

Our Environment – Our Cultural Heritage

Working with local
Aboriginal communities
on environmental
projects





Overview

This resource guide will help local councils to involve Aboriginal communities in environmental and stormwater projects.

Local councils have produced publications on Aboriginal issues, which have focused on how Aboriginal people can access services the councils provide. This guide describes culturally appropriate ways in which local councils can develop relationships with Aboriginal people, and involve them in environmental matters affecting their communities.

The guide has been prepared by the Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW).

Why do this guide?

Over the last five years, the NSW Stormwater Trust has funded local councils to help them turn actions in their stormwater management plans into stormwater education projects. A review of these projects indicates that Aboriginal communities have not been included in stormwater management planning, project planning or related education activities.

How was this resource developed?

The information in this guide resulted from a workshop coordinated by the former NSW Environment Protection Authority—now the Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW). The workshop involved Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who manage, preserve, protect and maintain the environment and its heritage value for Aboriginal people.

Contents of guide

This guide complements resources that are currently available and provides an up-to-date listing of resources that local council staff can easily access.



Where to start


The first step in involving Aboriginal communities in stormwater and environmental projects is to talk to your Aboriginal staff members or elected councillors, or meet with the Aboriginal consultative or advisory committee in your council. If your council does not have Aboriginal staff or an Aboriginal committee, contact the Local Aboriginal Land Council.

Guiding principles

By following these guiding principles you will ensure you are providing meaningful, culturally appropriate and genuine involvement of local Aboriginal people in environmental projects.

These guiding principles are:

1. Ensure proposed projects show respect for cultural diversity, and acknowledge and protect cultural knowledge, practices and protocols. Environmental projects that build on Aboriginal people's unique relationship with the land are more likely to achieve good Aboriginal community engagement.
2. Ensure proposed projects are based on the ideas and desires of the whole community, including community elders, respected leaders, different family groupings, organisations and individuals.
3. Develop significant and genuine relationships with members of the local Aboriginal community. These require an investment of time, and are best developed in informal settings as well as through regular formal meetings.
4. Build on the strengths, knowledge and capability of Aboriginal communities, groups and leaders and ensure projects reflect the importance and worth of strong, positive role models and previously successful projects (Dave Brown and Derek Foster 2001). Be prepared with positive case studies and examples of how the community may contribute to the project.
5. Ensure Aboriginal people are involved in each stage of the design, implementation and evaluation phases of projects that include them. For example:
 - engage the Aboriginal community in the initial planning of the project—this is more likely to result in a project that the Aboriginal community feels committed to
 - employ an Aboriginal person to implement the project
 - design the evaluation process using culturally appropriate methods.

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6. Allow enough time to facilitate the involvement and participation of the whole community. It is critical to continuing Aboriginal involvement to ensure the Aboriginal community has a role in all decision-making aspects of the project. Be clear with the community about what you see as their roles and responsibilities, and be prepared to negotiate.
 7. Ensure all Aboriginal people are included in making decisions about natural resource management, and made aware of how the outcomes or results of the decisions will affect them.
 8. Ensure communication strategies are culturally appropriate and accessible to as many Aboriginal people in your local community as possible. Aboriginal communities respond more positively to information given in person. Therefore, written correspondence should be supported by personal contact wherever possible.
 9. Ensure projects are designed, delivered and promoted in ways that emphasise the development and maintenance of trust and the evolution of formal and sustainable partnerships with local Aboriginal communities (Dave Brown and Derek Foster 2001).
 10. Ensure all council staff are trained in cross-cultural awareness and that local Aboriginal people are aware of and have endorsed the training development and delivery.

Cultural practice tips

This section identifies cultural practice tips that can be used in different situations. The tips provide ideas for building and maintaining sustainable relationships with local Aboriginal communities and their members.

1. Learn from Aboriginal people about the local protocols for making contact with and working on environmental initiatives in the community. Your first port of call could be with the local Aboriginal Consultative Committee or Aboriginal members of the Local Government Environment Committee. If these groups do not exist, consider establishing an Aboriginal Consultation Committee to work with your local council.
2. Identify key Aboriginal stakeholders in your local community. The *National Directory of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations* provides a list of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-controlled organisations and their contact details in each State and Territory.



Stakeholders will include:

- local elders, community leaders and family groups
- corporations, Landcare groups or local tribal groups
- local Aboriginal organisations, e.g. Community Development Employment Programs (CDEPs) or Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs)
- participants in indigenous land use agreements
- traditional owners or custodians of the land.

3. With community support, consider developing a local community map so you can determine the relationships between different groups, organisations and local families.
4. Ensure you are clear about how different people, their organisations and their families are linked or not linked as it may impact on the progress of your project.
5. Have more than one contact person for each group or organisation to ensure you collect a range of different views and interests, especially from a women's business or men's business perspective.
6. Distribute clear, plain English guidelines throughout the consultative process, and terms of reference for the project and its implementation.
7. Regularly check your perceptions or assumptions with different people to ensure that you are developing an accurate picture of what is happening.
8. Make sure you develop an understanding and appreciation of local history and the colonisation processes that occurred in your local area, and their impact on the traditional custodians of the land.
9. Do some research on previous social and environmental issues that have occurred in the past so you can adequately prepare for the new project.
10. Give representatives adequate warning, time to think about and comment on issues, and the opportunity to talk to others who are not present at your meetings, before they make a final decision.
12. Conduct meetings in Aboriginal-friendly and accessible places, and always try to acknowledge the traditional owners.
13. Identify if your council has an Aboriginal employment strategy. If not, explore with the local community ways to establish one.



Useful resources

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) 1999, *As a Matter of Fact*, 2nd edn., see www.atsic.gov.au/News_Room/As_a_matter_of_fact/index.asp

Australian Heritage Commission 2002, *Ask First—A Guide to Respecting Indigenous Heritage Places and Values*, see www.ahc.gov.au/infores/publications/indigenousheritage/pubs/askfirst.pdf

The Boomanulla Conference for Country, report dated 5 and 6 March 2002. This conference in Canberra was attended by approximately 55 natural resource representatives from Aboriginal communities in NSW. They assembled to prepare a statement about Aboriginal people's expectations of the NSW Government's planning processes for water, catchments and native vegetation. See www.alc.org.au/resources/Reports/reports.htm

Brown, Dave and Foster, Derek 2001, *Assisting Indigenous Extension Services: Key Guidelines for Training and Development of Extension Officers Dealing with Indigenous Communities*, see www.regional.org.au/au/apen/2001/p/BrownD.htm

Callaghan, Gavin and Moseley, Lillian 2000, *Healthy Waters, Healthy People—A Support Package for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Representatives on Water Management Committees*

'Koori Land and Water Care: Planning an Environmental Project', *Healthy Waters, Healthy People* (see previous publication), Appendix 4, p. 28.

National Directory of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations, IPR Shandwick Pty Ltd, 33 Walshe Street, West Melbourne, Victoria, phone: (03) 9290 9333

NSW Premiers Department 2000, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment in Practice*, see www.eeo.nsw.gov.au/atsi/practice.doc

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Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW)
59–61 Goulburn Street, Sydney
PO Box A290, Sydney South 1232
Phone: 131 555 (NSW only—publication and information requests)
Phone: (02) 9995 5000 (switchboard)
Fax: (02) 9995 5999
TTY: (02) 9211 4723
Email: info@epa.nsw.gov.au
Website: www.environment.nsw.gov.au

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