

Hazard Note

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Healing Country through Wiradjuri and Wolgalu-led land management

About this project

Healing Country through Wiradjuri and Wolgalu-led land management is a community-led, place-based research project, in collaboration with the Wiradjuri and Wolgalu Aboriginal community of Brungle–Tumut in New South Wales (NSW). Wiradjuri and Wolgalu want to be effective custodians of Country and rekindle cultural practices that foster resilient ecological systems. Natural resource management (NRM) agencies want to develop partnerships with Traditional Owners. However, many NRM agencies lack experience in building genuine, respectful partnerships with Traditional Owners. The project aimed to better understand what supports and what presents barriers to Aboriginal cultural land management practices, to assist NRM agencies to build partnerships with Traditional Owners.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are advised that this document may contain images of people who have died.

This project was undertaken with a commitment to ensuring First Nations peoples benefit from and contribute to the research.

Summary

Since the devastating fires of the 2019–2020 Black Summer bushfire season, NRM agencies have been proactive in working with the Wiradjuri and Wolgalu community and Brungle–Tumut Local Aboriginal Land Council to heal Country. To support this work, a Wiradjuri and Wolgalu Cultural NRM Officer position and ranger program (Bugang Bila) was established. Much of this work has been undertaken on a small-scale project basis, not allowing Wiradjuri and Wolgalu to put culture at the centre of land management.

These opportunities and limitations for Wiradjuri and Wolgalu to partner with NRM agencies to care for Country reflect the support for removing barriers to developing genuine partnerships.

Healing Country is community-led, place-based research that responds to Wiradjuri and Wolgalu needs and aspirations, as well as clear Federal and NSW government priorities to partner with First Nations peoples to restore the health and resilience of the landscape and its peoples. The project aimed to empower Wiradjuri and Wolgalu to reconnect with significant landscapes and

knowledge practices, be effective custodians of Country, amplify their voices to speak for Country and develop relationships of trust and reciprocity with NRM agencies.

The already-established working relationships between Wiradjuri and Wolgalu and NRM agencies provided the foundations to ask: what supports Wiradjuri and Wolgalu cultural land management practices, and what are the barriers?

The project found that achieving the widely held objective of 'healthy Country, healthy people' requires alignment of values and establishment of trusting relationships. This can be achieved through a process of two-way learning where NRM agency staff work closely with Traditional Owners. For this to happen, policy, procedures and resourcing need to strategically support partnerships with Traditional Owners through:

- supporting women's participation
- investing in individuals through long-term funding security
- increasing the number of identified positions within NRM agencies.

The project report provides guidance for NRM agencies seeking to work closely with Traditional Owners to rebuild resilient ecological systems and mitigate the risks of natural hazards.



Photo: Uncle Ramsey Freeman. Photo: Ethan Williams



Above: Wiradjuri and Wolgalu community members undertaking cultural burning. Photo: Ethan Williams.

Background

Traditional Owners want to manage their lands and rekindle cultural practices that foster resilient ecological systems. This can only be achieved through the development of healthy working relationships between Traditional Owners and NRM agencies because these agencies manage considerable Wiradjuri and Wolgalu traditional lands.

NRM agencies have corporate aspirations and responsibilities to partner with First Nations peoples. The adoption of reconciliation and self-determination principles by many government agencies, and more broadly in Australia, has grown appreciation for First Nations knowledge, values and practices as vital to creating a resilient, healthy Country and people.

These changes reveal knowledge, values, practice, policy and implementation gaps and ethical challenges:

- Power imbalances between government and broader non-Indigenous Australia and First Nations communities mean NRM agencies are not experienced in building genuine, respectful partnerships with First Nations communities.

- NRM agencies' lack of understanding and respect for First Nations peoples' values and deep knowledge of and cultural obligations to Country leads to community distrust of NRM agencies, lack of cultural safety and disengagement.
- NRM agencies seek First Nations knowledge of Country but do not invest in communities to revitalise that support ecological systems, healthy Country and healthy people.
- These partnership problems result in implementation challenges. Government and non-governmental agencies cannot meet their commitments and targets to incorporate cultural land management practices, increase First Nations engagement and grow First Nations representation in the workforce.

Concurrently, Traditional Owners have limited opportunities to care for Country. As a community-led, place-based action research project, the *Healing Country* research process and findings contribute to understanding what supports productive relationships between First Nations communities and NRM agencies.

Research methodology

The project was committed to a community-led, place-based action. The user-driven approach responded to Wiradjuri and Wolgalu needs and aspirations and clear government and non-governmental priorities to partner with First Nations people to restore the health and resilience of the landscape and its people.

The Bugang Bila program provided a strong foundation for the project. The research aimed to empower the Wiradjuri and Wolgalu community to reconnect with significant landscapes and knowledge practices, be effective custodians of Country, amplify Wiradjuri and Wolgalu to speak for Country and develop relationships of trust and reciprocity with NRM agencies.

Multiple qualitative methodologies were used, including semi-structured interviews with community members and NRM agencies, yarning and ethnographic-style observations followed by research team reflections. On-Country was a key aspect, and focused on rekindling important cultural practices, reconnecting Wiradjuri and Wolgalu to significant landscapes and connecting and sharing with other Nations.

These initiatives are central to revitalising and strengthening connections to Country, cultural land management practices and intergenerational knowledge exchange. They also provide spaces to yarn, learn and hear the voices, experiences and aspirations of a broad base of community.

A critical component was the employment of two local community research assistants, assuring the research was community-driven, adhered to cultural protocols and respected community dynamics. The overall aim was community ownership of the research and its benefits.

Research findings

Key barriers to Wiradjuri and Wolgalu accessing and participating in cultural and NRM activities on Country include:

- First Nations peoples and NRM agencies often have very different value systems.
- NRM agencies' working environment and procedures often impact First Nations people's cultural confidence.
- There is limited capacity to share knowledge and reconnect with other Nations.
- Time and opportunities are lacking to build trusting, mutually respectful relationships with relevant NRM agency staff.
- Access to Country is restricted by government policies and insufficient resources.
- NRM agencies lack understanding and consideration of community dynamics.

Values challenge

First Nations peoples, government and non-governmental agencies have very different knowledge and value systems. Generally, non-Indigenous Australians usually expect First Nations peoples to translate their values and feelings for Country into broader Australian understandings. Non-Indigenous people's knowledge and values dominate yet little expectation or responsibility on non-Indigenous people/agencies exists to do any of the translation work.

Cultural confidence

Cultural confidence is a key support. The absence of cultural confidence creates barriers to Wiradjuri and Wolgalu caring for Country.

"Cultural confidence means being able to have the confidence within yourself and your culture to be proud of culture and be able to speak on and up for culture."

Megan Considine, Cultural NRM Officer for Brungle–Tumut Local Aboriginal Land Council

Connections, learning and sharing with other Nations

Sharing knowledge and reconnecting with other Nations was a powerful aspect of the Healing Country project. Community members spoke about how cultural exchanges build cultural confidence, belonging, identity, cultural knowledge and a sense of shared responsibility.

Reciprocity, respect and relationships

Community and NRM agencies emphasised the vital importance of taking the time to build trusting, respectful relationships. Both First Nations and non-Indigenous people reported that by developing a genuine partnership they grew in confidence and learned how to work together. Their shared confidence led to greater trust and the creation of other opportunities to co-manage Country.

Policy, resources and access to Country

A significant obstacle to cultural land management Traditional Owners' lack of access to Country. Many community members spoke of being locked out of their traditional lands by gates, policies or permits.

Understanding community dynamics

A significant challenge to building partnerships between NRM agencies and Traditional Owners was the difficulty for NRM agencies to understand and respect cultural obligations to care for Country, community dynamics, cultural governance and the complex realities First Nations peoples navigate every day.

Sink or swim

Community members spoke of government and non-governmental agencies' sink-or-swim approach to community engagement and support. While agencies want to work with the community, little capacity building or support is provided to communities, leading to the inability to engage the community and implement cultural land management.

Connecting community with NRM agencies – the value of the Cultural NRM Officer

NRM agency staff described the Bugang Bila Cultural NRM Officer role as "a critical pathway for us to engage community". The Cultural NRM Officer and First Nations people working in NRM agencies or running small businesses play a key intermediary role between community, government and non-governmental agencies.



Left: Megan Considine, Cultural NRM Officer and community research assistant. Photo: Dave Hunter.

Research impact

The long-term project objective was healthy Country, healthy people. To achieve this, Wiradjuri and Wolgalu and NRM agencies need to work together. NRM agencies play an invaluable role in resourcing and supporting genuine partnerships built on trust, respect, goodwill and co-learning.

One of the most significant impacts of the project was the growth in cultural confidence of Wiradjuri and Wolgalu. Community-driven, on-Country activities and connection with other Nations builds cultural confidence. Cultural confidence benefits are numerous and it is the foundation of strong identity and inter-community, intergenerational, cross-cultural relationships.

The project's investment in the community led to greater inter-cultural trust. Too often agencies and projects are driven by non-Indigenous values and needs. NRM agencies and other government and non-governmental agencies and funding bodies can play an important role in supporting the revitalisation of culture, hence cultural confidence.

On-Country activities provided spaces for intergenerational knowledge sharing and relationship building. Young people felt seen, heard and valued as future cultural custodians. These activities also provided opportunities for the whole

community to be involved, helping identify people interested in NRM work.

Another important impact was reconnecting women with women's cultural practices and sites. This led to more women interested in participating in land management. That NRM agencies are supporting on-Country activities, working and learning with community and building relationships needs to be recognised as a positive Outcome of the project. NRM agencies play a significant role in capacity and relationship building. This is slow, considered work that is transformational in the long term.

NRM agencies can work in silos, individually approaching Local Aboriginal Land Council or community members to consult on projects. The Cultural NRM Officer role enabled a more coordinated approach for NRM project management consistent with self-determination principles. However, when a Cultural NRM Officer is managing multiple competing projects and agencies, there is a risk of 'burnout'. To support Wiradjuri and Wolgalu self-determination requires collaboration between NRM agencies, community and other agencies. We recommend a community of practice approach: a group of people, organisations and/or communities that share a concern, come together to learn and work better.

Next steps

The threatened species space is crucially important to Traditional Owners. NRM agencies need to invest in and engage with Traditional Owners to work in partnership to protect threatened species. It is a space in which NRM agencies can invest in traditional cultural practices and science to not only protect species but also strengthen people, connections to Country and relationships. The opportunity exists for NRM agencies to work with community to identify threatened species and undertake two-way learning.

The next phase of the project works with NRM agencies to facilitate such a community of practice. Agencies work seasonally, so a community of practice would allow agencies and community to work together to develop a coordinated seasonal work plan. When agencies work in silos insufficient resources are available to meet broader objectives. Working collaboratively utilises available resources for better outcomes, supporting Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to have a stronger voice and be partners in the care, protection and recovery of their traditional lands.

End-user statement

Cherie White, Natural Capital Advisor Riverina, Local Land Services Agency, NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development

"As an NRM agency working closely with the Brungle–Tumut Local Aboriginal Land Council, we view this report as a valuable resource for strengthening our partnership. It offers meaningful insights into the barriers that can hinder the development of genuine and lasting relationships with Traditional Owners. The findings will inform our approach as we collaborate with the local community to support and enhance cultural land management practices into the future."

Further reading

<https://naturalhazards.com.au/resources/publications/report/healing-country-through-wiradjuri-and-wolgalu-led-cultural-land>

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