Alison Barrett, Danielle Manton and Dr Lesley Russell reported on the HEAL 2023 online conference – Collective Action for Health, Environment and Climate for the Croakey Conference News Service in November 2023.
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Fire in the belly: collective action for environment, climate and health at HEAL 2023

Introduction by Croakey: If ever there was a time for collective action on health, the environment and climate, it is now.

The HEAL Network is a coalition that brings together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wisdom, sustainable development, epidemiology, and data science and communication, to share knowledge, and to put that knowledge into action as we face the health challenges of environmental degradation and climate change.

To preview the conference discussions, Croakey’s Alison Barrett spoke to organisers and participants on behalf of the Croakey Conference News Service. See the program here, and on Twitter follow #HEAL2023 and this Twitter list.
Alison Barrett writes:

Like most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Veronica Matthews was devastated by the “emphatic rejection” of the Voice in the recent referendum.

Matthews, from the Quandamooka community at Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island), and an Associate Professor at the University Centre for Rural Health at The University of Sydney, told Croakey the Voice referendum was a “real opportunity to see some transformational change in the way we do things”.

Had the Indigenous Voice to parliament been embraced, she said, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities would have experienced broad benefits from having a platform where they could share their knowledges and suggest better ways of doing things.

Such a loss is difficult to move forward from, but Matthews told Croakey, “we just have to keep the fire in the belly,” calling for genuine and respectful partnerships at a national and local level.

First Nations’ justice, rights and leadership will be among the broad range of topics discussed at the annual HEAL Network Conference, of which Matthews is co-chair, with the theme, collective action for health, environment and climate.
From knowledge to action

The **HEAL Network**’s charter is to bring together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wisdom, sustainable development, epidemiology, and data science and communication in order to bridge the gap between knowledge and action on environmental and climate change in Australia. It’s a gap that is starkly apparent in the findings of a recent international report.

Although work on the forthcoming **National Health and Climate Strategy** and other national climate policies indicates the Albanese Government has climate change on their agenda, the 2023 **United Nations Production Gap Report**, published last week, showed that Australia’s planned fossil fuel projects are inconsistent with actions to reduce emissions and fossil fuels production.

The report found that Australia is one of ten higher-income countries that have government plans to produce coal, oil and gas exceeding the global 1.5 degree-consistent pathway. While not all are expected to materialise, a government **list of major projects** showed 69 coal and 49 new oil and gas projects in the pipeline.

Australia is not alone – cumulatively, **governments across the world** still plan to produce more than double the amount of fossil fuels in 2030 than would be consistent with limiting warming to 1.5 degrees.

Commenting on the report, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said:

“We cannot address climate catastrophe without tackling its root cause: fossil fuel dependence. COP28 must send a clear signal that the fossil fuel age is out of gas – that its end is inevitable. We need credible commitments to ramp up renewables, phase out fossil fuels and boost energy efficiency, while ensuring a just, equitable transition.”

**First Nations’ justice**

In the leadup to the HEAL Network conference, Matthews told Croakey that, while it’s good we now have a government open to “listening to the science of climate change” and genuine policy commitments, it may not be “enough to reign in the consequences of climate change that we are living with now”.

“Anything we do really has to think about a decolonising process,” Matthews said. “We need to remedy what the colonial impacts have done to us, the detrimental impacts that we’ve endured,” as well as strengthen the value and appreciation of Indigenous knowledge systems and what they can bring.

The number one prescription for planetary health is **justice**, according to Matthews. She told Croakey that with the referendum defeat, it will be important to keep governments accountable to their international climate change and human rights obligations.

With the pending National Health and Climate policy, she said “I’m hopeful. I just hope that what they say they’ll do they’ll commit to and properly implement” … in real partnerships.

Matthews said one of the conference highlights will be the **International First Nations plenary** on Thursday, 16 November.
With a focus on rights-based approaches to climate justice, the plenary will feature “remarkable Indigenous speakers” from across the globe including Professor Sandra Creamer from the School of Public Health at University of Queensland; Associate Professor Rhys Jones from the University of Auckland; international human rights lawyer and Executive Director Water Protector Legal Collector Natali Segovia; Francis Nona, Research Fellow at Queensland University of Technology’s Carumba Institute; and Joan Carling, Executive Director of the Indigenous Peoples Rights International.

Director of the HEAL Network and conference co-chair Professor Sotiris Vardoulakis told Croakey ahead of the conference that First Nations knowledge and wisdom would continue to be the cornerstone of the Network as it always had. “For us, First Nations means First.”

He said it has been a difficult time for Aboriginal communities and researchers in the Network following the Voice referendum, but that he would like to highlight their “tenacity, resilience, diversity and their capacity to adapt to environmental change, policy change and other circumstances over thousands of years”.

**Collective action**

Speaking to Croakey prior to the conference, HEAL Network members Vardoulakis, Matthews, Dr Aditya Vyas and Associate Professor Fiona Charlson all agreed that a collective approach was needed for substantive action on climate change.

Vardoulakis told Croakey that one of the highlights of this year’s conference was that it would enable collective action by bringing together policymakers, researchers and health practitioners to break down siloes – “which we now realise don’t work” – and collaborate across systems.
Matthews said that collective action needs to occur at every level, with “everyone moving together in the same direction towards a healthier future and really caring for each other”.

She called for more place-based approaches done in a collective way, ensuring that adaptation strategies are led from the bottom up, relevant to local context and designed for the communities that they are directly meant to support.

This will ensure we don’t “perpetuate the inequity” that we currently see for First Nation’s communities, Matthews said.

Charlson, a psychiatric epidemiologist and health services researcher, told Croakey that, for her, collective action meant researchers from different strands coming together as well as engaging with communities more to understand what their strengths are.

Charlson runs two research networks – Connecting Climate Minds Oceania, and University of Queensland’s Mental Health Climate Change Research Network – one of which in particular has a strong stakeholder engagement component.

Vyas, a public health physician and academic focusing on climate change, health system sustainability and global health governance, spent several months working with the Fiji Ministry of Health this year, including with doctors, nurses and health system managers, on their Health National Adaptation Plan (HNAP). He said this work – building partnerships and bringing in different aspects of a country’s health system – was an example of collective action.

Vyas told Croakey the health sector needs to be “climate informed” which can be considered in terms of how the health sector secures itself to respond to the impacts of climate change and/or by its efforts to scale up infrastructure or climate change specific programs including sustainability officers, better surveillance of climate sensitive diseases or health promoting approaches.

However, he acknowledged that the health system is saturated and financially constrained, making some of these actions challenging to implement. He said partnerships and collaborations strengthen “problem solving capability” that “addresses the real challenges of today and tomorrow”.

**Appetite for action**

“This is a time when the field of climate change and health is burgeoning,” Vyas said. “There’s increasing awareness but also an appetite for action,” whether it be at the grassroots level by individual clinical practitioners and increasing sustainability officers in health systems, or in top levels of governance.

Vyas is Deputy Director of the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Climate Change and Health Impact Assessment at Curtin University, and inaugural fellow of the Lancet Countdown for Oceania.
Also involved in the United Nations COP28 at the end of the month, Vyas said the first-ever scheduling of a Health Day at COP showed that “health is now finally at the table, which is a really big step forward” in addressing climate change.

Vardoulakis echoed Vyas’ sentiments, telling Croakey that one of the highlights for HEAL this year is the “rapidly evolving policy landscape”. As well as being involved in the development of the National Health and Climate Strategy, the HEAL Network is collaborating with CSIRO on the first National Climate and Risk Assessment.

“These are two very important national pieces of work,” Vardoulakis said.

While unable to say much about the Strategy prior to its release, Vardoulakis told Croakey that it had a focus on implementation. “It’s not window dressing”, he said, and it has been co-designed with communities and the health sector.

As noted by Australia’s Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly last week, in a speech at the National Medicines Symposium, Vardoulakis said the Strategy will not only influence action in the health sector, but also other sectors.

Charlson also agreed there was momentum for policy action on climate change. “The biggest thing that’s happening in Australia at the moment is the National Health and Climate Strategy”. There appears to be an understanding that we need to do things differently, she said.

She told Croakey the past twelve months has seen increased research in her field involving the intersections of climate change and mental health, some of which will be presented at the HEAL conference.

While the level of research has increased, Charlson said “more funding for research would be amazing”.

Health and climate season

The HEAL Network conference will coincide with a multitude of other health and climate related events, including the launch of the latest Global Lancet Countdown report.

A discussion about the regional aspects raised by the Countdown report will be held on 23 November.

The conference program includes concurrent sessions based on the HEAL Network’s themes: Indigenous knowledge systems, data and decision support systems, science communication, health systems resilience and sustainability, bushfires, air pollution and extreme weather events, food, soil and water security, biosecurity and emerging infections, urban health and built environment, rural and remote health and at-risk populations and life course solutions.

Also included will be a plenary on the first series of projects conducted from the HEAL Innovation Fund.

The eight initiatives funded in the inaugural round of the Fund include:

• Gerard Duck, NSW Ministry of Health, A/Prof Geoffrey Morgan, University of Sydney, The Impact of bushfires and other extreme weather events on long term NSW public hospital service and capacity planning. $50,000
• Dr Nigel Goodman, Australian National University, Can portable air cleaners reduce exposure to volatile emissions from wood heater smoke? $49,961

• Associate Professor Fiona Charlson, University of Queensland, Using Systems mOdelling fOr menTal Health (SOOTHE) to identify more efficient and effective support measures for communities impacted by climate change-driven extreme weather events. $41,966

• Associate Professor Patricia Lee, Griffith University, Paving the way towards building resilience: co-designing an integrative climate-resilient and health-promoting aged care community. $36,663

• Dr Penelope Jones, University of Tasmania, Let’s talk about smoke: co-designing effective behaviour change solutions to the winter wood smoke challenge. $19,775

• Dr Manoj Bhatta, Menzies School of Health Research, Decarbonizing the remote Primary Health Care sector: A pilot study in Central Australia. $19,400

• Dr Kayla Smurthwaite, Australian National University, Community Perceptions and Experiences of Residential Wood Heater Use in the Australian Capital Territory. $19,794

• Dr Luise Kazda, Australian National University, Respiratory Inhalers – Sustainably reducing the footprint of a health system carbon hotspot. $20,000

Being guided by the Network’s principle of sustainability, Vardoulakis encouraged conference attendees to engage and network locally with others in the regional hubs – of which there is one in every Australian jurisdiction – and then join the national gathering online.

Further reading:

Poetic call to support sovereignty in all climate and health work by Francis Nona


Global priorities for climate change and mental health research by Fiona Charlson and colleagues, in Environment International

Justice, culture and relationships: Australian Indigenous prescription for planetary health by Veronica Matthews and colleagues, in Science

Published on Monday, November 13, 2023
From remote housing to federal parliament, Indigenous-led co-design is a game changer

Photo from “Waka ņurrkanhayngu: Regenerating the existence of life”. Provided by Dr Petra Buergelt

Introduction by Croakey: “Indigenous knowledge is a resource and an opportunity.”

This quote, from Torres Strait Islander academic Francis Nona, sums up the first day of national sessions at the HEAL2023 conference on Thursday 16 November.

Below, Alison Barrett deep dives into key conference presentations that reveal the secrets of successful program co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Alison Barrett writes:

When Francis Nona addressed the Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Ministerial Roundtable at Parliament House on 16 November, he had an uncompromising message for the parliament. “Australia is lagging behind” on rights-based approaches to climate action.

“It’s time for Australia to catch up with other countries,” he said.
Later that day, he spoke to the Heal Network’s conference. “First Nations people have valuable knowledge systems, and we can contribute to policies that are affecting us,” Nona, a Torres Strait Islander Man from Badu Island and lecturer at Queensland University of Technology, told attendees.

“The Australian Government has to sit with community and understand what the community’s needs are, instead of implementing what’s best from a hierarchy position.”

In the wake of the Voice to Parliament referendum verdict, this indictment of Australia’s response to climate change should galvanise all those concerned by the slow pace of progress, and by the missed opportunity presented by the referendum, to harness Indigenous knowledges and perspectives, Nona told Croakey following the Conference.

The Ministerial Roundtable was hosted by the Lowitja Institute at Parliament House, and attended by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and community leaders, and government representatives including Assistant Minister for Health and Aged Care Ged Kearney, Assistant Minister for Climate Change and Energy Jenny McAllister, Senators Jana Stewart and Dorinda Cox and Assistant Minister for Indigenous Australians Chief of Staff Sheralee Taylor.

Participants discussed policies, strategies and reforms aimed at addressing the impacts of climate change on First Nations health, including Lowitja Institute’s recommendation for the Government to fund the establishment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition on Climate and Health.

“Indigenous knowledge is a resource and an opportunity” – there is much to be gained in partnerships, Nona said.

The Lowitja Institute’s position paper on the proposed Coalition states that it would be “an independent collective and strong voice that has its own table to invite government to sit at, and representatives that can also sit at the table of government to advise. A Coalition could work with government as a partner in developing effective and meaningful policy on climate and health”.

The position paper also noted the importance of a decolonising approach in healing “relational wounds”, and to “ensure our peoples have power and agency in this space” – similar comments were also made by Dr Veronica Matthews in Croakey’s preview of the annual HEAL conference.
The recommendation for a Coalition is based on community engagement, discussions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics, and the climate and health panel at Lowitja Institute’s 2023 conference.

Stay tuned for more Croakey coverage of the discussions on First Nations rights-based approaches to climate justice from HEAL 2023, to be reported by Danielle Manton.

**More than consultation**

The conference also heard about the need for strong partnerships and relationships in co-designing research and other initiatives.

Yamatji Elder Dr Mara West, Manager of the *Kulunga Aboriginal Unit* at Telethon Kids Institute, told the conference it was important to engage and involve First Nations people in research from the beginning.

West said the fallout from the Voice Referendum has “created a huge chasm between Aboriginal people and the wider community”, with many Aboriginal people going back to distrusting non-Aboriginal people.

Research driven and controlled by First Nations’ people is critical for research to succeed – it “diminishes the negative impacts of past research practices”, West said.

On creating collaborative research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, West recommends ensuring that everyone understands the common goal and that it is more than “just consultation”.

“Don’t promise what you can’t deliver and don’t do anything about us without us”, she added.
Social determinants

Dr Kimberly Humphrey, Public Health Medical Consultant and Climate Change Lead for South Australia’s Department for Health and Wellbeing, told the conference that while climate change will impact everyone and all body systems, it will disproportionately impact some people – most often those who have contributed the least to climate change.

In addressing climate change, the social determinants of health and poverty need to be addressed from the community level by finding out what communities’ experiences are of climate events, particularly in areas where interventions are most needed, Humphrey said.

She said it was important to consider what co-design is not – in policy spaces, she sometimes hears co-design being used interchangeably with consultation, which it is not.

If truly co-designed, policy needs to be community-led and based on “what a community needs as opposed to what we think the community needs”, Humphrey added.

Echoing Humphrey’s comments, Professor Rebecca Bentley from the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health at University of Melbourne, told the conference it was critical to address the social determinants of health, including housing, if we want to put public health policy in place.

Bentley also said that given it is such a personal thing, co-design in housing was critical.

“Partnerships with communities and engagement” are a way to mobilise a prevention strategy in Australia, which will enable us to be prepared and work towards equity, particularly in the context of the changing climate and housing policy in Australia.
Co-Director of The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre Professor Lucie Rychetnik said that science communication and accurate information is “essential for community co-design approaches”.

Misinformation has been shown to undermine “some really valuable initiatives”, particularly in the climate space.

**Identifying strengths**

A session on Indigenous Knowledge Systems showcased examples of co-design and bringing Indigenous knowledges into practical strategies to improve community health.

Following the devastating category four **Cyclone Nathan** in 2015, the remote Galiwin’ku community in Arnhem Land felt a need to strengthen their community resilience to disasters.

Acknowledging that social impacts often outweigh natural impacts following disasters, they aimed to “rebuild Indigenous capacities that would reduce the risk of natural and social disasters”, Dr Petra Buergelt of University of Canberra told the conference.

On behalf of Yolŋu researcher Dr Elaine Lawurrpa Maypilama and the whole project team who helped prepare the presentation, Buergelt shared insights on the project titled **‘Waka Njurkanhayngu-Regenerating the existence of life’: Pathways for reviving & strengthening Indigenous ways of being, knowing, doing to heal the source of ‘Natural’ & social disasters**.

Applying a long-term Indigenist community-based participatory action research methodology, the project team includes current and emerging clan leaders, managers and ceremony men covering nearly all the 16 clans living in Galiwin’ku.
“We are co-creating and co-implementing at every stage and it’s completely emerging – we never know what’s going to happen next which is very exciting,” Buergelt said of the long-term ongoing initiative. They have just completed phase two and are moving into phase three of the project.

Buergelt acknowledged the “tremendous resilience, courage, humility and generosity of Indigenous leaders past, present and future for being able to withstand all of the colonising practices and to really make sure that all the sophisticated knowledge is preserved and cared for”.

The researchers have been embedded in the Galiwin’ku community, participating as much as possible. The project has involved many in-depth yarning circles, voice and video recordings, mapping, and kinship education. It has been a holistic and transdisciplinary approach, according to Buergelt.

Throughout the research, multiple pathways for strengthening the Yolŋu culture on Galiwin’ku have been identified.

The “crux of it all” is the need to make Yolŋu governance explicit, strong and living, Buergelt said. Yolŋu governance is sophisticated and has been so effective for at least 60,000 years. If it is made explicit so that non-Indigenous people understand it, it empowers Yolŋu to make their own decisions which is really important if we are serious about self-determination.

The other pathways for strengthening the Yolŋu culture presented by Buergelt were:

- Bringing back Yolŋu belongings
- Yolŋu knowledges centred on Country
- Yolŋu education first, as well as recognition
- Living back on Country in old and useful ways
You can track Croakey’s coverage of the conference [here](#).  

From remote housing to federal parliament, Indigenous-led co-design is a game changer

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- Two-way exchanges on Country and higher-education pathways
- Collective independent Yolŋu income streams
- Documentary of pathways and working two-way together.

**Relationships and trust**

Kris Vine – Research Fellow at the University Centre for Rural Health, University of Sydney – told the Conference that relationality and trust are everything in co-design.

Following a co-design participatory action research method, Vine has been working with [Wilya Janta](#) (Standing Strong) Housing Collaboration on an evaluation of a community-driven climate adaptation strategy, of which early findings have shown the importance of collectivism, respect of culture and self-determination in adapting to climate change.

The evaluation has involved formal and informal yarning, coming together, relationship building, learning… “and more relationship building”, Vine said.

“In recording and evaluating the [Wilya Janta] story, the lessons can be scaled out to other communities. The Indigenous knowledges and practices that inform this work is something that all Australians can learn from.”

![Wilya Janta team, provided by Wilya Janta.](#)

Professor Veronica Matthews – who chaired the Indigenous Knowledge System session and the panel that followed – rejected the idea that co-design was inherently difficult.

“It shouldn’t be hard. In a way it makes logical sense to work with local mob who the policies are going to influence most to make sure that it is effective and efficient and the best use of funding,” she said.

Both Vine and Buergelt commented on the need for more funding to continue their work.

Buergelt said the program had been strengthening Yolŋu and they were now in a position to implement the pathways. They need “funding to financially bring the pathways into being, and partners who can contribute to implementing the various pathways”.

From remote housing to federal parliament, Indigenous-led co-design is a game changer

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She also commented that current funding systems needed to be decolonised as they do not work for First Nations’ communities.

Wilya Janta have an ongoing fundraising drive for the community designed housing work.

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Further reading

- **Nine key messages for the National Health and Climate Strategy**: Lowitja Institute. Lowitja Institute’s submission to the National Health and Climate Strategy consultation included calls for a coalition on health and climate.

- **Let’s walk together, work together, we’ll be stronger together. The need for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition on Climate and Health**: Lowitja Institute’s policy position paper on the need for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition on Climate and Health.

- **Waka Nurrkanhayngu – Regenerating the Existence of Life Working Together Two-way** by Dr Petra Buergelt, Lavurrpa Elaine Maypilama and colleagues.

- **Nurturing and strengthening communities for future generations** by Alison Barrett at Croakey

- **Climate, housing, energy and Indigenous health**: a call to action by Simon Quilty, Norman Frank Jupurrurla and colleagues in the MJA

From X/Twitter

- Read tweets from the plenary on ‘co-designed public policy & community perspectives’ here.

- Read tweets from the concurrent session on ‘Indigenous knowledge systems’ here.
Some insightful presentations on Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander health & knowledge translation for building resilience to environmental change. True community led co-design with broader applications. Now the panel considers: what will make this work sustainable?

#HEAL2023

Published on Saturday, November 18, 2023
**First Nations rights-based approaches to climate justice will make the world a better place**

*Illuminating the path to First Nations Climate Justice. Image Ngemba Country Western NSW, Courtesy Ruth Armstrong*

**Introduction by Croakey:** The final plenary of the HEAL2023 conference drew on the experiences and wisdom of First Nations Peoples around the world to explore the theme of First Nations rights-based approach to climate justice.

Danielle Manton, a Barunggam women, grown up on Dharug Country, and a Senior Lecturer in Indigenous Teaching and Learning at the University of Technology Sydney, attended the conference on behalf of the Croakey Conference News Service.

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**Danielle Manton writes:**

The strength, resilience, leadership, and expertise of the speakers in the final session of the HEAL 2023 conference was overwhelming and inspiring.

The plenary was followed by a panel, chaired by Veronica Matthews, proudly Quandamooka from Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island), and an Associate Professor at the University Centre for Rural Health at The University of Sydney as well as a co-leader of the Indigenous knowledges theme of the HEAL network.
Matthews proudly recognised she was leading the conference out “with a real bang”.

Exploring human rights-based approaches to climate justice in Australia and internationally, each plenary speaker highlighted the huge influence of power and greed, particularly by mining companies as well as governments who shift the rules according to the agenda at hand.

The results are detrimental to our environment, our culture, and our ability to advocate and protect our Country – and everything it means to us physically, culturally and spiritually.

The speakers were:

- Ngāti Kahungunu man, Rhys Jones, Associate Professor at Te Kupenga Hauora Māori, Auckland University
- Quechua women from Peru, Natali Segovia, Executive Director Water Protector Legal Collective and, International Human Rights Lawyer
- Joan Carling (Kankanaey), International Human Rights Lawyer and Executive Director of Indigenous Peoples Rights International
- Francis Nona (Torres Strait), Research Fellow, Carumba Institute, Queensland University of Technology.

Veronica Matthews chaired the final panel, taking the conference “out with a bang”

Making the invisible visible

The climate crisis is overwhelming, so what can we do to influence change? The wise words of Natali Segovia set the tone for the session: “make the invisible visible”. This sentiment recurred throughout the presentations, through the sharing of the experiences of our Indigenous brothers and sisters globally.

Segovia reminded us we must be “documenting the frontline, making the invisible visible to the world, sharing knowledge on a regular basis”.

We need to advocate by continuing to share the stories of the terrible injustices that happen all over the world – that is how we can shine a light into the corners that some people might prefer to remain dark.
Segovia shared that **Colombia** has one of the world’s highest rates of internal forced displacement, much of which is directly linked to the mining industry. Colombia hosts the **Cerrejon Coal Mine**, the second largest open-air coal mining operation in the world, sitting alongside the River Bruno, which is significant to the Wayuu people.

Segovia told the conference:

> “The Wayuu people talk of the river that was stolen, which has become a drought zone in northern Colombia. The industry diverted the water towards the coal mining operations and left the children of the Wayuu territory with so little they die at a higher rate than cattle.”

Segovia described “environmental sacrifice zones” such as in Arizona, where a road to be constructed called **Loop 202** would result in the Hohokam peoples losing their sacred and spiritual connection to their protector, by severing their undisturbed connection to their sacred sites. This was done without respectful and authentic consultation. Communities were considered collateral damage in the quest to ease traffic congestion.

She went on to highlight the **pandemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit relatives** in the face of the extraction industry. It was identified in a recent oil company budget that the company was aware of and complicit in human traffic and violence, by including it within the cost of operations.

Assaults, harassment and other forms of violence were expected, with no attempt to mitigate the risk beyond creating a public safety fund that was **directed to the state of Minnesota** to have a permit approved. The fund was established to cover the cost of law enforcement and the prosecution of offenders.

This example makes visible that governments are aware of the pandemic of violence, but also complicit, establishing policies to protect their own interests – but where is the policy to protect the women and girls from harm, to protect their rights to live on, and be connected to, their land?

Loss of Country, physical and psychological trauma and the loss of family are not things that can be flippantly placed in a policy, with a monetary value – we need to make the invisible visible!

*Natali Segovia spoke compellingly about why we need to make seen, the unseen injustices inflicted on First Nations Peoples*
Joan Carling reminded the conference that “Indigenous peoples have the least carbon footprint yet are at the frontline of the consequences of climate change. “Green Colonialism” is an important issue to make visible. There is an assumption that the values and aspirations of conservationist and renewable energy organisations align with those of Indigenous peoples, the stewards, and protectors of their lands; however, this is often not the case.

Indigenous peoples are routinely displaced in the name of conservation, forcibly removed from their lands, the lands they have reciprocally cared for over hundreds of generations – in the name of conservation.

In recent years, renewable energy companies have cleared Indigenous lands to make way for renewable energy sources and minerals. Carling shared two examples of Windfarm parks in Norway and Kenya, where attempts were made to desecrate traditional lands to make way for renewable energy.

Both Segovia and Carling highlighted the data regarding criminalisation of Indigenous land defenders. Indigenous stewards of nature “caring for “85 percent of the world’s biodiversity”.

Segovia told the conference that human rights defenders were “routinely killed all over the world”. She cited a 2022 report which documented the killing of 401 Human rights defenders in 26 Countries.

Breaking the data down further, Carling added that defenders of the environment, land, and Indigenous peoples’ rights, accounted for 11 percent of human rights defenders’ deaths.

It’s a call to action: make the invisible, visible!
Sharing knowledge, learning and tools, to demand change

Making the invisible visible is not only about advocacy and demanding better, it’s also about shared knowledge – learning from each other’s experiences. This includes experience with the use of human rights frameworks and international law to influence change.

Associate Professor Rhys Jones gave the example of an amendment to the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975, Wai 2607, which was submitted by a Māori group, holding the Crown to account for breaching the Treaty by failing to implement policies to address climate change commensurate to need.

This includes lack of authentic consultation with Māori peoples, and failing to ensure Māori peoples are not unduly harmed due to the impact of climate change. The principles of this claim can be replicated within an international framework.

Jones has developed an Indigenous climate justice policy analysis tool based on five dimensions of justice, with three levels demonstrating that, although the current colonial systems are limited and strained, progress is possible under the governance arrangements we already have.

I encourage “policymakers, advocates, activists and communities to use the tool to think about how policymaking and climate policy action measure up to the dimensions of climate justice from an indigenous-rights, climate-justice lens,” he said.

“Climate justice is only achievable through system transformation, and decolonial action to transform the way we govern and address climate change in general.”

“If we really want to achieve climate justice, we need constitutional transformation,” and to “extend our thinking beyond equity within the health sector, to convey a vision of climate justice that depends on decolonisation and restoration of relationships,” Jones told the conference.

Veronica Matthews told the conference we are “facing multiple barriers to effective engagement when it comes to climate and protections of our lands and waters, despite legislation that is meant to support Indigenous rights such as Native Title in Australia. These levers can be easily extinguished to make way for government priorities and other priorities such as mining”.

On another aspect of making the invisible visible, Segovia spoke of the need to share knowledge, learnings and tools, to more effectively use the law and other structures to influence change and hold companies and organisations to account. She gave the example of the concept of Free Prior and Informed consent (FPIC), which is a primary aspect of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).
“FPIC an expansive concept that goes beyond consultation and aspires to consent that is meaningful and free, given without intimidation or coercion in a process informed by the community from whom the consent is being sought, without timelines being imposed on the community.”

“It is sufficiently in advance, prior to authorisation of activities, informed because of engagement prior to seeking consent and ongoingly, and consent is a collective decision made by rights holders through a customary decision-making process,” she said.

FPIC is a useful framework in advocating for climate change and the rights of Indigenous peoples however Carling pointed out “only a few companies have policies on FPIC. Violations are part of the business-as-usual approach, despite commitments to respect and uphold human rights”.

Segovia’s advice is to “influence transformative change by using the law and other structural avenues to build power for the people, sharing our knowledge and tools to universally hold companies and industry bodies to account to ensure these commitments are enforced and maintained to a standard acceptable to Indigenous peoples collectively”.

Nona highlighted what Australia is NOT doing – including failure to implement actions and principles from frameworks such as UNDRIP. He noted that “if they were implementing these principles, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would be at the decision-making tables”.

“They fact that the Australian Government is not implementing and enforcing these human rights principles explains why we are not at the table. Instead we are in the court systems.”

Nona pointed out the global initiatives taking place from which Australia could share and learn.

- Finland has established the Sámi Climate Council. An independent expert body appointed under the Reformed Climate Act to promote the rights of the Sámi peoples, the council is tasked with the objective of bringing Sámi knowledge and perspectives into climate policy.

- The Utqiagvik Declaration Act 2018 (Arctic) was declared by the Inuit peoples of Alaska, Canada and Greenland as well as the Chukchi peoples of Northern Russia. According to Nona, the declaration is responsible for the Inuit Circumpolar Council, which “facilitates the development of Inuit protocols on the equitable and ethical utilisation of Indigenous knowledge, and the engagement of Inuit communities to provide guidance to the international fora such as the Artic Council”.

Segovia reminded the conference that “International law is young and in constant shift, and we have the opportunity to mould it”.

A moving call to action by @FrancisNona1 at #HEAL2023! Torres Strait Islander people are disproportionately affected by climate inaction; Indigenous rights should be contributing to climate responses in Australia as is happening elsewhere in the world. @LowitjaInstitut
The importance and power of our collective voice

Climate Justice is a global crisis, impacting every aspect of life for indigenous peoples. Segovia spoke about the law being used as a tool for repression and being weaponised against our peoples, the importance of using international human rights frameworks as Indigenous peoples, and the intersection between justice and having access to basic human rights.

By making the invisible visible, we can see the problems, but we can also see the triumphs and the power in our collective voices, and determination to not stop fighting for our lands, our communities and our peoples.

Carling said, for us,

“It’s a matter of dignity, it is a matter of justice. Our collective voices are important and powerful.”

She gave the example of the “strong unity amongst Aboriginal peoples to speak with one voice and demand change – with the support of the population,” evidenced in the response the destruction of Juukan Gorge sacred site in Western Australia whereby mining company Rio Tinto was held to account.

The power of collective voice and action was also demonstrated in the two examples of green colonialism Carling shared in her address.

• The Sámi people in Norway were triumphant in protecting their sacred reindeer herding area from a windfarm Park. They did not oppose the windfarm but were clear it should be constructed in a location that did not impact their cultural practices and protocols, or their livelihood. Despite this, the construction was planned and approved by the government to take place on a Sámi reindeer herding area. When the Sámi people took the fight to the Supreme Court, the court found the windfarm was a violation of their cultural rights.

• At Lake Turkana in Kenya, where a windfarm was constructed, the traditional owners lodged a provision to respect their rights to community lands, which had been violated. The Supreme Court agreed and demanded that the company to properly compensate the Indigenous peoples displaced through the windfarm’s construction.
Segovia cited the Indigenous resistance at Standing Rock in North Dakota where the members of the Dakota and Lakota nations fought together to protect water from the Dakota Access pipeline, which was already operating without adequate permission. Over 800 Indigenous water protectors and non-Indigenous allies were criminalised by the state of North Dakota through this process; however, the pipeline has been shut down for review.

The examples provided by the speakers demonstrate the importance and power of our collective voices and the importance of determined advocacy. These protests were successful because they demanded change and did not give up. As Carling said, “Just keep on fighting, that is the spirit”.

Another recent case cited by Segovia is using litigation law to demand justice. At Red Hill on O’ahu, the US Navy had been storing tanks of jet fuel, just 100 feet above the sole water source serving 900,000 people, since the 1940’s. In 2021 the tanks leaked, contaminating the drinking water. As a result of ongoing community activism and litigation demanding accountability, it is only now, 3 years later being cleaned.

Segovia said, “the law is part of the tapestry we are responsible for weaving together, for weaving it collectively. It is the same with policy and what we want to see in the world. One thread can undo the whole tapestry”.

As human rights defenders we must understand that we have a voice in every sphere and every aspect of society and that we have an obligation to contribute and influence change.

Segovia also reminded us that our voice is instrumental to our survival as Indigenous peoples physically, psychologically, spiritually, and culturally, as the protectors and stewards of our lands, waterways and skies.

“If we are not at the table, we are on the menu… We need to be in the spaces that were not built for us,” she said.
Listen to First Nations peoples to benefit all peoples

This narrative should resonate for everyone: climate justice is a global problem that should be everyone’s business. The climate crisis impacts every aspect of life for Indigenous peoples, but getting the response right will benefit all peoples. All the speakers recognised this:

“Front-line resistance struggles are part of the everyday struggle for existence by Indigenous peoples. Climate change is palpable in everyday events that community must engage with, to protect our ancestral lands and the wellbeing of all future generations – not only our own.” Natali Segovia

“Tackling climate change and the actions we need to put in place to address climate change can be really good for health, but also can be really good for health equity and Indigenous health and wellbeing. If we do it right.” Rhys Jones

“Indigenous knowledge is a resource and opportunity, there is much to be gained with partnerships. Who is sitting at the table and whose table is it? The government needs to sit with the community, we know what our people and Country need.” Francis Nona

“You stand with us, and we will make the world a better place.” Joan Carling

See Dr Lesley Russell’s Twitter thread for Croakey News on this conference session here.

Published on Wednesday, November 22, 2023
Tackling bushfire threats: lessons from the HEAL 2023 conference

Introduction by Croakey: As Dr Lesley Russell outlines in the post below for the Croakey Conference News Service, bushfires/wildfires are on the rise globally.

Even as the HEAL 2023 conference was taking place in mid-November, The Guardian was reporting that a land area greater than that of Spain has burned in Australia’s north this year. The following week saw up to 18 families lose their homes to a huge bushfire on the northern outskirts of Perth that took days to control.

The conference included international and local presentations on different aspects of the bushfire threat, with some important take-away messages, including the importance of effective communications.
Lesley Russell writes:

Over three days from 14 November, the third annual conference for the Healthy Environments and Lives (HEAL) Network, “Collective Action for Health, Environment and Climate”, analysed and discussed the leading health, climate and environmental challenges facing Australia, the Asia-Pacific region, and the world.

A major climate change threat is the increasing frequency and severity of bushfires / wildfires, as well as the increasing duration of fire seasons and the occurrence of extreme wildfire events. This means physical and mental health hazards that extend well beyond those in the immediate vicinity of the fires, the destruction of homes, communities and environments, and loss of biodiversity.

Australia’s summer has yet to officially begin, but already there are daily reports of bushfires around the nation, with fears that the arrival of El Niño will increase the bushfire risk. The average bushfire frequency in Australia has doubled since 1980; in some places, fires are occurring so often, entire ecosystems are at risk of collapse.

The focus of a number of sessions at HEAL2023 – bushfires and their consequences, and efforts to better manage these – was therefore very timely.

Getting serious about smoke

In the session on Bushfires, Air Pollution & Extreme Weather Events/Rural & Remote Health, Dr Sarah Henderson from the National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health at the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control spoke about her 20 years of work on wildfire smoke and the impact of the unprecedented 2023 wildfire season in Canada.

In words that ring true for many working in this space in Australia, Henderson referenced Chicken Little’s warnings that “the sky is falling,” telling the conference:

“For this entire period I have been shouting my head off about wildfire smoke, and why it’s so important from a public health perspective.”

However, it is clear that her shouting has led to meaningful action.

Henderson told the conference that, in 2012, the Health and Smoke Exposure (HASE) Coordination Committee was established to coordinate planning and response efforts related to public health impacts for significant wildfire smoke events in British Columbia.
The committee includes public health agencies from across the province, First Nations Health Authority, BC Emergency Health Services, Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, BC Wildfire Service, Health Emergency Management BC, the Public Health Agency of Canada, and WorkSafe BC.

Henderson outlined how the committee works:

“We all have a table where we come together and work on the management of these exposures when they occur. We develop materials together. We do work together, and we have this guidance document that lays out how we’re going to respond.”

Some of the resources Henderson referred to are here:

- **HASE Coordination Committee Guideline**
- **Guidance for BC Public Health Decision Makers During Wildfire Smoke Events**
- **Toolkit for public health authorities**
- **Preparedness and response planning documents from NCCEH.**

Henderson emphasised the importance of being prepared ahead of wildfire season. She also described how frustrating it is when public health solutions are not implemented.

> “One of the big frustrations is that the solutions exist. It’s an implementation problem, and how they get to those implementations, and how to advocate for those implementations as public health professionals is always a challenge.”

Speaking in the same session, Dr Lucas Hertzog, from the Curtin University School of Population Health and the WHO Collaborating Centre for Climate Change and Health Impact Assessment, also highlighted the importance of implementation.
Tackling bushfire threats: lessons from the HEAL 2023 conference

You can track Croakey’s coverage of the conference here.

He emphasised that, while we know what to do to address the hazards of smoke and particulate matter from bushfires – health warnings and public education, improving air quality in buildings – these actions often are not implemented.

He noted that the Global Burden of Disease study shows air pollution from wildfires is now a major risk factor for early death and disability worldwide, and wildfires killed an estimated 130,000 people worldwide in 2019.

Planning and support for recovery

Dr Carina Anderson from the University of Southern Queensland picked up on another issue raised by Henderson – the need to plan and be prepared for bushfires and their consequences.

She presented work from a project funded by the Federal Government’s Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program to help build resilience in the communities in the Noosa Shire affected by the 2019 bushfires.

Interviews with Noosa residents identified three main themes: (1) planning; (2) support and wellbeing; and (3) communication.
Communicating crisis

Not surprisingly, the issues of effective communication and trusted sources of information were raised in several presentations and discussions.

Alice Cronin from Victoria University highlighted the importance in a multicultural country like Australia of communicating emergency information around extreme weather events in multiple languages.

And in a presentation from the Indian Institute of Technology in Madras, Aswin Giri looked at where different population groups in India get credible information about air quality and what preventive actions they then take in response.

In the session on Science Communication & Risk Perception, Dr Rebekah Anderson, who works in behavioural change at the University of Melbourne, outlined how to optimise science communication to ensure research translation and evidence-based policies and actions and, importantly, to do no harm.

She listed the three key – and interlinked – components of communication as: (1) make it compelling; (2) ensure it is understandable; and (3) be accurate.
Communication during bushfire events was also one of the topics explored by the Tasmanian HEAL Hub, during the State and Territory-based sessions the day before the National Conference.

The Tasmanian report back to the conference served to highlight how practical advice can help communities and families plan for a catastrophic bushfire day.

People need answers to questions like “what does this planning look like and how do I do it?”

Reassurance and guidance are key aspects of planning for such catastrophic events.

First Nations leadership

Around the world, Indigenous peoples have been using fire for generations, in cultural and land management practices. Wildfires have a disproportionate and destructive impact on Indigenous communities. This is as true in Australia as it is internationally.

A pronounced theme during the #HEAL2023 conference was the need to integrate and capitalise on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge in co-design for research and implementation, in building resilience and in environmental management mechanisms.

See these two recent articles from the HEAL conference:

• From remote housing to federal parliament, Indigenous-led co-design is a game changer.

• First Nations rights-based approaches to climate justice will make the world a better place

The Darwin Centre for Bushfire Research at Charles Darwin has been working with Indigenous land managers, conservation, research and government organisations in northern Australia to find more effective ways to manage wildfires.
This collaboration has led to a new approach to reducing bushfire risk, blending modern scientific knowledge with traditional Indigenous land management practices.

The Indigenous Knowledge Institute at the University of Melbourne has also outlined how combining traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fire management techniques with new technologies can improve environmental outcomes and reduce bushfire risk.

**Take-away lessons**

1. Australia needs better coordination and planning to prevent and address the health and environmental impacts of bushfires.

   The British Columbia Coordination Committee provides a useful model. Hopefully this is an issue that will be addressed in the (yet to be released) National Health and Climate Strategy.

2. Better community consultation and education, and appropriate and timely provision of guidance on emergency action are essential.

   This must take into account the different ways people access information, the information sources they consider to be trustworthy, and the language needs of a multicultural population.

3. As highlighted by Dr Sarah Henderson, more research is needed on the health effects of bushfire smoke, especially the long-term effects.

   A “guidance” on the health impacts of bushfire smoke from the Federal Department of Health and Aged Care is fairly dismissive of the long-term impacts, but acknowledges that there is limited information about the long-term implications of prolonged exposures.

   In early 2020, in an article for Croakey Health Media, I outlined the case for research into the long-term health effects of bushfires. As far as I can determine, only $5 million has been provided towards this work.

4. An article from researchers at the Darwin Centre for Bushfire Research, published in The Conversation in 2021, makes a seminal point that was also made several times during the HEAL2023 conference:

   “a collaborative approach to emergency management [of issues around bushfires and climate change] can create opportunities on country, enhance cultural and learning opportunities for Indigenous peoples and deliver environmental benefits for everyone.”

   • See the Twitter thread of the bushfire session of HEAL 2023 from Alison Barrett [here](#)
   
   • The Bushfires, Air Pollution and Extreme Events theme of the HEAL Network has invited researchers and policy makers around Australia to complete [a short survey](#) to help with its future work (closes 6 December).
On the eve of Australia’s Health and Climate Strategy release, some expert advice from HEAL 2023

Introduction by Croakey: What should be our policy responses to the climate threat, and who should be involved? The answers to these questions, according to a diverse group of speakers at the recent HEAL 2023 conference, is that it must be a very broad Church.

Reporting on behalf of the Croakey Conference News Service, Alison Barrett has captured just some of the passion, expertise, collegiality and creativity that was on show at the event.

Alison Barrett writes:

As well as responding to the health impacts of climate change, the forthcoming National Health and Climate Strategy will guide Australia’s health system on ways to reduce its carbon footprint and contribute to a “net zero future for Australia”, Assistant Minister for Health and Aged Care Ged Kearney said in her opening address at the recent HEAL conference.
“I want you to know that our Government recognises that climate change is a significant threat to health and wellbeing, and we acknowledge the urgent need to act,” Kearney said.

The Strategy will be shared with Australians “very soon”, Kearney said, and will outline how the Australian Government “can continue to protect and promote human health in a changing climate,” in a just and equitable way.

Kearney told the conference that targeted action is required to support people who are disproportionately impacted by climate change.

Co-Chair of the HEAL 2023 conference Dr Veronica Matthews emphasised that Kearney “has been a fantastic advocate for not only driving the National Health and Climate Strategy, but also ensuring that First Nations’ voice is central to the development of the Strategy”.

Kearney’s opening address to the conference set the scene for wide-ranging discussions on public policy, as well as co-design, Indigenous knowledges and climate justice. See Croakey’s previous reports from #HEAL2023 here.

Evidence-based policies

Professor Sotiris Vardoulakis – Director of the HEAL Network and Co-Chair of HEAL 2023 – told the conference that as Australia heads towards an El Nino event this year, it is important that are prepared for high temperatures, drought, and fire weather.

Referring to the recently released United Nations Emissions Gap Report, Vardoulakis told the conference that more needs to be done to stop reliance on fossil fuels. The report showed that global production of fossil fuels is increasing, which is inconsistent with limiting warming to 1.5 degrees.

The Production Gap. Screenshot by author.
Vardoulakis told the conference:

“It is absolutely sensible to have policy and evidence which are consistent with containing a substantial reduction in fossil fuel production and consumption and greenhouse gases, but also to strengthen adaptation and resilience in the health system... and broader society.”

The National Health and Climate Strategy and Australia’s first National Climate Risk Assessment are very important national initiatives, according to Vardoulakis – and the HEAL Network has been heavily involved in the development of both.

Identifying climate risks

The National Climate Risk Assessment is being undertaken by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, in collaboration with partners including CSIRO, Bureau of Meteorology, Australian Bureau of Statistics and Geoscience Australia, to gain a better understanding of the risks and impacts to Australia from climate change.

The Assessment is being done in parallel with the National Adaptation Plan – the “blueprint” for responding to the climate risks identified in the Risk Assessment.

Presenting an overview of the work undertaken to date on the Risk Assessment, Billy Quinn, who is leading the Assessment for the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, told the conference this work will provide guidance and an evidence base for how Australia can build resilience to climate impacts.

The first pass assessment – to deliver a high-level understanding of national priorities for climate adaptation action – will be completed by the end of the year. A detailed analysis of these priorities will be undertaken in 2024 – the second pass assessment.

Quinn said some of the expert views identified during the first pass assessment include the need to integrate planning to manage future health in the built environment, and to connect the health system with other systems.

Another finding from the first pass assessment was the importance of secure and resilient housing and infrastructure in preventing or reducing the health impacts from climate change, Quinn said.

He told the conference that experts had also expressed the importance of “taking a holistic approach” to assessing climate risk to the health system, and capturing perspectives from people most susceptible to the impacts from climate change.
**Strengthening Indigenous voices in climate action**

Via a pre-recorded presentation, the IPCC Voices research team shared some key findings with the conference from a recent report on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and knowledges can be included in the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change process.

The report was invited by the Australian Government ahead of the IPCC Assessment Report 7 planning discussions, in response to increasing calls for First Nations inclusion in the Lead Authorship [of IPCC] from Indigenous leaders, media and community.

One of the Aboriginal respondents to the IPCC Voices survey said:

> “There is limited recognition regarding First Nations peoples other than relegating us to ‘vulnerable communities’ in the context of climate change.

> This disregards our over-65,000 years of sustainable practices and customary knowledge of the natural environment and thus our significant contribution to policy. First Nations need a voice.”

The IPCC Voices research team includes Dr Nina Lansbury, Associate Professor Bradley Moggridge (Kamilaroi), Professor Sandra Creamer (Waanyi Kalkadoon), Lillian Ireland (Melukerdee), Dr Lisa Buckley, Dr Geoff Evans, Olivia Milsom, Professor Gretta Pecl, and Dr Vinnitta Mosby (Meriam Nation, Torres Strait).

While the research team welcomed the request to provide guidance to the Government on including Indigenous people and knowledges in the IPCC process, Moggridge said “consultation has to be done right”.

“We want to make sure that our knowledge can influence the way we manage into the future, especially around the impacts, but also the adaptation and mitigation, of climate change,” he said.

Mosby added that often “nothing comes back to the community” – research and surveys should lead to action, and respect of people’s time.

Although tick and flick survey methods are convenient, they are culturally inappropriate and do not “allow people time to think big”, Mosby said.

Creamer said “we are not the magic bullet for resolving the complex dilemmas for climate change. But we will offer additional tools, advice and community solutions through our traditional knowledge”.

"It is very important to be in the conversation. It affects us where we live: the desert, sea... It impacts us greatly the way we live - even around economic development, it affects us.

- Aboriginal survey respondent
Another recommendation in the report is that gender equality for Indigenous people must be built into the IPCC, Creamer said.

Ireland told the conference that one recommendation of the report is to recognise “Indigenous peoples as more than stakeholders”.

The categorisation as stakeholders mis-describes Indigenous people’s connection to Country, obligation to care for Country and invaluable knowledge they hold about the Country, she said.

“People’s survival, which is inextricable from the future of that Country, can’t be described as a stake, and therefore stakeholders is not a good term,” Ireland added.

A rights-based approach at every level of climate change action will enable the “opportunity to transition into more just environments where we protect environmental rights, and Indigenous people’s rights,” she said.

A video of this presentation can be found here.

Health in all policies

Health in all policies was a strong theme across discussions on the first day of the national HEAL conference.

Professor Lucie Rychetnik, Co-Director of The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre, told the conference that climate and health policy is similar to preventive health policy in that, to have real impact, we often need to work outside of the health sector and health portfolios.

However, cross-sectoral collaborations or partnerships can be “difficult to be sustained”, she said. They require investment in infrastructure to support them, power dynamics need to be well managed and reflexive learning opportunities need to be incorporated.

On successful long-term research-policy partnerships, Rychetnik also said it is important to have the capacity to identify a shared vision and mutual benefits, and to be able to respond and act when opportunities emerge.

Organisations like the Prevention Centre and HEAL Network play an important role in linking up and building the research and policy system, Rychetnik said.

While both are funded within the health sector, by the National Health and Medical Research Council, they have a “strong focus on working outside of the health sector”, she said.

She said the HEAL Network is a good example of a “distributed leadership model where decision making isn’t dependent on any one person”.

A whole of government approach led by the Prime Minister or Premier is really needed to support the systemic change required, Rychetnik told the conference.

GP and Doctors for the Environment Australia’s Executive Director Dr Kate Wylie also told the conference that a health in all policies approach could be used in assessing the health impacts of coal and gas.

Wylie said the DEA are asking for a “health trigger”, where all fossil fuel projects are assessed by the Health Minister and “that approval is given before projects can go ahead”.

On the eve of Australia’s Health and Climate Strategy release, some expert advice from HEAL 2023

You can track Croakey’s coverage of the conference here.
According to **new research** conducted by The Australia Institute and DEA, two-thirds of Australians support a requirement for a “health trigger”, Wylie told the conference.

Climate and Health Alliance’s Policy and Advocacy Manager Chelsea Hunnisett said **CAHA’s approach** is to advocate for health in all climate policies, working closely with government and policy makers to develop the structures and policy levers that are needed to ensure health is part of Australia’s domestic and international climate agenda.

Even if we “turn off the faucet today”, climate change is locked in and we need to be well prepared, Hunnisett said.

Hunnisett emphasised that health in all policies is not easy – engagement across portfolios and jurisdictions is needed but will only occur if it’s coordinated.

She said that CAHA is hoping the Strategy will propose strong actions on governance structures, implementation of actions, and that health in all policies is going to be credibly embedded.

**Regional hub wrap**

The HEAL Network has a regional hub in each Australian state and territory, where meetings were held on the first day of the conference. Updates from each regional hub session were provided on the final day of the national event.

The Heal Network’s strengths in linking up and building on research, and working across sectors, was on display in these brief presentations.

**HEAL NSW Hub** conveners, Associate Professor Geoff Morgan and Associate Professor Veronica Matthews, reported that their session included discussions about the need for engagement with the NSW Government, as well as improved community collaboration in co-design.

They also discussed the need to co-design a program of work (rather than just a one-off) with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to address asthma.
Queensland Hub convener Dr Aiden Price told the conference that his group discussed taking action on Indigenous rights in research and policy development, as well as enabling communities.

Queensland Hub Session #HEAL2023
Convener Dr Aiden Price QUT
Taking action - synergies & cooperation, enabling communities, Indigenous rights in research and policy development

Our Current - HEAL 2023

- Engaging with organisations to better understand knowledge translation opportunities (and requirements)
- More than just a pretty dashboard – outreach becoming a requirement!
- Better learn how researchers and policy makers can interact across research areas.
- These things are not just talked or associated, they are deeply entwined.

Queensland Hub convener Dr Aiden Price told the conference that his group discussed taking action on Indigenous rights in research and policy development, as well as enabling communities.

The Tasmanian Hub session was held outdoors, and involved a diverse group with valuable – and timely – discussions about planning for a catastrophic bushfire day.

Tasmania Hub Session #HEAL2023
A focus on planning for a catastrophic bushfire day: What does this look like and how do I do it?
Timely:

Meeting outdoors brought home what was at stake in Tasmania. Screenshot by Croakey
South Australia’s Hub convener Professor Craig Williams highlighted work of early-mid career researchers on addressing human health challenges in the face of ongoing environmental and climatic change.

Key research themes include occupational injury and heat, health in all policies and One Health.

The Victorian Hub session took a deep dive on the issues of multi-disaster exposures, community-based tools and guidance for long-term disaster recovery.

Professor Sotiris Vardoulakis reported that the ACT Hub session focused discussions on adapting to climate now and the future, exploring challenges and solutions on:

• Health service delivery and infrastructure
• Built environment and housing
• Water and natural resources.

They also discussed the Human Rights (Healthy Environment) Amendment Bill 2023 that introduced “to enshrine the right to a healthy environment in the ACT’s Human Rights Act”.

SA hub: a broad church. Screenshot Croakey

The Victorian hub report featured several presentations looking at disaster recovery. Screenshot Croakey
Similarly, the Northern Territory Hub session discussed climate justice, as well as research gaps and priorities on heatwave management and energy insecurity.

Clear public health messaging tailored to NT’s diverse population needs is critical for bushfire and air quality management.
Associate Professor Brad Farrant provided an update on Western Australia’s session which had a focus on co-design in practice and bringing together diverse community members.

- Thank you to Dr Lesley Russell for covering and live-tweeting the regional hub session updates. See thread here.

**Further Twitter/X highlights from #HEAL2023**

Assistant Minister for Health and Aged Care Ged Kearney, and Professor Sotiris Vardoulakis’ HEAL update thread.

Policy session thread

IPCC session threads.
Bringing a cultural lens to pandemic preparedness: Aboriginal Elders share their learnings from COVID

Artwork on display at the yarning workshops. Photo by Angela Ryder AM and Carolyn Mascall

Introduction by Croakey: The success of Indigenous communities and health services in protecting Elders during the first waves of the COVID pandemic in Australia is known all over the world. What we know less about are the experiences and perspectives of those who were shielded.

An interesting research project, presented at the recent HEAL conference, sought to capture some of these experiences using yarning circle workshops. The research team also sought and received insights about how future public health responses could be improved.

Their findings will help form a submission to an ongoing inquiry into Australia’s COVID-19 response.

Finishing off her coverage of #HEAL2023 for the Croakey Conference News Service, Alison Barrett reports below.
Alison Barrett writes:

As evidence about the interaction between infectious diseases and climate change increases, it is important for climate disaster responses to incorporate public health measures to mitigate outbreaks, according to Professor Tulio de Oliveira and Dr Houriiyah Tegally from the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (CERI) at Stellenbosch University in South Africa.

The pair recently wrote in the journal Science about the need for health systems to adapt to the occurrence of outbreaks associated with climate events, and changes in transmission patterns caused by global movement of people, animals and goods.

Here in Australia, the first stage of an inquiry into the COVID-19 Response, which will hopefully inform our own attempts at adaptation and preparedness, is underway – the deadline for submissions is 15 December 2023.

At the recent HEAL 2023 Conference, Amie Furlong and Selina Edmonds shared some timely and important lessons about Aboriginal community experiences of the pandemic. These lessons, from Aboriginal Elders, organisations and communities will, according to Furlong, be used to inform a submission to the COVID Inquiry.

Furlong, from the University of Canberra, and Edmonds, chair of the Miya Kaadadjiny (Learning Sanctuary) Community Centre in Western Australia, delivered a joint presentation at HEAL 2023 based on research undertaken to gain a better understanding about measures to keep Aboriginal Elders safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In search of fair, equitable and dignified public health responses

This project was led by Professor Pat Dudgeon AM and Professor Helen Milroy AM from the Bilya Marlee School of Indigenous Studies, at the University of Western Australia.

It stemmed from the recognition that older people are more likely to be negatively impacted by COVID-19, and that previous research and experience on disasters had shown that pandemic responses needed to be “fair, equitable and dignified for Aboriginal people”, Edmonds told the conference.

Aboriginal people have often been left out of critical planning and decision-making in the past, Edmonds said. It is important to include their voices in disaster response and management plans.

Furlong said the lessons from this research will help provide practical suggestions and lessons learned about the pandemic for governments and organisations working in public health and emergencies.

Through the research – which involved yarning circle workshops between July and October 2023 – it became apparent that the “COVID crisis amplified challenges” in achieving equity for those doing it toughest and not having the resources or means to adapt fully, Furlong said.
Redefining frontline and essential workers

The findings indicate the importance of embedding a determinants-approach and cultural lens into health and wellbeing to help reduce the experiences of heightened discrimination and racism reported by research participants, Furlong told the conference.

Furlong shared an example where some Aboriginal organisations working in family domestic violence and suicide prevention were “side-lined during COVID” and were not able to get into community to deliver in-person support.

Representatives of these organisations told the researchers they would like equal weight given to community and social services when defining frontline and essential services. “In reality, in communities, social services and health cannot be separated,” Furlong said.

Impact on cultural law and customs

Two of the “biggest conversation patterns” in the research were around the vaccine rollout and the impact on cultural law and customs, including sorry business and funeral practices, Furlong said.

Many of the participants, particularly the Elders, appreciated the emphasis on keeping safe from COVID by staying at home especially during the initial stages of the pandemic.

On the other hand, these measures, including funeral restrictions, had a devastating impact on participants.

One participant described being ventilated in hospital without family being able to visit and said, “this was the worst day of their life”, Furlong told the conference.

The strong restrictions on funerals and not being able to participate in customs and traditions compounded grief and negatively affected wellbeing. “Communities really wanted to see that they could be trusted and given ownership to manage these practices safely,” she said.

The research found that many participants felt they had lacked proper choice and control around the vaccines. Furlong said they described having more worry and distrust of the different public health measures and justifications, particularly around the vaccines.

COVID-19 “created an environment which surpassed normal decision-making processes”, Furlong told the conference.
“People have different beliefs and knowledge systems, and a public health response that takes a cultural lens into consideration may be more beneficial and create less tensions along the way,” she said.

Aboriginal knowledge

Furlong told the conference that “Aboriginal knowledge as wisdom and approaches to health and healing” came through strongly in the research. However, while this approach exists, it has been overwritten and diminished at times via settler colonial concepts of public health, she said.

Furlong said the research participants emphasised the importance of trusting science – “when it is accessible, safe and best practice information in regard to COVID-19” but said ideally the settler colonial concepts of public health should be combined with Aboriginal epistemologies.

The participants wanted to have faith in the science, but it “didn’t always reach all corners of the community” and misinformation spread.

Diverse Aboriginal perspectives

Another key finding is the principle of including diverse Aboriginal representation when co-designing disaster plans and responses.

Furlong said the participants were keen to be involved in the COVID-19 crisis response but had different ideas on how to engage.

Connecting up community organisations with shared goals, to embrace opportunities and apply jointly for grants and funding were some examples of ways in which participants said they wanted to be involved.

“Some participants stated that they really wanted to set up an Aboriginal state-wide advisory board that makes decisions and creates emergency plans ahead of time,” Furlong said.

It is important to “ask what a community prefers during a crisis rather than assume”, she added.

Human generosity

The research identified some positive stories around human generosity in a crisis. Furlong said they heard of strangers, best friends, and communities coming together to help out and make COVID a little less scary.

Participants said they wanted to see more positive stories to bring people together and remind everyone they weren’t alone.

Furlong told the conference that highlighting these positive experiences helped to “balance out the fearful communications and information that went around”, as well as counterbalancing the pathologising and deficit reductionism often applied to Indigenous communities.

There was a lot of compassion for everyone involved including government, different organisations and participants, Furlong said. Participants felt as though everyone was trying their best during this “really troubling time”.

Furlong told the conference that learning about the response to COVID from people’s own experiences as knowledge holders, rather than organisations or professionals is really important in improving Australia’s systems approach to crises.
About the research team

Edmonds and Furlong presented at HEAL 2023 on behalf of the research team.

Angela Ryder AM, with the support of Carolyn Mascall from the Miya Kaadadjiny (Learning Sanctuary) Community Centre facilitated the yarning workshops.

Dr Shraddha Kashyap from the Bilya Marlee School of Indigenous Studies at UWA was the project manager, and Associate Professor Petra Beurgelt from the University of Canberra was Amie Furlong’s academic supervisor.

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- On the eve of Australia’s Health and Climate Strategy release, some expert advice from HEAL 2023

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An analysis of the HEAL 2023 conference coverage on X/Twitter

A Tweetbinder analysis of the conference hashtag #HEAL2023 identified 1,081 tweets sent by 87 contributors around the time of the conference, creating a total of 118,156 impressions, with an estimated economic value of $18,039.

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The Croakey Conference News Service team for #HEAL2023 was Alison Barrett, Danielle Manton, Dr Lesley Russell, Dr Ruth Armstrong, Dr Melissa Sweet and Mitchell Ward.