

Reimagining Conservation



Working Together for Healthy Country: Final Report

19–22 August 2024

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The terms 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander', 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous' and 'First Nations' are used interchangeably throughout this document, reflecting their varied usage by the forum participants.

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Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this document are a synthesis of the inputs of many participants and do not necessarily reflect those of North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) or Australian Committee of International Union for Conservation of Nature (ACIUCN), other organisations involved, editors, workshop partners, nor individuals who attended the forum. While reasonable efforts have been made to ensure that the contents of this publication are factually correct, the organisations do not accept responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of the contents and shall not be liable for any loss or damage that may be occasioned directly or indirectly through the use of, or reliance on, the contents of this publication.

NotebookLM, a generative AI tool, was used to help identify key themes from session transcripts. The tool did not reinterpret or alter the content from the transcripts but functioned as an aid in organisation and synthesis.

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¹ NAILSMA

² Australian Committee of IUCN

³ Transdisciplinary School, University of Technology Sydney

Glossary of terms

Biocultural knowledge

Recognises the interconnected and inseparable nature of cultural priorities and Traditional Knowledge.

Conservation

Defined through a ‘western science’ lens as the maintenance and recovery of ecosystems and natural habitats and viable populations of species in their natural surroundings, as well as components of biological diversity outside their natural habitats¹. Norms enshrined by conservation include that biodiversity and ecological complexity are good and should be fostered.

Country

Country refers to more than the physical land, waterways and seas; it includes all living things on the land and in the seas, and it also includes the connected language, knowledge, cultural practice and responsibilities.²

Cultural capability

The ability to work respectfully and effectively in or with another culture, in this case Australia’s Indigenous culture. Cultural capability may include self-awareness, knowledge and understanding of relevant Indigenous culture, laws, principles (e.g. Free, Prior and Informed Consent; and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Protocols) and protocols, and an ability to engage and communicate respectfully and effectively.³

Indigenous peoples

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the first peoples of Australia – they are not one group but comprise hundreds of groups that have their own distinct set of languages, histories and cultural traditions. Various terms are used interchangeably in this report, namely Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Aboriginal, and First Nations.

Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)

A specific right in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*⁴ to consent, on a free and informed basis, to developments that affect them and their Country. The consent must be given voluntarily without coercion, intimidation or manipulation.

Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Protocols (ICIP)

Based on the right to self-determination, ICIP are Indigenous people’s rights to their heritage and culture. Heritage includes all aspects of cultural practices, Traditional Knowledge, and resources and knowledge systems developed by Indigenous people as part of their Indigenous identity. ICIP rights are based in customary laws which are not currently recognised by the Australian legal system.⁵

Indigenous culture

That which is woven together from customs, ceremony, learning, testing, adapting, and respect for the environment.

Indigenous data sovereignty

The right of Indigenous peoples to govern the collection, ownership and application of data about Indigenous communities, peoples, lands and resources.⁶

Indigenous or Traditional Knowledge

The beliefs and understandings acquired through long-term association with a place. It is knowledge based on the social, physical and spiritual understandings which have informed survival and contributed to a sense of being in the world.

Indigenous science

Can be defined as a systematically organised body of holistic knowledge embedded in culture and Country. Indigenous science is the process by which Indigenous people build their empirical knowledge of their natural environment.

¹ Article 2. Use of terms (Convention on Biological Diversity) [webpage]

² Australia State of the Environment 2021 ‘Indigenous’ chapter (Australian Government 2021) [PDF]

³ AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (AIATSIS 2020) [PDF]

⁴ UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (adopted in 2007) [webpage]

⁵ Rights to Culture: Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) Copyright and Protocols (Kerry Janke and Company) [webpage]

⁶ Delivering Indigenous Data Sovereignty (AIATSIS) [webpage]

Right-way science

The Traditional Owner right-way approach is based on listening, reciprocity, respect and learning. 'Right-way science' describes the process of western scientists working together with Aboriginal partners. This is preferred over the term 'two-way science' which suggests there are only two ways or that there must always be two ways. An alternative term used is 'cross-cultural' science.⁷

Self-determination

The fundamental right of people to shape, and make decisions about, their own lives, including political arrangements, and cultural, social and economic development.

⁷ [What is 'right-way' science? \(Bush Heritage Australia\) \[webpage\]](#)

Traditional Owner (TO) and Traditional Custodian

People of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who have spiritual or cultural affiliations with a site or area, or are holders of native title with that site or area, and are entitled to undertake activities under custom or tradition. 'Custodian' better reflects the responsibility and process of looking after the land.

Western science

Can be defined as the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence. That is, the system of knowledge that relies on certain laws established through the scientific method, that begins with an observation followed by a prediction or hypothesis which is then tested.

Table of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
AbCF	Aboriginal Carbon Foundation
APN Cape York	Aak Puul Ngantam (Our father's father's Country)
ACIUCN	Australian Committee of International Union for Conservation of Nature
EPBC Act	Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Cth)
FPIC	Free Prior and Informed Consent
ICIP	Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property
ICBA	Indigenous Country and Biodiversity Alliance
IDA	Indigenous Desert Alliance
IPA	Indigenous protected area
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
KLC	Kimberley Land Council
NAILSMA	North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance
NIERN	National Indigenous Environmental Research Network
TUMRA	Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreements

Foreword



The Reimagining Conservation Forum is pivotal in addressing the intersection of Indigenous perspectives and conservation in Australia. This biannual gathering challenges conventional approaches to conservation and reframes them within the rich cultural frameworks and enduring knowledge systems of Indigenous Australians.

The custodianship of Australia's land by Indigenous peoples spans tens of thousands of years, informing practices and traditions that have sustained fragile ecosystems long before modern conservation methods were conceived. This forum acknowledges and amplifies these perspectives, recognising Indigenous knowledge as an essential foundation to the evolution of conservation strategies.

The conference explored critical questions central to the future of protected areas in Australia. What does joint management with Indigenous communities look like? How can sole management of these areas by Indigenous Australians redefine our understanding of conservation?

By addressing these questions, we aim to pave the way for more inclusive, effective and culturally grounded approaches to managing and protecting Australia's unique landscapes and seascapes.

Reimagining Conservation brings together Indigenous leaders, land and sea managers, conservationists and policymakers, providing a platform for Indigenous perspectives and conservation initiatives to move forward in partnership, with mutual respect and shared responsibility.

Participants were encouraged to engage with an open mind, recognising the wealth of wisdom that emerges from Indigenous peoples and their continuing connection to Country. It is through these conversations and collaborations that we can redefine conservation – not as an external imposition, but as a shared commitment to restoring and preserving our natural and cultural heritage.

Barry Hunter
Djabugay and Jirrabul
NAILSMA Chief Executive Officer

Forum overview

The second Reimagining Conservation Forum: Working Together for Healthy Country was held on Djabugay Country near Cairns from 19 to 22 August 2024.

Over four days the cross-cultural forum brought together 170 people from Indigenous communities, conservation groups, philanthropy and government agencies, to explore critical challenges and innovative solutions within the conservation sector. The forum followed on from the inaugural Reimagining Conservation Forum in Meanjin / Brisbane in November 2022.

In 2024 the meeting continued the practice of having an Indigenous-only session on the first day. There was also an opportunity for participants to get out on Country and learn more about local cultural practices and conservation challenges through field trips to the outer Great Barrier Reef and Mona Mona near Kuranda, hosted and led by Traditional Owners the Djabugay people.

Following cultural protocols on Djabugay Country, when forum participants arrived they were invited to introduce themselves to Country by taking a quartz rock, rubbing their sweat on it and throwing it in the creek and speaking to Country.

“Country will talk to you in different ways, it’s just a matter of how you listen, and what you hear when you listen.”

– Barry Hunter, Djabugay and Jirrabul

Reimagining Conservation seeks to redefine the concept of conservation by moving beyond conventional approaches, to valuing and empowering Indigenous-led conservation supported by non-Indigenous allies.

“When we’re thinking about conservation, we need to think about it from the heart, from Indigenous peoples perspectives.”

– Cissy Gore-Birch, Jaru/Kija with connections to Balanggarra, Nyikina and Bunuba Country

Forum participants were invited to reimagine what this means for them as individuals, or part of our families, groups, organisations or agencies.

“At the end of the day it’s about managing Country, about how we collectively work together.”

– Barry Hunter, Djabugay and Jirrabul

The forum was designed to provide opportunities to engage in critical cross-cultural discussions, and to examine difficult issues of how we reimagine conservation approaches in a way that is meaningful for Indigenous peoples. For example: How do Indigenous people fulfil their cultural obligations while working in a western system? What do Indigenous-led programs really look like from an Indigenous perspective?

The Reimagining Conservation Forum challenges dominant norms and advocates for systemic change in conservation practices.

The forum began with an Indigenous-only day, a safe space for strong, unfiltered conversations where experiences could be shared and where Indigenous-led solutions and initiatives were freely discussed. This session generated bold ideas that catalysed discussions over the following days.

On the second day, the opening keynote speech was given by Ricky Archer, Director National Parks in Parks Australia, a Djungan man from the Western Tablelands region of North Queensland, and the first ever Indigenous person to hold this position. He drew attention to the critical role of Indigenous leadership in conservation in Australia. He also highlighted the call to move beyond simply involving Indigenous communities towards a rights-based approach that recognises and respects Indigenous peoples inherent rights to manage their lands and waters based on their own laws, customs and values.

A key highlight of the forum was the Youth Perspectives Panel. As powerful advocates for change, raising awareness and pushing for policy reforms that prioritise Indigenous rights and environmental sustainability, youth hold clear roles in creating a better future for conservation.

Key Themes

Seven key themes emerged from the 2024 forum that are detailed in the *Reimagining Conservation 2024 Key Themes Report*⁸

1. Reimagining conservation through Indigenous perspectives

There is a need to move away from western-centric language and concepts to embrace Indigenous perspectives and terminology. Western terms like ‘conservation’ and ‘sustainability’ fail to capture the depth and complexity of Indigenous worldviews. The term ‘conservation’ can carry negative historical connotations related to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and often implies exclusion and control. Advocating for the use of Indigenous languages and conceptual frameworks is essential to defining and discussing conservation on Indigenous terms. Reviving and caring for Indigenous languages is core to everything.

2. Centering Indigenous knowledges and leadership

Indigenous knowledge systems reflect centuries of accumulated wisdom in ecosystem management and sustainability. Indigenous knowledge is deeply connected to spirituality, and this interconnectedness must be respected in conservation efforts. Applying Indigenous knowledges, and honouring cultural authority and integrity will result in more effective conservation.

Indigenous leadership is paramount for successful conservation and land restoration. This requires empowering Indigenous communities to lead conservation efforts on their Country, guided by their knowledge and cultural practices. One of the easiest ways to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into conservation is to put Indigenous people into positions of power and decision-making within agencies and organisations.

3. The intrinsic link between culture and the environment

Reimagining conservation means understanding that conservation from an Indigenous perspective is holistic, encompassing not just lands, seas, animals and plants, but people, culture and spirituality. It’s about keeping people on Country to look after Country. This contrasts with non-Indigenous conservation, which is founded on valuing areas where people have been excluded.

The connection between Indigenous peoples and their lands and waters is not just spiritual but a lived reality. Culture, identity and wellbeing are intrinsically linked to the health of the environment. As Cliff Cobbo from the Wakka Wakka nation stated, **“People and Country are one and the same”**. This deep connection means that caring for Country is inseparable from caring for people.

4. The vital role of youth and Elders

Youth and Elders both have critical roles in reimagining conservation.

Youth represent the future of conservation, ensuring long-term commitment to protecting the environment and cultural heritage. They bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas, and are powerful advocates for change, raising awareness and pushing for policy reforms that prioritise Indigenous rights and environmental sustainability.

Indigenous Elders hold a wealth of Traditional Knowledge, serving as living libraries of cultural practices and understanding the interconnectedness of all things. Elders embody Indigenous cultural values and principles, serving as role models and inspiring younger generations through their deep connection to Country and commitment to sustainable living. Elders have often been at the forefront of advocating for Indigenous rights and self-determination, paving the way for younger generations in conservation and land management.

“The strength of youth comes from our Elders and the values they set and fought for.”

– Tilly Davis, Butchulla descendant

5. Breaking down systemic inequities

Current environmental laws and systems in Australia have excluded Indigenous peoples by failing to recognise Indigenous sovereignty, cultural authority and knowledge systems, and have also failed to protect the environment. Urgent changes are needed.

Existing legislation makes it almost impossible to achieve Indigenous-led conservation because these laws are often rooted in western perspectives and diminish the value of Indigenous knowledges and worldviews in decision-making processes⁹.

Other systemic barriers and inequities include the disproportionately low funding for Indigenous-led conservation efforts in both government- and donor-funded programs. We also need to ensure that environmental policies enable the rights of Indigenous peoples. For example, native title may confer rights to freshwater, but the water allocation system may not provide access to freshwater.

6. Economic development

Indigenous economic development initiatives – particularly within nature markets such as carbon trading, cultural fire management, blue carbon projects and ecotourism – offer substantial benefits by generating crucial income for Indigenous communities and helping to sustain their vital work on Country. Beyond direct financial gains, these initiatives provide profound benefits by advocating for a significant shift away from western economic models that often prioritise profits, instead championing a system that values Traditional Knowledge, cultural practices and a holistic approach to conservation.

Engaging effectively in emerging economic opportunities, particularly within ‘nature markets’, requires Indigenous Australians to be equipped with a comprehensive understanding of their rights, and to possess the necessary capability and capacity to take advantage of emerging opportunities.

7. Building equitable and effective partnerships

It is critical for organisations and agencies to work in partnership, collaboration and service of Indigenous peoples, including across government, non-government and private conservation initiatives. Meaningful change requires implementing policies and practices that genuinely incorporate Indigenous culture, not just acknowledging it.

Working with Indigenous communities requires adopting culturally appropriate communication and engagement strategies, including respecting cultural protocols. Non-Indigenous people should approach collaboration with humility, understanding, and a willingness to reassess engagement processes due to the complexity of relationships and the need for adequate time for decision-making.

It is also important to address the growing issue of consultation fatigue in Indigenous communities, which stems from repeated engagements without tangible outcomes or shifts in power dynamics.

⁸ McCreedy E, Hunter B, Wilson J, Chapple R (2025) [Reimagining Conservation – Working Together for Healthy Country: Key Themes](#). Summary report of 4-day Reimagining Conservation Forum, Djabugay / Cairns, August 2024, produced by the North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance.

⁹ Samuel G (2020) [Independent Review of the EPBC Act – Final Report \[PDF\]](#), Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, Canberra.

Keynote

Ricky Archer is the Director National Parks in Parks Australia.

Mr Archer, a Djungan man from the Western Tablelands region of North Queensland, is the first ever Indigenous person to hold this position.

Mr Archer is responsible for the protection and conservation of some of the country's most precious natural areas, including the World Heritage-listed Uluru-Kata Tjuta and Kakadu national parks and our precious marine parks. He works with Parks Australia staff, Traditional Owners and community members to care for the parks and ensure crucial conservation, infrastructure and tourism projects are completed.

A key ministerial priority is to sort out relationships and rebuild trust and work positively with Traditional Owners. ***"The problems that have been long standing are problems I was used to dealing with every day of the week. We've gotten a lot of things on track"***, says Ricky. He also drew attention to the critical role of Indigenous leadership in conservation in Australia. There is a call to move beyond simply involving Indigenous communities and towards a rights-based approach that recognises and respects Indigenous peoples inherent rights to manage their lands and waters based on their own laws, customs and values.

Ricky also advocates for equitable resourcing of Indigenous protected areas to reflect their importance

in biodiversity conservation and to close the funding gap with the Commonwealth national parks estate. A key theme is the shift from traditional plan of management approaches to 'Healthy Country Planning', which emphasises the interconnectedness of land, water, people and culture. Several crucial mechanisms for achieving these goals are identified. Building strong relationships and trust between government agencies and Indigenous communities through ongoing dialogue and meaningful engagement is emphasised.

He highlighted the National Indigenous Engagement Research Network as a critical tool for facilitating effective engagement between government agencies and Indigenous communities on conservation priorities.

"I want to be mindful that there are a lot of agencies (such as Parks Australia) that get a lot out of Indigenous engagement, consultation and ICIP. As an agency head, I want to make sure we remember that this isn't a box ticking activity to say you've talked to a mob of black fellas. Use it as a starting point, use it as something that's going to liven you up to do it in an ongoing way. These forums bring stronger respect to the values that Indigenous land and sea managers bring to the table. We're beyond the point where it's a question about how we need to be involved, it's a matter of us resetting the agenda and the things we want to do from a rights-based approach."



Indigenous-only day

Reimagining conservation: A call for Indigenous-led reimagining

At the 2024 Reimagining Conservation Forum, the purpose of Day 1 was to bring Indigenous participants together. On this day Indigenous leaders, knowledge holders and community representatives came together in powerful unity to talk through a bold and necessary vision for the future of conservation in Australia. The opportunity being to discover, discuss and make suggested changes to mainstream conservation actions based on Traditional Knowledge and cultural authority.

The clear message was that it is time for a fundamental paradigm shift – one that places Indigenous leadership and knowledge systems at the heart of environmental stewardship.

“How does an ancient black society operate and function in a western colonial construct?”

– Duane Fraser, Wulgurukaba and Bidjara Traditional Owner

Shifting paradigm to reimagine through Indigenous thinking

Forum participants shared strong views that conservation must be reimagined from the ground up. The current systems – shaped by government, funders and external partners – often constrain Indigenous interests and approaches. There is a pressing need to create space for Indigenous communities to define and lead their own models of care for Country, from joint to sole management.

Asserting First Nations leadership and self-determination

Central to this vision is the assertion of Indigenous leadership with Indigenous peoples being recognised to speak for Country. This includes shaping policy and leading work on Country, and is not just about inclusion, but about self-determination where Indigenous perspectives are not just heard but prioritised.

Protecting Country, culture and kin

Participants emphasised the cultural responsibility to protect Country from over-commercialisation and manipulation, and to uphold First Nations knowledge systems. Conservation must honour cultural balance, elevate Indigenous knowledge systems, and safeguard the deep spiritual and relational ties between people, land and kin.

Building genuine and equitable relationships

A recurring theme was the need for authentic partnerships. Many Indigenous attendees expressed frustration with organisations that ‘say the right things’ but lack actions and true cultural competency for engagement. There is a call for genuineness, equity and respect in all collaborations. Relationships must be built on trust, not tokenism.

The role of the National Indigenous Environmental Researchers Network: accountability and Indigenous science

The establishment of a National Indigenous Environmental Researchers Network was strongly endorsed. The network is envisioned as a critical Indigenous-led body to set research priorities, ensure accountability, and promote culturally safe and environmentally sound science. Its pillars – accountability, leadership, capacity building and data sovereignty – reflect a commitment to ‘right-way science’, grounded in Free, Prior and Informed Consent and Indigenous oversight from the outset.

Elevating Culturally Significant Entities

Participants called for legal recognition of Culturally Significant Entities – place-based cultural assets that hold spiritual, symbolic and ecological value. These entities must be defined by Indigenous communities, not western science. Key objectives for Culturally Significant Entities, ranging from cultural landscape/seascape health to Indigenous-led governance, must be considered holistically and not in isolation.

Legislative reform: embedding Indigenous voices

The forum identified legislative reform as the most powerful lever for change. With the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999* under review for the first time in 24 years, there is a historic opportunity to embed Indigenous voices and leadership into nature positive laws. Key reforms include:

- Indigenous representation in all decision-making processes
- creation of an Indigenous Land and Sea Commissioner
- integration of Indigenous Knowledge into all environmental reforms
- development of Indigenous-led metrics and indicators.

Language, sovereignty and identity

Finally, participants raised concerns about the erasure of Indigenous languages and meaning through government processes. There was a strong assertion that sovereignty must be recognised, and that Indigenous peoples should not have to conform to systems that obstruct their cultural truths. The lack of Treaty recognition continues to raise urgent questions about Indigenous positioning within the national framework.

Unified for change

In essence, Indigenous participants at the Reimagining Conservation Forum 2024 amplified their voices – not to seek permission, but to reclaim their authority. They are calling for a future where conservation is not something done to Indigenous communities, but something led by them, in accordance with their laws, values and obligations to Country.

This is not just a shift in policy – it's a shift in power, in perspective and in purpose.

Barry Hunter,
Djabugay and Jirrabul
NAILSMA Chief Executive Officer

Global perspectives

The global context for Australia's climate and biodiversity response was discussed early in the forum and covered several interconnected global themes including Indigenous rights, the state of the environment, and economic opportunities.

The significant knowledge held by Indigenous people regarding climate change adaptation was emphasised. Chrissy Grant noted that Traditional Owners have been dealing with climate adaptation for the past 60,000 years, accumulating invaluable knowledge and lessons. Panellists acknowledged that First Nations people have lived through extraordinary climate changes and possess knowledge that can help in dealing with the future. The importance of recognising this knowledge and how it can help in the future was a key outcome of the session.

Global recognition of Indigenous rights

The state of human rights laws in Australia was a significant point of discussion; and it was noted that while the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and Queensland have their own human rights laws, Australia remains the only democratic country in the world without a national bill or charter of rights.

The international platform provided by Article 8J of the *UN Convention on Biological Diversity*¹⁰ was highlighted. This article emphasises the need to respect, preserve and maintain the knowledge, innovations and practices of Indigenous people and local communities relevant to conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, stressing their right to have a voice in these conversations.

The recognition of Indigenous cultural values within the framework of World Heritage listing was another crucial theme. Only four of Australia's 20 World Heritage sites are recognised for their cultural heritage values, and only one for its cultural landscape. This underrepresentation occurs despite the responsibility of World Heritage nominees to work with Indigenous people to ensure these sites are recognised for their cultural significance. The nomination process often prioritises tourism over involvement and engagement of Traditional Owners or local Indigenous communities. When cultural values are not recognised, it effectively discounts the

importance of human involvement in maintaining these landscapes. The International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on World Heritage addresses similar issues globally and aims to ensure Indigenous voices are heard by the World Heritage Committee.

Climate change and biodiversity crisis

Climate change is dramatically impacting biodiversity and the planet's life support systems. Around 90% of the extra heat is being absorbed by the oceans¹¹, warming waters from the surface to a depth of 4 to 5 kilometres and leading to shifts in ocean currents. Immediate action is needed. While global frameworks like the *Convention on Biological Diversity* and the UN's *Framework Convention on Climate Change*¹² have set ambitious targets, governments are failing to deliver on them. Every available tool, especially the human rights and legal frameworks, needs to be used including taking governments to court to challenge their lack of delivery on international obligations. The Convention on Biological Diversity has created the *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework*¹³ and the 30 × 30 target aimed at reducing biodiversity loss, which Australia is implementing through its *Nature Positive Plan*¹⁴.

Governance and community involvement

Local governance was identified as key to decision-making that meets community aspirations. The concept of Free, Prior and Informed Consent in a community context was discussed in relation to registering nature or carbon market projects without external partners, including how decisions are made about untied funds. The importance of women's participation in decision-making processes, particularly in areas where men traditionally held this role, was emphasised. Building coalitions and collectives was seen as essential for achieving a nature positive future.

¹⁰ [Convention on Biological Diversity \[webpage\]](#)

¹¹ [Oceans \[webpage\]](#)

¹² [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change \[webpage\]](#)

¹³ [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework \(Convention on Biological Diversity\) \[webpage\]](#)

¹⁴ [Nature Positive Plan \[webpage\]](#)

Incorporating Indigenous perspectives into conservation

Two panels on the first day of cross-cultural conversations focused on identifying Indigenous perspectives and how to bring these into conservation in Australia, recognising we are just at the beginning of this journey.

Against a history of failing to recognise Indigenous sovereignty, cultural authority and knowledge systems, environmental agencies and conservation organisations have only recently become more aware of the need to incorporate Indigenous cultural values, perspectives and voices. This brings both opportunities and challenges.

The first step is knowing that people and Country are one. This means understanding that the connection between Indigenous peoples and their lands and waters is not merely a spiritual connection, but a lived reality where their culture, identity and wellbeing are intrinsically linked to the health of the environment.

Cliff Cobbo from the Wakka Wakka nation shared the following story:

“We did not come into this world, we came from it – and each and every one of us will return to it. People and Country are one and the same. You can see this story in the eye of a cassowary. I’ve seen and heard this story on the breath of a humpback whale. You can see it on the ripples of a river rounding a bend. You can smell it and taste it in the smoke when we burn Country the right way. It’s in the laugh of the kookaburra and the howl of a dingo. You can hear it in the clapsticks and the didgeridoo. I hear this story every day when I look in the mirror. People and Country we are one and the same.”

Recognising Indigenous authority and knowledges

Environmental laws and systems in Australia have failed to recognise Indigenous sovereignty, cultural authority and knowledge systems, and have failed to protect the environment. This needs to change.

Indigenous knowledge systems hold centuries of accumulated wisdom about managing and sustaining ecosystems. This knowledge should not be seen as anecdotal, but rather as a sophisticated and valuable resource that should be integrated with western scientific approaches to create more effective conservation strategies.

One of the easiest ways to elevate Indigenous perspectives is to place Indigenous people in decision-making positions within conservation organisations and government agencies. This enables long-standing issues to be addressed and resolved.

Consultation fatigue

There is a huge push for Indigenous voices to be heard and for Indigenous representatives to sit on multiple committees. It is a double-edged sword – being heard but being consulted constantly. While the intention is good, this can lead to consultation fatigue due to lack of coordination among multiple projects and initiatives. Governments need to better coordinate how they engage with Indigenous people to avoid endless repetition. Consultation fatigue has also resulted in a growing awareness within Indigenous communities about the need to protect their time and energy, and to ensure that their engagement leads to concrete actions and genuine influence in decision-making processes.

Cultural capability

Non-Indigenous partners need to develop a better understanding of Indigenous perspectives, values and decision-making processes. While there is a greater willingness to include Indigenous voices in conservation, a fundamental understanding of how decisions are made in culturally appropriate ways is often lacking. This can lead to misunderstandings and hinder the development of effective partnerships based on mutual respect and understanding.

It also needs to be understood that integration of Indigenous knowledge systems takes time. Meaningful Indigenous-led conservation requires

adequate time for consultation, relationship building and the integration of Traditional Knowledge into management plans.

Western language and concepts

Clashes between western and Indigenous worldviews are inevitable, but progress is being made as we become more conscious of moving away from western-centric language and concepts to embrace Indigenous perspectives and terminology. Terms like ‘conservation’ and ‘sustainability’ are western constructs that fail to capture the depth and complexity of Indigenous worldviews.

“We invite non-Indigenous partners to open minds and open hearts to the way we manage, our way. Language and history have a lot to do with how we interpret and understand. Conservation comes with a legacy of Country being locked up, taken away from us. It’s important to notice that.”

– Leah Talbot, Eastern Kuku Yalanj

“Terms such as ‘protect’ and ‘conserve’ come from fear, while terms such as ‘respect’ come from love.”

– Gavin Singleton, Yirrganydji

The term ‘conservation’ also carries colonial baggage associated with the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands and often implies exclusion and control. Advocating for the use of Indigenous languages and conceptual frameworks to define and discuss conservation on Indigenous terms is an important step we can all take.

“Notions of collective voice are emerging more and more which brings both concerns and positives. There are concerns about taking away individual voice for their own Country, but this is the only way we can achieve critical mass – so coming together at a forum like this is a great opportunity.”

– Duane Fraser, Wulgurukaba and Bidjara

While collective voices for Indigenous issues are emerging, it’s also important to recognise and respect the unique cultural values, traditions and governance systems of different Indigenous groups. This recognition underscores the importance of tailoring conservation approaches to the customs and priorities of local Indigenous communities.

Telling the story

The stories of success of Indigenous-led conservation initiatives should reflect the voices and perspectives of Indigenous communities. Strong stories that demonstrate impact across cultural, social, economic and environmental outcomes are important to show the intrinsic link between human wellbeing and environmental health, and to ensure ongoing support and increased funding for Indigenous-led conservation programs. Work is underway to develop better monitoring and evaluation frameworks for Indigenous protected areas that recognise earlier work and opportunities to work with new initiatives such as the National Indigenous Environmental Research Network.

Addressing inequities

Panel members recognised that government agencies and conservation organisations are working to listen to and work in partnership with Indigenous peoples, but they need to be held accountable for their commitments. This includes challenging the inadequate funding that goes to Indigenous-led conservation efforts compared to the level of funding they attract from government funding, the public and donor organisations.

On a per hectare basis, Indigenous protected areas receive a fraction of the funding allocated to other national parks and reserves. Adequate funding is needed to support Custodians and Traditional Owners to manage their Country in their way. Accrediting Indigenous protected areas so they are protected under the National Reserve System will support real compliance powers.

Legislation is a key barrier to changing the conservation approach. With the promised review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act), there is an opportunity to address this. Existing legislation makes it almost impossible to achieve Indigenous-led conservation because these laws are often rooted in western perspectives and diminish the value of Indigenous knowledges and worldviews in decision-making processes¹⁵.

“This space is very busy right now, with the EPBC reform to the Nature Positive Act, there is a lot of activity and we can hold the government to higher thresholds, however, the problem with really busy periods is that voices can get lost. The ways the western world makes laws and policies is very foreign to the way Indigenous decisions get made.”
– Duane Fraser, Wulgurukaba and Bidjara

¹⁵ Samuel G (2020) [Independent Review of the EPBC Act – Final Report \[PDF\]](#), Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, Canberra.

Building equitable and effective partnerships

To bring Indigenous perspectives into action, it’s critical that organisations and agencies work in

partnership with Indigenous peoples. There are many opportunities to work together across government, non-government and private conservation initiatives. Joint management programs between government and Custodians or Traditional Owners are where lands are managed together in partnership. But in terms of incorporating Indigenous perspectives, there is a need for standards or benchmarks to clarify what respectful and meaningful partnership looks like, from jobs to incorporating cultural values and practices, to economic benefits to communities.

Working with Indigenous communities requires adopting culturally appropriate communication and engagement strategies. This includes understanding and respecting cultural protocols, ensuring that information is shared in accessible ways, and creating safe spaces for dialogue and collaboration.



Youth perspectives

To reimagine conservation, it's vital that we incorporate youth voices in discussions and decision-making.

Young people involved in looking after Country bring unique perspectives, knowledge and capacity to drive meaningful change in how we relate to and manage Country. By empowering youth and supporting their leadership, we can foster a more inclusive, equitable and effective approach to environmental land and sea management.

Youth play a vital role in carrying forward Traditional Knowledge and practices, ensuring cultural continuity and applying it to contemporary conservation challenges. They bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas, challenging norms and pushing for new solutions. Youth are also instrumental in bridging the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, fostering collaboration and understanding. They are powerful advocates for change, raising awareness and pushing for policy reforms that prioritise Indigenous rights and environmental sustainability. The youth panellists also highlighted the significant role of Elders in supporting and connecting with youth.

The panel highlighted several reasons why youth perspectives are crucial to looking after Country and implementing conservation management practices.

Intergenerational knowledge transfer: Youth play a vital role in carrying forward the Traditional Knowledge and practices of their Elders, ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage and its application to contemporary conservation challenges.

Tilly Davis, a proud Butchulla descendant and Djaa Narawi Senior Ranger, emphasises this by sharing stories from her grandfather, a young protestor who fought to protect the Mary River. She stresses the importance of learning from Elders' experiences and adapting traditional practices, such as the *"right-way burn"*, to address modern issues like the Myrtle Rust tree pathogen.

Innovative and adaptive approaches: Young people bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas to conservation, challenging established norms and pushing for new solutions. They are often more adaptable to change and open to incorporating new technologies and approaches into traditional practices.

Ty'a Dynevor is a proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, final year Bachelor of Science student and Research Assistant. Her research explores how to integrate kinship connections and storytelling into research on Crown of Thorns starfish, and addresses the implementation of innovative and adaptive approaches. Ty'a asked *"How can government listen to mob? For the future, we want to bring kinship connection and story to answering scientific questions. So, how can scientists work with us, not just us working with them? It's important to work with non-Indigenous people, so they get to see our view."*

Bridging cultural divides: Youth are instrumental in bridging the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, fostering collaboration and understanding between different knowledge systems.

Kasey Singleton, a proud Yirrganydji woman who works in cultural heritage, emphasises the need for young Indigenous people to take on leadership roles in conservation and for non-Indigenous individuals to receive cultural awareness training. This cross-cultural exchange is crucial for developing holistic and inclusive conservation strategies.

Advocacy and policy change: Young people are powerful advocates for change, raising awareness about environmental issues and pushing for policy reforms that prioritise Indigenous rights and environmental sustainability.

Amba-Rose Atkinson, a proud Gumbaynggirr/Thunghutti woman and PhD student, underscores the need to change power dynamics and ensure Indigenous leadership in decision-making processes. She emphasises that climate change necessitates a fundamental shift in how we live and calls for greater recognition of Indigenous self-determination and land rights.

Long-term vision and commitment: Youth represent the future of conservation, and their engagement ensures a long-term commitment to protecting the environment and cultural heritage for future generations.

Hozaus Claire, a proud Bunuba/Gooniyandi man, emphasises the importance of “*keeping the fire burning*” for conservation, advocating for sustained engagement and support for youth participation in events like the Reimagining Conservation Forum. He sees these events as opportunities to build networks, share knowledge and inspire continued action.

Support and resources: Young people need access to adequate support systems as they transition from education to employment.

Nic Rodway, Junior Ranger Program Coordinator, observes that upon graduation, young people lack services to assist with essential needs like housing, making it difficult to secure and maintain employment. This lack of support can create significant barriers for Indigenous youth seeking to establish themselves in land management careers.

Youth and Elders

The youth panellists also expressed the significant role Indigenous Elders play in supporting young people’s involvement in conservation.

Knowledge keepers and mentors: Elders hold a wealth of Traditional Knowledge accumulated over generations, serving as living libraries of cultural practices and stories, and a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things. Knowledge is shared and transferred to younger generations through storytelling, ceremonies and hands-on experience, fostering cultural continuity and responsibility for caring for Country. Tilly Davis highlighted the strength and inspiration youth derive from their Elders, emphasising the importance of the values they embody and the struggles they fought for.

Cultural guides and role models: Elders embody the values and principles of Indigenous culture, serving as role models for young people. Their deep connection to Country, their commitment to sustainable living, and their resilience in the face of adversity inspire younger generations to embrace their cultural heritage and become active stewards of the land. Hozaus Claire stresses the importance of keeping cultural practices alive, including songs, dances and stories, to ensure the wellbeing of Country. This interconnectedness between culture and conservation reinforces the vital role Elders play in guiding and inspiring young people to embrace their cultural heritage as a foundation for environmental stewardship.

Advocates for Indigenous rights and self-determination: Elders have often been at the forefront of advocating for Indigenous rights and self-determination, fighting for recognition of their cultural heritage, their connection to land, and their right to participate in decision-making processes that affect their communities and the environment. Their activism and leadership pave the way for younger generations to claim their rightful place in conservation and land management.

Bridge builders and facilitators: Elders play a crucial role in connecting young people with opportunities in conservation, facilitating their entry into land management roles, and fostering collaboration between Indigenous communities, scientists and policymakers. They can help bridge the gap between Traditional Knowledge and western science, ensuring that Indigenous perspectives are respected and integrated into conservation strategies.

Honouring the wisdom of Elders and supporting their continued involvement is crucial for a more sustainable and equitable future.

Presentation: Health impacts of Indigenous practice

Amba-Rose Atkinson is from the Gumbaynggirr/Thunghutti peoples, and talked about her Doctoral research on the relationship between Country, climate and its associated impacts on First Nations health.

Key points:

- **Country and health:** The health of the Country is directly linked to the health and wellbeing of Indigenous people. This relationship is explored through a three-phase framework focusing on conceptual understanding, indicators of health, and policy application.
- **Spiritual connection:** The spiritual connection to the land is crucial; losing Country equates to losing spirits, which are essential for both the health of the Country and its people. Disruption of this spiritual connection was discussed, referencing an example with dolphins.
- **Decolonising health:** There is a need to decolonise the understanding of health, prioritising the health of the Country and plants before human health. Research is showing how being on Country improves health.
- **Relationships and energies:** The relationship is a measure of health and is measured by the relationships between all energies and entities, with knowledge understanding the infinite relationships impacted by infinite variables.
- **Research methodology:** ‘Photovoice’ was used as a research methodology, including photos of Country with beneficial fire practices that enhance biodiversity.
- **Interconnectedness:** Relationships exist between different Countries through shared rivers, and it is important to consider the relationships Country has with itself, that people have with Country, and that people have with themselves.
- **Impact of colonialism:** Colonialism is a key factor impacting the health of the Country, with climate change being a symptom. Colonial dispossession affects various aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s lives, including economies and value systems. Addressing food insecurity through Indigenous food systems and culture was suggested as a way to alleviate health issues (e.g. diabetes).
- **Transformation and responsibility:** Transformation involves everyone working on culture and community with a responsibility to fight for life, emphasising that life itself is secured through empowering Indigenous people.

Country areas of focus

Sea Country

The Sea Country session focused intently on the concept of ‘Flipping the Script’ regarding Sea Country rights and management, examining where different groups fall on the spectrum from low control to high control over their Sea Country policy. Although interests and rights exist over 66% of the Australian coastline, a pervasive feeling of low control persists. This is often because compliance enforcement keeps people out of the management spectrum altogether. The core goal articulated throughout the discussion was the need for true control with ownership.

Systemic barriers and lack of control

Participants identified significant systemic barriers imposed by government structures. Foremost among these is state and Commonwealth legislation that restricts power and cultural authority. Relationships with governmental and external bodies are frequently problematic because the entire system is perceived as being designed to restrict mobs from achieving their cultural intent, enforced through three distinct layers of government.

Further complicating matters are operational and resource challenges. There is a lack of resources, and management processes often involve navigating many bureaucratic layers, sometimes requiring groups to operate “*for Country or money*”, raising questions about funding motivations. Consultation is often viewed as insufficient or insincere. The session noted that legal definitions used by the Australian Government regarding the number of people associated with Sea Country (6,000 to 21,000) have also inadvertently led to fractured voices and division.

Hinchinbrook was highlighted as an example of these challenges. While six saltwater groups there have recognised rights, they face a lack of financial support and reliance on others for access, confirming that the situation remains “*still not equal*”. Groups lack control over crucial areas, such as commercial fishing quotas, fishing permits and compliance enforcement.

Enablers and the path to high control

To achieve high control, the session outlined transformative strategies centered on strong cultural authority, unified action and legal precedent.

The Blue Mud Bay precedent in North East Arnhem Land was highlighted as a powerful successful example. Elders in this region fought for and won rights over both intertidal and offshore areas, empowering all Traditional Owner clans through a system driven by cultural obligation and protocol. This demonstrates that mobs can pursue legal action through the courts to secure rights. A fundamental enabler is strengthening cultural authority, which means “no one else can” claim jurisdiction or management authority.

Collective action is also seen as vital, particularly through the National Indigenous Environmental Research Network (NIERN), which is considered an important space for groups to work collectively. This collective effort aims to achieve ‘one yarn’ and prevent the duplication of efforts across different mobs.

Regarding external relationships, partnerships with non-Indigenous bodies must be relational, not transactional or merely contractual arrangements. Groups like the Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreements (TUMRA) were noted for embodying a positive, proactive approach.

Aspirations and future action

The overarching aspiration is the recognition of sovereign rights leading directly towards self-determination. Economically, a key missing piece is the expansion of benefits derived from Sea Country to fully capitalise on existing rights, pushing for a model of ‘Conservation Plus Economic Development’.

Practical steps forward include establishing strong governance and focusing on co-delivery and management through Healthy Country Planning guided by robust business plans. There is a critical need to lean into Ranger expertise. Enforcement and management capabilities also need expansion, including strengthening rights for compliance

and conducting patrols for customs, surveillance, fishing and border service, potentially requiring the deployment of multiple vessels.

Educational aspirations were discussed, suggesting the need for establishing a Marine College and a Bush/Sea Country University. Ultimately, successful progression requires proactive action across mobs and, crucially, for the government to move past superficial consultation and start with more focused listening to the mobs' desires.

Moving from low to high control requires shifting the current dynamic, which is illustrated by the analogy of rowing a boat: currently, many groups feel they are rowing against a current set by external legislation, but by asserting cultural authority and utilising legal precedents like Blue Mud Bay, they can collectively turn the boat around and paddle in the direction of self-determination and sovereign control.

"If we get our balance right for us as Aboriginal people we can then get that cultural context. We can determine the value of what's in front of us. The government process for determining cultural value is box ticking. That's why knowing the past is important. Those people that came before us set the way. That value that they set goes into the future for our grandchildren."

– Jeffrey Newchurch, Kurna leader

"Sunny coast council have spent \$50m to buy land to create this process to let tidal water rise up. Over many years we negotiated to be co-partners. It's a world first. We'll be the first blue carbon project in the world or in Australia established an MOU. It's an ongoing process. It's not about doing all of it in one go. This is a start."

– Brian Warner, Kabi Kabi

Land restoration

Land restoration is a major conservation strategy in Australia to restore biodiversity and ecosystem health, and this discussion focused on how it can be informed by Indigenous perspectives. Several interconnected themes emerged.

Centering Indigenous knowledges and leadership

Indigenous knowledges and leadership are paramount to successful land restoration. The importance of strong Indigenous leadership in applying Traditional Knowledge and practices in restoration efforts was emphasised. The point was made by Andrew Picone (Pew Charitable Trusts) that non-Indigenous organisations and the government need to *"know your place and make the space"* to allow for Indigenous leadership.

Reciprocity and holistic restoration

The important point was made that restoration is not solely about environmental recovery but also about healing and empowering Indigenous communities. Restoration is a reciprocal relationship, requiring attention to the wellbeing of people alongside caring for Country. This sentiment is echoed in calls for trauma-informed restoration and a holistic approach that considers people, Country and spirituality. Issues like domestic violence and health disparities within Indigenous communities need to be addressed as part of caring for Country.

"Restoration is a much bigger picture than just planting trees. It's a reciprocal relationship, we need to take care of ourselves first."

– Phil Rist, Nywaigi Elder and Traditional Owner of the broader Ingham/Hinchinbrook region in North Queensland

Commit to caring for Country

Prevailing non-Indigenous Australian cultural values can impede genuine restoration. For example, a focus on economic gain prevents a shift to the healing mode necessary for the recovery of Country. Widespread cultural change across non-Indigenous peoples is needed to foster a national commitment to caring for Country.

Rethinking restoration metrics

There is a need to move beyond conventional ecological metrics, which means moving away from direct measurements such as the number of trees planted, and instead focusing on biocultural indicators that capture the broader social, cultural and environmental benefits of conservation work. Moving towards tenure-blind restoration and consulting with mob would also support reconnecting landscapes. This change reflects the understanding that successful land restoration is intertwined with the wellbeing and empowerment of Indigenous communities.

‘Land Back’ and access to Country

The concept of ‘Land Back’ was often raised as a fundamental prerequisite for effective restoration. Returning land to Indigenous management and custodianship is seen as crucial for strengthening cultural heritage laws, enabling grassroots decision-making, and facilitating the integration of traditional practices like cultural burning. Access to Country is not only seen as a practical necessity but also as a means of reconnecting Indigenous people with their ancestral lands and reviving cultural practices.

Collaboration and power sharing

While the importance of genuine collaboration between Indigenous communities, non-Indigenous organisations and the government was highlighted, Indigenous groups still experience superficial attempts at ‘co-design’ that fail to genuinely share power. Power sharing would be enabled by moving away from competitive grant processes that pit communities against each other, to a more equitable system. Non-Indigenous people need to approach collaboration with humility, understanding and a willingness to reassess their engagement process. They need to realise that there are complex relationships to be understood and need to give time for culturally appropriate decision-making. Further, policy and legislative redesign is needed *“to give mob access and ability to influence and take power back”* (Dr Teagan Shields Arabana Country).



Freshwater

Rivers and wetlands have profound cultural significance for Indigenous peoples. The freshwater panel discussion focused on how management of freshwater can be informed by Indigenous perspectives. Several interconnected themes emerged.

Freshwater as the essence of life and identity

Freshwater is not merely a resource, but the lifeblood of Indigenous cultures, inextricably linked to their identity, spirituality and wellbeing.

This intimate relationship was expressed most vividly in the opening of the Freshwater Panel session. Yinimala Gumana, Dhalwarju clan leader, began with a song that symbolised the waters flowing from different rivers, bringing people together. This act underscores the deep spiritual connection that Indigenous people have with water. It's not just a physical substance but a living entity that unites communities and sustains life.

The cultural value of freshwater was highlighted in a video shared by Sonia Takau, Jirrbal woman, showcasing the importance of water to her people, with specific language names along the river holding special meaning, such as 'healing place' and 'camping place'. These language names reveal a deep understanding of the landscape and the unique qualities and uses of different water bodies. Further emphasising this point, Sonia shared a Dreaming story about the creation of rivers, demonstrating how these narratives embed knowledge about the environment and guide responsible stewardship.

Impact of colonisation on Country

Colonial practices have had devastating impacts on freshwater systems and, consequently, on Indigenous cultures. Sonia describes the degradation of the Tully River on her Country caused by agricultural practices, highlighting the historic dynamiting of the river which has disrupted the natural water flows. That has had direct negative consequences for both the ecosystem and the people who depend on it. Natural flows follow the headwaters down the river and its tributaries, and are retained in the floodplain wetlands for several years before mixing with seawater in estuaries then completing their journey in the ocean.



Beyond the physical impacts, the speakers revealed a sense of profound loss and grief associated with the degradation of freshwater systems. Sonia spoke of her father's memories of the river in a healthy state, a condition she can no longer imagine due to the extent of the damage and landscape change. She highlighted the enduring cultural impact of environmental degradation and the urgency of embedding Indigenous knowledge and leadership in management.

Incorporating cultural knowledge to improve river health assessments

Justin Perry (NAILSMA) noted that the current water quality indicators and river health assessments don't reflect Indigenous values of freshwater, which are complex and connected. In developing measures that do incorporate Indigenous perspectives and knowledges, there are many aspects to consider including: What is a positive change and who should be involved in monitoring and assessing waterways? What can be achieved given the current landscape pressures and irreversible changes? and How do complex biodiversity measures align with Indigenous observations? It is also important to respect different worldviews held by Traditional Owners in different places such as in the Northern Territory where buffalo are considered by some Indigenous groups as a valuable food source, but are seen as a pest by other Indigenous groups and western scientists.

"Knowledge is held in the land, and knowledge is key for all of us. Country is the value to Aboriginal people."

– Yinimala Gumana, Dhalwangu clan leader

Yinimala called for Indigenous rangers and organisations to work together to bring science and knowledge together to implement programs that are based in culture to ensure land management is being done the right way, but also to bring direct economic benefit to communities.

Indigenous voices in water management

Until recently, the voices of Indigenous peoples and living waters have been largely excluded from water planning and allocation initiatives and policies. For example, historical policy efforts such as the National Water Initiative and the *National Plan for Salinity and Water Quality* provided limited opportunity at best for Indigenous voices. Jim Turnour (James Cook University) noted that how water is allocated does not align with Indigenous values, and stressed the importance of creating opportunities for communities to apply for and use the water allocations available to them.

Indigenous rights to water remain unresolved in a legal sense. Neither the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) nor state/territory-based land rights legislation provide rights to freshwater.

Recent progress was acknowledged in Queensland water plans that now include allocation of cultural flows and Indigenous Strategic Reserves, particularly in Cape York. Throughout Australia there is an ongoing need to continue to work to secure water rights for Indigenous communities and to ensure their equitable participation in decision-making processes.

The role of assigning personhood status to rivers and nature was raised from the floor as a way to ensure nature has a voice in decision-making.

National Indigenous Environmental Researchers Network

“When we talk about reimagining conservation, we’re talking about changing the conversation when it comes to research priorities.”

– Leah Talbot, Eastern Kuku Yalanj

The National Indigenous Environmental Researchers Network (NIERN) is an initiative that responds to the persistent challenges and growing opportunities facing Indigenous-led conservation research programs in Australia¹⁶. Scientific research is still mostly led by western scientists and institutions, and First Nations people need support and guidance to stand strong for their rights and to ensure benefits for them.

¹⁶ For more information about the progress of NIERN: <https://nesplandscapes.edu.au/projects/nesp-rlh/developing-niern/>

NIERN is a scoping project funded for two years by the National Environmental Science Program to develop a compelling case for an Indigenous-led initiative designed to empower Indigenous communities to shape the direction of and priorities for environmental research, and to ensure that research outcomes benefit Indigenous peoples and their Country. A nationwide consultation is underway to deliver a co-designed case for a NIERN that addresses the critical need for Indigenous leadership and self-determination in environmental research.

The aim of this session was to discuss how NIERN can drive change in how First Nations knowledge is valued, cared for and respected in conservation programs. How can NIERN support bringing culture to conservation and ensure Indigenous cultural authority and governance is at the centre of research and decision-making?



NIERN aims to address the inequity in the current system for research where the government announces funding for research priorities and researchers, then find people on Indigenous lands to work with, when it should be the other way around, where Indigenous priorities are set up-front. NIERN aims to create a shift in power dynamics within this research landscape, ensuring that Indigenous knowledges and priorities guide and influence research agendas. Indigenous communities are often excluded from setting research priorities or are brought in as an afterthought. NIERN will advocate for rights-based approaches that ensure benefits for Indigenous communities, including fair compensation and co-authorship that truly reflects contributions.

Key functions and goals of NIERN are:

- **Setting Indigenous research priorities:** NIERN seeks to establish a platform where Indigenous communities can collectively identify and prioritise research questions relevant to their needs and aspirations. This would ensure that research efforts align with Indigenous conservation goals and contribute to the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples and their lands.
- **Supporting Indigenous leadership and governance:** NIERN aims to foster Indigenous leadership in research by providing training, capacity building and mentorship opportunities for Indigenous researchers and community members. This would empower Indigenous peoples to participate more effectively in research processes and advocate for their rights and interests.
- **Protecting Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP):** Safeguarding Indigenous knowledge and ensuring that Indigenous communities benefit from research conducted on their lands. NIERN is seen as a mechanism for promoting ethical research practices that respect ICIP and ensure equitable benefit-sharing arrangements.
- **Weaving knowledge systems:** NIERN seeks to bridge the gap between Indigenous and western knowledge systems by creating a space for dialogue and collaboration between Indigenous knowledge holders and western scientists. This would foster a more holistic and culturally informed approach to environmental research.
- **Influencing policy and decision-making:** NIERN can play a significant role in influencing policy and decision-making related to conservation and environmental management. By providing a unified voice for Indigenous researchers and communities, NIERN could advocate for policies that align with Indigenous values and priorities.



Economics and conservation

One of the key themes that emerged from the 2022 Reimagining Conservation Forum related to how economic development fits into this conversation.

Economic opportunities for Indigenous Australians related to conservation include carbon market trading, cultural fire management, blue carbon projects and ecotourism. These 'nature markets' have the potential to generate income for Indigenous communities, to help finance and sustain work on Country. But it's important to understand the opportunities, risks and obstacles.

This panel focused on the importance of maintaining cultural integrity in nature-based markets and 'nature positive' initiatives.

Emerging opportunities for Indigenous communities

The Aboriginal Carbon Foundation (AbCF) is a not-for-profit organisation that in the past year has generated more than a million dollars for Traditional Owners from carbon market trading. Rowan Foley (CEO of the AbCF) noted that the AbCF has a carbon trading licence and trades carbon at \$72 per tonne, higher than the market rate of \$58 per tonne. It is valued more highly due to a strengths-based approach which includes culture, community and environment as core values and carbon as a co-benefit.

In short, the AbCF has reimagined the economy and is commercially successful because it makes economic sense, yet it has very little support or collaboration from the conservation sector, who are the most competitive players in the game.

It was noted that while First Nations people have made great steps in the clean energy sector, the untapped market is ecotourism (i.e. nature-based tourism). Indigenous leaders are trying to bring cultural integrity to nature-based tourism and to have Australia be world leaders in putting First Nations people in front of this market.

Valuing Indigenous approaches to conservation

Indigenous Australians are advocating for a shift away from western economic models that prioritise profits over people and the environment. They are calling for an economic system that values Indigenous knowledge, cultural practices and a holistic approach to conservation.

Indigenous communities want to decide themselves what is important to measure in the carbon market, and how to verify outcomes based on what they want to verify. This should be based on a peer-to-peer, "black fella to black fella, not outsiders" (as Rowan Foley says), and strengths-based approach. This contrasts with conservation organisations that use deficit models and undervalue cultural aspects – they talk about carbon and co-benefits, which undervalues the commodity.

Emerging markets require partnerships and agreements based on integrity (such as Free, Prior and Informed Consent) and access and benefit-sharing in joint ventures. Not-for-profit organisations will be challenged to address issues of direct and indirect benefits for Traditional Owners where there are for-purpose organisations. There is a need for direct and indirect benefits to flow to both not-for-profit and for-purpose organisations, emphasising place-based approaches.

"Markets need integrity at every level, emerging markets require relationships."

– Mel Sinclair, General Manager APN Cape York

Need for support and policy frameworks

There is potential for First Nations peoples to be the most powerful drivers of nature markets in Australia. In terms of buying nature-based services in the international marketplace, North Australian First Nations people are leaders.

But Indigenous communities require support to participate effectively in economic markets while maintaining cultural integrity. Indigenous Australians are frustrated by existing power structures that undervalue their labour. There is a need for policy frameworks that support and understand Traditional Owner leadership, with a bilateral commitment at both the federal and state levels to create a policy framework for these markets that protects Indigenous-led initiatives from international organisations potentially taking over markets and buying them out. Water markets is an area where there is much work to be done.

Competition with eNGOs

The issue of economic inequity in the conservation sector was highlighted throughout the forum, and that conservation organisations (environmental NGOs) should be held accountable for sharing their

income with Traditional Owners. There is so much competition in this conservation space that relates to money disparity – not only Aboriginal groups competing but conservation groups competing to work with Indigenous groups to obtain funding.

Benefits for Indigenous peoples

A key takeaway message is that Indigenous Australians see economic opportunities in caring for their Country, but are calling for systemic changes to ensure that they are fairly compensated for their knowledge and labour, and that their cultural authority is recognised and cultural values are respected.

The panel advocated for a shift in power dynamics, urging non-Indigenous people and organisations to step back and allow Indigenous peoples to lead the way in environmental and economic management.



Indigenous Country and Biodiversity Alliance

The Indigenous Country and Biodiversity Alliance (ICBA) was announced at the forum by Barry Hunter (CEO, NAILSMA) and Rowan Foley (CEO, Aboriginal Carbon Foundation). This is an exciting new initiative made up of NAILSMA, the Indigenous Desert Alliance (IDA), Kimberley Land Council (KLC) and the Aboriginal Carbon Foundation (AbCF). The alliance aims to change the mainstream paradigm of how biodiversity is managed.

The primary goal of ICBA is to build a strong, unified voice for Indigenous Australians in the conservation and biodiversity sectors. This goal is rooted in the belief that Indigenous communities must have a leading role in shaping the future of land management and biodiversity conservation in Australia.

The alliance focuses on developing research methods and amplifying the voices of Indigenous Australians in the emerging biodiversity market. As the new nature repair market comes into being, the alliance sets out to ensure Indigenous people are involved in every step of its development, implementation and accessibility to maximise the biodiversity, cultural and financial core benefits of the market.

The alliance recognises the extensive experience and expertise that Indigenous organisations have accumulated in managing their lands and waters. They seek to leverage this knowledge to establish Indigenous leadership in meeting the challenges posed by other sectors, particularly in the context of the emerging nature repair market.

ICBA aims to proactively shape the emerging biodiversity market, drawing comparisons to the existing carbon market. ICBA partners recognise the potential of this market to support Indigenous-led conservation efforts and want to ensure that Indigenous communities benefit from its development. They aim to challenge existing policies and initiate new conversations with the government, advocating for greater recognition of Indigenous rights and expertise. ICBA emphasises the importance of knowledge sharing and collaboration to avoid competition and ensure the widespread adoption of Indigenous-led approaches to biodiversity management. ICBA partners envision expanding the alliance in the future to include additional sites and partners, fostering a collective effort to promote Indigenous leadership in conservation.

Indigenous people are underrepresented in existing biodiversity governance structures. As an example, the Australian Government Advisory Committee for the biodiversity market includes only one First Nations representative out of 12 members. ICBA aims to address this imbalance and advocate for greater Indigenous inclusion and decision-making power.

ICBA is aware of the threat of international organisations dominating the biodiversity market and potentially displacing Indigenous ownership and control. ICBA aims to safeguard Indigenous interests and ensure that Indigenous communities retain ownership and benefit from the emerging market.

Significantly, ICBA is not reliant on government investment. Instead, it receives support from the private sector, indicating a growing recognition of Indigenous leadership in conservation and biodiversity management.

Final reflections from forum participants

In the last session on the last day of the forum, participants were invited to respond to three questions:

1. Why did you come to the forum?
2. What most inspired you at the forum?
3. What story will you tell at the next forum?

A summary of responses and quotes is provided below.

Why did you come to the forum?

Listen & learn

"Listen actively, learn deeply"

Networking

"Connect with colleagues and build relationships"

Support Reimagining movement

"find quote"

Understand the issues

"Learn about what Indigenous communities need in order to care for Country"

Take ideas back

"To see what initiatives I can take back to mob"

Barry invited me :)

Learn how to be a better ally

"Learning how to change our approach to better respect Indigenous knowledge, experience & culture"

Share experiences & knowledge

"To hear and be involved in conversations for our mob"

What inspired you most at the forum?

Culture - songs and stories

"Feeling connected through stories of Country"

Safe space for tough conversations

"Meeting so many deadly mob"

Connecting on Country

"Spending time with Barry and his dad at Mona Mona"
"Co-naming of the reef would tell the whole world that it's First Nations Country."

Indigenous leadership

"Seeing and hearing Indigenous leaders"

Youth - talking up for Country

"Hearing the clear and strong voices of youth"

Realising the opportunities

"How important it is for mob to initiate and be on the front foot"

Realising how far we have to go

"Solvable problems still a major barrier for TOs"

What story will you tell at the next forum?

Indigenous rights

"Get land back"
"We have rights to fish on our Sea Country"

Youth have ongoing support

"Youth panel supported and funded to shape next forum and wider reimagining space"

Stories of change from mob

"I told you so - we can and did do it!"

Expand RIC

"Create a talkfest locally-unite your mob"

Realisation

"We realise how privileged we are to have 60,000 yr of First Nations knowledge"

Stories of change from govt, NGO

"Decolonise the organisation where / work"

Continuing the conversation

The goal of the Reimagining Conservation Forum series is to inspire change in the way that conservation is imagined, realised and practised in Australia.

It aims to create a safe place for Indigenous people and organisations to lead these conversations and for allies to open their hearts and minds to new and ancient ways of doing things. We aim to continue biannual forums to strengthen cross-cultural networks and catalyse action on Indigenous leadership, amplifying the voice of youth and instigating legislative and policy change.

Participants from the 2024 forum are working to create the stories they want to tell at the next forum – empowering change in Indigenous communities, stories of change in government departments and non-government organisations in the way they work with mob, achieving Indigenous rights, ‘Land Back’, and providing a forum for a strong youth voice.

In reflecting on both the 2022 and 2024 Reimagining Conservation forums, the conversations have continued and we are seeing a bolder approach and willingness to recognise and respect Indigenous knowledge and leadership across the conservation sector. In 2022, we agreed on some of the key principles for working together, emphasising Indigenous voices to highlight the need for change in managing Country, focusing on new economic opportunities based on respect for Indigenous rights and cultures, valuing Traditional Knowledge, ensuring equity and self-determination in co-management, and developing culturally competent partnerships.

In 2024 we built on this understanding and identified further that managing Country together means reframing conservation through Indigenous perspectives, Indigenous knowledge and leadership, and ensuring that Elders and youth are actively involved.

The inclusion of Indigenous values and cultural authority requires the dismantling of systemic barriers and inequalities, and the building of equitable and effective partnerships. Returning economic benefit and weaving western and Traditional Knowledge is a key theme across both forums. Notable progress between forums was the appointment of the first Indigenous person, Mr Ricky Archer, to Director National Parks in Parks Australia, the initiation of the National Indigenous Environmental Research Network, and development of the Indigenous Country and Biodiversity Alliance.

This report has been written to capture the conversations, thoughts, aspirations and calls for change to systems and conservation actions that have historically (and in many aspects continue to) marginalise the voices, practices and culture of Indigenous peoples. The report synthesises key messages for consideration and continued enquiry. To conclude this report – and where you might normally find recommendations and guidelines on ‘how to’ form authentic partnerships and create change – we instead leave you with an invitation to continue the conversation. To connect with Indigenous people in your locality, to engage in meaningful conversations before deciding the conservation actions you will take, and to ensure there are adequate resources to support Indigenous participation and space to lead. “Know your place and make the space”.

Local connections to Country hold significant cultural and Traditional Knowledge. Traditional Owners are witnesses to the everyday changes occurring on Country in real time, they are the observers and knowledge holders. Together in genuine partnership, what is discussed and challenged in reimagining conservation can be realised.

Join us in 2026!

Appendices

Appendix A: Snapshot of the three-day program

First Nations Day - Mon 19 Aug

Introduction to the forum and its purpose – Barry Hunter, CEO, NAILSMA

Why are we here and who is in the room? – Barry Hunter, CEO, NAILSMA

National Indigenous Environmental Researchers Network (NIERN) – Dr Leah Talbot, Research Manager, NAILSMA Teagan Shields, Research Fellow, Curtin University

Culturally Significant Entities – Dr Leah Talbot, Research Manager, NAILSMA Teagan Shields, Research Fellow, Curtin University

Networking and Sharing – Barry Hunter, CEO, NAILSMA Cissy Gore-Birch

Key Messages – Cissy Gore-Birch



Day 1 – Tue 20 Aug

Introduction to the forum and its purpose – Barry Hunter, CEO, NAILSMA

Key messages from First Nations Day – Cissy Gore-Birch

Indigenous Conservation – Ricky Archer, Director of National Parks, Parks Australia

Participant Introductions – Erica McCreedy, COO, NAILSMA

National Indigenous Environmental Researchers Network	Global Themes	Reimagining Conservation Indigenous perspectives
Facilitators – Dr Leah Talbot & Teagan Shields Panel Members: • Cissy Gore-Birch • Joe Morrison, Group CEO, Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation • Ricky Archer, Director of National Parks, Parks Australia	Facilitator – Stan Lui, Director, Five Cubed Environmental Consultants Panel Members: • Chrissy Grant, Chair, Wet Tropics Management Authority • Peter Cochrane, Councillor and Vice President of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) • Ariadne Gorring, Co-CEO, Pollination Foundation	Facilitator – Cissy Gore-Birch Panel Members: • Leah Talbot, Research Manager, NAILSMA • Stan Lui, Director, Five Cubed Environmental Consultants • Duane Fraser, Chair, Indigenous Advisory Committee EPBC Act • Gavin Singleton, Land and Sea Manager, Dawul Wuru Aboriginal Corporation
Reimagining Conservation incorporating Indigenous perspectives	Youth Panel	Critical Thinking Session
Facilitator – Cissy Gore-Birch Panel Members: • Ricky Archer, Director of National Parks, Parks Australia • Jody Gunn, CEO, Australian Land Conservation Alliance • Doug Humann, Chair of Landcare Australia and Director of the Australian Land Conservation Alliance • Miya Isherwood, Assistant Director, Indigenous Protected Areas, DCCEEW • Cliff Cobbo, First Nations Principal Advisor, World Wide Fund for Nature	Facilitator – Cissy Gore-Birch Panel Members: • Amba-Rose Atkinson, PhD Candidate, University of QLD • Kasey Singleton, Cultural Heritage Project Officer (Cape York), QLD Parks and Wildlife Service • Nic Rodway, Junior Ranger Coordinator, Walalakoo Aboriginal Corporation • Ty'a Dynevor, Research Assistant, Crown of Thorns Starfish Research and Management project Final year student Bachelor of Science Presentation by Amba-Rose Atkinson, PhD Candidate, University of Queensland	Facilitator – Cissy Gore-Birch

Day 2 – Wed 21 Aug

Field Trip 1: Mona Mona Mission

Field Trip 2: Dreamtime Dive and Snorkel Outer Reef

Day 3 – Thu 22 Aug

Breakout groups – feedback and reflections session

Key Messages from Field Trips

Facilitators – Barry Hunter, CEO, NAILSMA & Dr Leah Talbot, Research Manager, NAILSMA

Session 1: Sea Country Management

Location – Restaurant Area

Facilitator – Dr Cass Hunter, Indigenous Social Ecological Researcher, CSIRO

Panel Members:

- Keron Murray, Chair, Wuthathi Aboriginal Corporation
- Jeffrey Newchurch, Kurna Elder
- Kerry Jones, Director, Kabi Kabi People's Aboriginal Corporation

Session 2: Land Restoration

Location – Breezeway

Facilitators – Barry Hunter, CEO, NAILSMA & Sarah Terkes, Executive Director, Australian Committee for International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

Panel Members:

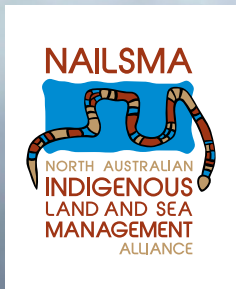
- Andrew Picone, QLD Manager, The Pew Charitable Trusts (Australia)
- Richard Swain, Indigenous Ambassador, Invasive Species Council and Honorary Associate Professor with the Fenner School of Environment and Society with the ANU
- Teagan Shields, Research Fellow, Curtin University
- Phil Rist, Process Unite Coordinator, Girringun Aboriginal Corporation

Freshwater	Indigenous Country and Biodiversity Alliance	Economy and Conservation	Implementing Change
Facilitator – Dr Allan Dale, Professor of Tropical Regional Development, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University Panel Members: • Dr Justin Perry, Research Manager, NAILSMA • Jim Turnour, Principal Strategic Regional Planner, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University • Samarla Deshong, Great Barrier Reef Foundation Water Quality & Integrated Monitoring and Reporting Traditional Owner Tech Working Groups Co-Chair NESP Climate Hub 2 First Nations Peoples' Climate Change Platform	Facilitators – Barry Hunter, CEO, NAILSMA & Rowan Foley, CEO, Aboriginal Carbon Foundation	Facilitator – Barry Hunter, CEO, NAILSMA Panel Members: • Rowan Foley, CEO, Aboriginal Carbon Foundation • Dr Allan Dale, Professor of Tropical Regional Development, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University • Dr Cass Hunter, Indigenous Social Ecological Researcher, CSIRO	Facilitator – Cissy Gore-Birch

Appendix B: Forum Participants

Aak Pul Ngangtam	Indigenous Desert Alliance Ltd
Aboriginal Carbon Foundation	Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation
Aboriginal Sea Company	Invasive Species Council
Australian Committee International Union for the Conservation of Nature	James Cook University
Australian Land Conservation Alliance	Kabi Kabi Peoples Aboriginal Corporation
Biodiversity Council	Landcare Australia
Bush Heritage	Namultja Aboriginal Corporation
Cairns and Far North Environment Centre	Normanby Aboriginal Corporation
CCSI	North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance
Connected Land and Sea	NRM Regions Australia
Conserving Canberra	NRM Regions Queensland
Dhaarba Land Trust on Cape York	NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust
CSIRO	NSW Environment Protection Agency
Curtin University	Parks Australia
Dabu Jaijkal Aboriginal Corporation	PEC Consultants
Dawul Wuru Aboriginal Corporation	Pew Charitable Trusts
Department of Climate Changes, Energy, the Environment and Water	Pollination Foundation
Department of Environment and Science	Queensland Conservation Council
Department of Environment, Science and Innovation	Queensland Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger Program
Deshong Consulting	Skills Insight
Dingo Culture	Tagalaka Aboriginal Corporation
Environmental Defenders Office	Terrain Natural Resource Management
Firesticks Alliance	The University of Queensland
Forest Stewardship Council	The Nature Conservancy
Future Dreaming Australia	Torres Strait Regional Authority
Great Barrier Reef Foundation	Trust for Nature
Girringun Aboriginal Corporation	Wilderness Society
Great Barrier Reef Traditional Owner Taskforce	WWF Australia
HSBC Australia	Yued Aboriginal Corporation





Reimagining Conservation 2024

**Working Together for Healthy Country
19–22 August 2024**