

Wiyi Yani U Thangani

(Women's Voices)

## **Background**

### **Wiyi Yani U Thangani Vision**

Our vision is for First Nations gender justice and equality in Australia. Led by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, June Oscar AO, Wiyi Yani U Thangani elevates the voices of First Nations women and girls, knowing that they hold the solutions to drive transformative change.

Wiyi Yani U Thangani provides the evidence that the inequalities experienced by First Nations women and girls are perpetuated and entrenched by mainstream systems and structures that have marginalised the voices of women and girls for generations. First Nations women and girls are clear: we need large-scale structural change to create a world where the unique cultural, social, economic and political rights and interests of First Nations women and girls are realised. **We need First Nations gender justice and equality.**



The journey has been through three stages, currently at the third stage, which includes **the establishment of a First Nations Gender Justice Institute**, founded on the first ever national gathering for First Nations women, the Wiyi Yani U Thangani National Summit held in May 2023.

We thank Wiyi Yani U Thangani for the opportunity to provide submission for consideration in the action plan.

## **Indigenous Eco-Feminism**

### **Climate Change**

**The greatest threat to human existence is climate change. The impact of climate change disproportionately effects Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) peoples and communities.** This is particularly important for ATSI women and children who are connected too land, sea, and river country, sustainably managing, and living with country, for survival, both innate and cultural. This has occurred for over 60,000 years. ATSI women hold much of the knowledge, practice, wisdom, and traditions that are integral to the preservation and



protection of the current wide environmental degradation that has occurred and continues in Australia.<sup>1</sup> ATSI women are disproportionately impacted by climate change and increased natural disasters.<sup>2</sup> ATSI women's voices must be included in all economic, environmental, disaster responses, climate change and biodiversity policy and decision making, to ensure that their stewardship is enshrined in Australia's future.<sup>3</sup>

The gendered impact of climate change on Australian ATSI women includes:

- loss of housing and food security;
- increase in disease from water borne and mosquito related diseases and general ill health (including mental health) from impacts of climate change on country;

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<sup>1</sup> Jerez, Mirian. (April 2021). United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Decade of Action, Policy Brief 101. *'Challenges and Opportunities for Indigenous Peoples Sustainability.'*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 1.,

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organisation. (2020) *'Workshop report on Mobilizing Indigenous and Local Knowledge Solutions: Addressing Climate Impacts and Vulnerabilities, a Perspective from the Caribbean Region, Georgetown, (2019).'*



- environmental refugees due to rising sea levels, floods, fires and increased natural disasters, which further displaces our already displaced peoples, women, and children;<sup>4</sup>
- loss of natural resources (biodiversity) used for traditional ceremony, lore, art and connection to culture and country, for example introduced species such as exotic perennial grasses overtaking natural grasses used for traditional weaving;<sup>5</sup>
- loss and irreversible destruction of culturally significant places, particularly women’s places, which are not named and generationally carried on through traditional spoken lore; and
- disruption of the traditional roles of the matriarch in ATSI culture and communities.

Following on from this, *to deeply understand and preserve ATSI women’s places, the spiritual, sacredness and connection to land, sea, and river country, that is intrinsically intertwined with the self for ATSI women, we ask that any conversations on the environment,*

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<sup>4</sup> Jerez, Mirian. (April 2021). United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Decade of Action, Policy Brief 101. ‘Challenges and Opportunities for Indigenous Peoples Sustainability.’

<sup>5</sup> New South Wales Department of Planning and Environment. Exotic Perennial Grasses. (updated 22 September 2022).



*must centre ATSI women's voices.* In the spirit of centring ATSI women's voices, we would ask the **First Nations Gender Justice Institute to have a focus group that will respect and honour ATSI women's voices on caring for country.**

For external organisations to understand preservation of women's places, caring for country may be entirely different to how decision makers currently recognise culturally significant places. To re orientate policy, legislation, and protection of social, cultural, and environmental significant places to align with traditional lore and practice, further preserving, not deconstructing ATSI matriarchal traditions, a focus group under the First Nations Gender Justice Institute should be considered as part of an actionable target. Of particular importance is to work in a deep way of understanding significance for ATSI women. This must be run by ATSI women and kept by ATSI women, this must be protected by cultural norms and practices that only ATSI women are knowledge bearers of.

For example, it may be entirely inappropriate to speak to a male scientist about caring for country or women's places. This would recognise the gendered matriarch of culture.



## **Biodiversity**

### **Australia home of the largest collection of coral reefs**

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*'The Great Barrier Reef is a site of remarkable variety and beauty on the north-east coast of Australia. It contains the world's largest collection of coral reefs, with 400 types of coral, 1,500 species of fish and 4,000 types of molluscs. It also holds great scientific interest as the habitat of species such as the dugong ('sea cow') and the large green turtle, which are threatened with extinction.'*<sup>6</sup>

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**Australia is home to rich unique biodiversity; however, many species are endangered and at risk of extinction.** <sup>7</sup>This submission would be to recognise the work currently being

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations Economic Social and Cultural Organisation. World Heritage Convention. Great Barrier Reef, Date of inscription 1981; Criteria (vii), (viii), (ix) and (x), 34, 870, 000 ha. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/154/>  
<sup>7</sup> Ibid 6.



undertaken by ATSI women to protect and prevent species extinction. This submission would advocate for the strengthening and replicating of women’s healing and caring for country and advocacy throughout Australia. One example would be ‘Strong women for Healthy Country Network.’<sup>8</sup> Examples could be planting trees for the water table or sea grass for the dugong, or food sources (trees) for native birds such as the red tail black cockatoo and insects or for extensive ranger programs to be rolled out nationally to focused on ATSI senior elder women, young women, and girls, caring and healing country. This would bring immense benefit to ATSI women and communities and protect the biodiversity of Australia.

**As the connection and protection of country is strengthened through the inclusion of ATSI women’s voices, this will provide healing for ATSI women and children and all of community, including healing of country itself.** Focusing on the long-term goals of gender

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<sup>8</sup> Mimal Land Management ‘Strong Women for Healthy Country’ (2019). <https://www.mimal.org.au/Strong-Women-Healthy-Country>



equality, biodiversity, Sustainable Development Goals and Indigenous led solutions to climate change, will benefit all of community and Australia.<sup>9</sup>

Further having a focus on Indigenous (ATSI) Eco-Feminism, and strengthening this work, will also strengthen the mental health impacts on ATSI women. The connection to country has been evidenced to improved wellbeing for ATSI peoples.<sup>10</sup>

We thank you for the opportunity to put forward a submission to the **Wiyi Yani U Thangani Commission**.

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations Secretary General. *'Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary General.'* (2021) A/75/982 United Nations Economic Social and Cultural Organisation, International Commission on the Futures of Education by the UNESCO. A/75/982.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, Roxanne et al. (12 July 2018). Associations between Participation in a Ranger Program and Health and Wellbeing Outcomes among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Central Australia: A Proof-of-Concept Study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2019. Vol 15, p 1478.

