

Climate Change Adaptation and Human Movement in Western Australia: Partnering with Indigenous Australians Through Visual and Legal Mediums

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Western Australia is a low-lying desert state with the majority of its population living in coastal cities. It is particularly vulnerable to climate change's effects constituting sea level rise, desertification, and extreme weather events, having to adapt through sustainable land use, movement of farming areas, and human movement away from the coasts. Western Australia also has a history of colonialism, genocide, dispossession, and forced removal from land for indigenous Australians. In late 2020, Lillian Robb was travelling through Western Australia with an indigenous elder; Dr Noel Nannup of the Whadjuk Noongar People. He explained his hope for Western Australia: that indigenous community will be included in climate change adaptation, that their stories and knowledge of the land can be of assistance, and that a partnership with indigenous community prevents the next stage of human movement from constituting further acts of dispossession for his people. The Whadjuk people have been moving in response to climatic changes for hundreds of generations and continue to share that knowledge through stories. They remember song lines and recognise sacred sites that are now underwater and have adapted to the changing climate moving inland in patterns directed by local 'lore' and 'dreaming'. Indigenous peoples are the caretakers and stewards of the land. They safeguard the knowledge of the region, and their rich cultures are shaped by, dependent upon, and inseparable from the land on which they have lived. This project acknowledges that indigenous peoples have a right to participate in climate change adaptation and valuable insights to offer in these discussions. It surmises that solutions produced without their input will be, at best, unresponsive and at worst maladaptive in further dispossessing indigenous peoples.

This work views climate change and climate induced movement in Western Australia as a peace concern. This is in keeping with views of the international community. Climate change is considered a threat to international peace and security as evidenced by its incorporation into the work of the UN Security Council, with climate induced human movement forming a central element. Emphasis is placed on indigenous peoples as particularly vulnerable to climate change.

Process

This project aims at furthering the vision of Dr Noel Nannup. It will involve a series of workshops occurring over several days during a yearly planned local summit conducted in association with Danjoo Koorliny. Danjoo Koorliny translates to 'walking together' and is a project designed and led by indigenous leaders in association with the Centre for Social Impact and the University of Western Australia. Danjoo Koorliny summits bring together indigenous and white Australians to shape a future influenced by both perspectives and parallelly run initiatives that work on law reform, government engagement, and community development. Our workshops will consist of 'co-design workshops', 'yarning circles', and proposal forming directed by Dr Noel Nannup and other elders, with the assistance of partners from Danjoo Koorliny having expertise in indigenous engagement using these methods. The workshops will be held during the summit utilising the available resources and support. From this starting point, the ideas and inputs arising from the workshops will be used for two concrete outcomes: a policy report (written by Lillian) and a documentary film (directed by Maevia)

Impacts and Outcomes

The primary object of this project is one of lending voice to indigenous elders and opening up a discussion. This opening up of space is our first impact and will allow for further and future engagement.

Documentary Film: The documentary film will be divided into five sections: one long format film and four short films. The first will be a feature-length documentary (60 min or more) following Dr. Noel Nannup, visualizing connection to land and understandings of environmental transition vis-à-vis climate change. Indigenous oral histories will guide the narration of the film and will develop around Dr. Noel Nannup and different leading and auxiliary characters, depending on their willingness to be filmed. The recording of the event – the yarning circles and the workshops – will allow for visual and epistemological renderings of indigenous knowledge and community efforts to actively participate in the decision towards climate change adaptation, centring indigenous voices and agency. Further filmed interviews will be held 'on country', meaning on important indigenous land, traditionally home to the elders. The chosen property is known as 'Nowanup'. It is an area of land that is co-run between indigenous and white carers for projects relating to sustainable land use, decolonisation initiatives and the bringing together of indigenous and white perspectives. This new setting will allow further filmed interactions and engagement with the elders, providing further understandings of potential collaborations with indigenous communities. The film will be submitted for screening in diverse film

festivals in both Australia and Europe in order to open national and international discussions about indigenous knowledge as crucial to integrate into climate change adaptation policies, politics and discourse.

The series of four short documentaries (15min) will be created for the community to use throughout their own advocacy work as the community frequently communicates through the sharing of recorded stories – often through schools and universities. Importantly, visual content is generally placed on governmental information pages for pedagogy related to civil society, as well as on tourist information displays at all local parks and conservation areas, in national art galleries, at conferences, in governmental events, and a range of community run events. It is unusual in Western Australia to engage with a topic without some form of presentation expressing indigenous views to be present. It is our aim that these 15min films will be made to suit the needs of the community and are utilisable for a range of communication needs relating to climate change displacement.

Written Report: The policy report will be written in the format required by local parliaments and legislatures for consideration during policy formation. It will additionally be adapted for use by the community if and when needed for any future policy work. Additionally, the work will be publishable in local law journals relating to climate impact planning.

Cultural Considerations

The nature of the project envisages that its long-term impacts and outcomes will be shaped by the indigenous elders present. In indigenous engagement, it is vital that indigenous voices are centred in directing the work. This is both important due to the need to restructure power, but also because indigenous community members often shut down and do not engage without this ability. As such, the project is aware of and willing to shift and change to adapt to views of the subjects. Additionally, consciousness of visual representation is highly important in this project. Among the Whadjuk people, it is prohibited to show on film or in photos those who have died. Thus, shots will be designed such that only one person is visually present in the frame allowing the footage to be shown later. The four 15min documentaries, designed for this purpose, each will present one indigenous member such that, if a death occurs, the remaining films may still be shown.

Positionality

As two non-indigenous individuals, the positionality of us as project leaders is vital. Lillian Robb (Current MA in International Law at the Graduate Institute) was exposed extensively to indigenous culture during her childhood: her family spent large periods in the outback where Lillian often accompanied indigenous tour guides learning all she could from them as they took tourists through sacred sites. She has the ability to sit, listen, and understand in these contexts. Lillian has continued to work with indigenous Australians, being employed by: the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia; in a native title claims office; in indigenous water policy; as defence council in racial discrimination matters; and on projects in collaboration with Danjoo Koorliny. Lillian is currently commencing pursuit of a PhD on indigenous engagement in climate adaptation in Oceania.

Maevia Griffiths (2019-2021 Development Studies MA alumni and current Screen Documentary filmmaking MA student at Goldsmiths University London) has made the documentary *Elles les (in)visibles* recounting the stories of four undocumented women domestic workers in Geneva - selected for screening at the *FIFOG*, *FIFDH*, *Goldsmiths Human Rights Film Festival* (See trailer here <https://vimeo.com/584831307>). Maevia uses filmmaking as a medium to visually engage with social science research and works with vulnerable populations in diverse cultural settings. Aware of the power dynamics involved in research and filmmaking, Maevia integrates visual anthropological perspectives to ensure that the recording is carried out with great respect for the needs and beliefs of the subjects.

Partnerships

The interviews operate through a partnership with Nowanup and key organiser Rodney Safstrom. Rodney has a close relationship with many of the elders, and is himself an expert on indigenous engagement on land use issues. We have also partnered with Danjoo Koorliny: the workshops and future film screenings will be included in the Danjoo Koorliny calendar and they will provide the marketing and event support. Further, Main organisers will bring their expertise in indigenous engagement and facilitation to the workshops. We have further partnered with Zoe Bush, Solicitor heading the ‘Safe Climate Team’ at the Environmental Defenders Office, and the Piddington Justice Project focused on law reform and social justice Western Australia. This funding will also allow professional support for the production and post-production work on the film such as producing work, sound recording, editing, colour grading and distribution. The support assistant to the director will be mobilised from the local community to have further local insight into the topic. Overall, the partnership between Maevia and Lillian is manifest of the power of interdisciplinary collaborations as innovative peace initiatives. These collaborations are encouraged by the Graduate institute Geneva.