

Cultural land management governance and research

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Project team

(who we are)

Research Team

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Project Steering Group

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Project background

(where we came from)



Previous projects

Hazards, Culture and Indigenous Communities project (2017-2021)

Principles for Enhanced Collaboration project (2021)

Cultural land management in southeastern Australia project (2021)



Sustaining collaborations...

- “I cannot over-emphasize the need to have a **trusting relationship**. The more you open yourself to people, the more important it feels to you... the days where you think “oh, Christ, this is hard,” you can just go, “I know what this means to me”... you kind of have to be a bit vulnerable.” – Non-indigenous fire manager
- “I think whilst there is a desire for [Aboriginal peoples] to be getting back to “historic burning practices,” for want of a better term, there’s a significant hiatus in their experience... So, it’s about them **getting the opportunity** to start to re-learn some of that expertise.” – Indigenous fire manager
- “... if we don’t have the right staff, if we get some of these fellas that come along, particularly, don’t see the value in it and sort of really disagree with co-management that can sort of upset relationships pretty quickly and then, then you take a long time to end up, um, **repairing the damage**.” – Non-indigenous fire manager
- “Yeah, well, there wasn’t much engaging before, but I think it’s improving through **having conversations** with guys, but the best place for the conversation is **out on Country** when we’re doing burns. So, when we burn, we invite some [rural fire service] members to come along and when we’re in that space, we can really have a meaningful conversation and attitudes change.” – Indigenous fire manager





Key enablers

1. Interpersonal trust
2. Cultural literacy
3. Process self-determination
4. Specific funding
5. Open to change
6. Making it “BAU”



Mechanisms of change

→ External to agencies

- Whole-of-government reforms
- Legislative and regulatory changes
- Post-event inquiries
- Public expectations
- First Nations governance

Potential levers:

Land rights determinations
New cultural heritage policies
Inquiry recommendations
Community pressure

→ Internal to agencies

- Demonstration cases
- Personal investment
- Resourcing
- Translation and education
- Mentoring
- Networking and exchange

Potential levers:

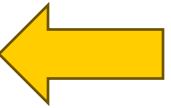
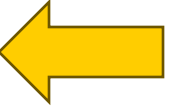
Publicising local initiatives
Getting execs on Country
Medium and long-term funding
Staging practitioner gatherings



Recommendations

1. Formal acknowledgement by research organisations of the equivalent value of Indigenous knowledge, practice, and science to Western understandings/knowledge systems. Respect and Recognition of knowledge-holders and cultural land management practice
2. Recognise the holistic and highly diverse context of Indigenous ways of being and Caring for Country
3. Make clear commitments to supporting Indigenous people to get on Country and engage in cultural stewardship practices to build the resilience of Country and people
4. Establish an Indigenous Research Strategy with dedicated research streams/project areas for cultural stewardship research within Natural Hazards Research Australia's research agenda that supports Indigenous-led research pathways.
5. Create avenues to recognise Traditional Owners as research partners/end-users of research funded by Natural Hazards Research Australia
6. Include Indigenous voice and representation in governance structures of institutions and land management agencies
7. Establish meaningful and ongoing pathways for Traditional Owner inclusion and consultation, to ensure research agendas and processes reflect Traditional Owner aspirations and priorities
8. Development of a framework of broad research principles/protocols and processes to guide more ethical and collaborative cultural land management research
9. Embed multiple aspects of capacity building into research frameworks and processes
10. Support opportunities for developing Indigenous governance, collaboration, and knowledge sharing

= Cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia project (2022-2024)





Cultural land management governance and research



Principles, protocols and processes to cultural land management governance and research

- Self-determination to practice culture on Country
- Reconciliation, equity and social justice
- Healthy Country, healthy spirit, healthy people
- Empowerment of Indigenous knowledge-holders
- Benefits with and for Indigenous communities
- Respect diversity of Indigenous peoples and cultures

Principles and protocols for cultural land management governance and research

Natural hazards managements agencies and research institutions all have legal and ethical obligations to engage with Indigenous peoples no matter where they work in Australia. **Everywhere is Country and Indigenous peoples speak for Country.** Nonetheless, starting or maintaining intercultural collaborations can present many obstacles, and there is a need for guidance on how to best work together for the benefit of Country. The following summarises a review of relevant collaborative principles, processes and protocols for agencies and research institutions. It is only a **starting point** for local and in-depth conversations.

	PRINCIPLE	EXAMPLE PROCESS	EXAMPLE PROTOCOL
1. SELF-DETERMINATION TO PRACTICE CULTURE ON COUNTRY	Cultural land management must be self-determined and rights based	Develop collaborative structures that respect Indigenous self-determination	Establish free, prior and informed consent mechanisms for collaborations
	Indigenous peoples have the right to speak authoritatively about Country	Resource and support representative bodies to act as partners	Require co-design and co-delivery with representative bodies
	Cultural leadership and resurgence through caring for Country 'our way'	Resource and support capacity-building according to self-determined pathways	Establish agreements that provide long-term and secure access to Country
2. RECONCILIATION, EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE	(Re)centre women and their unique role within Country	Resource and support Indigenous women's access to sacred and significant sites	Establish guidelines for identifying and protecting sacred and significant women's sites
	Support truth-telling and healing	Develop awareness of historical and contemporary issues facing Indigenous peoples	Make place-based cultural sensitivity training compulsory for all staff
	Address racism and promote cultural safety	Develop training and policies to foster cultural safety and acceptance	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices
3. HEALTHY COUNTRY, HEALTHY SPIRIT, HEALTHY PEOPLE	Healing Country and healthy people are interrelated	Resource and support Indigenous peoples' connection to Country and culture	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices
	Centre Country, culture and kin in contemporary land management	Develop policies that consider, measure and monitor cultural and natural values	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices
	Cultural land management is living knowledge and culture	Regulatory changes to support participation in cultural activities	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices
4. EMPOWERMENT OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE-HOLDERS	Empower Indigenous knowledge and knowledge-holders	Resource and support Indigenous knowledge-holders	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices
	Manage, protect, and share knowledge	Develop policies that consider, measure and monitor cultural and natural values	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices
	Transfer and maintain knowledge	Regulatory changes to support participation in cultural activities	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices
5. BENEFITS WITH AND FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES	Strong and healthy communities	Resource and support Indigenous knowledge-holders	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices
	Accountability and monitoring	Develop policies that consider, measure and monitor cultural and natural values	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices
	Indigenous peoples' cultures are diverse	Regulatory changes to support participation in cultural activities	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices
6. RESPECT DIVERSITY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND CULTURES	Embed flexible and place-based policy and processes	Develop policies that consider, measure and monitor cultural and natural values	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices
	Understand Indigenous cultural protocols and cultural authorities	Regulatory changes to support participation in cultural activities	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices
	Respect Indigenous cultural protocols and cultural authorities	Regulatory changes to support participation in cultural activities	Establish a cultural safety framework embed it in all individual and organisational practices

This document has been developed by the "Country is our business" project team as a guide for agencies and researchers to learn and share protocols. More information and references are available at naturalhazards.com.au

For other key guidance, see: AIATSIS 2020. AIATSIS National Indigenous Cultural Heritage Survey. Canberra, ACT: AIATSIS; Woodward, E. et al. 2020. *Indigenous-led approaches to strengthening and sharing our knowledge for land and water management*. Canberra, ACT: NAILSMA and CSIRO.



Available from
naturalhazards.com.au



Data collection:

- 26 interviews (17 Indigenous, 9 non-indigenous), split between SA, VIC and NSW
- 5 workshops

Findings:

- Pragmatism (“making do”)
- Experimentation (“trying out”)
- Affect (being there)

SEE: Beggs L, Neale T, Costello O, et al. (2025) Emergent sovereignties: Pragmatism, experiment, and affect within collaborative Indigenous wildfire management in southeast Australia. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*.



Pragmatism

...it's hard for us to do our cultural obligation and burn Country when there's policies that are really, really grey – so it's hard to even understand where you're going. And I think it's deliberately grey because they don't want to have to look over our shoulders.... in the [LLSA] it states that using fire to burn land is an act of clearing so it gives us an exemption to clear land using fire basically. – Indigenous participant, NSW

Well he's our Indigenous officer in [government] type of thing – to communicate how the history is for us, talk about for us, our campaigns. That's what he's paid for at the same time like a liaison officer or whatever, but he's our main source of connection through that system. He does a bloody good job. Works out ways we can work together, operate together, under their law structure. – Indigenous participant, SA

...government loves hierarchical representative bodies. There's nothing better than a state representative body. It makes our life easy. We've got to talk to one body and it works... [But] when you're dealing with Traditional Owners that doesn't work... [because] you'll have mobs now that'll go – “but I'm only here to talk to my Country and my people.” – non-Indigenous participant, VIC



Experiment

What they've [government] got to understand is that our cultural governance is how we fashion ourselves to live on Country, care for Country at the same time. So we're fashioning ourselves now to care for Country using the Westminster system and fire industry and wait a second, they should be fashioning themselves on the signs of the Country, the land itself, our Indigenous peoples' land... we're trying to inform the processes or the powers that be. – Indigenous participant, SA

[A state fire agency] didn't want to come to the party, so there were lots of delays put in... I think four months, they told us that they were going to write this burn plan for us and in the end, I went to look into, through the [legislation] under clause 5(A) it allows activities and includes cultural burns with community. So being private landowners, that was kind of a loophole I could utilise then to get in and get that work underway. Then we still gave courtesy to [the agency] of notifying them as per their kind of practices and procedures, but yeah, there was definitely a pushback. – Indigenous participant, NSW

Rather than us supplementing [settler government] or their resource management objectives, they can actually support ours, not the other way around. We're sick of that. We've been doing that for 190 years and we've been asked to help them achieve their objectives and their outcomes and we're saying enough of that. This is the objective for this Country. This is what we're doing about it and we invite you to work with us to achieve it. – Indigenous participant, VIC



Affect

How about you read our Country plan or look at our webpage and find out a bit more about us and our [land rights] agreement? 99% of the time they never come back. These one percenters, when they come back they were so informed and could provide a relevant contribution to what we were doing. But they were people that could shift their values now to align with what our values were as opposed to asking of us to shift our values or focus onto helping others. – Indigenous participant, VIC

...it's the valuing each other and it's just sort of showing some mutual respect... if [the relationship] is valued then you can work through any of the challenges and when it's not really genuinely valued then they become blockers, you know? – Indigenous participant, VIC

...[government agencies have] already got a big enough trust issue with First Nations people. Very good reasons as to why they would distrust us. So, if we're trying to build trust, then we have to be committed. – non-Indigenous participant, SA

Whenever you meet on Country, it's just always better... It's funny that you have to justify and advocate for that to happen... if you're meeting on Country, in the space, and you can connect as a human to each other, it makes way more sense. You're just there. It's tactile. You can see the importance. When Aboriginal people are on Country, talking about Country, they are just enlivened. – non-Indigenous participant, SA



Some takeaways:

Pragmatism: pursue both legal and policy reforms and creatively “making do” in the meantime

Experiment: partnership is everyone’s job but do not underestimate the importance of intermediaries

Affect: collaborations and partnerships require “being there”; stay attuned to the causes of trust and mistrust



Thanks!

