

First Law a gift to healing and transforming climate and just us!

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767

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Abstract

Purpose – These words of introduction locate me on my tribal ancestral lands, and centres me as belonging to the Martuwarra, Fitzroy River in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. My family and community's inter-generational lived experiences of colonisation are grounded in the characteristics and learnings of "conflict, manipulation, divide and rule" as invasive unjust strategies of oppression and anti-dialogic action. These characteristics of oppression reflect invasive and unjust developments, colonialism continues to impact on our daily lives and threaten our cultural heritage, lifeways and livelihoods (Freire, 2005).

Design/methodology/approach – I understand the Net Zero: Heritage for Climate Action is a first of its kind, a capacity development project that aims to use Indigenous knowledge to develop integrated strategies for disaster risk reduction, climate action and peacebuilding (Jarillo and Crivelli, 2024). Importantly, one of the aims of the Net Zero Project is to enhance risk reduction and coping capacities of vulnerable heritage communities. In this way, my video story speaking directly to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) highlights the interconnected issue of heritage safeguard, upholding cultural rights and sustainable development of our people who are vulnerable cultural bearers, importantly, how we are working to effect change locally, while strengthening efforts globally, as we see ourselves as planetary citizens with a duty of care to Mother Earth and humanity (Redvers *et al.*, 2020).

Findings – The opportunity for freedom is being created through the growing coalitions of hope (Poelina, 2020). Organisations with a regenerative focus are connecting, networking, collectively thinking and transforming our world by being brave and challenging legal systems to recognise "rivers" as the lifeblood of our planet and our survival co-dependent on "a declaration of peace with Indigenous Australians with nature laws and first law" (RiverOfLife *et al.*, 2024). Together we are decolonising our thinking; uniting and bringing together a pluriverse of ideas and actions to right size our planet and give humanity and Mother Earth a climate chance (RiverOfLife *et al.*, 2024).

Research limitations/implications – The final question, I ask my country and the world to sustain my culture, my home, my lifeways and my livelihood "can we achieve peace, harmony and balance"? Can we shift from business as usual, to the new economies, through intentional communities, through bicultural and bioregional planning and development? If the answer is yes, then there is hope for humanity, and the young ones yet to be born. Let us adopt the values, ethics and virtues found in First Law as a gift to healing our lands, our people and climate.

Practical implications – It is clear from the voices of Yi-Martuwarra people, "If [our] River Dies, We Die" (Moore *et al.*, 2023). When we stand united, we hold the dreaming time, from past, present and future, and we sing together a new "Martuwarra River Time" song. Through this moral and ethical partnership of hope the Net Zero Project Heritage for Climate Action ignites the opportunity to transform climate change, climate chaos and provide the climate chance through just us!

Social implications – Yi-Martuwarra people highlight the need for dialogue, unity, cooperation and multiple forms of evidence, to understand the cumulative impacts of development. It is clear from the voices of Yi-Martuwarra people, "If [our] River Dies, We Die" (Moore *et al.*, 2023). When we stand united, we hold the dreaming time, from past, present, and future, and we sing together a new "Martuwarra River Time" song. Through this moral and ethical partnership of hope the Net Zero Project Heritage for Climate Action



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Originality/value – As the impacts of climate change continue to intensify, it is imperative to centre Indigenous well-being in adaptation efforts by enabling bottom-up approaches via community-led solutions, promoting land rights, protecting traditional heritage and cultural practices and cultivating social connections. Given the increasing recognition of well-being as a fundamental marker of successful adaptation, it should be central to climate change research and policymaking, but for this to be of benefit to Indigenous Peoples and local communities context-specific understandings of health and well-being are necessary (Jarillo and Crivelli, 2024).

Keywords Climate change, Indigenous wisdom, Well-being, Peace

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This introduction through place locates me as the storyteller across deep time. *Jaiyda Boorroo, Nyikina, Ngayoo yimardoowarra marnin*. Welcome to Nyikina Country, I am a woman who belongs to the Martuwarra, named Fitzroy River by early European settlers of what is now Australia. These words of introduction locate me on my tribal ancestral lands, and centres me as *belonging to* the Martuwarra, Fitzroy River in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. My family and community's inter-generational lived experiences of colonisation are grounded in the characteristics and learnings of "conflict, manipulation, dived and rule" as invasive unjust strategies of oppression and anti-dialogic action. These characteristics of oppression reflect invasive and unjust developments, colonialism continues to impact on our daily lives and threaten our cultural heritage, lifeways and livelihoods (Freire, 2005). Now more than ever, in the face of climate change, I have focussed on "cooperation, unity, organisation" as the strategies of dialogic action for our peoples' dreams for freedom and hope (Poelina, 2020). This decolonising approach calls for the raising of consciousness as critical to understanding and acting against the colonised world which we have inherited. In turn our people believe and hold the right to be "free" by engaging in dialogue and a transformative action for change (Freire, 2005).

I understand the Net Zero: Heritage for Climate Action is a first of its kind, a capacity development project that aims to use Indigenous knowledge to develop integrated strategies for disaster risk reduction, climate action and peacebuilding (Jarillo and Crivelli, 2024). Importantly, one of the aims of the Net Zero Project is to enhance risk reduction and coping capacities of vulnerable heritage communities. In this way, my video story speaking directly to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) highlights the interconnected issue of heritage safeguard, upholding cultural rights and sustainable development of our people who are vulnerable cultural bearers [1]. Importantly, how we are working to effect change locally, while strengthening efforts globally, as we see ourselves as planetary citizens with a duty of care to Mother Earth and humanity (Redvers *et al.*, 2020).

My story defines First Law, Indigenous jurisprudence, as one part of the collective wisdom necessary to balance the planet away from extinction and protect our heritage through climate action. Together in a law of relationships between human and more-than-human beings, Indigenous people believe we can all take these learning of First Law to reframe legal regimes and an ethics of care, from individualism back to communityism, from the "I to the We"; by emphasising the interconnectedness of people, culture, nature and our well-being (Sangha *et al.*, 2024). I share examples of Indigenous knowledge and practices for resource use and demonstrate how such wisdom can be used to develop integrated strategies to reduce the risk of disasters, adapt to climate change and reduce greenhouse gases (Poelina *et al.*, 2023). The challenge is to take the gift of First Law offered by Australia's original peoples as a way of knowing to not only address planetary collapse but to consider healing and transforming must begin with "Just Us" (RiverOfLife *et al.*, 2024).

Martuwarra story and people

First Law is earth centred. Its objective is to maintain the balance, sustainable lifeways and sustainability of all life. First Law, philosophy, values and ethics have shaped our Indigenous worldview in the Kimberley, Western Australia, and in turn our actions and lived experiences, particularly our relationship with Country, living waters and our more-than-human kin. First Law focusses on building the individual to self-regulation through spiritual Law that informs moral, ethics, values, behaviour and connection. It is a framework for understanding the central role of water in all things, and its relationships to everything else. First Law and the interdependence of all things are necessary principles for building a hopeful future living with climate change, based on peace and justice (RiverOfLife *et al.*, 2024).

First Law underpins Yi-Martuwarra people's approach to justice. As one society, Yi-Martuwarra people, people who belong to the Martuwarra, Fitzroy River believe they have a legal and moral obligation – a responsibility-to maintain living waters, to prevent ecocide and the genocide (RiverOfLife *et al.*, 2023).

As Yi-Martuwarra people we come from a culture of oral history and storytelling through mixed methods of song, dance, paintings, carvings and message sticks. Today in modernity we are using multi-media, plays and films. In this story I include the voices and feelings of our people to convey the meaning of our stories. We share how we live in a time of this Anthropocene where the attempts of humans to dominate and control the natural environment through technological and economic advancement have altered earth systems. There is a strong international consciousness that human activity has induced climate change which is quickly spiralling into *climate chaos* (RiverOfLife *et al.*, 2024). As we move into 2024, the world earth systems are facing unprecedented risks that are pushing the planetary boundaries towards ultimate collapse. The intergovernmental partnership on climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022) report contextualises the transformative changes needed to overcome the societal, economic, legal challenges and biodiversity threats associated with climate change.

Our co-existence and life and ability to adapt and be resilient in the face of climate change and growing uncertainty is totally reliant on our "River of Life". It is as real as "If the River dies", "we die", as told by Yi-Martuwarra people:

The Mardoowarra (Fitzroy) River is the lifeblood of the Kimberley region of Western Australia. The River is threatened by extensive development proposals from the agriculture and mining industries within the River's catchment area. This inspired the formation of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, an alliance of Traditional Owners from the different language groups connected to the River . . . Nyikina Elder Linda Nardea, and her son Kimberley Watson speak of how their people read Country like a book. Since colonisation, they've witnessed extractive industries slowly rewrite the ancient stories of their land and waters . . . The Nyikina people refer to health and wellbeing as Marboo-joonoo Liyan. They understand that their Marboo-joonoo Liyan is intrinsically connected to Country. Linda says if "the land die, we die, the river die, we die" (Moore, Nardea, Watson and Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, p. 3).

Over the past decade we have seen our river country changing from the impacts of unjust development and climate change. Climate impacts are threatening our lifeways and livelihoods and our capacity to live and thrive. The question, remains, "how are Yi-Martuwarra people and cultural heritage going to be resilient and adapt in the face of climate change and growing uncertainty"? How will we sustain our health and well-being, our sustainable lifeways and livelihoods? Our report, "Trail for Life", was provided to the Western Australian Government's Natural Resource Management (NRM) Programme. It describes building two-way science around climate change and the impacts of projects and the results of evidence base research to inform both policy and investment. To this end we need to generate the body of evidence to show how we can inform climate change policy and better practice (RiverOfLife *et al.*, 2024).

Indigenous cultural health and well-being

Health and well-being are terms increasingly used in climate change policy. Globally, Indigenous people are amongst the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and play a critical role in caring for land, biodiversity and traditional ecological knowledge (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019; Fa *et al.*, 2020). In the context of Indigenous Australians, these terms carry a culturally distinct meaning by connecting the state of Indigenous individuals to the health of their families, kin, community and their connection to country, cultural heritage, spirituality and ancestry. Indigenous concepts of well-being encompass more than just physical health; they are deeply intertwined with cultural identity, social relationships and environmental stewardship (Jarillo and Crivelli, 2024). However, studies do not always link specific climate drivers to core elements of well-being, which is necessary to evaluate risks and target adaptation goals, while research remains highly compartmentalised by discipline with different conceptualisations of well-being (Jarillo and Crivelli, 2024). To address the challenges posed by climate change to Indigenous health and well-being, culturally responsive approaches that prioritise Indigenous heritage, knowledge and values at local levels and place-based contexts are vital (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019; Jarillo and Crivelli, 2024).

Climate change threatens the health and well-being of Indigenous Australians in multifaceted ways by disrupting traditional practices, connection to place and resource security. Changes in meteorological factors, seasonality, biodiversity loss and exposure to acute and chronic weather events, have been linked to negative physical and mental health outcomes including strong emotional responses, suicide, depression and anxiety. Exacerbating the issues are a lack of engagement with cultural drivers of health, leading to inappropriate intervention models and a failure of markets to recognise the contribution of Indigenous heritage and practices that support ecological, economic and cultural function and resilience. As a result, chronic physiological and psychological stress has reduced the life-expectancy of Indigenous Australians by an average of 20 years compared to the national average (Burgess *et al.*, 2009).

Maintaining and sharing cultural traditions and time spent on country was consistently noted as a coping mechanism to experienced climate changes by decreasing climate related distress and increasing community resilience (Pearce *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, access and connection to country, including land rights, can be seen as both a health issue and a primary tool for well-being by providing physical, emotional, spiritual and mental sustenance (Berry *et al.*, 2010). In addition to promoting Indigenous well-being, connection and access to land provides a suite of environmental services of local, national and global significance including border protection, quarantine services, wildlife abatement, carbon sequestration, control of invasive weeds and feral animals, biodiversity conservation, fisheries management, water resource management, sustainable commercial use of wildlife and maintenance of cultural heritage (Burgess *et al.*, 2009).

As the impacts of climate change continue to intensify, it is imperative to centre Indigenous well-being in adaptation efforts by enabling bottom-up approaches via community-led solutions, promoting land rights, protecting traditional heritage and cultural practices and cultivating social connections. Given the increasing recognition of well-being as a fundamental marker of successful adaptation, it should be central to climate change research and policymaking, but for this to be of benefit to Indigenous Peoples and local communities' context-specific understandings of health and well-being are necessary (Jarillo and Crivelli, 2024).

Today, in Martuwarra time, deep time, we, our sacred ancestral serpent beings are waiting and watching with our "Friends of Martuwarra". The opportunity for freedom is being created through the growing coalitions of hope (Poelina, 2020). Organisations with a

regenerative focus are connecting, networking, collectively thinking and transforming our world by being brave and challenging legal systems to recognise, “rivers” as the lifeblood of our planet and our survival co-dependent on “a declaration of peace with Indigenous Australians with nature’s laws and first law” (RiverOfLife *et al.*, 2024). Together we are decolonising our thinking; uniting and bringing together a pluriverse of ideas and actions to right size our planet and give humanity and Mother Earth a climate chance (ibid). Through this coalition of hope we can dream and work hard to transform our circumstance whilst focused on freedom, justice and peace. The final question, I ask my country and the world to sustain my culture, my home, my lifeways and my livelihood “can we achieve peace, harmony and balance”? Can we shift from business as usual, to the new economies, through intentional communities, through bicultural and bioregional planning and development? If the answer is yes, then there is hope for humanity, and the young ones yet to come. Let us adopt the values, ethics and virtues found in First Law as a gift to healing our lands, our people and climate. Yi-Martuwarra people highlight the need for dialogue, unity, cooperation and multiple forms of evidence, to understand the cumulative impacts of development. It is clear from the voices of Yi-Martuwarra people, “*If [our] River Dies, We Die*” (Moore *et al.*, 2023). When we stand united, we hold the dreaming time, from past, present and future and we sing together a new “Martuwarra River Time” song. Through this moral and ethical partnership of hope the Net Zero Project Heritage for Climate Action ignites the opportunity to transform climate change, climate chaos and provide the climate chance through just us!

Notes

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