

# RNTBCs AND CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION WORKSHOP 'CHANGES TO COUNTRY AND CULTURE, CHANGES TO CLIMATE: REFLECTIONS ON INDIGENOUS RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION'

National Native Title  
Conference, Townsville,  
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By Christine Regan

The Centre for Land and Water Research at AIATSIS is undertaking case study research into what helps and what hinders climate change adaptation for registered native title bodies corporate (RNTBCs) and the native title holding groups they represent. This is part of a research grant from the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF). The research project focuses on the social and institutional barriers to and enablers of RNTBCs in facilitating community driven climate change adaptation.

RNTBCs, sometimes also referred to as PBCs, are the corporate entities that are established after a successful determination of native title has been made. Their key role is to protect and manage native title lands and waters on behalf of the broader native title holding group. There are currently 93 RNTBCs across Australia, with formal land management and community development responsibilities on native title land, which now comprises around 17 percent of the Australian continent.

RNTBCs have a key role to play in climate change adaptation practices because of their legislative, cultural and social responsibilities and because they are a contemporary structure through which traditional Indigenous authority can be exercised. However, research by AIATSIS has found that these governing Indigenous bodies are marginalised in the governance, institutional and decision-making structures and practices designed to facilitate climate change adaptation.

As part of the project a workshop was held at the Native Title Conference in June 2012. The aim of the workshop, entitled 'Changes to country and culture,



changes to climate: Reflections on Indigenous resilience and adaptation', was to engage in a dialogue between RNTBCs and Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and stakeholders about:

- the social, economic and institutional factors that drive or undermine RNTBC facilitation of climate change adaptation in remote Indigenous communities
- the gaps in Indigenous involvement in climate change policy and decision making
- the use of traditional Indigenous knowledge to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

The workshop was co-convened by Dr Jessica Weir, a Research Fellow at the University of Canberra, and Tran Tran, Research Fellow at the Centre for Land and Water Research at AIATSIS, and chaired by Professor Marcia Langton. There were presentations by Traditional Owners from the Karajarri Traditional Lands Association (KTLA), Abm Elgoring Ambung RNTBC and Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC (with Sonia Leonard from the University of Melbourne). The critical issues that emerged from the workshop were:

- how the governance, land holding and management, and community development responsibilities of RNTBCs places them in a strong position to contribute to climate change adaptation
- how RNTBCs, local councils and governments can more successfully and inclusively collaborate on the building of infrastructure, town planning, economic development, land and water management and other adaptation work
- the need for the knowledge, experiences and unique situation of RNTBCs to be taken into account in recommendations for institutional design for climate change adaptation
- the gaps in Indigenous involvement in climate change adaptation decision-making processes, and the need to identify what constitutes best practice for that decision-making.

The workshop began with the presentation by Ngurrara Traditional Owners, from the Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation, who, in partnership with Sonia Leonard from the University of Melbourne, discussed the Ngurrara Climate Change Initiative project. The

project establishes a methodology for using traditional knowledge to provide a better understanding of climate patterns and ways to adapt to environmental changes on native title lands.

Traditional Owners from the KTLA discussed how PBCs can play an important role in coordinating the use of traditional knowledge to care for country.

The Karajarri also focused on ways of maintaining cultural identity in the context of climate change and its impacts on Indigenous cultural practices relating to country.

Representatives from the Abm Elgoring Ambung spoke about how RNTBCs are the governing Indigenous institutions

through which Traditional Owners can potentially exercise control over the decisions that are made about country, but that lack of investment in RNTBCs is preventing them from having a voice in climate change decision making.

Tran Tran and Jessica Weir presented on the social and institutional dimensions of climate change adaptation and the role of native title holders in this context, noting that there are many areas of law and legislation, policy making and institutional processes that are yet to adapt to the introduction of native title and to the even more recent establishment of the RNTBCs. Tran and Weir discussed how existing legal, political and academic institutions can compartmentalise and exclude native title holders.

THE OUTCOMES AND EMERGENT THEMES OF THE WORKSHOP ARE DISCUSSED IN MORE DEPTH IN THE RNTBCS AND CLIMATE CHANGE WORKSHOP REPORT, WHICH WILL BE MADE AVAILABLE IN OCTOBER TO VIEW ONLINE AT THE AIATSIIS CENTRE FOR LAND AND WATER RESEARCH WEBSITE: [HTTP://WWW.AIATSIIS.GOV.AU/RESEARCH LW/ADAPTATION.HTML](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/lw/adaptation.html)



Images: Opposite page: Seasonal flooding in Kowanyama, QLD. Credit: Tran Tran. Above: Tran Tran and Thomas 'Dooli' King, Bidyadanga, WA. Credit: Jessica Weir.

