

Hazard Note

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Connecting Indigenous people and the emergency management sector

About this project

The *Connecting Indigenous people and the emergency management sector – pathways to effective partnerships* project focused on the 'how to' questions in building cross-cultural partnerships in northern Australia. The project and the forum^{*} held in Mougibi/Burketown in Queensland in September 2023 are of practical importance because they:

- address equity in cross-cultural collaboration
- document and promote Indigenous stewardship in partnerships
- describe ingredients for effective cross-cultural partnerships.

* Whether the forum series is ongoing depends on financial support, but individuals and groups involved are nonetheless in a position to share their experience of the forums to date.

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Summary

True collaboration in this cross-cultural environment has not been a common feature of mainstream responses to hazards. However, the frequency and intensity of climate change-fuelled disasters is forcing Australia to look outside the box for a more effective response. Most Australians are aware of the significant and often devastating effects of climate change, and can appreciate the challenges involved in an initiative as significant as reshaping emergency management strategies. Indigenous voices about what Indigenous people have to offer in this space are getting stronger, infused with centuries of accumulated experience and a working relationship with the land and elements based on familial connection, cultural law and responsibility – largely unrecognised in mainstream approaches to hazard and community management.

Indigenous groups in many parts of Australia are kick-starting and leading conversations about cross-cultural collaborations and what they might look like. There are many questions and challenges about how collaboration can work, but without a respectful and informed process among leaders and practitioners

these questions and challenges will never be asked constructively or addressed.

The Traditional Owners of Mougibi/Burketown invited the *Connecting Indigenous people and the emergency management sector – pathways to effective partnerships* project to host a forum in September 2023, enabled through a partnership between Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal

Corporation (CLCAC) and North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA), as the focal event of the project. The forum hosts called on senior emergency management agency representatives, senior Aboriginal leaders and land managers to refine and discuss questions and challenges in regard to engagement of Indigenous communities in a better model for hazard management.



Images from the Mougibi/Burketown forum 1 September 2023. Photo: NAILSMA

Background

A 3-day forum was held in Darwin in November 2020, hosted by NAILSMA and Charles Darwin University's Research Institute for the Environment and Livelihoods, to discuss emergency management and the prospects for better engagement between agencies and Indigenous communities. This was perhaps the first conversation involving senior Indigenous representatives and senior emergency management agency representatives from across the north of Australia. Conversation about what Indigenous communities have to offer the emergency management effort and what better relationships might look like continued with the Djabugay-hosted forum held in May 2021 in Kuranda (Queensland) and then the September 2023 forum as

part of this *Pathways to effective partnerships* project, hosted by CLCAC and Gangalidda and Garawa people in Mougibi/Burketown.

Fragmented experience

There have been many constructive, failed, stalled and persistent initiatives but, as is often the case, they are fragmented across the various circumstances and areas of the wide north of Australia. These forums sought to explore this fragmented experience and come up with a road map for partnership development.

Uniqueness and continuity

Research by NAILSMA recognises the unique qualities and circumstances of

each and every place, arguing for local, context-specific approaches to relationship building and emergency management. It also recognises a number of broadly common features or circumstances across the Indigenous north. Federal, state and territory emergency management agencies need to scale-up their engagement approaches from fragmented and/or disconnected experiences to a regional, state or even trans-northern scale to achieve the kind of emergency management results needed. Pathways to effective partnerships must recognise, respect and support uniqueness within a scalable approach that is guided by equal recognition of commonalities.

Table 1: Challenges facing effective partnerships

Logistical/operational challenges	Description
Diverse stakeholders	Lack of clarity/equity as to roles, responsibilities and authority among multiple stakeholders, with independent modus operandi and key performance indicators (KPIs).
Technology	Communications and other technologies need renewal/updating for functionality and to match agency equipment.
Resource continuity	One-off resources lead to gaps/breakdown in maintenance and functionality
Volunteerism	Volunteer labour worked well for CLCAC rangers but it does not fit all circumstances.
Land tenure – responsibilities and access	Regions are a mix of tenures (parks, pastoral, private, Indigenous held). Roles and responsibilities, access and relationships differ.
Continuity across (emergency management) commands	Continuity of decision-making process etc. across commands is challenging.
Staff continuity	Staff turnover presents problems.
KPIs	KPIs and other measures vary across agencies.
Cross-cultural challenges	Description
Stereotyping	Engagement with Indigenous groups suffers from stereotyping, which is a common symptom of ethnocentrism within government agencies.
Partnership governance	Indigenous partners are usually treated inequitably.
Language	It is difficult to share understanding across First Nations languages and technical/bureaucratic language.
Culturally safe places/relationships	People need to work where there is understanding and respect and not feel threatened or subservient.
Community, family, cultural obligations	Obligations and responsibilities are not barriers to professional partnerships; they are strengths.
Developmental challenges	Description
Training and capability	Indigenous land managers and rangers work in a 'two-way' knowledge system (Indigenous/local and Western style).
Professionalism	It is challenging to create a strong commitment, purpose, skill and reliability in the local workforce to partner with the Queensland Fire Department.
Goal setting	Development and relationship-building goals must be achievable.
Research gaps	Description
Cost–benefit analysis [†]	Comparison is required of current scenarios for natural hazard preparation, response and recovery with (better) projected partnership scenarios.
Local governance	Good legal and structural options for governing and business models need investigation.
Climate change	The impacts vary over time and place but need ongoing research to inform local emergency management planning and implementation.

[†] Work on cost–benefit analysis was undertaken by Russell-Smith, Sangha and Edwards (2020), estimating monetary and non-monetary costs incurred through natural hazards in the Northern Territory and informing their argument for developing a new equitable partnership scenario in emergency management. More research is needed in other jurisdictions and other circumstances to refine the cost–benefit scenario and inform policy.

Research methodology

The *Pathways to effective partnerships* forum held in Mougibi/Burketown was the culmination of extensive consultation with Indigenous community leaders and emergency management agency representatives to determine the level of interest in such an event and the relevant themes to pursue. The Mougibi/Burketown forum was the third in what is hoped will be an ongoing series.

Setting the agenda

A participatory and inclusive approach was taken with this forum, including preliminary discussions prior to the forum about themes of local importance at community level undertaken by local Indigenous researchers, who then brought the ideas to Mougibi/Burketown to share with others.

Indigenous-only space

CLCAC and Traditional Owner hosts ensured the forum included a day for Indigenous-only delegates. Indigenous delegates were welcomed to Gangalidda Country by senior Traditional Owner Murradoo Yanner and were then able to get comfortable, review the agenda and the Kuranda discussion before considering priorities for discussion with emergency management agency representatives on days 2 and 3. This countrymen-only time was important and much appreciated.

A live case study approach

The invitation from Murradoo Yanner to hold this forum in Mougibi/Burketown was to take a close look at Traditional Owners' 15-year partnership with the then Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES), now Queensland Fire Department (QFD). The Mougibi/Burketown hosts were well prepared to present this as a learning opportunity for all delegates.

Focus on cross-cultural realities

The forum was co-hosted and run by Indigenous organisations CLCAC and NAILSMA and was framed with a strong cross-cultural perspective. Communication aids, such as interpreters, were discussed in the planning phase to ensure everyone would be clearly understood.

Research findings

The research identified and described issues and challenges facing Indigenous groups wanting to engage in emergency management and for emergency management agencies who want to improve their own effectiveness through engagement with Indigenous groups. Table 1 offers some examples of the challenges and gaps discussed.

Unpacking the story of the CLCAC and QFD partnership

CLCAC and QFD have been building their partnership over the past 15–18 years. The long genesis and mutual trust are testament to individual challenges not being deal breakers. What needs to be understood is that the ingredients for a successful partnership include the ability to host solutions to individual challenges. Much partnership building is organic and not easily described, nor described the same way by different actors. Figure 1 is a summary of conversations between CLCAC and QFD – a storyline for how the burgeoning partners got on with the job.

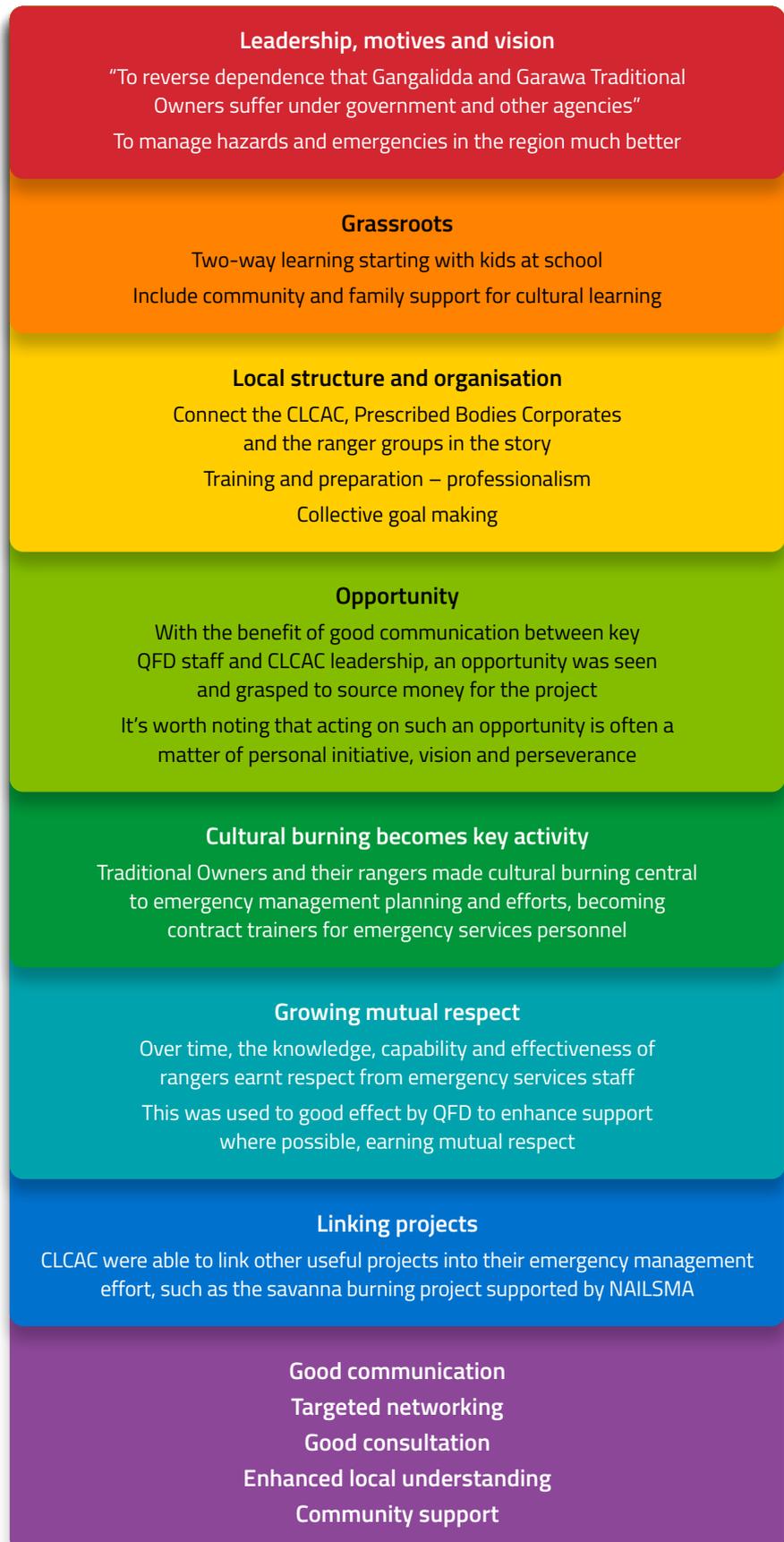


Figure 1: Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation and Queensland Fire Department storyline

Research impact

The challenges and gaps were generated mostly in consideration of the experiences of the CLCAC/QFD partnership but clearly resonate at some level with other locales.

There may be myriad possible solutions and as many formal and informal processes might apply in the unique circumstances of different communities. This participatory process does not deliver a definitive, stepwise plan for developing effective emergency management partnerships. It outlines the experience in the Gulf and suggests that other, deeper ingredients for partnership building are needed to deal with the various challenges thrown up by circumstance and experience. Looking back, the coloured storyline outlined in Figure 1 begins to paint a picture of how solutions to specific challenges might be found in the steps outlined in Figure 1.

As the forum discussion developed, it became more obvious that solutions can be found for most challenges and gaps (some more easily than others) in an organic storyline of how they got to where they are now. An effective development pathway is, however, dependent on a deeper set of qualities, such as those grown over time in the CLCAC/QFD partnership, helping to explain how solutions to problems can be found and how strategic initiatives might

be supported to advance the collective regional emergency management project.

Discussion about the CLCAC/QFD partnership teased out some abiding qualities or ingredients of good partnership making and then sought to codify them in a kind of Memorandum of Understanding, serving to outline the foundations of this successful partnership and, secondly, spelling out for others the core ingredients for successful relationship building elsewhere. Without these ingredients, local initiatives (such as the healing process in Gnowangerup and the reinvention of traditional authority and decision making in Galiwin'ku) will not be heard. Everyday challenges and plausible solutions may remain unrecognised – seemingly unimportant to an otherwise business-as-usual (top-down) emergency management approach.

The resulting Statement of Mutual Understanding and Intent is a composite of well-known home truths and moral and practical imperatives, but was arrived at through a deliberate and participatory process keenly focused on emergency management partnerships. The Statement has an important context for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous

partners in the emergency management space and is a step back to fundamentals, emphasising that unless these fundamental elements of our (future relationship) are agreed to and worked on, it will not work. This is the platform for more effective emergency management in remote areas.

Further reading

Archer, R., Hunter, B., Yanner Snr, M., Yanner Jnr, M., Amini-Yanner, R., Anderson, K., James, G., Ford, A., Pearse, M. (2025) *Connecting Indigenous people and the emergency management sector: pathways to effective partnerships*, final report, Natural Hazards Research Australia, Melbourne.

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Aboriginal Research Practitioners Network (ARNPNet) and North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) Ltd (2020) *Lessons from the ground – shared experiences and conversation from Galiwin'ku and Ramingining Partnerships Projects*, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, Melbourne.

Russell-Smith J, Sangha KK & Edwards AC (2020) *Final report: savanna fire management and bushfire and natural hazard scenario planning for north Australia*, Charles Darwin University, Darwin.

Dhamarrandji AM, Maypalama E & Burton D (2017) *Burrumulala (Strong Winds) Research Project – Galiwin'ku*, NAILSMA, Darwin.

Sithole B, Campion OB, James G, Burton D, Dhamarrandji M & Hunter-Xenie H (2020) *Developing effective EM partnerships in remote north Australian communities: Indigenous research and leadership in Ramingining and Galiwin'ku*, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, Melbourne.

End-user statement

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Learning about opportunities and trying to understand the combined challenge across the remote parts of Australia. I think we all have similar issues and sharing them will help us all. People need to understand the relationship with Traditional Owners is vital and how we provide that continuity and connection with others. It's always challenging, but others would have good ideas or processes that would assist us all. Projects and funding sources don't really understand that side of the coin, which cannot be measured or reported on, as in KPIs and outcomes reached.

Natural Hazards Research Australia is the national centre for natural hazard resilience and disaster risk reduction, funded by the Australian Government and Participants.

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