

Caring for Country: Old ways, new beginnings



Auntie Tjalaminu Mia

Kaya Brothers and Sisters – all our Mobs. I hope you are traveling well.

I have been asked to share my thoughts about Caring for Country, as a Noongar Elder and avid supporter of the old ways of our peoples – two-way learning that enables our older generations to share their voices and cultural knowledge with our younger generations. This includes cultural knowledge about the environment in our Countries; our places of cultural belonging as First Peoples.

You are aware of growing concerns about the condition of the planet, which is causing catastrophic outcomes for people and their communities. We are experiencing droughts, constant bush or wildfires, and floods including some islands in the South China Sea and Pacific regions shrinking in size from sea levels rising.

People are now regularly experiencing natural disasters that in the past would never have happened in a person's whole lifetime. These disasters cause devastation and trauma for families and whole communities and people often have no immediate recourse to deal with the outcomes financially, let alone socially or emotionally. That causes further mental anguish and physical health problems.

At the 2024 APEC Summit held in November in Peru, Prime Minister Albanese re-committed to achieving Australia's emissions reduction targets by 2030 which includes focusing also on Australia as a global leader in renewable or green energy initiatives and practices.

Governments and industry are working alongside scientists, environmentalists, ecologists, biologists and meteorologists to develop urgent solutions to these climate disasters. These experts have been working in turn with our Elders and cultural knowledge holders who know about bush tucker production for people, and nurturing and protecting animals, birds, bees, waterways and trees that play a vital role in our ecosystems.

But our natural world is being



Auntie Denise Wald and her granddaughter Mila.

affected by climate change, with some waterways turning to salt, plants withering away and dying and first creatures facing extinction. We are running out of time to find and implement solutions, which adds to people's stress and mental health issues.

As First Peoples of Country we have known for generations and to this present time, that Country was becoming sick and has been for a long time. We understand via our Elders, who shared their cultural knowledge and wisdom, that we all have cultural obligations and responsibilities to care for our individual places of belonging – the Gnaark Boodjar or Mother Country. Otherwise we people – the carers of Country – will also get sick, which is already happening in front of our eyes.

Where our Elders' voices once fell on deaf ears, they are now in some instances being valued, which is a good thing. First Nations knowledges are starting to be a major focus in conferences, research papers and podcasts, though still not enough in my estimation. I feel there needs to be more ways of

disseminating the importance of First Nations environmental knowledge so non-Indigenous people too can understand and support our people's initiatives to Care for Country.

At the recent Social and Emotional Wellbeing Gathering held in Tarndanya (Adelaide, South Australia), an Elder Women's Yarning Circle shared what they are doing collectively, as well as in their individual Countries (Central Desert region). Though they live a fair way away from each other, they have established a cultural sharing group, where they work hard to reconnect their communities at all ages and levels to Country, in the hope of rejuvenating cultural practices in their people's daily lives, especially with their young people. There are now several published books and media resources in both their language and English.

The non-Indigenous writer/author and environmental activist Tim Winton's latest book, *Juice*, talks to environmental issues and the changes he has noticed in south-west regional

Western Australia – my Moort's (family - Menang Goreng Wadjari) Country.

In this Country, there is an Aboriginal Rangers Program, which our Elders are supporting by sharing Stories passed down the generations. This helps our young brothers and sisters employed in the program as they are trained to Care for Country both culturally and through mainstream education. They are versed in gathering and documenting information and applying research processes, resulting in important data collection for government environmental reporting.

Just recently the Aboriginal Rangers found several petrified tree trunks under beach sand in my Country, that were carbon dated at six to seven thousand years old. These finds have added credibility to the cultural knowledge of my ancestors' Stories of Place, that where there are now pristine beaches in some parts of Noongar Country, there was once a fresh waterway and ecosystem with animal life. The landscape has changed over millennia, but this

cultural knowledge can still aid our young people in their work of caring for Country.

My workplace, the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention at the University of WA, recently hosted First Nations people from Canada, the USA, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia, for public lectures and events focused on connections between people, Country and mental and physical health. There is now a consensus to continue this important discussion and develop research papers very soon.

I would also like to share that I recently visited Larrakia country (Darwin) for the Elders' Social and Emotional Wellbeing Program workshop at Danila Dilba Health Service. I heard many insightful Stories about Elders sharing cultural knowledge with their younger generations, including the young artist Mila, the granddaughter of Elder Auntie Denise Wald. Mila and Auntie Denise painted a Story of Country together, which will soon be printed on T-shirts. The painting is a wonderful representation of knowledge Mila's grandmother is passing down to her, as well as aligning her with her place of belonging.

I do highly value, as a proud First Nations yorga (woman), the wealth of cultural knowledge my mummy shared with me whilst she was still with us, especially Stories of her and her grandmother (my great-grandmother Emily Farmer – nee Coyne) walking country. I'll never forget these words they shared down the generations in my family:"We all need to watch how we treat our land because ... country can't live without people and people can't live without country"....

These words are honest and very, very true!!

It is nearing the Christmas holidays – only a few weeks to go. My family is yarning around 'going country' as I am sure is happening with all our Mobs, planning to get out of the city to freedom – open spaces, and to re-connect with their countries – places of belonging. Wishing you all a wonderful Christmas with your families – happy times ahead!

Yarn Boodawaan (talk again)
- Auntie Tj

Auntie Tjalaminu Mia is a Menang Goreng Wadjari Elder, from the South-West and Great Southern region of Western Australia.

This column is one of a series contributed by the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention at the University of WA.