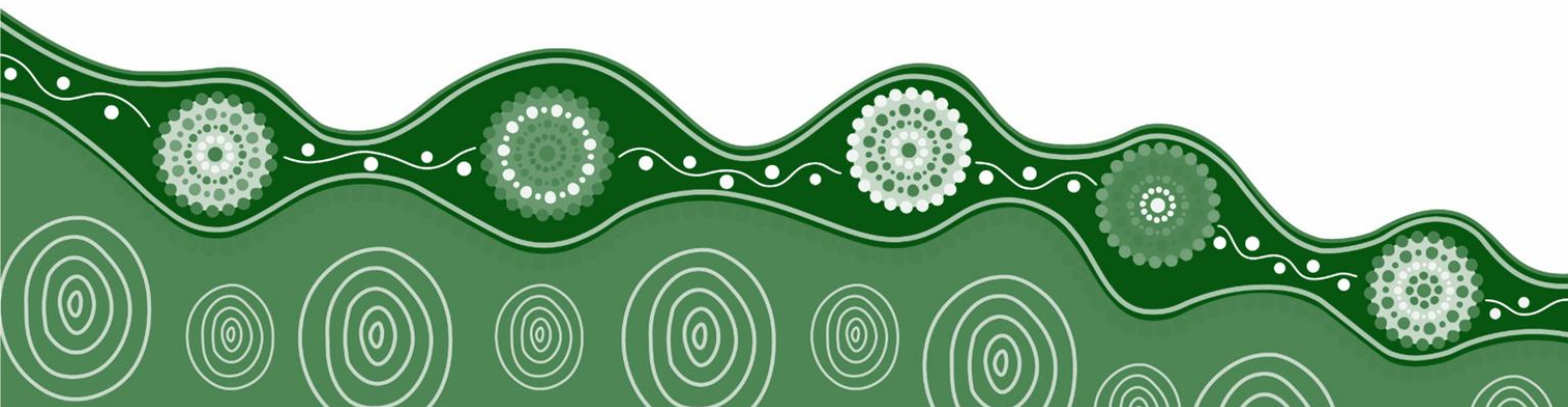


First Nations-led Circular Bioeconomies: Social and Economic Impacts and Social Perceptions

First Nations of Australia Circular Bioeconomies Report
International Energy Agency – Task 43



Acknowledgments

We, Tolita Davis-Angeles and Timothy McBride, wish to formally acknowledge the invaluable contributions of the First Nations participants who took part in the consultations essential to the development of this First Nations of Australia Circular Bioeconomies Report. We express our sincere gratitude for your insights and openness throughout this consultation.



Bunya Peoples Aboriginal Corporation



Butchulla Indigenous Industries Group

Korrawinga Aboriginal Corporation



Butchulla Native Title Aboriginal Corporation



Dulabed and Malanbarra Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation
RNTBC



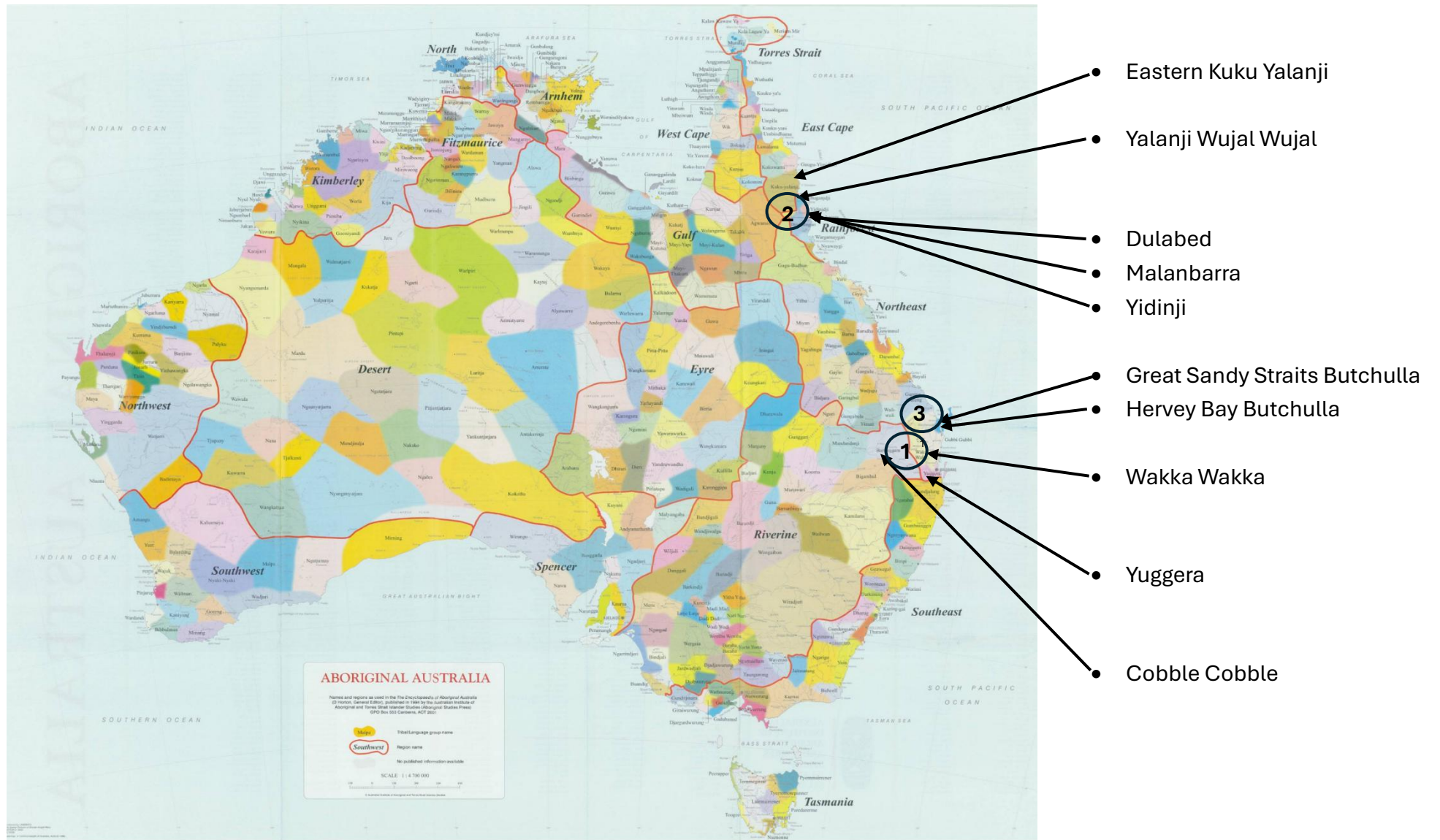
Jabalbina Aboriginal Corporation

This First Nations of Australia Circular Bioeconomies Report was developed through a face-to-face consultation process that involved First Nations voices from several different cultural groups. These groups included:

- Cobble Cobble
- Wakka Wakka
- Yuggera
- Great Sandy Straits Butchulla
- Hervey Bay Butchulla
- Eastern Kuku Yalanji
- Yalanji Wujal Wujal
- Dulabed
- Malanbarra, and
- Yidinji

The consultation was conducted through in-person meetings held at three distinct locations, encompassing what Australia's First Nations refer to as Rainforest Country (Tropical Queensland), the Northeast (Fraser Coast), and Riverine regions (Darling Downs). The consulted First Nations groups provided current examples of First Nations-led circular bioeconomies and offered valuable insights and reflections on the social and economic impacts associated with these bioeconomies

Figure 1 – Acknowledging the First Nations participants and their respective Country.



This First Nations of Australia Circular Bioeconomies Report aims to document perspectives from First Nations People of Australia on local circular bioeconomies and their social, environmental, economic, and cultural impacts on communities. The report presents opportunities for First Nations participants to describe the challenges, risks, and benefits associated with circular bioeconomies in relation to their traditional responsibilities for caring for Country and maintaining ancestral practices and knowledge systems.

A final draft was supplied to all the First Nations participants for a final review before handing over to the University of the Sunshine Coast. All participants were compensated for their valuable input and time.

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Acronyms, Definitions and Key terms

TERM	DEFINITION
Acknowledgement of Country	An Acknowledgement of Country is an opportunity for anyone to show respect for Traditional Owners and the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country.
Bush Tucker	The diverse native foods of Australia, including native plants, seeds, fruits, insects, and animals, traditionally eaten by First Nations People.
Community	Due to the removal of First Nations people from their ancestral lands, the First Nations definition of community is not always based on geographical location. The term community can refer to country, family, experiences and belonging.
Care for Country / Healthy Country plan	The practice of Caring for Country has been intrinsically woven into the traditions, customs, and legal frameworks of First Nations Peoples. In contemporary contexts, the term broadly refers to Indigenous-led land and sea management initiatives. Caring for Country extends well beyond environmental stewardship, offering substantial health, cultural, socio-political, and economic advantages for communities.
Country	The term "Country" encompasses the values, locations, resources, histories, and cultural responsibilities associated with a specific region and its characteristics. It signifies the entirety of ancestral territories. Although First Nations Australians may not retain legal ownership of the land, they maintain a profound connection to their ancestral Country and commonly regard themselves as custodians or stewards of these lands.
Lore	A body of traditional knowledge, beliefs, and stories passed down within a particular culture, group, or subject area. In Australian First Nations Peoples, lore is synonymous with laws.
Mobs	A colloquial term for a family, clan, or community group associated with a specific place.
Native Title	Native title refers to the legal acknowledgment in Australian law of the enduring rights of First Nations People to their land and waters, derived from their traditional laws and customs.
Traditional Owner/Custodian	A Traditional Owner or Custodian refers to a person who is a direct descendant of the First Nations peoples from a particular region or Country and has a cultural connection to that area through traditions, customs, beliefs, observances, or historical ties associated with its original inhabitants.

Acknowledgement of Country

I am honoured to have the opportunity to write and Acknowledge Country for this document.

The words 'Acknowledge Country' hold such significance to me. When I define the word acknowledgement, I define it as acceptance of the truth, accepting the existence of something.

To put that concept together with Country, speaks volumes.

For a First Nations person, Country is more than the land we walk on. It is more than geographical features that define a place or space. Country is the waters that run from the ground up and the sky down. It is the trees from an individual species to a forest that create living landscapes. Within those landscapes each individual grass type, plant, rock formation, big and small, connected to soil types from sand to stone. Country incorporates the animals and their life seasons that complements our own.

When we speak of seasons, First Nations seasons are far more interconnected.

On Country, our seasons are governed and guided by all that Country speaks for. Our seasons are a pillar of our existence, a guide for our living forms, they create who we are, where we are, and why we are. This undivided truth is what Country Connection is to us.

Country is us, our community, our past, our present and our future seen and unseen Country and its unmistakable, continuous connection with us as First Nations people.

It is something to honour, protect and respect.

When we acknowledge Country, we are acknowledging it as an acceptance of truth, an acceptance in the existence of seen and unseen Country and its unmistakable, continuous connection with us as First Nations people.

It is something to honour, protect and respect.

As Australians we all hold the oldest living culture in the world. That is something we all can celebrate and feel a sense of pride in.

“Ngai Cobble Cobble Warra, ngai Boobargun Nguumunge, ngai Gujus, ngai Cabool, ngai Barrungam, Budin Yadgie, Ngeum”

“I am a descendant of the Cobble Cobble people from Warra. I am kinnected to Bunya Mountains, I am kinnected to carpet snake. I am Barrangum language speaking. I am called Big Sister.”

Tolita Davis-Angeles © 2025

Executive Summary

This report provides an in-depth analysis of First Nations-led circular bioeconomies in Australia, examining their social, economic, environmental, and cultural impacts. It captures the perspectives of various First Nations groups, emphasising their traditional responsibilities for caring for Country, preserving ancestral knowledge systems, and engaging in sustainable practices that support community wellbeing and environmental health.

Introduction to First Nations Circular Bioeconomies

Circular bioeconomies are defined as economies that are restorative and regenerative by design, aiming to maintain products, components, and materials at their highest utility and value while operating within ecological boundaries. The report integrates First Nations worldviews by identifying four main elements essential to sustainable circular bioeconomies: process and protocols, economy, environment, and society/community. These elements reflect a holistic approach that aligns with First Nations cultural values emphasising interconnectedness and stewardship of Country.

Process and Protocols

This element encompasses the value systems, customs, and cultural practices guiding respectful interaction and collaboration among First Nations groups. It includes transparency, adherence to cultural protocols, and collaboration, which are vital for maintaining cultural authenticity and ethical engagement.

Economy

From a First Nations perspective, the economy extends beyond monetary value to include generational knowledge exchange and spiritual connections. Traditional knowledge and skills serve as alternative forms of barter, reinforcing community bonds and spiritual ties to Country. Equity and inclusivity are emphasised in cultural transactions, and economic activities prioritise harmony with the land over profit.

Environment

Environmental stewardship is deeply intertwined with cultural identity. Participants stressed the importance of healing and caring for Country, with sub-elements such as productivity, regeneration, efficiency, and circularity reflecting traditional responsibilities. The health of Country is seen as directly impacting the wellbeing of First Nations peoples.

Society/Community

Society, often referred to as community, involves kinship and traditional ways of knowing, being, and doing. Community wellbeing is closely linked to access to and rights over traditional lands. The report discusses the adverse effects of colonisation, including forced removal from Country, social disparities, and the complex impacts of legislation like the Native Title Act 1993, which, while recognising some rights, has also caused divisions within families and communities.

Current Circular Bioeconomies in Practice

Several examples of First Nations-led circular bioeconomies were identified, including Care for Country, harvesting non-timber forest products, forest harvesting and residue use, eco-tourism, forest carbon initiatives, and cultural burning.

Care for Country

Care for Country is a holistic approach to land and water management rooted in ancestral laws, customs, and reciprocal relationships. It encompasses connections to land, waters, flora, fauna, heritage, and ancestors. Participants described Country as a conscious entity with memory and life force, integral to community wellbeing. The forced removal of First Nations peoples disrupted these practices, leading to environmental degradation. Returning to traditional land management has shown benefits for both environmental health and community wellbeing.

Harvesting Non-Timber Products

Non-timber forest products such as bark, seeds, bushfoods, medicinal plants, native bee honey, and natural gums provide cultural and economic opportunities. These resources support First Nations businesses and employment while maintaining sustainable practices.

Forest Harvesting and Residue Use

This involves sustainable harvesting from natural forests or plantations, including the use of residues like sawdust and woodchips. Forest harvesting also delivers ecosystem services such as protecting cultural sites and biodiversity. Despite some land being returned to First Nations communities, challenges remain due to historical government control and reluctance to allow forestry developments on returned lands. Sustainability and cultural values must be balanced in forestry practices.

Eco-tourism

Eco-tourism involves nature-based activities that promote appreciation of natural and cultural values while ensuring ecological, economic, and social sustainability. First Nations eco-tourism includes cultural tours, artwork sales, and bush tucker trails,

although development is often hindered by bureaucratic challenges and lack of respect for cultural values.

Forest Carbon

Australia's forests hold significant carbon reserves critical for mitigating climate change. First Nations participants view forest carbon initiatives as opportunities for revenue generation and conservation.

Cultural Burning

Cultural burning is a traditional fire management practice used to maintain land health, promote biodiversity, and reduce wildfire risks. It holds deep spiritual and cultural significance, supporting the transmission of knowledge and community connection to Country. Colonisation disrupted these practices, but there is growing recognition and reintroduction of cultural burning through partnerships and hybrid systems.

Community Impacts and Social Perceptions

Workshops with First Nations corporations revealed that Ranger programs, cultural burning, and eco-tourism positively influence social structures by providing employment, education, and community connection. These programs have led to reputational gains, fee-for-service opportunities, and increased recognition of Traditional Owner knowledge. However, challenges include limited resources, jurisdictional boundaries, bureaucratic barriers, and the need for respectful partnerships.

Social acceptance emphasises the need for Western recognition of Traditional Owner knowledge, partnerships for access to Country, breaking down barriers, and balancing economic goals with cultural values. Technology and blending knowledge systems are seen as tools to empower communities and improve Care for Country outcomes.

Acknowledgments and Cultural Context

The report acknowledges the contributions of numerous First Nations groups and corporations across Australia, including Bunya Peoples Aboriginal Corporation, Butchulla Native Title Aboriginal Corporation, Butchulla Indigenous Industries Group, Dulabed and Malanbarra Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation, Jabalbina Aboriginal Corporation, Korrawinga Aboriginal Corporation and others. It includes a heartfelt Acknowledgment of Country emphasising the deep spiritual and cultural connection First Nations peoples have with their ancestral lands, which are viewed as living entities integral to identity, wellbeing, and cultural continuity.

This summary encapsulates the core ideas and detailed insights presented in the First Nations of Australia Circular Bioeconomies Report, reflecting the voices and

perspectives of First Nations communities engaged in sustainable bioeconomic practices that honour their cultural heritage and responsibilities to Country.

Introduction

Background

The International Energy Agency (IEA) Bioenergy Task 43 has organised a series of workshops on innovative biomass supply strategies, conducted in Hungary during autumn 2019 and in Canada throughout winter 2020. More recently, additional workshops in Canada engaged Tribal Councils, Tribal industrial investment organisations, Indigenous-led businesses, and representatives from local Indigenous Nations.

During these sessions, Mr. Dean Assinewe, a forestry consultant from Sagamok First Nation, presented his evaluation of the IEA Bioenergy Task 43 report regarding strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to biohubs. He outlined several recommendations:

- Invite Indigenous communities, organisations, companies, and their representatives to actively contribute to the development of a biohub economy by establishing forums that are both respectful and welcoming.
- Develop a network of Indigenous community and economic representatives from diverse regions to participate regularly or as needed, fostering dialogue and business interactions that enhance productivity and strengthen the biohub model.
- Recognise that various economic development initiatives exist across different regions, each possessing foundational elements for biohub creation; therefore, increase opportunities for inclusion and participation.
- Expand the criteria for identifying biohubs and adopt multi-sectoral approaches to economic development in partnership with Indigenous communities.

In response to this analysis, the current project plans to conduct a series of three workshops in two countries, involving representatives from Indigenous Tribal Councils, Social Enterprises, Tribal Council Investment Organisations, businesses, and other First Nations-led bodies. The aim is to collect insights regarding the social and economic impacts of existing First Nations-led circular bioeconomies.

The Canadian and Australian workshops will be complementary in nature, each adopting approaches that align with their unique national contexts. For example, in Canada, certain First Nations communities are engaged in bioenergy initiatives, including projects that incorporate carbon capture. The economic and social effects of these activities will be assessed, with attention given to issues such as biomass supply during project implementation. By contrast, the Australian case study will focus on defining circular bioeconomy practices, including the harvesting of non-timber products, ecotourism, cultural burning, silviculture, and forest carbon management.

Purpose

This project seeks to document and analyse existing First Nations-led circular bioeconomies, with particular attention to their social and economic impacts.

The primary objective is to convene workshops in Canada and Australia to gather insights on two key themes:

- Detailed descriptions of local circular bioeconomies, including various applications of biomass (such as construction, food and medicine, heat and energy, intergenerational cultural exchange, among others).
- Assessment of community impacts stemming from circular bioeconomies, addressing aspects such as social, environmental, and economic development, employment opportunities, and broader community benefits.

This project will directly inform IEA's Work Package 3: Assessing Social and Socio-Economic Implications of Biomass Supply in Nature-Positive Circular Economies, by providing concrete examples and models of current circular economy practices.

Notable Findings

- Technology enables spiritual growth by integrating knowledge systems and improving practical application. It also helps preserve traditional knowledge and values, and shifts power dynamics in interactions with colonial governments.
- Grant-based funding for salary payments is not directly comparable to compensation structures within colonial job frameworks. Income from grants often restricts financial allocation to specific purposes, which may not align with organisational needs. Additionally, grant-based funding typically does not provide administrative financial support, an essential component for sustainable business operations. Many First Nations organisations operate with salaries below minimum wage due to these constraints. Grants also impose strict requirements regarding the timing and allocation of funds. Facilitating opportunities for active and sustainable employment within First Nations organisations has been associated with a reduction in perceived racism. Financial sponsorships and partnerships can support First Nations organisations in transitioning away from reliance on grants, ultimately fostering economic independence and equity.
- There is currently limited trust in the application of Traditional knowledge to Country management activities. Greater recognition and integration of Traditional knowledge are essential. To achieve this, it is important to provide First Nations People with expanded opportunities to lead Country healing practices, such as cultural burning and traditional harvesting, which can help shift perceptions and foster confidence in traditional knowledge systems.

Demonstrating positive outcomes through these efforts can contribute to establishing a "Fee-for-Service" business model based on reputation and results.

- Working on Country is a fundamental practice for First Nations Peoples. The restoration of Country contributes to improved well-being and spiritual health. This connection strengthens spiritual values and facilitates the recovery of artefacts and the preservation of sacred cultural sites that may otherwise be overlooked or damaged by those unfamiliar with their significance. It is essential for First Nations Peoples to lead efforts in walking and healing Country. Furthermore, engaging in this work provides opportunities to educate others about its importance and meaning.

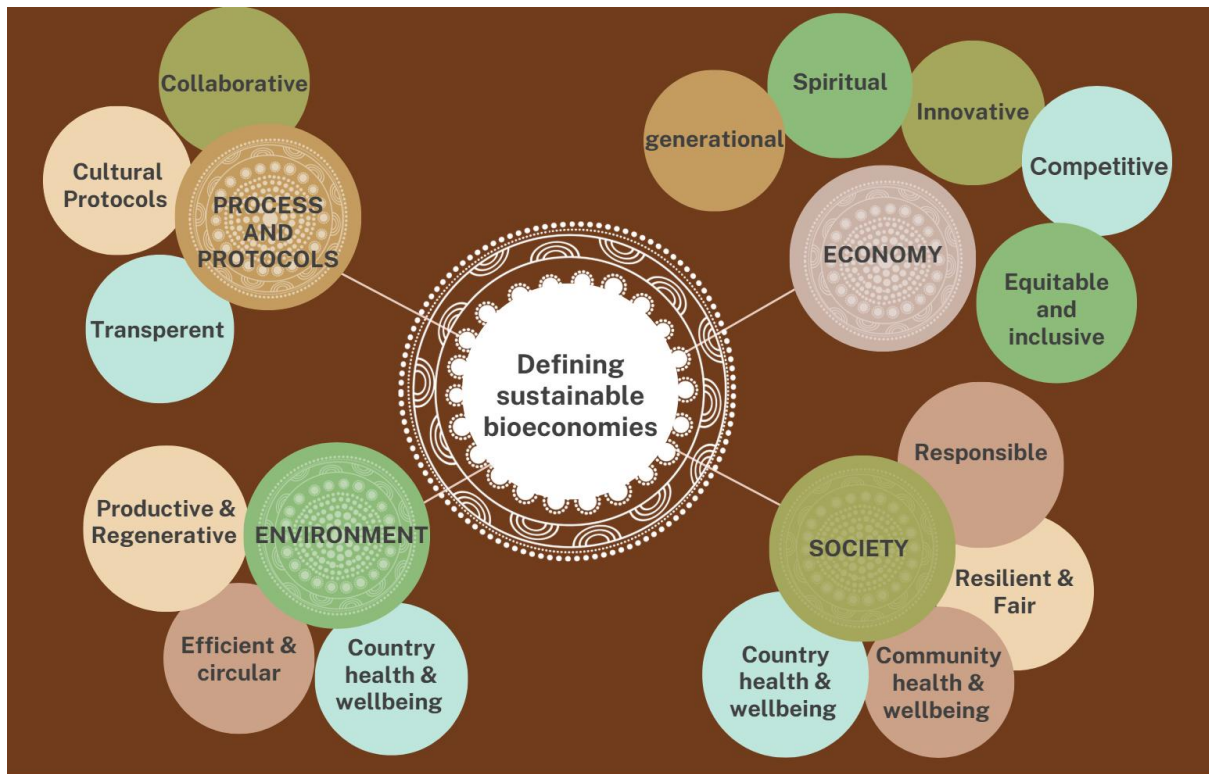
Circular Bioeconomies

Circular Bioeconomies are defined as an economy that is restorative and regenerative by design, and which aims to keep products, components, and materials at their highest utility and value at all times. Circular economies aim to achieve sustainability in social, environmental, and economic areas by providing ecosystem services and managing biological resources (such as plants, animals, micro-organisms, and derived biomass including organic waste) in a sustainable manner. These resources are processed in a circular way within the ecological boundaries of their respective ecosystems (Circular Bioeconomy Alliance, 2025).

In consultations with First Nations groups, circular bio-economies were outlined using an infographic (Figure 1) intended to facilitate knowledge exchange in a manner aligned with cultural protocols. Four main elements identified for a sustainable circular bioeconomy were process and protocols, economy, environment, and society/community. These elements align with the aim of this comparative report *‘to examine how circular bioeconomies affect the environment and communities both socially and economically’*.

To connect these elements to First Nations worldviews, sub-elements of each element were further examined. Often,

Figure 2- Definition of sustainable Bioeconomies through a First Nations viewpoint displaying layers and sub-layers ^a.



^a terms like layers or sublayers better connect Western systems with First Nations cultures, which emphasise circles, layers, and ripples in their stories.

Process and protocols refer to the value systems, customs, and cultural practices that help identify particular First Nations groups. In many First Nations cultures, process and protocols provide guidance on interacting and working with others respectfully. They support the recognition of kinship mapping, caring for Country, dispute resolution and support communications across diverse circumstances (Davis-Angeles & Collard, 2024).

"Cultural protocols provide clear lines on what is shared vs. not shared" Workshop 1

With a history spanning over 65,000 years, First Nations cultures encompass a range of diverse practices. Recognising and following cultural protocols signifies respect for ongoing traditions, knowledge processes, and different practices. Protocols also serve as ethical guidelines that direct behaviour in specific contexts (Davis-Angeles & Collard, 2024). Sub-layers for process and protocols included the transparency, cultural protocols (referring to traditional customs and practices) and collaboration.

"There is a need to ensure cultural authenticity by understanding cultural protocols. People are telling stories that aren't theirs to share" Workshop 1

Consultation revealed that, from a First Nations perspective, the concept of economy encompasses more than just monetary values; it also includes generational knowledge exchange and spiritual connections. Generational knowledge transfer holds significant importance, with traditional knowledges and skills often serving as alternative forms of barter.

"If we keep learning and sharing, it leads to generational sharing which keeps us going, you know" Workshop 1

These informal exchanges provide benefits to individuals and the communities by reinforcing spiritual connections, even when no monetary value is assigned. It remains critical that during these cultural transactions equity and inclusivity remain important considerations.

"Gain, is knowing Country and how to use it. Harmony, is working with Country, and Country working with us. What's good for the land comes first" Lakanovic (BNTAC)

"We and the land will always be one, that comes first. Money is not the first priority for business" Barney (BIIG)

In view of ongoing changes in policies and legislation affecting First Nations peoples, a strong emphasis on innovation and competitiveness is considered necessary for First Nations groups to be recognised as equal contributors within western economic systems.

"Local and provincial colonial government pressured First Nations businesses to collapse due to perceived competition risks" Workshop 3

First Nations groups referenced the concepts of healing Country and caring for Country when discussing environmental matters. According to participants, the health of Country plays an important role in the wellbeing and identity of First Nations Peoples. Discussions identified key sub-elements – productive, regenerative, efficient, and circular – as interconnected through a traditional responsibility to care for Country.

"We care for the land, because out of the land comes the people. We preserve and we protect our Country, that's what we do" Workshop 1

Finally, the society element, more often referred to as community, delves into the inner layers of kinship and traditional ways of knowing, being and doing. Society refers to a

community's wellbeing, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. On many occasions through consultation a community's wellbeing was determined by the wellbeing of Country and the level of access and rights a First Nations group had to their traditional lands. The sub-layers responsible, resilient and fair refer to the inseparable, inherited duty to be stewards of the Country in which they belong. Sadly, during colonisation, First Nations People were forcibly removed off their Country in an act of genocide which has resulted in detrimental outcomes for First Nations People and the Australian landscape.

"Country was never told we were taken away, so it continued to grow unmanaged and now it is sick" Davis, workshop 1

Since colonisation, First Nations people have faced persistent prejudice and discrimination. Their rights and needs have often been overlooked, creating significant social, economic, and political disparities compared to non-Indigenous peoples (Davis-Angeles & Collard, 2024).

In recognition of the past dispossession and dispersal of Australia's First Nation's People from their Country, kinship and culture, Australia has implemented a range of Acts designed to protect the rights and heritage of First Nations Peoples. A legislative Act known as Native Title Act 1993, was implemented after the identification of First Nation's Peoples' current disadvantaged position in Australian society (Davis-Angeles, 2024). Although it aims to increase the participation of First Nations Peoples in decision-making processes related to their Country, welfares and support self-determination, self-management, and self-sufficiency, through consultation it was uncovered that this Act was also causing division amongst family groups and upsetting kinships.

"More disconnection to Country intimidates Mob to take action to heal Country"
Workshop 1

"Colonial bureaucracy still having negative effects on outcomes with tenures and jurisdictional boundaries" Workshop 1

Native title 1993, was first recognised in Australia after Meriam people from the Eastern Torres Strait filed a 1982 High Court claim seeking legal acknowledgement of their traditional ownership of Murray Island. In 1992, the High Court confirmed their native title rights, overturning the doctrine of terra nullius. This decision led to the Native Title Act, which recognises that First Nations Peoples had established laws and land rights before colonisation—rights that can still be recognised and protected through Native Title determinations (Australian Institution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AITSIS), 2023).

Native title is often perceived as First Nations People having a ‘bundle of rights’ over their traditional Country, however, these rights mostly include the right to camp, hunt, use water, hold meetings, perform ceremony and protect cultural sites (AITSIS, 2023). AITSIS (2023) stated the importance to acknowledge that Native Title only recognises the right to perform some activities which come from traditional laws and customs but does not recognise those traditional laws and customs themselves and is all dependant on what each First Nations claimant can prove in relations to traditional custodianship.

“Native Title is an issue. It resulted with the wrong people in the wrong positions.”

Anonymous

"The Native Title system has broken us. It is shocking to adapt to the western "corporation" space. Native Title legislation is a divisive piece of legislation that has divided us. Mobs have weaponised government regulations to use against each other to better themselves" Workshop 2

In many conversations, it was argued that Native Title was a westernised attempt of continuing a supremacy control over First Nations People by turning First Nations groups against each other.

“First Nation People know their traditional land and boundaries, it is in our blood, our songlines, our identity and it was respected. We didn’t need the government to put a western layer of boundaries over our lands. It causes fights, creates greed and fuels into the negative stereo type that many Australians have of First Nations People.” Anonymous

"Working in the constraints of legislation doesn't allow you to do what you need to do to care for our people" Workshop 2

In reference to the sub-layers of society – resilience, fairness, and responsibility – it is evident that these attributes have served as vital pillars and will remain essential to the foundation of community frameworks. Throughout consultations, the resilience demonstrated by the ancestors of participants was frequently acknowledged and commended, underscoring their enduring cultural obligations. Moreover, First Nations traditions, culture, and epistemologies were consistently described as balanced and fair in their approach to knowledge, behaviour, and practice.

“We have lost a lot of Old people. I can remember my grandparents fighting for the land we still fight for" Workshop 2

“Our lore never changes but their law changes everyday" Workshop 2

Current circular Bioeconomies

For Australia's First Nations People, examples of current circular bioeconomies included: Care for Country, harvesting non-timber products, forest harvesting and residue use, eco-tourism, forest carbon and cultural burning.

Care for Country

Care for Country is understood as a First Nations Peoples' approaches to land and water management. This management is centred within the laws/lores, customs and traditional ways of knowing, being and doing. A First Nations Person's responsibility to Care for Country is inherited from their ancestors and ancestral beings (AITSIS, 2011).

During consultation, numerous First Nations participants emphasised the significance of their connection to Country and the responsibility of caring for Country as fundamental to their wellbeing. These relationships encompass connections with traditional lands, waters, flora, fauna, heritage, culture, ancestors, laws/lores, customs, seasons, and other elements (Rose 1992, 1996, as cited in AITSIS, 2011). Consultation further identified this as a reciprocal relationship, recognising that when Country is unwell, individuals and communities are adversely affected (Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), 2021).

Additionally, participants described Country as having qualities similar to those of a conscious member during their engagement. They referred to Country using terms typically associated with people, indicating its integral role within their community. Participants reported engaging with Country through practices such as speaking to, singing to, walking on, and expressing emotions toward it. They also mentioned perceiving Country as knowing, hearing, feeling, and seeing. The accounts characterised Country not as a generalised location, but rather as an entity regarded by participants as having consciousness, memory, and a drive for life. Because of this notion, First Nations People see Country as home, as harmony, and as nourishment for their body, mind, and spirit (Rose 1996:7, as cited in AITSIS, 2011).

"What is the most important thing? Land, land is the most important thing. Without the land we have nothing, land is the most important thing" Korrawinga, workshop 3

Government policies, including the Aboriginal Protection Act, resulted in the forced removal of First Nations people from their traditional lands, preventing them from fulfilling their inherited responsibilities for the stewardship and management of

Country. Consultations have indicated that these measures not only led to cultural disconnection and loss of identity among First Nations Australians but also contributed to the deterioration of Australia's natural landscapes and waterways.

For First Nations People, the care of Country is regarded as an honour rather than an obligation. In contemporary contexts, the opportunity to return to traditional lands and resume caring for Country has been shown to benefit both environmental health and the wellbeing of First Nations individuals and communities.

*"If you look after the Country, the Country will look after you" BNTAC
Workshop 1*

Harvesting non-timber products

Non-timber forestry products refer to resources derived from forest environments that offer valuable prospects for First Nations business initiatives and employment opportunities, contributing both cultural and economic benefits. Examples of these products include bark, pinecones, seeds, bushfoods and medicinal plants, native bee honey production and pollination services, natural gums, resins, oils, and wax as well as sandalwood-related goods (Groenhout et al., 2023).

For First Nations People, harvesting non timber products have been a part of traditional practice for thousands of years as a way of balancing Country and maintaining sustainable ecosystems.

"We see more than just planting and harvesting trees, we see spirit, we see Country and all it needs, we see our ancestors. Harvesting is not just in the trees, it's for the land and we are doing it right for our old people" Workshop 3

Forest harvesting and residue use

Forest harvesting involves the sustainable harvesting of forest products from either managed natural forest Country or forestry plantations established for community use or commercial purposes (Groenhout et al., 2023). Harvest residues include stumps, bark, crown material, tree heads, and butts. These materials are usually left in forests to contribute to forest and soil quality for future planting cycles. Sawmill residues comprise solid wood offcuts, woodchips, sawdust, shavings, and bark. These by-products are commonly processed into other products or used as fuel onsite for energy production (Lock & Whittle, 2020).

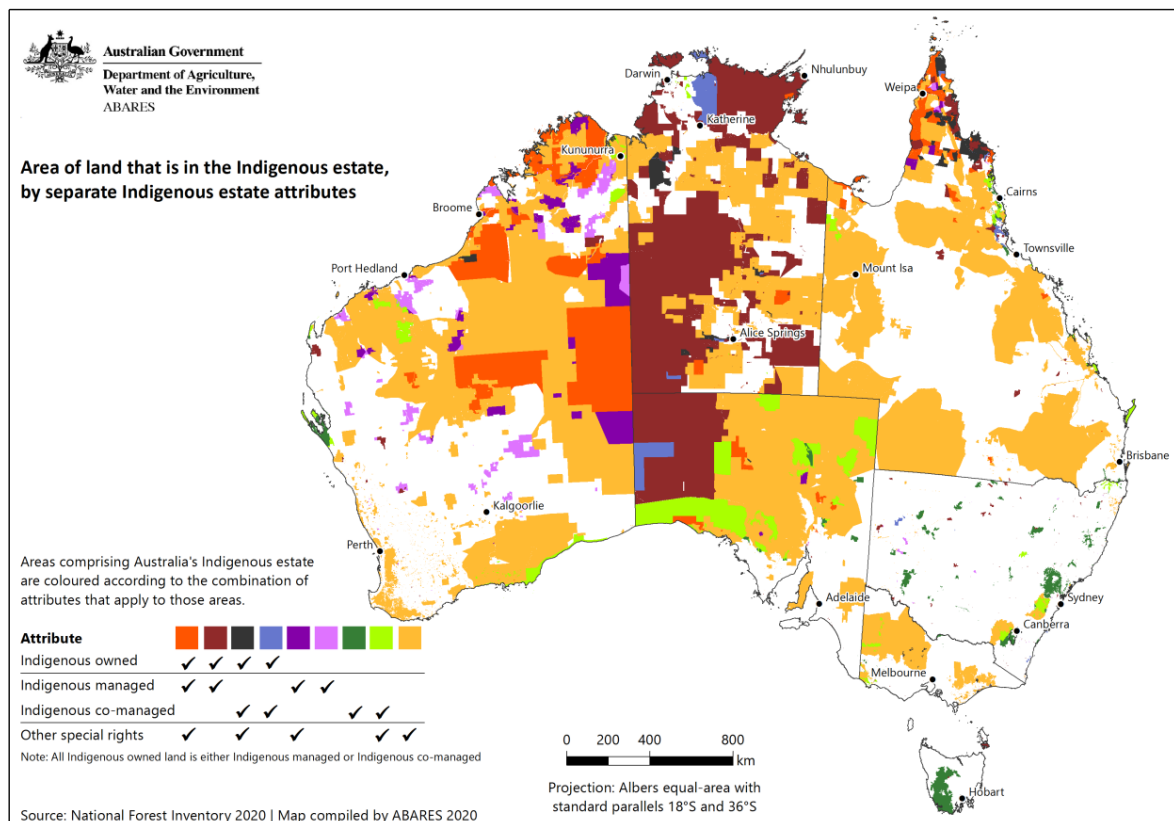
Forestry encompasses both the management of natural forest Country for the extraction of natural products and the delivery of ecosystem services. These services include protecting cultural sites (such as story places, sacred sites, and camping areas), conserving biodiversity, enhancing soil stability, sequestering carbon, safeguarding rivers and wetlands, and providing resources like bush foods and traditional medicinal plants.

Plantation forestry focuses on cultivating trees for timber production, which may serve various purposes, including land rehabilitation after mining activities and the generation of non-timber forest products (Groenhout et al., 2023).

During colonisation, extensive tracts of forest were cleared or fragmented for agricultural expansion and other forms of development. The cessation or disruption of traditional forest management practices, along with the incursion of invasive species and feral animals, led to degradation of some remaining forest areas.

In recent years, certain forest regions have been returned to First Nations communities through Native Title determinations and various state and territory land acts. With the recognition of First Nations' traditional approaches to caring for Country as best practice, government-managed forests are increasingly overseen by First Nations People, particularly through the implementation of traditional fire management techniques (Groenhout et al., 2023).

Figure 3- Australia's Indigenous land and forest estates 2024.



The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forests (DAFF) developed Australia's Indigenous land and forest estate (2024) as a continental spatial dataset to identify and report on specific attributes of Australia's First Nations estate. This includes the extent of land and forest where First Nations Peoples and communities have ownership, management, co-management, or other rights. The land attributes for the First Nations estate are as follows:

Indigenous owned: Freehold land or forest owned by Indigenous communities, or land or forest with vested ownership through other mechanisms.

Indigenous managed: Land or forest managed by Indigenous communities.

Indigenous co-managed: Land or forest subject to formal, legally binding agreements that incorporate Indigenous involvement in developing and implementing management plans.

Other special rights: Land or forest covered by native title determinations, registered Indigenous Land Use Agreements, or legislated cultural use provisions.

According to the Australia's Indigenous land and forest estate (2024) dataset, First Nations communities own 154 million hectares (20%) of Australian land, including 24 million hectares of forest Country. A total of 192 million hectares (25%) is under some form of First Nations management—156 million hectares managed directly and 36 million co-managed—with 31 million hectares of forest Country split between 20.7 million hectares managed and 10.6 million co-managed. Additionally, 443 million hectares (58%) have other special rights for Indigenous peoples, with 62 million hectares of this being forest Country (DAFF, 2024).

Historically, forestry in Australia has primarily been managed by government entities or non-Indigenous private industries, resulting in some hesitancy regarding the development of forestry on lands where First Nations rights have only recently been reinstated. First Nations communities are understandably cautious about relinquishing resources upon regaining access to their Country.

“We are having to prove ourselves for people to acknowledge our knowledge. We are expected to function in the systematic chaos”

Workshop 2

To facilitate successful forestry initiatives, it is essential to recognise and integrate traditional forest management practices. Forest resources must be made accessible to

First Nations communities for physical, cultural, and spiritual purposes; this may involve designating areas for cultural significance, such as sacred sites, initiation locations, and story places. Additionally, certain areas may need protection due to biodiversity concerns or to safeguard species that hold particular cultural importance for First Nations Peoples connected to the land (Groenhout et al., 2023).

“We see more than just planting and harvesting trees, we see spirit, we see culture, we see our ancestors” Workshop 3

Australia’s commercial forests play a vital role in meeting the increasing global demand for wood fibre. The contribution of small-scale, privately owned forests is an important part of the fibre supply chain. One of the most significant challenges for First Nations forest owners being more actively involved in forestry is lack of knowledge regarding the management of plantations and native forests as profitable land uses that contribute to Australia’s future wood fibre needs (Groenhout et al., 2023).

Consultation revealed that there remains limited awareness and understanding regarding the definition of forestry and its potential benefits for the community. The collection and harvesting of forest wood products typically occurs during specific situations, such as when areas managed by First Nations undergo culling of certain wood products, or when permission is granted to utilise or repurpose wood through larger projects like road clearing.

First Nations communities have traditionally adhered to practices that prioritise taking only what is necessary to meet their families' needs. These approaches are grounded in their responsibilities as stewards of the land and reflect generations of knowledge related to sustainability and the care of Country.

“We need to balance Country when culling resources. It comes full circle and shows the old ways and how we function” Workshop 1

*“We see people continuous taking from Country and not giving back”
Workshop 2*

Given these principles, implementing a profitable circular economy based on wood products poses significant challenges. Such an approach could require First Nations groups to depart from their traditional values or to establish plantations of particular species, potentially leading to the displacement of native plants and animals. The

introduction of exotic or non-native species in place of indigenous flora and fauna may ultimately result in negative consequences for the health of Country.

Eco-tourism

Ecotourism refers to nature-based activities designed to enhance visitor awareness and understanding of natural and cultural attributes. These activities are managed with considerations for ecological, economic, and social sustainability, aiming to support conservation and the welfare of both natural areas and local communities (Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation (DETSI) 2025).

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), ecotourism is defined as environmentally responsible travel to relatively undisturbed natural regions, with the purpose of enjoying and learning about nature and associated cultural characteristics from both past and present. The IUCN states that ecotourism encourages conservation, limits negative impacts from visitors, and promotes positive socio-economic involvement by local populations (DETSI, 2025).

Several participants expressed concerns regarding their position within the ecotourism sector, recounting instances when other tourism service providers appeared to feel threatened by their active engagement in tourism activities. Consequently, some First Nations participants have identified a need for support in establishing common ground that upholds cultural values and delivers benefits to all stakeholders.

“People need to let First Nations speak for themselves. They are taking our stories and telling them wrong ways” Workshop 1

“Increased tourism increases bio security threats due to increased foot traffic and lack of understanding and respects for Country and custodians.” Workshop 1

Forest Carbon

Recent studies indicate that Australia's forests possess significant carbon reserves. The safeguarding and effective management of these forest carbon stocks serve as important benchmarks for sustainable forest management. Furthermore, enhancing the long-term sequestration of carbon within forests and harvested wood products plays a critical role in mitigating atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), 2024).

The terms ‘**tree carbon**’ and ‘**forest carbon**’ denote the quantity of carbon dioxide sequestered by individual trees or entire forest ecosystems. When forests are removed or impacted by events such as deforestation or wildfires, the stored carbon is released into the atmosphere (Wilderness Society, 2025).

The Queensland Government released the 2021-22 Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) report on 17 July 2024. According to the report, 323,676 hectares of land were affected by land clearing during the 2021-2022 reporting period, reinforcing Australia’s position as one of the countries with the highest rates of deforestation globally (Wilderness Society, 2025). In response to these findings, First Nations People in Australia have identified Forest Carbon initiatives as an opportunity to generate revenue while conserving native forest Country.

During the consultation, it was identified that Queensland possesses the most extensive diversity of native Australian species nationwide, many of which face the risk of extinction. Numerous First Nations participants expressed concerns that widespread deforestation and increased footprint that is accelerating the decline of threatened species, negatively impacting and negatively impacting significant water sources.

“Too many people. Our river is under threat, all them houses are pumping our river. The river is our story, we are all connected to the waters” Workshop 2

Cultural Burning

For tens of thousands of years, First Nations People have utilised fire as a land management tool, strategically conducting controlled burns with fire sticks to promote the wellbeing of both the environment and its communities. These practices encompass burning specific areas to support the health of native flora and fauna, including species such as native grasses, emu, black grevillea, potoroo, bushfoods, threatened species, and overall biodiversity. Techniques may involve patch burning to establish varied fire intervals across the landscape or be implemented for fuel load and hazard reduction purposes. Additionally, fire is employed to improve access to land, clear significant pathways, fulfil cultural responsibilities, and contribute to cultural heritage management (Firesticks, 2025).

“Healing country = healing spirits” Workshop 1

For many non-Indigenous individuals, including those residing in urban or agricultural areas, fire is often regarded as a destructive force and viewed as contrary to civilisation (Watarrka Foundation Limited, 2025). In contrast, consultations have repeatedly highlighted the profound spiritual significance of fire within First Nations cultures. Fire serves as a central element for the transmission of stories, knowledge, and practical skills across generations.

“Elders are seeing the positive change. Burning brings out Country stories and knowledge sharing storylines” Workshop 1

Additionally, it represents a vital connection between First Nations Peoples and their stewardship of Country, with shared understandings of fire’s restorative role for the land and its symbolic importance within First Nations traditions.

“Our way of burning Country is different, instead of hot fires in Summer, we have cool fires in Winter” Workshop 1

In many regions of Australia, cultural burning is not currently practiced in its traditional form due to the effects of colonisation and limitations on First Nations Peoples' rights to manage land using customary methods. There is increasing acknowledgement of the effectiveness of cultural burning for land management and wildfire mitigation. As a result, collaborations among industry, research organisations, and government are supporting the reintroduction of cultural burning through hybrid systems that are generally uniform in their approach. These include mosaic burning techniques and adaptations based on variables such as vegetation type, old growth forest presence, and local weather conditions (The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (RCNDA), 2020).

Consultation has identified numerous environmental and cultural advantages associated with cultural burning. These include wildfire prevention, stimulation of local flora through seed germination, protection of native animal habitats such as tree canopies, the provision of medicinal benefits to animals – for example, wallabies and birds that bathe in cool ash to remove lice – and the restoration of First Nations’ kinship with Country, fostering generational knowledge transfer.

“Cultural burning heal Country, it leads to a more resilient Country better suited to withstand future biosecurity attacks” Workshop 1

Components of Current Circular Bioeconomies

Figure 4 -Components of current circular bioeconomies.

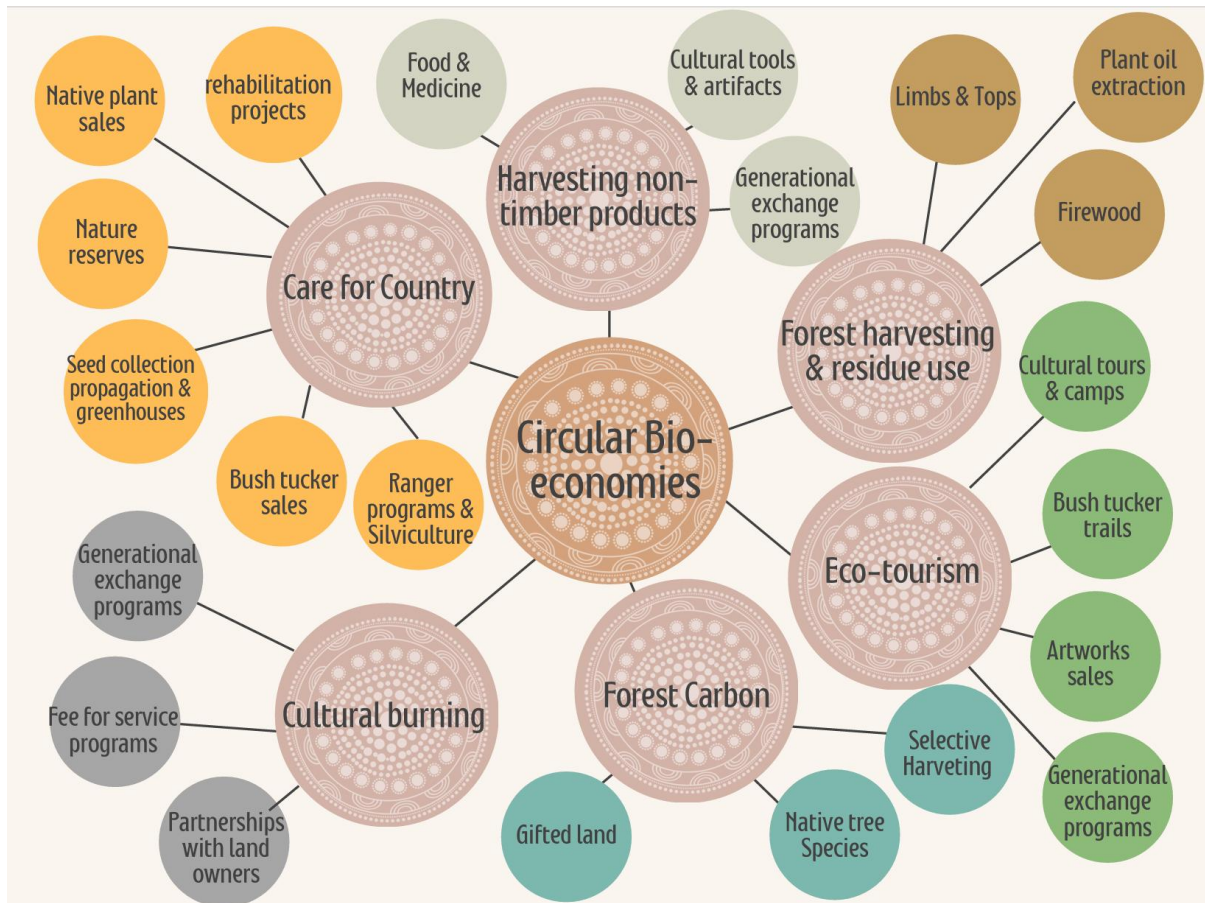


Figure 4 illustrates the various components constituting current circular bioeconomies as identified through consultations. Discussions on caring for Country highlighted six key elements: rehabilitation initiatives (such as the restoration of degraded land including mine sites), native plant and bush tucker sales, establishment of nature reserves to support agriculture through windbreaks or shelter belts, provision of habitats for flora and fauna, ranger programs, and seed collection and propagation efforts.

The harvesting of non-timber products encompassed food and medicinal plant collection, intergenerational knowledge exchange initiatives, and the crafting of traditional artefacts and tools. Forest harvesting was noted to involve three principal activities: firewood collection, plant oil extraction, and the use of limbs and tops of trees.

Within the domain of ecotourism, notable components included cultural tours and camps, sales of artwork and artefacts, knowledge transfer programs across generations, and bush tucker trails. Key aspects of forest carbon management were identified as selective harvesting, native forest management, and exploring opportunities for land designated for specific purposes.

Consultations regarding cultural burning practices recognised opportunities for fee-for-service arrangements, partnership development with landholders where First Nations People do not hold ownership or rights, and the importance of generational knowledge transmission through the revival of traditional land management practices. First Nations communities are actively engaging Elders and community members in the revitalisation of cultural burning and enhancing their understanding of Country to promote land restoration.

Community Impacts

The report highlights the significant positive and negative impacts of First Nations-led circular bioeconomies on communities. These impacts are derived from various programs and initiatives such as Ranger programs, cultural burning, and eco-tourism.

The commitment to Caring for Country has led to the implementation of cultural burning practices, which in turn have served as a catalyst for First Nations corporations to establish Ranger programs. These initiatives have facilitated educational opportunities for younger generations and enabled community members to engage in meaningful employment while maintaining a strong connection to Country. As these Ranger programs evolved and demonstrated effective outcomes, First Nations groups achieved notable reputational benefits and began participating in strategic planning with local, regional, and provincial government organisations. For example, BPAC's expertise in fire management prompted some non-Indigenous firefighters to adopt traditional methods, foregoing standard firefighting attire during controlled burns to reflect longstanding Indigenous practices. Furthermore, the enhanced reputation of First Nations communities has resulted in increased engagement by private landowners and community groups, who contract cultural burning services on a fee-for-service basis. This development contributes to a more reliable annual revenue stream for First Nations communities.

The collection and harvesting of forest wood products primarily take place during infrequent opportunities, such as when lands managed by rangers require selective removal of certain plant species or when authorisation is granted to utilise or repurpose timber resulting from major land-clearing activities, including road construction or maintenance. The sustainability of programs dependent on timber products is often

constrained by land tenure and jurisdictional considerations arising from property boundaries.

Ecotourism activities have been slow to develop. For First Nations communities the structure and criteria of government permitting systems is difficult to navigate. Past experience has proven to First Nations communities that little respect and consideration is applied to First Nations cultural values when colonial-minded entities initiate development of an “ecotourism” venture. First Nations voices reflect loss of cultural identity, mixing of cultural protocols and traditions, and a degrading of spiritual significance to Country. In addition, First Nations communities have experienced media misuse and theft of cultural IP (intellectual property).

Positive Impacts

- **Employment and Education:** Ranger programs and cultural burning activities have created employment opportunities and educational pathways for younger generations. These programs help community members connect with Country and develop skills that are valuable both culturally and economically.
- **Reputational Gains:** Successful implementation of these programs has led to reputational gains for First Nations communities. This has resulted in increased recognition and respect from local, regional, and provincial governmental organisations, as well as private landowners.
- **Fee-for-Service Opportunities:** The positive outcomes of these programs have led to the development of fee-for-service arrangements, providing a reliable source of annual revenue for First Nations communities.
- **Community Connection:** Activities such as cultural burning and eco-tourism have strengthened community connections and promoted the transmission of traditional knowledge across generations.

Negative Impacts

- **Resource Limitations:** Limited resources at the corporation level have hindered the ability to seize opportunities and fully develop programs.
- **Jurisdictional Boundaries:** Western-developed land tenure and jurisdictional boundaries have negatively impacted project development and outcomes, creating challenges for accessing and managing Country.
- **Cultural Disrespect:** The tourism industry, being highly colonial-driven and bureaucratic, has often shown a lack of respect for First Nations cultural values

and spiritual significance. This has led to the misuse and theft of cultural intellectual property.

- **Biosecurity Risks:** Increased foot traffic from eco-tourism activities has raised biosecurity risks, threatening the health of Country.

Social Acceptance and Perceptions

There is broad consensus among First Nations communities that the development and maintenance of Ranger programs, Cultural Burning initiatives, and ecotourism activities positively influence social structures, community members, and shared values. Feedback consistently demonstrates that when communities are provided with opportunities, resources, and effective leadership and governance, individuals experience greater prosperity and well-being, crime rates decrease, assistance programs remain robust and well-funded, and people are empowered to find purpose and achieve success.

- **Recognition of Traditional Knowledge:** There is a strong need for Western culture to recognise and respect Traditional Owner knowledge. Partnerships are critical for accessing Country and conducting healing activities.
- **Balancing Economic Goals:** While economic gains are important, there is a need to balance them with cultural values and community wellbeing.
- **Technology and Knowledge Integration:** Blending Western and First Nations knowledge systems, along with the use of technology, can lead to positive outcomes for Care for Country initiatives.

Overall, the report underscores the importance of respectful partnerships, resource allocation, and the recognition of First Nations knowledge and cultural values in achieving sustainable and positive community impacts.

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Appendices

Workshop 1

Participants

Two separate corporations met on communal Country, Bunya Mountains, to participate in the workshop. Bunya Peoples Aboriginal Corporation (BPAC) and Butchulla Native Title Aboriginal Corporation (BNTAC). Representatives for these two corporations are voices for (are connected with) 5 separate First Nations groups.

Circular Bioeconomies discussed

The current economies discussed were common to both corporations and included Ranger Care for Country, Cultural burning, and ecotourism programs. The corporations categorised Ranger Care for Country activities into three separate areas of focus:

- Forest Harvesting – largely built on restoring Country to pre-colonial conditions
- Residue Use – cultural artefact development
- Harvesting non-timber products (both) is related to “bush tucker” tours, but includes a marine Country healing program as well for BNTAC only

Ranger Care for Country Program

The collection / harvesting of forest wood products is mainly through rare opportunities where areas managed by rangers require culling or thinning of certain wood products, or there is permission to use / repurpose wood products through larger projects such as road building or land development activities. There is an imprinted obligation to Country that First Nations people will only take what is needed for family. This instinctive value stems from being traditional custodians of the land and naturally inherited knowledge of sustainability and Care for Country. Considering this mentality, running a profitable circular economy using wood products is a challenging concept as this would create a situation of First Nations groups either going against their inherited morals, or creating a plantation of species to use which would in-turn create a displacement situation where native plants and animals are eliminated in favour of areas with exotic or non-native species which creates and maintains an unhealthy Country situation.

"More opportunity to work with Country, leads to more education opportunities"

"Balance Country need for culling resources, comes full circle - shows the old ways and how we function"

"I can be part of change, even if I won't see it happen"

"Country was never told we were taken away, so it continued to grow unmanaged and now it is overgrown"

Cultural Burning Program

The lack of fire management in Bunya Country was a key factor in establishing a Ranger Group. This group operates independently of Native Title but is guided by Traditional Owners with ties to the Bunya Mountains. Consultation with BPAC revealed concerns among Traditional Owners regarding the increase of invasive species related to limited fire management. BPAC facilitated discussions about fire behaviour based on Traditional Owner knowledge of local soils and vegetation, and considered developing a strategy to collaborate with stakeholders.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism activities have been slow to develop. For First Nations groups the structure and criteria of government permitting systems is difficult to navigate. Past experience has proven to First Nations People that little respect and consideration is applied to First Nation's cultural values when colonial minded entities initiate development of an "ecotourism" venture. First Nations voices reflect loss of cultural identity, mixing of cultural protocols and traditions, and a degrading of spiritual significance to Country. In addition, First Nations have experienced media misuse and theft of cultural IP (intellectual property).

Community Impacts

The following is a collection of positive and negative community impacts discussed:

- Western culture developed land tenure jurisdictional boundaries have negative impacts on project development and outcomes
- Colonial view on Traditional Owner knowledge of fire behaviour has softened over time and allowed Traditional Owners to lead fire management planning and strategies
- More opportunities to access Country creates opportunities for generational education exchange
- Country managed through traditional use of fire leads to Country that is more resilient to biosecurity attacks
- Limited opportunities for mobs to access Country can block community growth
- Elders are seeing positive change
- Reputational gains can lead to development of "fee-for-service" programs generating reliable annual revenue
- Limited resources at the corporation level limits ability to seize opportunities
- Care for Country activity leads to connecting with community
- Guaranteed long term access to Country develops business opportunities like native plant nursery operation and ownership

- Frequent shutdown of forest product harvesting programs leads to negative impacts on assistance opportunities for younger generations which in turn lead to higher crime rate observed amongst youth
- Lack of respect and consideration of First Nations cultural values and spiritual significance
- Tourism industry is extremely colonial-driven and bureaucratic
- Colonial views can be altered through First Nation designed and managed ecotourism opportunities
- Ecotourism can lead to increases in biosecurity risks
- Western cultures gain deeper understanding of First Nations cultural diversity and values through ecotourism

Social Acceptance and Perceptions

“If we keep learning and sharing, leads to generational sharing, which in turn keeps us going, ya know”

“People are living better, getting ready for work, weren’t using drugs”

“Activity leads to connecting with community and develops generational engagement”

The following social perceptions were discussed:

- Need the western culture to recognise Traditional Owner knowledge
- Partnerships are critical to getting on Country and conducting healing activities
- Strong need and desire to break down social, cultural, environmental barriers
- Mindset should not just be about economic gains
- First Nations mobs reputation is built on positive outcomes and can lead to development of “fee-for-service” programs
- Technology can empower spiritual growth
- Technology can reduce barriers
- Blending western and First Nations knowledge systems can lead to positive Care for Country outcomes
- Barriers to growth are people, resources, and access
- Government needs to educate First Nations on tourism industry and measures for success
- There needs to be dedicated spaces for First Nations groups to conduct tours
- First Nations mobs / corporations need investors for ecotourism opportunities
- When developing tours, there is a great need to find common ground that supports tour values that benefit everybody

Addendum – BNTAC Comments during draft report review

“BNTAC has achieved more cultural and economic benefits because of our Native Title Determination. A Native Title determination provides traditional owners a voice and a seat at the table. The paper mentions Native Title is the recognition of customary law through a ‘bundle of rights’. This is true, however, those bundle of rights, are still yet to be utilised to its fullest potential. However, regarding a legal rights both cultural and statutory as a result of our Determination, this has facilitated more opportunities like employment, income (both through grant funding and fee for service). It has also provided BNTAC the opportunity to hold agencies to account regarding their obligations to ensure cultural heritage is protected, this may be a challenge at times, but nonetheless, we are still able to have our say and put our position in writing. One of the biggest aspects of Native Title is the impact on our native title interests, which is referred to as “Future Acts”. Future Acts provides traditional owners with the opportunity to negotiate Indigenous Land Use Agreements, compensation for loss of cultural rights. ILUA’s also provide BNTAC with the opportunity to negotiate Relationship Agreements for additional benefits. ILUA’s are not only beneficial economically but also culturally and environmentally and provides opportunities for protecting country that may be over and above any legislative requirements under the Cultural Heritage Act. Most of these ILUA’S are negotiated in good faith and with good will from the many parties we have dealt with.” (Veronica Bird, BNTAC General Manager, 2025).

Figure 5 - Workshop 1 participants.



Workshop 2

Participants

Two separate corporations participated at two different locations: Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation in Mossman, Qld and Dulabed and Malanbarra Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation in Gordonvale, Qld.

Circular Bioeconomies discussed

Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation

Green Economies (Clean Energy program)

The emergence of the Green Economy and Global Sustainable Development Goals represents an opportunity to combine market-based solutions with caring for Country. These projects will support members of the oldest continually surviving culture to protect the oldest continually surviving rainforest in the world. These projects will create employment and economic development opportunities through holistic projects that combine reforestation of properties owned and purchased by Jabalbina with social and cultural outcomes. Jabalbina have already secured funding for the next 5 years and have employed Bama (First Nations People) in the Foresters team to begin a carbon sequestration project on a property in the Daintree. Planning and negotiations are under way to expand this program. Jabalbina is working to develop a Rainforest Restoration Alliance to support this work into the future. This focus on developing the “green economy” will facilitate a number of other strategies to support the Eastern Kuku Yalanji clans. These strategies include:

- Moving back to Country – develop financially accessible housing solutions, expanding community development to support people returning to Country, establishing healing / community centres on freehold land to enable community to reconnect with and enjoy Bubu and Jalun (Country and sea)
- Land gifted to Jabalbina – develop the philanthropic partnerships program and ensure supporters of Jabalbina can donate to Jabalbina. These lands are assessed for best purposes (i.e. carbon credits, biodiversity credits, plantation development, agriculture and ranching)
- Renewable / Green energy – develop a green energy network to deliver low cost energy to extremely remote communities

Youth justice – Junior Ranger program

The program is available to Bama and/or Torres Strait Islander people who are involved with or at risk of involvement of Youth Justice. Jabalbina On Country Healing Camps engage and awaken the cultural and spiritual awareness of the roles and

responsibilities each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and youth inherently possess within them and is a fundamental part of building a healthy cultural society.

Ranger and Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) program

Vital to the program is Jabalbina's commitment to employ 14 First Nations rangers and 1 sea skipper. The work plan was developed in consultation with traditional owners and Elders, encompassing cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, and community empowerment. This holistic approach yields diverse outcomes, including land conservation, biodiversity protection, cultural revitalisation, habitat restoration, fire management, species monitoring, and cultural heritage preservation. Jabalbina community embrace a program that goes beyond conservation, fostering employment, skills development, and intergenerational knowledge transfer within the Eastern Kuku Yalanji Clan groups. The program serves as a catalyst for sustainable land management, biodiversity conservation, and the resurgence of indigenous practices, ensuring a harmonious balance between cultural heritage and environmental sustainability for present and future generations.

The Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) and Ranger programs are funded by the Australian and Queensland Governments and play a central role in supporting cultural heritage and environmental management. By 2024 there were fifteen (15) Yalanji Bama employed through these projects with bases at Mossman and Ayton Qld. Ranger work programs are based on IPA Plans developed for each of the three main Eastern Kuku Yalanji clan groups Nyungkal, Yalanji and Jalunji. Eastern Yalanji and Jabalbina have been working to combine the three IPA plans into one overarching plan that covers all Yalanji Bubu and Jalun. Work programs are reviewed through annual clan meetings involving Elders.

Ecotourism

Jabalbina developed a tourism strategic plan in 2020. The strategy was designed to support all Eastern Kuku Yalanji Bama to engage with tourism across all Bubu and Julun. The plan identified the development of a tourism hub as central to supporting existing and new Eastern Kuku Yalanji tourism operators. Funding has been received from the State and Federal Governments to build a visitor centre and related tourism products and services. This project will create another employment pathway and business incubator and mentoring program and that will not only make a strong contribution to the visitor experience in the region but also social, cultural, and economic outcomes for Eastern Kuku Yalanji people.

"Your investment helps us keep our focus on the core values"

"Living on Country leads to better health, better education, better employment"

Traditional Owners aspirations - "Get back on Country, we want people to thrive on Country for their wellbeing and economically"

Dulabed and Malanbarra Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation

Ranger Program

Ranger activities include fire management, cultural area protection and management, and Caring for Country. Weed management is an important part of taking care of Country. The Rangers work alongside government entities like Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) in maintaining shared areas. Rangers are currently securing Certificate level 3 in Conservation and Ecosystem Management. This accreditation credential is establishing Ranger's competency to conduct wildlife surveys using camera traps. Rangers are the front face for Dulabed and Malanbarra Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation and regularly engage with mob and the greater community conducting NAIDOC celebrations, school visits, and Welcome to Country ceremonies. Through the Care for Country activities caring for Cultural Heritage areas and artefacts engage generations and facilitates cultural exchange. Dulabed and Malanbarra Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation has set up a Cultural Heritage Knowledge system to record data on sites, artefacts, and stories.

"All we want to do is enjoy Country and honour our Elders"

"This has been slow.... very slow.... and we have lost a lot of Old people. I can remember my grandparents fighting for the land we still fight for"

"The river is our story, we are all connected to the waters"

Community Impacts

- In extremely remote areas, "No mob is living on Country as there are limited services" (electricity)
- Positive outcome through the Australian 'Disaster Resilience Program'
- Rebuilding energy networks to incorporate solar, battery, and hydro energy, power buyback scheme with Ergon
- Enhanced 365 day (reliability) security (of energy) for extreme rural areas
- Community receive 'energy purchase cards (pre-paid debit cards to buy power)
- Health services benefits for diabetes patients (reliable dialysis equipment operation)
- "Everything we earn goes back to the people, everything we earn goes back to Country ensuring economic freedom and equality"
- Drone operator certificate criteria is mostly difficult to reach
- Resources are limited
- Partnering with Jabalbina- "Your investment helps us keep our focus on the core values"
- "Our river is under threat, all them houses are pumping our river"

- Public Liability, Indemnity, and other insurance criteria are great goals for mobs to attain
- Government system needs to recognise, consider, and incorporate culturally appropriate awareness of the culture values exploited for existing and upcoming permits issued
- Western culture has impacted Traditional Owners and how they react with each other - outcome is now Traditional Owners take a very guarded position when working with each other
- Public liability issues limiting capacity to work on Country
- "Looking over our shoulder situation prohibits autonomy on Care for Country programs"
- With environmentally protected areas, 17 ILUAs, management frameworks, vegetation management frameworks, planning schemes and government acts, 300,000ha turns into 3000ha of good living areas"
- "The Native Title system has broken us"
- "Mobs have weaponised government regulations to use against each other to better themselves"

Social Acceptance and Perceptions

- "We need to employ local Yalinji people to operate the ecotours / clean energy systems"
- "We work on 30,000 year cycle not 25 yrs (as based on western culture criteria)"
- "Western culture supportive, but skeptical of rehabilitation as colonial view is "good program, but not in my backyard"
- Use of technology has reversed position of power when dealing with colonial government requests for information
- "Restoration of Country does lead to healthier spirits"
- Grant-based funding for salary pay is not comparable to colonial job framework pay scales
- Philanthropic donations are the only way to augment "life by grants" scenario
- Western culture fears their property rights will be degraded
- "We want people to thrive economically and socially, and we can do this by closing the economic gap through our programs"
- "Under immense weight of government regulations Dulabed and Malandbarra Yidinji has done really well to maneuver and guide us to where we are"
- "The river is our story, we are all connected to the waters"
- Developed 'Cultural Camp' for younger generational education
- Developing a language program to help younger generation learn Traditional Owner language through cultural values identification

- Bureaucracy limits growth and acceptance and tolerance
- Dulabed and Malandbarra Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation have established a good working relationship with land management agencies at the state and federal level.
- Growing relationships through demonstrations of capabilities
- Need support in developing and accessing upskilling programs
- For mobs to succeed, more access to and availability of training programs
- "Aspirations have never changed but priority has to because of changing government. Our lore never changes but their law changes everyday"
- "We aren't looking for commercial tourism, we offer a genuine experience, it is too emotional, we would have too many people crying because we share so deeply"

Figure 6 - Workshop 2 participants.



Figure 7 -Workshop 2 participants.



Workshop 3

Participants

Korrawinga Aboriginal Corporation in Hervey Bay, Qld and Butchulla Indigenous Industries Group (BIIG).

Circular Bioeconomies discussed

Scrub Hill Community Farm –

“In the past First Nations People were not allowed to get jobs, were not allowed to have self-determination”

Scrub hill is not Native Title run, but managed by Korrawinga Aboriginal Corporation which is inclusive of all First Nations People. Scrub Hill Community Farm used to employ 250 people and was supported as a Community Development Program. In 1960's First Nations People were not allowed to own their land either so Scrub Hill Community Farm gave First Nations People a sense of connection to Country.

BIIG Care for Country – BIIG is a corporate business structure that manages programs to augment the mission of Scrub Hill Farm. BIIG has developed a positive working relationship with a local plantation manager and BIIG stresses “working relationship with plantation manager is the greatest outcome for First Nations People employed with BIIG and for those in the local community”. BIIG can develop vegetation residue recycle programs that provide economic, cultural, spiritual, and social benefits. Establishing a working relationship with the plantation manager, BIIG can collect culturally important native vegetation seed, germinate and tend in their nursery, and provide seedlings and immature plants for revegetation projects that protect and enhance cultural values through these activities. These activities have led to the potential development of plant oil distilling strategy.

“Walking on Country is Caring for Country”

“We had a vision, we needed to get our people working back on Country, so we worked for 4 weeks with no pay, we booked up fuel and food just to get our people on the ground. Then we got our first paychecks, and we are still here today, 6 years later”

“What is the most important thing? land, land is the most important thing. Without the land we have nothing, land is the most important thing”

“Forests are a part of who we are”

“We see more than just planting and harvesting trees, we see spirit, we see culture, we see our ancestors”

"We are making a change, not just for community, but for the land and we are doing it right for our old people"

"You can only teach our ways by being on Country"

Community Impacts

- Generational knowledge exchange - not only with old to young, but also with many older people that have never "gone out on Country".
- There are many older First Nations People that haven't experienced their own Country
- Access to Country through the plantation manager has strengthened generation connections and facilitated "myth-busting" (people of different generations having untrue ideas or beliefs about how plants and animals act on Country)
- Colonial government entities supported First Nations People getting jobs within the system but shied away from supporting First Nations independent job / business development
- BIIG independent business aspirations "is to upskill employees so they can take knowledge back to their communities and develop businesses"
- "Young fellas are only seeing bad things like drugs and stealing cars, they need to see these opportunities"
- Alcohol and drug issues are still running through families today
- Cultural values are being destroyed by land clearing activities on Country
- Pine vegetation has chemical properties which can negatively affect water quality which leads to degradation of cultural values
- Native Title regulations could be a detriment to BIIG operations due to the establishment of Native Title boundaries
- Current tourism industry has had negative impacts for First Nations communities as opportunities for ecotourism establishment favoured colonial entities
- Working on Country leads to recovery of artefacts
- Working on Country leads to teaching opportunities to 'westerners'

Social Acceptance and Perceptions

- World Heritage designation development in Australia included First Nations concerns
- "We are going to do something to change people's lives"
- Access to Country improves generation connectedness
- "We and the land will always be one"

- "My people come first, money is not the first priority for business"
- "It is the small things that matter, even a couple of words make you feel better"
- "Local and provincial colonial government pressured First Nations businesses to collapse due to perceived competition risks"
- "We see more than just planting and harvesting trees, we see spirit, we see culture, we see our ancestors"
- "We are making a change, not just for community, but for the land and we are doing it right for our old people"
- "You can only teach our ways by being on Country"
- First Nations People having active and gainful employment has led to a perceived reduction in racism
- "Working on Country (plantation forests) connects people to spiritual values"

Figure 8 - Workshop 3 participants.

