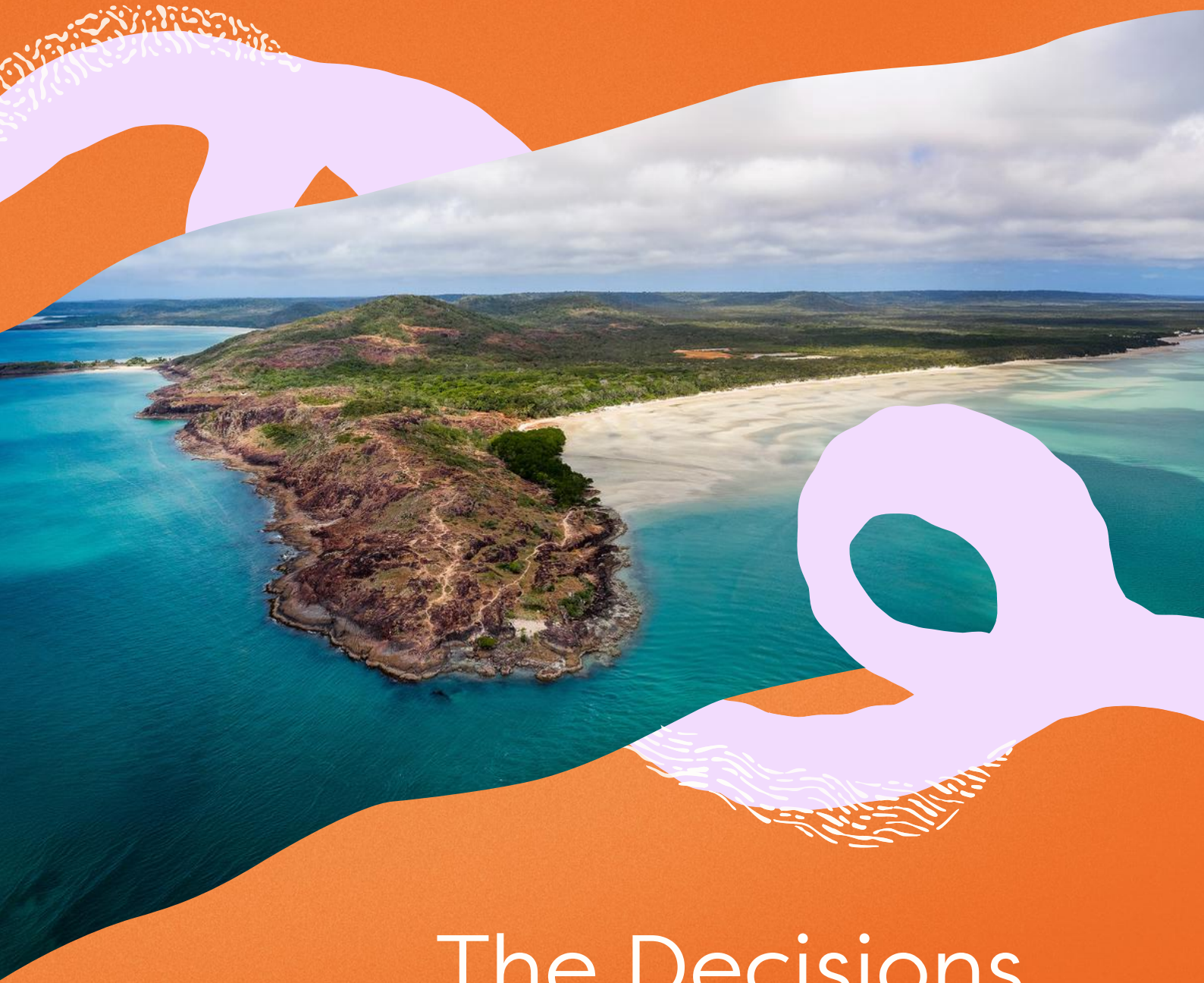
Indigital

Indigital Yarns



The Decisions That Hold Are Built Differently

From fragmentation to shared opportunity on Country



Indigital acknowledges the First Nations peoples of the lands and waters on which we live and work. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and to all those who continue to carry knowledge and responsibility for Country.

We offer our deep gratitude to the Elders and Traditional Owners of the Wik, Wik-Waya, Alngith, Peppan, Thanakwith, Wathayn, Apalech, Winchanam, Tjungundji, Yupungathi, Kaanju and Taepadhighi clan groups in Western Cape York, Queensland Australia. Their knowledge, leadership and aspirations have shaped the work on Country that this paper draws from.

We recognise Aunty Diane Nichols Pitt, Aunty Melanie Wilson, Aunty MaryAnn Coconut, Aunty Vera Koomeeta, Aunty Maria Pitt, Uncle Herbert Jerry, Uncle Ernest Madua Jnr, Nancy Wilson and Jamilla Dix-Blanco, whose conversations, stories and experiences have helped shape this paper. We are deeply grateful for the time shared on Country, the conversations that have stayed with us, and the trust with which they have shared their knowledge.

Reading this paper

This paper draws on community stories from Western Cape York in far north Queensland, Australia. First Nations peoples' connections and responsibilities to Country long predate the region's sixty-three years of bauxite mining and remain strong today. We begin with a brief explanation of Country, community and Traditional Owners to help readers understand the relationships and responsibilities at the heart of this paper.

Country means more than a place on a map. It encompasses lands, waters, sky and the relationships, knowledge and cultural responsibilities that connect people to place and across generations.

Community: when we refer to community in this paper, we mean people connected through Country, kinship, culture or shared place. Within community there are many voices, experiences and aspirations. People do not necessarily share the same views or hold the same authority; particular people carry responsibilities for particular Country, knowledge and decisions.

Traditional Owners describe people whose cultural connections and responsibilities belong to particular Country and continue across generations. Throughout this paper, we use the terms people use to describe themselves.

A message from Indigital

Across mining regions, many people are working towards a better future. Yet projects and programs affecting the same Country are often planned and funded separately. Communities can find themselves explaining their priorities again and again, while opportunities to connect that effort are missed. This paper opens a conversation about how we could work differently.

At Indigital, we work across two worlds — alongside Traditional Owners who carry deep responsibilities for Country, culture, family and future generations. We also work with mining teams navigating the pressures of keeping people safe, delivering projects and managing costs.

Our role begins with listening, building relationships and making space for people to understand one another. Working together takes care.

We want our work to strengthen the relationships, capability and community-led systems that can continue beyond our involvement.

The voices in this paper have shaped our thinking about how decisions are made, how investment connects and what remains after a project ends. We share what we are learning, knowing there is more to understand and work through together.

We invite industry leaders to listen to these experiences, bring their own and consider what working differently could mean for the decisions and partnerships they influence.

Join us as we begin this conversation on Country.



Opening story

The Waterways Remember



The heat sits heavy across Cullen Point, a significant Tjungundji story place on the western coast of Cape York Peninsula in far north Queensland, Australia.

Along the sheoak lined shore, smoke drifts from a fire, where mud crabs collected earlier are being cooked.

This is Tjungundji Country.

Today, seven generations have come together on Tjungundji Country. Tjungundji Elders, families connected through Mapoon's shared history and people from other clan groups come together to share stories, knowledge and time on Country. Elders, young people and family gather in a way that has not happened in this place for decades. Those who are not from this Country are here by invitation.

Time on Country has a way of slowing things down. There is time to sit, to watch, to listen, to connect. Conversations move slowly, but they are full of purpose.

Under the soft shade of the trees, stories are shared about how this Country looked in the past, how it is known today and what it might look like for generations to come.



Geraldine (Tjungundji), Aunty Beryl (Yupungathi) and Lena (Tjungundji)

For Tjungundji Traditional Owner and Elder, Aunty Diane Nichols Pitt, seeing the generations together brings back memories of learning from her own Elders.

> Seeing the next generation sitting at the point. It brings back memories of how I would sit with my Elders on the beach and listen to their stories. And how our mother used to talk about Country. To be there on Cullen Point and seeing all these generations out there. This is what Country does. It brings people together.
>
> **Aunty Diane Nichols Pitt**,
> Tjungundji Traditional Owner and Elder

Alongside the sharing of stories and knowledge, young people are learning new digital skills to support the monitoring and care of Country. Caring for waterways is a priority identified by community, and that priority has helped shape the work which is bringing generations together here.

Nearby, young people prepare to collect eDNA water samples. Bottles are lowered into the water, while others use tablet devices to create 3D scans of Country using LiDAR. Aunty Di and other Elders have given permission for the sampling and guided where it can take place. Alongside them, young people learn to use tools within cultural protocols that guide what can be shared and how it is used.

The technology offers another way of seeing health of Country, but it enters a much older system of knowledge and responsibility. For tens of thousands of years, these waters have sustained the Tjungundji peoples and surrounding clan groups. Knowledge passed between generations connects the waterways to the sea, the life they sustain and the responsibilities people carry in caring for them.

Taking samples and learning new skills is only one part of what is happening here. Just as important are the relationships being strengthened, the knowledge being shared between generations and the confidence people are building. The gathering is part of something much bigger, grounded in community knowledge, priorities and responsibility for Country.

> Ancestors were there that day to bring the people. That's a wonderful thing to see — everybody, the whole community was there. And I think our ancestors brought us there for a reason and for a purpose. Together and to unite as one.
>
> **Aunty Diane Nichols Pitt,**
> Tjungundji Traditional Owner and Elder



Eileen and Nathanial with their daughter at Cullen Point, doing eDNA water sampling.

Executive summary

Mining takes place on Country, where knowledge, authority and responsibility extend across generations. Decisions about a mine are therefore shaped by more than what happens at the mine site.

Australia's resources sector is operating in an increasingly complex environment, with mining intersecting with renewable energy projects, data and cloud infrastructure, environmental programs and regional development on Country.

These activities often affect the same waterways, involve the same people and draw on shared infrastructure and capability. Their connections extend beyond individual mine sites.

Yet these activities are often planned, funded, approved and delivered separately. As staff change, projects end and organisations restructure, commitments and learning can be lost. Communities face a cycle of repeated requests to share knowledge and rebuild relationships, without seeing that effort translate into lasting outcomes. Communities should not have to join all the pieces together themselves.

This paper proposes that decisions that hold begin with Country and the authority already held there. Indigenous governance must shape decisions affecting Country, including whether and how work proceeds. Engagement alone is not enough. Industry, government and other partners must connect their decisions and investment around community-defined priorities and be prepared to change how they work in response.

Putting this into practice starts with recognising the authority, relationships and cultural protocols that guide decisions on Country. It also means understanding what community wants to achieve and what is already happening across a region. Indigital brings together Community Intelligence, which helps us understand community aspirations, priorities and existing capability, and Regional Intelligence, which provides a picture of activity, investment, commitments and pressures across the region.

Community determines what knowledge can be shared, with whom and for what purpose. Bringing these perspectives together helps reveal where decisions need to change, where existing efforts could connect and how partners could work together to support community priorities.

A decision that holds is one that remains culturally legitimate, understood and workable as projects, people and circumstances change.

For mining companies and governments, this means ensuring Indigenous authority, community-defined priorities and regional intelligence inform investment approvals, procurement, operational planning and mine closure decisions. The test is whether commitments made on Country change how resources are allocated, how projects operate and whether those decisions support community aspirations, create lasting opportunities and deliver benefits for future generations.

Why decisions do not always hold

Across a mining region, many conversations are happening at once. A mine is planning rehabilitation. A renewable energy developer is seeking meetings with Traditional Owners. Researchers are studying waterways, while government agencies and service providers run employment, training, health and family support programs in the same communities. Each may bring its own meetings, information requests and reporting requirements. Through all of this, community is caring for Country, strengthening culture and pursuing their own priorities.

Each organisation operates within its own mandate, budget, approvals and timelines, often with genuine intent. A decision may make sense for one project while creating additional pressures on Country, waterways, infrastructure, public services or existing livelihoods. These consequences accumulate across a region, but responsibility for managing their combined effects is often dispersed across different organisations, with no clear accountability for their combined effects.

Decisions made through separate processes can overlook existing commitments, proceed without the relevant cultural authority or depend on funding and relationships that are not sustained.

For First Nations communities, responsibility for Country does not sit neatly within project boundaries or timelines.

Country holds cultural authority, knowledge, identity and obligation. Decisions made today across multiple disconnected programs can shape landscapes, waterways, cultural knowledge and future opportunities long after individual projects have ended. Responsibility for those outcomes continues through the people connected to that Country and the many generations that follow.

As more development activity converges on Country, so do more decisions and responsibilities. The same people may be asked to consider proposals, explain priorities and make sense of how the pieces connect.

This work takes time. Elders, Traditional Owners and other community members may be asked to read reports, attend meetings and work through decisions alongside employment, family and cultural responsibilities. When that contribution is expected without adequate resourcing or payment, community carries part of the cost of decisions made across the region.

Funding engagement alone is not enough. Organisations need to resource the time, information and support communities need to exercise their existing governance. Alongside that investment, partners need to connect their own decisions and commitments, so community is not left to join the pieces together.

When these efforts remain disconnected, opportunities are lost too. Investment is likely to repeat earlier work, skills developed through one initiative may never connect with employment or enterprise opportunities, and community aspirations may remain disconnected from the partners or resources that could support them.

> Everyone wants decisions from Indigenous communities. Very few invest in the systems that allow us to make them properly.
>
> **Mikaela Jade**,
> Indigital founder, Cabrogal, Dharug



Tanaya (Peppan) and Aunty Mel (Peppan) with Lindsay and Mikaela from Indigital

Jamilla, a Wik-Mungkan, Wik Waya, Kaanju woman from Aurukun, describes what repeatedly starting again feels like and how funding arrangements can keep services apart;

> It's really exhausting. Sometimes you don't even see things come to their true potential or fruition before they're taken away or not utilised properly. It's disheartening. Especially when you see it regurgitated a few years later, or a few months later, in another format but essentially the same service. It can get really tiring, and that leads to a lack of engagement and communities feeling as though, 'We've seen and heard this all before, but we're still not seeing any outcomes from it.
>
> **Jamilla,**
> Wik-Mungkan, Wik Waya, Kaanju, Aurukun

Sometimes multiple services, they work in silos because they're competing for the same buckets or, you know, they don't want to step on toes or they don't want to, I guess, ruin their own chances of gaining the funding if they're assisting their competitor or someone else who's doing similar service.

It doesn't help that not all services are on the ground constantly. So when they're flying in and flying out. Their feet are not on the ground in Aurukun and only sporadically visiting. The engagement between them and community does fall down

Communities become the place where fragmented systems meet.

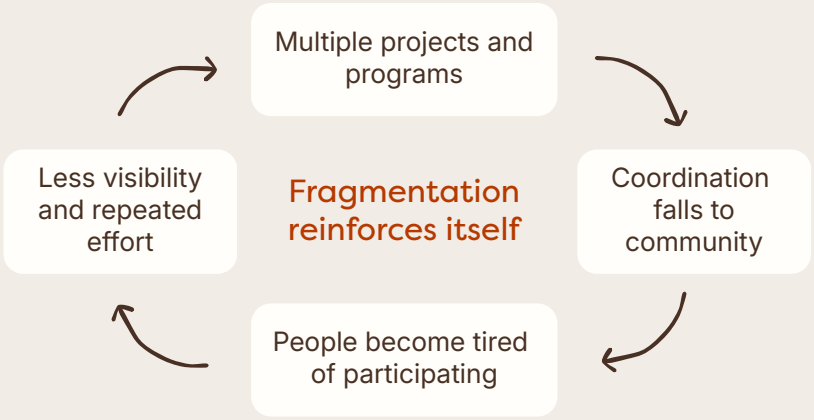
This creates a repetitive cycle. Disconnected activity brings more requests and coordination work for community. Limited follow-through leaves people tired of participating, while changes in staff and funding interrupt relationships and learning. The next project begins without that understanding, bringing the same gaps and requests again.

From fragmentation to shared opportunity

How separate activity can reinforce the same problems, and what becomes possible when decisions are made differently.

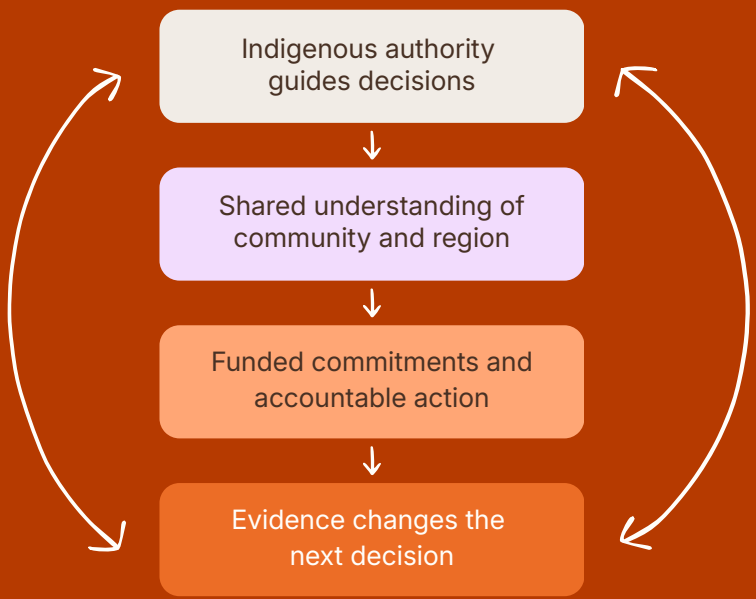
Today

Separate projects and programs



What could change

Decisions, investment and action connected around community priorities



Decisions do not hold when authority is overlooked, commitments are lost and investment remains disconnected from community priorities. Changing this pattern begins with recognising the authority already held on Country and ensuring it shapes whether and how work proceeds.

How authority shapes decisions

The resources sector has spent decades improving engagement. However, engagement and Indigenous governance are not the same thing.

First Nations authority is held through Country, Lore, kinship and cultural responsibility. It exists independently of any project or external organisation.

Indigenous governance is the system through which First Nations people exercise authority and responsibility in relation to Country, community, culture and knowledge. These include formal organisations and representative bodies, but they also include cultural authority, kinship and family structures, Elders and knowledge holders, cultural protocols, and the relationships through which decisions are made and responsibilities are carried.

This distinction matters. Asking who should be consulted or who can sign an agreement does not establish whose authority applies, how a decision should be reached or what responsibilities accompany it. Indigenous governance must shape decisions about whether work goes ahead and, if it does, how it is undertaken, rather than being treated as advice on plans developed elsewhere.

A decision is more likely to be culturally legitimate when the relevant authority has been recognised, the right people have been involved and the process through which the decision was reached reflects the governance and cultural responsibilities that apply.

Understanding who carries authority takes time and trust. It develops through relationships with people and an understanding of how decisions are made within community.

Authority is understood through relationships

When seeking to understand who to engage with about decisions affecting Country, governments and companies often begin with formal organisations and representative bodies. A Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC), Land Council, Aboriginal corporation, board or committee can provide an important point of entry.

Some of these organisations also have specific legal roles and responsibilities. For example, mining companies may have legal obligations to engage with PBCs or other relevant native title parties, depending on the circumstances. These roles and responsibilities must be understood and respected. However, formal organisations do not necessarily provide a complete picture of cultural authority on Country.

Some people carrying cultural authority hold formal positions, others do not. Across many First Nations communities, authority is also held through relationships, cultural responsibility, kinship systems and the knowledge of Elders and other cultural leaders.

Understanding these relationships cannot be achieved through organisational charts or stakeholder mapping alone. It develops through appropriate introductions, time in community and trust. Over time, as relationships deepen, people can guide organisations towards who carries responsibility for particular places, knowledge and decisions.

Aunty Melanie Wilson, a Peppan Traditional Owner from Napranum, describes how that authority is carried across generations:

> We've got to listen to our Elders. That was in place from people long before us, from our families. It's always important to get an Elder involved. Mum was our Elder. She was our teacher, and she continued that work from her parents and her grandparents.

> Because the people, you know, people coming up for business, they go to the, you know, they ask the wrong people and then they go to the wrong people. And that's how it cause conflict in communities.
>
> **Aunty Melanie,**
> Peppan Traditional Owner, Napranum



> You know, you can't build that trust, you can't build that respect in that maybe couple of hours event or bbq or something yarn. You have to at least make it two or three days and that person will gradually open up and you have to approach yourself in a, you know, respectful manner and tell, you know, community who you work for. They're not in trouble, they just want to know this thing. They want to know that thing. You have to open up...
>
> **Aunty Melanie**,
> Peppan Traditional Owner, Napranum

The challenge is therefore not to choose between formal governance and cultural authority, it's understanding how they work together, and navigating the responsibilities of each with guidance from the people who hold them.

Indigital starts by understanding the governance already operating on Country, taking time to understand how cultural and formal responsibilities connect in practice. Community guides how the work proceeds and what needs to be resourced or strengthened as new decisions and opportunities arise.

Cultural protocols shape decisions

Cultural protocol is an important part of Indigenous Governance. It articulates how people come together, who speaks for the Country, who carries responsibility for decisions, whose knowledge is relevant and how that knowledge may be shared. These are not administrative steps that sit around a decision. They are core to the way communities function.

Understanding cultural protocol within a community requires time for relationships to develop and trust to be built. Sometimes the person with the formal role also holds the relevant cultural authority; sometimes the responsibilities sit elsewhere. Sometimes a decision cannot progress until particular people are present or until the right cultural process has taken place.

This work is not always visible from outside community, yet it can determine whether a decision is simply accepted at a particular moment or remains legitimate as people and circumstances change. Taking time to understand the local cultural protocols is an important foundational step.

At Cullen Point, these responsibilities shaped where environmental sampling could occur and how knowledge could be shared. Tjungundji Traditional Owner and Elder Aunty Diane Nichols Pitt explains;

> When it comes to cultural protocols, it's very important. It's very important to always engage Elders, especially when you're going to do water quality testing or whatever you want to do on Country. But no matter whose Country you have to go on, you always have to ask for permission, because every clan group has their own cultural protocol to the land and sea they come from.
>
> **Aunty Di**,
> Tjungundji Elder, Traditional Owner

Respecting cultural protocols can change where and when work happens. Aunty Melanie describes how Rio Tinto's environment and heritage team supported her family when Country was closed for sorry business.

> I thank each and every one of them who I was working with in the environment and heritage team because, you know, they put a sign for us telling people that country is closed.
>
> Now if you have sorry business in family, they'll ask you. They'll, you know, come up and see the family and ask you what part of the country you have to close down.
>
> **Aunty Melanie**,
> Peppan Traditional Owner, Napranum


Cass from Indigital with Aunty Di, Tjungundji Elder

Respecting cultural protocols is an ongoing responsibility. Decisions hold when authority and cultural responsibilities continue to shape what happens as circumstances change.

The forums through which community considers decisions need to respect these protocols and remain accountable to the people who carry authority.

The right governance forums

As decisions become more complex, community may identify a need for additional resources for the forums through which it considers priorities and exercises authority.

Organisations should recognise and resource these arrangements rather than duplicate them. Where community identifies a gap, it may determine that a new forum or decision-making mechanism is needed.

What matters is that these forums are culturally legitimate and accountable to the people holding authority, rather than established primarily for the convenience of an external organisation.

Bringing Traditional Owners, industry and government together can help coordinate investment and action across a region. A regional coordination forum cannot give consent on behalf of the Traditional Owners or override their existing governance and rights. If the relevant Traditional Owners do not support an activity then partners must be ready to look at the design of that activity, the timing of it or indeed whether it should go ahead at all. More engagement cannot replace the need to recognise and respect the authority of the relevant Traditional Owners.



Lena (Tjungundji), Aunty Grace (Thanakwith), Aunty Gladys (Thanakwith), Uncle Peter (Mapoon Shared History), Aunty Maria (Tjungundji) and Maggie Peters (Tjungundji) with Peta from Indigital.

Consent, cultural knowledge and data governance

The same questions of authority extend to consent, cultural knowledge and data.

Free, Prior and Informed Consent is part of how communities exercise authority over matters affecting them. This requires time, accessible information and freedom from pressure, with decisions made through their own governance. **Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property** recognises the rights and responsibilities attached to cultural knowledge, while **Indigenous Data Governance** determines how information about Country and community is collected, accessed, interpreted and used, and who has authority over those decisions.

These arrangements need to be agreed at the outset of a partnership and revisited as activities or proposed uses change. Permission to gather knowledge for one purpose does not automatically permit its use for another.

Technology offers new ways to gather and understand information about Country. It cannot determine who holds authority over knowledge, or replace community decisions about its use. Findings need to be returned in forms community can access, interpret and use. Responsibilities also extend to sharing the skills and tools to undertake the work.

Aunty Melanie's words bring us back to what remains with community. Control of knowledge must be accompanied by investment in the skills and tools to gather, interpret and use it, so community can guide decisions and care for Country beyond an individual project.

> "They used to come in and get traditional owners and go surveying. They don't do that anymore. They get the drone up in the air and they only bring the picture back... That's why I asked them. You have to teach us. Instead of you doing it for us, we could do it ourselves.
>
> **Aunty Melanie,**
> Peppan Traditional Owner, Napranum



Seeing the whole system and the power of coordination

Across a region, there may already be people, programs, capability and investment that could support what community wants to achieve. The challenge is that these often sit across different organisations, each with their own priorities, commitments and ways of working.

Here, 'regional' does not assume a fixed government or industry boundary. Country, cultural relationships and community priorities guide which places and people need to be considered. Different priorities may bring different communities and partners together.

Consider a region where Traditional Owners want to strengthen their capability to monitor and care for waterways on Country. One mining company is funding environmental monitoring training, another mining company is contracting biodiversity surveys, government is investing in local employment and researchers are studying the health of local waterways.

Each activity has value, but when they happen separately, opportunities can be missed. People may receive training without opportunities to apply their skills, while mining companies continue bringing in external contractors for monitoring during operations, rehabilitation and closure. Research may be undertaken without building local capability, and government investment may end before an ongoing pathway develops. A mining company could procure environmental monitoring services locally.

What if these activities could be better connected?

Training could lead to paid monitoring work. Research could support community-led Caring for Country priorities, with appropriate permissions and knowledge protections. Companies could connect their monitoring needs with investment in local Ranger groups or community enterprises that want to provide these services.

For mining companies, this creates an opportunity for training investment to contribute to the capability they need over time. For community, it could create ongoing work on Country, supported by procurement opportunities and the resources to develop and sustain those services.

This is where understanding the wider regional system becomes important.



Peta from Indigital with Uncle Alair Pambegan, Wik-Mungkan

Indigital brings together two perspectives:

Community Intelligence

Helps us understand community aspirations, priorities, relationships and existing capability, alongside the authority and cultural protocols that guide decisions. Community determines what knowledge can be shared, with whom and for what purpose.

Regional Intelligence

Helps us understand what is happening across the region, including existing investment, programs, commitments, organisations and opportunities.

Bringing these perspectives together helps reveal opportunities that may not be visible when organisations are looking only at their own activities in silos.

Together, these perspectives help reveal what's working, what's not and where opportunities or investment may need to change.

Understanding regional activity alone doesn't tell us how community experiences existing programs or whether they're meeting community needs. Community must shape which opportunities are pursued. Genuine co-design means understanding the problem and developing the response together, rather than arriving with a solution already decided.



Regional coordination then brings the right partners together around community-authorised priorities. This means identifying which decisions need to change, whether in procurement, investment, operations or government funding, who can make those decisions and what each organisation will contribute.

Traditional Owners retain authority over decisions affecting their Country. Coordination helps other organisations align their activities and resources with community priorities, not make decisions on their behalf.

For mining companies, this creates opportunities to connect existing commitments, operational needs and local capability.

For communities, it can create stronger pathways from aspirations to action, without leaving them to coordinate the activities of multiple organisations themselves.

As Nancy Wilson, Peppan Traditional Owner from Napranum, puts it:

> We all have to work together. You can't build something without everybody.
>
> **Nancy Wilson,**
> Peppan Traditional Owner



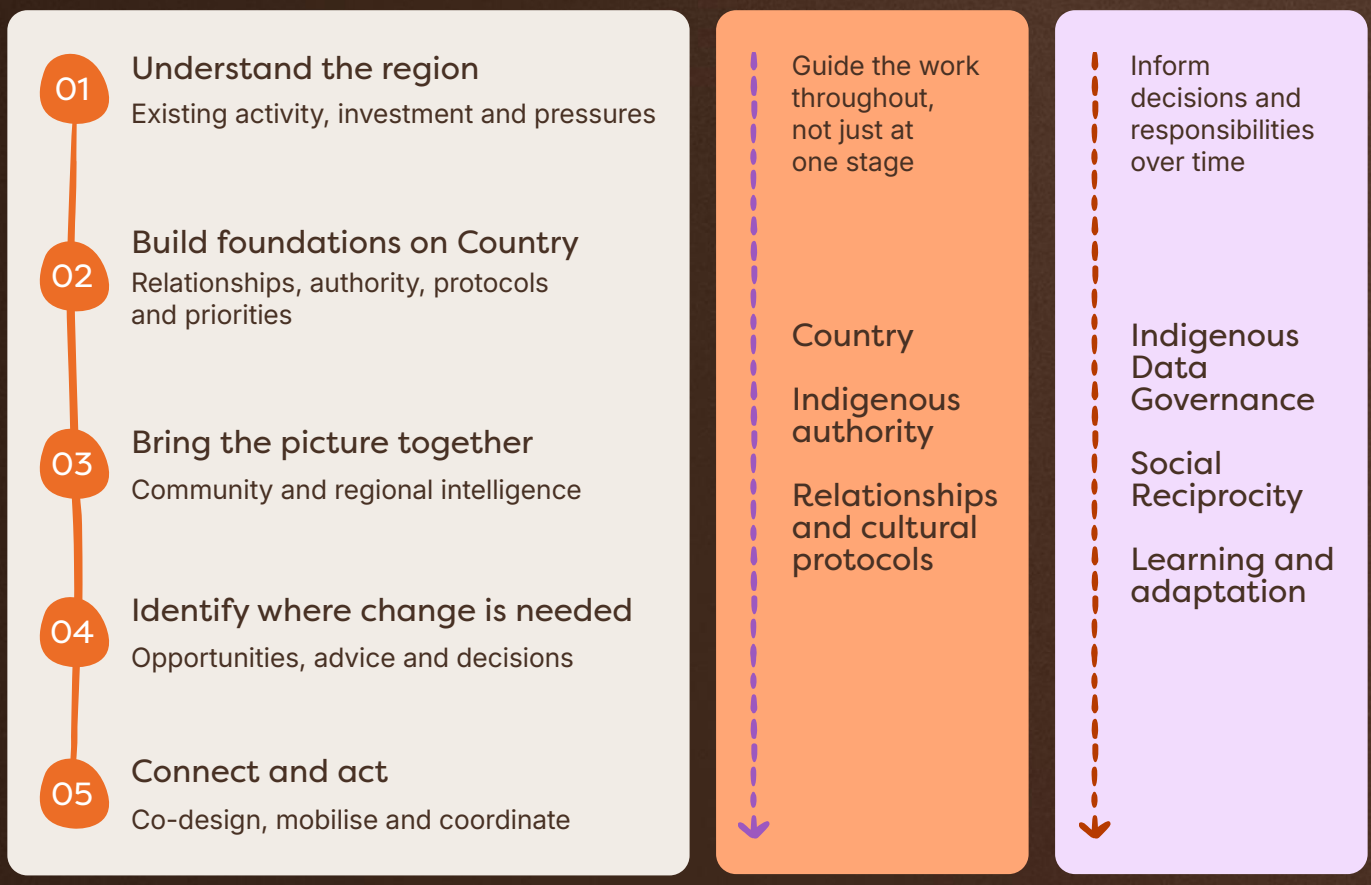
Bringing it together

Indigital's Systems Change Framework

Indigital's Systems Change Framework brings these ideas into practice. It connects understanding, decisions, investment and action around community-defined priorities with learning informing what happens next.

The five parts are connected and can be revisited as understanding grows and circumstances change. Country, Indigenous authority, relationships and cultural protocols guide the work throughout. Co-design, learning and adaptation continue across the approach.

Indigital's approach: From understanding to action



01

Understand the region

Build an initial picture of existing activity, investment, commitments and pressures. This research informs our preparation and reveals connections or questions to explore with community. It does not establish community priorities, cultural authority or permission to proceed.

02

Build foundations on Country

Spend time on Country, build trusted relationships and understand community aspirations, authority and cultural protocols. Community guides how the work proceeds, including the governance arrangements, consent processes and responsibilities for knowledge and data.

03

Bring the picture together

Connect Community Intelligence and Regional Intelligence with agreed cultural protocols. Understand how community experiences existing programs and investment, what's working and where gaps remain. Explore where community priorities, existing capability and resources could come together to create opportunities.

04

Identify where change is needed

Work with community and partners to explore what is possible and what needs to change. This might mean connecting existing programs, strengthening local capability, changing procurement or investment decisions, or bringing in new partners.

Understand which decisions need to change, who can make them and what support is required. Sometimes our role is to provide advice that informs decisions, without progressing into implementation.

05

Connect and act

Where wider coordination is needed, bring relevant organisations together through existing partnerships or community-authorised arrangements. Co-design the response with community and partners, agreeing what each will contribute, what resources are required and who is responsible for taking action.

Traditional Owners retain authority over decisions affecting their Country. Partners must follow through on their commitments and support the community governance, leadership and capability needed to sustain the work.

Indigital's role may include connecting partners, supporting cultural understanding, coordinating investment and activities, and providing ongoing advice.

Responsibilities that continue throughout

Social reciprocity keeps the partnership grounded in mutual responsibility. Community's knowledge, time and contribution carry obligations for partners: to return value in ways community defines, follow through on commitments and respond when the work is not meeting those expectations. Community continues to guide how that value is understood and assessed.

Indigenous Data Governance and cultural protocols guide how knowledge and information are accessed and used.

Together with community and partners, we review what is working, whether commitments are being met and what needs to happen next. Learning informs subsequent decisions, including adjustments to investment, partnerships and activities.

The work continues beyond individual programs. Community continues to guide decisions about its priorities and what happens on Country, while relationships, learning and shared responsibility carry forward. Success is measured by what remains with community: the resources, relationships and capability to exercise authority, care for Country and pursue opportunities beyond individual projects.

What this means for mining

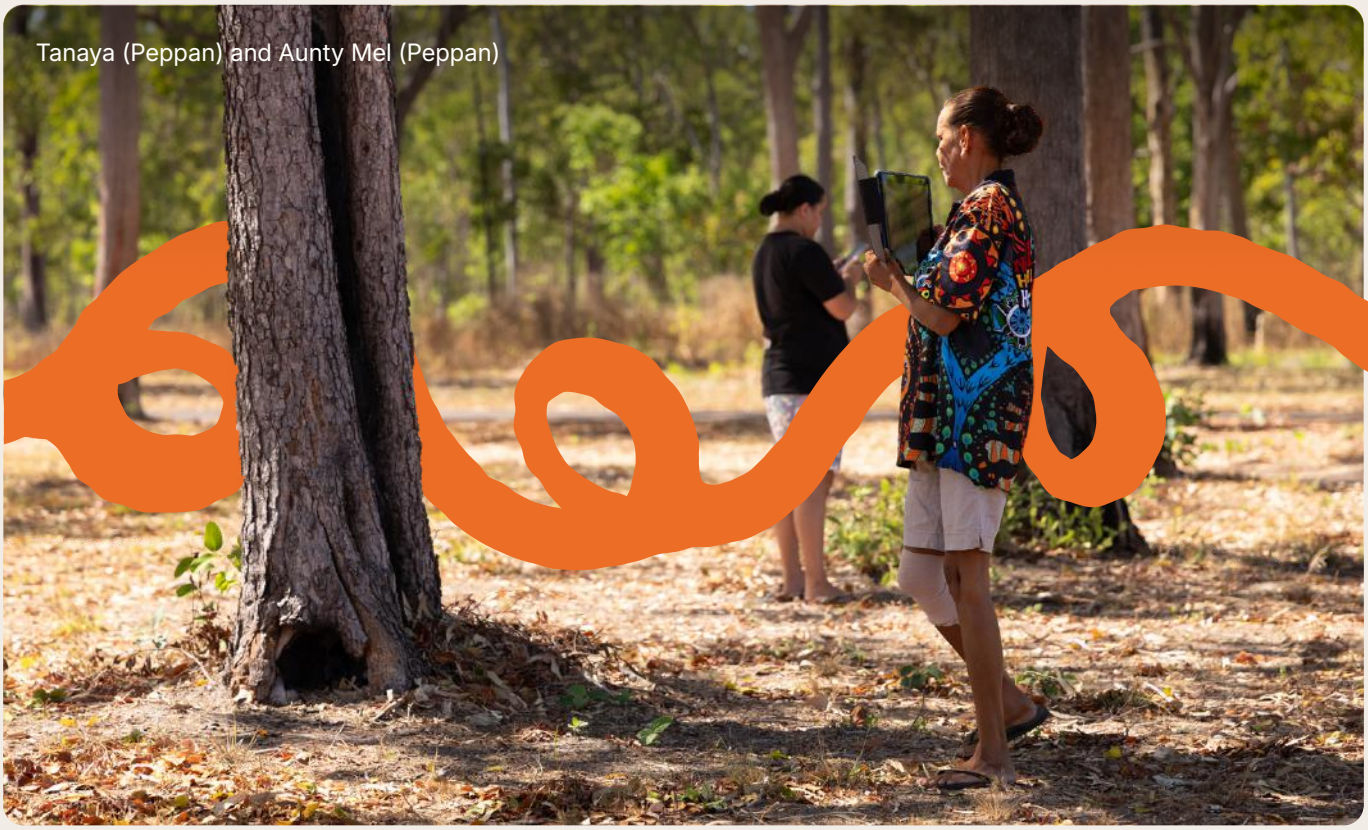
For mining companies, this approach offers a different way to inform the decisions that shape an asset over its lifetime.

Decisions about capital, procurement, environmental management, workforce, rehabilitation and closure are often made across different parts of the business, through different processes and at different times. Bringing Community Intelligence and Regional Intelligence into these decisions can help people see where they connect, where risks or opportunities may be missed and where decisions made in one part of the business may affect another.

For asset leaders, this means understanding what is happening on Country and across the wider region alongside the information already used to plan and manage the asset. Community priorities, regional activity, existing commitments and emerging pressures can provide important context for decisions about investment, operations and future planning. This does not replace existing asset planning or risk processes. It can strengthen them by bringing in relationships, knowledge and connections that may otherwise sit across different functions or outside the mine boundary.

This can change how risk is understood. A decision may make sense for one project or function while creating pressure somewhere else. Several projects may rely on the same community capability, infrastructure or relationships. Commitments made at different times may also become difficult to sustain if they are not visible to the people making later decisions. Bringing these connections together can help identify risks earlier and understand where a different decision, additional investment or another partner may be needed.

It can also inform how capital is allocated. The opportunity is not necessarily to create new investment, but to understand whether existing and planned investment could work harder. An investment in skills or community capability, for example, could connect with future procurement, environmental management, rehabilitation or closure needs. Where several organisations have a shared interest, there may also be opportunities to invest together in capability or infrastructure that would be difficult for one project to sustain alone. The opportunity is also to broaden and diversify investment streams into a community, reducing investment reliance from the mining company.


Tanaya (Peppan) and Aunty Mel (Peppan)

Procurement is one of the ways these connections can move from aspiration into opportunity. Understanding future demand from an asset can help identify where capability that community wants to develop could connect with future contracts. Environmental monitoring, Caring for Country and rehabilitation may create opportunities for training and capability developed today to become paid work or community-owned enterprise over time. This requires procurement decisions, contract design and capability investment to be considered together rather than as separate activities.

Rehabilitation and closure create another important connection. Decisions made during operations will shape what is possible after mining. Understanding community aspirations for future land use, Caring for Country, environmental monitoring, employment and enterprise early can help those aspirations inform rehabilitation and closure planning over time. Capability developed during operations may then support work that continues beyond the life of the mine.

Making these connections takes time and understanding. It also requires people who can bring what is being learned on Country into the plans, budgets, contracts and decisions that shape the asset. Not every opportunity will sit with the mining company. Government, other industries, investors, researchers, community organisations and other partners may have different responsibilities and resources to contribute.

The role of coordination is to understand those contributions and connect them around priorities that community wants to pursue. Community should be able to guide the work without carrying responsibility for coordinating the different parts of a mining company, bringing other organisations together or chasing commitments.

The opportunity for mining is therefore not just to understand community priorities differently, but to allow that understanding to inform the decisions the business is already making. The test is whether what is learned on Country changes decisions about investment, procurement, risk, operations and closure, and whether those decisions contribute to capability and opportunities that remain beyond an individual project.

Western Cape York

Community priorities shaping opportunity



Aunty Vera Koomeeta (Apalech)

Aunty Vera Koomeeta, an Apalech Traditional Custodian from Aurukun, describes what she would like to see for her Country, community and future generations:

> I would like to see our Rangers manage our country through technologies and teach our children how to look after our country.
> I would like to learn about these technologies to manage tourism businesses for my grandchildren's future. We would like to keep our culture alive and our language strong for future generation.
> I am an artist and I would like to tell stories through my paintings using digital technology.
>
> **Aunty Vera Koomeeta,**
> Apalech Traditional Custodian, Aurukun

Aunty Vera's aspirations bring together caring for Country, technology, culture, enterprise and opportunities for future generations. They show why understanding what community wants to achieve needs to come before designing a program.

Across Western Cape York, the three-year Caring for Country partnership between Indigital, Rio Tinto and the Western Cape communities of Mapoon, Aurukun, Weipa and Napranum is guided by their aspirations for Country and community.

The work began by listening and spending time on Country. Before choosing technologies or planning workshops, Indigital needed to understand who carried authority, who should be involved and the cultural protocols governing activities, knowledge and data.

The Caring for Country Aboriginal Community Reference Group brings respected Traditional Custodians from the four communities together to guide the work. The group helps identify shared priorities, shape the direction of the program and ensure that what is distinct to each community is respected. Cultural authority for activities on Country remains with the relevant people in each place.

Aunty Maria Pitt, a Tjungundji Traditional Owner and Elder, describes the difference she experienced in how the work was approached;

> Community has never had a community led, anything, as far as I know, everything's been organised and as community residents, this is what we were told, that our input only matters so far, but with Indigital, it was like flipping the coin over. We were allowed to be ourselves, we were allowed to engage in a way where we had never had that [type] of engagement before with other organisations.

...having experts come in, but also working side by side to make it a community owned project, where it is led by community leaders and with the backing of the community ... so it's a collaboration of trying to work together, for the sole purpose of really how do we take care of country.

Aunty Maria

Season one

The first season created opportunities to explore digital storytelling, augmented reality and new ways of documenting and sharing knowledge. It also allowed relationships and trust to deepen, building a clearer understanding of community aspirations for Caring for Country and future opportunities.

When communities identified waterways as a priority, that direction changed what the partnership did next. Rather than choosing the technology first, the next season responded to what communities wanted to understand and care for on Country. For Aunty Melanie, a Peppan Traditional Owner from Napranum, caring for water is an ongoing responsibility:

> Water in the Cape is very important to us and we've got heaps of springs here. For Peppan we've got seven springs that we have to look after and monitor... because when we go out on country, we rely on that spring. So it's got to be well looked after.

Aunty Melanie,
Peppan Traditional Owner, Napranum



Aunty Vera Koomeeta (Apalech)

Season two

The second season, Our Waters, Our Futures, moved towards environmental DNA and LiDAR, with the relevant Traditional Custodians determining where the work could occur, who should participate and how the knowledge and data created through it would be handled. Elders, Rangers and young people explored these technologies alongside cultural knowledge, learning how they could monitor waterways, map Country and observe environmental change.

Cullen Point was one expression of this work. Seven generations came together on Tjungundji Country, bringing knowledge carried across generations into conversation with new tools and new possibilities. Across the four communities, similar connections have taken place. Elders sharing knowledge beside waterways, Rangers applying new monitoring techniques on Country, young people learning through language, culture and technology, and families imagining new ways to live, work and care for Country.

As Aunty Vera Koomeeta reflected:

> “This is how it should be. Elders and young ones learning together, teaching each other.
>
> **Aunty Vera Koomeeta,**
> Apalech Traditional Custodian, Aurukun

These moments carry a kind of magic, but they do not happen by chance.

The partnership brings together community authority and leadership, long-term investment from Rio Tinto, local organisations including APN Cape York and PCYC Qld, and technical partners such as EnviroDNA.

The program builds on the knowledge, skills and expertise already held on Country. Elders, Rangers, young people and technical partners share knowledge and learn from one another. This involves developing new technical skills with technologies such as eDNA and LiDAR and also building understanding of First Nations ways of caring for Country.

More than 500 people have participated across the program. In Aurukun, Rangers used eDNA and LiDAR independently on the day they learned the techniques, and participants went on to deliver community sessions, sharing what they had learned with others in their traditional language.

These are early steps towards capability remaining on Country, learning alongside technical partners, applying the tools and teaching others. The pathway is simple – do it together, teach it together and then do it yourself.

Aunty MaryAnn Coconut, a Thanakwith Elder and Traditional Owner, connects this learning with the responsibilities young people will carry:

> “Well, they're the younger generation, and they're the next leaders of the community. So what they learning now is putting them in a position to be leaders as they grow up, leaders of the country. So later on they will know technology.

Aunty MaryAnn Coconut,
Thanakwith Elder and Traditional Owner

For some participants, these skills are also opening a view towards what might come next. Nancy, a Peppan Traditional Owner from Napranum, has spoken about using eDNA and LiDAR on her own Country and imagining a family enterprise that could enable people to live, work and care for Country on their own lands. Her vision connects learning today with future opportunities in environmental monitoring, rehabilitation and futures beyond mining.

Indigital's social reciprocity framework helps keep the partnership accountable as the work develops.

We keep coming back to community to understand what's working, what isn't, whether the work is creating the value community wants, whether partners are following through on their commitments and what needs to change.

The first measure of success is whether community priorities change decisions. The enduring measure is whether those decisions leave communities with the resources, capability and relationships to exercise their authority and pursue opportunities beyond the original investment.

Rio Tinto is supporting the next stage of the partnership, building on the relationships and opportunities that have emerged through the work so far.

Across Western Cape York, there are already organisations, programs, resources and investment that could contribute to what communities want to achieve. The next stage is about understanding how these efforts could better connect, what support is needed and who else needs to be involved.

This will take continued work with community, industry, government and other partners to explore how the opportunities emerging through Caring for Country can be supported beyond the life of the program.



Uncle Herbert (Alngith), Aunty Lorraine (Wathayn), Aunty MaryAnn Coconut (Thanakwith) and Aunty Janice (Peppan)

An emerging question

Technology and the changing information environment

Through the Caring for Country work, we're seeing how technologies such as eDNA and LiDAR can help communities gather and work with new information about Country, alongside the knowledge they already hold.

Information is also a source of power. Much of the environmental data, research and technical information about Country is gathered and held by industry, government and researchers. When communities have access to these sources of information, and the tools to gather and interpret data themselves, it can change the balance. They can ask their own questions, challenge findings and bring additional evidence into conversations and decisions about Country.

AI could create further opportunities, including helping communities understand complex technical reports or work with environmental data.

But access to information alone is not enough. These possibilities also raise questions about who controls information, what can be shared and how it may be used. They also raise questions about whether communities have access to the tools, information and resources to work with that information on their own terms.

> Since time began Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been scientists, engineers, technologists and inventors. The last 200 years did not mark the beginning of Indigenous innovation. We are not newcomers to the future. We have always helped invent it and we are still doing this today.
>
> **Mikaela Jade,**
> Indigital Founder, Cabrogal, Dharug

These decisions must remain guided by the relevant Indigenous authority and governance. Indigenous Data Governance must guide how information is collected, accessed, shared and used.

Uncle Herbert, Alngith Traditional Owner and Elder reflects on new technologies:

> Well, sitting down, learning this, what you're gonna teach us with this new technology. It's kind of different, you know, it's new to us because we never been taught these things in our days. But it's good we share our culture through this way so everyone can see that we still got our culture, you know, it's alive. You know, it's been passed on from generation to generation.
>
> **Uncle Herbert,**
> Alngith Traditional Owner and Elder



Uncle Herbert (Alngith) and Aunty Janice (Peppan)

Closing reflection

Decisions that hold

The decisions being made across mining regions today will shape Country and communities for generations to come.

For those decisions to hold, Indigenous authority must be respected in the decisions that affect Country, commitments must be followed through, and the investments made by industry and government need to contribute to opportunities that last.

For governments, that means investing in independent Indigenous governance and ensuring that regional planning, public investment and accountability consider the cumulative impacts and outcomes across a region, not just individual projects.



Uncle Ernest Madua Jnr (Alngith)

For industry, it means linking commitments made on Country to the procurement, investment and operational decisions that will determine whether those commitments are delivered.

Neither can pass those responsibilities onto communities.

Success is not measured only by what is delivered, but by what remains with community: the relationships, knowledge, capability and opportunities to shape what happens next.

Uncle Ernest Madua Jnr, an Alngith Traditional Owner, reflects on what that future can look like:

> We need to have our children embrace and embed those kind of positive thought processes that can help them get up, stand up and move forward in life. Not swim around in a circle like a school of mullet, because that's just vulnerability... if you get rid of that tunnel vision, and open your peripherals, you'll see that there is a lot that can be done and that we can contribute not just for ourselves, but our families and our community as a whole.
>
> **Uncle Ernest Madua Jnr**



Back at Cullen Point, the sun begins to set on a day spent together on Country. Footprints left by Elders, young people and visitors mark the sand as the tide slowly turns.

What future generations inherit will be shaped by decisions made today. The knowledge and responsibilities carried here across generations must guide those decisions, and the work that follows.



Cullen Point





Projects will end.

Organisations and people will change.

But Country, and the responsibility
to care for it, will remain.

**This is what it means to build
decisions that hold.**



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