

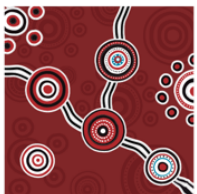
Caring for Country:
Indigenous Wellbeing, Law, and Environmental Justice.

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Rational: The goal of this edited volume is to place a critical social justice lens while also situating mental health equity at the heart of how we understand and propose potential global solutions that address the differential impacts of climate change on mental health across time and place.

Abstract

Climate change is emerging as a global determinant of mental health and wellbeing impacting existing and escalating socio-economic inequities (Charlson, et al, 2021). There is clear evidence that the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous peoples in general are being adversely impacted by climate change (HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021; Middleton et al. 2020; Vecchio, Dickson & Zhang 2022). For Indigenous Peoples the complex environmental devastations brought about by climate change are part of a continuum of colonial destruction of land and people: ecocide and genocide are interconnected mechanisms of mass destruction (Crook, Short & South 2018).

While new psychological constructs such as 'solastalgia' (Albrecht 2007) and 'ecological grief' (Cunsolo & Ellis 2018) seek to map the links between climate change and mental health and wellbeing, for Indigenous people's deep grief over the loss and destruction of land, Country and totems (Fauna and Flora) is a collective intergenerational trauma spanning centuries (Morgan, Mia & Kwaymullina 2010). Fundamental to many relational eco-centric holistic Indigenous world-views or philosophies of flourishing is an ontological and axiological connection to Country and land. Globally, indigenous peoples are guardians of some 80% of Mother Earth's biodiversity and continue to develop eco-centric knowledge systems - philosophies and practices - which support a harmonious and flourishing balance between people and planet (Redvers et al. 2020, 2022). This chapter explores the traumatic impact on mental health and wellbeing through the loss and destruction of Country and Land as well as the protective and restorative benefits of connecting to and caring for Country and Land through the prism of an Australian Indigenous paradigm of eco-centric flourishing called social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) (Dudgeon, Bray, D'Costa & Walker 2017; Gee et al. 2014; Sutherland & Adams 2019).

Evidence which validates the protective mental health and wellbeing benefits of connection to Country is presented and pathways which support a decolonial eco-centric Indigenous futurity explored. As the wisdom holders of one of Mother Earths oldest continuing and developing knowledge systems of eco-centric flourishing, Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander people and their psychology of SEWB have much to teach about resisting and recovering from the colonial anthropocene. Finally, this chapter recognises, (along with peak international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) and World Health Organisation (WHO) that solutions to the mental health and SEWB impact of climate change involves place-based and large scale structural changes and in this context continued Indigenous climate change resistance and environmental advocacy at local and international levels is explored as part of the solution (Bray & Dudgeon 2020; Redvers et al. 2022).

Introduction

As Yankunytjatjara Elder and traditional owner of Uluru Uncle Bob Randall says in 'The Land owns us', 'the interconnectedness of every living thing is not just an idea but a way of life' (Global Oneness Project 2022). There are common teaching within indigenous people, for all things and everyone originate from the Great Mother Earth. Mother Earth provides everything that is needed to survive: medicines, clothing, food, water, and shelter (Mascarenhas 2012; McNab 1999; Sizoo 2010). Accordingly, the earth and the environment are sacred. While there are differences in mythologies to teach people how to manage their local environment (Country) and how to treat each other, all Land is sacred within these teachings (Sutherland 2017). 'When Country is healthy, we are healthy. Our knowledge systems are interconnected with our environment and it relies on the health of Country '(2021 First Nation Peoples Statement on Climate Change).

The environmental impact of European 'settler colonialism' (Veracini 2015) on the land now called Australia has been, and continues to be, catastrophic. Land management policy, farming and mining manipulate the natural environment, destroying the land and Country which for Indigenous people support more than the flora and fauna of the continent. Large scale farming, and mining continue to use the land as a resource, removing significant cultural and sacred sites, and habitats. More than one hundred species of flora and fauna in Australia are now extinct (Woinarski et al. 2019). Australia has the *highest* extinction of mammals in the world - since colonisation thirty-four species of Australian mammals have become extinct (Roycroft et al. 2021) and more mammals have

become extinct in Australia since colonisation than on any other continent over the same period (Woinarski et al. 2019). The Christmas Island Forest Skink, Bramble Cay Melomys, and Christmas Island Pipistrelle are some of the more recent extinctions (Woinarski et al. 2017). Others include the Pig-Footed Bandicoot, Tasmanian Tiger, Paradise Parrot, Toolache Wallaby, Rusty Numbat, Tasmanian Emu, Red-Fronted Parakeet, Lesser Billby, Gastric-Brooding Frog, Desert Bandicoot, Desert Bettong, Great Hopping Mouse, Blue-Grey Mouse, Big-Eared Hopping Mouse, Percy Island Flying Fox, Norfolk Kaka, Victorian Grasslands Earless Dragon. (Their names have been capitalised out of respect). Anthropocene extinctions are estimated to be 10,000 times higher than natural extinction rates (World Wildlife 2022). Of concern is the extinction of insects which is not properly represented by the Red List (the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species) which has been widely criticised for species bias and for radically underestimating the immensity of extinctions (Cowie, Bouchet & Fontaine 2022; IUCN 2022).

In Australia mass death caused by fossil fuel industry driven heatwaves include the death of 33,000 spectacled and flying foxes over two days in 2018 (Commonwealth Government 2021). Between one and three billion more-than-humans died or were displaced in the 2019-2020 Australian 'Black Summer' bush fires, including the death of an estimated 25,000 koalas who are now listed as an endangered species (Walters 2022). The Great Deluge of 2022 saw extreme flooding across the Eastern States of Australia destroying untold flora and fauna (Romanello et al. 2022). Of the numerous invasive species introduced to Australia, sheep and cattle can be counted as some of the most destructive, grazing almost half of the landmass of 7.7 million square kilometres (Climateworks Centre, 2022). The destruction remains unchecked: between 2000 and 2017, 7.7 million hectares of land occupied by threatened species was 'cleared' and 7.1 million hectares of that 'cleared' land was not assessed under federal environmental laws (Commonwealth Government 2021). The word 'cleared' is the language of ecocide - the bulldozing of forests and draining of water from wetlands brings mass death. The environment of Australia is in crisis. According to the 2022 released *State of the Environment Report*, a comprehensive evidence-based overview led by scientific and environmental experts:

Overall, the state and trend of the environment of Australia are poor and deteriorating as a result of increasing pressure from climate change, habitat

loss, invasive species, pollution and resource extraction. Changing environmental conditions mean that many species and ecosystems are increasingly threatened. Multiple pressures create cumulative impacts that amplify threats to our environment, and abrupt changes in ecological systems have been recorded in the past 5 years (Commonwealth Government 2021, para 1).

Furthermore, according to Australia's Climate Council, an independent, evidence-based organisation on climate science, impacts and solutions, Australia's response to the climate crisis has been ranked the worst in the 'developed' world (Climate Council 2021).

In addition, the State of the Environment Report described the state of Country and connection to Country for Indigenous peoples as 'very poor' (Janke et al., 2021:25). Also assessed as 'very poor' was the access to lands and waters in order to maintain cultural, spiritual, physical and economic connections (ibid. 26). The assessment of 'very poor' is defined as '[t]he environment is in very poor condition, and environmental values are substantially and/or rapidly declining' (ibid. 27). Earlier research by Indigenous academics on the impact of prolonged drought on the SEWB of Aboriginal communities found that fossil fuel industry driven drought was subjecting Indigenous people to forms of environmental injustice and impacting wellbeing by 'damaging traditional culture [...] exacerbating underlying grief and trauma; undermining livelihoods and participation; aggravating socioeconomic disadvantage; and creating a context for behaviour that brings shame to culture' (Rigby et al. 2011, 252).

As custodial guardians of the majority of the earth's biodiversity Indigenous people's health is of vital importance to the health of all. This chapter is aligned with Redvers et al's, position on this issue:

The health of the planet is intrinsically tied to the wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples. When Indigenous Peoples have their Land, culture, and sovereignty, they are more likely to have greater wellbeing. Thus, they will continue to sustainably care for more than a third of the worlds old-growth forests and the

most biodiverse regions on the planet. As noted, Natural or First Law provides frameworks for understanding relationships to place; therefore, it lays the foundations for the fulfilment of Indigenous Peoples' ecological and relational responsibilities. However, due to ongoing processes of colonisation, many Indigenous Peoples struggle with cultural disconnection, dispossession of land rights, and actioning self-determination. These processes impact on Indigenous Peoples' health and wellbeing and, therefore, on their abilities to care for Mother Earth. It is imperative that Indigenous Peoples' health is approached from a holistic lens that acknowledges cultural and Land-based practices as being crucial for human health and for the health of the planet (Redvers et al. 2022, e160).

Here Indigenous Peoples' health is approached through the Indigenous paradigm of SEWB, an eco-centric model of holistic relational flourishing which adopts a strengths-based, Indigenous stand-point and is embedded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) which are grounded on a stewardship ethics towards Country.

Climate change is now recognized as a global determinant of mental health and wellbeing and escalating socio-economic inequities (Charlson et al. 2021). The emerging fields of green psychology and green psychiatry are documenting the links between fossil fuel and large scale agricultural industries driven climate change and ecocide and post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide and anxiety (Cianconi, Betro & Janiri 2020; Kjellstrom & McMichael 2013). New psychological constructs such as 'ecological grief' (Cunsolo & Ellis 2018) and 'solastagia' (Albrecht et al. 2007; McNamara & Westoby 2011) seek to capture the intangible affective consequence of Anthropocene driven destruction. A growing body of literature on the psychology of climate change denial is also seeking to understand what motivates a refusal to engage with the facts and lived realities of climate change. It has also become clear that those who are least responsible for mass ecological destruction are those who are most impacted. This includes Indigenous peoples (Janke et al. 2021; Morgan-Bulled et al. 2021; Weeramanthri et al. 2020).

Evidence that the mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples are being adversely impacted by climate change is mounting and includes loss of cultural continuity and disrupted place attachment, pervasive disempowerment, multiple expressions of psychological distress, increased adverse health effects from climate change, along with as yet unquantifiable intangible loss of SEWB (HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021; Middleton et al. 2020; Vecchio, Dickson & Zhang 2022). The interruption and destruction of spiritual and customary relationships with Country, as well as cultural, social, political and economic systems along with grief over the dying Country and kin, all impact on Indigenous wellbeing (Hartwig et al. 2022; Lansbury & Crosby 2022).

For Indigenous Peoples the complex environmental devastations brought about by climate change are part of a continuum of colonial destruction of land and people: ecocide and genocide are interconnected mechanisms of mass destruction (Crook, Short & South 2018). It is important to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples endured genocide as defined under international law, and that the violent dispossession and destruction of culture, language and land, along with frontier massacres, the forced removal of children across generations and their subsequent abuse, exploitation and enslavement, resulted in complex patterns of intergenerational trauma, and that the ongoing interpersonal, cultural and institutionalized or system-wide racism continues to be experienced and resisted by Indigenous peoples. While new psychological constructs such as 'ecological grief' (Cunsolo & Ellis 2018) and Solastalgia seek to map the links between climate change and mental health and wellbeing, for Indigenous people's deep grief over the loss and destruction of land is a collective intergenerational trauma spanning centuries (Morgan, Mia & Kwaymullina 2010). For many Indigenous peoples land is kin, not a resource, the relationship with land is fundamental to identity, way of life and wellbeing.

Fundamental to many relational eco-centric holistic Indigenous world-views or philosophies of flourishing is an ontological and axiological connection to Country or land (Dudgeon & Bray 2019; Dudgeon, Bray & Walker 2023). Globally, Indigenous peoples are guardians of some 80% of Mother Earth's biodiversity and continue to develop eco-centric knowledge systems - philosophies and practices - which support a harmonious and flourishing balance between people and planet (Redvers et al. 2020, 2022). Providing an over-view of an Indigenous world-view that honours a healing connection to Mother Earth, with a particular focus on Australian Indigenous knowledge systems, referred to as Lore, or

First Law is both proper and essential (Dudgeon, Bray, Smallwood, Walker, & Dalton 2020; Redvers et al. 2022). Emerging Indigenous paradigms of flourishing, while founded on ancient place-based knowledge systems which recognise the therapeutic benefits of Nature, share a recognition that maintaining harmony between people and planet is vital to collective wellbeing (Dudgeon et al. 2020; Sutherland 2017).

This chapter explores the traumatic impact on mental health and wellbeing through the loss and destruction of Country as well as the protective and restorative benefits of connecting to and caring for Country through the prism of an Australian Indigenous paradigm of eco-centric flourishing called social and emotional wellbeing or SEWB (Dudgeon et al. 2017; Gee et al. 2014; Sutherland & Adam 2019). Evidence which validates the protective mental health and wellbeing benefits of connection to Country is presented and pathways which support a decolonial eco-centric Indigenous futurity explored. As the wisdom holders of one of Mother Earths oldest continuing and developing knowledge systems of eco-centric flourishing, Indigenous people and their psychology of SEWB have much to teach about resisting and recovering from the colonial anthropocene. Importantly, this chapter recognises (along with peak international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) and World Health Organisation (WHO)) that solutions to the mental health and wellbeing impact of climate change involves place-based and large scale structural changes and in this context continued Indigenous climate change resistance and environmental advocacy at local and international levels is explored as part of the solution (Bray & Dudgeon 2020; Redvers et al. 2022).

Section 1. Indigenous World-views and Paradigms of Eco-centric Flourishing

Indigenous knowledge systems contribute directly to sustaining biological and cultural diversity, poverty eradication, conflict resolution, food security and ecosystem health, serve as the foundation of indigenous peoples' resilience to the impact of climate change (UNPFII, Report on the eighteenth session, 2019, 5/28).

Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) are among the earth's oldest continuing epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies of holistic eco-centric flourishing, knowledges that have been vetted and developed over tens of thousands of years prior to colonisation and continue to develop in response to the complex and substantial threats to communities and the lands they belong to. The cultures of Australia's diverse First Peoples are estimated to be between 65,000 to 120,000 years old (Bowler et al. 2019) and central to these cultures are complex holistic relational AIKS which are grounded in a symbiotic custodial relationship or kinship with Country. The term Country means more than simply land but encompasses all more-than-human life, including sky, waters, spirits; as a multiplicity of sentient beings. Country has a past, present and future, a plethora of more-than-human cultures, and describes a consciousness or agency which feels, responds, directs, loves, nurtures, and importantly, is the source of Indigenous legal systems, Laws, or Loes. The land is 'the logos of the law' (Black 2016, 165). In brief, Country is understood as the source of Law, the spiritual and cultural practice of living in harmony with Mother Earth through the practice of custodial kinship ethics which include respect, responsibility and reciprocity with Country. The AIKS which emerged from and are an expression of Country encompass holistic and interconnected knowledge systems about wellbeing, astrology, medicine, geography and ecology, among other systems.

While global IKS are diverse and place-based, reflecting sophisticated cultural laws (Country), Indigenous scholars have identified what can be called a golden thread running through these diverse knowledge systems which reflects a common worldview or philosophy of life, centred on a relationship based on harmony between people and planet (Land). In a significant article on the Indigenous determinants of planetary health, a group of Indigenous thinkers from across the world formulated a consensus on what this worldview represents, terming this First Law (Redvers et al. 2022).

Planetary health is an emerging trans-disciplinary field which is in principle aligned with Indigenous world views, although it is important to recognise that Indigenous understanding of holistic stewardship differ from the World Health Organisations concept of One Health (Lerner & Berg 2017; Hiller et al. 2021; WHO 2017). The One Health paradigm recognises the interdependence between the health of humans, more-than-humans and the environment, and the urgency to develop strategies for addressing zoonotic threats, and while this paradigm resonates with Indigenous holistic knowledge systems, systematic

reviews have noted a lack of Indigenous engagement in the development and implementation of the model (Riley et al. 2021). The Indigenous perspective on the planetary determinants of health represented by Redvers et al centres the Indigenous concept of 'stewardship' -

Stewardship is premised on a deep appreciation for Indigenous Natural or First Law, which warrants recognition and respect for an earth-centred and relational jurisprudence system. These Land-specific and Country-specific Natural or First Laws are rooted in complex notions of reciprocity and responsibility, which view biospheric values as human values (Redvers et al. 2022).

The ethical foundations of an Indigenous relational worldview are embedded in a custodial responsibility for Country. This worldview is also an axiological praxis which describes a spiritual and ontological dimension in which humans are understood to be an expression of Country, as 'self-same' and not ontologically separate (Moreton-Robinson 2017, 2000; Simpson 2014; Singh 2022). Indigenous axiological relationality has been described as a Law of Obligation, a collective ethical responsibility.

The custodial ethic is the combination of many laws of obligation – reciprocity, sharing, stewardship, looking after relations etc., with the cultivation of people's qualities of mind, character, and behaviour. These obligatory habits become a tradition which collectively becomes a general law underpinned by the sacralising of land – a process of becoming and being' (Burgh, Graham & Thornton 2021, 13).

The totem system is an integral part of the custodial ethic which underpins SEWB and social harmony. While there is not space enough here to fully discuss this complex relational system, and furthermore, this system is part of the sacred and secret cultural knowledge of the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the following offers a succinct description:

Aboriginal people are bound to their homelands, spiritually and practically as the well-being of their people, animals and plants are closely linked. Each tribe had a different totem, which was identified by an animal, or plant. Totems are sacred and therefore must be protected they are not to be damaged, injured, killed or consumed by clan members who identify themselves as belonging to a particular totem. It is believed that the totem is an ancestral being which is part of their dreamtime. Totems are linked to sacred sites and the Aboriginals spiritual, emotional, physical, social and environmental well-being depended on the maintenance of sacred sites. This ensured the maintenance, care and protection of Mother earth, who is the giver of all life as the land and its people are one (Pattel 2007, 2-3).

The concept of stewardship (of which the totem system of care is central) is therefore a central axiological practice or ethical system. As it will be discussed further on, the practice of caring for Country through Indigenous led land and sea management programs, as well as therapeutic cultural activities such as bushfire mitigation, protection of threatened species, and biosecurity and heritage compliance by Indigenous ranger groups, which reconnect people to Country, are contemporary articulations of traditional practices which are re-empowering and revitalising land-based healing (Commonwealth of Australia 2019). These include reproductive environmental justice practices such as Birthing on Country (traditional women's birthing practices) (Dudgeon & Walker 2011) healing camps for men and youth, and Elder led engagements with Country (Dudgeon & Bray 2019).

Section 2. Indigenous Resistance to Ecocide— international and Australian Contexts

This section provides an over-view of the international context of Indigenous resistance and advocacy for Mother Earth, with a particular focus on Australia in order to situate Indigenous resistance, advocacy and policy in Australia within this international context. Underpinning the fight against environmental injustice is a shared vision of holistic eco-centric health such that counter-colonial, counter-anthropocene resistance can also be understood as the illumination of an Indigenous futurity which centres harmony between planet and people (Bray & Dudgeon 2020).

Indigenous people across the world have led resistance to ecocide both in terms of mounting activist protests which seek to protect Mother Earth and in terms of instigating counter-hegemonic discourses which centre Indigenous world-views and eco-centric holistic stewardship ethics. From Indigenous defenders of the earth in the Amazon, to the Idle No More and Standing Rock movement, Indigenous mobilisation against mining and the destruction of sacred sites in Australia by mining companies, through to the Rights of Nature movement, Indigenous minorities have been at the forefront of the environmental justice movement (Grossman, Parker & Frank 2012; Norman 2017; Poelina 2021; River Of Life et al. 2020). Indigenous water rights are recognised as cultural rights in Australia: an Indigenous alliance formed around the protection of the Murray–Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN) in 1998 which was then strengthened by the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) in 2011 (Hartwig et al. 2022). 'Coordination and advocacy have produced several Indigenous-led policy initiatives, programmes and proposals including 'cultural flows' (Weir, 2009, 2017)' (Hartwig et al. 2022, 36).

Indigenous women in Australia, who traditionally had an equal and respected place with men, have led activism against the mining of Country, mobilising one of the largest record blockades against the Northern Territory's Jabiluka uranium mine in 1998 under the leadership of Jacqui Katona. Earlier protests in 1983 against Pine Gap, a high security military base, were led by Pitjantjatjara and Aranda women (Dudgeon & Bray 2016; Maynard 2007). There is also a growing critique of environmental racism, the recognition that the destruction of the environments of minority groups such as Indigenous peoples is motivated by a racist disregard for their human, cultural and land rights. The testing of nuclear bombs on Indigenous communities (including children) in Maralinga in Australia between 1959 and 1963 is an example of environmental racism or more precisely radioactive racism (Green 2016).

More recently activists and Elders have mobilised to protect their communities against the ravages of climate change. In 2021 Traditional Owners from 40 different nations came together at the National First Peoples Gathering on Climate Change holding a workshop on the dangers already facing Indigenous peoples, urging co-operation, advocating for AIKS based solutions and producing a Statement on climate change (Morgan-Bulled et al. 2021). Young Indigenous people have also mobilized to address the impacts of climate

change. Emergency Leaders for Climate Action hosted a panel with Indigenous youth on First Nations Climate Justice affirming that 'Sovereignty has never been ceded. We recognise that respect for traditional knowledge and promoting the rights of First Nations communities must be at the heart of responding to the climate crises' (Emergency Leaders for Climate Action, 2021, para 2). The report from the panel details Indigenous led activism against fracking in the Northern Territory. As the report states

Water is life for Aboriginal communities. Our lands and waters hold our stories, our law, our songlines, our culture and have fed and sustained our people since the beginning of time. Right now, water and our water rights as the original sovereign people of this continent are under greater threat than ever before from irreversible gas fracking & oil drilling, mining, forestry, overfishing, toxic chemical spills, industrial agriculture, cotton farming and the dangerous climate change that these extractive industries cause. We are hurting in the face of unprecedented drought, extreme heat, environmental pollution and the destruction of Country and culture. Enough is enough, it's time that we look to the leadership of Indigenous people who are building strong, sustainable, self-determining communities (Emergency Leaders for Climate Action, 2021, 13).

Indigenous peoples have always been active in guarding Mother Earth at national and international levels for many decades and have led and inspired policy innovations which combat ecocide and climate change across the world (Bray & Dudgeon 2019). A shared and culturally mature awareness that the wellbeing of people and planet is entangled and inseparable has guided these numerous interventions in policy and the philosophical and political paradigms which support them, constituting a broad and powerful decolonisation and Indigenising of the sustainable development discourse. The environmental devastations caused by colonisation is a lived reality for millions of Indigenous peoples across generations- colonisation results in the 'the imposition of 'development 'models that are destroying the life-giving capacities and integrity of Mother Earth and producing a range of detrimental impacts of which climate change could prove to be the most destructive' (United Nations World Conference on Indigenous Peoples 2013, 2). The awareness globally that partnership with Indigenous peoples includes making space for Indigenous leadership and knowledge systems about eco-centric flourishing has increased over the last few decades. For example, the Declaration

of Belém (1988) addresses the rapid decline in biodiversity, outlining the responsibilities of scientists and environmentalists in addressing the needs of local communities and the pivotal role of Indigenous peoples in all aspects of global planning, calling for Indigenous engagement in protection of their lands as custodians of the majority of the earth's biodiversity. Thirty years later the Declaration of Belém + 30 reaffirmed the importance of supporting Indigenous self-determination over land in the fight against loss of biodiversity. The Alta Outcome Document which was influenced by hundreds of Indigenous leaders from seven geo-political regions urged a rapid transition from fossil fuels, 'decentralized, locally controlled, clean, renewable energy systems and structures' (United Nations World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, 2013, 4) and the adaptation of IKS. 'Decolonisation' is stressed as necessary to 'protect, recognize and respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples and that are in harmony with the sacredness of Mother Earth (United Nations World Conference on Indigenous Peoples 2013, 9).

Indigenous world-views have had a significant impact on the global sustainability movement. Since 2009, the United Nations have also sought to incorporate Indigenous world views into models of global sustainability, integrating Indigenous legal orders with Western ones through the Harmony with Nature project. Harmony with Nature is founded on Indigenous led legal innovations in Ecuador which sought to protect Pachamama or Mother Earth (Becker 2011). 'Harmony with Nature is a programme of global environmental governance that attempts to align Indigenous legal traditions, rights of nature, and a philosophy of law fit for the Anthropocene' (Schmidt 2022, 821). The concept of 'earth jurisprudence' otherwise known as the Rights of Nature movement has been developed from Indigenous relational governance systems and worldview which recognise the interconnected wellbeing of all human and more-than-human beings and the sacred Indigenous covenant to protect and guard the health of Mother Earth.

Rights of Nature is grounded in the recognition that humankind and Nature share a fundamental, non-anthropocentric relationship given our shared existence on this planet, and it creates guidance for actions that respect this relationship. Legal provisions recognizing the Rights of Nature, sometimes referred to as Earth Jurisprudence, include constitutions, national statutes, and local laws. In addition, new policies, guidelines and resolutions are increasingly pointing to the need for a legal approach that recognizes the rights of the Earth to well-being. Furthermore, educational activities on the rights of Nature

are on the increase in the professional and public spheres to advance Earth Jurisprudence worldwide [<http://www.harmonywithnatureun.org/rightsOfNature/>].

Using the legal framework of earth jurisprudence which has been established from within the UN framework of Harmony of Nature, Indigenous people in Australia have successfully fought for and achieved rights for Country in 2017, namely the Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murron) Act 2017 which acknowledges that the Yarra River is a being and as such must be protected and in particular by the traditional custodians of Birrarung land and waterways (Birrarung 2017).

The relationship between language, culture and Country is also significant such that ecocide is also understood as a form of epistemicide as language and culture is embodied in and comes from Country, entangled and relational in the landscape, its Fauna and Flora (Carved and Ring trees, Rock Art). Country is recognised as a source of language and knowledge and language provides 'deep knowledge of Country, like a data base' (Janke et al. 2021, 36). As Indigenous Martu women rangers put it 'each plant has its own songs, places, stories and laws, and has special techniques, tools, knowledge and skills to prepare them' (Country Needs People 2016, 88). There is a growing international concern about the loss of Indigenous land-based knowledge systems which are impeding resilience to climate change and contributing to the loss of humanities intangible cultural heritage as well as, most importantly, the very survival of Indigenous people (Lyons & Harkness 2021). Connection to, caring for, and being on Country is central to the cultural and social and emotional wellbeing of men, women and children, families and communities, fosters resilience identities and is a recognised protective factor across a number of measures (Fatima et al., 2023).

Section 3. Social and Emotional Wellbeing - an Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing Paradigm of Eco-centric Flourishing

This section provides an over-view of the Indigenous holistic strengths-based SEWB and mental health paradigm, the seven interconnected or relational domains of mind and

emotions, body, family, community, culture, Country and spirituality which compose SEWB and the social and cultural determinants which shape those interconnected domains of wellbeing (Gee et al. 2014; Dudgeon & Walker 2015; Dudgeon et al. 2017; Sutherland & Adams 2019). The relational domain of Country is focused on describing the interconnected nature of Country and how harmonious relations between Country is central to the strengthening of resilient identities and communities.

Aboriginal peoples' view of health and flourishing is built around the obligation to nature, protecting and caring for people, family, Country and the law (Franks & Curr 1996; Nannup 2006, 2008). This provides a platform on which to connect the concepts to spirituality (Randal 2003). Kanyini is a Pitjantjatjara¹ word for the principle of SEWB or way of life (Kanjini Co-Op 2014) and includes: the aspects of creation and a place for mother earth; lore, dreaming, spirituality, soul, psyche; family and kinship; and Land, Country (Randal 2003).

This concept is echoed across the continent and relates to the whole family, including the environment. The child walks through a particular song-line of the earth where conception took place, and this in turn becomes their totemic story. Everything connects with the song-lines becoming the totem and connecting the person back to the fauna and flora of that area (Lee 1994).

Indigenous philosophies of flourishing, as mentioned previously, are eco-centric, recognising that the wellbeing of Country and people are entangled in complex multi-dimensional ways. The determinants of Indigenous wellbeing are also shared with Country, a link which recognises the intersectional destruction of ecocide, epistemicide and genocide.

The Australian SEWB paradigm of Indigenous flourishing can be recognised as a development of older AIKS about living in harmony, knowledge systems which have evolved and adapted in response to the challenges of colonisation. Emerging from the

¹Pitjantjatjara are an Aboriginal language group from Central Australia. Their traditional lands are vast, taking in the Great Victoria and Gibson Deserts.

Indigenous self-determination movement, of which the Indigenous mental health movement played a central role, this holistic definition of flourishing was described in ground breaking work by Indigenous communities and leaders during the last few decades of the last century and is now a central paradigm in policy and programs across Australia as identified below.

Early articulations of SEWB are present in the nine guiding principles highlighting the need to acknowledge the strengths of family, community and culture and recognition of self-determination which were first published in the 1989 National Aboriginal Health Strategy (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party, 1989). Previously, Aboriginal health journals published innovative work during the 1970s, arguing for self-determination across the mental health sector, including the freedom to define mental health and wellbeing from an Indigenous perspective. Much of this early thinking emerged out of the Indigenous community-controlled sector. In September 1993 the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) released their wellbeing manifesto, The NACCHO position paper on Aboriginal mental health which has as a first goal to 'achieve the state of emotional wellbeing at least equal to that which existed prior to colonisation and equip Aboriginal people the prerequisites for that state of emotional well-being' (NACCHO 1993). The second goal is to 'enable the reunion and cultural revitalisation of Aboriginal persons, families and communities'. NACCHO links the 'denial of Aboriginal community self-determination', along with the imposition of mental health constructs based on 'caucasian principles and philosophies' as key issues in preventing wellbeing. They argue that Aboriginal people should define health and wellbeing and that the impact of colonisation must be recognised including 'alienation, powerlessness, racialism, paternalism, attempted physical and cultural genocide (extermination and assimilation), violation of human rights and dispossession' (NACCHO 1993). The right to self-determination supports the definition of health created by NACCHO:

Health does not just mean the physical well-being of the individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole community. This is a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concepts of life-death-life. Health services should strive to achieve the state where every individual can achieve their full potential as human beings and thus bring about the total well-being of their communities.

This is an evolving definition' (NACCHO 1993).

This evolving definition clearly situates SEWB as a key to the achievement of community well-being. Indeed, more recent studies have identified a number of cultural continuity paths or mechanisms for facilitating the SEWB of connections to community (Dudgeon et al. 2021).

Several significant national Indigenous mental health conferences also contributed to the development of a holistic paradigm of mental health. In a meeting in September 1993 in Cairns representatives from NACCHO and Aboriginal Medical Services among others including consultants, Sister Pat Swan and Professor Beverley Raphael came together and agreed on a definition of 'social mental health' with a holistic framework and associated principles. This was followed by "Our Way": National Aboriginal Mental Health Conference (November 1993, 25th- 27th) was the first large gathering, in which more than 900 people came together in Sydney, New South Wales (Dudgeon & Collard 1993). The following year at another NACCHO conference in Darwin, Northern Territory, a model of holistic well-being which incorporated a recognition of 'spiritual, physical, emotional, mental, land culture and ethnic factors' was developed and it was affirmed that 'mental health must be reviewed in the context of this holistic concept, and that the social aspects must be taken into account' (Swan & Raphael, p. - appendix). The concept was then further developed in 'Ways Forward': National Consultancy Report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health (Swan & Raphael 1995). Here in a section on 'mental health as understood in Aboriginal communities' they argue against the use of Western interpretations of 'mental health' and 'mental illness' and report that the Aboriginal holistic concept of well-being encompasses

mental health and physical, cultural and spiritual health. *Land is central to wellbeing.* This holistic concept does not merely refer to the "whole body" but in fact is steeped in the harmonised inter-relations which constitute cultural well-being. These inter-relating factors can be categorised as largely spiritual, environmental, ideological, political, social, economic, mental and physical. Crucially, it must be understood that when the harmony of these interrelations is disrupted, Aboriginal ill health will persist (emphasis added, Swan & Raphael 1995, 19).

Finally, several Aboriginal psychologists from the Australia Indigenous Psychologists Associations further developed the model of SEWB (shown in Figure 1 below) produced an important paper (Gee et al. 2014) which now underpins numerous frameworks, strategies and programs, including The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023 (previously established in 2004-2009) and a range of other frameworks and strategies (see Dudgeon et al, 2021; Dudgeon, et al, 2014). Currently, SEWB is embedded in policy across a range of areas and the definitions cited above remain central.



Figure 1: Social and Emotional Wellbeing adapted from Gee et al. 2014

This Indigenous paradigm of flourishing can be understood as an evolving IKS which encompasses ancient systems of holistic eco-centric philosophies, and governance practices of flourishing continually vetted and developed over tens of thousands of years and now engaged in strategic practices of decolonising the mental health systems and revitalising cultural continuity and wellbeing in communities (Dudgeon et al. 2017).

Each of the seven domains of flourishing are relational or interconnected such that the domain of Country, for example is connected to or understood as, mind and emotion, body, family and kin, community, culture and spirituality and these interrelated systems constitute Indigenous self-hood.

Section 4. Validating Connection to and Caring for Country - Restoring Harmony and Wellbeing

Building on work undertaken by the authors of The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2004-2009 and 2017-2023 frameworks (Social Health Reference Group 2004 and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2017), and a range of other frameworks and strategies (see Dudgeon et al. 2021; Dudgeon et al. 2014) validating the mental health and SEWB benefits of connection to Country, this section explores innovative solutions developed by Indigenous communities across Australia. Indigenous-led policy innovations which support connection to and caring for Country are also discussed (Lyons & Harkness 2021). 'Caring for country' means participation in inter-related activities on Aboriginal lands and seas with the objective of promoting ecological, spiritual and human health' (Berry et al. 2010, 140). Caring for Country can be understood through the paradigm of SEWB as a complex, multidimensional relational practice which not only connects people to Country, but to the other domains of wellbeing, to mind and emotions, body, family and kin, community, culture, and spirituality. As Dudgeon and colleagues explain:

Being on and caring for Country has positive physical and mental health outcomes. Spending time on Country (or out bush) has been shown to be associated with overall better health outcomes such as improved physical fitness and importantly for SEWB, lowered psychological distress (Burgess et al.,

2009). *Caring for Country can promote dignity, self-determination, and build community strength (Berry et al., 2010) [...] Connecting to Country is recognised as a protective factor that develops and strengthens Indigenous wellbeing (Burgess, Berry, Gunthorpe & Bailie 2008; Davy et al. 2016) (Dudgeon et al. 2017, 321).*

The restoration of healthy and harmonious relationships between people and Country is linked to positive wellbeing and caring for Country vital to cultural continuity and the collective empowerment of the community (Yap & Yu 2016). There is now an abundance of literature on the wellbeing benefits of caring for Country described by different Indigenous Nations around Australia. For example, the Yawuru people, who are the recognised native title holders of the land and waters in and around Broome in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, refer to wellbeing as *Mabu liyan* (good spirit) which emanates from connection to family, community, country and culture, having good health and living well, safety and respect and rights and recognition (Yap & Yu 2016). The Yawuru Corporate Group have established the *Mabu Liyan* (good spirit) philosophy as a guiding principle which is inclusive, supportive, and committed to the principles of sustainability and community cohesion, cultural and language maintenance, land management and economic development (Nyamba Buru Yawuru 2020). There is a growing body of evidence regarding the link between connections with Country and culture and Indigenous health and SEWB among Indigenous peoples across Australia.

Stronger collective identity, resilience autonomy, health and cultural life (Bourke et al. 2018; Butler et al. 2019; Schultz & Cairney 2017; Weir, Stacey & Youngetob 2011); increased confidence, biocultural knowledge and commitment to the environment (Daniels et al. 2022); family wellbeing and high quality of life (Kingsley et al. 2009, 2013); reduced markers for diabetes, hypotension and psychological distress (Burgess et al. 2009; Ganesharajah 2009); increased language use and wellbeing (Wright et al. 2021), employment of Indigenous people and improved eco-system resilience (Barber & Jackson 2017), transmission of traditional knowledge systems (Divarkarla et al. 2020) and overall improvements in community and cultural revitalisation (HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021) have all been found as benefits of connection to Country. Activism against the destruction of Country can be understood as another form of caring for Country and the actualisation or practice of stewardship of Country, as a counter-colonial resistance to

ecocide. While there is a paucity of research on the wellbeing benefits of defending, guarding and protecting Country it is logical to assume that such benefits exist given the central importance of stewardship to community identity. For instance, giving evidence at the inquest into the deaths of 13 young Indigenous people in the Kimberley, Senator Patrick Dodson, and senior Yawuru Elder referred to the responsibilities of caring for Country within the context of cultural continuity inherent in Mabu Liyan. He explained it thus:

Liyan embodies the interconnectedness between a person's sense of self, the wider community and the natural landscape. Yawuru people's connection to country and joy of celebrating our culture and society is fundamental to having mabu liyan (good spirit). When we respect country and look after it, we have a good feeling about ourselves as people and our place in the world, and this is reflected in the nature of our relationship and encounters with other human beings. Prior to Western colonisation, mabu liyan was at the centre of Yawuru cultural and social existence, informing our obligations to family, community and country. The impact of colonisation on our people has been traumatic and we are now seeking to heal and work toward building "mabu ngarrungu", meaning strong community and "Mabu buru", meaning strong country (Fogliani 2019, 56).

Indigenous perspectives on Country included in the 2021 Australian Government State of the Environment Report also echo this sentiment of interconnectedness of individual wellbeing derived from an inherent obligation to look after Country: 'Country is so much more than the land, seas and waters. It encompasses all living things and all aspects of the environment, as well as the knowledge, cultural practices and responsibilities connected with this' (Jenke, et al 2021, 14).

Given the abundance of evidence demonstrating the SEWB benefits of caring for, being on and connecting with Country it seems clear that evidence based mental health policies should be implemented accordingly. It is important to recognise that from an Indigenous standpoint, healing the detrimental impacts of climate change - which include extreme weather events, the entire cacophony of colonial Anthropocene

destruction, the escalating loss of biodiversity, and so forth - is never a palliative act. It is not about adjusting to dying or ecocide but rather resisting climate change deniers and working with Mother Nature to restore and revitalise Land and Country. Healing demands whole-of-Country wellbeing, an end to and a reversal of the devastations of colonisation on a local and planetary level. It is this recognition that we are all interconnected irrespective of land, ethnicity, or species that underpins the global Indigenous world view of healing and provides such promise for the future.

However, there are many studies that reveal the various structural social determinants that drive existing planetary health inequities and climate change producing what is described as the global 'consumptogenic system', that perpetuates the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health and wellbeing. These structural social determinants are 'characterised by institutions, policies, business practices, and social norms that embed and entrench principles of extractive capitalism and colonialism' (Friel 2022, 466). They are manifested in unequal power relations among stakeholders, institutions and discourses, neoliberal corporatism and individualism permeating institutions and communities, affecting policy decisions influencing systems that unjustly and inequitably affect the lives and health of individuals and communities.

Crucially, racism remains a key determinant that supports the discriminatory systems and structures driving global inequities in health and wellbeing (Dudgeon & Walker 2022) and exacerbating the devastating impacts of climate change on Indigenous peoples globally. While Indigenous groups have identified numerous solutions to the climate crisis racism remains a substantial barrier to implementing them. Nevertheless, '[c]limate change represents an opportunity for redress and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to lead climate action planning based on their intimate traditional and historical knowledge of Country' (HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021). The evidence for this is Fire Stick burning. For instance, the outcry across Australia after the Black Summer fires of 2019/20, provided an opportunity for AIKS regarding land management to be adopted by governments (McKemey et al. 2022). Aboriginal people use fire management to prevent the buildup of scrub and grasses, and to encourage new growth. The use of multiple fires created small cool fires, allowing for wildlife to escape, tree canopy to remain intact and plants to regenerate. The main aim of this practice is to prevent high intensity, large scale fires, and to manage hunting grounds. Fire-Stick burning as it is

known has become part of the Australia land management program (McKemey et al. 2021).

Conclusion

The chapter concludes by summarising the central themes from the evidence which validates connection to and caring for Country and situates Australian Indigenous solutions to mental health and wellbeing impacts of adverse climate change within a climate justice framework which recognises the interconnected mechanisms of ecocide and genocide. The importance of affirming and expanding Indigenous eco-centric worldviews and value systems is stressed (Arabena & Kingsley 2015; HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE 2021; Petzold et al. 2020; Redvers et al. 2020, 2022). Caring for Country is an Indigenous practice which includes what is often referred to as land and sea management. Quantitative and qualitative studies of such practices have shown that revitalised SEWB is a clear benefit to caring for Country. However, Caring for Country is more than a management of land and sea, but also a spiritual and cultural practice which is vital to cultural continuity, self-determination and the healing of people and planet. Caring for Country is also a global de-colonial practice, a practice which is central to the covenant of stewardship or guardianship of Country or Mother Earth. This covenant is central to the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017) which affirms the 'ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors'.

Achieving the transformative goal of planetary health equity within Australia requires a 'social vaccine' which involves: 1) embedding policy norms of social equity, environmental sustainability, and wellbeing; 2) applying these policy norms and implementing multi-sectoral policies that ensure a fair social foundation and economic environment operating within the ecological ceiling; 3) implementing a guiding national strategy on climate, equity and health; 4) resetting the governance of planetary health equity ensuring that no vested interests are at the policy development table and that there is protected space for civil society in order for health and equity to flourish (Friel 2022,

467). This in turn requires as a minimum: 'a life with security, opportunities that are fair, a planet that is habitable by humans and supports biodiversity, and governance that is just' (Friel 2022, 467).

New Indigenous led policies both at the international and national level seek to challenge the hegemony of ecocide and the colonial Anthropocene and restore planetary wellbeing. This requires international consensus and co-operation and the recognition that the multinational corporations which are destroying Mother Earth are engaged in acts of colonial ecocide. Recent international advances include the Indigenous led Right of Nature or earth jurisprudence movement championed by the United Nations under the framework of Harmony with Nature which seeks the protection of more-than-human life by recognizing the ontological sovereignty of that life. In Australia, so far, Indigenous peoples have fought for the recognition of the Yarra River which has now been acknowledged as a sovereign being under this legal framework.

As the United Nation's Harmony with Nature, and the World Health Organisation's One Health demonstrate, IKS and world views are increasingly central to global visions of sustainable human existence. However, the repatriation of land, the actual decolonisation of and return of Indigenous lands remains marginal in much of these discussions and action plans. Ultimately, one clear and vital solution to the climate crisis and impacts on SEWB and mental health caused by ecocide is the return of Indigenous lands to the guardians of those lands. Janke, et al advocate solutions which include improved land rights and access to Country, along with the management of and expansion of Indigenous Protected Area's which strengthen and conserve Indigenous ecological and cultural knowledges and points out that best-practice guidelines exist (Janke et al. 2021; Woodward et al. 2020). The importance of Indigenous stewardship over land is recognised not only by International organisations but frequently recommended through many reports such as the Western Australian Climate Inquiry (Weeramanthri et al. 2020). As a foundational cultural determinant of Indigenous health and SEWB, strengthening and protecting connection with and caring for Country is broadly recognised as a key to revitalising the wellbeing of communities (Arabena 2020).

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