

Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management

Final report

Kate Brown¹ and Shaun Hooper¹

1. NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water





Version	Release history	Date
1.0	Initial release of document	5/6/2026



Australian Government

Natural Hazards Research Australia receives grant funding from the Australian Government

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We acknowledge the traditional custodians across all the lands on which we live and work, and we pay our respects to Elders both past, present and emerging. We recognise that these lands and waters have always been places of teaching, research and learning.

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Publisher:

Natural Hazards Research Australia
 ISBN: 978-1-923057-70-8
 Report number: 86.2026
 June 2026
 Cover: Kate Brown



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Acknowledgements

Country

Natural Hazards Research Australia (the Centre) and the researchers acknowledge the Country and the ongoing connection of the Traditional Custodians who, through Law/Lore, kinship and ceremonial practices care for the lands, seas and skies where we work and live. We pay our respects and gratitude to Elders past and present and all Aboriginal people reading this report.

This resource may contain images or names of deceased persons in photographs or historical content.

Contributors

We would also like to acknowledge our gratitude for the contributors to this report who have dedicated themselves to truth-telling and supporting Aboriginal-led research in a culturally respectful and effective way to understand the barriers to, and ways forward for Aboriginal caring for Country in New South Wales:

- Aboriginal caring for Country practitioners who participated in the yarning research
- Aboriginal authors (especially women) who have published about their lived experience caring for Country
- Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peer reviewers
- The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water for supporting this project
- Donella Andersen, Nature Edit for editing with your head and your heart.



Executive summary

Since the Dreaming, Aboriginal peoples have cared for Country through holistic, relational systems of governance grounded in cultural Law/Lore, kinship and ceremony. These knowledge systems have sustained biodiversity, cultural identity, and community wellbeing across New South Wales (NSW) for thousands of generations. Today, caring for Country practices offer critical insights and capabilities to address contemporary environmental challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss and increasing frequency and severity of natural hazards. In response to widespread calls for Aboriginal-led land and sea management, the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), in partnership with Natural Hazards Research Australia (the Centre) and Aboriginal practitioners, undertook a statewide research project to understand the conditions necessary to support scalable, Aboriginal community-led caring for Country. The project is called *Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management (OALSM)*. However, on advice from Aboriginal practitioners these practices became referred to as caring for Country in later communications. The research explored the alignment of Aboriginal knowledge and management systems with existing policy and land management structures and identified ways to enable caring for Country practices at a landscape-scale across NSW.

Through literature review, policy analysis and extensive yarning with Aboriginal Elders, land managers, rangers and community leaders, the research revealed both persistent barriers and substantial opportunities. Barriers included fragmented governance, short-term project funding, policy tokenism and marginalisation of women's leadership. Aboriginal rights remain under-implemented, and cultural obligations are often excluded from land management frameworks. Despite these barriers, the project highlighted strong community aspirations, cultural resilience and deep place-based knowledge. Aboriginal communities are transitioning from land rights to land use, asserting their responsibilities as cultural custodians and leading innovative, relational approaches to conservation and healing Country. NSW Government initiatives, such as Aboriginal ranger programs, joint management reforms and Treaty development are very positive steps but also require sustained investment and structural change.

The key insights of the research findings were used to design and preliminarily test policy barrier identification and remediation to support government, institutions, land managers and partner organisations identify and resolve barriers to caring for Country. The tool encourages two-way or two-eyed seeing approaches which are frameworks for knowledge-sharing and collaboration that value both Indigenous and western ways of knowing. Integrating Aboriginal perspectives alongside western frameworks helps to uncover biases and hidden assumptions that may exclude or misrepresent Aboriginal relationships with Country. The policy tool can be used as a diagnostic tool for existing policies and during policy design in conjunction with two-eyed seeing methods to reveal hidden assumptions and evaluate unintended policy impacts and barriers to caring for Country.

The key recommendations are:

- embedding Aboriginal, especially women's, governance and cultural authority in all levels of decision making by recognising kinship, obligations and spiritual relationships to Country
- true reform that acknowledges Aboriginal obligations to care for Country as valid and lawful, not just as symbolic rights
- long-term, flexible and culturally grounded funding is also essential to support intergenerational knowledge transfer, cultural and spiritual practice, Aboriginal-defined economic models and holistic wellbeing as integral to caring for Country.

Together the project's insights, recommendations, communication and support tools lay the foundation for a transformative shift toward Aboriginal-led, culturally grounded caring for Country across NSW, guided by deep biocultural knowledge systems and enduring partnerships.



End-user statement

Laura Babian, Director Conservation & Restoration Science, Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water

Why this research matters

Caring for Country by Aboriginal peoples, and particularly Aboriginal women, is foundational to building community resilience to climate change, disasters, the conservation and restoration of nature and Aboriginal culture. The two companion reports *Understanding barriers to caring for Country* and *Understanding women's barriers to caring for Country* provide powerful insights into the barriers that limit Aboriginal peoples' cultural authority and ability to lead land, water and cultural management.

For DCCEEW, these findings can directly inform how we can create more inclusive policies, programs and partnerships that strengthen Aboriginal-led resilience, respect cultural governance and ensure Aboriginal people are supported in their roles as leaders and knowledge holders in disaster prevention, response and nature and cultural recovery.

Key findings

The *Barriers to caring for Country report* identifies barriers in policy, governance exclusion, and a lack of recognition for Aboriginal Law/Lore and knowledge systems as critical obstacles to Aboriginal leadership in land and disaster management.

The *Women's barriers to caring for Country* report highlights how Aboriginal women face additional gendered barriers, including exclusion from decision making, inadequate resourcing of women's roles in cultural governance, and erasure of women's responsibilities in Law/Lore, kinship, ceremony and environmental stewardship.

Both reports emphasise the need to embed Aboriginal governance and knowledge into climate resilience strategies, recognising that Aboriginal women's cultural roles are vital to maintaining healthy Country and community safety.

Why these findings matter to DCCEEW

DCCEEW is committed to delivering on NSW Government priorities such as Closing the Gap and the NSW Plan for Nature. These reports offer evidence-informed, culturally grounded insights that help us:

- identify and address structural barriers in our programs and partnerships
- better support Aboriginal women and men as equal leaders in cultural fire, biodiversity and climate resilience initiatives
- align state-level policy with community-led cultural governance and land-based practices that reduce disaster risks and improve recovery outcomes.

How the findings are useful for policy, operations and strategy

Policy development: The insights are being used to inform and contribute to the NSW Plan for Nature and the review of the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Act.

Operational improvements: The findings could support DCCEEW in reviewing and redesigning co-management, land access and grant funding systems to remove barriers to Aboriginal women's participation.

Strategic planning: These reports are informing cross-agency planning processes to better integrate cultural governance into bushfire management, climate adaptation and emergency response frameworks.



Implementation guidance

To act on these findings, DCCEEW will:

- promote internal Winanga-li cultural safety training modules for all staff and contractors working in disaster, land and environmental programs
- promote the inclusion of Aboriginal science concepts into the Nature Strategy.

We recommend the Centre also use these findings to guide research investments and practitioner engagement models that centre Aboriginal leadership, respect cultural obligations and support place-based partnerships for disaster risk reduction.



Introduction

Aboriginal peoples have managed Country through sustainable practices deeply rooted in Aboriginal cultural values for millennia. These practices have long been essential to the health and resilience of Australian ecosystems, which have depended on caring for Country practices and methods for their continuity. Caring for Country approaches offer significant contributions to ecologically sustainable practices across NSW, and as awareness increases, it becomes crucial to integrate Aboriginal values, perspectives and practices into conservation and land management policies and practices.

Mounting environmental challenges and increasing frequency and severity of natural hazards led to widespread calls for the implementation of caring for Country practices in NSW, with numerous government inquiries and policies recommending stronger Aboriginal leadership in land and sea management. However, to enable implementation of caring for Country at a landscape scale and ensure it is led by Aboriginal communities, there are some barriers that must be resolved.

This research project was funded and supported by the Centre and conducted by NSW DCCEEW in partnership with Aboriginal practitioners. It sought to identify the barriers and opportunities for caring for Country implementation across NSW. The project aimed to strengthen foundational understanding of how these practices interact with existing policies and explored how governments could better support Aboriginal communities to lead and deliver caring for Country on their own terms. The research undertook an intersectional analysis of cultural and gendered systemic barriers, providing critical insights via practical recommendations on opportunities to operationalise caring for Country. This foundational knowledge is essential for achieving broader outcomes, including the revitalisation of Aboriginal culture; improved biodiversity and conservation practices; strengthened social, cultural and economic outcomes for Aboriginal communities; enhanced resilience in the face of increasing frequency and severity of natural hazard events; and more effective and culturally grounded policy responses to climate and conservation challenges.



Background

Aboriginal communities in NSW have been sustainably managing the environment through the cultural practice often referred to as 'caring for Country'. In response to increasing landscape change, habitat loss and species extinctions and the frequency and severity of natural hazard events driven by climate change, there are growing calls for implementing caring for Country practices.

Aboriginal community responses to greater leadership and engagement

The 'Always Was, Always Will Be Aboriginal Land' movement in Australia asserted Aboriginal people's ongoing connection to their lands and cultures and contributes to fulfilling their cultural obligations to care for Country. 'Always Was, Always Will Be Aboriginal Land' has come to symbolise the Aboriginal land rights movement in NSW since its use in the early 1980s by Barkandji Land Rights activist, the late Uncle William Bates. Uncle William led the campaign for the return of Mutawintji National Park, the first national park returned to Traditional Owners in NSW. The 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report states: '18.1 Indigenous land management aims to protect, maintain, heal, and enhance healthy and ecologically diverse ecosystems, productive landscapes and other cultural values.' (Commission, 2020, p. 387).

This movement acknowledges that Aboriginal people in NSW have cared for, renewed and maintained their relationship with their lands since the Dreaming. Traditional knowledge and cultural practices are crucial for its ongoing sustainability and survival. Aboriginal people in NSW seek to assert their rights and maintain their cultural identity while emphasising the importance of traditional knowledge and cultural practices for environmental sustainability. This concept is supported by the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which recognises and underscores the spiritual and cultural connection between Aboriginal peoples and the land, which are fundamental aspects of caring for Country practices.

'This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished and coexists with the sovereignty of the Crown.' Uluru Statement from the Heart (Convention, 2017)

The shift in Aboriginal people's assertion of their rights presents numerous challenges for Aboriginal communities to contribute to objectives of social, cultural and economic outcomes from caring for Country and address issues arising from landscape and climate change and increasing natural hazards. This is a social shift that Aboriginal communities in NSW need to consider as they move forward in response to increased land management opportunities.

NSW support for Aboriginal leadership and caring for Country

The NSW Government is actively supporting Aboriginal involvement in land management through implementing caring for Country in conservation reforms initiatives, reforming the Aboriginal joint-management program, and developing a Treaty framework to support Aboriginal community aspirations. The NSW Government has invested in Aboriginal ranger programs to develop skills and create meaningful career pathways for Aboriginal people in caring for Country.

In 2025 the NSW Government announced its plans for a 12-month consultation process with Aboriginal communities across the state to explore their views on a treaty or other formal agreement. This process is led by three independent Treaty Commissioners to ensure it remains community-driven and not government-directed. The consultations aim to reach Aboriginal people in all regions of NSW, including metropolitan, rural, regional and remote areas, ensuring broad participation and representation in shaping the future of Aboriginal-state relations (Consulting Aboriginal people on desire for a treaty process, NSW Government, 2025). This



project was designed to undertake the necessary research to develop the knowledge and understanding that supports Treaty outcomes.

The *NSW Closing the Gap Implementation Plan* (NSW, 2022) recognises that Aboriginal people maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical, and economic relationship with land and waters, committing to:

- increase Aboriginal legal rights and interests over land and sea by 15% by 2030
- improve access to inland waters and cultural fishing rights, ending prosecutions for cultural fishing
- establish a taskforce to improve the interaction between Native Title and Land Rights systems
- pilot new models to expand Aboriginal land ownership and management
- strengthen joint management arrangements to reflect Aboriginal aspirations and support self-determination. To support Aboriginal-led conservation and sustainable use practices through joint management and land activation.
- recognise and embed Aboriginal cultural, spiritual and ecological relationships with Country in land and water management.

The *Independent Review of the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 Final report* (Independent Review, 2023) found the Act was not meeting its objectives in recognising Aboriginal peoples' roles in conservation. The review identified significant potential to integrate Aboriginal ecological knowledge, recommending a new nature-positive architecture for NSW. The NSW Government's response (Premier's Department, 2024) was 'committed to exploring, in partnership with Aboriginal stakeholders, new and better ways to support Aboriginal people to connect with and care for Country.' Tailored Aboriginal engagement is planned to ensure Aboriginal people's views, knowledge, values and interests underpin the response including:

- building genuine partnerships to deliver both biodiversity outcomes and benefits for Aboriginal communities
- recognise the commitment of time and resources by Aboriginal organisations, communities and people
- seek free, prior and informed consent
- respect Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property rights.

The treaty consultation process offers Aboriginal communities in NSW a chance to shape formal agreements that could strengthen their rights to care for Country, including land, water and cultural heritage. If the dialogue with Aboriginal people and the NSW Government is supportive, a treaty could provide a formal framework for recognising Aboriginal peoples' rights to care for Country, including stronger access to land and waters, protection of cultural heritage and support for traditional ecological knowledge in environmental management. It could also enable long-term agreements that empower Aboriginal communities to lead land and sea governance, co-design conservation strategies and activate cultural and economic opportunities grounded in self-determination. In addition, the Plan for Nature commitment to support Aboriginal people to connect with and care for Country, Aboriginal communities may have greater opportunities to lead and co-design environmental management frameworks and embed cultural values and traditional ecological knowledge embedded in legislation, planning and conservation practices. These reforms may support Aboriginal-led caring for Country initiatives, enable greater access to land and water, promote joint management of public lands, and create pathways for economic development through cultural and natural capital programs.



Research approach

Aboriginal community-led landscape-scale implementation of caring for Country represents a significant shift in land management paradigms. There are various potential implementation models involving multiple tenures. It is therefore necessary to understand the scope of the challenges and benefits inherent in Aboriginal communities implementing caring for Country on a broad landscape scale. The research focused on the following research questions:

1. Values research - how can we identify Aboriginal community values and knowledge systems and how do these relate to Australian mainstream land management and conservation approaches?
2. Policy - how can we identify pathways that support existing land management objectives while prioritising Aboriginal community values and knowledge systems?
3. Implementation - what needs to be considered in the implementation of culturally appropriate caring for Country responses to address contemporary challenges while considering capacity needs, empowering Aboriginal community participation and leadership, and maintaining Aboriginal cultural practice, so that it is not lost in the implementation of caring for Country at a broad scale?
4. Reporting - how can outcome measures for caring for Country initiatives be designed and implemented in ways that are meaningful to Aboriginal communities and inform existing land management?

To investigate these questions, the following research approaches were used:

Policy and literature review

A thorough examination of existing research, policies and case studies related to caring for Country and landscape management in NSW and other relevant contexts was undertaken. This helped identify gaps in knowledge, best practice and potential areas of improvement. Researchers with previous experience in policy development identified existing policies in NSW relevant to caring for Country implementation; however some key policies are currently being reviewed (this is addressed in the *Understanding barriers to caring for Country* report). Therefore, a policy assessment tool has been developed.

The yarning process: a cultural research method

Caring for Country practices are something that lives in people's stories, memories and behaviours, not just in academic articles or policies. That is why this project used yarning as our main way of listening and learning from Aboriginal practitioners. Yarning is more than just a research method; it is a cultural practice, a way of building relationships, sharing knowledge and respecting different voices and methods of communication. Instead of a strict set of interview questions, we brought open ears, minds and hearts to listen deeply and respond adaptively and thoughtfully to the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Yarning allowed Aboriginal people to speak in their own way, at their own pace, about what matters to them. Through this process, deep truths emerged about barriers, but also about strength, wisdom and resistance.

The yarns were held across different parts of NSW, in both urban and regional places. Participants included a wide range of Aboriginal people: Elders, cultural fire practitioners, Aboriginal rangers, land council representatives, Aboriginal staff in government and people doing quiet cultural work in their own communities and land. Some spoke from personal pain and loss, others from professional experience, and many from both. All yarns were grounded in trust, cultural safety and the understanding that their stories would be respected and protected.



To keep that trust, we de-identified contributions so people could speak freely. We also invited participants to review drafts of the report before publication, respecting them as co-authors of this work even if not cited. Yarning and storytelling are never linear, rather they weave between topics as our rivers and winds do. Sometimes a story would circle around several themes before landing on a point (or hinting at it). This weaving is a cultural way in which many Aboriginal yarn 'around something' rather than directly, which is the western approach to conversations. It brings strength and resilience as it is the way Aboriginal knowledge is shared: connected, relational and deeply layered within ecological and social/cultural systems.

Ethics approval

The project aimed to demonstrate best practice in Aboriginal-led research by seeking ethics approval, even though it was not a formal requirement for a service delivery organisation. To support this goal, a strategy was developed to manage the ethics process, and an application was successfully submitted. Unfortunately, the ethics application process became a barrier to Indigenous-led research as it was unable to accommodate the culturally appropriate, Indigenous research methodologies and approaches of the researchers. This led to the ethics application process itself being identified as a barrier to Indigenous-led research, the project and operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management at a landscape scale in NSW.

The ethics process and assessment criteria seemed to be designed for non-Indigenous researchers working with Aboriginal communities to ensure ethical research. However, the outcome for this research was that it excluded Indigenous researchers from working with their own people using culturally and contextually appropriate approaches. This was demonstrated in the amount and volume of feedback requests on the ethics application, for example, the committee required a draft of detailed questions to be asked of yarning participants to be included in the application, however our methodology wasn't an interview, with a formal set of questions, but an iterative and adaptive yarn with participants. In addition, the committee requested a set list of all yarning participants be provided, however we were using an Indigenous method of participant referral from our participants to ensure we yarned with all the right people.

This placed the Indigenous researchers in a difficult situation to navigate walking in two worlds. Ultimately it was decided it would be unethical to force conformity onto the Indigenous researchers and participants which would represent a further act of colonisation and silencing of Indigenous voices and perspectives. Therefore, the project proceeded ethically without ethics approval, and this approach was supported by the yarning participants. This demonstrated barrier to Indigenous-led researchers in the academic and institutional ethics applications needs to be addressed and was raised by the researchers in feedback.

Research pathway

This project was intended as an initial phase of a pathway towards first understanding the Aboriginal community aspirations for caring for Country in NSW. Followed by scoping the barriers to operationalising caring for Country on a landscape scale. The primary objective was to determine the most effective ways to facilitate and support Aboriginal communities in leading and implementing caring for Country on a broad landscape scale through the following stages:

- **Stage 1** (this project) the aim is to bridge the knowledge and understanding gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives in land management, conservation and sustainable development in NSW. This stage focuses on foundational understanding of the critical issues affecting how caring for Country can be implemented.
- **Stage 2** research should look at how the learnings from Stage 1 research can be applied to resolving the challenges identified.



- **Stage 3** of the project should build upon the insights gained from the previous stages, focusing on the practical implementation of caring for Country as the primary management approach in selected case study locations across NSW. With the aim of applying the lessons learned to real-world scenarios and observing how caring for Country practices can be effectively implemented into land management policy.

By implementing several case studies in NSW, Stage 3 will be instrumental in demonstrating the effectiveness of caring for Country practices and informing future policy development and implementation strategies to empower Aboriginal communities.

This report recommends DCCEEW continues with Stages 2 and 3 by embedding these stages into business as-usual activities as well as any new or emerging policy or programs.



Research findings

The research findings are detailed in the project outputs and summarised below in this report:

1. *Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management literature and policy review: summary report*
2. *Introducing Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management project video*
3. *Understanding barriers to caring for Country report*
4. *Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management final video*
5. *Understanding barriers to women caring for Country report*
6. *Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management Hazard Note*

Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management literature and policy review

Caring for Country practices are relational, cultural, ecological and spiritual

- Caring for Country is deeply connected to Aboriginal Law/Lore, Country, kinship and cultural obligations. It includes fire, food, ceremony, water management and knowledge sharing.
- Caring for Country is a holistic worldview and practice, not just environmental management; it is also spiritual, intergenerational and tied to wellbeing.
- Land, sea and sky Country are interconnected in a relational system not divisible as often conceptualised in western governance models.

Challenges in implementing caring for Country in NSW

- Caring for Country in NSW faces complex policy, legal and funding barriers.
- Short-term project funding restricts long-term cultural and ecological care.
- There is a lack of strategic coordination across agencies and jurisdictions.
- Aboriginal rights are often symbolically acknowledged but not pragmatically supported in law and practice.
- Women's leadership and knowledge can be marginalised in caring for Country spaces

Recognition of rights is incomplete

- Despite formal support for Aboriginal rights on the ground recognition and implementation is patchy.
- Recognition without self-determination leads to tokenism.
- NSW legislation and biodiversity policy mention Aboriginal values but often fail to embed them meaningfully.

Aboriginal knowledge systems are vital, but misunderstood

- Aboriginal knowledge is not just information; it is a dynamic practice embedded in Country and community.
- Traditional ecological knowledge must be understood as cultural practice, not just data.
- Scientific frameworks need to move from 'extracting knowledge' to enabling relational knowledge sharing on Country.

Barriers to rights-based approaches

- Complex legal processes (e.g. native title) are burdensome and costly.
- Ongoing colonisation, dispossession and policy fragmentation limit Aboriginal decision-making.
- Aboriginal governance is often ignored or sidelined by state institutions.

Food sovereignty and cultural practice are linked

- Food insecurity is a pressing issue. Revitalising traditional foods and native grains supports health, land management and economic development.



- Rights-based and community-led food systems strengthen cultural connection and ecological resilience.

Aboriginal women's roles need greater recognition

- Aboriginal women are custodians of land, Law/Lore and ceremony.
- Their contributions to caring for Country are often invisible in policy and program design.
- Addressing gender-based exclusion is essential for strong intergenerational knowledge transfer and holistic governance.

Opportunities

- A NSW Aboriginal ranger program, co-designed and aligned with federal investment, could enable long-term, culturally grounded caring for Country.
- Aligning legislation with United National Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), embedding Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), and supporting Aboriginal governance structures are key to change.
- There is an urgent need to shift from symbolic gestures to structural, sustained partnerships that centre Aboriginal rights and responsibilities.

Understanding barriers to caring for Country report

This report builds on the Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management literature review by going deeper into Aboriginal lived experience through incorporating the yarning outcomes throughout. While the accompanying literature review addressed the broad policy, rights and recognition context for caring for Country in NSW, this report reveals additional lived, relational and cultural barriers specific to the ways Aboriginal people experience caring for Country.

Key findings include:

- bias and modern racism – Aboriginal practitioners face subtle and systemic racism when engaging in cultural practice. This includes modern racism framed as 'special treatment', unconscious bias in institutions, and the 'gatekeeping' of Aboriginal knowledge.
- cultural suppression and spiritual disconnection – colonisation has interrupted intergenerational knowledge transfer, ceremonial practice and spiritual connection to Country.
- fragmented and conflicting governance – western governance systems do not align with Aboriginal kinship-based decision-making, creating instability and conflict. Aboriginal women's governance roles remain undervalued.
- overwhelming bureaucracy and burnout – government processes require Aboriginal people to navigate complex, burdensome systems to access land, funding and decision-making roles, often without recognition of cultural or emotional labour.
- economic models misaligned with culture – government funding tends to support 'fee-for-service' or commodified versions of culture, rather than supporting holistic, cultural responsibilities to Country.
- barriers specific to cultural burning – Aboriginal fire knowledge is heavily regulated, poorly understood and marginalised within current fire policy. Legal and institutional frameworks prioritise risk over cultural benefit.
- internal community challenges – government and institutional legislative, policy and program divisions (e.g. Native title, land councils, ranger teams) sometimes create confusion, competition and internal conflict and lateral violence within communities.
- systemic silence on Aboriginal rights – while programs and policies exist, Aboriginal rights (as obligations and responsibilities) are often treated as optional.



This research found that many of the barriers to Aboriginal caring for Country are systemically embedded in legislation, funding structures, institutional cultures and social attitudes. Yet Aboriginal people continue to lead cultural practices with strength and resilience. The report calls for culturally grounded, rights-based reforms, greater support for Aboriginal-led models, and a deeper recognition of cultural governance and intergenerational responsibilities.

The three key recommendations are:

1. Embed Aboriginal governance and cultural authority

Aboriginal governance systems based on kinship, obligations, cultural protocols and spiritual relationships to Country, must be recognised, respected and embedded in all levels of decision making. This includes supporting Aboriginal-led governance structures, valuing consensus and relational approaches, and moving beyond token consultation.

2. Reform to recognise obligations, not just rights

Current legal and policy frameworks often treat Aboriginal rights as symbolic or conditional, requiring a shift from rights as permission to recognising Aboriginal obligations to care for Country as lawfully and culturally valid. This includes legislative reform to acknowledge Aboriginal Law/Lore, spiritual practice and responsibilities to Country, not just in exemptions, but through codified recognition.

3. Provide long-term, flexible and culturally grounded funding

Short-term, project-based or commodified funding models undermine Aboriginal-led caring for Country. The report calls for sustained investment in Aboriginal organisations and practitioners that supports:

- intergenerational knowledge transfer
- cultural and spiritual practice
- Aboriginal-defined economic models
- healing, mental health and wellbeing as part of caring for Country work.

Understanding barriers to women caring for Country

1. Literature review

Caring for Country is more than natural resource management. It is an Aboriginal governance system that integrates ecological, cultural, spiritual and community wellbeing. Core elements: Law/Lore, kinship, ceremony, Land Country, Sea Country and Sky Country each carry gendered rights, responsibilities and obligations that sustain biocultural resilience. Aboriginal women's governance roles anchor biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, food and water security and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Biocultural resilience, the capacity of cultural–ecological systems to adapt and regenerate, declines when women's authority is excluded.

2. Barriers

The primary barrier to Aboriginal women's caring for Country is gendered biocultural loss, the systemic disruption and erosion of women's cultural authority, rights and ecological responsibilities. This loss is both ecological and epistemic, weakening the feedback loops between culture and Country that sustain resilience. The Bidjaay yugal gaay methodology provides a culturally grounded and evidence-based pathway to address gendered biocultural loss, mapping relational feedback loops between cultural practice and ecosystem health.

Gendered biocultural loss is driven and reinforced by:

- colonial disruption of governance: suppression of women's authority in cultural decision making



- loss of sites and species: destruction, alienation or restricted access to culturally significant landscapes and species
- policy and legislative gaps: governance frameworks that fail to recognise Aboriginal women's systems and obligations
- economic and resource inequity: chronic underfunding and lack of resourcing for women-led programs
- cultural and knowledge erosion: interrupted intergenerational transmission of Law/Lore, language and ecological knowledge
- cultural and gender bias: systemic discrimination in policy, research and management processes.

3. Key findings

Excluding Aboriginal women's governance weakens ecological feedback loops and reduces adaptive capacity of Country:

- Species decline and site loss remove the living anchors for cultural authority and biodiversity management.
- Restoring women's governance regenerates resilience across cultural, social and ecological systems.
- The Bambul yugal gaay methodology shows that protecting one culturally significant species can serve as a governance anchor and a measurable indicator of whole-system health.

4. Recommendations

National level

- Legislation: Embed gender parity in Aboriginal-led governance in environmental, heritage and climate laws.
- Policy: co-develop a national biocultural resilience framework and monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI), using an Indigenous methodology like Bidjaay yugal gaay methodology to integrate gendered cultural and ecological indicators.
- Programs: fund long-term gender parity in Aboriginal-led place-based caring for Country initiatives that link species, site and ceremony revival.

NSW level

- Legislation: strengthen Aboriginal cultural heritage laws to protect interconnected cultural–ecological relationships and systems.
- Policy: develop a co-design NSW biocultural resilience framework and MERI using the Bidjaay yugal gaay methodology.
- Programs: resource gender parity in Aboriginal-led seasonal, species and site-based cultural revival projects, with measurable biocultural outcomes.

The recommendations in this report are grounded in Aboriginal women's cultural authority and governance. They respond directly to the systemic and intersecting barriers identified, focusing on actions that restore women's roles as governors, protect biocultural knowledge and strengthen community resilience. By embedding Aboriginal women-led solutions into policy, programs and planning, these recommendations aim to regenerate cultural governance, safeguard biodiversity and ensure Country and community thrive together.



Cultural monitoring, evaluation and reporting

The Cultural Science Team forms part of the Science and Insights Division in the NSW DCCEEW. The team coordinate and support the delivery of a range of cultural science research projects in collaboration with other parts of the department and external stakeholders. Through Indigenous-led research, co-design and testing, a cultural MERI framework is being developed to support Aboriginal communities' autonomy and self-determination for healthy Country and communities. This report detailing the research, co-design and testing of the draft cultural MERI framework is an in-kind contribution from the Cultural Science Team towards the *Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management* project.

Cultural monitoring, evaluation and reporting (MER) is a method used to measure cultural outcomes in realising healthy Country through cultural practices. Cultural MER is a framework that supports healthy Country, healthy culture and healthy people. Cultural MER is different from other frameworks and has a unique set of principles.

These principles are:

- facilitating Aboriginal-led, relationships-based, collaborative research processes
- fostering co-learning and intergenerational transmission of knowledge
- recognising Aboriginal health as holistic, including the mental, physical, cultural and spiritual health of both people and Country
- building community capacity to undertake their MER in a self-reporting framework.

Key findings

- Cultural MER is about culture – and more specifically the doing of culture. While cultural MER may include technical methods of measurement, it is the cultural principles and practices that matter.
- Cultural MER is not new – Aboriginal people have always applied it as part of living in partnership with Country. What is new is sharing it with an audience who are coming to realise the impact cultural approaches have on land management.
- Cultural MER is determined by Aboriginal people.
- Cultural MER shows the influence of cultural practices in landscape management.
- Cultural values are not singular, so cultural MER will be different in different communities
- our role is to support communities in activating and applying cultural MER on Country.

A cultural monitoring, evaluation and reporting working group has been established to provide guidance and support the development of the cultural MER framework and resources. The cultural MER working group strives for transparent collaboration and knowledge sharing between DCCEEW staff. All members have cultural expertise and obligations to Country alongside their work to monitor, evaluate and report on programs they are delivering on behalf of DCCEEW. The working group will review and co-design resources to ensure they meet the cultural needs of Aboriginal communities across the different areas of the department.



Key milestones

The following table is a summary of the key milestones for the *Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management* project:

No.	Deliverable	Status
1.	Establish project contract	Complete
2.	Establish and maintain a Project Management Committee	Complete
3.	Approved project proposal including a project plan and short project summary/plain language statement	Complete
4.	A literature review of Aboriginal land and sea management (ALSM)	Complete
5.	Videos explaining the project	Complete
6.	Quarterly report (Oct-Dec)	Complete
7.	Quarterly report (Jan-Mar)	Complete
8.	Quarterly report (Apr-Jun)	Complete
9.	Land management policy analysis related to ALSM implementation Report (including literature review)	Complete
10.	Aboriginal Community Yarning Report	Complete
11.	Cultural MER Report	Complete
12.	Focused workshop reports	Complete
13.	Video explaining the outcomes of the project	Complete
14.	Project closure meeting and approval from Project Management Committee	Complete
15.	Final project report	Complete
16.	Evaluation report	Complete
17.	Financial acquittal	Ongoing



Utilisation outputs

The findings of the Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management research and barrier analysis were used to create a policy tool which could be used to identify, mitigate or remove a range of caring for Country barriers and create opportunities across a diverse range of policy contexts.

Policy tool: Identifying and resolving barriers to caring for Country

This policy tool is designed to support government agencies, land managers and partner organisations in identifying and resolving barriers to caring for Country. The tool provides a relational, strengths-based framework to diagnose systemic and cultural barriers and to guide culturally safe, obligation-based solutions. The aim of this tool is to encourage two-ways or two-eyed seeing approaches which are frameworks for knowledge-sharing and collaboration that value both Indigenous and western ways of knowing. The use of these frameworks can provide functional epistemic insight bridging Indigenous and western worldviews for policy makers, program and project designers and evaluators (Michie, 2023). By integrating Aboriginal perspectives alongside western frameworks helps to uncover biases and hidden assumptions that may exclude or misrepresent Aboriginal relationships with Country. Two-eyed seeing promotes holistic evaluation of policy outcomes by empowering Aboriginal communities to highlight cultural, ecological and social consequences not visible through western metrics. This tool is intended as a desktop guide only and all barriers identified by and with Aboriginal communities must be addressed in true partnership.

Cultural governance principles

This tool has been designed using the following principles which should also guide its use:

- Two-way approach: Aboriginal Law/Lore precedes and sits alongside western legislation and policy, governance and MERI design.
- Nothing about us without us: Design and decision-making must involve cultural custodians, especially women, from the start.
- Place-based and relational: Strategies must be grounded in Country, kinship, with rights and obligations.
- Strengths-based: Avoid deficit framing by recognising and respecting Aboriginal peoples’ worldviews and cultural obligations.

Diagnostic checklists

These checklists have been designed to be used as both a diagnostic tool for existing policies as well as during design in conjunction with two way seeing method, revealing hidden assumptions and evaluating unintended policy impacts and barriers to Aboriginal-led caring for Country practices.

TABLE 1 THEMATIC AREA DIAGNOSTIC CHECKLIST

Areas	Guiding questions (opportunities)	Yes/ No
Law/Lore	Is Aboriginal Law/Lore recognised and embedded in governance structures? Are decisions made in line with cultural authority?	
Ceremony	Are ceremonial practices acknowledged, funded and protected? Are sacred sites and knowledge related to them accessible?	
Kinship	Are kinship-based governance systems recognised? Are Elders and custodians supported in their roles?	
Worldview	Does the program reflect Aboriginal concepts of Country as living and relational?	



Areas	Guiding questions (opportunities)	Yes/ No
	Are ontological differences respected?	
Funding	Are funding models long-term, flexible, low-barrier and culturally aligned? Do they enable collective and intergenerational responsibilities? Are they aligned with community aspirations?	
Governance	Are Aboriginal people included and supported in decision-making roles? Are gendered power imbalances addressed explicitly?	

The following table can be used to interrogate policies and programs with environmental impacts, but it must acknowledge that Country is a whole. It is not divided into discrete silos, jurisdictions or Country types. Sea Country is an example of this interconnection which includes salt and freshwater systems, culturally significant entities (species and landscape forms) within and connected to them and Aboriginal people. Sky Country is another example, as although it is not legislated and managed in the same way Land and Sea Country is, consequences of land and sea management policies can impact Sky Country such as through interactions with sacred, celestial land and sea sites or through light pollution limiting access to dark skies and celestial knowledge.

TABLE 2 COUNTRY TYPE DIAGNOSTIC CHECKLIST

Country type	Guiding questions (opportunities)	Yes/ No
Land	Is Aboriginal ecological knowledge and systems integrated in land management programs? Are sacred land sites identified, respected and funded for cultural use? Is there secure and supported access to Country for land-based practices? Is local knowledge of culturally significant species and entities (landforms) considered and protected including ICIP? Does the policy/program address land degradation through Aboriginal-led adaptation? Are Aboriginal enterprises and ranger programs included and resourced? Are Aboriginal land ownership and governance models connected across agencies? Are young people involved in land-based learning and responsibilities?	
Sea (salt and freshwater)	Is traditional ecological knowledge and systems used in marine policy, water policy and program design? Are salt and freshwater-based culturally significant entries (species and landforms) and sites identified and protected? Do Aboriginal communities have access to the saltwater and freshwater resources? Are salt and freshwater Country stories, names and harvesting knowledge protected? Is sea level rise and erosion addressed through Aboriginal community-led strategies? Are there opportunities for Aboriginal sea rangers or marine businesses? Is salt and freshwater caring for Country integrated and protected through regulation? Are youth programs supporting cultural continuity on and in Sea Country?	
Sky	Although Sky Country is not legislated for and managed by policy in the same way Land and Sea Country is, outcomes of land and sea management policies impact Sky Country and Sky Country is embedded in celestial land and sea cultural sites. Do activities in policy impact Sky Country through air quality, aerosol or light pollution? Are there land or sea celestial sites with the policy scope and impact? Is sky and star knowledge able to be used alongside scientific indicators in design? Are people supported to return to places for star watching and ceremony? Are cultural astronomy places and dark skies accessible? Does policy support the inclusion of sky-based indicators for climate and seasonal shifts?	



	Is Aboriginal sky knowledge considered in climate and disaster planning?	
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Answering no to these questions is not indicative of a policy or program barrier for Aboriginal people caring for Country, but rather an indicator of a potential opportunity applicable to the specific policy. Truly understanding and removing barriers in policy must be identified and addressed with Aboriginal peoples and communities.



Barrier identification

Using a two-ways or two-eyed seeing approach identify the barrier type and potential impact for each Area and Country type applicable, in the matrix below. Or alternatively use a western approach to identify the barrier type and potential impact and then evaluate using two-ways or two-eyed seeing framework.

TABLE 3 BARRIER IDENTIFICATION TOOL

Areas	Barrier description	Cultural impact	Risk to resilience/policy outcome
Law/Lore			
Ceremony			
Kinship			
Worldview			
Funding			
Governance			
Land			
Sea (salt and freshwater)			
Sky			

This table can be used to support consultation with community partners.

Responsive action

Once barriers are identified responsive actions must be designed with the Aboriginal community through engagement and consultation. The following are some examples of responsive actions:

TABLE 4 EXAMPLES OF RESPONSIVE ACTION BY BARRIER AREA

Barrier areas	Action examples
Law/Lore	Include Aboriginal Law/Lore in policy design and formal governance agreements. Recognise cultural authority in consultation, engagement and employment.
Ceremony	Allow space and resources for the inclusion (or not restriction of) practice of ceremony and seasonal cultural activities. Protect sacred sites in legislation and regulation while retaining community access to sites
Kinship	Map and respect kinship governance into policy program design. Support Elders and cultural advisers to advocate the kinship-based ecological care.
Worldview	Cultural capability training for staff should include understanding different worldviews. Avoid framing Country as an object or resource to be used or protected by being locked away (prohibited) rather as a living system which benefits from Aboriginal caring for Country practices.
Funding	Shift to relationship-based, future focused, long-term and flexible funding models. Reduce administrative burdens by streamlining reporting with existing reporting requirements and systems.
Governance	Encourage gender equity and undertake co-design approaches with cultural leaders. Consider flat or circular governance models guided by agreed cultural protocols rather than hierarchical models.



TABLE 5 EXAMPLES OF RESPONSIVE ACTION BY COUNTRY TYPE

Barrier areas	Action examples
Land	<p>Embed Aboriginal-led governance in environmental management legislation, policy and co-management frameworks.</p> <p>Ensure Aboriginal women's land governance roles are included in decision-making and funding models.</p> <p>Incorporate Aboriginal ecological knowledge in all land management programs using co-designed methods.</p> <p>Legally protect sacred sites and provide sustained funding for cultural practice, maintenance and revival.</p> <p>Ensure physical and legal access to cultural sites and species through funded community programs.</p> <p>Support Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) protections for knowledge and support community data governance initiatives.</p> <p>Include Aboriginal-led land restoration in climate and biodiversity programs with adequate resourcing.</p> <p>Increase long-term funding for Aboriginal ranger programs and enterprises.</p> <p>Create cross-agency Aboriginal governance bodies to guide integrated policy responses.</p> <p>Support/Fund on-Country intergenerational knowledge transfer opportunities</p>
Sea	<p>Recognise the role of Aboriginal governance in sea Country legislation and protected areas.</p> <p>Include Aboriginal people, especially women in marine and water planning processes and fund cultural knowledge programs.</p> <p>Include Aboriginal marine and water ecological knowledge in conservation, fisheries and coastal planning.</p> <p>Protect marine and inland water-based sacred sites and support cultural practices revitalisation programs.</p> <p>Ensure access to salt and freshwater Country through tenure agreements and resources/equipment.</p> <p>Implement ICIP protocols for Aboriginal knowledge with community ownership and governance.</p> <p>Support Aboriginal-led salt and freshwater Country monitoring and adaptation strategies in policies.</p> <p>Fund salt and freshwater ranger programs and Aboriginal-led tourism and business initiatives.</p> <p>Establish cross-agency governance forums for Aboriginal sea Country planning and integration.</p> <p>Support/Fund on-Country intergenerational knowledge transfer opportunities.</p>
Sky	<p>Integrate Aboriginal sky management into environmental, climate and cultural heritage policies.</p> <p>Recognise Aboriginal peoples cosmological roles in cultural and environmental planning.</p> <p>Embed star lore and seasonal sky indicators in agriculture, fire and ecological planning tools.</p> <p>Formally protect celestial sites on land and sea Country.</p> <p>Provide resources and space for star watching, cultural events and sky-based cultural practices.</p> <p>Ensure ICIP protections for sky knowledge and develop protocols with communities.</p> <p>Include Aboriginal climate and sky indicators in forecasting, fire planning and resilience strategies.</p> <p>Fund Aboriginal-led astronomy programs and support community outreach and education tools.</p> <p>Embed Aboriginal sky knowledge into disaster risk planning and environmental strategies.</p> <p>Support/fund on-Country intergenerational knowledge transfer opportunities</p>

Monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI)

The learnings from working through this tool with Aboriginal communities should be used to co-develop a two-way MERI framework with Aboriginal partners and communities co-developing the indicators. Indicators could include access to Country, health of kinship systems, intergenerational knowledge transfer or the presence of culturally significant entities. MERI evaluation methods must provide evaluation outcomes to adjust policy and program settings responsively with Aboriginal community input, review and approval.

This policy tool is designed to be used in partnership with Aboriginal people and communities. Its value lies not in ticking boxes but in shifting worldviews and relationships through sharing power and restoring cultural autonomy to care for Country. True resilience to climate change and natural hazards comes from restoring these relational systems and Aboriginal self-determination. The previous section provides an update on the development of a cultural MER framework which is intended to be used by Aboriginal community members which could inform policy MERI in the future.



Publications list

- 1 Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management final report (this document)
- 2 Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management literature and policy review: Summary report
- 3 Introducing the Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management project video
- 4 Understanding barriers to caring for Country report
- 5 Understanding women's barriers to caring for Country report
- 6 Final Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management video
- 7 Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management Hazard Note

Original artwork list

Caring for Country is Everybody Business, Kate Brown

Caring for NSW Country - Kate Brown

Caring for her Country - Indi Halliday (the artists retains her ICIP)

Mothers Law, Brush turkey – Kate Brown



Researchers

Shaun Hooper

Shaun is a Wiradjuri Bularidee Aboriginal researcher focusing on bushfire management and Aboriginal land and sea management. Shaun has a strong background in western bushfire management as a Fire Behaviour Analyst and firefighter with the NSW Rural Fire Service, as well as a deep understanding of Aboriginal cultural practice associated with Aboriginal land and sea management. Shaun's current research interests focus on the understanding of thresholds for fire management in an Aboriginal worldview, understanding the application of Aboriginal land practices to the restoration of grasslands in NSW and the role of fauna in Aboriginal land and sea management practices as relational partners in land management.

Shaun is currently a Co-Lead Researcher on a Natural Hazards Research Australia project to investigate the operationalisation of Aboriginal land and sea management across the landscape. Shaun is currently undertaking his PhD research, investigating the role of 'myth, ritual and magic' in Aboriginal land and sea management and how this can support its (re)vitalisation.

Shaun's past research work has involved developing an understanding of how Aboriginal cultural burning is conceived within Aboriginal cultural practices such as story, language and Law/Lore and the development of tools and methodologies for the integration of Aboriginal cultural heritage in bushfire management planning.

Kate Brown

Kate is a descendant of the Gawbun Gonigal clan of the northern Gomeri Nation with cultural connections to the Yuin people on the south coast of NSW. As a Cultural Scientist her key research focus is on the role of women in Aboriginal land and sea management. She has a strong background as an Aboriginal land and sea project officer, researcher and practitioner. Working as a cultural regenerative farmer at Black Duck foods with Uncle Bruce Pascoe, Kate gained invaluable hands-on experience culminating in the first known harvest, milling and baking of bread with Mandadyan Nalluk (Yuin Dancing Grass) since colonisation. Kate was working on Uncle Bruce's farm near Mallacoota during the fires in 2019/20. This experience embedded in Kate a deep understanding of the intrinsically interrelated effects of drought, land use change, fire, regeneration and the interplay and role of Aboriginal culture. Kate has continued to deepen her understanding of Aboriginal cultural practice through daily ritual and frequently travels to her grandmothers Country to fulfil her reciprocal, cultural and customary obligations.

Kate was a co-lead researcher and later principal researcher on this project *Operationalising Aboriginal land and sea management* at a landscape scale. Kate is an emerging Gamilaroi researcher using a multidisciplinary and multimedia research approach to tell a story celebrating Aboriginal women's lived experience in Aboriginal land and sea management as part of our customary practice. Kate's personal research interest focuses on the distinct and shared cultural, spirit and environmental roles of dingo and domestic dogs in Aboriginal land, sea and sky management. Kate loves expressing her connection to Gamilaroi Country and its cultural essences through walking Country, yarning and creating physical and digital art science communications.



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