# Principles and protocols for cultural land management governance and research in Australia

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Research projects are moving from *consulting* with First Nations communities to *partnering* with them. This is a move from business-as-usual approaches towards greater First Nations peoples self-determination.

Over several years, we have collaborated on a series of research projects that seek to understand the interface between researchers, state land management agencies and First Nations organisations.[1,2,3] A key part of this has been supporting projects where these parties are trying to do things differently to how they have been done in the past, usually by moving from a model where First Nations people are treated as stakeholders to a model where they are treated as partners.[4,5,6]

There are many drivers for these changes, including policy drivers (e.g. Native Title or whole-of-government reform) and ecological drivers (e.g. extreme bushfires and biodiversity losses), but among the most important are what might be called personal or ethical drivers; that is, it feels like the right thing to do. There is an increasing number of people within research and land management who want to do things differently; to move from just consulting with First Nations communities to following or partnering with them. This is a move from business-as-usual approaches towards greater First Nations peoples' self-determination.

However, changing practices is challenging. What are the pathways between models? What principles to use? How do you put those abstract principles into practical action?

When we were designing the cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia (CLMRG) project[a], we were cognisant of how we had heard from many non-Indigenous and First Nations people that they felt there was no roadmap for the collaborations they were starting or trying to sustain. They knew there was guidance out there, but it was not tuned to their contexts for policy and practice. We were also very aware of findings in previous research projects on cultural fire management. For example, at both a personal and institutional level, these parties are often strangers who are unfamiliar with the protocols and processes appropriate to their respective contexts.[7] Additionally, because universities, government agencies and similar organisations operate from a dominant position (often complete with legal authority and resourcing) such that their protocols and processes can easily dominate even when people are trying to centre Country and First Nations priorities.

In response, the CLMRG project team reviewed academic research and other reports about cultural land management collaborations as well as general guides on leading practice research methods with and by First Nations peoples. We synthesised this material into a draft set of 6 overall principles, each with aligned processes to support those principles and specific protocols that suggested how the principles could be put

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a. Cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia project at www.naturalhazards.com.au/research/research-projects/cultural-land-management-research-and-governance-south-east-australia.

into practice. The draft was circulated through the project team (Timothy Neale, Oliver Costello, Dr Bhiamie Eckford-Williamson, Andrea Rawluk, Michael-Shawn Fletcher, Shaun Hooper, Tasmin-Lara Dilworth and Gabrielle Miller) and the steering group (Matthew Shanks, Vikki Parsley, Daniel Miller, Jack Pascoe and Teagan Goolmeer). This led to a revised draft that was circulated again for refinement. The principles are:

- self-determination to practice culture on Country
- reconciliation, equity and social justice
- healthy Country, healthy spirit, healthy people
- empowerment of Indigenous knowledge-holders
- benefits with and for Indigenous communities
- respect diversity of Indigenous peoples and cultures.

Nonetheless, certain as we were of the merit of these principles, the final report states that:

*This is a work in progress and will remain so even after publication for serval reasons. First, collaboration is always open-ended and evolving and attempting to produce definitive guidelines would disguise this fact. Second, the practices of good collaboration look different in different contexts. This document is not intended to act as an authoritative guide and was purposefully created to act as one set of guidelines for use in local conversations. Third, collaborative governance and research are developing fields of inquiry, with new work relevant to these guidelines continue to emerge. This document represents an account of relevant literature at a point in time, and necessarily contains gaps.*

It is important for non-Indigenous peoples to understand that there is no imperative for First Nations communities to collaborate with them. Many First Nations communities may have diverging or competing priorities or interests stemming from their unique cultural connections, rights and responsibilities. Their decisions to engage or not with non-Indigenous people are each expressions of sovereignty and self-determination.

Nonetheless, many people do choose to engage and collaborate. It is evident that in southern or temperate Australia the number, size and scope of cultural land management collaborations between government land management agencies and First Nations organisations are all growing. These projects have faced and will continue to face significant headwinds from doubters and the inertia of business-as-usual. But, for those people seeking to embark on these opportunities to work together, and ensure they are strengthened wherever possible, we hope that the principles and protocols we have helped co-create are useful, usable and used to create positive change.

## Endnotes

1. Costello O, Dilworth T, Haynes K, Jansen T and Neale T (2021) Cultural land management in southeastern Australia: Developing the foundation for an Indigenous-led and co designed research program for land management with Traditional Owners, Melbourne: Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

2. McKemey M, Neale T and Costello O (2021) Principles for enhanced collaboration between land and emergency management agencies and Indigenous peoples: green paper. Melbourne, Vic: Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

3. Smith W, Weir J and Neale T (2021) Hazards, Culture and Indigenous Communities: Final Project Report. East Melbournce, Vic: Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

4. Neale T, Carter R, Nelson T and Bourke M (2019) 'Walking together: a decolonising experiment in bushfire management on Dja Dja Wurrung country', *cultural geographies,* 26(3):341–359. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474018821419

5. Maclean K, Robinson CJ and Costello O (2018) A national framework to report on the benefits of Indigenous cultural fire management. Canberra, ACT: CSIRO.

6. Rawluk A, Neale T, Smith W, Doherty T, Richie E, Pascoe J, Murray M, Carter R, Bourke M, Falconer S, Nimmo D, Price J, White M, Bates P, Wong N, Nelson T, Atkinson A and Webster D (2023) 'Tomorrow's Country: Practice-oriented principles for Indigenous cultural fire research in south-east Australia', *Geographical Research,* 61(3):333–348. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12596

7. Smith W, Neale T and Weir JK (2021) 'Persuasion without policies: the work of reviving Indigenous peoples' fire management in southern Australia', *Geoforum,* 120(March):82–92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.01.015