



CLIMATE, COUNTRY, AND OUR FUTURE

A knowledge paper drawing on three national workshops with members of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

2025-2026

First Nations Affairs

First Nations Affairs (FNA) is a 100% First Nations-owned governance and strategy advisory firm founded by Noongar Ballardong woman Bec Blurton. FNA works at the intersection of First Nations governance, ESG, sustainable finance, and regulatory compliance, advising boards, government agencies, and institutional clients on how to engage with, defer to, and structurally support First Nations decision-making authority. FNA's advisory practice is grounded in FNSAF®, a proprietary nine-step framework, and in the principles of UNDRIP. FNA operates nationally across corporate, government, and financial sectors.

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About This Report

Climate, Country and Our Future is a three-part workshop series to examine First Nations climate leadership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) across Australia. The series was structured to move through time: from the history of adaptation under colonial governance to how current data and accountability systems operate to what participants see as possible and necessary for the future.

This report synthesises the findings across all three sessions into a single account. It draws on participant contributions from across Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and New South Wales, spanning remote, rural, and regional contexts. The findings are presented thematically and lean into difference. Diversity of perspective across the series reflects the central premise of the program that First Nations climate leadership cannot be rendered as a single position without being misrepresented.

Executive Summary

Climate, Country, and Our Future is a national knowledge series convened by First Nations Affairs (FNA) in collaboration with Celeste Ackerly, examining First Nations climate leadership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations across Australia. The series drew on three structured workshops and accompanying survey responses from eleven participants representing organisations across Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and New South Wales.

The findings describe what First Nations communities are already doing in climate governance, the barriers that limit their ability to lead on their own terms, and what needs to change.

Four consistent themes emerged across the series. First, the structural conditions facing ACCOs in policy fragmentation, extractive engagement models, under-resourced reporting requirements, and the bypassing of cultural authority as central to climate governance failure. Second, communities are already doing climate work. Cultural land management, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and on-Country ecological practice constitute active and ongoing climate governance. These contributions are largely invisible to the funding and policy systems that claim to support First Nations climate leadership. Third, current data systems extract from communities without reciprocity. Deficit-framed measurement, the commodification of Traditional Ecological Knowledge without consent, and administrative reporting burdens consume organisational capacity that would otherwise go toward Country care. Fourth, wellbeing as communities described it as being relational, ecological, and grounded in cultural continuity, has no adequate counterpart in the metrics that currently govern climate program design and evaluation.

The report's recommendations address four interdependent requirements: recognition of cultural and governance authority as the legitimate basis for decisions about Country; community involvement in program design from the outset; multi-year resourcing with proportionate reporting; and accountability mechanisms that include data sovereignty as a non-negotiable condition.

In the context of Australia's role as President of Negotiations for COP31, the report identifies six specific recommendations for the negotiating agenda, grounded in the existing trajectory of Indigenous governance within the UNFCCC system and in the gap between participation and governance authority that Belém made visible. These recommendations are offered as agenda items for exploration, tabling, and negotiation and as the next coherent steps from where the process currently stands.



Methodology and Scope

Climate, Country, and Our Future was convened by First Nations Affairs in collaboration with Celeste Ackerly and supported by Social Enterprise Australia through the SEDI Program, funded by the Australian Government. The series was designed to generate grounded, community-sourced knowledge about First Nations climate leadership for use in policy, funding, and engagement contexts and to produce a national paper ahead of COP31.

The series comprised three online workshops, each structured around a chronological frame: The Past (Adaptation and Regeneration), The Present (Data, Visibility, and Gaps), and The Future (Wellbeing and Climate Leadership). Workshops were held on 2 October 2025, 13 November 2025, and 19 February 2026. Participants were invited to attend one or all three sessions. Where attendance was not possible, participants were offered the opportunity to contribute via a structured survey instrument or through a direct conversation with the facilitation team, ensuring that all voices were included regardless of scheduling constraints.

Participation was open to one nominated representative per Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation working across climate and environment, land and water management, cultural fire and regeneration, native food systems, healing and community wellbeing, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Participants received compensation per workshop in recognition of their time and contribution. Eleven participants took part across the series, representing organisations from Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and New South Wales, across remote, rural, and regional contexts.

The series was designed and facilitated in accordance with FPIC principles established at the outset. A consent framework governed how contributions would be used, attributed, and published. Participants were informed that consent to participate and consent to collective publication and named attribution are distinct, both were sought, and both are treated as ongoing rather than assumed. This report reflects the consent position of each contributor as confirmed at the time of finalisation.

Findings were synthesised thematically across all three workshops and survey responses. The analytical approach sought to preserve the specificity of participant contributions rather than resolve differences into a unified position. Where perspectives diverged, the divergence is noted. The range of views across the series reflects the geographic, cultural, and organisational diversity of participants and is treated as substantive rather than incidental. It is evidence that First Nations climate leadership is shaped by place, governance history, and community context and cannot be accurately rendered as a single model.

The structure of the problem

Communities across the series described their relationship with Australia's climate governance systems in consistent terms of an expectation to participate in frameworks they did not design, on timelines they did not set, toward outcomes that do not reflect their priorities, and at a cost that is rarely funded. This summarises the structural condition of the current landscape.

The imposition of colonial governance, market economies, and regulatory regimes over generations has required First Nations communities to adapt continuously to systems designed without their worldviews or consent. That adaptation has been extraordinary and requires pause to reflect. It has also been exhausting, and it has been systematically rendered invisible by the very frameworks that now seek First Nations participation in climate response.

"The hangover of 'we can come in and do whatever we want.' First Peoples aren't taken seriously or respected as rights holders."

Governments frequently engage with Prescribed Bodies Corporate (PBC) or large regional entities as a proxy for community voice, while bypassing those with direct cultural authority. Funding and engagement are selectively channelled in ways that maintain dependence and diminish cultural cohesion. Participants described a structural pattern where a system fragments communities, imposes compliance frameworks incompatible with collective decision-making, and limits the capacity for self-determined climate care.

Climate adaptation, on this account, cannot be separated from governance reform. The exclusion of cultural authority from land and climate decisions perpetuates the very vulnerabilities that climate programs claim to address.

What communities are already doing

A consistent finding across the series is the gap between institutional recognition and what communities are already doing. While governments seek "capacity building," communities are exercising capacity daily through cultural labour that is largely invisible in funding and policy metrics.

Participants described the persistence of cultural practice as the foundation of ongoing regeneration even under structural pressure. Access to Country, women's knowledge systems, and intergenerational teaching were consistently identified as the mechanisms through which cultural and ecological continuity survive. The unbroken sense of obligation to Country and community is the social and ecological system of care that remains active regardless of what policy does or does not support.

"As women, that is our responsibility and our role traditionally. To retain knowledge and transfer it to the young."

Tangible examples of regeneration were described across the series such as right-way fire practices, native seed production, habitat restoration, and the integration of traditional methods within legislative frameworks. Practices that are already underway, yet frequently under resourced or void of formal recognition.

"Country is the foundation. If Country isn't cared for properly, then Country can't adapt and be resilient."

Indigenous land management practices are the existing example of a regenerative approach to climate governance as a living practice that current systems have constrained rather than supported.

Data as a site of power

The second workshop examined data as a mechanism of power, extraction, and governance failure. What emerged was a clear account of how current data systems simultaneously over-extract from communities and under-serve them.

Data collection on Country is dominated by deficit framing in health, welfare, law, and order, despite offering little insight into priorities such as land management, cultural continuity, or climate adaptation. Most data requests reflect what institutions need to justify programs, rather than what is useful, meaningful or of priority for communities. As one participant observed, the deficit data supports the continuation of industry and government programs. It does not support community programs.

The cost of data collection, financial and cultural, is rarely funded. Communities are expected to provide extensive information while industry and non-Indigenous organisations are paid to design programs that rely on that same Indigenous Knowledge and labour. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is over-referenced rhetorically and sidelined or commodified in practice. Examples cited included the patenting of native plants and traditional medicines, the commercialisation of Indigenous fire regimes within carbon markets with limited benefit flowing back to communities, and the extraction of Indigenous intellectual property to underpin profitable commercial products without consent, standards, or accountability.

"The deficit data supports more industry and government programs and their continuation. But what about ours?"

When participants were asked what indicators, they would design if they had full control, they articulated measures grounded in Country, culture, and continuity like the return of native species, restored waterways, visible night skies, fewer uncontrolled fires due to active land care, young people working alongside Elders, and knowledge being passed on. These reflect a different understanding of value and one that treats environmental health, cultural transmission, and collective wellbeing as inseparable. Current frameworks have no mechanism to measure or fund this understanding.



Wellbeing as governance

Across the series, participants described wellbeing as a governance condition. Wellbeing exists at three interconnected levels of:

- organisations operating as stewards of ecosystem health rather than administrators of harm reduction
- communities with resilience, social connection, and access to sustainable local resources
- Country - the relationships between land, water, sky, and culture - cared for as a living system.

"The wellbeing between organisations, communities and Country need to be interlinked together so that both people and the planet can flourish for generations to come."

This framing has direct implications for how climate programs are designed and evaluated. Frameworks that incorporate cultural, relational, and Country-based dimensions of wellbeing exist in Australian policy, but climate program design and its evaluation metrics have not caught up. Wellbeing as participants described it is produced through cultural practice, on-Country connection, intergenerational sharing, and the active transmission of values and knowledge. It is not delivered by programs. It is sustained by communities. The structural conditions that would support it remain outside the scope of most climate funding instruments.

Cultural, spiritual, and ecological wellbeing were described as the conditions that determine whether any climate response will hold over time. A climate solution designed without these dimensions is not simply incomplete. It is working against the systems on which durable climate responses depend.

Self-determination is not a participation mechanism

Participants consistently described a shift that goes beyond inclusion in existing frameworks. Self-determined climate leadership does not mean communities being given more responsibility for implementing frameworks designed elsewhere. It means communities being recognised as the appropriate authorities for decisions about their own Country with the governance structures, resourcing, and decision-making authority that this requires. When asked what climate leadership would look like if self-determination were fully supported, participants described different things because self-determined leadership is shaped by place, culture, governance history, and community context. There is no single model and producing one would reproduce the homogenisation that the series has documented as one of the central problems with current approaches.

What participants shared was a consistent direction from reactive to generative. Rather than responding to external policy requirements, communities would be the primary architects of ecological care, drawing on Indigenous governance systems and Traditional Knowledge as the central logic rather than a supplementary input. The capacity to understand the health of a place through presence, observation, and long-term relationship in what is seen, felt, heard, and known across generations, is not a cultural practice that sits alongside technical climate management. It is a different epistemology, and self-determination would require current frameworks to recognise it.

"We need to adopt a reciprocal relationship with nature rather than engage in exploitative practices. This approach draws upon the spiritual and cultural knowledge that has guided resource management for generations."

What engagement must become

Current engagement models are structured to produce institutional legitimacy rather than community benefit. This requires structural correction, not incremental improvement. Participants were specific about what changed engagement looks like and consistent across different organisations and geographies.

Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) must function as a threshold condition rather than a procedural step within a process already underway. Genuine involvement means being present from the beginning, before frameworks are fixed. Listening must be oriented toward understanding rather than toward response. And the three structural mechanisms that need to change must change simultaneously:

1. How decisions are made
2. How money flows
3. How knowledge is valued.

Changing one without the others produces partial reform that existing dynamics absorb without being meaningfully disrupted.

"If you are just wanting to tick a box you will be met with closed doors, but if your heart and reason are for the right reason, you will be met with love and respect."

Language, culture, and kinship are the infrastructure through which climate care is sustained and transmitted across generations. Programs that operate outside these systems are working against the systems on which durable climate responses depend. Including custodians at the table from the beginning, not as a consultation step but as the appropriate starting point, is the mechanism through which this is enacted.

What this requires of policy, funding, and practice

The findings across the series point to four requirements that are interdependent. Addressing any one in isolation produces change that existing structures can absorb without being fundamentally altered.

AUTHORITY

Cultural and governance authority (not only contemporary organisational structures) must be recognised as the legitimate basis for decisions about Country. FPIC is a threshold condition that determines whether engagement is taking place at all, not a mechanism within an already designed process.

DESIGN PARTICIPATION

Communities must be involved from the beginning of program design. This requires institutions to arrive without frameworks already fixed. A substantial change to how most government and industry engagement is currently structured is required.

RESOURCING

Multi-year funding, proportionate reporting requirements, infrastructure investment, and workforce development grounded in on-Country practice are the material conditions that make sustained climate work possible. The current funding architecture systematically prevents the stability required. Indigenous-funded programs carry substantially higher reporting burdens than equivalent mainstream programs where the time and capacity consumed by that reporting is unavailable for on-Country work.

"My understanding is that Indigenous funding requires a lot more reporting than mainstream funding, which takes away from the time we can spend doing the work we want to do to help heal and protect our Country."

ACCOUNTABILITY

Mechanisms must hold institutions to their commitments and recognise communities as the appropriate judges of whether engagement has been genuine. Data Sovereignty frameworks that ensure information about Country and community cannot be repurposed without consent are a non-negotiable element of this accountability architecture.

COP31: Australia's Presidency and the Governance Opportunity

AUSTRALIA'S ROLE

Australia holds the Presidency of Negotiations for COP31, to be held in Antalya, Türkiye in November 2026. As President of Negotiations, Australia leads the negotiation agenda, holds the gavel across all formal decision-making, and partners with Pacific nations to advance regional climate priorities. It is a position of genuine structural influence.

Australia's presidency arrives with stated commitments to elevate First Nations and Pacific voices. The pre-COP leaders' event co-led with Pacific nations is an opportunity to demonstrate what that commitment looks like in practice before negotiations begin. The test will be whether First Nations knowledge shapes the architecture of what is negotiated.

THE TRAJECTORY OF INDIGENOUS INCLUSION AT THE UNFCCC

The history of Indigenous participation in United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) processes is a history of incremental, hard-won recognition. Indigenous Peoples were not mentioned in the original 1992 UNFCCC text. Formal constituency status was granted in 2000. The Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) was established at COP21 in Paris in 2015 as the first formal mechanism within the UNFCCC dedicated to Indigenous Knowledge and participation. The Facilitative Working Group, established at COP24 in Katowice in 2018, was the first constituted body under the UNFCCC to provide dedicated seats for Indigenous Peoples' representatives alongside Party delegates.

At COP28 in Dubai, Indigenous Peoples secured a Pavilion in the Blue Zone for the second consecutive year and a focused day of high-level engagement, including dialogue with the COP President. At COP30 in Belém, over 900 Indigenous Peoples participated in the Blue Zone, the largest presence in COP history. The Belém Package included formal recognition of Indigenous land rights in the Mutirão decision, and the Just Transition Work Programme (JTWP) was updated to explicitly reference Indigenous rights. \$1.8 billion was pledged for land rights globally, and Brazil announced new Indigenous territories.

This trajectory represents decades of sustained advocacy by Indigenous Peoples' organisations globally and genuine, if incremental, responsiveness by the UNFCCC system. It is also incomplete. Many Indigenous participants at Belém reported that the talks fell short on representation, ambition, and meaningful inclusion. Participation has grown. Governance authority has not followed.



THE GAP BETWEEN INCLUSION AND GOVERNANCE AUTHORITY

The structural problem is that Indigenous Peoples remain caught between the state and non-state binary that organises the UNFCCC's legal architecture. As non-state actors, they can participate, advocate, and inform. They cannot negotiate. They can be heard but they cannot vote. Their self-determination rights under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) including the right to FPIC, to maintain and strengthen their own governance systems, and to determine and develop priorities for land and climate have no formal standing in the negotiating architecture that produces binding climate decisions. The LCIPP was designed to bridge this gap. Its three functions - knowledge exchange, capacity for engagement, and informing climate policy - position Indigenous Knowledge as a resource to be drawn on rather than a governance system to be recognised. The platform creates space for Indigenous voices within an architecture that was not designed with them. That is a meaningful achievement. It is not the same as structural inclusion in decision-making authority.

The findings of this report sit squarely in this gap. What participants described across three workshops is not a lack of cultural recognition. It is the structural conditions under which First Nations governance authority - over Country, over knowledge, over what climate response looks like in their communities - remains outside the formal frameworks that allocate resources, set targets, and define accountability. Closing the gap is the governance challenge that Australia's presidency has both the standing and the obligation to advance.

THE CASE FROM THIS REPORT

The communities that contributed to this series hold governance knowledge developed over tens of thousands of years of active land stewardship. A knowledge that is a different epistemology that situates ecological health, cultural continuity, and collective wellbeing as inseparable, and that produces climate responses grounded in place, relationship, and long-term obligation rather than policy cycles and output metrics.

The ecological disruption of the past two centuries was not produced by communities that remained in relationship with Country. The governance frameworks now seeking Indigenous participation in climate response are the same frameworks that disrupted that relationship. The question for Australia's presidency is whether existing frameworks can be sufficiently reformed to recognise the governance authority that knowledge represents and what Australia is prepared to do in its own domestic architecture and at the negotiating table to make that case.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COP31

The following recommendations are offered as agenda items for exploration, tabling, and negotiation. They are grounded in the findings of this report and in the existing trajectory of Indigenous governance within the UNFCCC system. They are presented as the next coherent steps from where the process currently stands.

- Formal recognition of FPIC as a threshold condition within Article 6 carbon market mechanisms, adaptation finance instruments, and technology transfer frameworks. FPIC should be a precondition for the design of any mechanism that affects Indigenous lands, waters, or knowledge systems, not a review mechanism after design is complete.
- Expansion of the LCIPP's mandate to include a formal advisory function within negotiating tracks, not only in thematic workstreams. This would not require restructuring the state/non-state architecture of the UNFCCC but would create a formal pathway for Indigenous governance knowledge to inform draft text rather than only respond to it.
- Integration of Indigenous-led indicators of ecological and cultural health — including land care outcomes, cultural transmission, species return, and waterway health within the Global Stocktake methodology. The current methodology measures what states report. It does not measure what Country holds. These are different data sets, and the difference matters for whether climate responses are assessed as effective.
- A formal commitment by Australia, exercised through its Presidency, to advance a Presidency initiative on First Nations climate governance bringing together ACCOs, Pacific Indigenous leaders, and international Indigenous Peoples' organisations to develop a shared governance framework that can be tabled for adoption at COP31. Australia's Presidency role gives it the standing to set this agenda. The pre-COP leaders' event in the Pacific is the appropriate moment to launch it.
- Review of the LCIPP's third three-year workplan to include explicit deliverables on Data Sovereignty, Indigenous Intellectual and Cultural Property (ICIP) protection, and the development of governance standards for the ethical engagement of Indigenous Knowledge within UNFCCC-aligned mechanisms including carbon markets, biodiversity credits, and adaptation programs.



These recommendations are consistent with what Indigenous Peoples' organisations have articulated across UNFCCC processes previously, and with the direction established by the Belém outcomes. Australia's Presidency is a moment to advance them from advocacy to decision.

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