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BOOMING CONTRIBUTIONS BY FIRST NATIONS TO ADDRESS AUSTRALIA'S ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS MUST BE RECOGNISED



Ranger Ray Nadjamerrek conducts an early dry season controlled burn in Arnhem Land, NT. Photo: Ted Wood.

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HEIDI NORMAN, JON ALTMAN, BHIAMIE WILLIAMSON, FRANCIS MARKHAM

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This week the federal government released the long-delayed State of the Environment 2021 report (hereafter SOE). In twelve chapters and a summary totalling over 2500

pages, the report draws attention to the rapid and continued decline of Australia's environment.

For the first time, in a separate 200-page chapter titled 'Indigenous', the report highlights the present and likely future impacts for Indigenous peoples from climate change and environmental degradation. The chapter also highlights the role Indigenous people currently play in responding to the worst effects of climate change and other threats.

The new government says the science is in and 'it's well past time we get to work'. The work will include not just responding to this report and working towards reducing emissions but also responding to the critical but constructive Samuel Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, completed nearly two years ago.

Today in the House of Representatives and the Senate there are more Indigenous representatives than at any other point in Australia's parliamentary history, as well as substantially more representatives who campaigned on platforms of stronger climate-change action such as The Greens and community independents. After a decade of inaction and political rancour, small and large businesses as well as community cooperatives are at various stages of readiness for the clean-energy revolution and other negative-emissions technologies that might reduce carbon in the atmosphere.

The government has made various promises in anticipation of the report. These include doubling the Indigenous ranger program, increased funding for Indigenous protected areas, a new cultural heritage protection act and, finally, spending a long-awaited \$40 million on Indigenous water entitlements in the Murray-Darling Basin. But these measures, while welcome and significant, are small relative to the scale of the challenge.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ARE ON THE FRONT LINE

As the SOE report highlights, Indigenous peoples are on the front line in terms of climate-change impacts and mitigation. These impacts are manifest across Australia—present in all landscapes, seascapes and ecosystems. In NSW, for example, Aboriginal missions and settlements located on town fringes are often situated on low-lying flood plains and are vulnerable to bushfires, heat stress, flooding and collapsing ecosystems and dry river systems. Food and water security are affected, limiting the ability of Indigenous people to live in their hometowns, which the majority Aboriginal communities along the Namoi, Barwon and Darling Rivers fear.

Heat will make large sections of inland central and northern Australia potentially uninhabitable. For example, without significant mitigation measures, the Kimberley town of Kununurra is projected to see temperatures by 2090 above 40°C for most of the year. Even new housing built to current standards isn't suitable for the projected heat extremes.

Natural disasters such as those experienced in the last five years—drought, fires and floods—also represent a clear and significant threat to Indigenous peoples' cultural heritage, as well as to their ability to restore degraded landscapes due to new threats such as weeds and feral animals, which inevitably move in, in the post-disaster period.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ARE ALREADY PROVIDING SOLUTIONS

Indigenous peoples have recognised land interests over more than half the continent, nearly four million square kilometres, with more under claim. Most of this land is in remote Australia and will inevitably prove highly significant in climate-change mitigation.

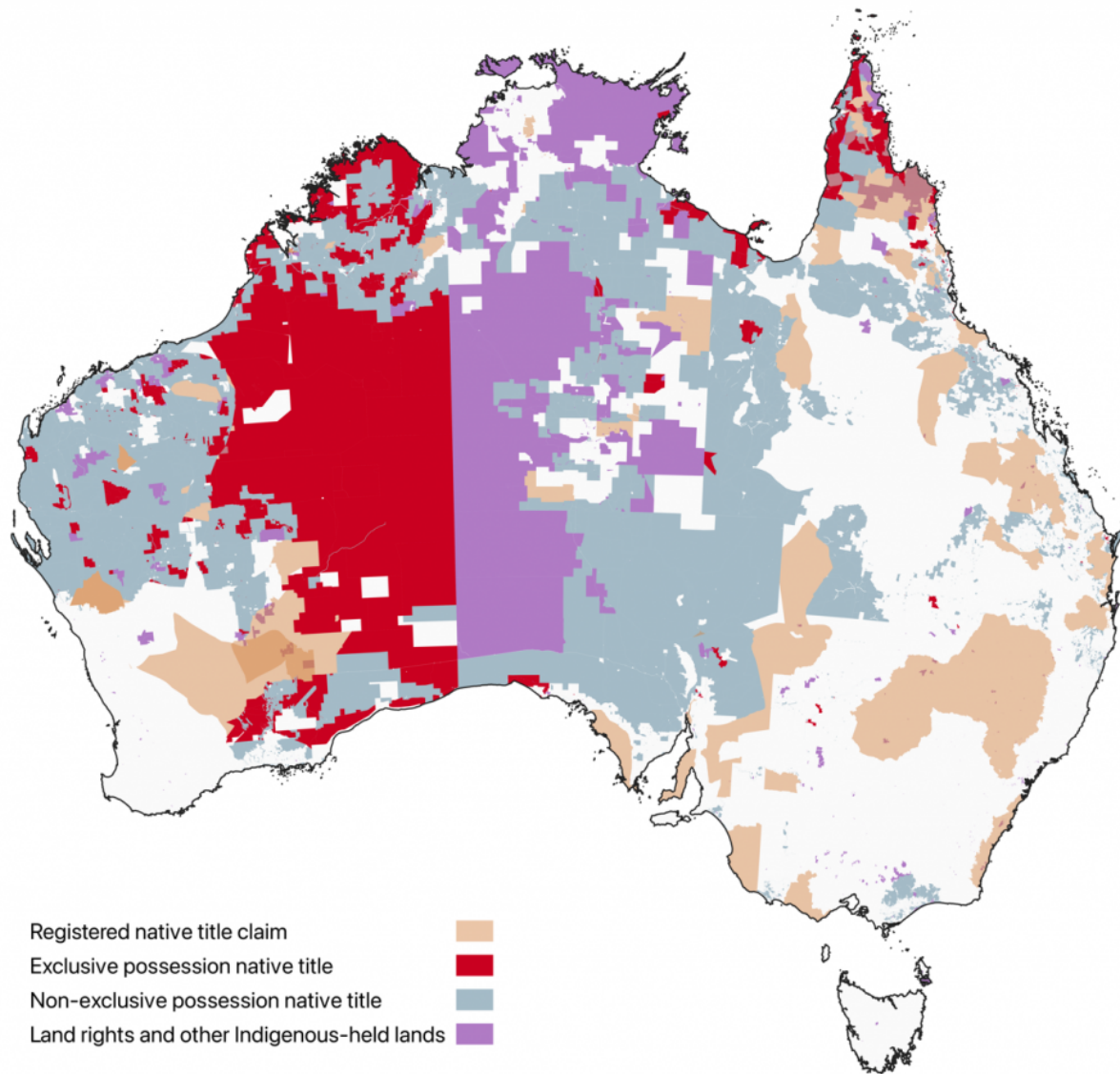


Figure 1: Selected Indigenous rights and interests in land. Source: Map by the authors from various data sources 2019 – 2022. Rights and interests in sea country are not displayed.

This massive Indigenous land estate is of high biodiversity and regeneration value, as evident in the declaration of seventy-eight Indigenous Protected Areas, comprising half of Australia's conservation estate. But the significance of Indigenous land holding is more than just the measure of square kilometres, with many including parcels proximate to urban areas and some extending into the coastal zone and sea.

In all these contexts, Indigenous people are guardians of local and traditional knowledge systems. While some are thriving and others recovering, this knowledge connects people to places of heritage and environmental significance, and to animals, plants and the seasons.

Across the tropical savanna, Indigenous ranger groups are already making impressive contributions to meet Australia's emission-reduction goals. In NSW, land returned to Aboriginal community control is small, with more awaiting return, with some claims unresolved since the 1980s. Yet even this small and fragmented estate is significant in

the context of stemming the worst effects of climate change. Indigenous presence in the urban areas of greater Sydney is high: in at least two local government areas Aboriginal land holdings are second in size only to those of government.

As much as 80 per cent of these urban lands are zoned 'conservation', meaning that for many Aboriginal land holders the ability to develop their land and generate much needed collective wealth is limited. In the context of urban land clearing and development, Aboriginal land often forms the critical 'green corridors' that provide habitat for animals and that are the 'lungs' of our cities.

The Aboriginal land estate in cities, towns and remote communities provides vital ecological services for all Australians in multiple ways; for example, weed and feral animal controls in riparian zones results in cleaner water; and fire management means cleaner air and less greenhouse gas. The urgency of the climate crisis calls for new ways to value the contribution of the Indigenous land estate and its owners to biodiversity conservation, provision of ecological services and reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and carbon abatement.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The transition to clean energy and decarbonising our atmosphere will intensify over the next few years, and the Indigenous land and sea estate and its people as managers and custodians will be key players. The value of this estate, and the work involved to regenerate landscapes and provide vital habitats in our cities, needs to be appropriately valued and supported as a necessary part of any transition plan. The State of the Environment Report goes some way in recognising this, but much stronger links must be formed to grasp the immense opportunity available to Indigenous peoples and the nation as a whole.

A growing network of interlinked First Nations alliances demonstrates clear leadership and engagement on clean-energy projects and emissions reduction. These include [Country Needs People](#), which advocates for living on, caring for and managing Indigenous-titled lands in accord with First Nation aspirations; the [Indigenous Carbon Industry Network](#), which operates across northern Australia to develop and deliver carbon projects, mainly through savanna fire management; and the [First Nations Clean Energy Network](#), auspiced by [Original Power](#), which advocates for landowner and community interests in the clean-energy transition to ensure First Nations communities share in the benefits of the clean-energy boom. They are assisted by the National Native Title Council, the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation, and the First Nations Heritage Protection Alliance. Many participated in the [First Nations Clean Energy Symposium](#) in Naarm/Melbourne just last week.

It is time for climate-change policies and programs at regional, state and federal levels to respond to the productive 'climate action' of First Nations people with recognition and respect, and equitable resourcing to allow it to flourish.



FRACKING ON TRIAL IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Lauren Mellor

As carbon dioxide in our atmosphere pushes 410 parts per million, fuelling a dangerous climate emergency, the world simply cannot afford to let the Northern Territory become the fossil-fuel industry's next fracking frontier.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

HEIDI NORMAN

Professor Heidi Norman is a researcher in the field of Aboriginal political history, a member of the Climate, Society and Environment Research Centre (C-SERC) and Convenor of the Indigenous Land and Justice Research Group at the University of Technology Sydney, and the Associate Dean Indigenous in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. She is a descendant of the Gomeroi people from north-western NSW.

[More articles by Heidi Norman](#)

JON ALTMAN

Jon Altman has a background in economics and anthropology and is an emeritus professor at the Australian National University. He works on practical issues around environmental, economic and social justice for Indigenous peoples in Australia and beyond with a number of not-for-profits. He has been an active participant in the Arena project for 20 years.

[More articles by Jon Altman](#)

BHIAMIE WILLIAMSON

Bhiamie Williamson is a Euahlayi man from north-west NSW with familial ties to north-west Qld. He is a PhD candidate and research associate at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University and a director of Country Needs People.

[More articles by Bhiamie Williamson](#)

FRANCIS MARKHAM

Francis Markham is a human geographer and is a research fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

[More articles by Francis Markham](#)

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