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PERSPECTIVE

The impact of climate change on country and community and the role of mental health professionals working with Aboriginal communities in recovery and promoting resilience

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Abstract

This paper emerged from discussions between the authors about our shared and different perspectives of climate change and its impact on the social, emotional, physical, spiritual and cultural wellbeing of Aboriginal Peoples and mental health services in a rural region, heavily impacted in recent years by bushfires and floods. Here we discuss, from the lead authors personal perspective as a Gamilaraay Woman, the experience of Solastalgia as a critical impact of climate change on wellbeing. Specifically, we discuss the relationship of a connection to country from a Gamilaraay, first person perspective through a series of diary entries from the lead author. Authors are researchers from different cultural backgrounds, connected through a medical research futures fund research project, to promote resilience within Aboriginal communities and the health services sector in the New England, North West region. The lead author has cultural connections to some of the communities we work with and our work is informed by these connections. While this paper was written to express an Aboriginal perspective on climate change and wellbeing, it reflects our shared perspectives of how disasters such as bushfires impact the wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples. We also explore the connection between the impact of localised, recurring natural disasters and the increasing demands on mental health services in regional and rural areas and discuss what this means with Aboriginal and non-Indigenous mental health nurses and researchers working in regional and rural areas where access to mental health services often poses considerable challenges. From our perspective, mental health research and nursing play an important role in walking alongside Aboriginal Peoples as we explore, respond and create resilience to the ever-present influence that climate change is having on our lives, communities, country and workplaces.

KEYWORDS
Aboriginal, Australia, climate change, connection, country, eco-anxiety, eco-grief, first nation, Indigenous, psychosocial well-being, solastalgia

PREFACE

This paper was written to express a personal Gamilaraay perspective, and has been informed by our discussion as a group of researchers with differing cultural backgrounds. As such, the role of this paper is to acknowledge the importance of connection to country and our different and unique relationships with the countries we live and work on when discussing social, emotional, cultural and spiritual dimensions of wellbeing.

We need to acknowledge and pay our respects to each of the unseeded First Nations Countries that we have the privilege of live, play, cry and work on.

We acknowledge the Aboriginal Communities of Inverell and Tingha from Rural NSW, with whom we have a respectful and valuable working relationship and have openly shared their stories to provide education and understanding of individual community priorities and perspectives.

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the beauty, depth, ancestor-ship and knowledge of each of the 250 distinct Aboriginal language groups within Australia and implore the reader to learn about the culture, community and country, of which some of you call home.

We also recognise the importance of language. By translating and writing Aboriginal story, there are oftentimes unacknowledged depths to the meaning behind the words. We wish to acknowledge the space between each word, the content of 'More than Words'. Furthermore, for the context of this paper, we will be referring to Gomeroi/Kamilaroi/Gamilaraay Country as Gamilaraay.

Lastly, we acknowledge the tensions surrounding First Nation identities and respectfully use the word 'Aboriginal' throughout this paper, to acknowledge and reflect the words of Aboriginal Elders who have expressed a preference for the term Aboriginal to that of other identifiers and identities such as Indigenous or First Nations. In the context of this paper, the word Aboriginal is inclusive of all of Australia's First Nations Peoples, including the recognition of Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

INTRODUCTION

There is no dispute, the planet we once knew is changing and has metaphorically been turned upside down in recent years. Not too long ago, terms such as 'Anthropocene'[1] and 'El Niño'[2] were terms not widely known or understood. However, in recent years, these terms are increasingly being used to foreground the significant issues many people are facing as the realities of climate change move beyond just words; As we repeatedly face, respond to and recover from devastating natural disasters and significant periods of extreme weather. In recent years in Australia, communities and professionals have struggled to respond meaningfully to these events and the increasing demand on mental health services to assist those impacted by these events.

Whilst there has been a marked increase in attention to the relationships between Culture and climate change in Aboriginal Communities, only limited research has investigated this issue. Platforms such as social media and content sharing websites, have grown relationships and connections between global communities concerned with climate change and increased the visibility of national and international public health priorities, political unrest, disasters and climate change (Rotman et al., 2011). As such, there is increased awareness of the impact of the changing environment on the mental health of our Communities resulting in an increased demand for mental health services.

In Australia, rural, regional, remote and discreet Aboriginal communities have suffered from impact of climate change and as such, research in this space is increasing. For example, we have experienced 1.4°C of warming since 1910 causing serious heatwaves, fires, rainfall changes, and severe droughts in areas of Australia (Bureau of Meteorology, 2022). In Australia, Aboriginal Communities have and will continue to be seriously impacted by these changes. A recent study by Standen et al. (2022) stated that factors such as climate sensitive health conditions and socioeconomic disadvantages due to the changing climate, will impact Aboriginal communities' abilities to adapt to climate change and may also adversely affect cultural practices.

Throughout history, Aboriginal peoples' families and communities have survived, however, despite the strengths and resilience of one of the the oldest living cultures, climate change will further delay Aboriginal peoples moving from surviving to thriving. Unfortunately, political and social influences are less responsive to the current research, with more work needed in this space to create meaningful and sustainable improvement.

This paper explores our shared and at times different perspectives about climate change, what this means in terms of working with Aboriginal Communities and the role of mental health services in regional New South Wales. Services, that are tasked with working in Communities impacted by unprecedented natural disasters, from droughts to bushfires and floods in a period of only a few years.

CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS

It is widely acknowledged that climate change is impacting health outcomes for the global population. Access to clean air, safe drinking water, sufficient food as well as problems related to rising temperatures and lack of access to safe shelter, may all result from climate change (World Health Organization, 2014). Increases in infectious and chronic disease, mental ill-health, entomology, food security, disaster planning and social disparities are attributable to the changing environment (Sullivan-Marx & McCauley, 2017). However, for some individuals and groups, the impact may be greater depending on the intersection between climate change and existing social and ecological determinants of health (Fook, 2018). Aboriginal people are identified as more vulnerable to climate change due to their close links to the environment (Pearce et al., 2015). As explained by Sullivan-Marx and McCauley (2017), many

groups are particularly vulnerable to climate change; those of low income, immigrant groups, Indigenous peoples, children and pregnant women, older adults, persons with disabilities and persons with pre-existing or chronic medical conditions. Climate change poses many threats to Indigenous peoples around the world who have been among the first to feel the diverse impacts of climate change because of the unique and enduring relationships Indigenous people have with the land. In fact, they are often the ones who experience climate change first because their livelihoods are more dependent upon the land, nature and the weather (Martinez-Alum, 2016). Issues such as forced migration away from homelands may result in the need for relocation to urban centres where Aboriginal peoples often end up living in poverty (United Nations, 2007) or to other areas that are also vulnerable to climate change. Displacement due to environmental circumstances, have also contributed to feelings of Solastalgia (Albrecht, 2005), a term coined by the environmental philosopher, Professor Glenn Albrecht which refers to feelings of pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace that results from seeing the destruction of one's environment. It is a term for the feelings of nostalgia or home sickness when you are at home. Albrecht described this sense of loss for Indigenous peoples as follows:

> The Indigenous people of the Earth who have been dispossessed of their land and its cultural meanings are likely to experience the pathology of nostalgia. Nostalgia for the past, in which geographical and cultural integration were both highly valued and sustainable is, for them, an ongoing, painful experience.
>
> (Albrecht, 2006)

While this is still a relatively new term, Indigenous scholars have already embraced its use and recognised its existence. For example, Maguire (2020) discusses the position of Solastalgia as a psychological condition, experienced by Indigenous Peoples. Stating, Solastalgia can be brought about by factors that are both natural (climate change) and artificial (dispossession of Indigenous lands through human induced change). Concern for the welfare of Aboriginal peoples has thus led to studies that have exposed the serious emotional consequences of climatic events on Aboriginal people and identify the factors that place Aboriginal peoples at a disadvantage in relation to climate change (Standen et al., 2022).

From an Aboriginal perspective, significant emotional distress that encompasses terms such as Solastalgia, eco-grief and eco-anxiety can lead to a denigration of culture and deterioration of physical and mental health such as '…high levels of chronic disease, disempowerment, apathy, and suicidality among young and Elders' (Fook, 2018).

Prior to the social influence of the climate debate in recent years, Aboriginal Peoples had rarely been considered in public discourse and investigations related to climate change; rather, they have had to tolerate a top-down approach to the issue where their input has been devalued or ignored (Petheram Zander et al., 2010). However, as stated previously, changes in public attitudes towards climate activism have highlighted the necessity for greater research in this space. In 2018, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) launched the 2018–2021 action plan: A Strategic Framework for Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health through Research (NHMRC, 2018), which led to the implementation of the NHMRC's Special Initiative in Human Health and Environmental Change (SIHHEC), with an objective to strengthen the Australian health system's resilience, preparedness and responsiveness to changing environmental conditions and extreme weather events by establishing a collaborative, multidisciplinary network that builds national research capacity and capability in human health and environmental change (NHMRC, 2019).

One of the resulting outcomes was the creation of the Healthy Environments and Lives National Research Network (HEAL) which has followed the finalisation of the previous project. Formally launched in May 2022, HEAL is a coalition of 100 investigators and more than 30 organisations from across Australia that will bridge the gap between knowledge and action. It brings together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wisdom, public health, epidemiology, sustainable development and innovative data science and communication methods to address environmental change and its impacts on health across all Australian states and territories (NHMRC, 2022).

The development of this initiative formed 'Organically' after rural and remote Aboriginal communities, already vulnerable to health care inequities and the social and cultural determinants of health, were then hit with unexpected and uncontrollable bushfires, after years of devastating periods of drought. The 2019/2020 Bushfires were described as unprecedented in scale, global in impact, and appear to have had wide ranging political and attitudinal impacts (Biddle et al., 2020). The effects were far reaching as an estimated 14.4 per cent of the adult population (of Australia) reported direct exposure either through their property being damaged, their property being threatened, or being told to evacuate (Biddle et al., 2020), with an estimated 77.8 per cent of the population reporting indirect exposure, by having a friend or family member that had property damage; friend/family that had property threatened; had their travel/holiday plans affected; were exposed to the physical

effects of smoke; or felt anxious or worried (Biddle et al., 2020). The impact of these events is still under investigation as we see increasing physical health disparities and both direct and in-direct impacts on mental health because of the bushfires.

In addition, a report by ecologist Professor Christopher Dickman from the University of Sydney, revised his (original) estimate of the number of animals killed in bushfires in NSW (in the 2019/2020 Bushfire season) to more than 800 million animals, and more than one billion animals impacted nationally (Dickman, 2020). In Aboriginal communities, long term and deep spiritual connections to country and responsibilities to care for country could potentially be affected by such a significant loss of wildlife.

Many Aboriginal communities have responded in frustration, at the apparent lack of planning and prevention strategies that were not implemented prior to the bushfires. It is the belief of many that the forced cessation of regular burning undertaken traditionally, led to an overload of forest fuel which has been blamed for the intensity of the 2019/2020 bushfires.

> Like the Dreaming, like Songlines, Black Summer showed us the past, present and future. We saw the consequences of our neglect, the devastation that caused, and a warning for the years ahead. We saw immense human effort, courage, mateship, skill, wonderous firefighting equipment and technology, strong community support and an international rally of resources, and a huge expense. The result? The worst fires we've ever had.
>
> (Gammage & Pasco, 2021, Pg. 155)

In response to the impact of the bushfires, the World Health Organization (2021) stated that 'The 2019/2020 bushfire season demonstrated that bushfire behaviour is becoming more extreme and less predictable. Catastrophic fire conditions may become more common, rendering traditional bushfire prediction models and firefighting techniques less effective'. Therefore, it is necessary for local and state governments and emergency response organisations to start planning and implementing prevention models in conjunction with local Aboriginal Communities who have a deep understanding of the Country that they have nurtured for thousands of years.

Additionally, now, more than ever, initiatives such as HEAL that aim to develop the scientific evidence, and research capacity and capability, to mitigate the long-term health consequences of environmental and climate change, and improve the health and wellbeing of communities (NHMRC, 2022) are essential for the planning of on-going strategies that promote Community connection, responsiveness and resilience in response to the continued threat of natural disasters.

CONNECTION TO COUNTRY

To understand the significance of the impacts of climate change, better understandings of the multi-dimensional relationship Aboriginal Peoples share with country needs to be shared with mental health nurses, practitioners and researchers. As this relationship influences the social, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing of Aboriginal Peoples, witnessing the devastating impacts of recent unprecedented natural disasters on country has the potential to cause significant grief.

In Aboriginal Cultures, a relationship to country is a reciprocal living kinship system. By developing a level of understanding of the extensiveness of this interdependence relationality, one can begin to see the impact that colonisation has had on not just Country but peoples' relationships with Country, creating a disconnect in many ways and affecting the health, wellbeing and spirituality of individuals and communities on a wholistic level. Everything starts and ends with Country in the Aboriginal worldview (Kelly & Neal, 2021, Pg.1).

But what is Country?

> Country is central to everything Aboriginal: it is a continuum, without beginning or ending. In this worldview, everything is living-people, animals, plants, rocks, earth, water, stars, air and all else. There is no division between animate and inanimate.
>
> (Gammage & Pasco, 2021, Pg.1)

A connection to country is a 'sense of belonging and identity', it is a connection to the land that is 'deeply spiritual, a relationship formed in the footsteps of ancestors' an integral part of Aboriginal Culture (Evolve Communities, 2020). This powerful connection is what grounds and motivates the art, dance, song, ceremony and lore of Aboriginal culture. Connection to country is the result of over 65 000 years' worth of ancestry and knowledge that has been passed down from generation to generation through unwavering oral traditions and a deep, spiritual sense of kinship with traditional lands.

The University of Newcastle's Aboriginal scholar, Dr Stacey McMullen states:

> Country is a living entity. It has a yesterday, it has a today, and it has a tomorrow with a consciousness- an action and a will towards life. It holds our stories. It holds our tradition. It holds a part of who we are. Country is home and peace. Nourishment for body, mind, spirit, and hearts…So that means if we Care for Country it will care for us, and it's not just the physical

> management of the geographical area, it's actually looking after all of the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations we have that are associated with that area.
>
> (Anderson, 2022)

Therefore, if Country becomes sick, how do we better understand that it's People become sick too?

THE LINK BETWEEN CONNECTION TO COUNTRY AND MENTAL HEALTH

The 2019/2020 Black Summer bushfires sparked a range of important conversations around the direct, indirect and on-going impact that ecological disasters have and will continue to have on rural and remote communities.

In January of 2020, the NSW Government launched an inquiry into the 2019/2020 Bushfires and welcomed Independent submissions from 'bushfire-affected residents, emergency and support personnel, organisations and the general public' (NSW Health, 2020a). The NSW Aboriginal Lands Council took the opportunity to provide the NSW Government with valuable recommendations and insights into the impact of the Bushfires on the Aboriginal communities within their jurisdiction.

The NSW Aboriginal Lands Council (NSW Health, 2020b) wished to highlight the mental health impact that the bushfires had on Aboriginal communities. Stating,

> …this trauma has been amplified by the fact that important cultural and sacred sites, homes and livelihoods have been destroyed. Country, trees, plants and animals are intensely significant to Aboriginal people, as a conduit for connecting Traditional Custodians to their culture, country, lore and ancestors.

Additionally, an article written by Vanessa Cavanagh, an Aboriginal Woman and Associate Lecturer from the School of Geography and Sustainable Communities at the University of Wollongong discussed the emotional distress she experienced from losing a prominent grandmother tree to the bushfires, on a property where she grew up on Darkinjung country.

> …for this grandmother tree, the combination of ongoing drought and persistent flames ended her reign at the far edge of the yard. The sight of this old tree with her crown removed brought warm, stinging tears to my eyes. It was a deep hurt of losing someone far older and wiser than me. Losing someone who was respected and adored. Someone with knowledge I cannot fathom or comprehend. When I told my mum that evening she reacted similarly, a personal and family loss. To others she might just be a big tree.
>
> (Cavanagh, 2020)

Country is an integral element of Aboriginal models of health and wellbeing. In an Aboriginal context, social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) varies from the understanding of non-Indigenous health. A report by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Project states:

> For Indigenous peoples, health itself is not understood as the concept often assumed by non-Indigenous people, rather it is a culturally informed concept, conceived of as 'social and emotional wellbeing'—a term that is increasingly used in health policy but in this context carries a culturally distinct meaning: it connects the health of an Indigenous individual to the health of their family, kin, community, and their connection to country, culture, spirituality and ancestry. It is a deep-rooted, more collective and holistic concept of health than that used in Western medicine.
>
> (Dudgeon et al., 2016)

The loss of Country is felt on a social, emotional and physical level for Aboriginal peoples. Furthermore, relocation due to environmental degradation can have a considerable effect on the SEWB of Aboriginal peoples. A report by the Australian Bureau of Statistics into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Perspectives on Homelessness (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014) states that 'some people who have adequate shelter, secure tenure and control of, and access to space may feel homeless if living 'off country' due to being disconnected from family and/or their community'.

The exposure of devastating natural disasters in rural and remote areas, especially in Aboriginal communities, have the added risk of communities experiencing 'Collective Trauma'. Collective Trauma is defined as 'the psychological distress that a group — usually an entire culture, community, or another large group of people — experience in response to a shared trauma' (Cook-Campbell, 2022).

Though there is minimal research into the experience of collective trauma in Aboriginal Communities, because of the recent natural disasters, it can be surmised that this will most likely be an experience felt by effected communities.

Mental distress related to climate change

More recently we have seen greater interest in the social and emotional impacts of climate change (Usher et al., 2019), but the impact remains less understood change (Upward et al., 2021). In 2021, Bruce Pasco a Bunurong/Yuin man wrote 'The past two years have shaken our assumed ability to control nature' (Gammage & Pasco, 2021, Pg.12) and possibly, the continuation and expectation of future environmental disasters is fuelling a sense of global dread. As a result of these feelings associated with climate change, individuals have experienced worsened mental health, including symptoms such as difficulty sleeping, stress, anxiety and depression (Usher et al., 2019). More severe symptoms such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may also develop for some individuals, especially among people with existing mental health conditions, which result in increased admissions to mental health facilities, an increase in mortality, and increased suicide rates (Charlson et al., 2021).

There is increasing evidence that extreme weather events such as bushfires and floods, lead to an increase in mental health distress, particularly increasing the incidence of depression and PTSD in affected individuals (Clayton, 2021).

Inaction by the Government to create strategies that would support communities through the effects of the changing climate, are generating emotional anguish.

> It's the feeling of being abandoned or overridden by authorities, of being denied action even though they have the money to act, that festers and contributes to this mental distress developing into a medical problem
>
> (Kenyon, 2019).

A FIRST PERSON, GAMILARAARY PERSPECTIVE OF CONNECTION TO COUNTRY AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NATURAL DISASTERS ON THE HEALTH OF ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Kisani Upward, BN, RN, PhD Candidate at the University of New England is research assistant and PhD candidate on a Medical Research Futures Funded (MRFF) bushfires grant (APP 1201667), led by Professor Kim Usher. Kisani is a Gamilaraay/Wiradjuri woman and artist who lives and works in regional New South Wales and has a deep connection to Gamilaraay country.

Over the past year Kisani has been working closely, gathering stories and facilitating arts workshops with regional Aboriginal communities who were significantly impacted by the 2019/2020 bushfires and have recently experienced unforeseen flooding after years of prolonged drought.

The stories of the experiences and emotional toll that these events have had on the Aboriginal communities, as well as the irreparable damage to country as a result of these disasters, has had a considerable impact on Kisani. However, Kisani is in the unique position of being both a Health Researcher and an Aboriginal woman, thus being a bridge between the two worlds. As such, we would like to share with you her story from this unique perspective. However, it must be said that the experiences she speaks of is solely her own and she does not speak for the community as a whole.

CRITICAL REFLECTION EXTRACTS FROM KISANI UPWARDS RESEARCH JOURNAL

A reflection of our project and my role

My Country has suffered through enormous amounts of heartfelt devastation and loss recently. My Community spent years worrying about our water supply, as the drought took its toll on our industries and our People with even the sturdiest native trees suffering in the intense heat and humid days. Consequently, just as our Community couldn't have been anymore disheartened, our land turned to ash.

The 2019/2020 Black Summer Bushfires were extreme, destructive and unprecedented. The impact was felt all across the nation as smoke filled the air and people were forced to stay inside. However, it was nothing compared to the incomprehensible fear that was felt by those in the path of nature's wrath.

The charred, dusty death that was left in the fires wake, was a morgue of desolation. My Country was unceremoniously scarred.

In recent years, we have seen a shift in how we as a collective we treat our Country, with a rise in cross-cultural initiatives that link our ancient knowledge of caring for Country, with Government supported programs. These changes are being led by Australia's most respected Aboriginal knowledge holders such as, Dr Victor Steffensen, founder of Firesticks (2022), an organisation that teaches Cultural Burning techniques, whilst teaching his avid students to respect the land and read the signs on when to burn. However, if we look at the destructive path of recent events, in some Communities, these initiatives are too little, too late.

Over the past year, my team on the MRFF Bushfires project, have developed a relationship and friendships with the Aboriginal Communities of Inverell and Tingha, in Regional NSW. A partnership that has brought to us an invaluable resource of information, that we have been trusted to preserve for future generations. Our project has become more than a collection

of stories and has morphed into a capacity building bridge that is creating resilience and connection in these Communities.

Whilst spending time in these Communities, local Elders have gifted us with stories of nurturing the land, of gathering Bush Tucker and Bush Medicine and of learning to manage Country through traditional Cultural Burning Practices. Their stories allowed us to see the joy of these memories but also the pain of their loss. As we process the true depth of the effects that un-natural fire has had on the land, we begin to see that the impact is more than surface deep. There is more to this story, a more-than-human impact. We have begun to unveil a sorrowful story of the increasing effect that Climate Change has had on rural, regional and remote Aboriginal Communities.

As both a health researcher and a Gamilaraay Woman, I have a responsibility not only to my team, but also a cultural responsibility to share my perspective of the impact that these disasters have had on our Country. My role as a Gamilaraay Woman and Researcher demands that I view and examine these stories from both my Aboriginal and Western lens, to encompass a wholistic depth to this work, for the sake of cultural responsiveness and as a member of this Mob (Upward, 2022).

Goonoowigal

Today we spent some time yarning with the Aboriginal Elders Group of Inverell and it was such an incredible experience. When we were finished, I felt compelled to head out on country and visit the sites that the Elders had spoken of, which is now referred to as the Goonoowigal State Conservation Park, Inverell.

Goonoowigal is a place of cultural, ceremonial and spiritual significance for the local Aboriginal community, as it was traditionally the home of many elders and their families. However, the stories of a bountiful traditional landscape that the Elders Group spoke of, did not match up to the desolation that was observed as a result of the destructive nature of the Bushfires. Through my observations, I saw burnt, fallen trees, an influx of lichen fungi and a bushland overtaken by un-natural weeds, that has replaced the once carefully nurtured Country of our Elders. The following images (Figures 1 and 2) depict the aftermath of the 2019/20 bushfires, 2 years on.

FIGURE 1 Upward (2022). Goonoowigal State Conservation Park [Photograph]. [Unpublished PhD Thesis Photograph] University of New England.

FIGURE 2 Upward (2022). Goonoowigal State Conservation Park [Photograph]. [Unpublished PhD Thesis Photograph] University of New England.

Lost opportunities

After my visit out to Goonoowigal, I reached out to a friend of mine who is a Native Horticulturalist and we had a conversation about the impact that the bushfire and preceding lichen outbreak had on the Native Landscape of the park.

From our conversation, it is my understanding that each pocket of bush medicine and bush tucker plants is genetically unique for that specific region. Therefore, without prior conservation efforts to gather seeds from these local species of vegetation, there is a chance that the loss of these distinctive plants will result in their extinction from this area. I'm not sure if this is the case for Goonoowigal, as I have not had a chance to talk to any local Nurseries, but I can only hope that local groups had the chance to preserve the history of their unique regional flora before the bushfires swept through.

As a Gamilaraay Woman, connected to this country through my Ancestors, my heart aches for this

community. The idea that thousands of years' worth of carefully curated bush tucker and bush medicine, that was once used to nourish and heal the Aboriginal peoples of this region for generations may be lost, pains me. Listening to the stories of our elders, seeing the joy in their faces upon reminiscing of times when they lived off this land, even as the settlers immigrated to their country, brought a deeply humanistic element to their loss. When I had visited and yarned with the elders, they had spoken of their passion, their need, their drive to preserve their stories. In a way, they believe their stories may be the only way left to share their history, and if the land has irreversibly changed because of the bushfires, this may ring true.

After this conversation, I took the time to research further into the impact that a loss of Native Vegetation may have on Aboriginal communities.

In my research, I learnt about the increasing popularity of Native, Natural products in mainstream markets. I discovered that there is increasing popularity in a range of products, that have been created using Traditional Aboriginal Knowledge's and Practices, catering to a niche market. This movement promotes natural, healthy food options and products, using native plants and animals and has created a valuable source of income for the Aboriginal communities who have created businesses around these products. Thereby, in situations where devastating natural disasters have severely impacted natural resources, the flow on effect means that Aboriginal communities like Inverell may have lost the opportunity to use their native resources and traditional knowledge of bush tucker and bush medicine, as a source of income in this industry. Therefore, natural disasters as a result of climate change can hinder the potential growth of self-sustainability within these communities, which can create a sense of loss, and possibly add to the collective intergeneration trauma experienced in rural, regional and remote Aboriginal populations as a result of lost opportunities (Upward, 2022).

Solastalgia

A few weeks ago, our team had travelled to meet with the Aboriginal community of Tingha and were obstructed by unprecedented flooding in the region. This past weekend, we managed to arrange another meeting and had an 'Art & Yarn' Session.

During our session, we spoke about the recurring natural disasters and one conversation really stood out. We were told that there was a family that had lost everything in the fires and were still living in a caravan 2 years on. Then with the flooding last week, some of the homes that were saved from the ferocity of the bushfires, were inundated by the rising river and suffered structural damage and loss of personal belongings. This is where the question was posed, if in 2 years, a family had not yet been afforded the luxury of a permanent, stable residence after the bushfires, what would happen to the families impacted this year by the floods?

In our previous yarning sessions with the Aboriginal community of Tingha, I had seen a community that was striving towards healing and resilience. A few of the local Aboriginal community members had even created a group called 'Building the Tingha Spirit', where they can teach, learn and come together a whole. However, they are yet again in the face of another unforeseen disaster and we are a long way from understanding the depth of the impact these collective events have had on this community.

Upon reflection of the yarns we had, one of the terms that keep coming back to me is 'Solastalgia'. I had mentioned the word and asked if they had ever heard it before, and they had not. which I knew would be the case as it was only recently coined. But even though this is an unfamiliar term in Aboriginal communities, I see Solastalgia reflected in their stories of loss and grief. I see Solastalgia being felt by a community expressing a sense of eco-anxiety of an unknown future, experienced by a community that lives day to day with the looming threat of the next 'big event' and unfortunately the flooding proves that this fear is not without warrant.

The Aboriginal communities of Tingha now face a long and strenuous battle to restore the homes lost through the disasters and in areas like Inverell, the community must now navigate their way through the red tape of legislations and law, to reinstate the beauty that was Goonoowigal. The implications of which have and will continue to have detrimental impacts on the social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of these communities. They have a long journey ahead of them and I believe that the support of mental health nurses, health professionals and researchers hold the key to assisting these communities alongside the present community initiated projects, to reconnect their People. They can encourage resilience, promote strength and guide them to create solid foundations which will help them establish methods of recovery, post-disaster for the future (Upward, 2022).

AN ARTISTIC REFLECTION OF THE FIRE & THE FLOOD

The following painting (Figure 3) is accompanied by a poem, which is a creative dissemination, is derived from the experience of listening to the stories of bushfire and flood impacted Aboriginal peoples. The poem features the term symbioscene, coined by Glenn Albrecht (2021) which is the imagined future described as 'that period in Earth's history where humans symbiotically reintegrate themselves, emotionally, psychologically and technologically, into nature and natural systems'. Therefore, the artwork alludes to the illusive potential future of the symbioscene, by excluding its existence.

FIGURE 3 Upward (2022). The Fire, The Flood & The Symbioscene. [Unpublished PhD Project Artwork] University of New England.

The Fire, The Flood & The Symbioscene

Whilst the Fire & Flood are represented, the finishing piece is missing. This Artwork will remain unfinished until the symbiocene – to retain hope – to capture a feeling of hope within the painting – Words not used, or even understood Symbiocene, Anthropocene, Solastalgia Yet these absent words are present in other forms in our yarns – sadness, loss, grief, loss, destruction, trauma, loss, What Country used to be … and what it is becoming (Upward, 2022).

WHAT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE CAN TEACH ABOUT FIGHTING CLIMATE CHANGE

Aboriginal people are very aware of climate change. While there may be low awareness of the anthropogenic climate change issues in general, there is evidence that Aboriginal people in Australia are critically observing climate change on country (Nursey-Bray et al., 2019). For example, Aboriginal people are anxiously watching changes to water levels, the increasing occurrence of untoward weather events, and the impacts of climate change on many native bush tucker species and animals. Nursey-Bray et al. (2019) reported that participants in their study indicated that Aboriginal people have been observing these changes since the time of colonisation in this country. In our work with local Aboriginal people affected by the Black Summer fires in the Hunter New England area we have observed great concern around the lack of input into land management, especially about the lack of fire protection practices. The local people have told us many stories about the traditional practices of managing the country and how these helped to ensure that when fires occurred, they could be more easily maintained to an area rather than spread at great speed.

This is reiterated in the book 'Future Fire, Future Farming' of the First Knowledge's Series. Gammage and Pasco (2021, Pg.87) state,

> In 1788 the people of this land were farmers. They made and maintained Australia by using fire and no fire to nourish and distribute plants, and plant distribution to locate animals, birds, reptiles and insects.

These traditional, cultural practices are still used in some Aboriginal communities to this day. Fortunately, interventions such as the NSW Firesticks Initiative have challenged some contemporary attitudes and approaches to fire management (Beukers & Costello, 2017) and are encouraging local Government organisations to work with Aboriginal communities in managing the land more effectively and efficiently. These partnerships are leading the way for contemporary land management and are allowing Aboriginal communities to care for country, thus allowing them to nurture their relationship to country.

HOW CAN MENTAL HEALTH NURSES AND OTHER MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS SUPPORT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE TO COPE WITH AND FIGHT THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE?

It is important for Western health practitioners to conceptualise the deep, spiritual relationship Aboriginal peoples have with country. However, it is imperative for readers to understand that this article has discussed connection to country in a broad and general sense and that each individual circumstance is varied and diverse. Each 'Country' represents their relationship with the land in diverse and wonderful ways and thusly, the impact that these environmental disasters have on those communities is variable.

It is recommended that mental health nurses and other mental health professionals tailor their approach and responses independently. As stated by the United Nations, the most fruitful approach is to identify, rather than define Indigenous peoples. This is based on the fundamental criterion of self-identification as underlined in a number of human rights documents (United Nations, 2015).

When responding to Aboriginal mental health service needs, mental health nurses and other mental health professionals should adopt a culturally responsive, respectful and wholistic approach. In an Aboriginal context, cultural responsiveness is defined as, being transformative, incorporating knowledge, especially self-knowledge, behaviour and action, which requires practitioners to continually respond rather than simply being competent (Indigenous Allied Health Australia, 2019).

Furthermore, we implore mental health nurses and practitioners to engage with their communities and encourage clients/patients to re-connect with their communities. As stated by Dudgeon et al. (2016), 'engaging in cultural activities is an indicator of positive cultural identity that is associated with better mental health among Indigenous Australians.'

CONCLUSION

In many respects, climate change is affecting us all. Particularly Aboriginal communities in regional and remote areas who have and continue to face increasing natural disasters. Additionally, the mental health professionals who are faced with working in such devastated communities are challenged with operating service in locations that are confronted by unpredictable futures.

In this space, mental health professionals can create a meaningful and culturally responsive approach to healing within impacted communities by developing an understanding of the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and country. Additionally, mental health professionals are encouraged to develop community informed, place-based culturally responsive practices and language. By tailoring mental health approaches to each community based on their Individual and unique needs, mental health professionals can demonstrate a deep level of care and compassion that Aboriginal Communities value greatly.

Aboriginal Peoples have a historical mistrust of government, welfare and healthcare organisations. Therefore, service providers that express an understanding of cultural awareness, acknowledgement, respect, sensitivity and can listen and respond to the needs of the community, gain an enormous amount of respect and engagement from Aboriginal communities.

It is our understanding that if mental health professionals support and/or facilitate projects that encourage community engagement, they can promote strength and connection in Aboriginal communities to people, place and culture. Additionally, mental health professionals should encourage and support Aboriginal communities in sharing (where culturally appropriate) cultural knowledges, stories and practices within these projects, such as art and dance. Thus, creating meaningful, valuable and culturally significant engagement within Aboriginal communities.

We are yet to understand the future effects of climate change on the Australian landscape and the impact this will have on Aboriginal communities. Nevertheless, by engaging in dialogues with resilient, capable, empowered Aboriginal communities, there is hope to face the challenges that come, head on.

RELEVANCE FOR CLINICAL PRACTICE

There is increasing pressure on clinicians as a result of climate and rapid social change, subsequently impacting the mental health and wellbeing of those both directly and in-directly affected. Thus, driving the need for practice innovations and new perspectives in this space. In addition, Aboriginal research highlights inequities in service responses, and the complexities and tensions of clinical practice, particularly where standards of cultural safety are challenging to realise. Aboriginal responses to the increasing presentations of bushfires and other disasters point to innovative ways forward for clinicians (some of which are highlighted in this article).

Furthermore, this article is an example of a 'strengths-based' perspective, rather than the traditional deficit modelling approach. Which focuses on what assets an individual or community has and seeks to maximise them in order to promote health (Shay, 2021). A practice that encourages a positive and holistic approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing.

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Professor Kim Usher co-authored this paper and is the Editor-in-chief of the International Journal of Mental Health Nursing.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request from the authors.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Anthropocene—a word that describes the most recent period of time in Earth's history, marked by the impact of human activity on the planet's ecosystems and climate patterns (Lewis & Maslin, 2015).

[2] El Niño—is defined by National Geographic as a climate pattern associated with the warming of surface waters in the eastern Pacific Ocean (National Geographic, 2022).

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