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# Country, climate change adaptation and colonisation: insights from an Indigenous adaptation planning process, Australia

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## Abstract

Indigenous peoples are going to be disproportionately affected by climate change. Developing tailored, place based, and culturally appropriate solutions will be necessary. Yet finding cultural and institutional ‘fit’ within and between competing values-based climate and environmental management governance regimes remains an ongoing challenge. This paper reports on a collaborative research project with the Arabana people of central Australia, that resulted in the production of the first Indigenous community-based climate change adaptation strategy in Australia. We aimed to try and understand what conditions are needed to support Indigenous driven adaptation initiatives, if there are any cultural differences that need accounting for and how, once developed they be integrated into existing governance arrangements. Our analysis found that climate change adaptation is based on the centrality of the connection to ‘country’ (traditional land), it needs to be aligned with cultural values, and focus on the building of adaptive capacity. We find that the development of climate change adaptation initiatives cannot be divorced from the historical context of how the

Arabana experienced and collectively remember colonisation. We argue that in developing culturally responsive climate governance for and with Indigenous peoples, that the history of colonisation and the ongoing dominance of entrenched Western governance regimes needs acknowledging and redressing into contemporary environmental/climate management.

Keywords: Environmental science, Anthropology, Geography

## 1. Introduction

Anthropogenic climate change is already changing the world's weather patterns (Rickard et al., 2016) and is predicted to have far reaching and disproportionate impacts upon Indigenous peoples (Macchi, 2008; Reisinger et al., 2014, 2014; Bardsley and Wiseman, 2012; Government of Australia, 2015) and in Australia, they will be particularly vulnerable to temperature increases, health, social and cultural impacts on their country and people (Basher et al., 2001; Berry et al., 2010; Green, 2008; Bird et al., 2013; Green et al., 2009; Reisinger et al., 2014; Race et al., 2016; Green and Minchin, 2014). This is of particular importance, as for Indigenous Australians, country is a fundamental concept. The term 'country' is commonly used to denote the traditional land/seas that belong to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural group. Indigenous peoples identify each other by their country, and 'caring for country' is a term used to denote the traditional and ongoing management of Indigenous land and seas. Country is a holistic concept that prescribes ways of seeing and doing for Indigenous peoples and is underpinned by a belief that all things are connected, and that Indigenous peoples belong to and are part of their own country.

Due to the predicted impacts of climate change, Green et al. (2009) concluded that it is imperative to develop:

Well-articulated adaptation strategies for Indigenous people in collaboration and partnerships between Indigenous communities, government, research, and non-governmental organisations (Green et al., 2009, p. 2).

However, such initiatives do not occur in a vacuum. As Veland et al. (2012) highlight, environmental management initiatives are not as successful if universal assumptions about Indigenous vulnerability do not also recognise the ongoing legacy of colonisation and overlook the cosmologically determined risks that determine Indigenous capacity to care for their country. They argue that when conducting adaptation planning, researchers should "epistemologically ground proof risk assessments and to listen and engage in conversations that create ways of 'seeing with both eyes, while not being blind to the hazards of colonisation'".

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