



Summary

Forum on improving Aboriginal involvement in invasive species management

Date: Tuesday 28 November 2023

Time: 9:30-16:00

Location: Greater Sydney Demonstration Farm, 40 Edwards Rd, Richmond Lowlands

Attendees: Den Barber, Aboriginal Partnerships Manager (Landcare NSW)
Brad Moore, SLSO Aboriginal Communities (LLS)
Mitchell Booty, Biosecurity Support Officer (LLS)
Bek Shephard, Principal Aboriginal Partnerships Officer (BCT)
Kira Duroux, Aboriginal Partnerships Officer (BCT)
Daryl Wells, Open Spaces Manager (Murru Mittigar)
Richard Swain, Indigenous Ambassador (Invasive Species Council)
Ben Russell and Lou Askew (Natural Resources Commission)

Key Issues

Barriers to Aboriginal involvement in invasive species management

- **Colonial notions of conservation and introduced species are counter to healthy Country:** notions of conservation as ‘locking up the land’ need to be challenged. Aboriginal cultures see Country as needing people to actively managing it to be healthy. Colonial and farming-based cultures around certain introduced species such as sheep, goats, cattle and horses are also challenging: *‘time to shift that paradigm, you are farming an invasive species so need to control their impacts on Country’*.
- **Invasive species management is siloed in NSW but the problems and solutions are holistic:** Aboriginal land managers are frustrated by the siloed approach of the NSW Government and different understandings and applications of its responsibilities for invasive species management, which inhibit a focus on cultural landscapes and holistic solutions. Even where cultural methods are considered, for example cultural fire, government applications have been narrow and one-off: *‘government want the photo opportunity from cultural fire not involving community, or getting country level outcomes’*.
- **There is a view among some non-indigenous land managers that Aboriginal practices and knowledge are diminished in NSW:** due to the intensive impacts of colonisation, and that practitioners and learning need to be imported from interstate. This impacts on local opportunities to continue and evolve cultural land management practices.
- **Weed and pest plans do not tell the story of Country:** some stakeholders who work closely with the regional plans noted there is no inclusion of Aboriginal voices or stories

of Country: *'it shouldn't be optional – we need to tell our story and it needs to be integrated into the whole plan; not just a single throw away paragraph. And that should increase and grow each time round to deliver good outcomes for Country'*.

- **Weed and pest plans are formulaic and do not match reality of on-ground work:** this can limit flexibility and getting holistic outcomes, Aboriginal land managers often work around the plans based on good relationships and practices.
- **Aboriginal land managers are a small cohort with extensive responsibilities:** often only one or a few Aboriginal staff operating across the whole state in any land management agency, and in some key NSW agencies the Aboriginal staff base has been decreasing. Non-government organisations also reported struggling to attract Aboriginal staff and youth. A common issue is that Aboriginal staff are often positioned in lower ranks and certain roles (cultural heritage, field officers), and offered no career progression, pathways and management and leadership opportunities.
- **Aboriginal landowners have competing priorities and differing capacity:** local Aboriginal land councils and Traditional Owners have competing priorities (such as basic social services, housing) so it is difficult to get interest, involvement and expertise in invasive species management in some areas, especially if it is not placed in the context of broader land management practices.
- **The limited resource base inhibits networking and support:** the small base of Aboriginal staff across NSW means that identifying other people and groups working in this area can be difficult and time intensive. This also spills over into challenges in finding Aboriginal organisations as service providers to undertake on-ground works. Simple barriers such as Aboriginal groups' lack of capacity and opportunity to obtain firearms licences and other relevant qualifications was noted by several participants as obstructing potential service providers.
- **Good on-ground outcomes are often mismanaged, not maintained or disregarded by land managers:** many described examples of good practices and outcomes for areas of Country that are then left to degrade, not maintained or completely ignored by the land manager, particularly issues with some land managers who are seen as taking a rudimentary 'box ticking' approach and use consultants who may not be driven by outcomes: *'you often feel you're not getting anywhere because of neighbouring land managers inaction or ineffective practices'*.

Enablers for Aboriginal involvement

- **Professional Aboriginal peer networks for support, awareness, knowledge and influence:** this forum event was viewed positively as a platform to build on to deliver: peer-to-peer support with the small cohort of Aboriginal natural resource management professionals across NSW; provide awareness of on-ground activities and opportunities; building knowledge of invasive species management practices; and importantly, providing a representative forum to engage with communities through one body (not multiple agencies) and influence land managers and political leaders in decision making.
- **Building obligation to Country in the invasive species system as positive way to frame and involve people:** viewed as an effective way to bring together a range of Aboriginal groups, scientists and leaders around shared obligation and common purpose for healthy country – aligns with the shared responsibility model of biosecurity management but may be better understood by both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. This was viewed as different from talking about individualising rights. It was also seen as more sustainable and powerful (for example, can draw in recalcitrants). *'Decision makers are often those who have been left an inheritance that has come at the cost of our inheritance ... need to build their understanding of that inheritance being more than that ... about obligations to country.'* *'Advocating the obligation as positive, building awareness and understanding why it's important – that's a different way of seeing ... it's*

about shared values and responsibilities ... the bean counter that only wants to know about the money, that's because that's their responsibility in that role. If they are given the responsibility of being custodian of the land – that's the game changer'.

- **Knowing the whole 'cultural and colonial' history to adapt and apply appropriate management practices:** it was seen as important to understand the complete history of sites to acknowledge hundreds of years of degradation and that traditional practices cannot be assumed to have the same outcome as 230 years ago; *'key is to identify what has happened in the landscape before you start ... it's about what will work now, what is realistic given those changes. It can't be static.'* *'Healing Country involves knowing who and what the ingredients are to get a better outcome.'*
- **Bringing in strong regenerative science to empower on-Country practice:** many acknowledged the growth in land management and bush regeneration science and that drawing on this was an effective way to apply cultural practices in current modified environments. It also provided a powerful opportunity to build scientists' and other stakeholders' understanding and commitment to their obligations to Country: *'Coming together on shared responsibility of custodianship built the connection to country with the scientists themselves ... then they put their minds to it to help. We need to give them a sense of connection and build that sense of obligation. Then you get an advocate to do that work ongoing and that's sustainable.'* *'We weren't given lore of healing country after 200 plus years of abuse, that's why we have to do this together'.*
- **An empowered, nil-tenure and holistic approach to achieve good on-ground outcomes:** need level of power of Rural Fire Service with fire responses to access Country where there are critical risks from invasive species that require a response and to get everyone working together with clear responsibilities and obligations – this is critical to cross-tenure participation and effectiveness. *'We've got to get past recommendations, we need to say you have to change, it's non-negotiable.'* *'There are other people doing this on country and we need to learn ... not only seeing country holistically but responding holistically.'*
- **Connecting the on-ground work directly with the decision-makers to create the platform for change:** there was a shared sense of a need to focus on the scale that's achieving outcomes on-ground and then connect this with the decision-makers at the top. Middle management was viewed as the most frequent barrier and that they should be made to keep moving toward integrated outcomes with direction from the top. *'Focusing on those that see the opportunity, leave those out who don't'.*
- **Start from goodwill and positive relationships and build:** there was a common sense of the need to focus on sharing on-ground experiences and stories (not opinions) and where goodwill and positive relationship are the base to develop from – building from relationships, then understanding, then actions as part of a behaviour change approach.
- **Acknowledging cultural practice and mentoring as critical part of training and skills:** it was seen as important to move away from the narrow focus on only certificate-based training and skills assessment to ensure on-country practice, learning and mentoring 'mob to mob' are equally respected as an integral component. On-Country work was seen as hugely valuable and that more opportunities for are needed (including through a professional network). *'While we can accept there's a role in saying the training is completed, there should be capacity to sign off on it and not try and change the training, saying you're competent but not dictate how you're trained.'* *'Need to enhance where it [Aboriginal invasive species management services] exists, and then support those areas where it doesn't to build and give Aboriginal people the "in" to get in there'.*
- **First principle across the whole system needs to be empowerment (not control):** there was a shared acknowledgement that focusing on singular issues or solutions such as increasing Aboriginal roles in agencies will have no impact without the end-goal being empowerment. Examples discussed included that NPWS co-management should be

viewed as moving to handing land over, that agency efforts to build capability should have an end-goal of contracting that skilled service back in from Aboriginal providers.

- **The solutions rely on behavioural and structural change:** it was acknowledged that the solutions and enablers proposed in the forum are all underlined by behavioural and structural changes – the current mainstream approach is not working. *‘It’s really a behaviour change that’s needed, looking across Country holistically and making it the priority.’ ‘Ranger programs have so many issues ... because they’re just employing the whitefella governance ... need cultural governance and lore models to make it work’.*
- **Need to drive consistent message from first peoples – ‘we care about invasive species because it impacts our connection to Country’:** view that Aboriginal land managers need to be driving that message that *‘we want to, and have an obligation to, play in that space’*, Aboriginal obligation to Country fits with invasive species management and ideas of shared responsibility – invasives species are a direct threat to healthy Country.

Opportunities for improving involvement

- **Establish an independent Aboriginal Commissioner for Invasive Species:** positioned within an independent agency in NSW (note: the Commission was mentioned as an option), with intention to build similar roles in each state, territory and nationally and eventually expand scope to healthy Country. The role would provide Aboriginal peoples with a culturally-symbolic position to give leadership and voice to Aboriginal peoples to drive the change needed in invasive species management and connect the grass-roots level all the way up and across NSW to build support that addressing invasive species is a critical issue to heal Country – the role would be *‘focused on the Country work not system work’* needed. *‘We need to argue that if we want healthy Country we need to tackle invasive species ... we need the idea of wearing a rabbit not possum skin cloak, to prove we’re doing the right thing for country at this time ... Country has had enough ... Give us the opportunity and come on the journey with us’.* Note: a broader role of national First Nation Land and Sea Commissioner is being advocated by Invasive Species Council but it was felt that this role may be too extensive to begin with *‘we could start with invasive species ... to set ground for other types of commissioners that we may not be ready for yet’.*
- **Integrate Aboriginal voice and Country throughout the Invasive Species Management Review report and recommendations:** participants were of the view that the review Report needs to reflect the enablers by demonstrating the relevance of an Aboriginal voice and integrating country throughout – in preface, findings, recommendations, actions and measurement for accountability. Examples included: integrating obligations to healthy Country for all, importance of holistic, landscape-scale approaches, why invasive species are important to address for healthy Country, moving story of conservation from locking up to active management, reframing colonial histories and farming narratives: *‘Business as usual forgets about our story and ours is the first story.’*
- **Support the network initiated through this forum for further advice on the Review and to promote its sustainability:** to provide ongoing support between practitioners beyond personal networks, to drive change, identify and share opportunities, and to provide a representative forum to engage with communities and decision makers. Specific actions included to: compile and share feedback from the forum; establish a subsequent group email to build on and distribute resources; facilitate a subsequent forum in April 2024 for participants and others unable to attend to continue the conversation; and refine inputs to the Review – with a view to a sustainable and shared model between agencies/staff.