

# Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum 2021



## REPORT

A summary of conversations with 260 women elders, rangers  
and supporters from across the Northern Territory

**24-28 MAY 2021 – BANATJARL, NORTHERN TERRITORY**

*Logo design by Shantelle Miller, story on page 12*

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Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum

## Strong Women for Healthy Country Network Vision Statement

“We are strong Indigenous women of the Northern Territory. We stand united as one strong voice. We commit to a network that gives equal power to the rights of all our women. Strong women means healthy Country.”

(Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum, 2019)

# Foreword by the Forum Hosts – Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup

The Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup as part of Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation were very pleased to be asked to host the 2021 Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum on the Jawoyn homeland of Banatjarl, also known to us as our Family Healing Centre and Bush Medicine / Bush Tucker Garden. Banatjarl was chosen as the place to hold the Forum because of the reputation of the work the women in the Jawoyn communities are doing to promote cultural ways of well-being, healing and connection for women, children, youth, and families across the region. Banatjarl is a significant place for the Jawoyn people and has been at the centre in this region for holding cultural camps, where the elders are passing on cultural knowledges to young people as well as providing a place for respite, support and where Aboriginal people can come together for important meetings and community consultation.

When Mimal Land Management Aboriginal Corporation (Mimal) and Rembarranga, Dalabon, an Mayali elders from Bulman and Weemol communities met with the Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup, the synchronicity for coming together to create an Aboriginal women's network in the region was evident. Throughout the Forum, the Banatjarl women were proud to share their local cultural activities and knowledges of bush medicine making and weaving together for support and change. Workshops were held over three days in which bush medicine was collected and the process of making medijin balms was shared.

This also created an opportunity for other women throughout the NT to share their plant knowledges and processes. The making of bush medicine is keeping focus on health and well-being and providing opportunity for social enterprise development and employment for both young women and elders.



The weaving workshops included the collection of fibre, natural dyes and teaching the skills of weaving and the depth of cultural connection and cultural Law as part of weaving. Both workshops were held under the outdoor bush shelter, on Country at the bush medicine / bush tucker garden and was a place for women to relax and sit together in a calm, quiet, safe space. The bush medicine making and weaving workshops are acknowledged as a culturally led therapeutic place where there is time given for self-care, mindfulness and to hear the stories shared by the elders. Young women sitting side-by-side with our elders, learning the art of preparing and stripping the pandanus and the women's work of weaving.

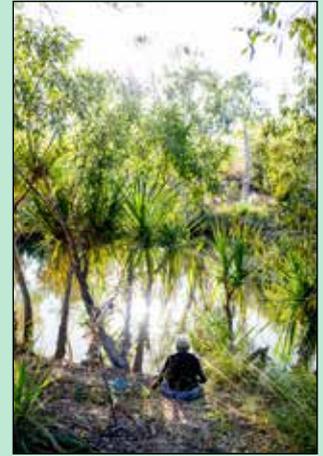
The Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup continues to voice that culture is to be taken seriously and wants traditional cultural knowledges to be recognised in providing solutions to issues concerning Aboriginal communities. **We are the experts of our own lives.** The women continue to promote Banatjarl land as a family healing place that makes culture strong.

*“Banatjarl is a strong cultural place that supports the healing of families, we are committed to supporting healing.”*

*Lisa Mumbin, Chairperson Jawoyn Association.*

*“As a traditional owner of Banatjarl, it was so fantastic to see 260 women in this one special place where they had the time to get to know other women from other places, and the diversity of cultures throughout the NT. Sharing stories and making new friends, we felt at peace, relaxed physically mentally and spiritually. We felt very proud to have this event on our homeland.”*

*Andrea Andrews.*



The Banatjarl traditional owners welcomed everyone to Country with a Water Blessing. The women shared their traditional knowledge of growing and making bush medicines in their garden on site at the Forum venue, and invited all women to hunt and gather at the river.



# Executive Summary

Between 24-28 May, 2021, the second Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum was held at Banatjarl on Jawoyn Country in the Northern Territory (NT).

260 Indigenous women rangers, cultural advisors and coordinators attended from across 31 ranger groups, as well as other female staff from 35 organisations, with a total of 260 women attending the Forum.

The Forum was hosted by Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup and Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation, supported by Mimal.

Mimal is collaborating with local women and other Indigenous organisations from across the NT to help strengthen the voice, role and support structures for women working for healthy Country and its benefits for local communities.

The Forum agenda and activities were informed by the first **Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum** in 2019. Pre-forum consultations with the Network highlighted the need for **effective, strong and strategic** communication and governance.

Women shared their skills, knowledge and stories about caring for Country. They identified how healing Country and healing people are connected, and the need for effective communication and governance. The key outcomes and recommendations from the Forum have been summarised in this report.

## 2021 Forum Key Outcomes and Recommendations

1. Women acknowledged that for Country to be healthy, people need to be healthy, when Country is sick, people are sick, when people are sick, Country is sick. Connecting to Country is the key to healing people.
2. Women formed the Message Sticks Working Group.
3. Women recommended that the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network should:

### Recommendation 1

Promote the understanding that healing Country means healing people, and advocate for women's caring for Country values, aspirations, and needs.

### Recommendation 2

Facilitate opportunities for Strong Women for Healthy Country from across the NT to meet and work together through: ranger exchanges, women's camps, training, and forums.

### Recommendation 3

Convene Message Stick Meetings every two months to maintain communication across the Network, plan future Network events, and inform the development of the Network's governance.

### Recommendation 4

Develop the Network's governance together with Strong Women for Healthy Country, and pursue support for governance training and meetings on different Countries throughout the NT.

# Introduction

The Strong Women for Healthy Country Network was initiated by a group of strong Dalabon, Rembarrnga and Mayali women leaders from South and Central Arnhem Land, including female Board Directors of Mimal. With the support of Mimal, women of Weemol and Bulman set out on a journey to connect women working for healthy Country and to better understand their needs.

Since then Mimal has been collaborating with Indigenous organisations and women from across the NT, to help strengthen the voice, role and support structures for women working for healthy Country.

In 2019 Mimal hosted the first of a series of three Strong Women for Healthy Country forums in Arnhem Land, where over 140 women from 32 ranger groups gathered to explore and form a network of women caring for Country in the NT. Today this network is known as the **Strong Women for Healthy Country Network (SWHCN)**.

## Strategic Context: Why is this important?

### The success of caring for country programs:

- The national and local contributions of IPA and ranger programs to health, economy, conservation, education, and culture have been widely reported.<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>
- There are currently over 120 Indigenous ranger groups and 80 IPAs in Australia, making up nearly half the National Reserve System.<sup>6,7</sup>
- Indigenous ranger programs have steadily increased the number of women they employ and have rapidly developed dedicated women's teams and projects.<sup>8,9,10</sup>
- The most recent national evaluation of federally funded Indigenous ranger programs reported that Indigenous women held a third of the over 2100 permanent and casual Indigenous ranger positions.<sup>11</sup>

*For footnotes see page 30.*

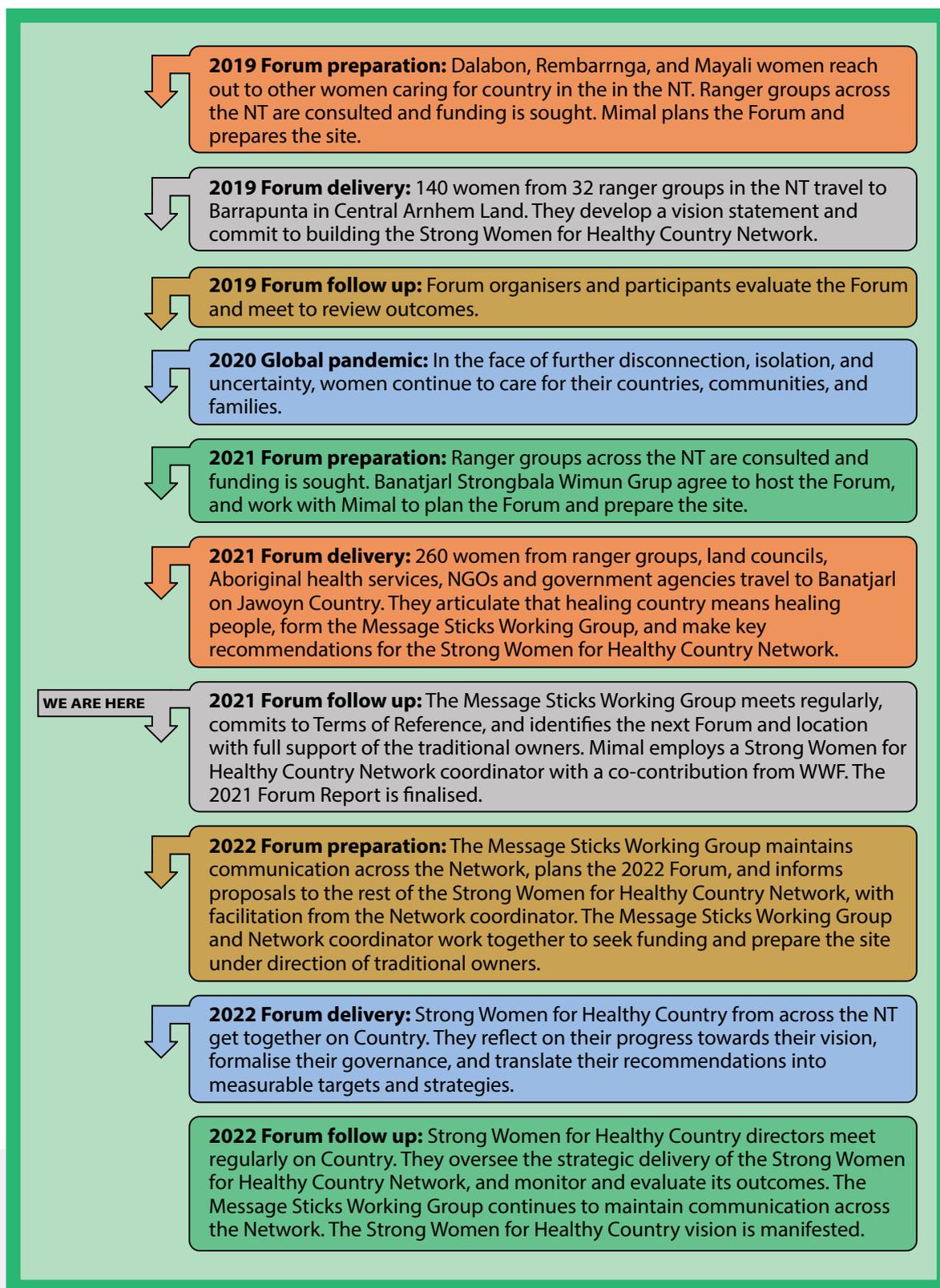
### Challenges to women caring for country identified at the 2019 Forum:

- Women are concerned about the health of their countries, communities, and families.
- Women are urgently seeking to share their distinct customary knowledge with each other and upcoming generations.
- Women worry their caring for country values, practices, and aspirations are invisible to non-Indigenous people.
- Women rangers do not have enough access to the dedicated support, training, and resources they need to feel safe at work.
- Women are underrepresented in caring for country leadership and governance.

### There is opportunity and momentum for change:

- Women from across the NT are committed to growing their Strong Women for Healthy Country Network.

## Strong Women for Healthy Country Network and Forum Timeline



The key outcome of the 2019 Forum was that women from 32 ranger groups committed to forming the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network, and articulated their vision: 'We are strong Indigenous women of the Northern Territory. We stand united as one strong voice. We commit to a network that gives equal power to the rights of all our women. Strong women means healthy Country.'



Gundung mural created at the 2019 Forum: A collective effort, built around the central theme of Strong Women for Healthy Country

The mural consists of a series of five panels on stretched canvas, representing elements symbolic to women - Night, Fire, Sun, Earth, Water. To learn more about each of the elements please see: <http://www.mimal.org.au/Strong-Women-Healthy-Country>. The panels are tied together by the feminine and masculine duality of the Rainbow Serpent. Artists Shantelle Miller, Karla McGrady and Shantae Mudul worked with community members and project staff to lay the foundation for an **effective, strong, and strategic** voice that is led by strong women and founded in Law and culture.

### **This report provides a summary of the second Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum**

The aim of the 2021 Forum was to understand, explore, and grow the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network, which was symbolised through the Gundung themes of earth, fire, and water.

The Forum hosts, Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup and Jawoyn Association, welcomed 260 Aboriginal women from across the NT working for healthy Country. The word Banatjarl comes from the homelands where the Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup resides. Also known as King Valley, Banatjarl is a place of cultural significance for the Jawoyn people. Banatjarl has always been and continues to be a place where women come together on Country to connect, share culture and learn from elders. It's a place to heal and grow, a place where grandmothers, aunties, mothers, sisters and daughters find sanctuary and strength.

The Forum objectives were to explore effective, strong and strategic communication and governance for the Network. The Forum facilitators identified the strengths and skill-sets that already exist within this Network. The Forum was supported by 12 volunteer facilitators who documented the women's voices included in this report.

***The purpose of the 2021 Forum was to explore and develop communication and governance informed by cultural Law, values, and protocols; and to determine the Network's key priorities over the next 3 years.***

#### **The 2021 Forum program included:**

- Keynote addresses from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female leaders.
- Presentations and discussions on best practice and knowledge sharing in caring for Country.
- Facilitated sessions to explore a communication and governance model for the Network.
- Opportunities to contribute to the 2021 State of the Environment Report.
- Facilitated healing spaces by Aboriginal healers from across the NT.
- Workshops focused on developing leadership and business enterprise capacity.
- Knowledge sharing workshops, fireside storytelling, and presentations by women ranger groups.
- An art installation space led by local artists.
- Activities to promote self-care, health and well-being.



Dr. Shellie Morris and Hon Selena Uibo reconnecting with family and friends

It has been a challenging year for all rangers across the NT. COVID-19 has impacted the ability to connect with each other, and to access knowledge and expertise. It has stalled significant projects on Country and prevented learning opportunities. The downstream effects of the pandemic in remote communities have costed time and energy to keep communities and families safe and strong. Poor digital infrastructure and connectivity across the communities has meant that now, more than ever before, people have felt the impact of isolation. This second of the three Forums was an opportunity to rebuild, heal and inspire women to continue their journey.

***“Now, more than ever, we need to recognise the value of strong women on Country and expand our vision to match their commitment, resilience and optimism to deliver a stronger and healthier Australia for us all”<sup>12</sup>.***

Pat Anderson Order of Australia, Strong Women on Country Report, Country Needs People



Connecting around the fire



## Forum Logo Story

This logo was created by artist Shantelle Miller from Central Arnhem Land to represent the connections between all women in the NT.

Together, the separate elements tell one story. The story of women coming together from countries spanning vast distances yet always connected through earth and sky, through dreaming and the systems of community that nourish and sustain them.

**Datum** is the Rembarrnga name for water lily. **Datum** holds deep significance for the people of the billabong Country. The **Datum** Dreaming story is very closely related to the Yawk Yawk mermaid Dreaming story and represents women from the region who were the hunters and gatherers, who collected **Datum** and all other bush foods and medicine. The **Datum** is itself a beautiful example of how a network exists in nature. The root comes from way down deep in the water where it is pitch black and reaches underground to other plants which share nutrients and oxygen. **Bruppah** – the Rembarrnga name for the water lily tuber – reaches up and the flower lives above the water in the sunshine, sending light down to the root. All parts work together in harmony.

Traditionally, all parts of the **Datum** are eaten and it is also used for cultural purposes.

The **water ripples** represent the flow from one place to another. When one movement happens in one place, the ripple effect means that the movement is felt from far away. What we do in one place, has an effect on the places all around us.

The **water shells** symbolise the salt water and fresh waters of the Northern Territory along with the shellfish and seafood that live in there.

The **Seven Sisters** constellation embodies an ancient Dreaming story and contains sacred meaning for peoples of the Central Desert as well as cultures all over the world. The **Seven Sisters** Songline travels over half the span of the Australian continent and connects peoples across the Central Desert, including Shantelle's ancestors from Central Australia.

The yellow flower is the **Parnarnak** in Jawoyn language or wattle in English. This plant is a bush medicine that is used as a soap for the skin but is also acknowledged for the juice it holds inside. It is the Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup's logo. Supporting our overall healing both physically and spiritually, just like the Banatjarl Bush Medicine Garden does. This flower is in honour of the women hosting the 2021 Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum.

# Overview of Forum Process and Discussions

## Pre-Forum Consultations

Pre-forum consultations were held with senior rangers, Mimal elders, Jawoyn Association and the Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup. The purpose of these consultations was to map out the structure of the Forum, including the facilitated component.

Pre-forum discussions were also held at the Forum site with the hosts, focusing on cultural protocols in terms of how to respectfully work on their Country. This provided an opportunity for the Forum facilitators and organisers to establish a connection with the people and Country prior to the Forum.

Most of the ranger co-ordinators from the various ranger groups in the NT were contacted by Forum facilitators to build relationships prior to the Forum, and to ensure any potential barriers to attendance were addressed. Supplementary funds were provided by Mimal to support ranger groups attendance.

During these discussions women had a strong focus on healing trauma, creating communities of care and safety, and personal and professional issues they were facing in their own communities and families. The feedback was that women were inspired to attend the Forum knowing that there would be a safe space to talk about these important topics.

The pre-forum consultations with women of the NT ranger groups resulted in a strong message about what they wanted from the Forum - a place to talk, share stories, connect, and heal.



Pre-forum meeting with Banatjarl women on site at the Forum venue

## Forum Design

The program was designed based on the pre-forum consultations and lessons learnt from the 2019 Forum. It was designed to provide facilitated healing spaces involving dance, song, yarning circles, one-on-one healing sessions, weaving, collaborative art installations, laughing yoga, making bush medicines, fishing and walking on Country.

## Forum Participants

260 women from across the NT gathered at the Forum. Participants included Aboriginal rangers, elders, healers and other strong women such as support staff and project partners. Many women are considered role models, respected leaders and those who hold or have been given the cultural authority to speak on matters relating to the purpose of the 2021 Forum.



Ripple Effect Band

## Indigenous women in the NT came from these ranger groups:

1. Anmatyerr Rangers (CLC)
2. Arafura Swamp Rangers (ASRAC)
3. Bulgul Rangers (NLC)
4. Crocodile Island Rangers (MOPRA)
5. Dhimurru Rangers (Dhimurru AC)
6. Finke Rangers (CLC)
7. Garawa Rangers (NLC)
8. Gurindji Rangers (CLC)
9. Jawoyn Rangers (Jawoyn Association AC)
10. Kakadu Rangers (Kakadu NP)
11. Kaltukatjara Rangers (CLC)
12. Li-Anthawirriyarr Rangers (Mabunji AC)
13. Ltyentye Apurte Rangers (CLC)
14. Malak Malak Rangers (NLC)
15. Mardbalk Rangers (NLC)
16. Mimal Rangers (Mimal)
17. Murru-Warinyi Ankkul Rangers (CLC)
18. North Tanami Rangers (CLC)
19. Numbulwar Rangers (NLC)
20. Uluru-Kata Tjuta Rangers (NT Parks)
21. Timber Creek Rangers (NLC)
22. Tiwi Rangers (Tiwi Resources)
23. Tjuwanpa Women Rangers (Tjuwanpa Outstation Resource Centre)
24. Waanyi-Garawa Rangers (NLC)
25. Wagiman Rangers (NLC)
26. Walpiri Rangers (CLC)
27. Walungurru Rangers (CLC)
28. Wardaman Rangers (NLC)
29. Warddeken Rangers (Warddeken Land Management Ltd.)
30. Yugul Mangi Rangers (NLC)

### **Interstate Ranger Group:**

Kara Jarri Rangers (KLC)

## Staff from the following organisations also attended:

ABC Radio

Akeyulerre Healing Centre (Akeyulerre Aboriginal Corporation)

ALFA (NT) Ltd

Anglicare NT

Antonia Burke Consultancy

Australian Wildlife Conservancy

Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup (Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation)

Bush Heritage Australia

Central Land Council

Charles Darwin University

Circulanation (Urapunga Aboriginal Corporation)

CSIRO

Darwin Community Arts

Environment Centre NT

Indigenous Carbon Industry Network

Karrkad Kanjdji Trust

Keep Top End Coasts Healthy

Kimberley Land Council (WA)

Moombahlene Local Aboriginal Lands Council (NSW)

National Environmental Science Programme

Northern Land Council

NT Government Department of Chief Minister and Cabinet

NT Outback (Pew Charitable Trust)

NT Treaty Commission

Nyirrungulung-Rise

Our Watch Ltd

Parks And Wildlife Commission of the NT

Regional Arts Fund Northern Territory

Renae Saxby Photography

Ripple Effect Band

Shellie Morris Music

Sunrise Health Services

TeamHEALTH NT

Urapunga AC

West Arnhem Regional Council



**Locations where women traveled from to reconnect at Banatjarl**

## Forum Agenda

The women gathered in yarning circles which explored how we build on and grow what we already have. Each day included activities and workshops on leadership, healing, art, weaving, bush medicine propagation and preparation, language and culture, public speaking, trauma support, water, fire and healthy Country stories.

## Daily Sessions

8-9am	<b>Grounding and preparing for yarning circles</b>
9-10am	<b>Session 1</b> – Facilitated Yarning Circles
10:30am-12pm	<b>Session 2</b> – Facilitated Yarning Circles
1-3pm	<b>Session 3</b> – Cultural Activities – Presenters - Speakers
3:30-5pm	<b>Session 4</b> – Cultural Activities – Presenters - Speakers

## Yarning Circle Structure

The morning sessions were delivered in 7 yarning circles with approximately 35 women in each of the groups. Women were invited to choose which yarning circle they participated in.

Forum Lead Facilitator Antonia Burke –  
“we already have the answers to healing and caring for our communities”



## Healing Country - Healing Self - Yarning Circle

The following questions were offered in relation to Healing Country Healing Self:

1. When you turn up to a new place on Country, how do you assess if it's sick or healthy? If Country is sick or unhealthy, what would be the steps you take to care for it and heal it?
2. How do you know when women are sick or unhealthy and how would you find out? What do you already do to care for and heal women?
3. How do you know when men are sick or unhealthy and how would you find out? What do you already do to care for and heal men?
4. How do you know when children are sick or unhealthy and how would you find out? What do you already do to care for and heal children?

The key message from this activity was that how we care for Country is the same as how we need to care for ourselves. Caring for ourselves is no different to caring for Country. Knowing the history of the place and the history of the person is important. We already have the answers to healing and caring for our communities.

Facilitator Antonia Burke talked about the We AI-li Culturally Informed Trauma Integrated Healing Approach Framework by Emeritus Professor Judy Atkinson AM that has been delivered nationally and internationally, to support Indigenous communities who are still living with the generational impacts of colonisation on people and Country. Indigenous people are experiencing loss and grief as a result of the disconnection from community, family and kin, Country, culture, body, mind and spirit, resulting in unhealthy and unsafe communities, and unhealthy Country. Antonia explored solutions to this disconnection with women at the Forum, and talked about how communities around Australia have been using this framework to heal, using Indigenous cultural practices.

### Culturally Informed Trauma Integrated Healing Approach Framework

- Realise:** the widespread impact of trauma.
- Recognise:** signs and symptoms of trauma.
- Respond:** by integrating knowledge about trauma into communities of care & practice.
- Resist:** re-traumatisation of Indigenous people.
- Rebuild:** connection to community, family and kin, Country, body, mind, spirit ...through:
- Creating culturally safe environments
  - Finding and telling our Stories
  - Making sense of our Stories
  - Feeling the feelings
  - Moving through the layers of loss and grief to ownership of choices
  - Strengthening cultural and spiritual identities

**Aboriginal cultural healing practices** are now being recognised by national peak bodies within the health industry such as the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA). Accreditation in Indigenous Therapies will be available in the NT in 2022.

<https://wealli.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Generic-We-AI-li-info-sheet-one-CITIHA.pdf>



Communication makes community

## Communication - Yarning Circle

As the women stood in their yarning circles, two questions were placed into each circle:

***“what do you feel are your greatest strengths when it comes to communication; and what do you think is needed to keep the communication strong in this Network?”***

Yarning circles were given a ball of string. Each woman held the string, and had a chance to share their strengths and ideas with the other women. When they were finished speaking they threw the ball of string across the circle to another woman to share her answers. This created a web of connection between all of the women. Women could see and feel how strong the web became with each connection.

A third question was asked:

***“what happens when someone drops their string?”***

The answers that came were that the communication weakened, became slack and droopy and that people missed out on receiving important information. When the string was strong and tight, the women felt supported and strong in their communication.

A fourth request was made of each circle:

***“if you feel that you have strong communication and are interested in supporting the Network by attending regular meetings and supporting the creation of a governance committee, pass your string to the woman next to you and stand in the middle of the web”***

Some women nominated themselves, and others were encouraged by their groups to stand in the middle. This activity resulted in the selection of the **Message Sticks Working Group**. Each woman who stood in the middle of the circle accepted responsibility for maintaining effective, strong and strategic communication with all stakeholders of the Network, and to support the creation of a governance committee and structure.

### Message Stick Art Process – as told by artist Karla McGrady

*The idea for the message stick art piece came from fellow artist and collaborator Shantelle Miller.*

*Message sticks are a symbol of going back to **old ways of communicating**, the traditional cultural way. It's how knowledge was shared. They were traditionally used as a **mapping tool as well as passing on messages between clan groups**, they gave **direction**, people would **share information** such as what you can expect along the journey, how to know where you're going, the things you need to get to where you're going. Women talked about how us Aboriginal people have used message sticks while painting them at the Forum.*



Communities of practice thrive with effective, strong and strategic communication

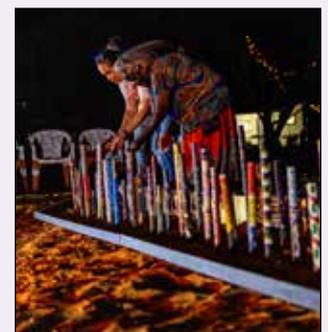
Before the Forum we invited women to bring a significant item to share with the message stick piece (with permission from the hosts of the Forum). Women brought white ochre, red earth, a dilly bag, shells, carving of significant cultural items and printed material from Yolngu stars that made up the backdrop which tied the piece together as a **collaborative** art piece.

Women sat by fire to do their designs, while other women came and watched, it was a **learning and creating space**, the women would yarn, paint, talk and **share different stories**. We were sitting under a billy-goat or Kakadu plum tree and an elder shared her story of the tree with us as she painted. We collected plums together, kids came to pick the plums and climb the tree, there was a constant supply of plums that the children collected for us.

To see it all come together the way it did, experience the unique differences and everything women bring, understanding that we are all connected to one earth, that's how we are as Aboriginal people. We all **connect** and communicate on one earth.



Message sticks art process



Message stick ceremony

We designed the message stick piece to align with the dimensions of the Gundung art pieces to create a **story map of the journey of the Network**. The third piece will be designed and created at the next Forum in 2022, to continue the story mapping of the Network.

The younger women cut timber, drilled holes, did the measurements to make sure it all sat right, they did the construction element of the whole piece, the base. It was a hands-on experience for women putting it all together, channelling their energy, ideas, thoughts, feelings and labour.

The message sticks were placed next to the fire, everyone came together and put sand into the base of the piece. **The ceremony of everyone coming and doing that, encapsulates what the women are doing with this Forum.**

This Forum was the first time my mum and I ever did something like this together, by ourselves, it was incredible. To be able to draw on that experience whilst we are in a challenging time with COVID down here in Qld and NSW, it really makes a big difference to our well-being to be able to go back and think about the whole experience. **The elders shared with us that they hadn't left their communities at all since COVID started last year.** So many women came because of what they'd heard about the first Forum.

The fact that we were able to produce something that usually takes months, and do it in such a short time, is remarkable, and it's because the women are all together, **sitting together, working together, focusing their time on this common goal.** This proves that when we value something, we make it happen.

Women came to the presentation ceremony and found their message stick when it was presented around the fire, and they could say, "here this is my bit, this is what I did", and look at all the different parts of it to **share the ownership** of something so beautiful.

There is so much relevance and importance of art in our culture, and what an incredible connection that can be for our mob.

## Governance - Yarning Circle



Story mapping the beginning of a governance committee and model

There was a moment where the women who had been selected to form the *Message Sticks Working Group* stood together in front of the Gundung art piece, in the river that was drawn on the ground, behind the canoes that had been made out of clay. This activity was to show that without people, the canoes don't move forward and we can only reach our destination, the goals we set for the Network, if we have **effective, strong** and **strategic** communication from the *Message Sticks Working Group* members. At the other end of the 'river' were the key areas of focus for the Network that were set in 2019. The question was asked:

**"What do we need to do between now and the next Forum to keep the canoes moving forward?"**

Forum Facilitator Antonia Burke shared the following story:

*“Thinking about building a group of canoes to go on a journey is a good way to think about governance. For every canoe trip, there are different things that need to come together on the day of a trip if we want to arrive at the place we are going to safely and **effectively**.*

*But, before the big journey, the team needs to develop a plan and a **strategy**. Time to practice, develop its skills and fitness, know the rules of the oceans or rivers, and learn to work together as a team. It also needs skilled captains and crews, who know how to plan for and go on a canoe journey. If all of these things come together, then the crew has a good chance of getting to where they want to go.*

*The team also needs to stay focused and **strong** throughout the whole journey, in this case it’s 12 months, not just for one trip or making one canoe. The crew must keep working on their skills, and if something goes wrong along the way, the canoe builders, captain and crew have to work together to fix the problem so they can make it to their destination.*

*The same is true for the governance of this group.”*

Antonia Burke



Building the canoes out of clay represents the journey of the Network

Women were asked the following question in relation to governance:

**“How would you like this group to be governed?”**

Each group mapped out their recommendations for the governance of the Network and then presented their ideas back to the whole Forum.

## Results #1: Healing Country Requires Healing Women, Men and Children

The 7 yarning circle groups agreed that if women are not strong and healthy, then Country cannot be healthy. Healing Country requires healing ourselves, healing men and healing children – they are all connected. Women explored ways that they can assess if Country is sick, and how to heal and care for Country, and people. These yarns built the understanding that the history of places and people are connected and embedded in Country.

### Recommendation 1

Promote the understanding that healing Country means healing people, and advocate for women’s caring for Country values, aspirations and needs.

### Recommendation 2

Facilitate opportunities for Strong Women for Healthy Country from across the NT to meet and work together through: ranger exchanges, women’s camps, training and forums.

# Strong Women for Healthy Country – Healing Country, Women, Men and Children

## Traditional Owner Permission

Permission from traditional owners to be on country - traditional welcome ceremony - where you can and can't go for cultural safety

### ASSESSING IF COUNTRY IS UNHEALTHY

#### WATER SUPPLY

Check billabongs & water supply – is it muddy, is there enough?



#### RIGHT BURNING

Are we burning at the right times and within burning boundaries, does the grass come green after a burn?



#### BUSH FOODS AND MEDICINE

Is there a good supply of bush foods and medicines on country?



#### CULTURAL SEASONS

Are seasons changing due to climate change, flowers not coming in right seasons, rain late, bush food not fruiting on time, soil salinity (sea water coming into the freshwater), pollution?

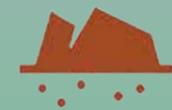


#### LAND

Unhealthy soil

Weeds

Trees, grass & plants green and healthy



#### ANIMAL INDICATORS OF UNHEALTHY COUNTRY

No birds

Feral animals - destroy springs, billabongs, lilies

No wildlife or native animal populations decreasing

None or not many fish in the rivers & ocean



### HEALING AND CARING FOR COUNTRY

#### LAND

- Keep growing native bush foods
- Revegetation - close parts of country to give time to heal, wait for recovery
- Regeneration when the rains come, they chop down the seeds to flow down the river
- Collect seeds in case of fire
- Cleaning up litter
- Burning - ground, aerial, both ways burning, firebreaks, early burning is good at right time. Small patches for animals
- Weeds Management - spraying with non-toxic weed killer
- Test water and soil, fertilizer to make soil healthy
- Relocate mussels so there are more
- Build bridges
- Seasonal Calendar - how to care for Country
- Crocodiles live in all billabongs, our fishing spots, we used to drag nets now we can't

#### WATER

- Make waterways healthier, plant native trees which stabilise the banks & spread down stream
- No toxic waste or chemicals
- Rubbish & ghost net clean-up
- Fish and wildlife monitoring, don't take too much
- Open up streams and waterways - flush out mud, leaves, debris
- Resourcing water to other streams that need it
- River has got a story for all the people. River is a lifeline – fish, turtle, everything living there
- Don't let cotton growers into our rivers

#### SACRED SITES

- Protect sacred sites with fencing & signs
- Permit access
- Rock art site – look for termites, is the art healthy, right way fire

#### PEOPLE

- Connecting with Country as much as possible
- We are all protectors - family groups take turns then communicate on different areas, share responsibilities
- Economy that uses resources
- Visitors talking to elders about the Country
- Practice culture on Country – dancing, singing, storytelling, learning on Country
- Tell story of Country - what used to be there? Dreamtime story of the land
- Strong leaders with integrity who have strong relationships with their community
- Effective governance

#### EDUCATION

- Training – Learning on Country (LOC) program & Conservation & Land Management Certificates
- Education through tourism
- Collaborate with other ranger groups
- Study & research - camera survey, rock art surveys for condition/recording, constant monitoring
- Rangers, elders, landowners, children, community all working together

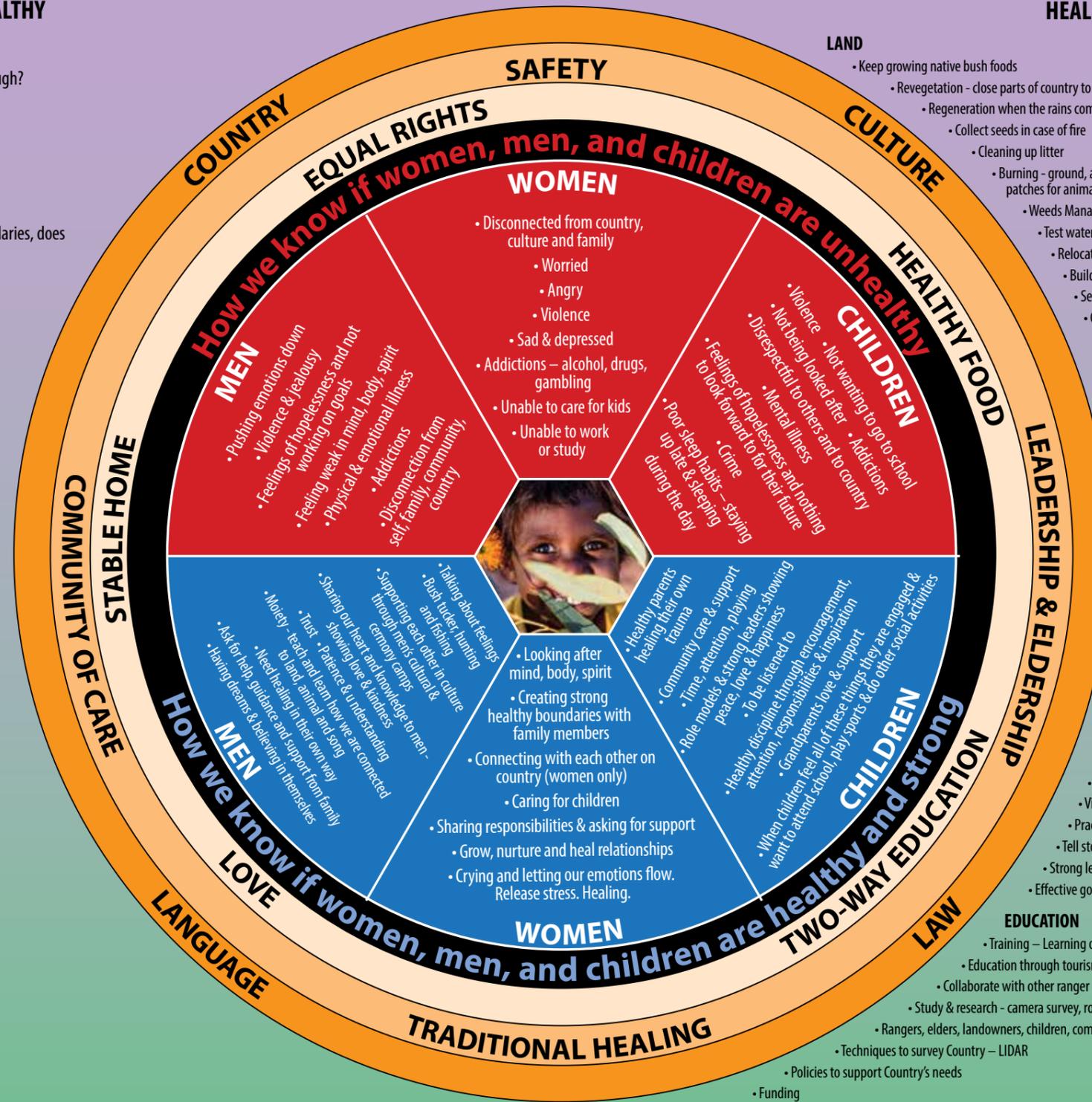
• Techniques to survey Country – LIDAR

• Policies to support Country's needs

• Funding

#### ANIMALS

- Feral animal management- fencing, ground & aerial culling, GPS tracking, predator study
- Native animals - biodiversity survey





Preparing pandanus leaves for traditional dying and weaving



Traditional dying and weaving

There are deep springs within each one of us. Within this deep spring, is a sound. The sound of Deep calling to Deep. The time for re-birth is now. If our culture is alive and strong and respected, it will grow. It will not die. And our spirit will not die. I believe that the spirit of dadirri that we have to offer will blossom and grow, not just within themselves, but in our whole nation<sup>413</sup>.

Dr. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann AM

## Results #2: Communication – Development of the Message Sticks Working Group



The yarning circle, string exercise, and message stick art process and ceremony all fed the formation of the Message Sticks Working Group. This group is made up of almost 40 women from 20 organisations across the NT, who have agreed to meet at least once every two months and maintain communication across the Network. The Message Sticks Working Group will support the development of the Network's governance into the future.

“An art piece of this nature would usually take at least 3 months to complete, however, what this process shows is that when women all come together to focus on something we value, we are **effective, strong** and **strategic.**” Artist, Karla McGrady.

### Recommendation 3

Convene Message Stick Meetings every two months to maintain communication across the Network, plan future Network events, and inform the development of the Network's governance.

## Results #3: Working towards a Governance Structure

The Message Sticks Working Group agreed to support the development of the Network's governance.

There are a number of online training courses that can support this, such as the [Indigenous Governance Toolkit](#).

**Women at the 2021 Forum agreed that future directors of the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network should include:**

- Only Indigenous women
- A balance of young women and elders
- A mix of women working for independent and land council hosted ranger groups
- Women with diverse skill sets and connections (in media, finance, governance, etc.)
- A combination of women who are collectively accountable to all ranger groups in the NT through nomination or voting.

### **Women at the 2021 Forum want these leaders to:**

- Have regular meetings on Country, together with young women and children
- Uphold our customary Law and practices, and draw on these when building Strong Women for Healthy Country Network and Forum policies
- Develop clear strategies and protocols that outline how we will support each other
- Maintain the transparency of the Network through open communication with the Message Sticks Working Group
- Guide funding applications, and seek support from organisations that employ many women caring for Country such as the land councils, and Federal and Northern Territory Parks
- Teach others about our cultures, values, Law, and practices.

### **Women at the 2021 Forum agreed the development of the Network's governance should be supported by:**

- The Message Sticks Working Group
- Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network (membership guidelines are yet to be developed)
- A national Network of women caring for Country across Australia.

The wider Strong Women for Healthy Country Network will engage with the Message Sticks Working Group to collaboratively design an effective, strong, and strategic governance model with fair representation.

## **Recommendation 4**

Develop the Network's governance together with Strong Women for Healthy Country, and pursue support for governance training and meetings on different Countries throughout the NT.

## **Results #4: State of the Environment Report 2021 Strong Women for Healthy Country Network Contribution**

The State of the Environment Report is written every five years. This report informs parliament about the state of the environment and guides important decisions. Women were invited to contribute to the 2021 Report at the Forum.

An Indigenous owned consultancy is currently working with the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment on the **2021 State of the Environment Report**. Leading the way in preparing the national report is Dr Terri Janke, she has a pivotal role to strengthen the link between traditional and western science. This marks the first time an Indigenous co-chief author has been appointed for the report.

Dr Janke is being supported by Indigenous co-authors from across Australia on twelve environmental themes: Air quality, Antarctica, Biodiversity, Climate, Coasts, Extreme events, Heritage, Indigenous knowledge, Inland water, Land, Marine and Urban environments. Dr Janke and her team are ensuring Indigenous voices are strongly represented across the report combining Indigenous knowledge and western science systems through community consultations. This will ensure Indigenous views, values and knowledge are used to inform decision making for better environmental outcomes.

The following table summarises women's contributions to the 2021 State of the Environment Report into themes.

Theme	Sub-themes
<b>Significance of Country</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home</li> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Culture</li> <li>• Teaching children/learning happens on Country</li> <li>• Caring for Country using traditional methods</li> <li>• Law/cultural sites connected to totems/kinship/identity</li> <li>• Place to practice rituals</li> <li>• Hunting/food supply</li> <li>• Healing</li> <li>• Health of people</li> <li>• Teaching language words for Country</li> <li>• Ancestral knowledge of plants, animals, rocks, wind and water</li> </ul>
<b>Changes observed to Country</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in feral animals and weeds</li> <li>• Changing water levels and quality</li> <li>• Tourists coming onto Country with no permission, poaching, leaving rubbish</li> <li>• Positive changes such as using solar panels</li> <li>• More connection between rangers sharing knowledge</li> <li>• When rangers do controlled burning there are positive outcomes for flora, fauna and people</li> <li>• Having more local people on Country is healing sacred sites and water</li> <li>• More signs on Country identifying sacred sites</li> </ul>
<b>Impact of changes to Country on community's wellbeing, cultural practices, languages, physical health, and stress</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feral animals destroying the land and water</li> <li>• Too many weeds invading the land creating imbalance in the ecosystem</li> <li>• Tourists (non-Aboriginal people) coming onto people's land without permission and taking the food supply for the local landowners</li> <li>• Local rangers increase the well-being of the land which increases the well-being of the people</li> <li>• Disconnection from Country affects the mental health of our young people, leading to the use of drugs and alcohol and interrupts the transfer of cultural knowledge to children</li> </ul>
<b>Obstacles and solutions to caring for Country</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need more resources to access Country (vehicles, boats, rangers, funds to access helicopters during the wet season)</li> <li>• Rangers given more authority to ask for permits from non-Aboriginal tourists on their Country</li> <li>• Controlled burning, weeding with more rangers and resources</li> <li>• Balance between school and learning on Country to nurture transfer of cultural knowledge</li> <li>• More women rangers</li> <li>• Government to listen to traditional owners, learn from us and respect us</li> <li>• Freedom and full authority to use cultural methods in alignment with local seasonal calendars</li> <li>• Send a strong message to non-Indigenous people and give the rangers the authority to stop them from trespass</li> <li>• Never stop traditional owners from caring for their Country</li> </ul>

Theme	Sub-themes
<b>Community expectations from Federal Government in relation to the next five years up to the next State of the Environment Report</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indigenous communities expect support from the Federal Government to address these environment issues that are affecting them. This includes financial support and staff support</li> <li>• We want something to happen with the money that is there for us</li> <li>• Advocacy for increased funding to manage IPAs, they are half our national reserve and contain 80% of our biodiversity</li> <li>• Federal, Territory, and local Governments and councils must put conservation and environmental works out to tender and must ensure Indigenous organisations are included</li> <li>• Our voices should be heard at every table and conversation on environmental issues, with women represented. This should happen across Country, different regions, not just NT</li> <li>• Considering the impacts on future generations and on ecosystems when making decisions</li> <li>• Traditional owners make decisions and speak for Country. Native Title Laws should be changed so we can veto development projects on our countries. Traditional owners everywhere should be able to do this</li> <li>• Implement the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Fund environmental baseline assessments, particularly for freshwater/groundwater ecosystems in the NT. Fund monitoring of ecosystem health in the NT</li> <li>• Require environmental impact assessments for applications to clear pastoral land. Require consultation with traditional owners of land that pastoralists want to clear and / or use for non-pastoral purposes</li> </ul>

**I'd like to see some of the young people get up and talk and sit with the old people, the knowledge is with the old people. No matter where we are we've gotta stand up for our rights, all women. Some people they come and sit under them trees with us. We sit and laugh, they share their story. You can come and sit and talk every time. We sit and tell our stories and laugh and tell jokes, so we can get to know the young people. We gotta stand with the young people and make them strong.**

**- Monica Robinson - Kintore Community**



Elders and leaders panel and yarning circles

*This Forum is really important for Indigenous people across the NT. I am really enjoying it. I was at the first one. Back in my community I wanted to build up the female community. As a strong woman I feel more comfortable connecting in with other female ranger groups. I feel comfortable because I work with the families I grew up with. I seen the elders telling the story. When we grow up we need to follow them. They are showing us what's good to know for the young ladies. Some Indigenous people are losing their culture so I think it is important to build on the strong women network. We are trying to build more women's group in our community so it is a good opportunity here too. Caring for Country is in our history. It is really Important for rangers to keep caring for Country.*

*- Rosetta Wayatja, cultural advisor to the Maringa Ocean Patrol and Crocodile Island Ranger*

## References

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