

# Building Mutually Beneficial Partnerships

FIRST NATIONS  
CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Good practice guidance**



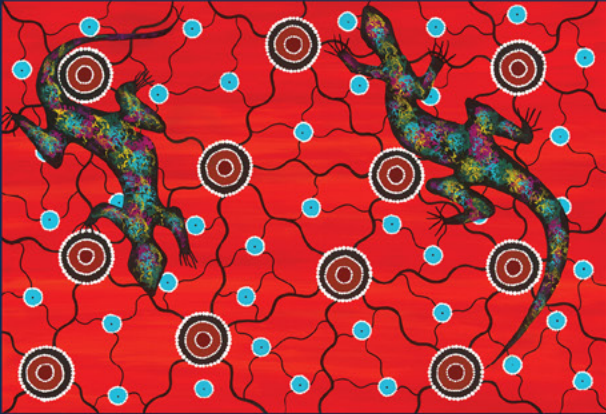
The Centre for  
Volunteering

# Contents

<b>Artwork Details</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Acknowledgement of Country</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>About</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>First contact and how to engage with First Nations Peoples</b>	<b>9</b>
Useful tips	9
<b>How to find details on what Country you're on</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Acknowledgement and Welcome to Country Protocols</b>	<b>10</b>
Useful tips	10
<b>How to build partnerships</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Working Respectfully on Country together</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Initiating Projects</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Cultural Load</b>	<b>12</b>
Useful tips	12
<b>More information</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>12</b>







## Artwork Details

Title: *Country*

Artist: Graham Toomey  
Wurrumunga Clan of Wiradjuri Nation/  
Wongaibon Nation

About: *Country holds a spirit which is old and at all times this spirit heals me, protects me and guides me. When I'm on Country, I feel this old spirit speaking to me and singing to me. The Goanna is the Wiradjuri's people 'totem' which connects us to our creators, ancestors and to our Identity. The Goanna's protect us and guide us through life.*

This artwork captures male and female Goanna's wandering across Country, ensuring all is well and the people are safe. The artwork depicts the colour of the earth along with ancient tracks, which connects clans to each other. The artwork also features old water holes where spirits linger, welcoming those who wish to drink from these old water holes, once they have paid respects and asked for permission.



# Acknowledgement of Country

**We acknowledge Country and pay our respects to the Traditional Owners across Australia. We pay our respect to them and to Elders past and present. We acknowledge the self-determination, resilience, and strength that provides inspiration, care, and support for Aboriginal communities. We also recognise that Aboriginal Peoples have and have always had a strong connection to Country and that their culture is a living Culture that provides richness and cultural value to their communities.**



**Wiradjuri Country**

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# Acknowledgements



## Barbara O'Neill

Barbara O'Neill CEO, is a proud Dunghutti Woman, raised on Bidjigal Country in NSW. Barbara has worked for eight years for a community organisation as the Aboriginal Caseworker and as a qualified Indigenous Trauma and Recovery Practitioner. Many of her clients have been Care Leavers. Barbara also sits on the Walama List headed by Justice Warwick Hunt of the NSW District Court. Her capacity is as a Respected Older Person. Barbara has been published in the NSW Jurisprudence Magazine. The subject was Trauma, and the work is now in the New Judge's Handbook and can be found as an Academic article in various search engines.

Barbara has a Bachelor of Indigenous Knowledge majoring in Aboriginal Health and a Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Trauma Recovery and Practice as well as a Diploma in Counselling. Barbara is currently engaged in a Master's in counselling. Building journeys of understanding for the non-Indigenous communities via evidence based and trauma informed practice is a passion for Barbara.

## Graham Toomey

Graham Toomey is a freshwater man from the Wurrumunga Clan of the Wiradjuri nation and also of Wongaibon Nation. Graham has been the CEO at Gunawirra for the last five years, which is an Aboriginal community led organisation in Rozelle. Graham has been with Gunawirra since 2010. In 2010, Graham was Gunawirra's cultural advisor and cultural facilitator who educated and guided staff while also working with the board and management on creating a safe and culturally appropriate place with policies and processors. Gunawirra is supporting over 25 mainly Aboriginal preschools across Sydney and NSW through health and educational programs. Graham has a Diploma of Aboriginal studies and is a practicing visual artist, designer and consultant.

Graham has strong community ties with the Redfern and inner west Aboriginal communities as well as rural NSW. Graham has been working as a cultural and art consultant, advisor, facilitator across Sydney for over twenty years and has a wealth of Aboriginal cultural knowledge, contacts and experience.

## The Centre for Volunteering

### Zac Harold

Manager – Sector Development and Engagement

### Ben Hillier

Senior Manager – Research, Policy and Advocacy





# Glossary

**Please be mindful that all people and communities are different. Some communities will have different preferences and meanings for some terms. It is important to ask the individuals and communities that you are working with what terms to use to refer to people, places, and things.**

## **First Nations peoples:**

'First Nations peoples' is a term used to represent peoples who are Indigenous to a place. In these resources, First Nations peoples is used specifically to refer to the First Nations people of Australia and is adjacent as a term to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A range of different terms are used in different Communities, including 'First Nations', 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal', and/or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders', and different people prefer different terms. Throughout these resources, 'First Nations', 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander(s)' and 'Indigenous Australians' are used interchangeably. This reflects how these communities refer to each other and themselves. It is vital that you always consult with the Elders of a community when you are working or volunteering in a community and ask people how they would like to be addressed. Be mindful that some people do not like certain terms being used to refer to them (e.g. 'Indigenous' is often not preferred because of its association with government labelling).

## **Country:**

'Country' refers to an area of land or sea on which Aboriginal peoples have a traditional or spiritual association. It has a broad meaning which can cover Land, Area, Connectedness to Place/Sea/Sky/Land/Animals/Plants, Lore, and Community.

## **Reconciliation:**

'Reconciliation' refers to the ongoing journey to create a positive and constructive relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples.

In a just, equitable, and reconciled Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will have the same life chances and choices as non-Aboriginal children, and the length and quality of a person's life will not be determined by their racial background.

## **Nation:**

'Nation' refers to a culturally distinct group of people from a culturally defined area of land.

## **Kinship:**

'Kinship' means identity and belonging in/through a complex system of social connectedness that covers responsibilities, roles, and reciprocal bonds. Within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations there are clan groups and within clan groups there are family groups. Kinship is at the heart of Aboriginal culture which links people to one another.

## **Elders:**

'Elders' are highly respected Aboriginal peoples held in esteem by their communities for their wisdom, cultural knowledge and community service. They have gained recognition as a custodian of knowledge and lore. Age alone does not determine whether someone is recognised as an Elder in their community.

## **Lore:**

'Lore' refers to the responsibilities, customs, practices, and cultural knowledge that the Aboriginal peoples learned from the Dreamtime. Aboriginal lore was passed across the generations through knowledge, songs, stories, and dance and it governs all aspects of traditional life.

## **Mob:**

'Mob' is a colloquial term identifying a group of Aboriginal peoples associated with a particular place or Country. It is used to connect and identify who an Aboriginal person is and where they are from. Mob can refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family, relatives, and/or Community.

## **Community:**

A First Nations 'Community' contains people who work together to advocate and support each other to maintain their Community. The community shares and builds a sense of cultural identity and belonging that ensures the community respect each other's differences and values. The same sense of belonging in community is what connects people to the many relationships they develop. Community Elders and leaders within community, work together with community to make decisions that best serves and represent the community.

## **Culture:**

'Culture' is a broad term. It includes cultural knowledge, traditional practices, ways of understanding the world, and methods of expression such as language, celebrations, and events. Culture also relates closely to Country. It is also best to avoid using the term 'lost' when referring to Culture (and/or language) as it passes over the current First Nations cultures and the survival of current First Nations peoples.

## **Sorry Business:**

'Sorry Business' refers to the process of the whole community coming together to share grief and the wider period of cultural practices

following the death of a community member. This allows communities and individuals to mourn the loss properly. This period can last days, weeks, and even months.

#### **Welcome to Country:**

A 'Welcome to Country' is delivered by Traditional Owners, (or First Nations peoples who have been given permission from Traditional Owners) to welcome visitors to their Country. It is a protocol which welcomes visitors a safe passage and protection of their spiritual being during their journey while on the Country of a specific First Nations people group.

#### **Acknowledgement of Country:**

An 'Acknowledgement of Country' is an opportunity for anyone (First Nations Person(s) and/or non-Indigenous person(s)) to show respect for Traditional Owners of Country and the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country.

#### **Self Determination:**

'Self-determination' is the ability to have power and control over your own affairs. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, this means being able to make decisions that affect Community and being able to practice culture.

Self-determination is about being empowered and having freedom and dignity. It also involves recognising and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as First Nations Peoples with their own decision-making and knowledge systems. Self-determination for Indigenous people is a human right recognised by the United Nations.

#### **Stolen Generations:**

'The Stolen Generations' refers to a period in Australia's history where Aboriginal children were removed from their families through government policies. This happened from the mid-1800s to the 1970s.

These children were taken by the police; from their homes; on their way to or from school. They were placed in over 480 institutions, adopted or fostered by non-Indigenous people and often subjected to abuse. The children were denied all access to their culture, they were not allowed to speak their language and they were punished if they did. The impacts of this are still being felt today.

There are currently more than 17,000 Stolen Generations survivors in Australia. Over one third of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are their descendants. In Western Australia almost half

of the population have Stolen Generation links.

The children, grandchildren and future generations of the Stolen Generations may experience disconnection from their extended families and culture and have high levels of stress. This creates a cycle of trauma, known as Intergenerational Trauma, where the impact is passed from one generation to the next."

#### **Sovereignty:**

For First Nations peoples, sovereignty is a spiritual meaning that restrains them to their ancestral lands, (Country or "mother earth"). First Nations peoples were born from their Country and remain attached and connected at all times.

First Nations peoples were self-governing with their own ancestral laws, social structures and systems in place. Sovereignty was never ceded by First Nations peoples, meaning they never consented or agreed to give their country to the invaders, or agreed to live under someone else's laws.

*"... since spiritual belief is completely integrated into human daily activity, the powers that guide and direct the earth are believed to exist with all human life".  
The first owners of the land were ancestral beings whose "creativity and incorporation into the land provides the basis for our sovereignty".*

Aileen Moreton-Robinson, in Jack Latimore, *Sydney Morning Herald*

#### **REFERENCES**

- Healing Foundation. *Who are the Stolen Generations?* Last accessed May 18, 2023.  
Latimore, Jack. *What's Indigenous sovereignty and can a Voice extinguish it?* *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 9, 2023. Last accessed May 18, 2023.

## About

These resources have been produced in partnership between Aunty Barbara O'Neill and Graham Toomey, and The Centre for Volunteering. Resource topics and insights have been informed by both The Centre for Volunteering's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group and non-Indigenous members of the NSW volunteering sector.

Developed through a co-design process with Aunty Barb and Graham, the resources seek to ensure that non-Indigenous volunteer-involving organisations are well placed to understand, support, engage and build strong relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

This information is designed to support people who coordinate, manage and lead volunteers in building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by providing introductory knowledge to better understand Culture, access reliable information and appropriately work with Community.

To build on these resources it is essential to continue to do the work of listening, learning and being an active supporter of Community. Transparency, honesty and being genuine are keys to long lasting relationships.

Non-Indigenous volunteer-involving organisations should look to build principles of Aboriginal self-determination into ways of working and program delivery. This includes ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are involved in program design and decision-making on services which affect them. Contact your local Aboriginal Community to gather information about your local area.



# First contact and how to engage with First Nations Peoples

Establishing respectful relationships between Aboriginal Peoples and non-Indigenous people is fundamental to working together. Relationships built on high levels of trust with a lack of prejudice and the growth of strong partnerships is a positive step towards reconciliation. You can show respect and build trust in these spaces by making sure you enter them informed about the people you are working with.

Be informed before building relationships with Knowledge-Holders you are engaging with and the history of the Community. Strong relationships will also be supported by ensuring you come ready to listen, learn, and protect the relationship.

## Useful tips

- When making contact with a First Nations person, ask politely “Where is your Country?”. This is culturally appropriate and can lead to that person properly identifying themselves.
- It’s important to understand that many First Nations peoples and their communities identify themselves differently eg. First Nations, Indigenous or Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. Once you have established which term they wish to be identified as, this can lead to a friendly beginning and potential partnership or relationship.
- Learn which Country you are on when working or visiting. Acknowledging the Country and its peoples is very respectful and shows you have cultural knowledge.



# How to find details on what Country you're on

Research [\*local Aboriginal Land Councils websites\*](#) and make contact with their staff before entering a Community. Look up local Aboriginal services, businesses and Community places to also find information which can also lead to establishing relationships. Find out as much information as possible before making contact. Don't be afraid to ask but be genuine and courteous at all times.

The [\*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands map\*](#) which is useful in finding the nations, but further research needs to be done to find local Country and its Community.



# Acknowledgement and Welcome to Country Protocols

An Acknowledgement of Country is a courteous and Cultural way to commence business with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. It should not be rushed or read from a piece of paper. As long as you are:

- Aware of the Country on which you are standing.
- Acknowledge the Elders Past and Present.
- Do not say and "Emerging Elders".
- Do not feel like an imposter.
- Feel the words that you are speaking, slowly Acknowledge and put feeling/sincerity into your Acknowledgement.

## Useful tips

- When meeting with First Nations peoples you can show respect by:
  - Acknowledging the Country you are on and the people you are meeting.
  - Ask them how they are today.
  - Be patient if it is an Older Community member.
  - If it is a professional setting privately thank an Aboriginal person to whom you are speaking for having you today. This changes any unconscious power dynamics that may be present.

## More information

If you want to learn more about Acknowledgement and Welcome to Country protocols we recommend checking out [\*Reconciliation Australia's\*](#) resource.







## How to build partnerships

When making first contact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their communities, there needs to be a warm, genuine feeling of respect and a friendly intent to work with people and communities. It's crucial that you immediately express your gratitude and willingness to listen, learn, and that you continue to value the cultural knowledge that is being shared.

Since colonisation, there has been a willingness to undermine and misuse Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander cultural knowledge and disrespect values and beliefs. First Nations peoples can be very cautious with white Australians because of the past, however this doesn't mean that friendly partnerships and relationships cannot be developed.

At all times, a high level of following the Community's lead is needed, as is a willingness to work together to achieve your mutual aims.

## Working Respectfully on Country together



You may believe that the project that you are bringing to Community is going to affect much needed support. However, the Community may not see it this way, the Community may have been waiting for this particular project for years from other services. Whether it is your organisation bringing in the project or someone else, the Community may be thinking that it is late and should have been done a long time ago.

The Community may often seem ungracious or unthankful by Western standards, by Aboriginal standards, the project may be small compensation for the stealing of Aboriginal Land.

For example, you may be sent to speak with a Community about healthy eating, this can often

go from request for a Partnership to a deep insult to the Community. For instance:

- The Community may have to travel very far to purchase fresh food.
- The Community may not have the resources to follow the food triangle.
- The Community may be traditional hunters and gatherers.
- This information may not be shared because of state imposed quotas.

Just because you and your organisation are passionate about a project doesn't mean the Community want or need it, and may leave the Community underwhelmed and resistant.

## Initiating Projects

If you find that the projects you are wanting to initiate do not allow time to work with or consult with Community, do not promote, support or amplify First Nations peoples; consider if more work is needed through consultation and project strategy prior to initiation.

If there are still gaps in relation to the above, consider if the project is in the best interest of the Community.





# Cultural Load

Always be mindful of the Cultural load that Aboriginal peoples have to carry.

## Useful tips

- Do not approach Aboriginal people during Sorry Business.
- Be prepared for cancellations due to Sorry Business.
- Always be well prepared if you are doing any research on a Community.
- ALWAYS contact an Elder first.
- Be prepared to have to abandon some of your ideas if the Community says no.
- Do not try to talk them around.
- If they think there is a better reason later on they will contact you.
- Talking of Sorry Business, Stolen Generations, loss and genocide will always deeply affect Community.
- Always have an exit strategy if the project involves any of these issues.
- Always end with an Afternoon Tea or meal. Always check back in.

Remember, building relationships and partnerships does take time, so you must be patient and respectful to build the trust needed to be able to work together. Building trust is the key. Once trust is established, a friendly and mutual working partnership will be operating and can be maintained.

## More information

### Community First Development

have created a First Nations approach to Community development framework. If you're interested in the best approaches to take, we recommend this framework.

Another example of a Community led initiative is from Tribal Warrior Aboriginal Corporation and their program with South Sydney Police Area Command.

## REFERENCES

AIATSIS. *Map of Indigenous Australia*, last accessed May 5, 2023.

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NSWALC. *Find your ALC*, last accessed May 5, 2023.

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