

Co-design, cross-cultural communication and climate change: considerations for engaging with First Nations peoples



In February 2020, the Earth Systems and Climate Change Hub convened a workshop at the Australian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society conference in Fremantle where Traditional Owners and researchers could share experiences and advice for successful collaboration. Important considerations that were identified in that discussion are summarised here with a view to providing guidance for co-designing climate-change-related research projects with First Nations peoples.

Climate change is having a major impact on Indigenous peoples, their country and culture. Understanding of the environment based on the observations and experience of thousands of years of custodianship of country is being challenged by recent human activities that are changing the climate. There are many benefits for western science by incorporating traditional knowledge in efforts to understand the past and current changes. At the same time, First Nations peoples can benefit from incorporating the understanding of climate change from western science in planning for the future.

While the benefits of bringing these two knowledge systems together are obvious, the steps to do so are not. Although well-intentioned, researchers in the past have not always recognised the importance of consulting Traditional Owners when working on country, collaborating to deliver mutual

benefits, and acknowledging the value of traditional knowledge and its ownership. Co-design of research – that is, including Traditional Owners in research inception, development and delivery with a view to mutually useful and useable research outputs – offers a framework for ensuring that the oversights of the past are not repeated in the future.

Co-design is complex, involving many factors that researchers may not have understood in the past. The following list of considerations is far from comprehensive but offers a useful starting point for co-designing research with First Nations people.

Understand that there are many peoples, many cultures

Australia's First Nations people comprise many hundreds of nation groups, each with their own culture, protocols, knowledge and connections. It is important to ensure that the Traditional Owners

that you are engaging with are the right ones to talk to about the country, community or culture of interest. This is not only in consideration of nation group, but also within that group who the appropriate person or people to speak to are. Elders are recognised custodians of traditional knowledge and protocols and should always be consulted.

Include Traditional Owners from the start (and all the way through)

If a research project affects Aboriginal interests on country, Traditional Owners should be contacted and involved as early in planning and developing the project as possible. This involvement should not be tokenistic and should include Traditional Owners in a meaningful and respectful way. Quite rightly, Traditional Owners want to have input to and be kept up to date on work that affects them and their country. This could be as simple as

making time for regular meetings or providing regular updates, but in all cases, it should meet the needs of the Traditional Owners as well as the researchers.

Build (and be prepared to maintain) trusted relationships

Long before a proposal is drafted, it is important that everyone gets to know, respect and trust each other. Trusted relationships cannot be forced but have to develop over time. Trusted relationships also extend over time – a one-off engagement is not a 'relationship'. This interpersonal dimension is not generally factored into research projects but is an essential component of working with Traditional Owners. In this context, as in life generally, building relationships can be complicated and requires considerable effort. Relationships also do not generally follow timelines and frameworks, unlike other aspects of research projects, which may be challenging for researchers.

Appreciate different timelines

Building and maintaining trusted relationships takes time, as does setting up common ground for research activity. This almost never aligns with project and funding schedules. Once the project is up and running, deadlines that are important in the project context have little meaning outside of it. Schedules need to be flexible to accommodate time required for protocols and practices outside of the research program.

Ensure free, prior and informed consent

Free, prior and informed consent is a fundamental principle recognised in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, among other international legal instruments. It recognises that Indigenous peoples have the right to be part of any decision-making process that affects them or their

country, and that they can do so with no pressure or coercion (free), with sufficient time before decisions are made (prior), and with access to all available information (informed). Consent may be given, withheld or negotiated, and can be withdrawn at any time. A memorandum of understanding or research partnership agreement is an excellent way to document the terms of free, prior and informed consent and engagement generally. It will ensure that everyone is aware of what to expect and what is expected of them from the start.

Respect the provision and ownership of traditional knowledge

In the past, intellectual property of Traditional Owners has not been recognised, with traditional knowledge being freely given but not valued or acknowledged by western researchers. It is now understood that traditional knowledge is not a free resource, there for the taking. Just as western science researchers are paid, payment for services to provide traditional knowledge may also be required. This needs to be factored into project budgets. Similarly, just as western science researchers are appropriately acknowledged in research publications and products, so too should Indigenous collaborators. Remember many Traditional Owners have been through cycles of new researchers, same research – often with little to show for it. Ensure you do your groundwork, so no-one's time is wasted.

Identify benefits to country and community

Be clear about the benefits to country and community of your research and be willing to work with Traditional Owners to deliver these. At a minimum, the benefits should include information resulting from your research (in a relevant, useful and accessible format);

however other benefits are possible, including capacity building opportunities for Traditional Owners. If a project has no benefits to country or community, it is not reasonable to expect cooperation and collaboration of the Traditional Owners. Like everyone, Traditional Owners have limited time and financial resources, and competing demands on both, so it should not come as a surprise if priority is given to projects with tangible returns for country or community.

Ensure you are giving as well as taking

If, in developing your research concept, you come across relevant information for the country and communities you hope to be working with, consider providing it to the Traditional Owners early in your engagement. During your project ensure Traditional Owners are informed and updated and at its conclusion, ensure research outputs come back – at the very least copies of papers and reports. Meetings, tailored communication products and ongoing contact are also appropriate.

Remember that connection to country is forever

Research programs and projects come and go, but the connection of First Nations people to country does not end. Be mindful that your legacy, good or bad, will stay with the Traditional Owners you have worked with after you move on so conduct yourself, personally and professionally, accordingly.

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