NHLF
National Health
Leadership Forum

Leading Aboriginal
and Torres Strait
Islander healthcare

POSITION PAPER: CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND HEALTH

The need to address climate change and its impact on health and wellbeing is a major concern for members of the National Health Leadership Forum (NHLF). *The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-31* acknowledges the impact of climate change by including healthy environments, sustainability, and preparedness, however the need for action goes beyond the scope of the Health Plan. The impacts of climate change and global heating must always be at the forefront of planning and decision making. Accordingly, the NHLF supports the international calls for the establishment of a set of new norms that sees a warming limit goal of 1.5C rather than 2C, raising Australia's 2030 ambitions, more equitable water management for communities, improvement in residential living standards, transition to renewable energy, and the end of fossil fuels.

CALL FOR ACTION

The NHLF calls for all Australian governments to collaborate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and adopt the following **recommendations and principles for action** to bring about systemic change to the way Australia looks after the environment and addresses the impacts of climate change.

Recommendations

1. All Australian governments implement the 46 recommendations from the Heal Country, Heal Climate statement, written by the Indigenous Peoples Organisation (IPO).

    ➢ Indigenous Peoples Organisation – Australia. 2021. Heal Country, Heal Climate – priorities for climate and environment. Developed for the 26 UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (known as COP26)

2. All Australian governments implement recommendation 13 from the 2021 Close the Gap Report.

    ➢ Close the Gap campaign Steering Committee for Indigenous Health Equality. Close the Gap Report 2021 – Leadership and Legacy through Crises: Keeping Our Mob Safe.

3. All Australian governments adopt and implement the Climate and Health Alliance's (CAHA) *Healthy, Regenerative and Just Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-Being for Australia.*

    ➢ Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA). 2017. Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-Being for Australia

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The recommendations from the IPO and recommendation 13 from the Close the Gap Report offer concrete guidance on the structural reforms required to respond to the climate emergency through investing in mitigation, prevention, and adaptation planning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Further, they offer a pathway to address existing injustice and inequity in land management, energy and resource development, employment, and connection to country. The CAHA Framework illustrates the role Australian governments can take in protecting the health and wellbeing of Australian communities through eight areas of policy action. These recommendations show what needs to be done.

Guiding Principles

The following principles should underpin action by decision makers. Adopting these principles will enable genuine action to be taken through valuing and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges. This will help realise social, legal and climate justice for all communities.

1. ***Action on climate change*** – strong urgent action is needed by all Australian governments to meet our local and global responsibilities in keeping the Earth's global average temperature below 1.5 degrees C, a level that will have very significant impacts.

2. ***Stop Racism*** – governments, services, and the public should all be clear on the scale, extent, and impact of racism and its impact on ignoring the experience and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples when it comes to caring for our land, water, and seas.

3. **Privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges in climate change responses** – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and doing are vital to caring for Country. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research and knowledge translation must be prioritised and reflected in our climate actions to meet our new 2050 target aspiration and beyond. Let local communities decide what is best for their local environment. The Wiyi Yami U Thangani[1] Report calls for "all Australian governments to recognise the vital role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, knowledge systems and technologies have in finding solutions to cope with impending climate changes and ensuring that their human rights are protected".

4. ***Adopt a Cultural Determinants approach to environmental care*** – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a holistic understanding of the connection to the environment and health and wellbeing which is bound by culture. This biocultural knowledge and

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[1] Australian Human Rights Commission. 2020. Wiyi Yami U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report.

understanding creates a strengths-based policy to caring for Country. Culture is an abiding strength for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and is the central foundation of resilience.

5. ***Partner in decision making*** – given the diversity across Australian and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, place-based decision making must be implemented to allow more control and certainty over adaptation and mitigation strategies within communities. Genuine sharing and respect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and western knowledge systems to inform adaptation and mitigation strategies is needed, without knowledge domination and assimilation.

6. ***Recognise social justice as a basic human right*** – climate resilience and safe housing is needed, embedding the right to be cool in summer, warm in winter, food security through access to health, nutritious, fresh food, food safety (storage), and refrigeration, through seeking local answers, and privileging local voices.

7. ***Reconnect learning systems back to Country*** – transform our values and thinking of the future and the ways of doing and being. It is critical that our education system acknowledges past injustices to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including the role our education system played in not telling the truth of this country's history. This is fundamental to understanding how differential outcomes based on preferencing one culture over another has perpetuated our lack of connection and respect for the environment. Recognising this is necessary to address the impact of ongoing poor environmental care.

8. ***Support an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health workforce*** – the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce possesses a unique combination of cultural and clinical knowledge. Similarly, our people working in and across the environment have the knowledge to mitigate the current climate change impacts and develop adaptation strategies. We need more investment to grow and support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce to do their work.

9. ***Appropriate Funding*** – access to resources is the key difference that determines the degree of impact climate change has on communities. Sporadic, and short-term approaches heighten the risk of ongoing environmental degradation of our land, water and seas and ongoing health inequity. Therefore, funding for adaptation covering land, water and seas, and air must be adequately and reliably resourced. This includes long-term funding frameworks that recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and cultural rights as First Peoples on this continent. Reliable funding arrangements provide the basis for partnership development, collaboration, and shared investment of resources toward adaptation and mitigation strategies.

10. ***Change the development model within Indigenous communities*** – to build on community resilience and empowerment from the ground up aligned with the communal and connectedness values of Indigenous people rather than the western "growth and jobs" model of development that undermines culture and connection.

Why act on Climate Change

Healthy climates and environments are critical to our health. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are strong and resilient, we continue to be negatively impacted by harmful policies and practices since colonisation. The current inaction on climate change and the ongoing degradation of our Countries is sadly placing our lives, livelihoods, and cultures further at risk.

Despite the intimate understanding of the landscape our people have forged over thousands of years, our voices in the climate change arena remain largely unheard. This paradigm must change. Our traditional knowledges will prove key to mitigation and adaptation strategies, and can help support health and wellbeing in a changing climate.

In November 2021, the Lowitja Institute with support from the NHLF released a discussion paper, '*Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health,*' describing climate change in Australia and its impact on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It highlights the importance of traditional knowledges and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led initiatives in climate change adaptation and mitigation in strengthening wellbeing and benefitting the global community. This Position Statement has been largely informed by this work.

The Climate Emergency and its impact is happening now

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to live in areas exposed to extreme heat, rising sea levels and exposure to extreme climatic events such as storms, bushfires, droughts, and floods. Housing, infrastructure, and access to essential health services are also more limited in these areas. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to have long-term health conditions such as diabetes, heart, and kidney disease.[2] Remote communities are more likely to under report these health conditions and have poorer access to and use of health services.[3]

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[2] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). 2020. Australia's Health: in brief. Australia's health series no. 17. Cat. No. AUS 232.
[3] AIHW. 2015 and 2019a. The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. 2015. Cat. No. IHW 147.
Indigenous Housing: https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-housing

Access to affordable, safe, sustainable housing and quality living environments is a key determinant of health[4]. One in three (33%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are living in houses with major structural defects or plumbing or electrical issues.[5] Construction of Aboriginal housing has been plagued by inappropriate design, use of cheap, substandard materials and inadequate maintenance.[6] Failures in household utilities and community infrastructure lead to environmental health risks related to water and electricity supply, food safety, sewerage systems and functioning health hardware such as taps and washing machines[7]. Water quality in remote communities often fails to meet national standards.[8] Overcrowding and infrastructure defects increase the risk of injury, infectious disease, and psychological distress.[9] Poor housing conditions also reduce residents' ability to control indoor temperatures with high indoor temperatures associated with poor sleep, cardiovascular disease, respiratory illness, and poor mental health.[10]

Central Australia is a significant example of the impact of climate change happening now, not something that may happen in the future. People are facing increasing and frequent high temperatures with little or no respite due to inadequate housing that is inadequate in meeting health and safety needs, as well as living with insufficient quantity and affordability to meet communities' needs. These stresses are exacerbated by unreliable and unaffordable power.[11] Disrespect, lack of interest and a lack of willingness to address the impacts of climate change appears to dominate the thinking of government agencies. The same issue occurs in the Torres Strait where most homes have no aircon and humidity is often more than 90-95% over summer putting people at risk of infections from mould, dust, and heat stress over extended periods where day and night-time conditions are very uncomfortable.

The CAHA Framework[12] outlines key facts and figures regarding the impact on health from climate change. For example heatwaves in Victoria in 2009 and 2014 contributed to 374 and 167 excess deaths respectively. Heatwaves attributed to deaths will only increase across Australia by 2050. The ideological reliance or support for coal-fired electricity generation ignores its role in air pollution and the resultant deaths. The impact of climate change is not

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[4] National Aboriginal and Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO). 2021. Aboriginal Housing for Aboriginal Health.
[5] AIHW 2020.
[6] NACCHO & AHCWA .2019. Mitigating climate change to optimise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health: a response to Climate Health WA Inquiry; and Pholeros, Lea, Rainow et al. 2013. Improving the state of health hardware in Australian Indigenous housing: building more houses in not the only answer. International Journal of Circumpolar Health, 72. Doi:https//dx.doi.org/10.3402/ijch.v72i0.21181
[7] NACCHO 2021.
[8] Office of the Auditor General Western Australia. 2015. Delivering Essential Services to Remote Aboriginal Communities. Report 8. May 2015.
[9] NACCHO 2021
[10] The World Health Organisation. 2018. WHO Housing and health guidelines – Executive Summary.
[11] Australian Indigenous Doctors Association. 2020. Policy Statement - Climate change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health.
[12] CAHA 2017, p5.

just on individuals' health, but represent a burden on the entire economy. For example, the "health and social costs of the Black Saturday bushfires and 2011 Queensland floods totalling AUD$3.9 and $7.4 billion respectively."

The IPCC finalised the second part of the Sixth Assessment Report, Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability[13] which "outlines multiple significant climate-related health impacts for people in Australia:

- In Australia, there will be 20-70% more days over 35°C by 2030, putting people at risk of heat-related illnesses.
- In Australian cities, excess heat-related deaths could quadruple in 2031-2080 compared with 1971-2020.
- Heatwaves almost twice as likely in Australia if temperature rise reaches 2.0°C compared to 1.5°C.
- Australia's "1-in-100-year floods" could occur several times a year.
- The dependence of regional Australia on an "overstretched" volunteer base to respond to disasters makes it extremely vulnerable; and
- Climate change will exacerbate the health inequities already faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples."[14]

Racism is endemic

Systemic and structural racism is endemic. In terms of climate change and disaster risk planning, the perspectives and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are consistently overlooked, undervalued, ignored, and denied. Business and profit are generally always favoured over our knowledge of Country and ways of knowing, being and doing that have been refined over millennia of careful and considered custodianship.

For at least 65,000 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have had a unique connection with land, sea and Country that is interconnected with the holistic view of health and wellbeing that encompasses physical, mental, and spiritual health. Cultural determinants strengthen wellbeing through cultural practices, identity, community, kinship, traditional knowledges and self-determination and they are all reliant upon connection to Country.

The ongoing cycle of political, social, and economic marginalisation also limits the ability of communities to adapt to climate stresses. Continued racism reinforces socio-economic exclusion and mistrust in mainstream institutions resulting in further negative impacts for social and emotional wellbeing.

[13] IPCC, 2022: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. In Press.
[14] Climate and Health Alliance. 2021. https://www.caha.org.au/mr_010322

Substantial health inequalities endure between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians across socio-economic and key areas of health such as life expectancy, chronic and communicable diseases, child and maternal health and mental health. The known health gaps are a legacy of colonisation and the ongoing trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians also affect mental health[15] and is exacerbated through the ongoing disconnections with traditional lands and is only made worse with the impact of climate change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This includes direct (deaths, injuries), indirect (poor air quality, lack of water, and food insecurity) and non-tangible impacts (loss of connection to culture).

These disparities are compounded and perpetuated through the inequities and the impact of climate change in Australia and mainstream society's neglect in caring for country and in valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. The *Heal Country, Heal Climate*[16] statement was developed in recognition that climate change has a direct detrimental impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians; by threatening the right to health, water, food, housing, and self-determination. Action on climate change is about climate justice.

The lack of recognition and of Aboriginal and Torre Strait Islander Peoples' knowledges and culture and the ongoing ignorance by governments and their respective agencies is compounded for people with a disability. The Royal Commission' Emergency planning and response issues paper[17] highlights some common themes for change to assist people with a disability such as including people with disability across all levels of emergency planning and responses and maintaining community connections. Community connections enable people to maintain social engagement for people with disabilities during emergencies.

Connection to country and culture are complementary components to living well, living strong. "For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, spirituality is closely tied to their connection to land or 'country'. Country or land has been described as an area to which people have a traditional or spiritual association. 'Connection to Country' is important for the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural groups around Australia."[18]

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[15] Dudgeon and Walker 2015. Mental Health retrieved from https://www.indigenousmhspc.gov.au/topics/mental-health#aboutthistopic
[16] IPO Australia 2021.
[17] The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability published the Emergency planning and response issues paper. February 2021.
[18] Gee, G. Dudgeon, P. Schultz, C. Hart A. and Kell K. 2014. Chapter 4 In: Dudgeon P. Milroy H. Walker R. Eds. 2014. Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice. Retrieved https://www.telethonkids.org.au/globalassets/media/documents/aboriginal-health/working-together-second-edition/wt-part-1-chapt-4-final.pdf

The [Wiyi Yami U Thangani Report](#) notes the critical role of Country in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls. Country provides women and girls with a sense of identity, a source of strength and a place for healing. The Report states that "Women spoke mournfully of a piecemeal yet cumulative loss of cultural knowledge since colonisation, and of the loss of Country from the impacts of climate change."[19] We are at a point in time where without substantive solutions to the impact of climate change, living a good life will only become harder for communities and people who are already marginalised by society and government services.

The Lowitja Institute's Discussion Paper[20] analysis of policy and legislation draws the conclusion that action on climate change is necessary and such action must protect the rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and the deep spiritual and sacred connections to Country and environment must be recognised and privileged. This will contribute to restoring justice.

The need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Solutions

Climate change poses a direct threat to community and cultural connections, as well as access to traditional foods (due to changing weather patterns, biodiversity loss and extinctions), water (through drought, lowering groundwater, saltwater intrusions and contamination from intense storms and floods) and the ability to fulfil cultural responsibilities in caring for Country. This can cause a range of health and social and emotional wellbeing impacts.

Australia's lack of caring for the environment and the denial of the impact of climate change is a result to the preferencing of western ways of seeing the environment – as a free and perpetual resource for economic development and growth, rather than as a source of life. The dominance of the western ways of knowing and seeing the world exemplifies racism by privileging one cultural lens over another. Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and western knowledges must be equally respected and utilised to effectively combat climate change and avoid knowledge domination and assimilation.

The [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan](#), endorsed by all Australian governments, has a *vision* for an *'Australian health system free of racism and inequality'* and for recognising the impact of systemic racism in health inequality. Additionally, the health plan also recognises the *cultural determinants of health*, the *environment and caring for Country* as a priority action area. Culture is a key element to social and environmental justice, in which our land and water management responses will vary depending on the needs of local

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[19] AHRC 2020.
[20] HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021, Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Discussion Paper, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, DOI: 10.48455/bthg-aj15

communities. A lack of respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, systemic and overt racism need to be addressed if our environment is to be restored and our land and water caring practices are to be free of racism.

Climate challenges present opportunities to rectify and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to lead climate action based on their intimate traditional and historical knowledges of Country. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have constantly adapted to both natural and unnatural disturbances and have always participated in adaptation and mitigation. There are many initiatives that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are already leading to adapt to and mitigate climate change impacts. Initiatives include adaptation planning, land, and sea management programs (fire management, environmental conservation), ranger programs (caring for Country) and carbon farming. They each have many benefits for both the health and socio-economic status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and for all of society.

It is critical that we are included in the planning and ongoing management to address climate change. Appropriate planning requires a holistic approach, sufficient resourcing and intersectoral collaboration to address priority needs of our communities. Ecological approaches should be incorporated into health services, to minimise the carbon footprint of the health system and across all sectors for coordinated sustainable outcomes. Growing, strengthening, and preparing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce for the impacts of climate change (including through increasing demand, reduced workforce capacity and disrupted health services) is also essential.