

JUNE 2021

First Nations Climate Justice

Written summary of the online public panel



Climate Council and Emergency Leaders for Climate Action acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live, meet and work.

We wish to pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and recognise the continuous connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples flourished sustainably on this continent for over 60,000 years, skilfully managing the landscape and protecting Country for future generations. Sovereignty has never been ceded. We recognise that respect for traditional knowledge and promoting the rights of First Nations communities must be at the heart of responding to the climate crisis.



THE PANEL

On 29 April 2021, Emergency Leaders for Climate Action hosted an all-First Nations panel on *First Nations Climate Justice*.

ONLINE PUBLIC PANEL

First Nations Climate Justice

Rae Johnston FACILITATOR

Tishiko King PANELLIST

Bhiemie Williamson PANELLIST

Mibu Fischer PANELLIST

#FirstNationsClimatePanel

Emergency Leaders for Climate Action

CLIMATE COUNCIL

This written summary follows the main themes explored by the panel over the course of their hour-long discussion. It is based entirely on the panellists' own words and the stories and experiences they shared. Together these offer many insights into the climate crisis from a First Nations' perspective: the impacts and the solutions, experiences of working with non-Indigenous peoples, how climate change compounds longstanding challenges and injustices faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, traditional land and water management, and more. The written summary is an invitation to further explore the issues raised, and to continue listening to First Nations' perspectives on the climate crisis. At the end of each section is a selection of resources for additional learning, and phrases highlighted throughout are further defined in the glossary.

Emergency Leaders for Climate Action offers its heartfelt thanks to Tishiko King, Mibu Fischer, Bhiemie Williamson and Rae Johnston for their time and for sharing their wisdom.



Click on the links throughout this written summary to be taken to the relevant part of the discussion.

Contents

The Panel	1
What does climate justice mean to you?	2
Impacts of climate change on First Nations communities	3
– Coastal and island communities	3
– The 2019-20 bushfires	6
Direct impacts of the fossil fuel industry upon First Nations communities	9
Including traditional knowledge and practices in the response to climate change	10
First Nations communities leading the fight for climate justice	12
– Resisting the fossil fuel industry: Seed Indigenous Youth Climate Network	13
– Holding governments to account: The Torres Strait 8	14
How to be a good ally	15
Final reflections	17
Glossary	18

The Panel



Tishiko King

Tishiko King is a proud Kulkalaig woman from the Island of Masig, Kulkalgal Nation of Zenadth Kes. Tish is the community organiser at Seed Indigenous Youth Climate Network and Our Islands Our Home campaign. During her studies in Ocean Science on the Gold Coast, Tish became passionate and actively involved with grassroots environmental groups and rallies across Australia and overseas. With experience across different industries at CSIRO Oceans and Atmosphere and the exploration and minerals industry, Tish brings a diverse perspective of First Nations and environmental justice. With Indigenous peoples on the frontlines from the impacts and causes of climate change, Tish believes that working towards a sustainable and just future for First Nations people is a fundamental step towards solving the climate crisis.



Mibu Fischer

Mibu Fischer is a Quandamooka saltwater scientist with engagement skills for strengthening partnerships between First Nations communities and the research sector. Her specific interests are around Traditional Knowledge (science) and management practices being considered within modern day fisheries, coastal and conservation management. She joins with other Indigenous and Traditional practitioners to strengthen the global Indigenous voice and leadership in areas of marine research and coastal Indigenous livelihoods. Her goal is to bridge a gap that draws attention to the Indigenous communities facing the frontline of changes to coastlines, ecosystems and livelihoods from climate change impacts.



Bhiamie Williamson

Bhiamie Williamson is a Euahlayi man from north-west New South Wales. He is a Research Associate and PhD Candidate at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University. He studied at ANU and in 2017 graduated from the Masters of Indigenous Governance at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Bhiamie also holds graduate certificates in Indigenous Governance from the Native Nations Institute at the University of Arizona and Indigenous Trauma and Recovery Practice from the University of Wollongong. Bhiamie's expertise includes cultural land management, cultural burning with a focus on southern temperate Australia, and the impacts of disasters on Indigenous peoples.



Rae Johnston

Rae Johnston was our facilitator for the panel event. She is a journalist, producer, editor and proud Wiradjuri woman from Dharug and Gundungurra Country in Western Sydney. Currently Rae works as a Science and Technology Editor for NITV at SBS and is the producer and host of podcasts Queens of the Drone Age, Hear+Beyond and Take It Blak.

What does climate justice mean to you?

“Climate justice... is a simple acknowledgement that the people who are and are going to be most impacted by climate change are the people who have had least to do with producing the problem.”



Bhiemie, 33:00

To view the relevant part of the video, click on the icon

“Climate justice is linked to self-determination and the ability for communities and Indigenous people to make decisions for themselves, and to have resources available to make those decisions. Because it is so unfair at the moment.”



Mibu, 35:35

“It comes back to white Australia acknowledging the dark history and colonial impacts of this nation. The systems that caused genocide on this Country are the same systems that continue to oppress us today. We need to acknowledge that communities have a right to have a final say about what happens on their Country... We should make our own decisions, because they are our own lives. It is only when communities really have the freedom to define their own path that we can really, truly heal from that.”



Tishiko, 36:32

Impacts of climate change on First Nations communities



“When Country is hurting, we are hurting, because we are so deeply connected to this land, to our islands.”



Tishiko, 37:43

Despite contributing the least to the causes of climate change, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are hit first and hardest by its impacts. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experience of climate change is typically of a far more profound and traumatic nature than those of non-Indigenous peoples, owing to the very deep connections between a community and **Country**.

When faced with the impacts of climate change, such as rising seas eroding coastal developments, a non-Indigenous person may be more able to relocate or otherwise adapt to these challenges. Besides being less closely connected to a particular place, a non-Indigenous person is more likely to have the financial means to move.

Drawing on their particular expertise and experience, the panelists offered insights into how climate change is affecting coastal and island communities, including in the Torres Strait, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experience of the 2019-20 fires.



Read more:
Country

COASTAL AND ISLAND COMMUNITIES

Changes to our oceans, fuelled by climate change and burning of coal, oil and gas, are affecting the survival and distribution of species upon which many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have depended for their food security and their livelihoods. As Mibu explains:



“Ocean acidification reduces the ability for carbonate to be available in the ocean. Various species require carbonate to produce structures: think of things like shells and crustaceans. Without the ability to get that within their environment, they become more vulnerable because they are unable to produce their exoskeletons.”



Mibu, 19:16

Ocean acidification, which occurs as the oceans absorb greater quantities of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, is just one change that is affecting the survival and distribution of marine organisms. Rising ocean temperatures are causing species to migrate. The once reliable presence of certain species, as well as seasonal patterns of migration, are changing.



“ Then we have ocean warming ...pushing the ocean’s warmth polewards, to the north and south, and that is actually starting to create species redistributions. We are seeing species from the tropical warmer waters move poleward, and this is starting to also impact on other ecosystems and species abundance. It is impacting on seasonal indicators and cultural species, like the mariner shells in Tasmania.”



Mibu, 19:47

As Mibu summarises:



“ Climate change impacts coastal communities in a myriad of ways. ...It’s not just the food sources, resources, culture and connections to Country ...the changes to the physical environment for First Nations people globally also impacts our ability to contribute to our economy, it impacts our wellbeing and our health - particularly our mental health. It is adding an additional obstacle to already marginalised communities. We’ve already been through so much with colonisation and to have these climate change impacts just adding to that pressure - it’s really sad.”



Mibu, 21:04

Image: “Seawater overflowing a protective sea wall on Sabai, Torres Strait Islands” David Hanslow TSRA.



For many communities in Zenadth Kes (the Torres Strait Islands), climate change poses a truly existential challenge, as rising seas swallow land, homes, and sacred sites. Tishiko explained the situation facing her home island of Masig, and what she experienced on returning there last year:



“As global warming is increasing, we are seeing our oceans rise. And as our oceans are rising, these low lying islands like Masig are seeing king tides erode metres of our island homes.”

 Tishiko, 23:18

“As I went up north at the end of 2020, over the summer, I went to visit my big brother Yessie Mosby - one of the claimants of the #TorresStrait8. I had to pick up the bones of my elders because erosion is damaging our burial sites. As First Nations people we know that these are our spirits of our old people, and it’s a sign of disrespect. It’s desecrating who they are. It’s that heart-wrenching pain in your chest.”

 Tishiko, 23:35

“We are seeing our ecosystems shift as our oceans are warming. ...This is the future of our food security that’s at risk. It’s impacting the way we hunt and practice our culture and traditional ways. Weather events are becoming more frequent and more aggressive. My people are finding it harder to identify those seasonal cues. And all the while, here we are in 2021 still continuing to adapt to the uncertainty of the COVID landscape.”

 Tishiko, 24:14

“My people and our island communities are at risk of becoming refugees in our own Country.”

 Tishiko, 24:56

You can read later about the [Our Islands, Our Home campaign](#), and how Torres Strait Islanders are fighting for their future.

Further Resources

> [How climate change is affecting the Torres Strait. 7.30 Report, 19 April 2021.](#)

THE 2019-20 BUSHFIRES

While most Australians were affected by the devastating 2019-20 fires in one way or another, the impacts upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were particularly severe and wide-ranging.

Firstly, areas impacted by the fires had disproportionately high populations of First Nations communities. As Bhiemie explains:



“At the time it was unfolding, we knew it was hitting in areas that had really high populations of Aboriginal people, right along the eastern seaboard in particular. ...We mapped the demographic distribution of communities affected by those fires. What we found was that in NSW, Victoria, the ACT and Jervis Bay Territory: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 2.4% of the population, in areas directly impacted by fires they made up 4.8%. So Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were twice as likely to be affected by those bushfires.”



Bhiemie, 27:38

Image: “Fire crowning of intermediate tree layer in Western Australia.” CSIRO (CC BY 3.0)



Moreover, as Bhiemie further explains, these demographic patterns only tell one part of the story:



“ Another part of what was unfolding that wasn’t being captured was the incredible impact that those kind of events have on people who are from that place, people who care for that Country, people who associated with that Country, including certain parts of that Country like landscapes, plants, animals, seasons, waterways, all of these things that had just been absolutely smashed because of the fires. No one was really talking about how those fires and events like that impact Aboriginal people in a way that is different to non-Indigenous people.”



Bhiemie, 28:24

“ We started to unpack some of the things that we knew would impact people: things like **totemic plant and animal species** that people associate with. What happens when those totemic plant and animal species are wiped out of the landscape and don’t return? What does that mean for the cultural continuity of the community? ...Even things like **Native Title** and proving land rights and connection to Country. Proving connection to Country is a big part of the Native Title regime. One of the key bits of evidence that people can use to demonstrate their ongoing connection is cultural heritage sites, and so what are the long-term impacts with things like Native Title cases and people’s legal recognition if those sites are wiped out? People aren’t really asking those questions, people aren’t understanding those stories. ...We also examined previous Royal Commissions and independent inquiries. We looked at the McLeod Inquiry (post the 2003 Canberra fires), the Royal Commission into the Black Saturday fires in Victoria ...and what we found was astonishing: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not there at all. Nowhere.”



Bhiemie, 29:05



Read more:

Totemic plant and animal species



Read more:

Native Title

Bhiamie stressed the importance of listening to the communities who were directly affected, of seeking out the stories of traditional owners, and of hearing the stories of how First Nations communities supported themselves when no one else would support them. To the question of whether the communities have recovered:



“ No. There is just a deep and unending sadness that lingers in those places, and may do for the rest of our lives. While people have come to terms with the destruction that was caused, they haven’t come to terms with the extent of their trauma and their grief, and people really need help with that.”



Bhiamie, 49:35

“ And people are angry, so so angry. But it’s not anger that’s crippling, it’s anger that is motivating. People are hungry to get out and start looking after those landscapes again. People are already talking about when’s the right time to put fire back into those landscapes. People are talking about what trees they need to plant, what native plants they need to propagate, what animals they want to bring back. People are talking about all of these solutions. And they don’t need help, but they need support. Looking after the land and helping the land to recover is such an important part of the healing process. Community recovery and recovery of the natural environment - for us they’re the same thing. And that’s where we really need to be supporting local communities who know what they want to do. They just need the resources and the support to be able to do it.”



Bhiamie, 50:20

Further Resources

- > *Strength from perpetual grief: how Aboriginal people experience the bushfire crisis. Bhiamie Williamson, Jessica Weir, Vanessa Cavanagh. The Conversation, 10 January 2020.*
- > *1 in 10 children affected by bushfires is Indigenous. We’ve been ignoring them for too long. Bhiamie Williamson, Francis Markham, Jessica Weir. The Conversation, 2 April 2020.*
- > *This grandmother tree connects me to Country. I cried when I saw her burned. Vanessa Cavanagh. The Conversation, 24 January 2020.*

Direct impacts of the fossil fuel industry upon First Nations communities



“Communities have a right to have a final say about what happens on their Country and to make decisions about their own lives. It is only when communities have the freedom to define their own path that our people can truly heal.”



Tishiko, 17:25

In addition to being heavily impacted by climate change, First Nations communities also face direct threats to Country from the mining of coal, oil and gas. In other words, not only are fossil fuels the chief drivers of climate change - which is disproportionately impacting First Nations communities - but the mining, processing and transporting of fossil fuels can do immense harm to communities and Country even before the fuels are burned.

In many parts of the world, Indigenous peoples have been forced from their land to make way for mining operations and other fossil fuel developments and/or seen their land and waters polluted, threatening their health and security. Right now in Australia, many First Nations communities face a particularly severe threat from the burgeoning gas industry as well as many longstanding threats from coal mining. As Tishiko explains:



“51% of the Northern Territory is covered in exploration licences for oil and gas. If it all went ahead, much of the Aboriginal owned land would have Country polluted by the shale gas industry. ...If [our water table] is polluted by dangerous fracking processes, all of our water is poisoned for those communities in the Northern Territory. Water is life for our mob. Our desert springs and our bushlands are way too precious to risk. ...We have seen now how it affects our health and our culture. We have seen that first hand from our brothers and sisters all the way on Turtle Island over in North America, and how this industry is risky business.”



Tishiko, 16:32

You can read later about [*First Nations communities are fighting to protect Country from the gas industry.*](#)

Further Resources

- > [*Water is Life. Seed Indigenous Youth Climate Network.*](#)
- > [*Protect Country Alliance.*](#)
- > [*Indigenous Elders ask what it will take to stop the NT fracking industry. Rima Martins. The Quo, 28 March 2019.*](#)

Including traditional knowledge and practices in the response to climate change



“The first thing, from the outset, has to be complete respect for traditional knowledge and knowledge holders. It might seem quite obvious, but a lot of people in this space may not exactly have that respect automatically there.”



Mibu, 41:20

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have lived sustainably on this continent for thousands of generations. Through these vast periods of continuous habitation, communities have developed extraordinarily sophisticated knowledge of their local ecology, weather, seasonal cycles, and more. These traditional knowledge systems and associated practices enabled communities to flourish in harmony with their ecosystems, protecting Country for future generations.

On the one hand, today there is growing recognition of the importance of traditional knowledge and practices. Most obviously, the time since the 2019-20 fires has seen an explosion of interest in traditional landscape management and **cultural burning**. On the other hand, panellists talked of the uphill battle to gain respect and support within Australia's more powerful institutions, as well as problematic attitudes from many non-Indigenous researchers. Mibu offered the following advice for policymakers on integrating traditional knowledge into the design and implementation of measures for mitigating and adapting to climate change:



Read more:

Cultural burning



“A lot of people when they get the opportunity to be in the room with knowledge holders, are challenged. And because they are challenged, they don't understand what's going on, and they just go in for the kill, saying that's wrong or doesn't make sense or is not real. All these things. But really people need to start checking themselves, and start trying to sit back and work out why I am uncomfortable with this, why is my view being challenged? Because it's just a different worldview, and it's not wrong.”



Mibu, 41:43

Mibu reflected that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, working to challenge prevailing perceptions and to gain true respect and recognition for traditional knowledge takes enormous amounts of work and persistence:



“ It’s a slow process because it’s institutional change, and systemic barriers that need to come down, which is always a slow process. It’s really hard work, and it feels like you can have all the right conversations, and get all the yeses, and you might only move a millimetre in the right direction.”



Mibu, 42:30

Bhiamie explained that while there had been a very welcome surge of interest in cultural burning since the 2019-20 fires, cultural burning needs to be understood as part of larger systems of traditional land and water management:



“ A lot of the media attention is obviously focussing on cultural burning. And the media attention is really welcome but we can’t just talk about cultural burning at the expense of other cultural land management and water management practices. Cultural burning is fantastic, and is something that Aboriginal people have done so well and for so long, and it is great to see them start getting recognition for that. But to think about it practically: there might be two months in a year when you are able to put fire into the landscape. That leaves ten months of the year, where people aren’t just sitting around streaming netflix and playing playstation. What happens in those other ten months is just as important, and the success of cultural burning relies on effective management over those other ten months as well. So we really need to be having holistic conversations around cultural management practices, and specifically cultural burning.”



Mibu, 38:52

Further Resources

- > [Right Country, Right Fire: A podcast about how Australia’s Indigenous people use fire to care for country. Firesticks.](#)

First Nations communities leading the fight for climate justice



“All around the world, First Nations people, Indigenous people, and people from marginalised groups are on the frontlines of the climate crisis.”



Tishiko, 25:30

Around the world, First Nations communities are fighting hard to protect land, rivers and oceans from both the impacts of climate change and the ongoing assault of the fossil fuel industry. In many many instances, here in Australia and globally, it is First Nations who are leading these fights. Very often these struggles have been waged for years before they come to the attention of the wider public.

Image: “First Nations people leading a public demonstration at the Origin AGM in Sydney, 2019” Lock the Gate Alliance.



RESISTING THE FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY: SEED INDIGENOUS YOUTH CLIMATE NETWORK

The panel highlighted two urgent and iconic fights in Australia, the first being the campaign by Seed Indigenous Youth Climate Network, working with traditional custodians and their communities, to protect Country from the harmful impacts of fracking in the Northern Territory.

For further information, see: nt.seedmob.org.au

“Water is life for Aboriginal communities. Our lands and waters hold our stories, our law, our songlines, our culture and have fed and sustained our people since the beginning of time. Right now, water and our water rights as the original sovereign people of this continent are under greater threat than ever before from irreversible gas fracking & oil drilling, mining, forestry, overfishing, toxic chemical spills, industrial agriculture, cotton farming and the dangerous climate change that these extractive industries cause. We are hurting in the face of unprecedented drought, extreme heat, environmental pollution and the destruction of Country and culture. Enough is enough, it’s time that we look to the leadership of Indigenous people who are building strong, sustainable, self-determining communities.”

See also the earlier section of this written summary on the [*direct impacts of the fossil fuel industry*](#) upon First Nations communities.



Read more:
Water is life

HOLDING GOVERNMENTS TO ACCOUNT: THE TORRES STRAIT 8

The panel also highlighted the case being made by the Torres Strait 8 against the Australian Government through the UN Human Rights Committee under the campaign *Our Islands, Our Home*. This is the world's first case of its kind. Tishiko explains this landmark initiative:



“For people of Zenadth Kes - the traditional name for the Torres Strait Islands - king tides, erosion, inundation, coral bleaching, are threatening their homes and our culture, while the Australian Government refuses to address the climate crisis. Urgent action is needed to ensure that they can remain on their islands, and for the continuation and survival of our culture.”



Tishiko, 25:38

“*Our Islands, Our Home* is a campaign led by eight incredible Torres Strait claimants to protect their homes and they have brought a human rights complaint against the Australian Federal Government to the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations over the Government's inaction on the climate crisis. The demands of the Australian Government are to fund adaptation programs that will allow Zenadth Kes communities to adapt to climate impacts; commit to going 100% renewable in Australia in the next ten years; supporting our communities to build community-owned renewable energy; and transitioning away from these fossil fuels as rapidly as possible through a transition for workers. We need to push the world to increase global ambition and keep warming less than 1.5°C.”



Tishiko, 26:03

For further information, see: ourislandsourhome.com.au

How to be a good ally



“Allies are really important in creating a platform and a safe space for our voices to be heard. ...Being a good ally is making that platform but also being quiet once you’ve made it, and making that space for Indigenous voices to come through.”

 **Mibu, 52:25**

Many of those listening to the panel asked questions about how to be a good ally to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the fight for climate justice.

Throughout the discussion, panellists affirmed that being a good ally begins with truly listening to those on the frontlines of the climate crisis. Further, that while allies can play a valuable role through helping create platforms, it can be equally important to stay quiet once you’ve helped create a platform and to make space for First Nations voices.

Mibu offered the following advice specifically to researchers:



“You need to think about putting funding aside in your projects for engagement, to remunerate people for their knowledge, to remunerate them for their time, to build relationships. It’s not free. You need to be genuine for that to happen and there needs to be money attached to it.”

 **Mibu, 53:47**

Tishiko observed that many non-Indigenous Australians can relate to some degree to the care that First Nations communities have for Country, and that their own connection to place and experiences of the natural world should be a motivator to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in fighting to protect Country:



“Looking at the last year we’ve had here, and all across the world: Australians love being outside. They love being in nature. You go on their Tinder or Bumble profiles, they’re all like ‘nature lover!’ So great, you love nature - so do we, and we come from here! So you should be advocating just as much as us, because you get that same feeling that we’ve had for our whole lives. You get it, that minute that you’re out there in the ocean, on your surfboard, hiking, snowboarding down a mountain.”

 **Tishiko, 46:47**

Bhiamie shared that despite the enormous interest in cultural burning since the 2019-20 fires, practitioners are still fighting for recognition where it really matters.



“ We’ve got a lot of really good allies that we work closely with and yet we kind of seem to still struggle to get allyship in the really big institutions in this country. For anyone who wants to see what we’re talking about, just think about the last year and a half and in the incredible interest in cultural land management and cultural burning, and yet the Bushfires and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre, which many people watching will know about, and which is to become a brand new permanent institute, released last month a disaster research portfolio that will set up natural hazards research over the next decade. You look at it and we’re nowhere in there. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And you think how can it be that we’ve had such interest and that all of these doors have opened and these are the conversations we are having and yet we are still left out? It is just extraordinary and my mind just explodes that this continues to happen. It’s just not good enough. We shouldn’t be fighting for space anymore. We should just be enriching the lives and the livelihoods of people in this country, all who enjoy it and who live here and who call it home and who care about it. It’s like two different ships going at different speeds and heading in different directions with this stuff. You don’t really know where it’s heading.”



Bhiamie, 58:38

Further Resources

- > [How to be a good Indigenous ally. Summer May Finlay. NITV, 26 January 2021.](#)
- > [How to be an ally to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Alice Curry. ReachOut.com.](#)
- > [What can I do? Reconciliation NSW.](#)
- > [Demonstrating inclusive and respectful language. Reconciliation Australia.](#)

Final reflections



“Our communities are our greatest strength and we need to keep going. Whilst I’m hopeful, I don’t feel confident that things will change. I don’t feel confident that this country gets it.”

 **Bhiamie**, 1:00:25

Asked to share their hopes for the future, panellists shared a mix of exasperation at continued recklessness from governments and corporations, and the continued struggle for First Nations voices to be heard, but also hope that comes from the strength and resilience of their communities.



“Looking at our current landscape at the moment: our national leaders are using public money right now to fund companies like Origin, Santos and Empire Energy to frack Country, that will exacerbate our emissions, that will affect First Nations people not just here but our brothers and sisters in the Pacific and all across the world. ...That’s concerning and it really deeply hurts me. But I am hopeful because there is change and there is advocacy and not just from the environmental movement. People think that climate justice is just about the environment but it’s also through education, it’s through health, it’s through art and there is a massive shift and I love that. And so I do have a vision for the future where systems of injustice are torn down, and sustainable and community-led solutions can rise up to their place, that there will be effective policies of systemic change. ...Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must have that seat at the table. It must be place-based, it must be deliberative, and culturally safe. Our involvement must be sincere, and in order to achieve real First Nations justice, I think we need to be able to lead that space. This extends to respecting our sacred sites and ensuring more First Nations voices to Parliament. It means reconciliation. It means **Treaty**. With all the people out there doing lots, I do see hope. ...To all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: we have strength and resilience, and I’ve never seen it so much ever in my life.”

 **Tishiko**, 54:57



Read more:
Treaty



“Hope is a strange word. ...It’s never an easy question. I feel hopeful about what our future holds ...working with the strength of community, building those relationships, and really living the lives of community members and people that we work with. And our own family members enrich us and sustain us and that really keeps us going. So really hopeful about that kind of stuff but then conversely I feel a bit hopeless about a lot of things as well.”

 **Bhiamie**, 57:28

“We are in the fight, not going anywhere. It’s really up to non-Indigenous people to really pick up this fight and walk this walk with us.”

 **Bhiamie**, 1:01:01

Glossary

These explanations of terms used in this written summary are reproduced from [CommonGround.org.au](https://www.commonground.org.au).

Common Ground is a First Nations-led not-for-profit working to shape a society that centres First Nations people by amplifying knowledge, cultures and stories.

Country

“For First Nations people, “country” encompasses an interdependent relationship between an individual and their ancestral lands and seas. This reciprocal relationship between the land and people is sustained by the environment and cultural knowledge.

...The interdependence between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the land is based on respect - while the land sustains and provides for the people, people manage and sustain the land through culture and ceremony. It is because of this close connection, we see that when the land is disrespected, damaged or destroyed, there are real impacts on the wellbeing of Indigenous people.”

Cultural burning

“First Nations fire management uses a deep understanding of Country to identify specific locations in an appropriate area and lighting small, controlled fires. It has to be done in the right conditions including the right season, humidity, temperature and wind.

To undertake traditional fire burning, First Nations people must first learn to read the local trees and plants, understand soil types, topography and weather conditions. Careful consideration is also given to the animals living in the area, and how they will move and survive during the controlled fires. This knowledge requires a strong relationship with Country and the landscape.

Traditional fire burning methods assess specific fuels and remove those that would drive larger fires during summer (in Southern and Eastern Australia), or during the late dry season (in Northern Australia).

These fires burn slowly and are controlled so the temperature of the flame does not exceed what the landscape can tolerate. Some areas are burnt thoroughly, some just singed, and others are left to grow. This leaves patches of Country that are burnt to regenerate over the coming season, while other patches continue to provide strong ecosystems for local fauna and food production.

This method ensures that there are always living areas in the local ecosystem, and some that are in a stage of regeneration. But a single ecosystem is never completely damaged.”



Read more:
[Country](#)



Read more:
[Cultural burning](#)

Native Title

“Native title is the legal recognition that some First Nations people have rights to certain land through their traditional laws and customs which predated the British. This act sets the rules for dealing with land where native title still exists or may exist, setting out arrangements for who can access and use the land in question.

To have native title recognised, First Nations people must prove they have a continuous connection to the land and have not done anything to break that connection (such as selling or leasing the land).

According to the latest numbers from the National Native Title Tribunal, there have been 498 native title determinations since the historic decision. However, the process can be lengthy, emotionally exhausting and also require lots of time and other resources from First Nations people and communities groups. Many say there is unfinished business that requires a whole other series of reforms.”

Totemic planet and animal species

“First Nations people often consider animals to be equally as important as humans. In First Nations kinship systems, individual people can be linked to specific animals through their totems. Each person has a totem. Totems can be animals, but can also be lands, waters, or geographic features.

Totems create a network of physical and spiritual connections between people and the world. First Nations people learn more about their totems as they go through life. An individual is accountable to their totems and must ensure they are protected for future generations.

First Nations people who have an animal totem have a responsibility to look after that animal. For example, if someone has a kangaroo totem, they have a unique connection to kangaroos and have a responsibility to look after them and maintain that connection. The way that an individual does things like ceremony and hunting would be defined by their totem; a totem may prescribe a responsibility to learn particular songs, dances and stories.

Through totems, First Nations people keep a strong connection between animals, people and Country.”



Read more:
Native Title



Read more:
Totemic plant and
animal species

Treaty

“Treaty” is one of the elements of reform set out in the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#).

From Common Ground:

“This nation has unfinished business. Australia is still yet to recognise the ancient jurisdictions of First Nations law. We have to address these differences through agreement-making or Treaty. A Treaty is like a contract between two sovereign parties. In this case, it would be a formal agreement between the Australian Government and First Peoples.

A Treaty could recognise First Nations people’s prior occupation of the land and the injustices we have endured. It could offer a platform for addressing those injustices and help establish a path forward based on mutual goals.”



Read more:
[Uluru Statement
from the Heart](#)



emergencyleadersforclimateaction.org.au



climatecouncil.org.au