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Indigenous-led conservation: The dynamics of successful partnerships between Indigenous groups and conservation organizations

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By Cecilia Riebl, ILCN Regional Representative for Australasia



Neds Corner restoration area, Victoria. Credit: Annette Ruzicka.

Indigenous cultures have stewarded nature for tens of thousands of years but contemporary conservation approaches can sideline this knowledge to the detriment of stewardship efforts, Indigenous Peoples, and our planet. An essential first step in turning this trend around is to better understand the dynamics of successful partnerships between conservation organizations and Indigenous groups. How can traditionally white conservation organizations learn from, and integrate, this deep cultural knowledge? How can they can effectively partner with First Nations people? And how can we best build capacity for Indigenous leadership?

In Australia, engagement with this topic is growing exponentially within the conservation sector but also through new laws, policies, and on-the-ground actions. In June 2023, Parliament will hold a referendum



Welcome to Country burning ceremony. Credit: Annette Ruzicka.

on a bill known as [‘The Voice to Parliament’](#). If passed, the bill will alter the Australian constitution and establish a new political body called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. The Voice will be a direct line between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Parliament, and the Executive Government of the Commonwealth, giving these communities autonomous representation in Australian policy making.

First Peoples’ voices are being considered and incorporated in decision making in a variety of

new ways. A key finding of a 2020 [review](#) into Australia’s key environmental legislation, the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act, [recommended](#) a national environmental standard for Indigenous engagement and for Indigenous knowledge to be considered alongside Western science. In Victoria, the State government has worked with Traditional Owner groups to create a [Cultural Landscapes Strategy](#), intended to enable and empower Victorian Traditional Owners to lead planning and activate cultural knowledge and practices to manage Country.

One of many reasons for this increased focus on Indigenous-led conservation is a growing understanding that, where land is owned and managed by Indigenous cultures, nature is healthier. A major United-Nations-backed [report](#) published by the World Economic Forum found that nature on Indigenous Peoples’ lands is degrading less rapidly than in other areas. To borrow the words of Deen Sanders, Worimi Man:

My people (the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia) are part of a global community of Indigenous Peoples who have nurtured the land, carved story in it, sung and danced, and cared for every inch of its vast landscape as ecological scientists and nature resource managers, since time immemorial. ... [Today we are at] the precipice of systemic collapse. The circumstances are more urgent than before, the context more complex, but – just as it has always been – the answer lies in a better understanding of nature, a better (proper) relationship with our landscapes and, as ever, it is the knowledge and sense of responsibility of Indigenous People, as custodians of landscape, that best place them to help everyone come into a proper relationship with nature, with *Nayiri Barray* – our Mother.

For private land conservation organizations in Australia, one key challenge is partnering effectively and respectfully with Traditional Custodians to achieve outcomes for people and [Country](#). Bambi Lees, a Torres Strait Islander Woman and Aboriginal Partnerships Manager at [Bush Heritage Australia](#), reflected on some key elements of what successful partnerships look like to her. “It’s all about relationships,” she said. “So, you need to work at the speed of relationships”. This means taking time to listen, spending time on Country, and rethinking some of the old rules of conservation.

Lees is working with Bush Heritage and local Traditional Owners, the [Dja Dja Wurrung](#), to develop the *Wurreka Galkangu* framework. This framework is about “turning Western systems upside down and inside out”; finding new language when talking about conservation—for example using the term

'knowledge team,' rather than 'science team'; using new practices, such as *Dhelkunya Wi*—healing fire cultural burning practices; and thinking about land management as an approach to achieving social and cultural outcomes.

Restorative justice, including access to land, is also an important issue. "The gate is not generally open" to First Peoples on private land, Lees said. Facilitating this would have extensive benefits to Country and to Aboriginal people.

Dr. Heather Builth is a landscape archaeologist and has worked with the First Peoples of the [Millewa Mallee Aboriginal Corporation](#) as they negotiate a land handback of [Neds Corner Station](#) with [Trust for Nature](#) in Victoria. An important aspect of the process supporting Traditional Owners in the transfer of ownership, from a practical, governance, and resourcing perspective. "They've never known land coming back – only loss of culture, spirituality, and connection to that country" said Builth. "[This is about] two very different groups going in parallel but eventually converging". Still, Builth is optimistic, "I do believe Neds Corner will be a blueprint for land handback in Australia. It truly has been a transition."



Dr. Heather Builth (left) with a member of FPMMAC. Credit: Annette Ruzicka.



FPMMAC works crew. Credit: Annette Ruzicka.

There is a long road ahead for partnerships between conservation organizations and Indigenous Australians, but significant change is underway. There is a growing awareness of the value of relationship building, including deep listening, early engagement, building trust, and sticking around for the long term. It is also about cultural safety and competency; conservation organizations need to not only have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to do their own job, but to value the cultural knowledge and skills of First Peoples. This may involve

rethinking traditional notions of conservation. Finally, there is a need to build capacity among Indigenous communities so that they have the skills and resources to do the vital work of caring for Country.

"There is great enthusiasm, great energy" around this process, said Lees. The conservation sector is a nurturing space for this work, unlike some government bodies, which can be unduly driven by bureaucracy. In the end, said Lees, "we're not that far apart in terms of what our values are and what we want for Country." It is all about respectful implementation.

This article draws on discussions from the May 3 webinar “Indigenous Wisdom: The dynamics of successful partnerships between conservation organizations and Indigenous groups”, hosted by the ILCN and moderated by Cecilia Riebl. A recording is available at www.landconservationnetwork.org. Please join us for the second webinar in this series, “Traditional Land Management Driving Conservation Outcomes” on June 21 at 7pm Eastern time (USA) – June 22 at 9am (AEST). Register [here](#).



Neds Corner on the Murray River. Credit Annette Ruzicka.

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