

Healing Country through Wiradjuri and Wolgalu-led cultural land management

Final report

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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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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge that we stand on Aboriginal land. As this project is based on Wiradjuri and Wolgalu Country, we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of this area and of the Country. We show our respect for Elders past, present and emerging.

Yanhagagi ngurra yindyamarra = Walk together respectfully.

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Executive summary

Healing Country through Wiradjuri and Wolgalu-led Cultural land management is a community-led place-based research project working with and supporting the Wiradjuri/Wolgalu Aboriginal community of Brungle/Tumut (NSW) and their Indigenous ranger program (Bugang Bila). Bugang Bila aims to put Wiradjuri/Wolgalu at the centre of land management on their traditional Country by collaborating with government and non-government natural resource management (NRM) agencies. Aligning this research project with Bugang Bila provided a valuable opportunity to gain insights and answers to the question: what supports Wiradjuri/Wolgalu cultural land management practices (caring for Country) and what are the barriers? This question broadly underpins similar programs being established across Australia and speaks to the aspirations of Traditional Owners and NRM agencies who want to consult, support and partner with Indigenous communities.

The project utilised multiple qualitative research methodologies, including semi-structured interviews (with community and NRM agencies), yarning, on Country workshops and activities and ethnographic style observations followed by research team reflections. A critical component of the project was the employment of two local community research assistants, which allowed for shared ownership of the research and adherence to cultural protocols and respect for community dynamics.

We identified barriers to Wiradjuri/Wolgalu accessing and participating in both cultural and NRM activities on their Country, which include:

- Indigenous people often have very different value systems to NRM agencies.
- The working environment and procedure of NRM agencies often impact Indigenous people's cultural confidence.
- Limited capacity to share knowledge and reconnect with neighboring Nations.
- Insufficient opportunities and time to build trusting, respectful relationships with relevant NRM agency staff.
- Restricted access to Country, due to government policies and insufficient resources.
- Lack of understanding and consideration of community dynamics by NRM agencies.

Our research suggests that achieving the widely held objective of 'healthy Country, healthy people' requires an alignment of values and establishment of trusting relationships, which can only be achieved through a process of two-way learning where NRM agency staff work closely with Traditional Owners. For this to happen, policy, procedures and resourcing need to strategically support Traditional Owners in key areas: building cultural confidence, supporting women's participation, investing in individuals through long-term funding security and a greater number of identified positions within NRM agencies. Positive change in this direction has already been observed during the first three years of the Bugang Bila project. A key to this achievement was the funding of and support for Cultural NRM Officers within the community, who established and maintained the necessary relationships between community and the different NRM agencies who currently manage much of their traditional lands.



End-user statements

As an NRM manager on Wolgalu/Wiradjuri Country, this report will be an invaluable guide for enhancing my team's relationship with the Brungle/Tumut Indigenous community. Other teams within NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service will also value and gain similar benefits from the report. It provides much needed perspective that will help us all in NRM to meet the ever-increasing desire to work closely with the Traditional Owners of this land.

Gabriel Wilks, Senior Project Officer, Southern Ranges Services, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.

As an NRM agency working closely with the Brungle/Tumut Local Aboriginal Land Council, we view this report as a valuable resource for strengthening our partnership. It offers meaningful insights into the barriers that can hinder the development of genuine and lasting relationships with Traditional Owners. The findings will inform our approach as we collaborate with the local community to support and enhance cultural land management practices into the future.

Cherie White, Natural Capital Advisor Riverina, Local Land Services Agency, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development



Introduction

On the sports ground in the centre of Tumut – the Bull Paddock – the broader community came together to paint a dead tree blue: in remembrance of lives lost to suicide. The Blue Tree Project is a national initiative to raise awareness of and encourage open conversations about mental health. It is a highly important cause and campaign.

Throughout the *Healing Country* project, the Wiradjuri/Wolgalu community, in all different ways, spoke about how non-Indigenous people and government and non-government agencies' good intentions rarely consider Wiradjuri/Wolgalu's cultural values. Traditional Owners continue to go unseen and unheard. Wiradjuri woman Jarrah Bousfield wrote the following in response to 'good intentions':

"You see a big blue tree for suicide awareness, I see an ancestor of my people defiled. You see powerline towers on a hill – important infrastructure – I see a sacred song line, a story forever tainted. You see a highway passing a fast-food restaurant, I see a hero's burial site destroyed. These are just three examples. Generations of oral history and story dismissed and desecrated. Good intentions mean little when values clash and voices go unheard."

The *Healing Country* project is on the lands of the Wiradjuri/Wolgalu people, Brungle/Tumut, NSW. It is a community-led place-based action research project, which aims to support Country, people, intergenerational community and intercultural relationships to restore the health and resilience of the landscape and its people. It is user-driven research, responding to Wiradjuri/Wolgalu needs and aspirations and commitments from government and non-government agencies to partner with Indigenous people to rebuild resilient ecological systems and mitigate against natural hazards. The report sets out to answer the question: what supports Wiradjuri/Wolgalu land management and what are the barriers?

"One of our biggest barriers is our values are different. Non-Indigenous people look at Country and see assets and we see kin. When we do asset protection, we need to protect the tree." (Wiradjuri/Wolgalu community member)

Since the devastating fires of 2019/2020, many NRM agencies – local, state and federal – have been proactive in working with Traditional Owners and Brungle-Tumut Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) to plan how we can heal Country after this enormous scorching of our ecosystem. Yet much of this work has been undertaken on a small-scale project basis, which has not allowed Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to establish and grow a culturally connected system. These opportunities and limitations for Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to partner with NRM agencies to care for their Country are reflective of the supports and barriers to developing genuine partnerships. There is a growing awareness within government and non-government agencies, driven by policy and social changes, research and advocacy, that Indigenous peoples' voices should be elevated and that they should be partners in the management of their traditional lands. Across Australia, there are increasing numbers of grassroots Traditional Owner cultural fire and land management projects (McKemey, Neale and Costello, 2021). Yet there is little research on what supports healthy relationships between Indigenous communities and NRM agencies, that do not reinforce power imbalances but rather enable Traditional Owner leadership of the NRM agenda.

"I think broadly in our society, we need to have a different relationship with the land and we need a different identity. All of us would benefit so much more if our society was centred around the tens of thousands of years of connection to this land that the First Nations people have." (Dave Hunter, Threatened Species Officer, DCCEEW)



Our experiences working with NRM agency staff in the Brungle/Tumut region are that there is goodwill, shared commitment to care for Country and a willingness to partner with Wiradjuri/Wolgalu. NRM agencies have a significant role to play in supporting Traditional Owners to revive and maintain their cultural connections and practices and build cultural confidence. Besides the policy, ethical, reconciliation and evidence-based drivers, there are many other mutual benefits. Most non-Indigenous people who work for NRM agencies do so because they have their own deep connections to, and value and care for, Country. There is a substantial opportunity to align values and enhance the experiences and fulfilment of everyone working in the NRM space.

Yet, as outlined in our findings, there are major barriers to creating genuine partnerships. In short, Indigenous knowledges, values and practices – environmental, wellbeing, governance, cultural – need to be validated within western knowledge practices and ways of seeing the world (Costello and Cameron 2022; Woodward et al., 2020; Weir, Neale and Clarke, 2022). This severely limits reciprocity and two-way learning, and thus the potential to combine traditional and scientific knowledges and values to rebuild healthy landscapes and mitigate the impact of natural disasters.

We all need to learn to hear one another, to hear Country, to learn from Indigenous people about how to come into relationship with Country.



Background

Government and non-government agencies are investing in and establishing policies, practices and legislation that support Indigenous engagement in natural disaster recovery and land management. This reflects the growing understanding within agencies that they need to partner with Indigenous people in the management of their traditional lands. These changes are driven by persistent advocacy from Indigenous communities, growing recognition that Indigenous people are rights holders and key stakeholders in healing Country and vital to creating resilient, healthy Country and people (Costello et al., 2021:5; Williamson and Weir, 2021; Woodward et al., 2020). Furthermore, the adoption of reconciliation and self-determination principles by many government agencies, and broader Australia, has grown the appreciation for Indigenous knowledges, values and practices as vital to resilient ecological systems and natural hazard reduction (for example, the Federal government's expansion of the Indigenous Ranger program and the NSW Government's commitment to hand back National Parks to Traditional Owners (15-to-20-year timeframe). However, this reveals knowledge, values, practice, policy and implementation gaps and ethical challenges. For example:

- Due to the power imbalances between government and broader non-Indigenous Australia and Indigenous communities, NRM agencies are not experienced in building genuine, respectful partnerships with Indigenous communities.
- NRM agencies' lack of understanding and respect for Indigenous peoples' values and deep knowledge of and cultural obligations to Country leads to community distrust of NRM agencies, a lack of cultural safety and therefore disengagement.
- NRM agencies seek Indigenous knowledge of Country but do not invest in communities revitalising cultural practices that support resilient ecological systems, healthy Country and people.

These relational/partnership problems result in implementation challenges. Government and non-government agencies cannot meet their commitments and targets to incorporate cultural land management practices, increase Indigenous engagement and grow the workforce.

In 2021, the NSW Cultural Fire Management Unit (CFMU), along with NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) and University of Wollongong (UOW), established the Buugang Wambal project (now Bugang Bila). It was a pilot project to support the Brungle-Tumut LALC and community to put Traditional Owners and culture at the centre of NRM. The aim was to address the above key problems. NRM agencies want to consult and work with Indigenous communities, and there is increasing investment in cultural land management; however, NRM agencies have not invested in fostering partnerships with communities based on trust, respect, reciprocity and shared understanding (McKemey, Neale and Costello, 2021).

With funding from CFMU and UOW, we created a Wiradjuri/Wolgalu Cultural NRM Officer position that is responsible for promoting, negotiating and managing NRM projects. Creating the position within the community is consistent with the principles of self-determination and enhances the capacity for Traditional Owners to speak for Country. The role has enabled Wiradjuri/Wolgalu voices to be amplified in discussions of what Country needs to be healthy and thriving, and enabled community governance and decision making, thus intervening in the power imbalance that is often inherent when government approaches community. Another key impact is Wiradjuri/Wolgalu reconnecting to significant landscapes in the NSW High Country and re-establishing responsibility for Country.

While there is a growing government commitment and investment in cultural land management and broader legislative and ethical requirements to engage with Indigenous communities, research and community lived experience reveals significant barriers to starting and sustaining cultural land and fire management projects. This is particularly true in southeast Australia and when projects require collaboration with government NRM



agencies (Costello et al., 2021; McKemey, Neale and Costello, 2021). Developing trusting, respectful, reciprocal partnerships that give Traditional Owners a stronger voice in management of their Country takes time, commitment, political will, resources, policy and legislative changes, and arguably a significant 'change of heart' by non-Indigenous Australians.

Wiradjuri/Wolgalu are now working with multiple NRM agencies, which has led to employment and greater opportunities to manage Country, mitigate against risk and protect endangered species. The *Healing Country through Wiradjuri and Wolgalu-led cultural land management* project leverages the significant and strong working relationships Bugang Bila established. The development of the Cultural NRM Officer has made positive changes for the community and NRM agencies. Such developments also raise larger questions, such as the question that drives this research: what supports Wiradjuri/Wolgalu cultural land management practices (caring for Country) and what are the barriers?

Our collaboration with the Brungle/Tumut Wiradjuri/Wolgalu community, Brungle-Tumut LALC, Cultural NRM Officer, DCCEEW and UOW, and partnerships with local NRM agencies, provides a unique opportunity to undertake a community-led place-based action research project.



Research approach

Following the publication of an article outlining the cultural significance of corroboree frogs (Gyak) to the Traditional Owners of the Snowy Mountains (Connolly et al., 2017), the corroboree frog recovery team began engaging various Indigenous groups to provide access and involvement in conservation efforts for this totemic species. This program expanded after the 2019/2020 fires, when a collaboration was established between Wiradjuri/Wolgalu, Brungle-Tumut LALC, the NSW DCCEEW and UOW. The Snowy Mountains were severely impacted by the fires, which led to significant interest in cultural land management from the public and governments. The initial project aimed to explore how to re-engage Wiradjuri/Wolgalu with natural landscape recovery and resilience. The method involved igniting the community's connections through a critically endangered and culturally significant species, the corroboree frog (*Pseudophryne corroboree* and *Pseudophryne pengilleyi*), who Wolgalu call Gyak.

The project has developed and deepened, and Gyak is just one part of putting culture at the centre of land management. In 2022 the NSW CFMU, in collaboration with DCCEEW and UOW, established the Bugang Wambal Project (now Bugang Bila). It was a pilot project to support the Brungle-Tumut LALC and community, through the creation and employment of the Cultural NRM Officer, to put Traditional Owners and culture at the centre of natural resource management. More recently, funding and support for the Cultural NRM Officer position has also come from the non-government agency 'Country needs People'. Wiradjuri/Wolgalu are now working with multiple NRM agencies, which has led to greater opportunities to manage Country, mitigate against risk, protect endangered species and increase employment. The *Healing Country through Wiradjuri and Wolgalu-led cultural land management* project leverages the significant and strong working relationships Bugang Bila established.

Our commitment is to a community-led, place-based action research project. It is user-driven research that responds to Wiradjuri/Wolgalu needs and aspirations, and clear government and non-government priorities to partner with Indigenous people to restore the health and resilience of landscape and its people. The key aims of our project are to undertake place-based work that empowers the Wiradjuri/Wolgalu community to reconnect with significant landscapes and knowledge practices, to be effective custodians of their Country, amplify Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to speak for Country and develop relationships of trust and reciprocity with NRM agencies.

To do so, we have utilised multiple qualitative methodologies, including semi-structured interviews (with community and NRM agencies), yarning, on-Country workshops and activities, and ethnographic style observations followed by research team reflections. Importantly, our methodology continues to be refined to reflect the community's needs, values and aspirations. The overall aim is that the community share in the ownership of research and it is of benefit to them. To ensure adherence to cultural protocols and respect for community dynamics, two local community research assistants are employed – Megan Considine and Jarrah Bousfield – and Megan regularly consults with cultural leaders and Elders.

A key aspect of the project is running on-Country workshops focused on rekindling important cultural practices, reconnecting Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to significant landscapes and connecting and sharing with neighbouring Nations. Prior to the Centre-funded research (March 2023), we ran a community forum to further discuss the research project, and consult, identify and plan on-Country activities. We have run men's, women's, youth and whole of community activities (refer to Milestones and Appendix 1). On-Country activities and connecting with neighbouring Nations are vital to revitalising and strengthening Wiradjuri/Wolgalu connections to Country, cultural land management practices and intergenerational knowledge exchange. They also provide spaces to yarn, learn and hear the voices, experiences and aspirations of a broad base of community. Another important aspect is providing resources that allow community to regularly participate in cultural activities and hold meetings on Country. This is an integral part of the project as it allows Country to



show what it wants, as well as Traditional Owners to share knowledge and wisdom to contextualise first-hand what is needed for people and Country. Notably all the above are learning, research, translations, outputs and implementation, which all support wellbeing and social equity.



Research findings

The key findings are drawn from discussions with Wiradjuri/Wolgalu community members and NRM agency staff. The starting point of all conversations was the key research question: what supports Wiradjuri/Wolgalu cultural land management and what are the barriers?

Values challenge

One of the largest barriers is the clash of values. Indigenous people and government, non-government agencies and broader Australia have very different knowledge and value systems.

- Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are on different pages. We need to get on the same page. This does not mean being the same, but learning to hear one another.
- It is expected that Indigenous people translate their values and feelings for Country to broader Australia. Non-Indigenous people's knowledge and values dominate, yet there is little expectation or responsibility on non-Indigenous people/agencies to do any of the translation work.
- The foundation of trusting, respectful intercultural relationships is recognising and respecting different values, and ways of knowing and relating to Country. It is not knowing and understanding the other's values and knowledges, but rather, knowing they are legitimate.
- Community members interpret the inability or refusal of non-Indigenous people to be interested in or understand Indigenous people's connections to and care for Country as ignorance, greed and racism.
- Government agencies need to learn to see what supports cultural land management from a Wiradjuri/Wolgalu community perspective.

"One of the largest barriers is the clash of values between Indigenous people, and government and non-government. I like to think that there's a political shift towards reconciliation, there's treaties being discussed in Victoria and everything else – I think the more our agencies, LLSs, national parks, DCCEEW, whoever work with Wiradjuri/Wolgalu, the more we're going to see a shift in the values that are elevated in a political sense, that'll then play out in terms of resourcing and what actually happens on the ground." (Dave Hunter, Threatened Species Officer, DCCEEW)

Speaking about the destruction of cultural sites, a community member said:

"If [non-Indigenous] people actually knew what it was that Country was used for (food, shelter, medicine, safety, information, life) they might think about it in a different way. Non-Indigenous people automatically think 'We want that piece of land. We've got to have this', so they will destroy the cultural site altogether – now it's gone. They have different views of what's important than Indigenous people – then they bury the past when there's no need to."

Cultural confidence

Cultural confidence is one of the key supports, and if absent, it creates barriers to Wiradjuri/Wolgalu caring for Country. What enables Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to grow in cultural confidence:

- Being on Country, learning from Country and learning and sharing cultural knowledge within the community and with other Traditional Owners.



- NRM agencies recognising and respecting the courage, commitment and energy it takes for Indigenous people to repeatedly engage in 'white' spaces.
- NRM agency staff taking the time to develop trusting, respectful relationships. Community and NRM agencies' staff spoke about feeling safe enough in their intercultural working relationships to allow themselves to be vulnerable.
- Recognition by NRM agency staff that there is a clash of knowledge systems and values, and the colonial system dominates.
- NRM agencies and broader non-Indigenous Australia being educated about the impact of colonialism.
- NRM agency staff treating Indigenous people with respect. This means that non-Indigenous people are aware of everyday racism – suspicion, judgement, distrust, stereotyping – and know that good intentions do not prevent racism.
- NRM agencies knowing and respecting that Indigenous people have cultural obligations to Country, community and family, and enacting these is vital for a strong sense of identity, connection and belonging.

NRM agency staff also reported the importance of Indigenous people being confident in their own skills and capacities and being proactive about how community want to manage their traditional lands. Community empowerment is key to developing partnerships between Traditional Owners and NRM agencies. Megan Considine, Cultural NRM Officer for Brungle-Tumut LALC, notes:

"To have cultural confidence means to be able to have the confidence within yourself and your culture to be proud of culture and be able to speak on and up for culture.

Cultural confidence is having, holding and passing cultural knowledge on; understanding why our own roles within Country are so important. We need to know our culture, our history, our stories, our practices – this strengthens our self-esteem and our confidence and our identity."

A community member spoke of the positive impact of learning in a culturally safe space and in particular how it contributed to the Wiradjuri men's confidence:

"That was the cultural confidence cutting in. Because being blackfellas, they're already worried about what people are going to think of them and a lot of them have reading difficulties, and [] has got dyslexia, and illiterate, so teaching verbally, not just writing, and learning with other Wiradjuri men, they looked after each other. What I've seen is huge confidence build up, usually they only got to think they're going to fail or think somebody's going to say something and they shut down."

Connections, learning and sharing with other Nations

The sharing of knowledge and reconnecting with neighbouring Nations is a powerful aspect of the Bugang Bila and the *Healing Country* project. Community members spoke about how cultural exchanges build cultural confidence, belonging, identity and a sense of shared responsibility, inspiration and motivation to undertake the challenging work of revitalising cultural practices and working with government and non-government agencies.

National Parks in the High Country are the traditional lands of multiple Nations. NRM agencies and the Traditional Owners need to work together to care for Country. Re-establishing traditional relationships is essential.



“Ensuring adequate community engagement is challenging when a natural resource or value crosses several Land Council boundaries. This is evident for landscapes that were traditional meeting places for more than one nation. A fear within natural resource agencies of causing conflict or talking to the wrong group results in an avoidance outcome of ‘do nothing’. Coordination between neighbouring land councils could increase opportunities for communities to work on Country.” (NRM agency participant)

Reciprocity, respect and relationships

Community and NRM agencies emphasised the vital importance of relationship building. The Bugang Bila program, the Brungle-Tumut LALC and key local NRM agency staff have built trusting, respectful relationships. These relationships took time, resources, goodwill and open minds and hearts.

Community highlighted the following as key to building respectful, trusting and reciprocal relationships with NRM agencies:

- Shared values about caring for Country. The problem isn’t simply that Aboriginal people and NRM agencies manage Country differently, but rather Traditional Owners need to know agencies are genuine and not just doing ‘tick-a-box’.
- There is a lot of talk about caring for Country; actions speak louder than words.
- NRM agencies being open and including Traditional Owners in plans, decision-making and proposals.
- Long-term commitment and a willingness to build and maintain relationships, especially through the hard times.
- Taking the time to talk.
- Resourcing community to do on-Country work.
- Value, support and resource getting community back on Country. Over time this will lead to a growth in cultural confidence and therefore a greater capacity to care for Country, and better relationships.
- Respect that there are men’s and women’s business and places.

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people reported that by developing genuine partnership they grew in confidence and learned how to work together. Their shared confidence led to greater trust and creation of other opportunities to co-manage Country.

“Money is not the problem: it’s relationships.” (NRM agency participant)

“Trust is a two-way process. Non-trusting culture is the worst kind of management. Therefore trust and safety are foundational to strong relationship.” (Jarrah Bousfield, Wiradjuri)

“We need people that are not just doing the tick-a-box things; there are so many things that are just ‘tick-a-box’ (in employment and land management, having an Aboriginal person to ‘consult’ with, but it’s just to tick that box). We want... healthy relationships with people who are passionate about the same sort of stuff and that care about the environment and not just on that level of ‘We need our trees so that we can breathe’. It’s deeper, you know, it’s for... Country.” (Megan Considine, Wiradjuri/Wolgalu, Cultural NRM Officer)



Policy, resources and access to Country

A significant obstacle to cultural land management is Traditional Owners not having access to their Country. Many community members spoke of being locked out of their traditional lands: gates, policies and permits.

- A lack of access to traditional lands limits Traditional Owners' capacity to care for their Country, fulfil cultural obligations, revitalise connections to Country and cultural knowledge, and feel respected as custodians.
- If Wiradjuri/Wolgalu feel excluded and not trusted, they do not trust NRM agencies.
- Agency staff also spoke of the need for Indigenous people to have meaningful employment and access to Country.
- Lack of access to Country is driven by legislation, policies and processes. While inadequate funding remains a key challenge, land tenure and permit arrangements, legal and policy instruments, insurance requirements and risk management frameworks, and institutional/agency cultures can all impede cultural land management practices, particularly cultural burning.

"Big things that stops community doing culture – policy, everything has been done on government terms, red tape. If government is 100% supporting us, this needs to be reflected in policy and changing policy."
(Wiradjuri community member)

Understanding community dynamics

Why is it so important for agencies to understand Community dynamics?

"So we can work together cohesively – agencies need to be able to understand why we need to be flexible with community (with Sorry business and family commitments etc) and how best to support us, so we in turn can support these agencies and work together." (Aunty Coral Bulger, CEO Brungle-Tumut LALC)

A key challenge for government and non-government agencies is understanding and respecting community dynamics, yet it is one of the foundations of creating trusting, respectful relationships between the LALC, community and agencies. A significant implementation challenge for NRM agencies partnering with Traditional Owners is the inability for NRM agencies to understand community dynamics, cultural governance and values.

Wiradjuri/Wolgalu highlighted the below as key:

Cultural obligations to Country

Aboriginal people have obligations to care for Country.

- This is a foundational community value and is vital to reclamation of cultural identity, confidence, social cohesion and revitalisation of cultural land management practices. Community members spoke of the need for NRM agencies to respect and accept different knowledges, values and ways of doing things, and to work together to establish ways of working that are mutually beneficial. There is a strong sense of respect for, and willingness to engage with, non-Indigenous people who do so.



“I hope this project will put a lot more people on Country, not just our Elders who know the Country already, but our young people who are developing into those Elders will have that knowledge. They’ll be on Country, they’ll be able to sit on Country, look on Country, listen on Country and then have that relationship with Country, which will be their responsibility then to look after it.” (Aunty Sue Bulger, Wiradjuri Elder)

Time

In discussions with the community, people often said Aboriginal people don’t run on a linear timeline like non-Indigenous people. Key concerns and distinctions:

- Short-termism vs five generations ahead: NRM agencies and Wiradjuri/Wolgalu people work on contrasting time frames and cultural and ecological values.
- Listening to Country is a different and equally valid form of planning.
- Community protocol is to talk, listen to Elders and build relationships with people and places. Cultural governance is highly inclusive and therefore requires a lot of back and forth, which takes time. When NRM agencies engage with Indigenous communities, they need to take into account the community protocols and obligations.
- The need for respect and flexibility.
- Indigenous and non-Indigenous people often have very different values around family and community obligations, death and grieving. Agencies need to understand that community protocols and values necessitate time away from work commitments.

“Things aren’t planned in the same way they are for NRM agencies – rather we are listening to Country and have obligations to Country. Country is a living calendar. We observe and listen and learn from Country.” (Megan Considine, Wiradjuri/Wolgalu, Cultural NRM Officer)

Cultural safety

Wiradjuri/Wolgalu often reflected on forms of ‘white ignorance’ – unawareness of the impact of colonialism and Aboriginal cultural practices and obligations to Country – that leads to people feeling unsafe and disrespected. Cultural safety is closely associated with:

- Non-Indigenous people educating themselves about the ongoing effects of colonialism: ‘Too often it [colonialism] is swept under the rug’.
- Government and non-government agencies becoming educated about and respecting community dynamics.
- Non-Indigenous people not judging and stereotyping Indigenous people.
- NRM agencies understanding and respecting that it takes courage, strength, vulnerability and commitment for Indigenous people to be in spaces dominated by government/non-Indigenous people and cultures.
- Being vulnerable is challenging for most people, but particularly hard for Indigenous people because they are subject to relentless negative stereotyping. Community members reflected on not wanting to ‘prove the stereotype right’. If people don’t feel culturally safe they disengage.

Capacity building needs to be undertaken in a culturally appropriate way. Therefore, agencies need to create trusting relationships, ‘respect where people are at’ and centre community decision making.



A Wiradjuri participant said that racism and stereotyping were major barriers to engaging with government agencies and therefore cultural land management:

“Just because one person did something, everyone is tarred. Racism, judgement, not knowing the truth. They are just blind.”

Gender

Indigenous knowledge and places can be gendered.

- In general, government and non-government agencies do not know or respect that there is men’s and women’s business.
- Several community members reported that they work with NRM agency staff who understand that knowledge, places and activities can be gendered, and this enhanced respectful working relationships.

Healing and trauma

Historical and ongoing colonialism and racism causes significant trauma in Indigenous communities and to Country. Despite the recognition of intergenerational trauma and the impact of colonialism on Indigenous people’s individual and collective health and wellbeing, it is rarely considered in government and non-government agencies’ planning processes or community engagement.

Key findings:

- There is a need to take a strengths-based approach. Alongside trauma is great strength, resilience and capacity.
- Ongoing colonialism, intergenerational trauma, racism and high death rates result in community being in cycles of grief. This is emotionally and psychologically exhausting. As one community member said:

“I feel sadness – the rollercoaster of emotions, doing the workshops, or the community engagements – like, you know, sadness over when I’m around some of the old people and they tell me stories about the old days. Sadness, but also happiness at the same time, because I get to hear it.”

- Agencies need to recognise and respect that people have very complex lives in which there are multiple demands, obligations and ongoing trauma. To not do so, results in further injury, racism and shame, and an inability to create trusting relationships.
- NRM agency staff also spoke of the importance of not shying away from the complexity of Indigenous people’s lives and the necessity of factoring this into working together.
- A number of community members spoke of the stigma of mental health. Indigenous people are subject to relentless negative stereotypes. To admit to having a mental health problem brings with it a fear of reinforcing stereotypes.
- Processing grief and trauma is enabled by being on Country, building cultural confidence, non-Indigenous people’s awareness of colonial history – truth telling – and building respectful cross-cultural relationships.
- Being on Country and working to heal Country results in less strain on the judicial and health system.



Lateral violence

A barrier to realising community aspirations for cultural land management is lateral violence. For very good reasons, lateral violence is often not an aspect of 'community dynamics' that people want to talk about. Again, because Indigenous people are subject to negative stereotyping, openly discussing lateral violence leads to a fear of reinforcing stereotypes and a sense of disloyalty to the community. Importantly, NRM agencies need to understand that:

- By not following community cultural protocols and decision-making processes, agencies can exacerbate lateral violence.

"You start a problem and you thought you were doing the right thing. It's been done a million times." (NRM agency participant)

- It is common for non-Indigenous people who work in and with Indigenous communities to speak openly and dis-compassionately about lateral violence. This reinforces a sense that lateral violence is an 'Aboriginal problem' rather than a product of ongoing colonialism and a shared responsibility to heal.

Sink or swim

Community members spoke of government and non-government agencies having a sink or swim approach. Agencies want to work with community, yet there is little capacity building and support, which leads to the inability to engage the community and implement cultural land management. Numerous people spoke of wanting to be given opportunities – given a go – like white people get given a go. Or as one community member said:

"Government 'disguise' opportunities when it is rights. We have the right to be on Country, care for Country and yet there is little opportunity. Given how much has been taken away – colonialism – there should be an abundance of opportunities to learn – two ways."

Key findings:

- Communication problems. It is taken for granted that Indigenous people know what agencies want and why.
- Government and non-government agencies need to understand that there is increasing pressure on a few community members to accommodate NRM projects around their busy lives, which leads to an increase in colonial load and burnout (this was the impetus for establishing the Bugang Bila Cultural NRM Officers, which has proved invaluable).
- An unintended consequence of the above is that Indigenous people working with agencies puts pressure on the community, which causes tension or lateral violence within the community. This leads to further social inequities within the community.
- There is a need for culturally safe forms of learning and capacity building. For some people there is a lot of shame around low literacy levels and education (due to school experiences) and there is a fear of reinforcing negative stereotypes. A Wiradjuri participant movingly spoke about being at fire training and telling the non-Indigenous trainers that many of the participants are illiterate but are very capable practical learners. The teachers adjusted their teaching style, were respectful and met the participants 'where they were at'. They all worked as a team and the Wiradjuri men encouraged each other: they were courageous and vulnerable. The teachers were open, didn't act like 'mission managers', encouraged, never shamed anyone and had humility and humour. Our interviewee



reported that he grew in confidence, which has supported him and his team to take on other work and capacity-building opportunities.

- A key form of support and capacity building is when NRM agency staff take the time to build trusting, respectful relationships.
- NRM agency staff spoke of the need for agencies to invest in capacity building and resourcing Traditional Owners to manage their own lands and work with NRM agencies and private landowners to co-manage Country. Not doing so results in an inability for NRM agencies to implement government agenda of increasing their engagement with Aboriginal people.

Connecting community with NRM agencies – the value of the Cultural NRM Officer

The Bugang Bila Cultural NRM Officer role, as an NRM agency staff member said, has been “critical to have a pathway for us to engage community”. The Cultural NRM Officer, along with Indigenous people working in NRM agencies or running small businesses, play a key role as intermediaries between community and government and non-government agencies.

Key findings:

- Community intermediaries walk in two worlds. This needs to be recognised, respected and appropriately supported. Means of supporting could be financial investments in such roles and resourcing both community and NRM agency staff to have the time to build and maintain relationships and undertake the vital and time-consuming work of genuine co-management.
- Agencies need to recognise how much work is undertaken behind the scenes.
- In general, communities don’t trust agencies therefore there is a lot of pressure on community working in or with government agencies, which can lead to burnout. Agencies need to recognise this pressure and support the roles, most especially by enabling community processes to unfold.
- Indigenous people in intermediary roles need to be strong enough to be vulnerable. It is taken for granted that Indigenous people engage in ‘white spaces’, which means they are subject to government demands, priorities and the dominance of colonial knowledge systems and values. Yet the reverse is rarely expected. Indigenous intermediaries need to draw on cultural and personal confidence, a dedication to self-determination, the strength of community and of those who have gone before them to maintain the necessary resilience.
- NRM agency staff who are open, take the time to build respectful, trusting relationships and show vulnerability and humility are also vital intermediaries.



Discussion

Bugang Bila means mountain to river. The name speaks to an interconnected cultural landscape, in which Country holds stories, songlines and pathways, and custodians have cultural obligations to Country. Thinking of one pathway, it crosses land managed by Forestry, Crown Lands, Local Land Services, Local Council, National Parks, Local Aboriginal Land Council and privately owned land. Along that same pathway, there are men's and women's ceremonial places, waterways and communities and habitats of endangered species such as corroboree frog and Tumut grevillea, which must be managed for the health of Country and people. Aboriginal cultural landscapes contrast significantly with how NRM agencies imagine and manage landscapes as humans separate from the environment, single agencies, projects, land tenure systems and adherence to legal obligations and policies.

Colonialism brought people with 'profoundly different ways of being, perceiving and imagining' into contact (Dowd, 2011:126). Since colonisation there has been a continual failure for settler colonials to meet, in a genuine sense, Indigenous ways of being, perceiving, knowing and imagining the world. This is our legacy. In Australia, western knowledge systems, authority and hierarchies are so normalised within governance, institutions and everyday life that they appear to many to be common sense, natural. Bugang Bila is an experiment in rebalancing power relationships and creating pathways for Wiradjuri/Wolgalu and NRM agencies to build respectful, reciprocal partnerships. This is only the beginning of revitalising Wiradjuri/Wolgalu cultural land management practices and cultural authority to speak and care for Country. The *Healing Country* project has provided an opportunity to evaluate what supports cultural land management and what the barriers and learnings are.

The long-term objective of Bugang Bila is healthy Country, healthy people. This can only be achieved through healthy and productive relationships with NRM agencies, because NRM agencies manage considerable Wiradjuri/Wolgalu traditional lands. The benefits are mutual: NRM agencies now have corporate aspirations to work closely with Traditional Owners of the lands and environmental assets they manage. However, there are typically a lack of relationships between Indigenous communities and government agencies, and even more so, 'fraught relations held between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and government organisations' and society more broadly (Williamson and Weir, 2021:63). One challenge is building and maintaining relationships and genuine partnerships between Traditional Owners, representative organisations (for example LALCs), the broader Indigenous community and natural resource management and natural hazard agencies (Costello et al., 2021; McKemey, Neale and Costello, 2021; Williamson and Weir, 2021). Another challenge is Wiradjuri/Wolgalu rebuilding cultural practices, community governance and authority as custodians. These two key challenges are intertwined and confronting them is necessary for the growth and success of Indigenous cultural land management.

Agencies want to work with Indigenous communities, yet too often they do not recognise or resource relationship building and maintenance, cultural revitalisation and capacity building. Research highlights the need for: creating paths (structures, policies and practices) that respect and protect Indigenous rights, knowledge and decision making, thus empowering Indigenous people; support for capacity building to practice cultural land management; significant policy and legislative changes (Costello et al., 2021; McKemey, Neale and Costello, 2021; Weir, Neale and Smith, 2021). Lived experience and research attest to the need to centre self-determination. Drawing on extensive literature on forming better relationships between Indigenous people, governments, universities and others, Williamson and Weir identify two interrelated priorities:

- To centre Indigenous people on matters of importance to them. This involves equitable sharing of resources and decision-making authority, including greater access to and ownership of land.



- To decentre non-Indigenous dominance of matters important to Indigenous people, by reducing the discriminatory assumptions, structures and processes that are the legacy of distorted relations (Williamson and Weir, 2021:64).

They refer to this as centring/decentring work. The question is how and what is required to centre/decentre and create respectful partnerships and relationships between NRM agencies, Indigenous land management organisations and Traditional Owners and Indigenous communities (Costello et al., 2021:11). Bugang Bila/*Healing Country* project provides a unique opportunity to respond to this challenge.

Values challenge

Indigenous communities and NRM agencies operate within different values and knowledge systems. A significant problem is that Indigenous people must translate their values, knowledges and feeling and connection to Country into mainstream understandings. Due to the dominance of western science within land management, Aboriginal knowledge and values, however inadvertently, are not engaged with and respected as legitimate and authoritative. This is a form of epistemic racism – prioritising western knowledge – which is both systemic and everyday racism, and largely invisible to non-Indigenous people. As Oliver Costello discusses:

One of the biggest challenges is interpretation between different knowledge systems and institutions. Much of the jargon used by agencies and researchers from across different disciplines can disregard or misappropriate other knowledge systems, including Indigenous knowledge and people's connections to Country. This can cause a great deal of concern and confusion, particularly to Indigenous communities, in understanding what the different agencies or researchers want, do or need from them or their Country. It also outlines the importance of sitting down together and learning each community's ways by building relationships and understanding what might be more equitable and respectful partnerships. Another challenging area is that, often, cultural knowledge is not known or understood by outsiders. (Costello and Cameron, 2022)

Bugang Bila has created opportunities for incorporating Wiradjuri/Wolgalu knowledges – for example, cultural fire management – however, for Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to fully realise their cultural land management aspirations requires resources to revitalise cultural practices and for NRM agencies to recognise and incorporate Aboriginal values (for example, relationships to Country as kin and cultural obligations to care for Country). If a goal of NRM agencies is to partner with and empower Indigenous communities to restore the health and sustainability of landscapes and address multiple natural hazard challenges, then conflicting values are a significant implementation challenge.

Capacity building

Bugang Bila has seen the confidence of everyone in the engaged group grow immensely since the project got underway. Megan Considine explains that the project is “strengthening community; community members are more confident within themselves and their cultural knowledge. There are opportunities for meaning-full employment and to get Country healthy.”

Community capacity building needs to be understood as resourcing Wiradjuri/Wolgalu cultural revitalisation, supporting people to be on Country and two-way learning – understanding different cultures, values, governance, knowledges and aspirations. If this is not appropriately resourced, then not only are Indigenous people not empowered to manage Country (and Country does not benefit from two-way knowledge and values), but NRM agencies cannot fulfil their mandate to partner with custodians.

There is a need to avoid assumptions that Aboriginal groups have cultural knowledge ‘ready’ or that they are willing to share it. Communities need opportunities and support to (re)build and grow knowledge (Costello et al., 2021:17).



Rekindling culture enables Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to grow their cultural confidence, which strengthens people's cultural identity, self-esteem and authority, and empowers Traditional Owners to speak for Country. As the literature attests, this has numerous social, health and wellbeing benefits, including 'empowering [Indigenous people] to stand in the role of cultural custodians for future generations' (Janke et al., 2021). Importantly, growing cultural confidence and authority supports Wiradjuri/Wolgalu people's sense of trust that non-Indigenous people will listen and behave respectfully, which leads to a willingness to engage with government and non-government agencies. Cultural confidence is one of the key foundations for Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to work with NRM agencies and develop trusting partnerships.

"Cultural confidence is so important – we need our people to have cultural confidence to be able to speak on our values and stand up for them and ourselves." (Megan Considine, Wiradjuri/Wolgalu, Cultural NRM Officer)

This is why throughout the *Healing Country* project we have invested in on-Country activities to revitalise cultural practices and to rebuild stronger connections to Country and community (see Appendix 1). The revitalisation of culture and intergenerational knowledge exchange are needed for healthy Country and healthy people, and contribute to community aspirations for cultural, social and employment outcomes. A significant outcome has seen youth and adults connect more comfortably with the Country and themselves 'regaining our own identity and voices'.

Throughout the project, Wiradjuri/Wolgalu have re-established relationships with Yuin, Walbunja and Dhuderoa, and created new connections with Anangu Rangers (APY Lands, South Australia). These on-Country exchanges enable Traditional Owners to share and learn cultural land management practices. Relationships with neighbouring Nations extend back millennia and revitalising them enables Traditional Owners to rebuild relationships and opens old pathways to ceremony in the High Country. This has many enabling effects: custodians learn and teach new and forgotten things about Country; custodians reconnect to songlines and stories that were traditionally shared. Notably, National Parks in the High Country are the traditional lands of multiple Nations. NRM agencies and all the Traditional Owners need to work together to care for that Country. Re-establishing traditional relationships is essential.

Capacity of agencies

The partnerships between Wiradjuri/Wolgalu and NRM agencies have grown the capacities and confidence of NRM agency staff. In turn, this supports the cultural safety of Wiradjuri/Wolgalu and allows agencies and community to participate in two-way learning and develop relationships that are the foundation for long-term co-management.

The success of Bugang Bila would not be possible without the strong commitment of several local agency staff to build and maintain good working relationships with the community. As Williamson and Weir make clear, there needs to be a shift from a few individuals' commitment to partnering with Traditional Owners, to structural change (2021). Without systematic changes within government and non-government agencies Indigenous people remain culturally unsafe, must legitimatise their knowledge, perspectives and relevance within western systems, all in the face of pressure to conform to government and broader society approaches. As researchers on fire, land management and natural hazard agencies report '[b]uilding the competencies of these institutions is an integral step towards supporting Indigenous-led and collaborative approaches in natural hazard research, policy and practice' (Williamson and Weir, 2021:63). A key competency is understanding and respecting community dynamics: the ongoing impact of colonialism; sorry business; grieving from loss, pain and trauma; cultural governance and decision-making; and the strengths in community. The commitment to, and resourcing of, the building of respectful relationships is an outcome.



“Elders are living libraries; their deaths are a loss of that person and their depth of cultural knowledge and leadership.” (Community member)

“I feel like we’re stretching community unfairly and I feel like that’s not conducive to getting the best outcome, but it’s also not conducive to things being a bit more considered and done in a way that’s thinking about culture and community broadly. It feels rushed and a bit stressed and everything else, whereas I feel like this needs to be done in a reflective, considered, more relaxed way, in a way.” (NRM agency participant)

NRM agencies and emergency management agencies, and broader Australia, benefit from re-evaluating and re-imagining their connections to Country. This requires understanding that one’s perspective of the world is cultural, not universal. Importantly, stepping into another cultural space can cause a lot of discomfort: not understanding, a sense of misalignment with one’s own knowledge and values, fear of doing the wrong thing and feeling vulnerable. As vital as two-way learning is, it is often discussed as if the only thing required is that two cultures come together and share. Bugang Bila has demonstrated that there is considerable goodwill and commitment from NRM agency staff. However, if we understand that two-way learning is based on principles of self-determination, ensuring that custodians are equal decision makers and their knowledges are recognised and not appropriated, then what we are discussing is systemic and social transformation (Costello and Cameron, 2022). This is acknowledged yet not fully recognised, accounted for, or resourced. A starting point is when NRM agencies partner with community, they work to decentre their way of seeing and understanding the environment: explain what they are doing, why and how they relate to and ‘know’ Country, and work to hear and learn from Wiradjuri/Wolgalu about Country.

Policies, legislation and resourcing

Wiradjuri/Wolgalu see, feel and care for Country as an interconnected cultural landscape. Landscapes need to be looked at in ways that Indigenous people perceive of Country, and their voices need to be elevated to speak for Country, otherwise clear communication and meaningful partnerships fail. As discussed, this is a key challenge for NRM agencies. In many cases, agencies have a direct remit of tenure that they have to work under, plus budgetary constraints, legal obligations to adhere to and project-based funding. This lies in stark contrast to how community sees Country. The complex web of laws, agreements and land tenure systems that communities have to navigate to access and care for Country exhausts and demoralises, and is a constant reminder that the legacy of colonialism severely limits Indigenous people’s capacity to manage their own lands and be authoritative decision-makers (Janke et al., 2021).

The landscape of cultural burns is a very complex one and the landscape that Bugang Bila burns on encompasses a wide range of land tenures including: National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Local Land Services (LLS), Crown Lands, LALC-owned land, private land and Forestry-owned land. Each of these has its own laws and policies that have to be adhered to, which is daunting for a community wishing to undertake cultural burning or cultural practice. There are numerous remuneration problems – for example, National Parks policies don’t enable payment of community members for cultural burns on NPWS land. This constrains Indigenous people conducting burns as possible employment and an economic activity, and limits their ability to continue working on Country, revitalising cultural practices which protect Country and important cultural species.

To undertake the planning process required to do a cultural burn around corroboree frog enclosures on National Park Estate (Kosciusko National Park) took over 18 months to set up. For all staff involved it was their first cultural burn and a huge learning process. When it was undertaken it was a powerful two-way learning experience for Bugang Bila and NPWS staff. The cultural burn was beneficial to the resilience and protection of the enclosures from any future bushfire events. The policy processes and procedures are not malleable enough to allow the aspirations of community and facilitate the cultural obligations of Aboriginal people. Notably, the processes are extremely resource-intensive for NRM staff and therefore make it difficult to implement over



competing priorities. What is required is the exploration of models that provide for areas of cultural priority to be managed according to cultural values and practices and allow for re-establishing traditional knowledge. This requires going slow and seeing what works for Country.

A major challenge for community is short-term investment timeframes. All the hard work of the project may fall over if government do not commit to longer-term investment and security for the Indigenous communities. Trust and goodwill are also burned in the process. The Cultural Fire Management Unit and UOW's commitment to supporting the experiment of creating the Cultural NRM Officer enabled the development of the Bugang Bila project. Funding from the Centre allowed us to resource community research assistants to undertake community engagement, research and organise on-Country activities.

The outcome of these resources is not simply the completion of projects, but importantly, has enabled community members to build trust in non-Indigenous people. Intermediary roles, such as community Cultural NRM Officer and rangers, whether they are embedded in community, government or non-government agencies and organisations, are vital to transforming intercultural relationships. There is a need to recognise the increasing pressure on a few community members to accommodate NRM projects around their busy lives, which leads to an increase in colonial load, thus burnout and further social inequities. Agencies need to not only resource more of these operational roles, but build capacity in community members to ensure there is a pipeline of potential intermediaries. Governments want and need strong local Indigenous governance, but they do not invest in it. 'Indigenous governance, both organisational and cultural governance, is the key for Indigenous knowledge to be used in caring for Country' (Janke et al., 2021). Importantly, resourcing, timeframes and what are considered as 'outcomes', need to be flexible and support the long-term goals of respectful intercultural partnerships that rebuild healthy Country, healthy people.

Several agency staff spoke about the tension between NRM agencies wanting to work with Indigenous communities and the limited resources to facilitate more coordinated approaches, which would yield greater outcomes. NRM agencies work in silos and there is a need to work more collaboratively and pool resources. NRM agencies could facilitate this process, for example, through a community of practice (CoP) approach.

"When we look at and we talk about Country and it's obvious and it's clear that us as people are missing from the landscape. Everything else is there, except for us. Bugang Bila is about putting Aboriginal people in control and back on Country. The bugang, gyak and our people, all have that one connection throughout this Country." (Shane Herrington, Wiradjuri/Wolgalu Man)



Implications

The long-term objective of this project is healthy Country, healthy people. To do this Wiradjuri/Wolgalu and NRM agencies need to work together. Country needs both Indigenous cultural knowledge, values and practices, science and, more broadly, Australians to develop a deep love and connection to Country. NRM agencies and community need genuine partnerships, built on trust, respect, goodwill and co-learning. As a NRM agency participant noted, “[w]ithout the local relationships very little happens”. Too often government and non-government agencies are outcomes-focused. However, if we take seriously the ongoing effects of colonialism, the implications are that to create the necessary partnerships, NRM agencies have a significant role to play in resourcing and supporting the foundational work – the bedrock – which leads to sustainable, productive and rewarding working relationships. Below we outline how agencies can best support the Wiradjuri/Wolgalu community to have a strong voice and partnership in the care, protection and recovery of their traditional lands.

Cultural confidence

Community-driven, on-Country activities focused on revitalising cultural knowledge, values and practices build cultural confidence. As noted in the discussion, cultural confidence has numerous benefits. Importantly, it is the foundation of a strong identity and inter-community, intergenerational and cross-cultural relationships. NRM agencies and other government and non-government agencies and funding bodies can play an important role in supporting the revitalisation of culture, hence cultural confidence. **Supporting on-Country activities** needs to be seen as an outcome in itself.

Supporting women

The implications of wanting more Indigenous women in the workforce is that there is a need to **recognise and support women carers’ responsibilities**. Women undertake the majority of childcare and care for extended family and the broader community. There are many demands on women, and they care for Country for the love of family, their children and Country. Ways to support women include:

- Indigenous childcare
- part-time employment
- support the self-determination of women by ensuring their voices and experiences are heard
- fund women to undertake the work to care for women’s places
- support the female workforce ‘pipeline’. The most accomplished person working in the Bugang Bila program had not previously worked in the NRM space. Supporting women’s employment in all different fields – that grow their confidence, administration skills and professional capacities – and to undertake on Country activities is a way to grow a ‘pipeline’ of women to work in cultural land management and build respectful relationships with agencies.

Cultural NRM Officer position

The short-term, ad hoc funding of the Cultural NRM Officer transformed the working relationships between community and NRM agencies. Currently, Brungle-Tumut LALC has one at 0.2 FTE. As NRM agencies, government and non-government, increase their engagement with Indigenous communities, they risk burning



out particular people and putting more pressure on the community and LALCs. There is a need to **recognise the importance of roles such as Cultural NRM Officer** and appropriately support and fund them.

NRM agencies – identified positions

NRM agencies need to **invest more in identified Indigenous positions**: Indigenous people with skilled, spatial awareness of the cultural landscape and a history of working in the NRM space. If NRM agencies want to partner with Indigenous communities, they need to invest in growing the Indigenous workforce. Again, agencies need to work with the community to grow the 'pipeline'. Short-term employment on Country is one way to test who is interested in the work or taking community members out on Country when agencies are undertaking particular work.

Invest in people who are interested in cultural land management

Too often agencies expect all Indigenous people to want to work on Country. Just like non-Indigenous people, Indigenous people are drawn to all different kinds of work. If **NRM agencies support on Country activities and employing community** to work with them on Country, they can identify and empower those who are interested and engaged in the work.

Outcomes and capacity building

NRM agencies and community working and learning together and building relationships is an outcome in itself. NRM agencies work on projects, which is important. However, if the long-term objective is to genuinely partner with Indigenous communities, then outcomes need to be understood differently. **NRM agencies have a significant role to play in capacity and relationship building**. This is very considered and slow work, yet in the longer term is transformational.

Consistency of work and team

To build a workforce and provide reliable work, **agencies need to provide consistent work to a team of people**. A number of community members have demonstrated their capacities, skills and engagement in NRM work. Collectively NRM agencies could provide enough work for a team or teams of Traditional Owners to have consistent on-Country employment. Importantly, communities do not want 'tick-a-box' projects, in which agencies undertake projects that have no long-term benefits. When NRM agencies explain why they are undertaking particular work – share the bigger picture – Wiradjuri/Wolgalu feel respected as working in partnership. They want to know that their work has tangible outcomes and is healing Country and protecting threatened species.

Threatened species

The threatened species space is crucially important to Traditional Owners. NRM agencies need to invest in and engage Traditional Owners to work in partnership to protect threatened species. This requires two-way learning, knowledges and values. It is a space in which NRM agencies can invest in traditional cultural practices and science to not only protect species but also strengthen people, connections to Country and relationships. **NRM agencies could work with community to identify particular threatened species** – for example the corroboree frog/Gyak – to undertake two-way learning.



Community of practice

NRM agencies often work in silos and individually approach the LALC or community members to consult about particular projects. Establishing the Cultural NRM Officer role enabled a more coordinated approach for managing NRM projects and is consistent with the principles of self-determination. However, the Cultural NRM Officer still must manage multiple competing projects and agencies, and the agencies' approach is inconsistent with how Wiradjuri/Wolgalu see a cultural landscape. To further enhance Wiradjuri/Wolgalu self-determination and for NRM agencies to work collaboratively with the community and other agencies, requires a community of practice approach: group of people/organisations/communities who share a concern, who come together to learn and work together better.

In late 2022, we brought NRM agencies together to learn about Bugang Bila and to think about their upcoming projects, where they could work with Bugang Bila. **NRM agencies could support, resource and facilitate a community of practice (CoP)**, with the aim of multiple agencies and community working collaboratively. Notably, agencies work seasonally: a CoP would allow the agencies to develop a coordinated work plan with Bugang Bila. When agencies work in silos there are insufficient resources to meet broader objectives. Working collaboratively utilises the available resources for better outcomes, including building relationships and – as land management is very context-specific – opportunities to undertake on-Country two-way learning.



Key milestones

Megan Considine, Brungle-Tumut LALC Cultural NRM Officer, makes the following observations on key milestones of the *Healing Country* project:

Inception – Community engagement meeting

In March 2024, we held our first community engagement meeting at Cooee Cottage in Tumut. This gathering included community members, two respected Elders and two well-known community leaders. The purpose of this meeting was to have a yarn about the project and explore how our community could participate. A key takeaway was the community's strong desire for local cultural workshops in Tumut and Brungle. These workshops would provide opportunities for our people to re-engage with cultural practices while also creating a platform to build relationships with non-Indigenous NRM agencies. This feedback was invaluable in shaping our approach moving forward.

Community communications

Following the community meeting, we regularly consulted and communicated with the community. Across the life of the project we have found that yarning with Elders and the various families works best, for example: dropping by their house, phoning or when casually running into people. Megan Considine works out of the LALC, where community regularly drop by and she updates them about the project or tells them about an upcoming on-Country workshop/activity. Consulting with Elders is key and we work closely with Aunty Coral Bulger (CEO Brungle-Tumut LALC) and various community leaders. Megan attends LALC board meetings to update them about the project and we make ourselves available to Elders and community members for a yarn, whenever asked. Initially when we ran events, we made posters, but we have found that messaging, ringing or talking to people in person works best.

Cultural history

A key objective is to develop more complex, cultural histories of the Brungle/Tumut region and for Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to tell their stories of the region's history and their Country. The Snowy Mountains are a part of Australian mythology. National narratives have largely been told from the perspective of non-Indigenous Australians. Whose stories are told, and how, matters. They inform and shape the broader public (including government and non-government agencies) understanding of the region and how to protect it.

In Phase 1 we began this work by undertaking archival research at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and employed local historian John Murphy, who has an ongoing relationship with the community, to research the region's pre- and post-colonial history, and in particular Wiradjuri/Wolgalu cultural knowledge. John has produced several documents, including *Indigenous Cultural Heritage in the Tumut and Murrumbidgee District*; *First Contact – Captain Charles Sturt & His Second Expedition into the Interior and Period of First Contact with the First People of The Murrumbidgee & Tumut*; *Indigenous placenames*; and *Wolgalu worklist*. It is important that these histories are repatriated back to community and Wiradjuri/Wolgalu have access to this material, test its validity and decide how, if at all, it will be disseminated and used. More complex local histories contribute to truth-telling, which is an important foundation for developing better understandings and relationships with NRM agencies and the broader community.



Cultural workshops

A key milestone was to undertake on-Country workshops that support cultural learning and build cultural confidence, which then enables our people to take care of Country properly. Over the course of the project, we have facilitated and/or organised numerous cultural workshops. Below we highlight a few that community said were the most beneficial.

Cultural art workshops for male youth

Three cultural art workshops were held specifically for male youth, led by a young local male artist. These workshops focused on teaching the boys about Aboriginal art, its significance and how it serves as a means of storytelling, identity and cultural preservation.

A particularly special aspect of these workshops was the involvement of four senior boys who were awarded raw didgeridoos. Under the guidance of the artist, they worked on their didgeridoos throughout the sessions, completing them by the final workshop.

Beyond learning about art, these workshops provided a crucial safe space for the boys – a place where they could connect with a strong male role model, confide in him, learn from him and engage in meaningful cultural conversations. This mentorship and cultural connection is critical in fostering resilience, self-confidence and a sense of belonging.

Cultural heritage workshop

On April 9, 2024, an Indigenous male leader (a Wolgalu man) from NSW Heritage led a workshop on cultural heritage and the use of the Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System (AHIMS) register.

This workshop was designed to teach community members how to identify and log cultural heritage artefacts, an essential skill in protecting our cultural history. Participants had the opportunity to see and touch traditional Aboriginal artefacts, including a fire stone, grinding stone, stone axe and coolamons. The hands-on experience deepened their understanding of these cultural items and their significance.

Twelve community members, ranging in age from 16 years old to Elder, attended. The discussions were rich with culture and curiosity, and the workshop strengthened our relationship with NSW Heritage, ensuring that our community knows how to report and preserve cultural artefacts when they are found on Country.

This workshop was funded by the Refreshing Rivers Project through the Brungle-Tumut LALC and was organised by Megan Considine, *Healing Country* Community Research Assistant, who played a key role in getting community members to attend.

Women's group visit to AIATSIS

A group of eight female community members travelled to Canberra to visit the National Museum of Australia and AIATSIS. This visit provided the women with the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of history, cultural collections and research methods. Learning how to use AIATSIS resources was particularly valuable, as it empowered the women to explore their own family histories, ancestral knowledge and broader cultural history.

Beyond the research aspect, this trip also strengthened female relationships within the community. Bringing women together in these cultural learning spaces fosters support networks, encourages shared learning and strengthens their role in cultural leadership within the community.

Each of these milestones played a vital role in reconnecting our people with culture, strengthening community ties and building relationships with external organisations. Through cultural learning, mentorship and hands-on



experiences, we are actively ensuring that our traditions, knowledge and responsibilities to Country remain strong for future generations.

Cultural exchange – Family camp 2025

In January 2025, five families from Brungle and Tumut travelled to Sanctuary Point NSW, for a two-night cultural exchange with Booderee Rangers and the Wreck Bay community.

This gathering was a powerful experience, as the Booderee Rangers shared their journeys – where they started and where they are now. Their stories showcased the strength of community-driven ranger programs and the importance of cultural knowledge in land management.

For our community, this experience was invaluable. Meeting an established ranger team and engaging in conversations about cultural gaps, challenges and solutions provided inspiration and insight. This type of networking supports Nation-to-Nation connections, strengthens relationships and ensures that our songlines remain strong.

By bringing families together in a cultural setting, the camp also reinforced the importance of intergenerational learning. When children see their parents and Elders engaging with culture, it instils pride and a sense of responsibility to carry these traditions forward.

Community consultation and design of project website

Our project aims to enhance Wiradjuri/Wolgalu data sovereignty. An ongoing objective is to develop a safe online cultural archive/knowledge place. In Phase 1, we began the process by undertaking discussions with the community – is it wanted; what is it needed for; who has access; how to make it accessible, useful and interesting – and scoping and learning about creating a safe online cultural archive/knowledge place. We have begun discussions with Conservation Futures who are trialling an Integrated Knowledge System (IKS), which is designed for organisations to be able to support knowledge capture, storage, permissions and transfer on behalf of Knowledge holders. Developing an online cultural archive/knowledge place is very complex and we hope to work with Conservation Futures to trial a site.

Importantly, we will take our lead from Elders and community. The Brungle-Tumut LALC are also wanting to develop a new website and there needs to be discussions about whether the cultural archive/knowledge place is held within the LALC site or elsewhere. The development of a cultural archive/knowledge place will be a very considered, complex and consultative process.



Further reading

Below is media about the Bugang Bila project. The short film of the Buugang Wambal project (now Bugang Bila) was funded by our partners, NSW DCCEEW.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFIXjkZNEiQ>

<https://www.crownland.nsw.gov.au/news/traditional-knowledge-helping-save-high-country-species>

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-21/buugang-wambal-project-tumut-grevillea-aboriginal-women/102357132>

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-27/school-children-perform-the-corroboree-frog-dance/102142538>



Utilisation outputs

What happens when government and non-government agencies invest in and partner with Wiradjuri/Wolgalu people to revitalise their cultural identity, practices and care for Country?

We got our identity back

Community members speak passionately and movingly about how working on Country has given them back their cultural identity, confidence and purpose:

I know who I am.

I didn't know there was a piece of myself missing, that I'd lost, before doing this work. It made me whole.

The Bugang Bila and *Healing Country* project brought the resources into the community to get people back out on Country, learning from Country and each other, and partnering with NRM agencies. NRM agencies have the resources available that can support Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to access and care for their traditional lands. The NRM space is critical for cultural revitalisation. Making working on Country a positive experience is a key objective and this happens when NRM agencies build good relationships with community.

Country is kin and it's human nature to be with your kin.

Women on Country

A key government and community priority is to get more women on Country. What enabled this in Brungle/Tumut was employing a female Cultural NRM Officer. There is men's and women's places and work. Having a Wiradjuri/Wolgalu woman organising cultural land management work encouraged more women to be interested and work to be allocated according to community cultural protocols and values. It has given women more opportunities to voice their priorities, for example, learning about and caring for women's places, making sure their children are involved in learning culture and young people are given opportunities to work, learn and grow.

Ranger program

In October 2024, the Brungle-Tumut LALC won a National Indigenous Australians Agency ranger program. This would not have happened without the Cultural NRM Officer and Bugang Bila project. Government and non-government agencies increasingly want to consult and work with community. This leads to the LALC and a few community members being overwhelmed with demands and requests and potentially becoming burned out. Our solution was to create the Cultural NRM Officer. In turn the role provided the structure and resources to establish the foundation of the Bugang Bila program, and resources and opportunities to build a team of Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to work on Country. Community is now pursuing their own cultural activities and objectives, and being empowered to speak and care for Country.

The Bugang Bila program demonstrated that Wiradjuri/Wolgalu are undertaking projects that were beneficial to the community and Country, and developed working relationships with NRM agencies, which ensures access



to resources and areas. The Brungle/Tumut ranger program will provide on-Country employment for men, women and young people.

Empowering young people

When we began this project, Elders were very clear: get kids involved and grow the next generation of Wiradjuri/Wolgalu to care for Country and be community leaders. To do this we started with running cultural activities for teenagers, for example, the cultural art workshops for male youth, led by a young local male artist (refer to Milestones). Importantly, parents' and Elders' involvement in the wider program led to young people being invited to work on Country with NRM agencies. Bugang Bila/*Healing Country* was the opportunity for parents to express their priority that their kids be involved. Wiradjuri/Wolgalu mothers, especially Megan and Jarrah, made it happen. The Bugang Bila team had been working with Dave Hunter, Threatened Species Officer DCCEEW, particularly with critically endangered frogs. Dave invited a number of teenage boys out on Country to participate in the work.

"The boys doing art started their thirst for knowledge, then going out on Country sparked their fire." Megan Considine, Brungle-Tumut LALC Cultural NRM Officer

Now several of the young men are part of the Bugang Bila team and applying to be rangers. All of the young people involved built their cultural confidence and feel they have a valuable role to play in the community. Importantly, they feel supported by the Bugang Bila team and each other. Investing in young people has led to many positive changes. Below are two:

- Five young people just completed the Conservation and Ecosystem Management Certificates 2 and 3. Bugang Bila gave them a strong reason to undertake the study, the support of a network of community and the necessary cultural confidence and 'fire'.
- The teenagers have been empowered to embrace their culture. This led to one boy being brave enough to explain the importance of his cultural connections to his non-Aboriginal grandparents. Megan explains:

"His mum's Aboriginal and his dad's not. When we were on the cultural camp in January, he said that 'my nan and pop don't know why I don't want to celebrate Australia Day and I don't know how to explain it to them'. He sort of had an identity crisis. It felt really horrible for him but we were able to talk about our culture and how he could talk to his family. It was a big thing for us as a group to be able to have that conversation and for him to feel strong enough to have that conversation with us and then to talk with his family."

Building relationships with other First Nations

Throughout the project, Wiradjuri/Wolgalu have rekindled cultural networks with neighbouring Nations – Yuin, Walbunja and Dhuderoa, and created new connections with Anangu Rangers (APY Lands, South Australia). These on-Country exchanges give Traditional Owners the opportunity to share and learn cultural land management practices. Community reported that building these networks boosts their cultural knowledge, confidence and motivation. Across Australia, there are different Nations who, like Wiradjuri/Wolgalu, are empowering themselves to care for Country. Relationships with neighbouring Nations extend back millennia and rebuilding them supports Traditional Owners to reconnect to songlines and stories and revitalise pathways to ceremony in the High Country. As noted in the Discussion, National Parks in the High Country are the traditional lands of multiple Nations. NRM agencies and all of the Traditional Owners need to work together to care for that Country. Therefore, re-establishing traditional relationships is essential.



Building trust and rapport between community and NRM agencies

As our findings make clear, building trusting, respectful relations is the foundation of positive working relationships. Megan speaks about how when we all started working together – Lisa, Dave and Ethan Williams – she felt safe and supported. The practices that enabled this were establishing the program with shared objectives, had regular meetings, interactions, communications and developed close working relationships. Essential to everything was flexibility, openness, commitment, care and a willingness to experiment. The project was always grassroots, driven by the understanding that we were trialling new ways of working together and this required flexibility, addressing and responding to the local context and being attentive to people and place. This allowed us to create a safe, trusting space for all of us to learn and grow together and be vulnerable. Megan highlights that knowing that Lisa, Dave and Ethan were sticking around and willing to ride out the challenges together, built not only her trust, but also the community's.

The solid foundation of our working relationship gave Megan, and the Bugang Bila team, the confidence and courage to work with other NRM agencies and openness to new projects. To build trusting relationships takes time, and importantly, consistency. Over time a critical mass of community and NRM agency staff who know, trust and respect one another grew. The amplification effects of this were unexpected. Developing trusting relationships with a number of whitefellas – working together, stopping and having a yarn in the supermarket, or planning a new project – has grown the community's trust in whitefellas, more generally.

Empowering NRM agency staff

Natural resource managers reported that through the Bugang Bila program they developed more confidence to work with community and feel more empowered in their roles. Prior to the program the relationships between the LALC, community and NRM agencies were relatively limited. Bugang Bila, and importantly the work of the Cultural NRM Officer, enhanced existing relationships and built many new ones. The Cultural NRM Officer provided the mechanism for NRM agencies to approach the LALC about projects and Bugang Bila provided a team of community to work with the agencies. Over time a practice was built, for example, ringing Megan to discuss a potential project, calling into the LALC, working on Country together and taking the time to talk through NRM plans and objectives, and community's needs and aspirations. They learned about each other. Below are just a few examples:

- Natural resource managers, who Bugang Bila work with regularly, now call into the LALC, have a cup of tea and yarn about upcoming projects. Previously, they would have sent formal emails.
- Megan and the Brungle-Tumut LALC CEO, Aunty Coral Bulger, said all of the agencies are much more comfortable and conversational, "There is much more openness and less walls."
- One Natural Resource Manager said, "Since working with Megan, I feel so much more confident working with community. I can think and plan new projects to work together on."
- After a day out working on Country with the Wiradjuri/Wolgalu women, a Natural Resource Manager said she went home and said to her partner, "*I had the best working day of my life.*" The women worked, yarned and laughed together and got the job done.

Agencies have corporate aspirations to partner with Indigenous people. There is a principle but no practice: no structure or resources to ensure implementation on the ground. For Natural Resource Managers, there is nothing in their individual roles to prioritise working with community over competing priorities. The Cultural NRM Officer built the practice by building the relationships. Bugang Bila provided the opportunity for Natural Resource Managers to meet and contribute to their organisational aspirations.



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Appendix 1: Community engagement and workshops

(attached document: Appendix 1 Community engagement and workshops 2023-2025)

APPENDIX 1: Community engagement and workshops 2023 – 2025

Date	Community engagement or workshop	Activity	Activity details	In partnership with	Location	No. of community members involved	Outcome / output
March 2023	Community engagement	First gathering: Inception Meeting	Conversations about the research project, including: what barriers we as a people have to getting on Country and what would help break down these barriers; what events community would like to see happen (eg. workshops, on Country activities).	UOW, & Coo-ee Cottage, Brungle/ Tumut Community	Coo-ee Cottage Tumut	15 community members	Community-building conversations took place about how our community feels and what we would like to see happen.
26 April 2023	Workshop (women)	Native Bee Workshop	Bee expert Karen Retra came to Tumut to speak with the ladies about bees and their role in the ecosystem. The women talked about the burn scars and wanted to know what other nations were doing to help with restoration (native bee monitoring and translocation project at Ulladulla/Nowra was discussed). This workshop was one discussed at the Inception Meeting.	UOW, & Brungle/ Tumut Community.	Coo-ee Cottage Tumut, Stockwell Gardens Tumut	9 female community members (and Megan)	The women had lots of conversation around bees and the fire burn scar. As a group the women decided that they would like to know more about native bees and would like to try something similar to the Ulladulla/Nowra native bee project. The ladies visited Stockwell Gardens to find some native

							bees but unfortunately it was drizzling rain and no bees were found this time.
31 Aug 2023	Workshop (male youth)	Cultural art workshop, led by Trent Dowell, a Wiradjuri/ Ngunawal man	Led by Trent Dowell, a Wiradjuri/ Ngunawal man, we engaged high school aged males (aged 13 – 18) from Tumut High School through Clontarf.	Funded by UOW.	Coo-ee Cottage Tumut	6 male youth	6 male youth learned from a local man about cultural art and its importance to our people. Being in this space and able to yarn about "men's business" with Trent gave the boys a connection and someone to look up to.
5 Sept 2023	Workshop (male youth)	Cultural art workshop, led by Trent Dowell	Led by Trent Dowell, a Wiradjuri/ Ngunawal man, we engaged senior high school aged males (aged 15 – 18) from Tumut High School through Clontarf.	Funded by NHRA	Brungle-Tumut Local Aboriginal Land Council (BTLALC) office, 55 Merivale Street Tumut	4 male high school seniors	4 male senior students have been awarded raw didgeridoos and started to work on them with Trent. This safe space and connection with a strong male role model is beneficial for the boys because they have someone to confide in, learn from and yarn to, in a

							culturally appropriate way.
27 Sept 2023	Workshop (women)	Native Bee Workshop	A follow-up workshop to the previous Native Bee workshop. This time the ladies built their own 'bee hotels'.	Funded by NHRA.	BTLALC office, 55 Merivale Street Tumut, and Stockwell Gardens	9 female community members (and Megan)	The women made their own 'bee hotels' which were then put into their own gardens – this is beneficial for the bees and the ladies' gardens. Some of the burn scar has started to heal with intervention so the ladies have decided not to translocate, the ladies however would like to survey areas in Tumut to find out what native bee species are in this area. Some of the ladies have joined online forums to help identify bees.
30 Nov 2023	Workshop (male youth)	Cultural art workshop, led by Trent Dowell	Led by Trent Dowell, a Wiradjuri/ Ngunawal man, we engaged senior high school aged males (aged 15 – 18) from Tumut High School through Clontarf.	Funded by NHRA	BTLALC office, 55 Merivale Street Tumut	4 male high school seniors	The boys finished off their didgeridoos. Two of these boys played these didges at their grandfather's funeral.

20 Feb 2024	Community engagement	BTLALC Board meeting	Megan presented the project concept to the Board and spoke about moving forward. A conversation took place about what the Board would like to see for community.		BTLALC office, 55 Merivale Street Tumut	Megan and 8 BTLALC Board members	The meeting re-opened communication and renewed community engagement and interest in the project.
11 – 15 Mar 2024	Community engagement and workshop	Knowledge exchange with APY Rangers	This was a learning and knowledge exchange opportunity to find out about what teams are taking care of what species and how we differ as tribes in our cultural land management.	Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), Saving our Species team, NPWS, Brungle/Tumut Community, APY Rangers. Research funded by NHRA	Jindabyne, Yarrangobilly, Goobarra-gandra and Tumut	7 Wiradjuri / Wolgalu community members, 7 APY Rangers, 8 non-Indigenous co-ordinators	This was a nation networking and building experience involving Aboriginal people out on Country, learning from each other and sharing knowledge – all leading to more cultural confidence.
23 Mar 2024	Community engagement	BTLALC community members meeting	A conversation with community about the research project and other current community projects, to plant the seed to get people thinking about what we would like to see happen within our community (eg. workshops).	Funded by NHRA	Brungle Health centre	21 community members	The meeting resulted in networking and community engagement.

26 Mar 2024	Community engagement	BTLALC Board meeting	Megan updated the Board on the progress of the project. The Board spoke about community engagement (for both work and workshops, women's group and NSW Heritage workshop planning). Megan advised that the women's group has been responsive and she will be working with them in the coming months.	No funding required.	BTLALC office, 55 Merivale Street Tumut	8 Board members	This meeting facilitated communication, planning and building relationships and rapport.
9 April 2024	Workshop (on Country activities)	Cultural Heritage workshop	Shane Herrington from NSW Heritage presented a workshop on cultural heritage and how to use the AHIMS (Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System) register.	Funded primarily by BTLALC, & NHRA. Supported by Megan (RA) organising this workshop, enabling / supporting community to attend (transport), providing lunch and resources to be able to take part in this workshop.	BTLALC office, 55 Merivale Street Tumut and Tumut Wetlands	12 community members	The workshop facilitated cultural learning. The 12 participants were able to hold and identify cultural artefacts and learn about the AHIMS register. There will be a follow-up to this workshop where community members will do further cataloguing in AHIMS.
30 April 2024	Community engagement	BTLALC Board meeting	Megan gave an update on projects. The Board advised on what direction they	No funding required.	BTLALC office, 55 Merivale	8 Board members	This meeting grew communication and

			would like to see the project move towards.		Street Tumut and Tumut River Common		planning opportunities.
2 May 2024	Workshop (on Country activities)	Native Tree planting day, in partnership with Local Land Care and Stars Foundation (girls)	Fire-resistant and fire-thriving trees were planted in the growing community garden, around the yarning circle.	Riverina Local Land Care and Tumut High School Stars Foundation students (girls 12 – 16), primarily funded by Local Land Care. Megan organised this event and supported with transport and community engagement.	Tumut Ecology Reserve	6 community members and 8 Indigenous female youth from Tumut High School	Female youth and key community members (who work on Country) planted native fire-thriving and fire-hardy plants around a newly installed yarning circle. The girls were on Country learning about native plants. Community members had the chance to network with NRM (Natural Resource Management) agencies, school and youth. This contributed to community partner strengthening.
12 May 2024	Workshop (on Country activity)	Tree identification workshop	The tree identification workshop involved learning to identify native trees at Mt Naughton, a parcel of land owned by BTLALC.	BTLALC – funded primarily by BTLALC & NHRA. Supported by	Mt Naughton, Tumut	12 community members	12 community members attended the workshop held at Mt Naughton to learn about native trees and what plant

				Megan organising this workshop, enabling / supporting community to attend by providing transport and resources to be able to take part in this workshop.			species should ideally be grown in this area. This was a bonding and learning experience, and there were yarns about the possibility of men's business in spaces at Mt Naughton.
17 May 2024	Workshop (on Country activities)	Cultural burn demonstration and workshop	A workshop, in partnership with Local Land Care and Rural Fire Service (RFS), highlighting native plants and their fire resistance and/or uses, as well as the importance of cultural burning. This workshop also spoke about mental health and being on Country, and the importance of this for Aboriginal people.	Riverina Local Land Care, Riverina Local Land Services, BTLALC, RFS and Coo-ee Cottage.	Tumut Ecology Reserve	17 Indigenous community members , 5 NRM agency team members, 6 Aboriginal burn team members	By facilitating learning on Country, this workshop resulted in relationship building within community and NRM agencies. The men's group was a big part of the community involved in this workshop (6 men's group members).
4 June 2024	Community engagement	Women's group	Conversations with Coo-ee Cottage women's group about what kinds of workshops they would like to attend, and the importance of learning about land management	Coo-ee Cottage women's group – funded by NHRA.	Coo-ee Cottage, Tumut	7 community members	Strengthening of relationships through engagement, consultation and planning future events.

			and history. Celebration of what has been achieved within the women's group and looking forward to community projects and a planning day.				
18 June 2024	Community engagement	Women's group	Further conversations with Coo-ee Cottage women's group about workshops they would like to attend. More specific conversations about Brungle history and a look on the AHIMS register, plus planning to visit women's sites.	Coo-ee Cottage women's group – funded by NHRA.	Coo-ee Cottage, Tumut	7 community members	Further strengthening of relationships plus planning for women's group events and workshops.
16 July 2024	Community engagement	BTLALC Board meeting	Megan gave an update on the project and the Board were happy with outcomes so far.	No funding required.	BTLALC office, 55 Merrivale Street Tumut	8 Board members	Communication of project updates and planning for next steps. Strengthening of rapport between BTLALC Board and project.
23 July 2024	Workshop (on Country activities)	Women's group visit to community garden in Wagga Wagga	Women's group attended two community gardens in Wagga Wagga.	Funded by NHRA.	Demonstration garden and community garden, Wagga Wagga	7 community members	The women learned more about native plants and talked about what could be applied in the Tumut community garden. This workshop has led to women playing a role in the community garden that has recently

							been establish at the Tumut Ecology Reserve. The women are thinking about, planting and maintaining veges and bush foods in this space, on Country.
30 July 2024	Workshop (on Country activities)	Women's site visit	Women travelled to Goobarragandra to visit a women's cultural site.	Funded by NHRA.	Goobarragandra area	5 community members	Important conversations occurred about gaps in cultural knowledge and site preservation. The women are interested in cultural learning and the AHIMS register. The visit also strengthened relationships.
1 Aug 2024	Community engagement	BTLALC community members meeting	NRM project and research update. Conversations on workshop held, as well as how best to communicate with community.	Funded by NHRA.	BTLALC office, 55 Merivale Street Tumut	17 community members	Updates on the NRM project and associated research strengthened relationships and continued rapport-building and clear communication on planning.

6 Aug 2024	Workshop (on Country activities)	Women's group visit to community gardens in Wagga Wagga	Women visited ErinEarth community garden in Wagga Wagga.	Community DroughtHub and Coo-ee Cottage, coordinated and funded by NHRA.	Wagga Wagga	8 community members	Further learning about native plants and the relationships they share. This was also a networking opportunity for the women.
3 Sept 2024	Workshop (on Country activities)	Women's group visit to National Museum of Australia (NMA) and Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)	Women's group attended NMA and AIATSIS in Canberra.	Funded by NHRA.	Canberra	8 community members	The women learned about the resources available in NMA and AIATSIS, and how to make use of them for growing cultural knowledge and building cultural confidence.
22 Sept 2024	Workshop (on Country activities) and research	Plumwood land handback	Megan and 2 community members attended land handback at Plumwood Mountain.	Funded by NHRA.	Batemans Bay	3 community members	The official handback of Plumwood Mountain property (to Batemans Bay LALC) was a networking opportunity and celebration, involving Aboriginal people out on Country sharing knowledge, leading to more cultural

							confidence and stronger kinship systems.
8 – 10 Oct 2024	Attendance at workshop (on Country activities) and research	Nelligen cultural burn	Megan and Jarrah attended cultural burn workshop at Nelligen.	Walbunja Rangers and RFS, research funded by NHRA.	Batemans Bay	2 BTLALC community members (with several Yuin Nation members including mob from Walbunja and Illawarra – approx. 35 attendees	Walbunja rangers invited different nations to attend the cultural burn workshop at Nelligen, facilitating nation-building.
17 – 19 Oct 2024	Attendance at meeting (on Country activities), research, nation networking.	MLDRIN (Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations) meeting	Megan attended MILDRIIN meeting.	MILDRIIN	Mildura	Megan (alongside several other nation advocates)	Megan attended a MLDRIN meeting in Mildura. This was an opportunity to learn about cultural water flows and network with advocates and Elders from other nations, increasing learning and relationship-building. Megan has been elected as a Wiradjuri delegate, meaning information will be

							brought back to community leading to informed community decisions.
19 Nov 2024	Workshop	Women's group meeting with Brendan Moore (First Nations Community Greening Officer at Botanic Gardens of Sydney)	Megan and four ladies from the women's group met with Brendan to talk about native plants.	Botanic Gardens of Sydney. Megan (RA) facilitated and organised: funded by NHRA.	BTLALC office, 55 Merivale Street, Tumut Ecology Reserve	5 community members	Megan and ladies attended an online meeting with Brendan to talk about what plants are endemic to the Brungle/Tumut area and what would thrive. Talks around best practices for the garden itself and how we would like it to look as a 'learnscape' and what is achievable. An excursion to Tumut Ecology Reserve involved harvesting some veges. The ladies learned about practical planning for expectations of the garden.
26 Nov 2024 to 13 Mar 2025	VET course	Certificate II and III in Conservation	Megan and 6 community members completed the VET courses.	Walan Miya and BTLALC, primarily funded by	Tumut	7 community members	Studying these certificate courses brought together 7 community

		and Ecosystem Management		Walan Miya, supported by NHRA – support includes catering, transport and learning supplies.			members to learn about cultural land management and conservation. Throughout the course there has been much yarning, culturally appropriate learning and relationship building.
12 – 13 Nov 2024	Attendance at workshop	Fire simulation training	Megan and Jarrah attended fire simulation exercise and workshop.	Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), Science Economics and Insights (SEI) Division.	Bega	2 Brungle / Tumut community members	Megan and Jarrah (due to NHRA RA funding and support of BTLALC) were able to attend a fire simulation exercise and workshop which enabled many different nations to meet and talk with NPWS and RFS in regard to culturally significant sites in a bushfire situation. Consequently, culturally appropriate conversations took place with relevant organisations and other nations. Valuable networking

							occurred with other nations and agencies, along with rapport-building with non-Indigenous people and organisations.
16 Dec 2024	Workshop (on Country activities)	Women's group and Walan Miya students, maintenance and planning at community garden	Women's group and students worked in the community garden, and planned around what we can plant next in the garden.	Funded by NHRA.	Tumut Ecology Reserve	11 community members (and Megan)	Megan, ladies and Walan Miya students attended community garden and had yarns about plants – particularly about murrnong (yam daisy) and what we could do to stabilise the bank of the dam and what we can do to reduce weeds. This was a good chance for younger community members to bond with and listen to the older ladies, generating cultural learning and respect.
6 – 8 Jan 2025	Workshop (on Country activities) and research	Family camp	5 community families (19 people in total) travelled to Wreck bay to visit Booderee National Park and the	Funded by NHRA.	Wreck Bay	19 community members	Community had the opportunity to learn from an established ranger group who take care of their

			rangers who take care of Country there.				own Country. The camp enabled nation networking and cultural learning, and further strengthened relationships between community members.
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