivers and other water catchments have been heavily polluted or redirected, the introduction of plant species needed to support cattle and sheep continue to impact on the native vegetation and has ramifications for what should be happening in an environmental and ecological sense in that area of Country. All of this has an impact on connection.

All participants held a deep connection to Country that includes both tangible (lands, waters, sky) and intangible (spirit, ceremony, songs, stories) connections for Indigenous peoples. Country was defined not just as land and waters, but as an all-encompassing description of the life-force itself – Land, Waters, People, Culture, Ceremony, Language, Lore, Spirit and Heritage. The key themes on the meaning of Country to Indigenous peoples were:

- **Reciprocity** – relates to the concept that Indigenous people belong to the land and not the reverse. Seeing Country in a holistic way comes with cultural and spiritual obligations, and results in a reciprocal relationship with deep responsibilities to care for Country.
- **Spiritual belonging** - Country was also described as home and a place of deep belonging. This sense of belonging is multi-faceted and encompasses family ties and an intimate knowledge of place, both in ecological and spiritual terms. Belonging and connection to place are aided by stories, which are seen as embedded in the landscape.
- **Cultural learning** - a significant number of participants described Country as a place of cultural learning, cultural revival and cultural transmission.
- **Torres Strait Islander perspective** - for Torres Strait Islander participants, they share similar meaning and value as Aboriginal people on the mainland and reference this to 'Ailan Kustom' (derived from the English: 'Island Custom'), denoting cultural tradition and continuity, has the similar significance. As with Aboriginal customs and beliefs, reciprocal obligation to care for place (akin to the Aboriginal concept of 'Caring for Country') is present in Ailan Kustom.

'Country is our culture…our Mother, It looks after us and feeds us…[and] we have got to look after it' (NT)

Observed Changes

The changes to Country observed by participants were strongly aligned, regardless of geographic location. While most described changes were overwhelmingly negative, some positive examples were provided. Specific examples of the positive changes to Country as a result of targeted efforts include:

- restoration of dragon tree ecosystem as a result of better cattle fencing (WA)
- increase in Bilby population due to improved protection programs (WA)
- rejuvenation of turtle population due to restoration work (e.g. mimosa clean up) undertaken by the Mak Mak people on former cattle stations (NT).

Negative observed changes to Country are described below.

Mismanagement

Mismanagement of the Australian landscape and waters over generations was raised by all participants particularly as it relates to the denial or restriction of traditional Aboriginal caring for Country practices being undertaken to support the environment. Specifically, mismanagement of fire reductions, land, waters, national parks and forestry and pest control were discussed.

Fire reductions

Mismanagement was linked to a lack of recognition and inclusion of traditional knowledge and Indigenous communities in environmental work. For example, Aboriginal rangers are employed by government agencies to work on fire reduction programs, but without employing traditional cultural burn techniques. Participants also raised concerns around government agencies developing 'Cultural Burn' policies without the involvement of traditional knowledge keepers. Participants also discussed the need for greater involvement of Indigenous people in the Volunteer Fire Brigades and the use of cultural burning.

Many participants, from across different States and Territories called for long term funding cycles to support ranger programs to reduce mismanagement.

Water

Participants with cultural connections to various inland waterways painted a distressing picture of what has historically occurred and continues to take place. Many participants provided examples of river systems drying up or a decline in water quality as a result of large scale development of pastoral lands and prioritisation of economic flows for agricultural purposes, overuse of artesian systems and the treatment of water as a commodity. Specific examples of this include:

- The Ban Ban Springs, on Wakka Wakka Country in the North Burnett region in QLD which was described as drying up due to unlimited access to the artesian water system.
- The mismanagement of the *Barka* (Darling) River, the traditional Country of the Barkandji people, is seen to be so dire it was depicted as a '*warzone*'.

  'It has been absolutely devastated. Government allow over-extraction of water and floodplain harvesting, particularly at the top end of the river system... Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike are suffering at an extent that most Australians

would barely comprehend as being something that's happening in this continent' (NSW).

- In the Lower Murray-Darling Basin, particularly the Murray River itself, numerous changes were attributed to government mismanagement, including the prioritisation of economic flows for agricultural purposes and treating water as a commodity.

  'The water has been harmed. More and more the past decade, I've noticed it's been harmed even more. The water colour now, it's a green, it's like an army green... that river's been turned into a storage channel, an irrigation channel. Basically, all the rivers it's happening to, they're just irrigation channels now for the Commonwealth and the state to mis-manage that water and allocate it out and sell it to the highest bidders' (VIC)

A similar picture emerged among Indigenous peoples traditionally connected to the sea. Major issues raised included commercial fishing practices (in particular in the Torres Strait), plastic pollution and rising sea levels linked to climate change.

'All them net - big netting and trap our turtles and dugong… Who be making them thing?... We had our own traps that we made out of reeds and things, but we only kept them food only for our family there, for our tribe… We never had big trawlers with them big nets that take the whole coral with them when they're going for prawns and bugs and all them' (Torres Strait Islands, QLD)

The ecological balance

All participants were able to provide extensive examples of identifiable changes to seasons, coastlines and waterways, to flora and fauna. Many of these centred on changes to key indicator species, such as wattle flowering randomly and out of any sort of defined seasonal patterns, and the ironbark orchid now rarely flowering at all. In the NT, changes in insect behaviours was identified, examples of which included dragonflies not knowing when to come and flying ants hatching too prematurely. Participants also felt they were generally observing less insects.

The quality of both salt and fresh water has also been impacted due to the destruction of Country. The changes to seasons also reflect changes to tides, sea levels and saltwater intrusion into freshwater Country. It was felt that vegetation has been affected to the point of less growth, leading to a decrease in wildlife, which for rural and remote communities in particular impacts lifestyle, cultural practices and food sources.

Unprecedented heat in central Australia is making it difficult for people to care for Country. Mangrove die off in northern NT is due in part to heat, and more dead kangaroos are seen than ever before. The traditional cycle of hot, dry, hard times followed by a period of regeneration has not been occurring to the same degree.

Broadly changes to the ecological balance can be categorised into impacts on flora and fauna, weather and seasonal patterns and the ability to live on Country.

Flora and fauna

Impacts on native animals were commonly raised by participants, with broad concerns around the loss of animals on Country, whereas others raised geographic or species-specific concerns. For example, Kangaroos in the Northern NSW/QLD border region were reported as dying of thirst and there was significant concern regarding the die off of Mulga Woodlands due to increased heat and drought, which never been seen to this extent and is seen to be impacting other plant and animal life reliant on woodlands.

Across the consultations, participants described a range of ways in which local ecologies are being thrown off balance, with one participant calling the situation a *'death of a thousand cuts'*. Examples of these included:

- **Feral animals and the spread of invasive species** adversely affecting native species and '*species assemblages'*, such as cane toads leading to a decrease in land goanna, blue tongue lizards and venomous snakes in and around Darwin. In WA this was described as cane toads, foxes, and *'feral cats that are predating on all the native wildlife'*.
- **Invasive weed species** such as the Neem Trees and Coffee Trees in WA, and the Komboma Water Weed in the NT, and Buffle and other grass species in a number of States and Territories. The spread of Buffle grass in particular was seen as a contentious and conflicting issue. This highly invasive, monocultural species was introduced by mining/pastoralists for dust suppression, is almost impossible to remove ('cut out') and is affecting the APY Lands, central Australia and the Western Desert. In the NT pastoralists tend to see Buffle grass it as beneficial, while many Indigenous people and environmentalists see it as an invasive weed that impacts cultural practices (e.g., fire burning) and sites. It was also felt that government appeared disinterested in managing the issue. Concerns relating to the spread included difficulties in managing traditional burning regimes, as Buffle grass burns hotter than native grasses. It also has a greater impact on other native fauna and flora as its presence makes it harder to access traditional foods and provides increased hiding places for snakes as an example. Participants at the Alice Springs consultation specifically highlighted the need for funding towards managing the grass spread before the situation is unable to be managed.
- In some parts, Koalas are becoming locally extinct, but in one part of Victoria, the Koala population has exploded to the point of causing **ecological pressure** on blue and grey gum forests.
- In Victoria, **changes in fire patterns and the lack of burning practices** over the last thirty or forty years has allowed large numbers of bandicoots and potoroos to take up residence in the expanded heathlands. However, the complicating factor is that increasing dry lightning strikes are occurring and agency plans for burns will likely wipe out the species. In other parts of Australia, changing fire regimes have seen the rise of single ignition fires over huge areas. In 2017 in remote WA one single fire ran over four million hectares. This has led to intense, permanent landscape changes particularly across the Western Desert.

> *'There are really stark change to the Country I grew up in. When I was a kid, you could walk through grassy woodlands into my mid-teens. There was really no scrub. But now you can't walk through it – it's all coastal scrub. The trees are mostly dead… A lack of fire allowed the scrub to take over' (Wadawurrung Country, VIC)*

Weather and seasonal patterns

Participants noted widespread changes in weather and seasonal patterns. Extreme weather events were observed across Australia, manifesting in various ways across different regions. In the Kimberley region of WA, cyclones ranges are expanding which results in huge increases in rainfall.

> *'In the last 15-20 years they [cyclones] are getting further down the coast… we've had some really wet seasons... About three or four years ago we got the total January rainfall, which is about 900mls, in a 3-day weekend… As a kid growing up, I always remember it being monsoonal weather, lots of rain, but nothing like that'.* (QLD)

In other parts of Australia, extreme weather events are taking the form of droughts, which combined with poor landscape management has resulted in catastrophic bushfires. One participant in Victoria explicitly linked this to climate change. In desert regions, increasing periods of wet seasons, and dryer dry seasons results in temperatures in the summer months that are now beyond a threshold that can sustain human life. Both Western Desert Lands Aboriginal Corporation (WDLAC) and the Ten Deserts Program have reports of large scale dying off of kangaroos. The higher number of deaths impacts both dietary and cultural significance of kangaroos in that region.

Changes in seasonal patterns have also been causing distress. In the Northern Territory for example, one participant noted that the dry season has been arriving later, which impacts cultural burning regimes, among other things. Both the green plum and the Carpentaria Palm have been fruiting later than usual. The berries of the Carpentaria Palm are a vital food source for the Torres Strait Pigeon which migrates down from the Papua New Guinea region each year.

These impacts extended to ability for Aboriginal peoples to rely on ecological indicators to inform the timing of certain cultural practices. In the Top End, for example, the arrival of migratory bird Birra Birra signifies the beginning of turtle hunting season. The arrival also coincides with the flowering of the Kapal tree, and tradition has it that if the Kapal is flowering vigorously, it is going to be a good turtle season. Changing seasonal patterns mean that ecological indicators are continuing to be less reliable and restrict traditional practices.

> *'…[the loss of wildlife makes it]…much harder to read Country. Plants/animals/responses are shifting.'* (WA)

Remote communities

The example of the Martu people of the Martu people of the Pilbara region provide a similar story for many of the issues impactingon remote communities, in that they feel that there is a need to support an ongoing caring for Country focus and that a local workforce is the foundation to a sustainable community. It was seen that increased numbers of Martu living on Country provides the greater capacity to care for Country as well as a diversity of employment (e.g., casual positions, jobs for a range of ages and skills) valued by local people. However, these remote communities will be susceptible to the upper limits of likely climate change impacts and harsher living conditions mean appropriate steps are required to ensure living on Country in a changing environment is accessible in terms of wellbeing, health and desirability. WDLAC is currently examining solar and wind power generation, and appropriate plantings to reduce heat sink. It was felt that this example can be extrapolated to any desert or remote community.

Development and tourism

Many forms of environmental degradation were named as a result of development, tourism, and extractive industries. The impact of development in various forms was a key theme across all jurisdictions and participants. Many equated the environmental damage caused by development as a form of ongoing colonialism. These impacts can be broadly observed across the rural and remote, and urban context.

Tasmania, however, is example of the unique impact in relation to specific policy and legislative framework where the damage to cultural heritage sites, as a result of development, were described in stark terms. Participants at the Tasmanian seminar described the Tasmanian Government development processes as 'a shambles'. In this situation it was felt that the Tasmanian *Aboriginal*

Relics Act[3] is ineffectual legislation that did not actually provide any protection for Aboriginal heritage sites.

> *'It's just disappearing in front of our eyes. It's soul-destroying and we have no actual input to any of those processes. This government is a law to itself when it comes to the management. When I say management, I really mean destruction.' (TAS)*

Rural and remote

In both the Northern Territory and northern NSW, gas companies are now playing a significant role in terms of damage on Country. In the NSW Pilliga/Narrabri area, sickness within local communities is attributed to gas odour in the air. One Elder provided the example of river water being able to be set alight because it contains high gas levels, and river fish dying because the water has been poisoned by coal seam gas.

For more remote communities, development built on hunting grounds is removing access to traditional practices. In and around Darwin, development and non-traditional hunting practices were cited as affected local water supplies. Increased boating on the Daly River was described as leading to a wider and shallower river, faster erosion, and rubbish left at sacred sites. An increase in feral pig hunters using quad-bikes on Country is eroding soil, and in Arnhem Land, the tyre tracks left from buffalo catching has reduced water in billabongs, impacting the local ecosystem. Moreover, industry and pastoralists in the Northern Territory (NT) are reducing Indigenous access to Country and the means to undertake traditional hunting activities.

Furthermore, recent changes to NT legislation has allowed for the large scale development of pastoral lands. There is a perception that COVID-19 has facilitated a reduction in 'red tape' that has also contributed to rapid approvals of large-scale developments (horticultural farming/rare mineral exploration and mining developments/cotton farming). Singleton Station, is awaiting approval as a large-scale horticultural farm with a licence to extract 40,000 megalitres from the same aquafer as Alice Springs. There is concern about this approval and its potential impact on natural resources. Both Federal and Territory governments are seen as pushing large industrialisation of marginal areas and community is not well resourced to raise disputes over the development.

Concerns were raised that some of these developments have not been planned for future drought, and that industry will seek approval for larger quantities of water to sustain the venture and to maintain jobs, at which stage community, cultural and environmental positions will be unable to respond as the commercial imperative will be seen to be greater than the environmental needs.

One of the biggest issues for Indigenous peoples in the Alice Springs and surrounds is access to water and poor quality water for domestic use. Outside the larger NT cities and regional centres, there is no regulation requiring compliance with base water standards. For example, one community in this area was described as having naturally occurring uranium levels in their water supply at three times the recognised safety level. It was seen that a lack of high quality water is contributing to lower levels of life expectancy in remote communities. There is also strong community perception that mining company access to water takes precedence over community and environmental requirements, and while Native Title provides some opportunity to negotiate water access it doesn't provide the right to declines access to others.

The urban environment

Participants from urban locations understood the impact of development was in pushing Indigenous people out of areas they had settled or been relocated into many decades ago. Communities described the issue of living off Country and increasing disconnection with Country as a direct result

[3] Possibly referring to the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1975* as the amended version of the *Aboriginal Relics Act 1975* commencing from August 2017

of living in highly urbanised areas where the built environment is valued over the land itself. The impacts of this are varied, however in general Elders are impacted disproportionately.

In Sydney, participants described how Elders living in the inner-city social housing were forced to leave their long-term homes and communities due to the prioritisation of new apartment builds and the redevelopment of social housing estates to achieve an increase in housing stock. Many of these Elders were born in or have lived in these areas for most of their lives. The absence of consideration for the cultural needs of Elders in housing development means that at the local level, traditional cultural and knowledge transfer to younger generations is disrupted and at risk of being lost.

> *'Changes in the way young people are today – more building, less Country. Kids becoming urbanised – losing their cultural identity and connection. Difference in growing up in the Bush' (NSW)*

Health and wellbeing

Impacts on people was closely aligned with concepts of Country and observed changes, through the close connection to plants, animals and Country. There was a consensus that the direct effects on individuals and communities includes all categories of wellbeing, such as cultural practices, languages, physical health and stress. In addition, a new layer of mental health stressors on young Indigenous peoples and children was raised as an emerging new wave of impacts affecting forthcoming generations. It was seen that the loss of Country impacts children and youth as there is no understanding of what changes are occurring or understanding of what Country was before colonisation.

> *'People have connection….and if it's taken away, we are left with nothing…I lose my wellbeing'*

Not being about to access Country was also seen as impacting social, health and wellbeing as *'Country is where we get our strength from'*. Specifically raised in Darwin, but impacting many communities, was the indirect issue of people moving off Country to regional and urban centres. The impact here is two-fold; first there are less people left on Country to undertake the work required, which result in damage to and loss of Country; and overcrowding and other social, environmental and health issues arise for Indigenous people living in higher population centres.

'Solastalgia'

Aligned with the health and wellbeing is the feeling and expression of hurt, distress and/ or desolation of Country, which is being caused by change in the environment or a place in which Indigenous people are deeply connected to. This concept is known as 'solastalgia' and maps to emotions expressed by participants regarding what is happening to Country.

> *'It hurts... almost like you lose your sense of direction because you're not used to being hit with all this' (NSW)*

Participants' feelings about the impacts on Country of extractive industries could also be seen as solastalgia, with the following sentiments expressed across various consultations:

> '*When things are blown up you're losing history, it's losing sixty thousand years of ceremony in certain areas… It creates huge sense of loss and it's loss that can then generate further trauma particularly if there is that close spiritual connection to the place' (WA)*
>
> *'Mining, fracking and digging up of Country is killing us physically and spiritually' (NT)*

'These are all the reasons why we have high incarceration rates, why we're dying 20 - 15 years earlier than non-Aboriginal people, all them statistics, the closing the gap issue, it all comes down to country' (VIC)

'Where people have got more access, and have been able to get out on country, which is hard, it makes a huge amount of difference on people being able to make construction decisions, get involved in local decision making' (NT)

Similar feelings were expressed in relation to rivers:

'When there's no water in the river it affects us emotionally… We can't survive without it and it can't survive without us… We need it more than it needs us. Then our spiritual connection, that's our stories, our arts, our culture' (Brewarrina NSW)

'From my personal, lived experience, all I can see is foreseeable harm and a fast track towards ecocide and genocide in terms of government's intent on what they want to do in the Fitzroy River... Whatever happens to the Fitzroy River is going to impact on our spiritual, cultural, economic wellbeing' (WA)

Cultural practices

Environmental degradation and destruction of Country is severely impacting on Indigenous people's ability to practice and sustain culture. This includes development of industry, agriculture and farming, extreme and uncontrolled fire as well as flooding has resulted in damage to cultural sites, particularly in NSW and Victorian areas. Damage to Country affects a range of practices such as the use of the landscape and natural landmarks as traditional mapping points and boundary indicators between Nations, both of which have been used by Indigenous Australians for millennia. It has also resulted in the disappearance of cultural heritage sites and places linked to songlines and storytelling.

'The killing of our waterways, the killing of our environment, killing of our food sources, plants, animals [is] killing… our ability to continue to practice culture and continue to recreate memories'. (NSW)

Many groups and interviewees spoke specifically about impacts on songlines, including the destruction of the physical mapping component of songlines through extreme weather, decrease in water levels, flora or fauna, and the highly destructive nature of development. The loss of language was also seen as affecting the ability to sing the land, has led to recent regenerative work.

'Our songlines have been built over by roads and borders.' (QLD)

Other ways in which culture is impacted by these factors are:

- **Loss of cultural identity** was commonly linked across all data collection activities to poor mental health outcomes.

  'A lot are disconnected from Country to a large degree… I'm sure that has a big impact on who they might think they are' (VIC). Reference to the impact on young people was raised by many. 'Suicide is a red flag that is popping up because youth are disconnected from culture.' (QLD)

- **Loss of intrinsic spiritual value.**

  'Across the land, you've got all the body parts and all the organs. That water is not being allowed to get across into those organs so it's killing off the ancestral beings that's in the Country, in the land' (Lower Murray-Darling Basin, (NSW)

- **Damage to culturally significant sites**, such as in Darwin NT where Milkwood Trees, which are associated with birthing places, are being cut down and in Brewarrina NSW the nearby Brewarrina Fish Traps – a site of internationally significant cultural heritage –

have been damaged by the mismanagement of flows down the Barwon River, as well as by invasive plant species like bamboo which are dislodging rocks and causing the ancient structures to disintegrate. Yet it was seen that '*the Australian government doesn't seem to care'*.

- **Loss of hunting grounds** due to culturally insensitive development.
- **Loss of significant plant species** and its impact of cultural craft practices.

  'When I was young, aunts from this Country would gather for weaving… [but] plants are disappearing…' (VIC)

- **Loss of food sovereignty** and associated cultural practices around food.

Caring for Country

Caring for Country is strongly embedded in Indigenous heritage and seen as including culture, stories and song lines, language and connection to the environment. Caring for Country is seen as protecting Country, and the requirement to embed the Indigenous perspective in all stages of development and decision making (e.g. policy, planning, delivery and management). The following themes emerged from the consultations of what caring for Country should or could look like:

- those whose Country it is have the right, means and processes to speak to the needs of that Country
- shift to a system where Indigenous peoples have the autonomy and legislative protection to care for Country
- a community led and localised approach tailored to each community's needs
- genuine engagement by government – where government is seen to genuinely listening to Indigenous peoples and communities and their contribution is tangible
- recognition of traditional knowledge and Indigenous science in the Australian system of environmental care, including embedding Indigenous people within the system and legislatively recognising them as a genuine and valued partner
- revitalisation of cultural practices, knowledge transfer and cultural education
- adequate resourcing for caring for Country by Indigenous people.

  'Caring for Country is also about sharing stories and supporting connection…' (NSW)

Participants named numerous means by which Country could be better cared for but where challenges or poor practices still existed:

- **Sustainable mining practices,** such as those being implemented by the Aboriginal-owned Gulkula Mining Company (Nhulunbuy NT), which has an intensive focus on revegetation and rehabilitation. However, in the Pilbara and Kimberley regions on WA, mining exploration is occurring in large numbers on parts of Country not serviced by ranger programs and Traditional Owners are not able to be on the ground in those areas most at risk of unwanted intrusions. Participants advised that most of this is unallocated Crown lands with various mining tenants, therefore there is no basis for a ranger program to operate. It was also commented that the WA Government is altering processes to allow miners to get on Country quicker.

  'Once the ground is disturbed it cannot be restored – mining companies know this after decades of working in the Pilbara. They scrape the surfaces and then recover with a seed layer which is OK from an environmental perspective but not from a cultural perspective' (WA)

- **Cultural heritage work** is required for mining exploration but there are limited numbers of people available to undertake it. WDLAC in WA, for example, does not have the capacity to keep up with the heritage side of exploration and applications.

  'The Martu have the highest level of Native Title protections but companies engage in exploration activities while waiting for the surveys etc… ahead of the formal approval. WDLAC find out after work has been done' (WA)

  'It's easy for mining companies to run stuff on Country and no one knows about it' (WA)

- **Sustainable agriculture and harvesting**

  'We Indigenous… We just go hunt for our food and… if you got turtle egg there plenty, you don't take all of it. You only take enough for you for food, you bury the rest. For we, we just live a simple life. For Country, what we do is just look after everything…. We… got little boats or little canoes, go in them creek with our little thing, trap all them eel or whatever, mud crab, that's all. The only thing left that will put food on the table for our family and that's how our environment been protected' (Torres Strait Island)

  '[P]lanting coconuts again, planting things, that's caring for Country… those coconut trees, that's our life, the tree of life. We eat from the fruit of that tree and that water is pure. That can go intravenous, that water. That's how pure it is, so that's our tree of life. The leaves, we can make things from that for our shelter. It's just - I don't know, white man is different. They want to bulldoze things, develop. They don't really care for Country, like you say' (Torres Strait Islands)

- **Cultural burning** is a key mechanism to restoring and caring for Country that was widely cited across multiple states, but with the overarching opinion that it continued to not be widely used or valued as a management tool

  'Back home in Coffs Harbour they do quite a bit of what people call cultural burn, also known as cool burn, fire stick farming, where they do tend to Country using our own fire, healthy fire. But around here where I live, which is south of Sydney, the land is still quite sick. It's choked with a lot of underbrush and large grassy fields which aren't tended to which is why you get your catastrophic fires every decade or so' (NSW)

- **Cultural education**, or traditional knowledge transfer is commonly regarded as being as relevant today as ever. Across the nation participants felt that caring for Country is just as much about storytelling as it is about the tangible management practices. It was felt that cultural education, underpinned transformation, and regeneration activities and there needed to be a concerted effort to ensuring that knowledge is transferred to the next generation.

  'I believe that we have a lot of the answers for a lot of the current day issues and problems. We only have to look at ancient wisdom and incorporate the relevant knowledge systems or approaches and embed those old ways'. For many participants, the key is to facilitate the acquisition and transmission of that knowledge down through the generations.

Barriers to caring for Country

It was broadly felt that there were barriers to practicing traditional caring for Country techniques as a result of colonisation and appropriation of traditional lands, and the creation of a system that excludes Indigenous peoples. A wide range of barriers that prevent Indigenous people from caring

for Country were identified, including the lack of access, the physical disconnection to Country, and issues with funding, governance and consultation.

It was seen that addressing the issues requires not only a greater understanding by both government and the private sectors of the strong connection Indigenous people have to environment, it also means an unlearning and unpacking of the systemic racism, bias and superiority built into Australian structures by government, and the recognition that Indigenous peoples and the more than 60,000 years of environment care knowledge they bring with them need to be part of the decision making in planning, development and implementation.

Lack of access to Country

Lack of access to Country was a common theme but had a variety of forms. For some communities, lack of resourcing to access Country for management activities is an issue, for others it is barriers from private parties in the form of mining and pastoralism. In NSW, the backlog of Aboriginal land rights claims sitting with the State Government was raised as a key barrier, while other States and Territories generally raised issues in relation to legislative blockages (e.g., land tenure, inter and intra legislative structures and general government control) and inconsistent application of laws.

The commonality was that lack of access makes it more difficult to care for Country and there are no or limited, perfunctory programs available to support communities and their organisations get on top of localised issues. The restrictions created by COVID-19 was also seen as an emerging barrier that would need ongoing consideration.

> *'Aboriginal people [are] being locked out of land and waters particularly those in the National Parks. Need to work with all Aboriginal people not just few to enable access to cultural fishing grounds. Needs to be a balance between National Parks and access for Aboriginal people to practice culture. Equal rights and access without having to ask for a key to open gates' (NSW)*

> *'Some people, in particular women, are facing difficulties and barriers to accessing Country. This is a result of the COVID pandemic restricting movement in 2020, as well as personal restrictions such as not having a driver's license or vehicle, and mining that occurs on Country' (WA)*

Living off Country

There are many reasons that Indigenous peoples live off Country and face pressures to live in cities and regional centres, away from Country. Some participants expressed the need for governments to create opportunities that allow people to return regularly, access and/or live on Country in a meaningful way.

> *'We have to be careful because of our situation now, mental health situation. A lot of us are not even healthy to go onto Country. If we go out on Country, we've got to make sure that we get the facilities out to house our sick bodies now. We're not healthy, we have sick bodies… We need facilities out there' (QLD)*

> *'The only real job that we should have is ranger, sort of things like a ranger, because that's who we are. We look after country. That's been our job since day one in this country. Look after country, children, family and all that. That's our job. If the government were talking serious, thinking about employment and all that, let's lay out a 50,000 ranger thing. We can look after this country better than anyone else. Engage us. We know, in your country, what to do. We definitely know what to do. We just can't get in there. At the moment, we're being sucked out of their country now' (QLD)*

Inadequate resourcing and funding

The inadequate resourcing and funding of caring for Country programs, particularly to Indigenous organisations, was seen as major barriers to caring for Country in any effective, long term and holistic manner. Across all consultation these concerns related to short-term funding cycles, a competitive funding environment that prevented collaborative practices, inflexible funding criteria that didn't recognise culturally bespoke and place-based management models, and general bureaucratic red tape.

> *'Government tends to dismiss anything that is not European origin' (QLD)*
>
> *'It's not like the government and forest fire management doesn't have enough money to fund everything that Traditional Owners in Victoria want to do for fire. They've got ample resources and they got an extra 200 million dollars this year which would easily cover what we want to do. What they've done, is they've deliberately under resourced the amount of money we've asked for by a significant amount so then it reduces the amount that's available so mobs have to compete against one another to get that funding' (VIC)*

The need for increased funding was raised across all groups and interviews, with many participants describing situations where local Indigenous organisations working in this space are becoming more innovative but overburden by the limited provision of funding according to both need and demand.

In addition, Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) and Working on Country programs are seen as difficult to access. A common view on Working on Country programs is that there is not enough funding available to appropriately manage protected areas and achieve the desired (within funding guidelines) outcomes. There was also shared view is that there is simply not enough funding to service existing IPA's and that the IPAs should certainly be extended to the southern states of Australia..

It was also felt that there was a lack resources for practical education and capacity building within communities. This included concern in some states around the lack of appropriate training programs or a delivery model that is untenable for those interested in upskilling. For example, in Tasmania the Aboriginal Centre is the only registered training organisation (RTO) offering Aboriginal conservation and land management courses but the Tasmania Government is the only employer of ranger programs and the two don't have a partnership. This was seen as resulting in challenges in maintaining employment and undertaking the course.

> *'I get a bit tired of being asked "How can we get involved in a blakfella project?" People want to fund the work because they want the shiny pictures and then leave. The Indigenous organisations need the space to work it out. To find long-term job opportunities for young people to learn. Take a long-term autonomous approach where the funding is provided… Aboriginal people are the custodians of the land. If you give them the money and the support for their culture and their governance structures, their staff in a real way, that has to follow cultural lore, Country will be looked after' (QLD)*
>
> *'We've got our farming practices. We want to introduce our farming practice, but because we're from here, and it is innovation, it's hard to match us and innovation into something that somebody will fund or someone will have a look at… The government doesn't believe in our people and our innovations. It's not a part of their thinking… they think, well, how can you fellas assimilate into that? How can we mould you into the modern-day farmer, where you have to buy a diesel tractor, cut the country down, fertilise it, spray it, kill it.... For years and years, they said we were nomads. That we didn't plant anything… Every group in this country has planted the yam… people knew about their food and practices farming…' (QLD)*

Inappropriate, ineffective governance

It was felt that there were legacy issues and various other structural and political challenges that have resulted in poor governance, particularly in relation to the management and delivery of collaborative and effective caring activities. Participants raised concern around governance relating to the lack of coordination, conflicting perspectives, or competition between different bodies such as land councils, community representative groups and other Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations within one area or across shared boundaries. It was also felt that there was still a lack of effort on behalf of government to build the capacity of communities and bodies to establish well governed and sustainable central bodies.

> *'Where there is not a central body, there are often too many groups trying to facilitate a process. However, where there is a strong group… that is recognised and supported by TOs [Traditional Owners], such as an ACCHO [Aboriginal community-controlled health organisation] with good governance, management etc. you can see change. When there is fragmentation across local groups and families nothing gets done'*

Furthermore, it was felt that there was an overemphasis on biological descent in terms of determining rights to Country, as encouraged under Native Title legislation.

> *'It causes a lot of problem throughout the whole country… because people will be using bloodline as my rights. No, you haven't got a right through bloodline. You've got a right through [traditional] lore' (QLD)*

It was generally seen that appropriate and effective governance key to caring for Country. For many participants this comprised of mitigated hierarchies and the inclusion of a diversity of Indigenous voices, honouring Elders and respecting cultural lore.

Ineffective consultation by Government

Lack of genuine consultation with Indigenous peoples continues to disempower Indigenous peoples and perpetuates both the loss of and disregard for the Indigenous knowledge and the cultural skills required to care for the Australian environment. While there is recognition of the increase in and desire for genuine engagement, as seen through the SoE Indigenous Facilitator, there continue to be concern regarding ineffective consultation. Broadly these concerns are comprised of the following:

- An over-reliance on certain, and often well-established or well-known community leaders often resulting in additional pressure being experienced by these stakeholders to ensure their communities have opportunities to participate

  > *'It's about how can they actually start to work in a more unified way doing inclusive consultation rather than just consulting paternalistic mob and creating alliances or opportunities where our mob can come together more unified' (WA)*

- Limited recognition of language and literacy barriers or the delivery of accessible engagement processes, undertaken in a manner that is appropriate for the intended audience and inclusive of their individual needs.

  > *'When the information is presented to mob, it's not generally done in a manner that mob can understand considering some of them are third or fourth language being English and so that's where a lot of the breakdown in communication occurs and many of our sites are then lost' (WA)*

- Siloed engagement processes being undertaken across multiple projects or by various government agencies that aren't being coordinated from within government, that result in consultation fatigue. There is also widespread frustration that many government consultation processes continue to be tokenistic with limited tangible change as a result

of Indigenous people's participation, which leads to lack of active engagement and mistrust of the process.

- Engagement process that continues to be both developed and delivered according to the needs of the delivery body (e.g., the government agency) rather than the capacity of a community in relation to being able to fully engage as a consequence of meeting existing family and community commitments. It is seen that community consultation is still done by 'their standards, their rules, and their timeframes'.

> *'… Often there is a six-week process and they get nothing from community because we don't work on those timeframes, then they walk away saying oh well, we tried, and the community's not interested but they make no attempt to actually understand the community's process or adapt theirs' (TAS)*

Government

Across all consultations participants expressed frustration that Indigenous people as the 'owners' of Country, cultural authority and traditional knowledge holders, and the practices that are inherent to connecting with and caring for Country was still not being regarded by government enough. This was felt as existing within all facets government, and inclusive of policy hierarchy, funding allocation, legislation development through to service delivery.

> *'Government still thinks they are the only custodians of Country… they enter into Country, at will without notice or showing respect to Custodians. Many of them do it. The mentality of there is a First Peoples as custodians is not there. There are many examples of where they just walk into gated properties, even those under quarantine to camp, do what they believe to be protecting the Country but in actual fact is the wrong-way.' (NT)*

This is very firmly viewed as a continuation of colonisation that continues to impact Indigenous peoples, in particular having a new wave of impacts on the current generation of youth and children. The impacts were seen as contributing to the tangible damage of the environment and to Country, as well as the intangible as the cause of stress, psychological unwellness and continued disempowerment of Indigenous communities. There is a general perception that government structural systems are set up to impede Indigenous and environmental interests, the impacts of which include:

- lack of access to land/Country (by government and as well as private sector and enterprise)
- appropriation of traditional knowledge to a western context (e.g., the 'Cultural Burns' policies)
- lack of changes in government attitudes or policies that respect, recognise and value Indigenous knowledge and practices
- The siloed nature and lack of interaction within a jurisdiction creating barriers to access or inconsistency of information
- lack of long-term view and timeframes for appropriate planning and management
- lack of cultural safety for Indigenous people dealing with government
- expectations that Indigenous people will care for Country without financial resourcing.

There were concerns that legislation is seen as prefacing development activities, with little or no consideration or limitations to where it should occur, the lack of adequate time for Traditional Owners to interrogate applications. It was also felt that Indigenous people, including Traditional Owners, have been locked out of the decision-making process and / or not been provided

appropriate opportunities to both participate in or benefit from caring for Country activities. This includes the lack of genuine consultation with the appropriate representative body.

Inappropriate legislation was also raised in the context of prohibiting Traditional Owners from undertaking the activities required to care for or connect with Country. Examples of these include Traditional Owners in WA prohibited from trapping trap feral cats, inappropriate zoning in QLD that leads to restrictions cultural fishing and hunting, and a carbon-farming initiative in Kakadu run by Parks Australia but without the participation of local Traditional Owners.

> *'…by the time we get to any kind of prosecution case, it gets thrown out by the state prosecution department every time because the grey, muddy area in between means that these individuals have nothing to do with the approval systems. So, we lose every single time, and government has been asked more than 13 times since 1975 to change that legislation. In that timeframe, they strengthened the European heritage legislation to the point where you can't fart in one of those buildings without getting a fine, but Aboriginal heritage sites, 47,000-year-old heritage sites, having massive highways just built across the top of them like they don't mean shit. There's massive problems with the planning and approvals, development processes in Tasmania and no willingness to change any of it' (TAS)*

APPENDIX A - ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

Activity	Method	Location	Theme	Stakeholders	Quantity	Participants
Seminar	Face-to-face	Melbourne VIC Geelong VIC Canberra ACT Dubbo NSW Sydney NSW Darwin NT Alice Springs NT Cairns QLD Thursday Island QLD Brisbane QLD Perth WA Broome WA Broome WA (Women's Gathering) Adelaide SA Hobart TAS	Indigenous		14	51
Survey	Online	National	Indigenous Heritage	Indigenous Stakeholder lists	1	172
Focus Groups / Yarning Circles	Mix of online / face-to-face	Armidale Kempsey Cairns	Climate Change	South West Rocks Aboriginal Corporation First Peoples Climate Change Gathering in Cairns	3	42
Individual Interviews	Online	National	Indigenous Heritage	LALC Traditional Owner Corporation Individual – Indigenous Traditional Owner	40	40
Group Interviews		Dja Dja Wurrung (VIC) NLC (NT) Majala Inc (WA) MLDRIN (VIC)	Indigenous Heritage		4	20

				Aboriginal Environmental Group Academic (Indigenous) Academic (Non-Indigenous) Individual - Non-Indigenous		
Case Studies	Mix of online / face-to-face	National	Climate Coasts Marine Extreme Events Land Urban Heritage Inland Water Biodiversity Indigenous	All stakeholders identified	88	88

APPENDIX B - ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Seminars

Fifteen seminars were delivered nationally, including an additional session in Broome to coincide with the Kimberley Aboriginal Women's Council three-day roundtable from 4-6 May. Seminars were intended to collect data to support the Indigenous theme. The agenda was developed collaboratively with Dr Janke and a copy is attached at Appendix C.

The locations were a mix of urban, regional and remote locations identified and agreed on with the Taskforce and Dr Janke. Invitations were issued to people identified on the stakeholder database by email, with follow up emails and phone calls two and one week before each seminar.

Table 2: Seminar participation overview

Location	Date	Venue	RSVPs	Attendance
Melbourne VIC	Monday 12 April	Seminar Centre Melbourne University College 40 College Cres Parkville VIC	5	0
Geelong VIC	Tuesday 13 April	Centenary Hall 1-15 Cox Road Norlane VIC	5	2
Canberra ACT	Thursday 15 April	NACCHO Level 5 East Tower 2 Constitution Avenue Canberra City ACT	8	5
Dubbo NSW	Friday 16 April	Community Connections 31-33 Church St Dubbo NSW	2	0
Sydney NSW	Thursday 22 April	Redfern Community Centre 29-53 Hugo St Redfern NSW	50	
Darwin NT	Friday 23 April	Lyons Community Centre 25 Damabila Drive Lyons NT	16	16
Alice Springs NT	Tuesday 27 April	Andy McNeill Room Alice Springs Town Council Wilkinson Street Ciccone NT	11	2
Cairns QLD	Monday 12 April	Andy McNeill Room Alice Springs Town Council 93 Todd street Alice Springs NT	1	5
Thursday Island QLD	Monday 10 May	Virtual	12	
Brisbane QLD	Friday 30 April	Hamilton Town Hall Cnr Rossiter Pde & Racecourse Rd Hamilton QLD	14	6
Perth WA	Wednesday 5 May	Virtual	5	4

Location	Date	Venue	RSVPs	Attendance
Broome WA	Thursday 6 May	Nyamba Buru Yawuru 55 Reid Road Cable Beach WA	0	2
Broome WA (Women's Gathering)	Friday 7 May	Notre Dame University 8 Guy St Broome WA	5	5
Adelaide SA	Tuesday 11 May	Tandanya Gallery 253 Grenfell St Adelaide SA	7	2
Hobart TAS	Wednesday 12 May	Salamanca Arts Centre 77 Salamanca Place, Hobart	3	2

Depth interviews

Up to 59 individual depth interviews of up to one hour were planned to be conducted by phone, in person or online as required. 44 depth interviews were conducted, consisting of the following:

- 60 people in total took part as interview participants;
- 40 Individual depth interviews were conducted; and
- Four (4) group sessions were conducted with a total of 20 participants.

Table 3: Interview participation overview

Interview Type	Individual Depth Interview	Group Interview
	40	**4 groups - 20 participants**
State / Territory	NSW - 10	QLD – 10
WA - 13	NT – 7	SA – 0
TAS - 0	ACT - 2	VIC - 18
Stakeholder Type		
LALC	5	**Group interviews:** • Dja Dja Wurrung (VIC) • NLC (NT) • Majala Inc (WA) • MLDRIN (VIC)
Traditional Owner Corporation	14 Individuals from 8 TOCs	
Individual – Indigenous	10	
Traditional Owner	8	
Aboriginal Environmental Group	4	
Academic (Indigenous)	1	
Academic (Non-Indigenous)	2	
Individual - Non-Indigenous	4	

Total Participants	**57**

Focus Groups

Due to the lack of support able to be provided to most co-authors, the planned 12 thematic focus groups, using a yarning circle facilitation approach were reduced to three groups to support Damien Morgan-Bulled and Sonia Cooper. These included face to face focus groups focused on, and delivered at the following locations:

- First Peoples Climate Change Gathering in Cairns in March 2021, with 13 people in attendance.
- Armidale NSW, with 20 people in attendance
- South West Rocks Aboriginal Corporation in Kempsey NSW, with nine people in attendance
- The focus for the remaining group sessions was shifted to conducting group interviews virtually as reported on above.

Online Survey

In partnership with Dr Janke, an online survey covering the Indigenous and Heritage themes was developed using online platform Survey Monkey. The survey was live during April and May 2021 and the link was disseminated through the Indigenous Stakeholder lists nationally. The survey posed the same five questions used in the national Indigenous theme seminars as well as an additional set of questions designed by Dr Janke for the Heritage theme. A total of 172 people took part.

Case Studies

In collaboration with the lead Co-Author, Murawin identified 88 case studies throughout the engagement for use across ten SoE themes. The case studies were developed through interviews with a range of key stakeholders and suggested alignment was provided for incorporation in the chapter.

APPENDIX C - SEMINAR AGENDA

Time	Item	Activity
	Intro Session	
10am	Open and Welcome to Country	Open by Carol and introduce local Elder wherever possible or LALC rep etc for WTC
10:10am	Outline of why we are here today • Who we are • What the SoE is • What we are doing for the SoE	Carol/Murawin
10:15am	Play Terri video	Terri (in person in Sydney)
	Session One: What is the SoE	
10:20am	What is the SoE?	Group session explaining what the SoE is and what is different about this round – the inclusion of the Indigenous perspective Q+A
	Session Two: Questions	
10:45am	What does country mean to you?	Break-out sessions Divide room into groups Have them consider one question at a time and report back – Murawin to record responses (15 mins + report back)
11:15am	What changes have you observed?	(15 mins + report back)
11:45am	How has this impacted your wellbeing, cultural practices, languages, physical health, and stress?	(30 mins + report back)
12:30pm	**Break**	
1pm	What should caring for country look like? • What stops you from doing it?	(30 mins + report back)

	• what do you think needs to be done the to address the issues?	
Session Three: Expectations		
1:45pm	What should Indigenous communities expect from the SoE and the federal government over the next 5 years?	Group discussion
2:30pm	**Close**	

APPENDIX D - INTERVIEW GUIDE

We are working with the federal Department of Agriculture, Water, and the Environment as the Indigenous Facilitator to support the work of the Indigenous lead Author and the 8 Indigenous co-authors for this year's Australian State of the Environment Report 2021. Every 5 years the Australian Government conducts a comprehensive review of the state of the Australian environment. National State of the Environment (SoE) reports provide information about environmental and heritage conditions, trends, and pressures. They cover the Australian continent, surrounding seas and Australia's external territories.

The next SoE report is due to be tabled in Federal Parliament by the end of this year, and publicly released in early 2021.

This is the first time the report will have co-chief authors, bringing both Indigenous and female representation into the SoE leadership profile. Further improvements see a team of Indigenous co-authors contributing to all twelve themes: Air quality, Antarctica, Biodiversity, Climate, Coasts, Extreme events, Heritage, Indigenous, Inland water, Land, Marine and Urban, integrating Indigenous knowledge and western science systems.

Heading the Indigenous Authors team is Dr Terri Janke, a Wuthathi/Meriam woman and an international authority on Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property. She is one of three Co-Authors of the Report and she is writing both the Indigenous and Heritage chapters for the Report.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. The following questions have been developed by Dr Janke for the Indigenous/Heritage themes. The information and responses you provide will remain anonymous, unless you tell me that you would like for stories or examples you have provided to be considered for inclusion as a case study, or named in the report.

Let's get started. Take as much time as you need to answer the questions.

Question	Notes
Use questions 1 to 4 for the Indigenous theme interviews	
What does Country mean to you?	
What changes have you observed?	
How has this impacted your/your community's wellbeing, cultural practices, languages, physical health, and stress?	
What should caring for Country look like? What stops you from doing it? What do you think needs to be done to address the issues?	
Use questions 5 to 11 for the Heritage theme interviews	
What does Indigenous heritage mean to you?	

How well do you think non-Indigenous people understand and value Indigenous heritage?
What do you think the biggest pressures are for Indigenous heritage? *Prompt: climate change? Protecting cultural sites? Development? Lack of legal protections under heritage laws?*
What are the barriers to a good approach to acknowledging Indigenous knowledge appropriately?
Do you think Indigenous people have a say in heritage issues?
Are Indigenous people empowered to manage their Indigenous heritage?
Is Indigenous heritage adequately protected by Australian laws?
What was your experience with working with a planning authority/local or state government on a heritage issue? Do you have any examples?
What is the impact to Indigenous people not being able to manage their heritage, particularly to their health and wellbeing?
What needs to change? How can Indigenous empowerment in Indigenous Heritage be improved for the future?
Ask all interview participants Question 10
Should Indigenous communities have any expectations of the Federal Government over the next five years up to the next State of the Environment Report? What should those expectations be?