Caring for Country: An urban perspective
The Inaugural Indigenous *Caring for Country* - An Urban Perspective Symposium took place on 25 May 2015 and marked the public commencement of the Monash Sustainability Institute initiative developed in partnership with Victoria’s Indigenous community.

**Introduction**

*Caring for Country* is a term used to describe the different sustainable land management practices and initiatives that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples undertake, and the key role these practices play in continuing culture. Most commonly used to describe activities in remote and regional locations, *Caring for Country* encompasses the entirety of country – its past and future, its people, its flora and fauna, its natural landscapes and its urban forms. Its history and culture. It is an integrated approach for sustainable land management.

The aim of the Monash Sustainability Institute and its Indigenous partners is the development and implementation of projects concentrated on the protection and development of Melbourne’s urban form and underpinned by Indigenous knowledge.

The symposium brought together over 75 Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants from across disciplines, levels of government, sectors and importantly a range of community organisations to consider whether the concept of *Caring for Country* could be applied in an urban environment.

The symposium was designed as a collaborative process structured to facilitate an exchange of ideas and information suited to the needs of the participants so that joint solutions can be developed. This joint leadership approach served to ensure that Aboriginal cultures were acknowledged and celebrated.

Participants were unanimous in their support of the initiative and the need for continued frank discussions and collaborative project development.

The partnership approach adopted by the Monash Sustainability Institute to deliver the symposium was acknowledged by participants as a method which could work to ‘remove the resistance’ manifested as a result of perfunctory engagement processes. In this regard it was also noted that even after generations ‘we are still saying the same things with little progress and therefore we must consider different methods.'
Indigenous Panel

A panel of Indigenous representatives presented views on what *Caring for Country* means in an urban environment. The panel members were: Aunty Di Kerr, Mick Harding, Janine Coombs, Paul Paton, Jeanette Vaha’akolo and Paul Gorrie. Themes that emerged from the panel presentations guided discussions throughout the day and included the following:-

*Caring for Country:*

Reflects -

- Connection to country needs to be shared with everyone not just Indigenous people. This sharing will lead to a better understanding and therefore respect for land.
- Caring for country is about understanding past traditions - look after country and it will look after you. Traditional principles should be applied to care for today.
- Country is mother - we say we would not hurt her but we are.
- We need to care for country and we all have a role to play.
- Respect each other and feel the land.
- We have finite resources.
- The land and everything on it is influenced by our actions.
- Racism decreases due to understanding, sharing a generation, culture and country.
- The beauty of the country is amazing we need to stop and smell the roses and appreciate it.
- Culturally significant areas need care, some more than others.
- Conversation with others keeps us together, we are all in it together.
- Improve and sustain for future generations.
- Rural principles also apply in city.

Encompasses -

- Caring for country is not only about land but also the languages and ceremonies (culture).
- Releasing and sharing the stories is helpful to future and current generations.
- Sharing traditional stories to non-indigenous people. Stories intertwined with country.
- Languages, songs and culture reconnecting. The benefit to community is priceless.
● Be good stewards both culturally and sustainably.

Understands -

● To understand sustainability we need to understand the seasons and place names.
● Seasonal understanding through the eyes of cultural leaders indicate how we utilized the land.
● 7 seasons tell us what we do and helps us understand the land and see different ways to view things. We need to use indigenous plants. In the urban setting this creates an atmosphere reminiscent of the past.
● We need to replant native plants rather than foreign plants.

**Exploration of Issues**

Working groups, led by key figures in each field, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, considered how *Caring for Country* principles might be applied to the following sectors:- Water, Built Environment, Community, Arts and Culture and Ecology and Natural Ecosystems.

**Working Group Summaries**

**Water**

● Continued engagement around water management.
● Water frameworks - design water policy which includes Indigenous people.
● Educate people on what the waterways were and could be from the context of cultural understanding.
● River management to be undertaken by Indigenous landowners and people funded by a levy.
● Healthy waterways is the target - all components, not restricted or exclusive.
Built environment

- Having the right conversations before and during a project - full engagement.
- Place-names, bring back language in tangible ways.
- Mapping country-mapping and providing a degree of interpretation (deep knowledge).
- Indigenous representatives in strategic planning boards.
- Display and communicate strategy. Tap into desire to connect and care for land.
- Take key stakeholders to key areas to understand culture and be more connected.
- Need an exemplar program/project to show how it can be done well.
- Consider how to construct value to inform development
- *Caring for Melbourne* as a concept.

Community, Arts and Culture

- Use of playgrounds and other places to educate and have youth understand and respect Indigenous culture.
- Decolonizing the thinking of our people.
- Education.
- Using impacted areas so as to minimize impact.
- Caring for country school programs.
- Spread positive energy and remove negativity.
- Communication, sharing the stories and culture.
Ecology and natural ecosystems

- Knowledge is lacking, educate.
- Recognizing the landmarks and cultural interpretations.
- Respect the land and the way culture governed it.
- Bring and collate knowledge from Indigenous cultural leaders and new ways together.
Project Proposals

A key aim of the symposium was the identification of projects concentrated on the protection and development of Melbourne’s urban form and underpinned by Indigenous knowledge. The project proposals identified at the symposium are the following:-

- Codify *Caring for Country* principles
- Integrated mapping of Melbourne’s Indigenous cultural heritage
- Development of Royal Park Amphitheatre.

Next Steps?

The Monash Sustainability Institute and its partners will scope the proposed projects and seek community and institutional endorsement, along with government and private sector funding. Additionally, the partnership approach applied to the symposium will be further developed.
Acknowledgement

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We collectively acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land upon which the symposium was held.