



REIMAGINING CONSERVATION FORUM: WORKING TOGETHER FOR HEALTHY COUNTRY

2 - 4 November 2022 Brisbane

Forum summary with key messages

The *Reimagining Conservation - Working Together for Healthy Country Forum* was held on 2 - 4 November, 2022 in Meanjin (Brisbane) on Yuggerah and Turrbal Country. The forum was organised by the North Australian Land and Sea Management Alliance ([NAILSMA](#)), the [Australian Committee for IUCN](#) (ACIUCN) and the [Protected Areas Collaboration](#) (PAC). We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters in Australasia, whose land was never ceded, and pay our respects to Elders past, present and future.

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The ***Reimagining Conservation - Working Together for Healthy Country*** forum provided an opportunity for First Nations people from across Australia to discuss how we can reimagine managing land and sea Country together with non-First Nations conservationists, scientists and protected area managers. The forum was possible due to the generous support of several sponsors and donors. NAILSMA, ACIUCN and PAC have prepared this short interim report that captures key messages from the forum. We apologise in advance for any omissions or misrepresentations. A more complete report will be available in early 2023.

The aims of the forum were to:

- Discuss what 'reimagining conservation' means to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and reflect on a shared reimagining for policy makers and land and sea managers.
- Hear and amplify the voices of First Nations people about where whole-of-country management and management of cultural landscapes is working well, using indicators based on both cultural values and 'western' science.
- Reflect on current policy and program settings to understand what is working and where change is needed.

The forum was attended by over 100 participants with approximately equal numbers of First Nations and non-First Nations people. The forum attracted senior leaders from many sectors including Traditional Owner corporations, non-government and not-for-profit organisations, philanthropic organisations, Commonwealth and State government agencies, universities and private companies. Participants brought diverse expertise including joint management, protected area conservation, cultural governance, ecology, climate change, traditional knowledge, cross-cultural science, economics, legal, agriculture, education and training.

It was unique to have a balance of First Nations people with non-First Nations people who work in conservation, and with First Nations voices amplified. For non-First Nations people it was a valuable and unique opportunity to listen and learn from First Nations people who shared generously from the heart. We acknowledge all participants for sharing their insights, knowledge and lived experiences.

The first day of the forum was dedicated to a First Nations-only focus group of 40 participants (see process in Table 1).

12:45	Introduction to the Forum and its purpose Ricky Archer, CEO, North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA)
13:00	Why are we here and who is in the room? Cissy Gore-Birch, Forum Facilitator & Balangarra Aboriginal Corporation
13:15	Session 1.1 – Reimagining conservation - what does it mean to us?
14:30	Session 1.2 – What is Indigenous-led whole-of-country (land & seascapes) management?
15:30	Session 1.3 – What does success look like and where do we want to be in 5–10 years?
16:30 – 17:00	What are key messages / challenges / solutions from each session on day 1 to introduce at the beginning on Day 2 as a foundation for the forum?

The main sessions of the forum on days 2 and 3 involved all First Nations and non-First Nations participants coming together. A range of topics was explored through panel discussions and group exercises). First Nations people made up the majority of panel participants.

Table 2. Panel topics
Our national/international governance and policy context in working together for healthy Country. What are the opportunities and obstacles?
What is important about weaving the different knowledge systems?
Managing Country together for environmental and cultural outcomes - government and non-government perspectives on successes and challenges.
Indigenous ranger programs - what's working, where can we improve?
Current policy & program settings – what works, what needs to change? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Government commitments ● Reimagining conservation through emerging Indigenous economies
Case studies of respect for Country in practice - what works, where can we improve?
Reimagining financing for environmental and cultural outcomes - what's changing, what opportunities, what concerns?
Reimagining governance and institutional infrastructures that bring together all relevant players to co-shape and co-navigate the system (scalable, place- and region-based). What enablers need to be in place for needed changes to happen?

KEY MESSAGES

Reimagining conservation in Australia begins with:

1. A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

“Can’t talk about conservation without first talking about housing, poverty and lack of self-determination”.

- A rights-based approach to conservation means ensuring that biodiversity policies, governance and management do not violate rights of First Nations people.
- Rights of First Nations people include self-determination, with Indigenous communities having the choice to ensure their social, cultural and economic needs are met.
- Rights include access to and responsibility for looking after Country, which in turn means significantly better health outcomes for individuals and communities.
- Key tools for advancing rights are the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Nagoya Protocol, Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and recognising Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP).

2. FIRST PRINCIPLES - VALUING CULTURE AND RECOGNISING CULTURAL AUTHORITY

Innovation in joint governance arrangements “can only move at the speed of trust”.

“We can’t talk about natural capital without cultural capital”.

- Conservation organisations and agencies are encouraged to listen, respect, and ask First Nations people before they act to ensure their actions are in the best interests of Country and that there are benefits for First Nations people and communities.
- Cultural capital needs to be recognised by ensuring resourcing for cultural outcomes matches resourcing for environmental outcomes.

- Cultural governance mechanisms can only be determined by First Nations people as it may differ in different areas, as determined by local Traditional Owners, Custodians or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

3. WEAVING KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS APPROPRIATELY

“Trusting in 60,000 years of knowledge is a risk that western science needs to take”.

“All partners contribute a thread that builds a bigger picture – weaving a mat based on cultural heritage management that we can all sit on together”.

- It’s time for another scientific revolution whereby First Nations culture becomes fully and wholly recognised as a science, and with First Nations knowledge appropriately woven together with ‘western’ conservation science.
- The 2021 State of the Environment Report marked a milestone in weaving First Nations knowledge with conservation science, and the next step is to build a reimagined national model of evaluation that includes First Nations values and knowledge.
- First Nations knowledge and data sharing needs to be based on Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) agreements and Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) principles.
- Conservation projects can be Indigenous-led and Indigenous-controlled and further shared practice is needed to understand what that looks like.

4. EQUITY IN MANAGING COUNTRY TOGETHER

“Pastoral leases are being handed back to Traditional Custodians who are set up to fail with a background of poverty and disadvantage”.

“The Nature Conservancy supports Traditional Custodians in the successful handback of 88,000 hectares of land in the Murray Darling Basin”.

- Traditional Custodians want to work closely with conservation organisations, and recognise that we are all on a learning pathway in this regard, and cultural competency of non-Indigenous people (e.g. being informed about ICIP) is key to building relationships and trust.
- New successful strategic alliances are emerging between Aboriginal organisations, private investors, NGOs and government, that demonstrate the power of working together with non-Indigenous people supporting First Nations’ custodial obligations.
- To be successful, co-management needs equity in funding, skills, capacity, education, and self-determination.

5. JOINT AND SOLE MANAGEMENT OF COUNTRY

“Institutions need to let go of resistance to letting TOs take control of Country”.

“In 2022, NSW government announces entire transfer of title of NPWS estate to traditional owners over 20 years”.

- For many First Nations people, joint management is seen as the start of the journey towards sole management, not the end.
- A big step was taken by NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service in 2022, to commence a consultation process with First Nations communities across the state to develop a new joint management model for the entire NSW National Park estate.
- Progress in joint and sole management is limited by lack of capacity and funding across all land and sea management initiatives, including Indigenous Protected Areas, the Indigenous Ranger Program, and Traditional Owner Prescribed Body Corporates.

6. INNOVATIVE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

“It’s hard to be green when you’re in the red”.

- Reimagining financing for bio-cultural outcomes can secure economic self-determination for First Nations people, and with legal ownership as a primary condition.
- New economies based on carbon, biodiversity, and native produce are bringing new opportunities for First Nations people. Through these economies, Indigenous rights can be translated into practical opportunities, while maintaining cultural authority and integrity.
- First Nations people should be at the forefront of economic development alternatives to conserve nature. Governments and corporations must actively engage First Nations people in decisions regarding new economies designed to conserve nature. Market mechanisms must be based on respect and rights of local Indigenous cultures, that enable communities to pursue livelihoods that are diverse and independent of mainstream market capitalism.

What next?

A forum report will be shared with participants, networks and available on our websites in 2023.

The organisers are considering the best ways to ensure this forum has a continuing impact to more effectively and equitably include First Nations values, perspectives, knowledge and authority in land and sea management and conservation science. We will use key messages from the forum to start conversations with decision makers and to advocate for real change. Another clear message from the forum was that an event of this nature be held annually, and the organisers invite other prospective partners for sponsorship and to co-design the next *Reimagining Conservation* forum.