

REIMAGINING CONSERVATION 2024

Working Together
for Healthy Country:
Key Themes

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Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures and to their Elders both past and present.

Thank you to all forum participants for sharing your experiences, energy and optimism for reimagining the future of conservation together. After hearing the passion and power of our young people, it's clear the future is in good hands. We especially thank Indigenous people who shared their wisdom and knowledge and brought culture to life at the forum through song, story and language.

The terms 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander', 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous' and 'First Nations' are used interchangeably throughout this document. Through the use of these terms, we seek to acknowledge and honour diversity, shared knowledge and experiences.

The 2024 forum was made possible through the generous support of sponsors and donors. We are sincerely grateful for this support which made the forum possible.

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 (NAISMA) or Australian Committee for International Union for the 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 summarise discussions and identify recurring themes from session transcripts. The tool did not reinterpret or alter the content of the transcripts but functioned solely as an aid in organisation and synthesis.

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Citation: 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.

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.

Reimagining Conservation seeks to redefine the concept of conservation by moving beyond conventional 'western' 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

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 of National 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.

Seven key themes emerged from the 2024 forum:

1. Reimagining conservation through Indigenous perspectives
2. Centering Indigenous leadership and knowledge
3. The intrinsic link between culture and the environment
4. The vital role of youth and Elders
5. Breaking down systemic inequality
6. Economic development
7. Building equitable and effective partnerships

Day 1

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

A paradigm shift 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. Indigenous peoples must be recognised for speaking for Country. This includes shaping

policy, and leading work on Country. This is not just about inclusion, it’s 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 (FPIC) 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

Theme 1

Reframing Conservation Through Indigenous Perspectives

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

The recent push for Indigenous voices to be heard is welcome. However it brings both opportunities and challenges.

Challenges include the need for non-Indigenous partners to recognise and respect Indigenous perspectives and experiences.

There is a need to move away from western-centric language and concepts to embrace Indigenous perspectives and terminology. For example, the western term 'conservation' can carry negative historical connotations related to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and often implies exclusion and control.

A lack of coordination in efforts to incorporate Indigenous knowledge can lead to consultation fatigue. Indigenous representatives may be asked to sit on multiple committees and repeat the same messages again and again. Instead, Indigenous

people want to prioritise engagement that leads to tangible benefits and genuine influence in decision-making processes.

"We invite non-Indigenous partners to open mind and open hearts to the way we manage our way." Dr Leah Talbot, Eastern Kuku Yalanji

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.

The measures 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 show the intrinsic link between human wellbeing and environmental health and ensure ongoing support.





Theme 2

Centering Indigenous Leadership & Knowledge

Indigenous leadership is critical to reimagining conservation and land restoration. This requires empowering Indigenous communities to lead conservation efforts on their Country, guided by Traditional Knowledge and cultural practices.

Putting Indigenous people into positions of power and decision-making positions within agencies and organisations was highlighted at the forum as one of the most effective ways to elevate Indigenous perspectives into conservation.

The concept of 'Land Back' is also seen as fundamental. Returning land to Indigenous management and custodianship strengthens culture and enables grassroots decision-making. Access to land and sea Country is both a practical necessity and a means of reconnecting Indigenous people with their ancestral lands and reviving cultural practices.

Indigenous knowledge systems reflect millennia of accumulated wisdom for managing and sustaining ecosystems, and have shaped landscapes in Australia for over 65,000 years. Indigenous

knowledge and management practices are critical for restoring and protecting Australia's deteriorating biodiversity, and offer practical solutions such as cultural burning, an integral part of traditional land management. This knowledge provides essential insights into what a healthy environment looks like and how to achieve it.

Any use or sharing of Indigenous knowledge and data must benefit First Nations peoples, and align with principles of self-determination and emerging best practice, recognising Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) and Indigenous data sovereignty. This ensures that Indigenous communities maintain control over their knowledge.

The revival and care of Indigenous languages are essential for the preservation of knowledge as languages carry the depth and complexity of Indigenous worldviews and concepts. Elders are the knowledge keepers and mentors who transmit this knowledge, while youth play a vital role in carrying forward Traditional Knowledge, ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage and its application to contemporary challenges.

Theme 3

The Intrinsic Link Between Culture and the Environment

Reimagining conservation starts with knowing that the connection between Indigenous peoples and their lands and waters is both a spiritual connection and a lived reality where culture, identity and wellbeing are intrinsically linked to the health of the environment.

“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.” Cliff Cobbo,

Waka Waka Nation

The forum heard that freshwater is not only a resource but the lifeblood of Indigenous cultures, inextricably linked to identity, spirituality and wellbeing. Language names for places along a

river hold special meaning and reveal a deep understanding of the landscape and the unique qualities and uses of different water bodies. A Dreaming story was shared about the creation of rivers and demonstrates how these narratives embed knowledge about the environment and guide responsible stewardship. More than landmarks, they provide evidence of knowledge systems that indicate and map connection to Country, stories and food sources. All of this identifies people with Country and Country to people.

We also heard that restoration is not just 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. We need to be looking at restoration from a holistic standpoint – people, Country and spirituality – restoring land and restoring people.

“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.





Theme 4

The Vital Role of Youth and Elders

A Youth Perspectives Panel was a new addition to the 2024 forum and was considered one of the most important and inspiring sessions of the forum. Each of the panelists delivered powerful messages from their own experiences and their personal and professional connections to Country.

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 panelists highlighted the significant role of Elders in supporting and connecting with youth. They recognised that Elders:

- Hold a wealth of Traditional Knowledge, serving as living libraries of cultural practices and understanding the interconnectedness of all things
- 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
- Have often been at the forefront of advocating for Indigenous rights and self-determination, paving the way for younger generations
- 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.

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

"The strength of youth comes from our Elders and the values they set and fought for." Tilly Davis, Butchulla descendent

Theme 5

Breaking Down Systemic Inequality

There are fundamental systemic barriers and inequities that need to be overcome to enable Indigenous-led, implemented and controlled land and sea management, and for Indigenous perspectives to be incorporated into conservation programs.

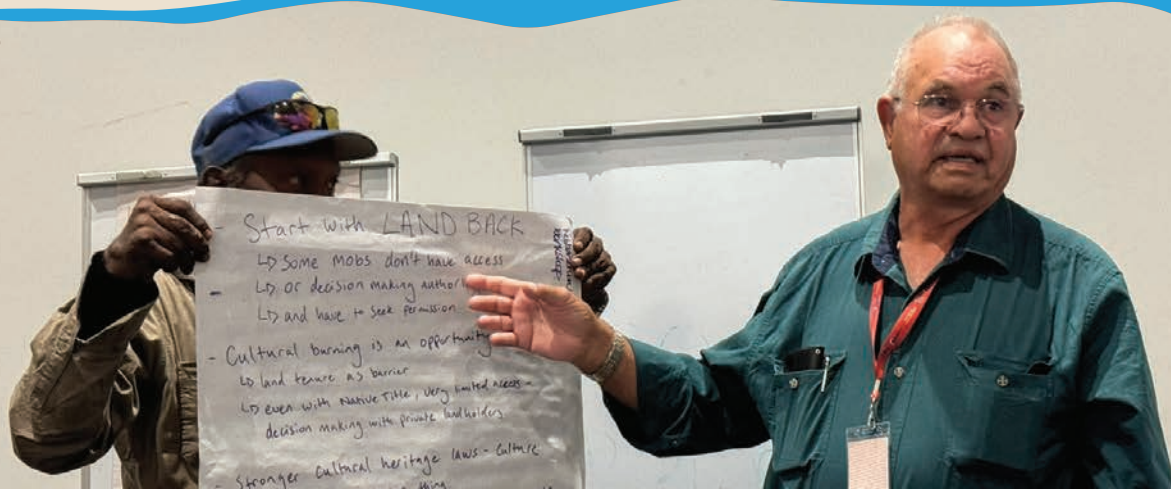
Current environmental laws and systems in Australia, while failing to achieve their goals of environmental protection, have excluded Indigenous peoples by failing to recognise Indigenous sovereignty, cultural authority and knowledge systems. Existing legislation makes it almost impossible to achieve Indigenous-led conservation while these laws are founded in western perspectives and ignore the value of Indigenous knowledge and worldviews in decision-making processes.

The forum called for legislative and policy reforms that align with Indigenous values, respect Indigenous knowledge systems, and create space for Indigenous communities to manage their Country according to their own laws and customs. For example, there is a need for clear standards and benchmarks for incorporating Indigenous perspectives into conservation efforts. The deficiency of culturally appropriate frameworks for practical implementation is a significant challenge.

A major issue is the disproportionately low funding for Indigenous protected areas (IPAs). Although

they account for over 50% of Australia's National Reserve System, contributing significantly to Australia's international obligations for biodiversity conservation, they receive considerably less funding per hectare than other Commonwealth national parks and reserves. This financial gap critically limits the capacity for effective conservation, monitoring and evaluation. Challenges also exist with the accreditation of IPAs in a way that ensures their protection under the National Reserve System and provides Indigenous custodians real compliance powers to manage their own Country.

The forum also identified the inadequate level of funding that goes to Indigenous-led conservation efforts compared to non-Indigenous conservation programs. Indigenous peoples face significant challenges when negotiating funding and program requirements, as they are often compelled to navigate and operate entirely within western systems that may not align with Indigenous values and frequently undervalue Indigenous knowledge systems. It is essential to ensure that relationships and agreements are built on integrity and that cultural values are maintained at every level. Inadequate allocation of funding for Indigenous-led conservation programs is evident and adds to the complexities of Indigenous people being involved in the development or implementation of conservation actions generally.





Theme 6

Economic Development

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.

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. This includes focusing on cultural indicators – such as the level of community involvement and benefit – rather than just direct, quantitative measurements like the number of trees planted.

Indigenous communities gain the autonomy to define what is important to measure and how to verify outcomes through peer-to-peer, strengths-based approaches, ensuring that cultural integrity is fundamental and integrated into all

economic markets. This empowerment ensures fair compensation for Indigenous knowledge and labor, recognition of cultural authority, and respect for cultural values, fostering relationships and agreements based on integrity, such as Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), and access and benefit-sharing in joint ventures.

Targeted support is needed to build the capacity of Indigenous organisations and communities to navigate complex policy frameworks and engage in economic markets. Some Indigenous communities have been able to successfully participate in nature-based and carbon markets to receive economic benefits for management of Country (e.g. cultural burning). The announcement of the Indigenous Country and Biodiversity Alliance (ICBA) is a positive step towards ensuring equitable access and benefits sharing for Indigenous communities. ICBA is an all-Indigenous partnership between the North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance, Indigenous Desert Alliance, Kimberley Land Council, and the Aboriginal Carbon Foundation. ICBA aims to change the mainstream paradigm of how biodiversity is managed as the new nature repair market comes into being, and ensure Indigenous peoples are involved in every step of its development and implementation, and have access to maximise the biodiversity, cultural and financial core benefits of the market.

Theme 7

Building Equitable and Effective Partnerships

Incorporating Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into conservation requires building partnerships between Indigenous people and organisations and government departments, non-government organisations and private industry.

Equitable and effective partnerships are built on mutual understanding, trust and respect. Indigenous peoples have often been disappointed in conservation partnerships and the forum participants called out what needs to change.

Many non-Indigenous partners need to improve their understanding of Indigenous perspectives, values and decision-making processes to ensure effective partnerships. Meaningful change requires implementing policies and practices that genuinely respect Indigenous culture.

Working with Indigenous communities requires culturally appropriate engagement and communication strategies, including respect for cultural protocols, knowledge sharing and creating safe spaces. Non-Indigenous people should approach collaboration with humility,

understanding, and a willingness to reassess their engagement processes to take into account the complexity of relationships and the need for adequate time for decision-making.

“When we talk about Reimagining Conservation, we’re talking about changing the conversation when it comes to research priorities.” Dr Leah Talbot, Eastern Kuku Yalanji

In response to the urgent and significant need to build research partnerships, a new initiative is the National Indigenous Environmental Researchers Network. The network responds to the persistent challenges and growing opportunities facing Indigenous-led conservation research programs in Australia. It is envisioned as an Indigenous-led initiative designed to empower Indigenous communities to shape directions and priorities for environmental research and ensure that research outcomes benefit Indigenous peoples and their Country. The network addresses the critical need for Indigenous leadership and self-determination in environmental research.



Continuing the Conversation

The goal of the Reimagining Conservation Forum series is to inspire change in the way that conservation is imagined, realised and practiced 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 building 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 of 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 expect to find recommendations and guidelines on ‘how to’ form authentic partnerships and create change, instead we 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. Local connections to Country hold significant cultural and Traditional Knowledge. Traditional Owners are witness 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.

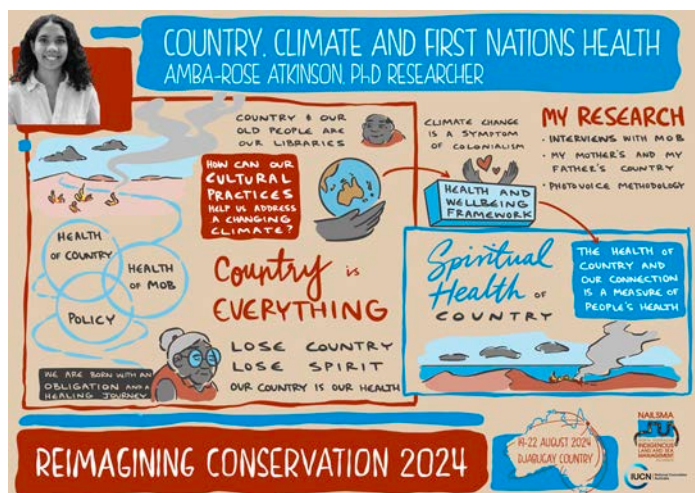
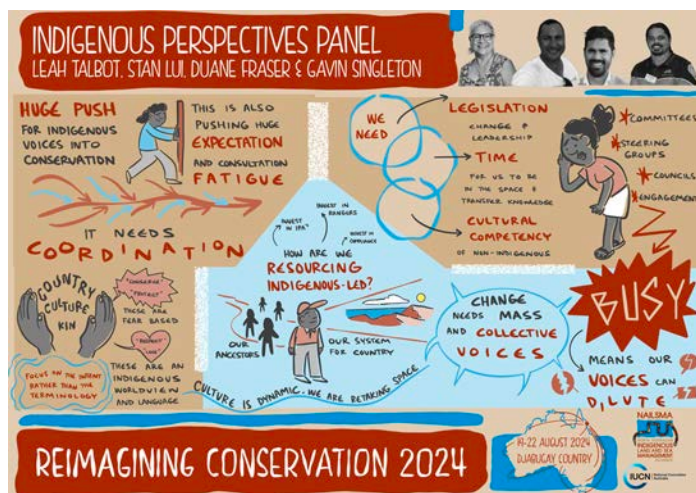
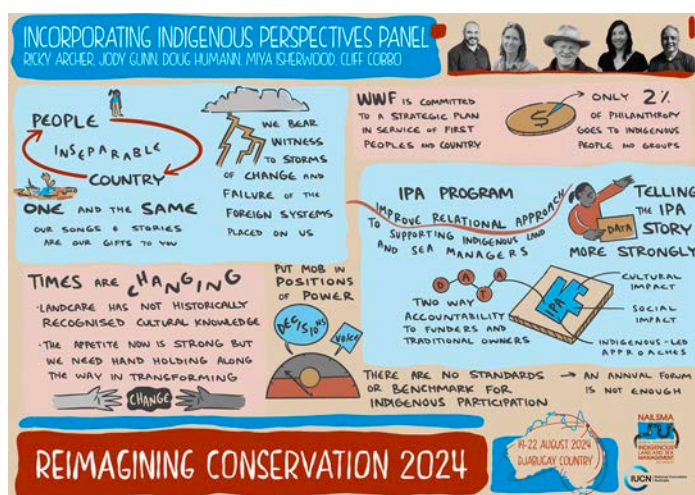
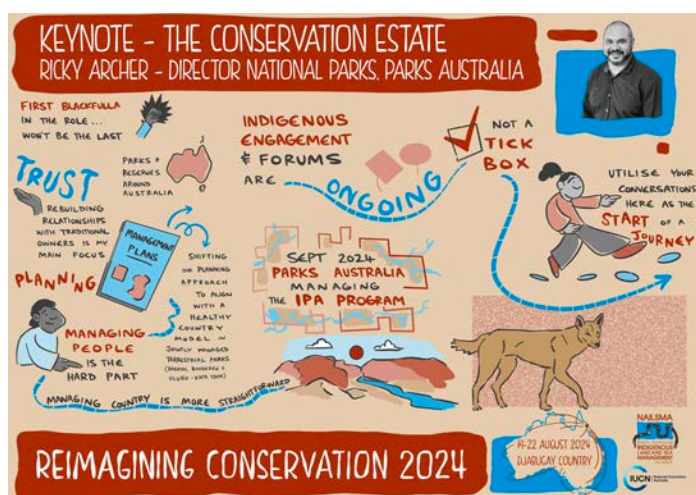
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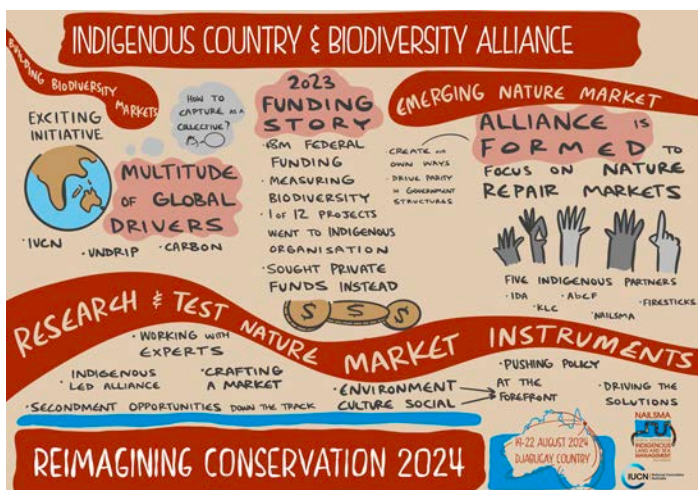
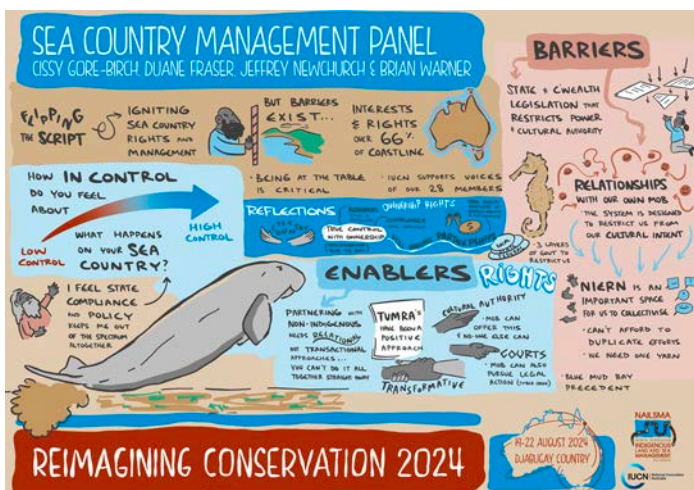
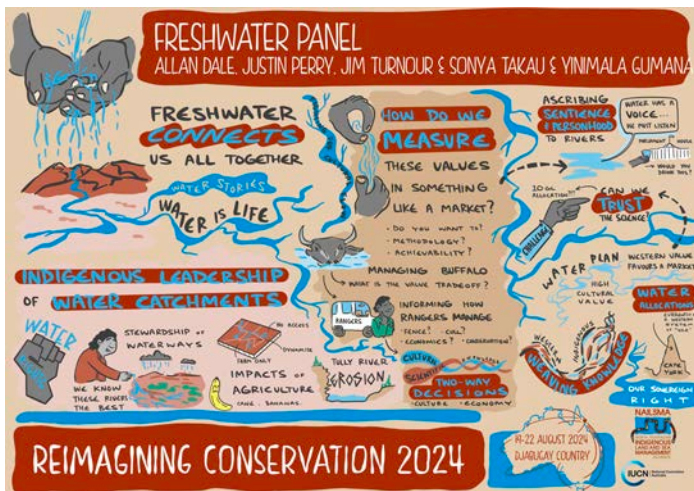
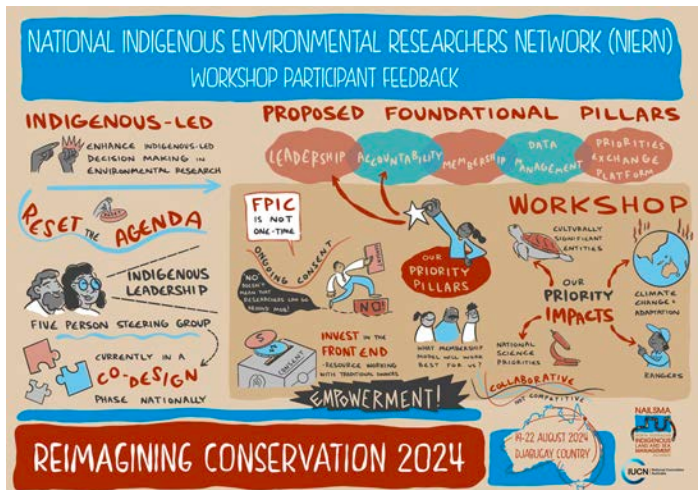
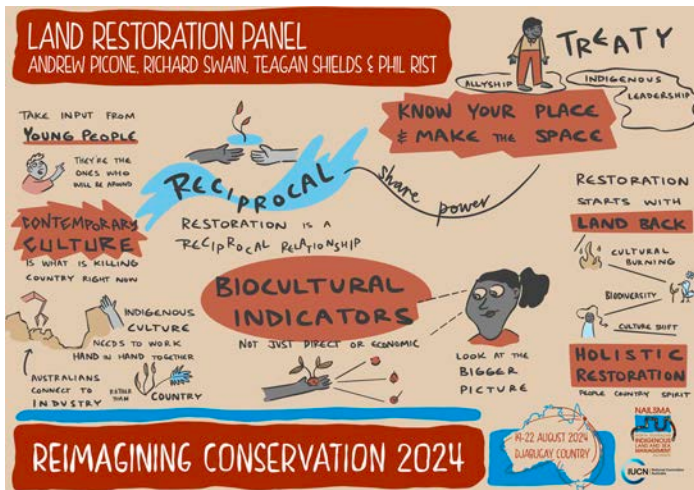


Reimagining Conservation Visualised

These visual representations of the Reimagining Conservation Forum synthesize key ideas raised in real time and now provide illustrated records to share and support continued engagement and connection as the conversation continues.

Illustrated by Graphic Scribe: Will Bessen, Tuna Blue







Reimagining Conservation 2024

Working Together for Healthy Country: Key Themes

