



**NATIONAL
INDIGENOUS
LAND AND
SEA
STRATEGY**

Discussion Paper: An Interview on Climate Change and Indigenous people



Australian Government
Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation



The ILSC GROUP

PEOPLE. COUNTRY. OPPORTUNITY.

This document is a summary of a discussion with Damian Morgan-Bulled, Yorta Yorta Nation and Emily Gerrard, Comhar Group. This conversation is intended to generate a broader discussion and may not represent the views of the ILSC.

Across Australia, climate change is impacting Country with more intense cyclones, fires and extreme weather events, saltwater inundation of freshwater systems, and erosion of beaches and coastal vegetation. These events are impacting access to Country and the distribution and availability of food, disrupting infrastructure and critical services including water supplies and transport routes, and leading to loss of cultural sites and ceremony places and opportunities for Indigenous people to make a living.

Indigenous people across remote and urban centres are disproportionately impacted by climate change as its impacts compound existing socio-economic disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous Australians. With Indigenous communities' wellbeing deeply intertwined with the health of country and cultural assets, as the landscape changes, the psycho-social health of communities is also threatened.

To address climate change, we need to rapidly decarbonise our economy and support large-scale climate resilience. This presents multiple opportunities for Indigenous people to engage with and benefit from emerging markets, corporate and government investment. These opportunities are supported by a growing recognition of Indigenous rights and the importance of Indigenous land and sea management.

The ILSC spoke to Damian Morgan-Bulled and Emily Gerrard about the impacts and challenges, as well as opportunities for Indigenous Australians in mitigating climate change and the role of the ILSC.

1 What are some of the key climate change trends impacting Indigenous people?

Damian Morgan-Bulled: Higher land (1.4°C) and sea surface (1.1°C) temperatures on average since the early 20th century are directly impacting on the Traditional Knowledge indicators in country. These impacts on First Nations peoples affect our wellbeing, our connections to country, our economic sustainability and even our ability to be on country. Displacement from country, particularly where adaptation and resilience are most critical, could potentially lead to more catastrophic events. For example, when there is a loss of riparian biodiversity, it can indicate that floods are coming. If people are displaced from country, there is no-one there to see what is happening and act. At the same time, government policy dictates when water is released for water storages. These policies are not always tied to what the landscape needs from an Indigenous perspective and have the potential to exacerbate climate change impacts on country and culture. Climate change and environmental policy should incorporate Indigenous knowledge of country and Indigenous culture as it is developed and applied.

Emily Gerrard: International investment, regulatory and disclosure trends and business-led initiatives to address climate change and environmental decline are relevant to Australia and raise challenges and opportunities for First Nations peoples. These developments include the expansion of 'market-based' mechanisms. Early examples of market-based mechanisms to address environmental issues include Kyoto Protocol linked emissions trading or carbon markets, water trading, native vegetation and biodiversity offsetting.

More recently, land-sector and coastal projects related to these environmental markets are broadly known as 'nature-based solutions' (refocusing on the value of nature and natural systems in addressing climate change challenges), which draw together climate change and biodiversity considerations, including climate adaptation and mitigation¹ activities.



Gabby Gumurdul on Gunbalanya Station,
Kunwinjku country, West Arnhem Land, NT
Photo Credit: Pam Daniell

The evolution of 'nature-based solutions', as well as increased focus on environmental markets, creates potential benefits for First Nations peoples, but also tensions and challenges due to differing interests, values, beneficiaries and competing land use considerations.

Ensuring First Nations peoples can access relevant information and advice to inform decisions about carbon project opportunities and 'nature-based solutions', or to explore other investment or market-based options, is central to developing First Nations lead initiatives and forming equitable partnerships with industry and other stakeholders. It is acknowledged that not all First Nations communities consider these uses and developments to be appropriate, which must be respected as part of informed decision making.



Photo Credit: Matt Newton & Tasmanian Land Conservancy

2 What are some of the key challenges and opportunities climate change presents for Indigenous people?

Damian Morgan-Bulled: Predicted average land temperatures across Australia would make some areas virtually uninhabitable sooner rather than later, due to constant days of temperatures of 40°C plus. The challenge to stay in situ on country and invest in resilience infrastructure, rather than having to move off country to live comfortably, would place a large resource and capacity issue squarely at the feet of First Nations people. It would become the responsibility of First Nations people to come up with the right climate adaptation measures for their country.

Emily Gerrard: The future use and habitability of areas will be a key challenge, which has the potential to significantly impact on livelihoods, food and water availability, country and cultural responsibilities of First Nations peoples. Changes to the climate may also impact on native title, land rights and other legally recognised interests in land and waters.

Damian Morgan-Bulled: A do-nothing approach is no longer an option as climate change is already impacting access to Country and culture. For example, coastal sea level rises, has the potential to force communities to evaluate moving to higher elevated areas to continue Traditional practices or face the real prospect of losing their culture places.

Emily Gerrard: Coordinated and planned responses, driven by local communities and with local leadership, are preferable to reactive and mandated movement of people from areas that become uninhabitable or unsafe. An area may become uninhabitable due to factors such as inundation, sanitation, water quality and disease impacts, as well as unviable essential infrastructure. Climate change vulnerability assessments to assess impacts of climate change and extreme weather on assets of investments, such as infrastructure, housing, and land-uses, are increasing. This can help identify issues early and instigate a planned response. Early engagement with First Nations peoples, including with respect to their cultural interests, is a key part of planned and managed retreats.

In canvassing ways to mitigate climate change and associated risks, there has been growing interest in investment in 'green' development such as renewable energy, carbon, and biodiversity and natural resilience projects. There has also been increased interest in biosecurity investment, including monitoring and managing impacts and indicators of significant change to landscapes, seascapes, plant and animal diseases and ecosystems. Innovation, mitigation and adaptation activities and investment bring opportunities associated with new 'green' developments and nature-based activities including economic development, employment and business skills.

These developments carry opportunities for First Nations peoples, including through formal regulatory and policy pathways (such as cultural heritage and native title agreement making), as well as community benefit investment, social licence initiatives, procurement and enterprise development. For example, First Nations people can run savanna fire management to reduce carbon emissions, take part in joint or sole management opportunities of national parks, provide biosecurity services, or strengthen the recognition and use of their sea rights. Land sector carbon, biodiversity and environmental projects are similar to other types of land uses and developments. Issues such as access, permission to use, take or plant, fence, disturb ground, erect structures etc. all need to be worked through, as well as who benefits and how benefits are shared between the people or parties involved.

In general, these types of opportunities tend to be more sustainable, culturally-aligned and inclusive of a focus on Indigenous peoples' rights and interests. However, the increased investment and development can create private interests and the potential for commercial competition on Indigenous lands. This again raises the challenge of Indigenous empowerment in decision-making and ensuring people have access to the information and expertise required to position themselves at the front, not back, of these opportunities and ensure unique traditional and cultural interests and rights are respected and protected.

Damian Morgan-Bulled: The opportunity for funders and government is to work with First Nations people to build capacity to ensure we can prepare for extreme natural events as regions across the country begin to meet modelled climate outcomes. Opportunities exist to build some resilience to manage extreme weather and natural events including building stronger housing able to withstand increased intensity of cyclones, protection of mangroves and reefs to shield coastal zones from severe weather and erosion, and the construction of heat-resistant housing to reduce the impact of heatwaves.

3 What climate change mitigation and adaptation opportunities exist for Indigenous people?

Damian Morgan-Bulled: We, Indigenous Australians, are at the forefront of climate change, being the first to be impacted, be it in the remote, rural, or urban settings of Australia or globally. As a people we have been adapting to a changing environment since settlement of our lands. We have experienced mass deforestation and manipulation of water for agriculture, just to name a few.

We need to be equipped to act and afforded Western science knowledge to build on our capacities and plan for both mitigation and adaptation. It will mean that a level of trust is built with western scientists, researchers, modellers, and all levels of government policymakers. This must be coupled with Traditional Knowledge Systems to work directly on the ground in planning out mitigation and climate change adaptation projects. This is going to be important going forward, so we need to be aware of the linkages and gaps that identify who will be developing and delivering those projects at the operational level.

Emily Gerrard: More broadly, in response to the need for climate change mitigation and adaptation action, there is a need for increased private and public sector innovation, policy reform and stimulus for green development that respects First Nations peoples' rights and interests. Innovation, reform, and stimulus will further assist with addressing the area-based impacts and investment and action opportunities discussed earlier. A key challenge in relation to this growing interest and investment is raising awareness of best practice approaches to engagement with First Nations peoples (early and respectful engagement and meaningful agreement making). There are also emerging land use and development opportunities linked to land and cultural interests held by Traditional Owners or their representative corporations/organisations.

In relation to adaptation, further planning and preparation for the changes and challenges we will all face is important. This includes issues such as the availability of resources such as water and food, commercial enterprise forecasting, and maintenance and safety of essential infrastructure, housing and services. Within this, there is an opportunity to properly value, promote and engage Traditional Ecological Knowledge, First Nations peoples' expertise, in the management of land, water and natural and biological resources throughout Australia.



Traditional Owners meeting on country to talk about the Savanna Fire Management Program

Emily Gerrard: In relation to examples of regional climate change and adaptation planning, the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) has undertaken adaptation and strategic planning, including work on preparing for future challenges and opportunities. Since 2007 it has been undertaking scientific investigations of key climate-related changes in the region.² In 2010 it released its first Torres Strait Climate Change Strategy, which was updated in 2014. This was followed in 2016 by the Torres Strait Regional Adaptation and Resilience Plan. Drawing on these plans, TSRA secured funding for a new seawall to protect the low-lying island of Saibai; established a climate resilient communities pilot to consider how to fast track resilience and reduce vulnerability; started a community heat mapping project to assess and mitigate heat stress risks; and is exploring options to reduce the region's carbon footprint, such as setting up solar power.³

4 What is the relevance of net zero emission 2050 targets for Indigenous communities?

Damian Morgan-Bulled: Due to the distribution of Indigenous peoples throughout Australia higher temperatures will impact us no matter what setting we are in, from coastal sea country to interior desert, and from remote, to rural to urban environments.

Global commitments to stabilise temperatures at well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels⁴ provide First Nations people with comfort and confidence to continue efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change, including through projects and partnerships. Achieving net zero emissions by 2050 will require more urgent action on the part of key policy makers that will impact how Indigenous people will act to manage and plan for resilience and adaptation outcomes within their country.

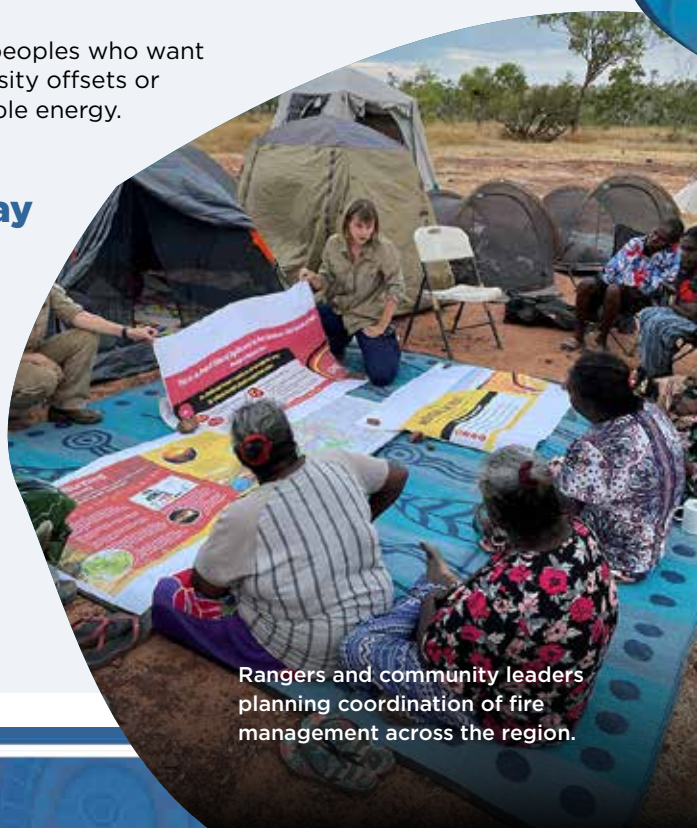
Emily Gerrard: The net zero target, as agreed under the Paris Agreement, at an international level is a driver for action, innovation and investment. A number of governments, including the Australian Government, have set a net zero target by 2050. However other national (and sub-national state and territory) governments and businesses have brought forward an aim to achieve net zero to well before 2050. For example, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory are already setting respective 2030 and 2045 targets.⁵ Net zero targets drive new and creative ways to engage and deliver opportunities, but their urgency may mean First Nations peoples' interests are overlooked or undervalued. It is not clear where the opportunities for Indigenous people to engage with government policy and net zero strategies or to centre Indigenous interests in related initiatives will grow, but there are new enterprise opportunities, including in relation to new technologies, as well as ways to complement Traditional Knowledge and more sustainable approaches to land management and consumption.

The corporate world is also increasingly setting its own emission reduction and net zero targets. These initiatives are frequently integrated with social responsibility investment and a bundled approach to supporting environmental, social and cultural outcomes, including a 'do no harm' principle. As identified earlier, these commitments present opportunities but also risks: rapid timeframes for delivery may affect the ability to engage, explore and commit to actions that are mutually beneficial and respect First Nations peoples' rights and interests.

Corporate targets may create opportunities for First Nations peoples who want to extend ranger programs and services in relation to biodiversity offsets or markets, or produce in carbon credit units or produce renewable energy.

5 What role can Indigenous people play in reducing emissions?

Damian Morgan-Bulled: Indigenous Australians as a collective of people contribute very little to overall global greenhouse emissions in terms of a sector of the broader public. First Nations peoples are well placed through the Indigenous Estate to influence a change from fossil fuel to more renewable energy sources for all. This could involve divesting high emitting carbon enterprises and leading a change to lower emission targeted enterprises across sectors, whilst protecting country.



Rangers and community leaders planning coordination of fire management across the region.

Emily Gerrard: First Nations peoples' hold rights and interests in relation to a significant proportion of Australia's land and sea.⁶ In general, these rights and interests are formally recognised through land rights, native title and land and sea management arrangements. The nature and scale of these interests highlight the significant role First Nations peoples can play in addressing climate change. Indigenous peoples, with their expertise and significant interest holdings, are essential to effective climate change adaptation and mitigation responses. In particular, effective adaptation to climate change will need to involve the Indigenous Estate.

First Nations peoples are experts in the sustainable management of Australia's land and sea, including the management of some of Australia's most important conservation areas and carbon sinks. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has recognised the critical role that Indigenous peoples play in stewarding and safeguarding the world's lands, waters and biodiversity, as well as the unique vulnerabilities of Indigenous peoples to a changing climate.⁷

There are significant opportunities to partner with, or better enable First Nations peoples to drive, emissions reductions in Australia, including through improving the awareness and engagement of new industries (leveraging and improving on experiences from traditional mining, energy and resources projects).

6 What economic opportunities could climate change related activities generate for Indigenous people?

Damian Morgan-Bulled: Enterprise and economic opportunities span many industries and include renewable energy projects, native food products, tourism experiences that focus on low emission outcomes, and restoring country. In all instances, these projects can be strengthened through well planned processes in partnership with both government and philanthropic funders.

Emily Gerrard: There are formal and informal engagement, agreement making, and procurement opportunities associated with emerging climate change innovation and development. Native title, land rights and cultural heritage laws require engagement in several development circumstances and, increasingly, the private sector wants to apply good or best practice approaches to their engagement with First Nations peoples. This means going beyond what is legally required. These circumstances create genuine opportunities for economic development and enterprise, including through Indigenous land use and other agreements. Benefits can include job creation, support for contracting, procurement and business development in a variety of direct and indirect services.

There can be challenges and potential limitations with emerging opportunities, particularly where Indigenous land tenures and associated rights are limited and projects are commercially constrained. However there remain opportunities, including in-kind benefits and agreement or consent elements which support non-Indigenous interest holders' social licence and engagement aims. Early engagement with First Nations peoples is central to maintaining scope for real and meaningful project benefits.

7 What role could the ILSC play in supporting Indigenous people in the climate change space?

Damian Morgan-Bulled: The ILSC could lead the policy direction of corporate Australia in partnership with First Nations people on the ground by advocating for lower emission projects and project partners that place a higher value on reducing their own emissions. This could include a focus on renewable energy-based projects or ensuring that what is procured has an emission reduction plan in place.



Ranger performing a controlled burn



Emily Gerrard: Climate change raises several considerations and potential pathways for the ILSC. In terms of engagement and empowerment, this could include the provision of relevant information, checklists, expert contact information, links to relevant ILSC research and reviews, peer-to-peer links and guidance material to assist First Nations peoples plan for or respond to opportunities or requests, as well as work through challenges and opportunities relating to business and policy activities associate with net zero (or low carbon) developments.

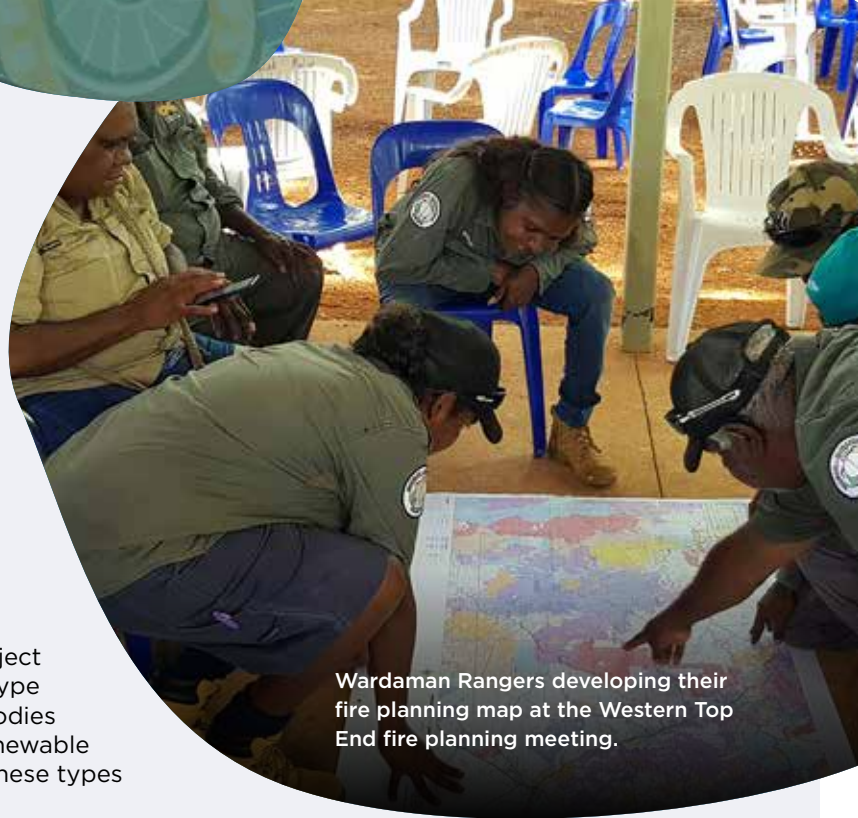
These materials could be used by communities who are able to start planning for opportunities and challenges, or by communities who are approached by third party developers about project and need to access information efficiently. This type of information could also assist representative bodies and may be particularly relevant to carbon or renewable energy projects, given the increased interest in these types of projects.

In terms of the ILSC's investments and activities, the ILSC could consider a review of its activities for alignment with land and water asset management practices which enable access to emerging opportunities and minimise or avoid significant challenges associated with climate change. This could include reviews to check forecasting, assessing impacts of climate change on assets, potential financial or enterprise development risks, and assessing and implementing resilience activities.

Damian Morgan-Bulled: Finally, developing a solid plan to achieving net zero in any organisation is no longer a nice to have, it is a need to have.

8 Related Discussion Papers

The Caring for Country Discussion paper is available at www.ilsc.gov.au



Wardaman Rangers developing their fire planning map at the Western Top End fire planning meeting.



Endnotes

- 1 Climate change adaptation can be described adjusting to emerging and expected changes in climate and related effects. This may include changing behaviours, systems, infrastructure and other aspects of the way we live to protect ourselves from the impacts of climate change and find new ways to live with altered environments. Climate change mitigation generally refers to actions to prevent or reduce the emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, which in turn are intended to prevent or minimise global average temperature increases.
- 2 Torres Strait Regional Authority (2016). Torres Strait Adaptation and Resilience Plan 2016-2021. Report prepared by the Environmental Management Program, Torres Strait Regional Authority, June 2016 https://www.tsra.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/12372/TS-Regional-Adaptation-and-Resilience-Plan-Final.pdf
- 3 Torres Strait Regional Authority (2016). Torres Strait Adaptation and Resilience Plan 2016-2021. Report prepared by the Environmental Management Program, Torres Strait Regional Authority, June 2016 https://www.tsra.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/12372/TS-Regional-Adaptation-and-Resilience-Plan-Final.pdf
- 4 The Paris Agreement has a more ambitious aim of stabilising global temperatures at 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>
- 5 ACT Climate Change Strategy 2019 – 2025 (Canberra, 2019) https://yoursayconversations.act.gov.au/download_file/3572/647 Tasmania: Net Zero by 2030 Emissions Review Pathway Review Summary Report, (Hobart, 2021) [https://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/587342/Tasmanian Emissions Pathway Review - Summary Report.pdf](https://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/587342/Tasmanian-Emissions-Pathway-Review-Summary-Report.pdf)
- 6 As at 2016 the Indigenous estate is estimated to comprise 57% of Australia noting the substantial overlap between Indigenous owned land, Indigenous managed or co-managed land, and land subject to other special rights. Jacobsen R, Howell C, Read SM 2020, Australia's Indigenous land and forest estate: separate reporting of Indigenous ownership, management and other special rights. ABARES technical report, Canberra, December, DOI: doi.org/10.25814/bqr0-4m20.
- 7 IPCC, 2019: Summary for Policymakers. In: Climate Change and Land: an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems - <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/chapter/summary-for-policymakers/>



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A feedback report summarising what we have heard from you and how we will use this important information will be available on the website.



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