

An intervention/input prepared by Sharon Bonython-Ericson and Dr Jenny Fraser from Australia, on behalf illuminate FNQ, for the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, Jose Francisco Calí Tzay, March 2022

* Special Theme – **Protected Areas and Indigenous Peoples’ Rights: the Obligations of States and International Organizations.**

This message comes today from the East Coast of Australia, the home of the Great Barrier Reef and World Heritage Rainforests. Some of our regions are currently reeling from major flooding, a natural disaster of “unprecedented proportions” that has wreaked havoc in communities across Southern Queensland and Northern NSW. Australias Indigenous Peoples have been custodians of these ancient places since Time Immemorial, but in recent centuries have been blocked under the name of government ‘protection’ for some areas which has actually led to destruction of significant sites instead. We worry for our future and know that the time to act to heal country is now.

Illuminate FNQ (Far North Queensland/First Nations Queensland) is an International Science, Environment and Arts Festival celebrating the intersection of First Peoples knowledge, science and technology. It is mainly driven by a small group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women from Australia. The gathering will be facilitating dialogue on the ecological and cultural significance of the Great Barrier Reef, the Wet Tropics, Savannah Grasslands, along with learning from the insider perspectives of place-based biodiversity from other regions around the world. We come together in the name of Citizen Science, Research and Traditional Knowledge and will be publishing papers from our conference in an effort to be proactive about the health of the Great Barrier Reef while offering user-friendly entry points for community to engage in science.

This focus is on our local environment and our contribution as Original Peoples of the oldest living culture and the Reef as the largest living structure on the planet, continually caring for these lands, reefs, seabed, rivers and estuaries are accessible and critically relevant. Our local and state economies are dependent on the health of these natural capital assets.

Indigenous Peoples in Australia understand and appreciate the urgency of acting of behalf of the Great Barrier Reef, the rainforest, and other natural assets of Far North Queensland (FNQ), the challenges facing us from global warming and other threats, and potential science-based mitigation measures involving both cutting-edge technologies and traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices. Promote dialogues and partnerships in science and environmental planning and research: between Australia and other countries; between

communities, industry, universities, and the private sector; and to specifically include youth, women, and local Indigenous interests in the FNQ regions.

Currently, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population has relatively low levels of STEM education and career attainment:

- Among First Nations students, only 37.8% of 15-year-olds were reaching the accepted level of proficiency in science literacy in 2009, compared with 68.5% of non-indigenous students (1).
- In Queensland in 2016, Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders comprised 4.6% of the population and 4.1% of tertiary qualification-holders; however, they comprised only 0.3% of degree-holders in natural and physical sciences, 0.6% of degree holders in information technology, and 1.6% of degree-holders in engineering and related technologies (2).
- Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander women in natural and physical science careers, 74% lacked tertiary education degrees (1).

This week officials from UNESCO arrived in Australia to begin a critical review, which could decide if the Great Barrier Reef should be listed as 'in danger'. The visit by the international team comes two weeks after authorities reported widespread coral bleaching on the world heritage site.

Illuminate FNQ is calling for:

1 Increase active access, understanding and appreciation for the largest living structure on the planet – The Great Barrier Reef, the rainforest, our rivers and other natural assets of FNQ, together with the threats from global warming, habitat loss and other pressures and how science and technology can be applied to mitigate these threats alongside traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caring for country.

2 Highlighting exciting opportunities for everyone and especially elders, women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in STEM, building support for applying science and research agendas to solving the problems of our regional Australia.

3 Promote dialogues and partnerships in science and environmental planning and research from the local to the global, between communities, industry, universities, and the private sector while ensuring opportunities for our elders, youth and communities in the region.

4 Strengthening the economy, acknowledging the contributions of regional tourist attractions—the Reef, rainforest, Rivers and First Nations culture, leverage local research opportunities and potential partnerships building regionally relevant research activities that redress the economic hits from the pandemic.

5 Highlight and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands culture, including the intimate bond with the land and environments. Structure learning, internships and mentoring opportunities created with internships, culture-based practices and managed volunteer roles.

“Protecting the Great Barrier Reef is not just an Aboriginal problem, it’s not just a farming problem, it’s everybody’s problem”

~ Yidinji Elder Dennis Ah-Kee.

Thankyou, illuminate FNQ <https://www.illuminatefnq.com.au>