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Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Inquiry into Responses to Racism, Hate and Violence toward First Nations People

Submitted by:

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Acknowledgement of Country

Capricorn Conservation Council respectfully acknowledges all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters across Australia. We recognise their enduring connection to Country, culture and community, and we pay our deepest respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We honour the living cultures, languages and knowledge systems that continue to guide the care of Country. We also acknowledge that the Capricorn Conservation Council Environment Centre in Rockhampton operates on Darumbal Country — land that always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Introduction

Capricorn Conservation Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Joint Standing Committee's inquiry into responses to racism, hate and violence toward First Nations people. As a regional environmental organisation based in Central Queensland, CCC has worked for more than fifty years to protect biodiversity and advocate for environmental justice while ensuring that environmental governance is guided by Traditional Custodians, Elders and cultural authority.

CCC's work occurs in a region where First Nations peoples continue to experience the ongoing impacts of colonisation, systemic discrimination and environmental dispossession. In Central Queensland these experiences are compounded by social inequity, extractive industries and structural exclusion from decision-making processes relating to land, water and resources. Racism toward First Nations people in regional communities frequently intersects with environmental governance, land management, cultural heritage protection and access to decision-making forums.

Our submission draws upon CCC's governance structures, Indigenous-led programs and cultural partnerships to demonstrate both the structural drivers of racism and the

community-led solutions necessary to address them. The experiences and initiatives discussed in this submission demonstrate that combating racism toward First Nations people requires systemic reform across government, environmental governance, community institutions and public discourse.

Structural and Historical Drivers of Racism Toward First Nations People

Racism toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia is deeply embedded within colonial governance systems that historically excluded First Nations peoples from decisions affecting their lands, waters and cultures. In many regions of Australia, including Central Queensland, environmental governance has historically ignored Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural authority.

The exclusion of First Nations peoples from environmental and land management decision-making has contributed to a broader pattern of systemic racism in which Indigenous knowledge is marginalised while Western scientific approaches are privileged. This dynamic reinforces social and institutional inequality and undermines the ability of First Nations communities to exercise cultural authority over their Country.

Capricorn Conservation Council recognises that environmental justice cannot be separated from racial justice. Environmental advocacy that fails to embed Indigenous leadership risks reproducing the same colonial structures that have historically dispossessed First Nations communities. CCC's strategic approach therefore centres Indigenous leadership, cultural authority and shared stewardship of Country as fundamental principles guiding our work.

Addressing racism toward First Nations peoples requires recognising that racism is not limited to interpersonal behaviour. It is also embedded in institutional structures that shape governance, funding distribution, environmental regulation and public narratives about land and culture.

Racism in Regional Communities

Regional and rural communities often experience distinct forms of racism toward First Nations peoples that differ from those commonly documented in urban settings. In Central Queensland, racism frequently manifests through exclusion from governance processes, dismissal of Indigenous ecological knowledge and hostility toward Indigenous advocacy relating to environmental protection or land rights.

These dynamics are particularly visible in debates surrounding mining, water management and climate policy. First Nations communities who advocate for protection of Country may face public hostility, misinformation or harassment when challenging environmentally destructive practices. Racism in these contexts is often directed not only at individuals but also at Indigenous cultural authority itself.

In regional areas, community organisations such as CCC play an important role in creating culturally safe spaces where First Nations voices can be heard and respected. However, addressing racism in regional communities requires sustained institutional support, funding and policy reform.

The Importance of Indigenous Leadership and Cultural Authority

CCC's strategic plan places Indigenous leadership and self-determination at the centre of its governance and advocacy. The organisation recognises that First Nations leadership is essential for protecting both cultural heritage and environmental integrity.

CCC has undertaken governance reforms to embed First Nations co-leadership within the organisation and strengthen representation of Traditional Custodians and Elders in decision-making structures. These reforms recognise that Indigenous knowledge systems provide critical insights into ecological stewardship, climate resilience and biodiversity conservation.

The organisation has also prioritised partnerships with Traditional Custodians and Elders across Central Queensland to ensure that environmental advocacy reflects cultural authority and community priorities. These partnerships demonstrate that addressing racism requires not only policy reform but also structural change within organisations to ensure Indigenous leadership is embedded in governance.

Cultural Safety and Community-Led Governance

One of the most significant barriers faced by First Nations communities in Australia is the lack of culturally safe spaces where Indigenous voices can guide decision-making processes. CCC works closely with Elders and Traditional Custodians to ensure that cultural knowledge, values and practices are respected and protected in environmental discussions and governance processes.

These partnerships recognise that First Nations communities must retain cultural authority over knowledge systems and cultural information. Cultural protocols guide how knowledge is shared, how decisions are made and how environmental stewardship is undertaken. Respect for Elders and cultural authority is central to ensuring that community engagement occurs in a way that is safe, respectful and culturally appropriate.

Within the programs CCC supports, racism, discrimination and disrespect are not tolerated. Cultural safety requires clear expectations for respectful behaviour and recognition that Elders and Traditional Custodians hold authority over cultural knowledge and decision-making relating to Country.

These approaches demonstrate how culturally grounded governance structures can strengthen Indigenous leadership while creating environments where First Nations participants are protected from discrimination and cultural harm.

Youth Leadership and Intergenerational Knowledge

Another critical response to racism toward First Nations people is the empowerment of Indigenous youth as leaders and decision-makers. CCC supports youth engagement initiatives that strengthen youth participation in environmental advocacy and community governance.

Youth leadership initiatives connect Traditional Custodians, Elders and younger generations

through on-Country learning and intergenerational knowledge exchange. These programs ensure that cultural knowledge systems are passed on while also supporting emerging Indigenous leaders.

Supporting youth leadership is essential for addressing racism because it creates pathways for young First Nations people to participate in governance and advocacy. Without these opportunities, systemic exclusion continues across generations.

The Relationship Between Environmental Justice and Racial Justice

Environmental governance in Australia cannot be separated from the broader question of racial justice. Many of the environmental challenges facing Australia — including biodiversity loss, water degradation and climate change — are occurring on lands where First Nations communities maintain deep cultural responsibilities.

CCC's advocacy emphasises that Indigenous ecological knowledge must be integrated into environmental decision-making. The organisation supports Indigenous and community-led restoration projects across Central Queensland that protect waterways, coastal ecosystems and culturally significant species.

Recognising Indigenous knowledge systems as equal to Western science is essential for both ecological sustainability and racial justice. When Indigenous voices are excluded from environmental governance, both cultural and ecological outcomes are compromised.

The Role of Community Organisations in Addressing Racism

Community organisations play a critical role in addressing racism at the local level. Organisations such as CCC provide platforms for dialogue, education and collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

CCC works with universities, schools, local councils and community organisations to deliver environmental education programs that incorporate Indigenous cultural knowledge and perspectives. These initiatives help challenge racist narratives by demonstrating the value and expertise of Indigenous knowledge systems.

However, community organisations often operate with limited funding and resources. Supporting these organisations through sustainable funding programs is essential for strengthening grassroots responses to racism and discrimination.

Recommendations for Government

Addressing racism, hate and violence toward First Nations peoples requires systemic reforms across governance, education and public policy. Based on CCC's experience working with First Nations communities in Central Queensland, several key reforms are necessary.

The Australian Government should strengthen legal protections against racism and hate speech targeting First Nations peoples while ensuring that enforcement mechanisms are accessible to communities in regional areas. Government agencies should also invest in Indigenous-led governance structures that empower Traditional Custodians to guide

environmental and cultural decision-making.

Education systems must incorporate comprehensive truth-telling about Australia's colonial history and the ongoing impacts of colonisation. Supporting Indigenous cultural education programs in schools and universities is essential for challenging racist stereotypes and misinformation.

Governments should also prioritise funding for Indigenous-led environmental stewardship programs that support cultural knowledge systems while addressing biodiversity loss and climate change.

Finally, government institutions must commit to genuine partnership with First Nations communities in environmental governance. This includes recognising cultural authority, respecting Indigenous data sovereignty and ensuring that Indigenous voices are represented in decision-making bodies.

Conclusion

Racism toward First Nations peoples in Australia is deeply embedded in historical and institutional structures. Addressing this challenge requires systemic change that recognises Indigenous leadership, cultural authority and knowledge systems.

The work undertaken by Capricorn Conservation Council demonstrates that community-led initiatives grounded in cultural respect and Indigenous governance can play a powerful role in confronting racism and building more equitable systems.

A future in which racism, hate and violence toward First Nations peoples are eliminated will require sustained commitment from governments, institutions and communities. It will require recognising that cultural knowledge and environmental stewardship are inseparable from justice, equity and reconciliation.

Capricorn Conservation Council remains committed to supporting Indigenous leadership, protecting Country and building communities where First Nations voices are respected and empowered.

Respectfully,

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