



SUMMARY FACT SHEET

# National First Peoples Gathering on Climate Change



Earth Systems and  
Climate Change  
Hub

National Environmental Science Programme

**The purpose of the National First Peoples Gathering on Climate Change (the Gathering) was to celebrate, learn from and enhance First Peoples-led climate action. The organisers (the First Peoples-led Steering Committee supported by the NESP Earth Systems and Climate Change Hub) set out to strengthen kinships, cultural identity and well-being, and to strengthen caring for Country by using both Indigenous and scientific knowledge.**

The Gathering supported this overall purpose through five aims, including to:

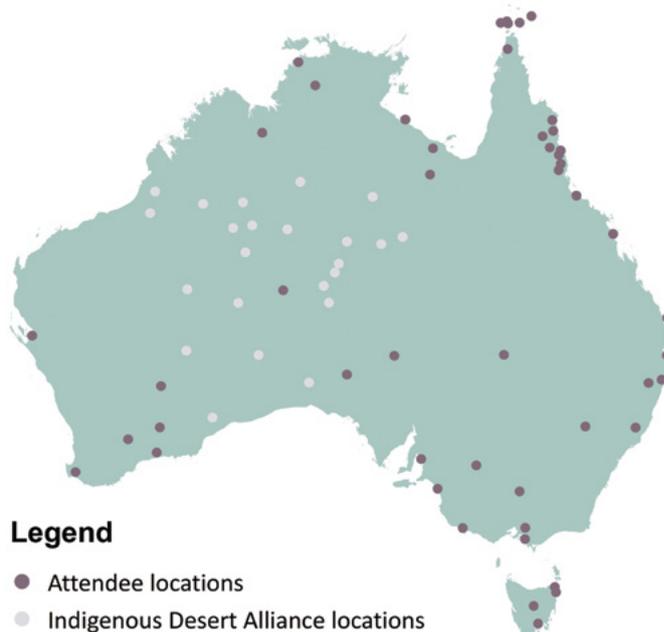
- Bring Traditional Owners together to share with one other about climate change
- Share scientific information in a format useful for Traditional Owners
- Identify options for policy to respond to climate change
- Provide tangible information to take back to communities
- Highlight First Peoples' climate change actions.

### **Traditional Owners sharing climate change knowledge with one another**

Traditional Owners shared their experiences in understanding and responding to extreme events associated with climate change.

Gimuy Walubara Yidinji and Yirriganjdi Traditional Owners welcomed the Gathering participants in a wonderful Welcome Ceremony. Field trips led by Gimuy Walubara Yidinji and Yirriganjdi Traditional Owners to the reef, rainforest and beaches allowed talking together with Country. Yarning circles were held back in town, bringing forward many common issues.

Building networks and supports between First Peoples and their Countries was a vital theme in discussions about solutions.



#### **Legend**

- Attendee locations
- Indigenous Desert Alliance locations

*First Peoples groups with delegates at the Gathering.*



‘An eye-opening experience. A very illuminating and insightful journey that is relevant to all life on, in, and above the land of our Ancestors! I’ll hopefully spend more moments with everyone in the future to be part of the evolving developments in the area of climate change.’

– Gathering participant, 26 March 2021



*Gavin Singleton, Yirriganjdi Traditional Owner, talks Gathering participants about climate change actions on Country*

## Extreme events and climate change are affecting First Peoples

The Gathering highlighted how extreme events exacerbated by climate change are affecting First Peoples through marine heatwaves, bushfires, heatwaves on land, extreme water events (wet/dry), cyclones and sea-level rise. First Peoples and scientists made joint presentations to start the later discussions on Country and in yarning circles.



‘We are concerned about marine heatwaves because they’re killing our seagrass and making our waters unhealthy. Seeing changes over time is concerning... but if we put our heads together, we can get a positive outlook.’

– Nykita McNear, Malgana Traditional Owner



Ngurrara Rangers

**Marine heatwaves** are causing loss of seagrass, kelp forests and mangroves. Coral reefs are bleaching. Culturally important animals like dugong, turtles, fish, sea snakes, crabs, conch-shells and prawns are suffering. First Peoples’ cultural activities, e.g. making kelp baskets and shell necklaces, are reduced, leading to a loss of health and wellbeing.

**Bushfires** are more intense, resulting in erosion, loss of wildlife e.g. flying foxes, and shifts from forest to savanna. Intense fires in the wrong place at the wrong time put a heavy emotional and mental toll on First Peoples. Cultural sites are damaged in the big fires. Aboriginal Rangers are playing a vital role in controlling bushfires and bringing back cultural burning.

**Heatwaves** are very intense on the lands in central Australia, which is warming faster than other parts of the continent. Mulga is dying, waterholes are drying up, and people are finding lots of dead kangaroos. Reading Country is becoming harder. Heatwaves affect Elders. Rangers need to spend more time on Country to watch, look and listen to the changes and become part of the climate change conversation.

**Extreme water events (both dry and wet)** are more frequent and more intense. Flooding destroys middens, birthing sites, scar trees, and droughts lead to loss of freshwater turtles and many other culturally important animals and plants. Droughts and floods interact with other impacts on waterways like loss of creek-side vegetation, water pollutions, industries that extract water, feral animals, weeds and bushfires. Climate changes and cultural impacts cannot be separated.

**Sea-level rise** is causing flooding of fish traps, middens, burial sites and erosion of these and other culturally significant sites. In the Torres Strait, islands are going under water, erosion affects food and fuel delivery and people may become climate refugees. Sharks, rays, fish, eels, insects and the monsoon are out of step with their seasonal patterns.



The future generation



Credit: Queensland Fire and Emergency Services



K’gari (Fraser Island) fire, October 2020.

**Cyclones** are increasing in intensity, causing habitat loss, risks to animal safety and life, risks to people and infrastructure, and land and sea management difficulties. However, they do have positive impacts include halting economic threats to Country, a reduction in carbon pollution as industries stop operating, cooling the reef, and a short-term boost to the economy from recovery efforts. Cyclones can clean up Country but are getting more vicious.

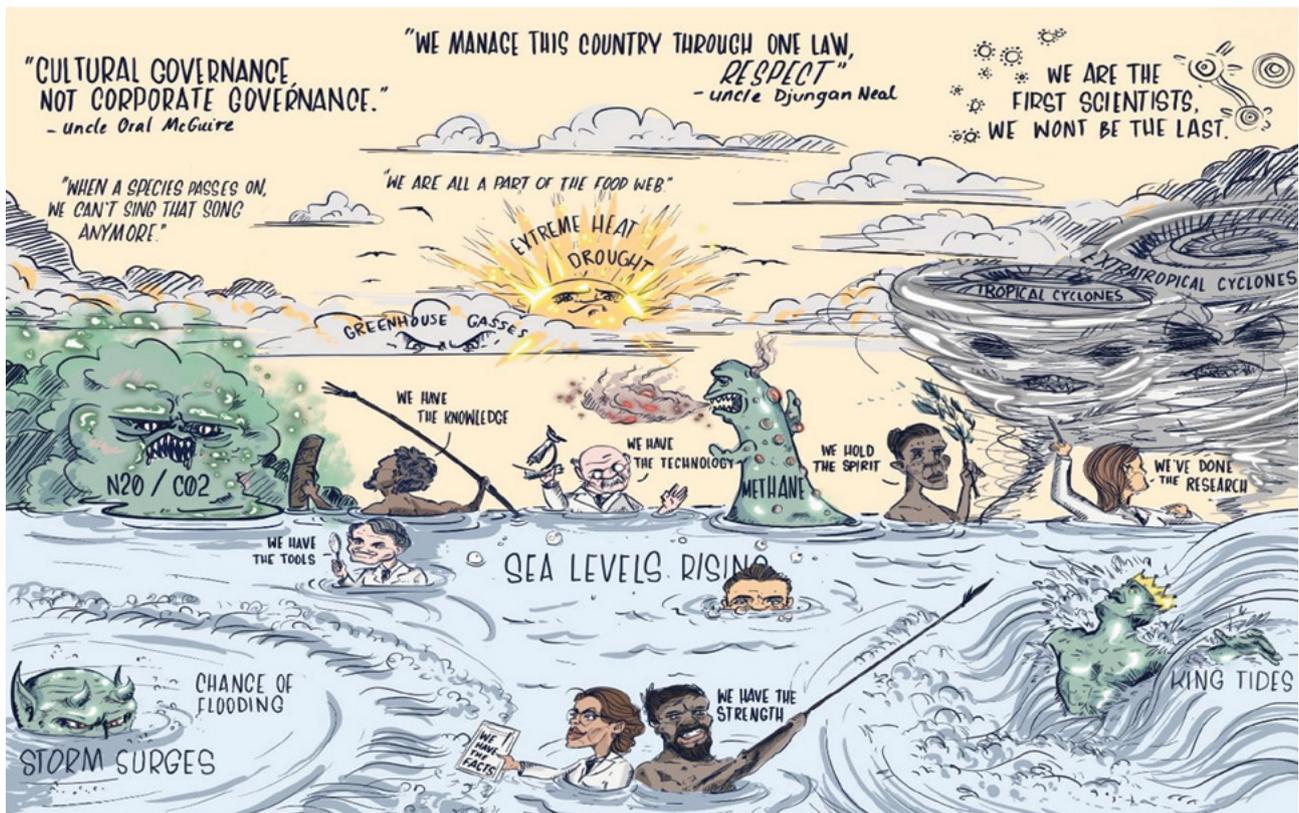
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‘Relocation is the last thing we want, we are doing everything we can to save our communities ... Torres Strait is part of the whole country, but climate change is a reality for us. We see it every day ... Protecting our islands and our country together with this whole group, the Gathering is very important to be part of for us.’

– Hilda Mosby, Torres Strait Regional Authority



A fish trap 15 years ago at Koinmerburra - now covered with water.



Credit Rhys Paddick



Participants of the Gathering meeting a cassowary

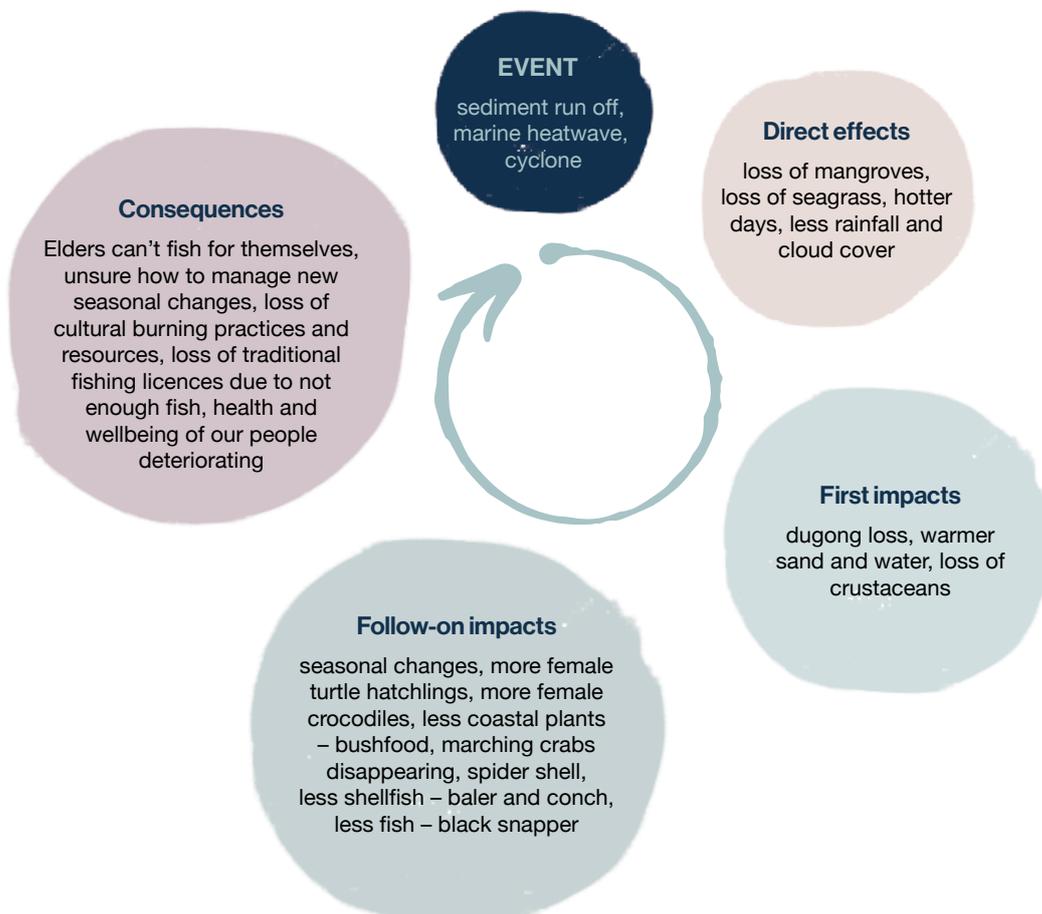
### Cascading impacts

First Peoples and scientists found discussions of cascading impacts a useful way to bring their knowledge systems together. Climate change has created a series of cascading environmental impacts affecting resident plant and animal species, and in turn, Traditional Owners, through their deep connection to Country.



'The island that sits in the middle of Trinity Inlet [near Cairns] has a cassowary story. The cassowary lies there today ... In 2030-40 that island will be underwater. So this system will be gone in a sense. It will always be remembered. When we do that story about the cassowary and that dance we won't be able to connect it to this country. We will, but it will be underwater ... We can't let our totem species go, gindarji (cassowary), emu, freshwater turtle (bungaru) or saltwater turtle (njiwiju). We need them - they don't need us.'

– Gudjugudju Fourmile, Gimuy Walubara Yidinji  
Traditional Owner



## Policy

The Gathering prepared a First Peoples Statement on Climate Change to guide future policy direction.

### 2021 First Nation Peoples Statement on Climate Change

We, the participants attending the Gathering, acknowledge the voices of the Gimuy Walubarra Yidinji and Yirraganydji, whose lands we meet upon in 2021. Building on the 2018 statement from First Peoples on Yorta Yorta land, we as First Nation Peoples of Australia recognise that overwhelmingly scientific and traditional knowledge is demanding immediate action against the threats of climate change.

When Country is healthy, we are healthy. Our knowledge systems are interconnected with our environment and it relies on the health of Country. This knowledge is held by our Elders and passed on to the next generation. Solutions to climate change can be found in the landscapes and within our knowledge systems. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the tools, knowledge, and practices to effectively contribute to the fight against climate change. We have lived sustainably in Australia for over 100,000 years.

First Nations people of Australia contribute the least to climate change, yet the impacts of climate change are affecting us most severely. We at the Gathering are calling for the following:

- A commitment from Federal Government to financially support an annual First Nations-led dialogue on climate change.
  - The annual dialogue should be a place where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders can discuss the changing climate in their communities and is a valuable input to inform policy at all levels.
- A commitment for federal-level funding for an Indigenous-led climate action hub, which would fund both Indigenous-led mitigation and adaptation climate change projects. These projects could focus on:
  - Domestic emissions reductions through enabling reliable renewable energy supply to off grid communities, Indigenous-led nature-based solutions.

- Indigenous-led adaptation planning for communities and the recording and transmission of knowledges and experiences across the country.
- The establishment of a Torres Strait Island taskforce, led by First Nations peoples of the region, to drive critical and tangible climate change solutions for island communities under present and immediate threat.
- We call on all Australians to join us in acting on climate change and in protecting the environment. To work collaboratively with us, learn our laws and our ways and respect our knowledges to find solutions together to combat climate change.
- Climate action that links all levels of government so our people and communities can work collaboratively in an Indigenous-led fight against climate change.
- The right to manage Country. First Nations peoples must be involved in the national dialogue about climate change and be engaged on any decision that impacts us and our Country. We call for these rights to be respected and observed on an international, national, state and local level. Our knowledge must be included in climate management frameworks.
- To look beyond ourselves, to include flora and fauna in climate planning and climate management frameworks so the plants and animals that support us can be represented.

We are seeing changes in the environment and the declining health of Country and people. We can see our native flora and fauna are suffering and the conditions of our lands, waters, seas and skies declining. For some of our people it is an emergency because the climate crisis has already caused widespread damage. Our connection to Country represents climate science developed over countless generations, listen to us, work with us and together we can enact a change that will shape our future for all Australians.

## Connecting across the globe

Participants enjoyed connecting with the global climate change agenda.



‘Making connections with other mobs, learning we all have our own concerns, but we’re all interconnected and seeing the value or opportunity in this.’

– Traditional Owner participant at the Gathering

**James Rattling Leaf, a Lakota leader** from South Dakota, USA, shared information about the **Group on Earth Observations Indigenous Alliance** which he co-founded. The Alliance links Indigenous groups to strengthen cultural heritage with global observation science, technology and Indigenous data sovereignty. A Lakota Elder explained how they need to bring together earth and spirit, Earth and sky both spiritually and technically. This builds on their traditions of using symbols.

**Taha Cowen, a Melukerdee** woman from southeast Tasmania shared information on global climate change commitments through the **Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**. This included how Indigenous people from all over the world are engaging on international climate change processes through the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform.



Facilitative Working Group of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform at the 2019 meeting of the Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC

**Birrin Hooper, a Bundjalung** man shared information about the **Convention on Biological Diversity**. A new post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework will be published in late 2021. First Peoples are at the forefront of protecting biodiversity 3% of the world’s population are protecting 80% of its biodiversity. In Australia, Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas are leading the way.

## First Peoples-led Co-design

The Gathering was developed through a First Peoples-led process of co-design. A Steering Committee of First Peoples, whose members received authorisation as a delegate from their respective First Peoples groups, made all the decisions and were supported by an Organising Committee from the ESCC Hub. The Steering Committee developed Co-design principles to guide all the work of the Gathering and ensure adherence to ethical standards.

The Steering Committee recognised that, although, well-intentioned, researchers in the past have not always worked well with First Peoples and acknowledged the value of traditional knowledge and its ownership. They produced a consent form for First Peoples to protect their Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, and a Code of Conduct for scientists based on the Co-design principles.

Challenging circumstances from the COVID-19 pandemic meant that initial plans to hold the Gathering on Country proved impossible. Hosting in Cairns by Gimuy Walubara Yidinji and Yirrganydji with inspirational field days on Country proved a good compromise. The Gathering between Traditional Owners has proven the benefit of peer-to-peer learning in this context. The actions to bring science to Traditional Owners in ways that are useful, and achieve wider recognition of First Peoples roles and better policy, are still very much works-in-progress.

Evaluation comments from participants in the Gathering:

*Thank you so much for a wonderful experience. Highly enjoyable and gained so much knowledge to take back to my Country (First People participant)*

*How many conversations are we going to have before our leaders do something? (First People participant)*

*Having access to scientists is crucial to building our knowledge. All were friendly and easy to approach (First People participant)*

*No evidence of how white science can help, my country has been dramatically affected by white man’s science (First People participant)*

*Not clear how western science was needed or whether wanted by traditional scientists (Scientist participant)*

## Working together

Both First Peoples and scientists committed to continue the dialogue and working together.



*Presenters from the sea level rise and cyclones theme.*



‘The big message that we have heard is that we need to focus on solutions. We need to start the journey together that can be passed on from community to community and help to transfer knowledge in any way we can. We need to continue the engagement.’

– Simon Marsland, National Environmental Science Program (NESP2) Climate Systems Hub leader, CSIRO



‘Coming together as one voice and people. We are stronger together and our connection to Country is needed more now than ever in our lifetimes. With our little footprints we can provide a big future for next generations. A future our next generations are proud of. We are thankful for our ancestors and our people’s resilience and provide a spirit that is still strong in our knowledge and our hearts. We can face a situation of doom and gloom and still bring strength to one another.’

– Bianca McNear, Malgana Traditional Owner, Co-Chair of the Steering Committee for the Gathering.

## Acknowledgements

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