LOWITJA INSTITUTE

Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research

# Climate policy is health policy: climate change should not be viewed solely as an environmental issue

## Policy Statement

At Lowitja Institute, we see climate change as one of the defining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health challenges of our time. With the arrival of COP31 in Türkiye, Lowitja Institute urges the Australian Government to place Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the heart of climate and health negotiations and policy reform at COP31 and beyond.

Human-induced climate change presents an existential threat to the health and wellbeing of the global community. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, this threat is driven by the unjust reality that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (as with Indigenous Peoples globally), have contributed the least to climate change, our peoples and communities are bearing its impacts disproportionately compared to other peoples. This has the stark effect of compounding existing health disparities across our communities, making it increasingly difficult to meet targets under national health frameworks like the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

These impacts from climate change are complex, multilayered, and widespread. On the one hand, climate change causes deaths, health related disorders, poverty and poor housing, and leads to cascading consequences like poor air quality, unsafe water, and food and economic insecurity. On the other hand, it inhibits the ability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to thrive across our cultural determinants, which primarily occur due to the disruption of access to Country (for human and non-human entities), traditional foods, medicines, ceremony, law, song, and regeneration of place-based sources of knowledge on Country. These factors serve as foundational reference points to our identities, the regeneration of our knowledge systems, and our custodianship of Country, which ultimately means that inhibited access to these factors through climate change will strongly influence the state of our social and emotional wellbeing (Lowitja Institute 2020).

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As such, given the close cultural ties we have with Country and traditional lands, climate change policy must not be viewed solely as an environmental issue. You cannot talk about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health without talking about the health of Country and therefore without talking about climate change. This notion is reflected in the one-health idea, understanding that human, animal, and environmental health is interdependent and intertwined (Australian Centre for Disease Control 2026).

Unfortunately, this worldview of the nexus between climate change and Aboriginal health and wellbeing has not been centred in climate policy. Instead, climate change policies have predominantly been designed without Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, meaning that our ways of knowing, being, and doing – which have enabled our peoples to care for and live in harmony with Country and climate for millennia – have been systematically overlooked, pushed to the fringes, or treated tokenistically, as traditional Western ideas of climate policy dominate the space, often for the benefit of the few at the expense of Indigenous peoples globally. This claim is perhaps best reflected by the Government's recent decision to approve a huge coal project the week of pre-COP31 in Fiji (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2026). As noted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, research shows that no new gas and coal projects approvals are compatible with limiting warming to 1.5°C (IPCC 2023).

This reality is a reminder that climate policy is ultimately about power, who makes decisions, whose knowledge is valued, whose interests are protected, and who carries the costs of transition and adaptation. It also a reminder that climate change (and the policy decisions that cause it) is an intensification of colonisation (Jones, R. quoted in HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021: 6). Colonisation in its original form disrupted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' relationships with Country, restricted access to lands and waters, displaced communities, and imposed systems of governance and development that have contributed to environmental degradation. The continuation of inconsiderate climate policy decision made by governments without Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will continue to reinforce this colonial pattern of dispossession and degradation if meaningful change and reform does not occur.

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# What needs to be done at COP31

Conference of the Parties, also known as COP, is a key vehicle through which international climate policy is developed and implemented. This year, the Australian Government holds the Presidency of Negotiations for COP31, which puts Australia in a privileged and influential position to shape political and technical negotiations and climate action outcomes on a global platform. With this privilege comes great responsibility to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who call Australia home.

While the Australian Government's approval of coal mines implies that it is not using its position at the COP31 process in the best interests of our people, Lowitja Institute remains steadfast in our advocacy that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander climate and health interests must be centred in discussions and negotiations. Lowitja Institute strongly urges the Australian Government to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, voices, and ways of knowing, being and doing into climate and health policy negotiations, actions, and outcomes. Failure to do so at COP31 or elsewhere will continue to undermine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, self-determination, and better climate and health outcomes for our communities. Ultimately, our challenge to Government is that it must recognise that responding to climate change is not merely about reducing emissions: it is about what kind of society we build through that transition – whether we reproduce existing inequities or use this moment to create healthier, fairer, and more sustainable systems.

**With that said, Lowitja Institute reaffirms calls for the Australian Government to:**

1. **Embed** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and shared decision-making at the centre of climate and health policy.
2. **Invest** in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led climate, health, and Country-based initiatives.
3. **Take action** – climate action that respects human rights and achieves equitable health and environmental outcomes is urgently required. The climate crisis is already disproportionately affecting the health and wellbeing of First Peoples. We need to address existing inequities and ensure future action (or inaction) does not perpetuate these inequities.
4. **Value and centre our knowledges and rights as First Peoples** – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have protected Country for millennia and have

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survived dramatic climatic shifts. We are intimately connected to Country and our knowledges and cultural practices hold solutions to the climate crisis.

5. **Work with us** – communities need dedicated resources and support to protect Country and implement adaptation, and we need equitable access to housing, renewable energy solutions, and our lands and waters to protect Country.
6. **Prioritise a movement for climate justice** – climate change affects us all , but some of us more so than others. Climate change is an opportunity to reset out relationships for the better and seek a health and just future for all peoples. We need to ensure climate action (or inaction) learns from the past and does not perpetuate existing inequities.

## Synergies and areas of alignment with Pasifika peoples

At Lowitja Institute, we work to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership evidence and knowledge shape Australia's climate and health response, rather than being added after policies have already been designed.

Our work has included bringing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, researchers, and organisations together through climate and health roundtables; developing research and policy evidence; advocating for a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander climate and health coalition; and engaging nationally and internationally, including through the United Nations and COP processes.

**Importantly, we are also building relationships with Indigenous peoples internationally**, recognising that climate change crosses borders and that First Nations peoples globally share both experiences of its impacts and knowledge that can contribute to solutions.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples share similar experiences of climate and health impacts with Pasifika communities**. Therefore, we also know that there are collaborative synergies and areas of alignment between our respective communities that could underscore future collaboration on climate and health initiatives. From our initial view, key areas of alignment exist in the following areas:

- **Impact of climate change**: Pacific Island nations such as Tuvalu are among the most vulnerable in the world to displacement, poverty, and the loss of critical infrastructure as a result of climate change. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are also disproportionately affected by the impacts of

climate change, whereby Torres Strait Islanders, for example, are also becoming climate refugees in their own country.

- **Housing:** housing is a key policy priority for us, and climate change is placing increasing pressure on housing in Pacific Island nations such as Tuvalu. This creates a strong area of alignment, particularly around the need for climate-resilient, culturally appropriate, and sustainable housing solutions.

- **Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and ways of being and doing:** Sala Dr Siaosi (George) Carter's work emphasises IKS, while Dr Rosalina Sa'anga-Banuve focuses on translating global knowledge into approaches that are meaningful and effective within her community. This reflects a shared commitment to Indigenous ways of being and doing as essential for responding to and mitigating the impacts of climate change.

- **Community-led solutions:** there is strong alignment in the belief that climate and health interventions should be community-led rather than externally imposed. Community participation, cultural knowledge, self-determination, and Indigenous leadership are fundamental to developing effective and sustainable responses.

For this reason, Lowitja Institute will continue to explore collaborations with Pasifika communities in our joint fight against the impacts of climate change on our collective health and wellbeing. This could include exploring the concept of a **Pacific-wide climate and health coalition**.

## Climate and Health Alliance 'Voices of the Vanua' policy brief

Lowitja Institute supports the priorities outlined in the Climate and Health Alliance's recent policy brief *Voices of the Vanua*, which outlines four core priorities identified by knowledge holders and leaders across the Pacific Islands, Australia, and Aotearoa. Lowitja Institute supports the following calls:

1. **Keep 1.5°C alive.** Phase out fossil fuels to protect Pacific health. Act in line with the legal obligation to limit warming to 1.5°C for current and future generations. Any pathway that plans to overshoot 1.5°C violates this obligation. Hold major emitters accountable for rapid emissions reductions and provide finance and technology transfer to support Pacific-led energy transition and mitigation priorities.

2. **Make financing flexible, sustained and accountable.** Deliver flexible, predictable, debt-free climate finance directly to communities and increase the contribution to the Pacific Resilience Facility for Pacific-led, culturally appropriate solutions. Finance must remain gender responsive, socially inclusive, and under Pacific leadership.
3. **Give Pacific people power in climate decision-making and amplify their voices.** Uphold frontline communities' rights and ensure Pacific voices shape climate and health priorities, implementation, and evaluation. Recognise Indigenous knowledge as an essential foundation for action, protecting Indigenous communities' authority over its use.
4. **Elevating the ocean-climate nexus.** Make ocean protection a core priority in all negotiations and national plans. Stop and prevent destructive extraction and pollution, uphold Indigenous-led stewardship, and deliver reparations for ocean-related loss and damage. States must act now to fulfil their obligations under international law.

*'Our peoples are often described as vulnerable to climate change. But we are not only vulnerable people. We are also people who carry knowledge, practices, cultures, and solutions that have been passed down through generations. — Daniel Hama, President, National Council of Kanak Youth of Kanaky–New Caledonia'* (Saltwater in Our Blood: A Pacific Climate and Health Talanoa, PreCop31, Nadi, Fiji. October 8 2026)

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