

Indigenous Partnership Principles

National Environmental Science Program



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Cataloguing data

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Acknowledgements

The authors thank the Indigenous Facilitation Network for their input.

Note: Suggestions to improve the content of this document are welcome.

Document control

Version	Date of issue	Author	Reason for change
1.0	January 2021	Science Partnerships	First draft
2.0	April 2021	Science Partnerships	Include hub input
3.0	April 2024	Science Partnerships	Update

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea and community.

We pay our respects to them and their cultures and to their Elders past, present and emerging. We are committed to working respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples.

Our Indigenous research partnerships are a valued component of the National Environmental Science Program (NESP) research.

Introduction

The National Environmental Science Program (NESP) recognises and values the experiences, perspectives and cultures of Indigenous Australians. The program supports Indigenous aspirations to maintain, protect and manage culture, language, land and sea Country, and heritage. Program researchers are working with Indigenous experts and Traditional Owner groups to help achieve improved on-ground outcomes for the environment. This involves better understanding of caring for land and sea Country through embedding Indigenous knowledge systems into the sustainable traditional use and protection of biodiversity, threatened species and threatened communities. Collaborative two-way partnerships are key to success.

The Australian Government invested more than \$145 million in the first phase of NESP (2014–15 to 2020–21) and a further \$149 million in the second phase of NESP (2020–21 to 2026–27). The program funds targeted research through four hubs: Resilient Landscapes, Sustainable Communities and Waste, Marine and Coastal, and Climate Systems. The program provides an evidence-base for environmental and climate policy-makers. Informed decision-making using the best available research greatly improves our capacity to protect our environment, conserve our biodiversity, and develop effective climate policies and services.

Hubs partner with Indigenous land and sea managers, weaving together Indigenous and western environmental knowledge systems, and applying Indigenous-led approaches to strengthening and sharing knowledge. This improves common understanding of caring for land and sea Country, and the sustainable traditional use and protection of biodiversity and threatened species and communities.

Indigenous partnerships and a deep respect for traditional knowledge are embedded in the NESP program. Hub research deepens our shared leadership role in looking after Country and meeting our mutual aspirations for the future. The program addresses Indigenous environmental research needs as identified by Traditional Owners and Indigenous communities and works with Indigenous people to build research capacity.

The hubs embed strong cultural capability in their research. Building on experience and lessons from phase 1 of NESP, the partnership principles laid out in this document are provided as a guide to building effective collaborations.

NESP hubs produce individual Indigenous partnerships strategies that are fit-for-purpose for the research of the hub. These include the principles and mandatory criteria outlined in the funding agreements.

NESP Indigenous Partnership Principles

The following seven principles must be applied across all NESP research. These are based on the AIATSIS code for ethical research on which all NESP research must comply.

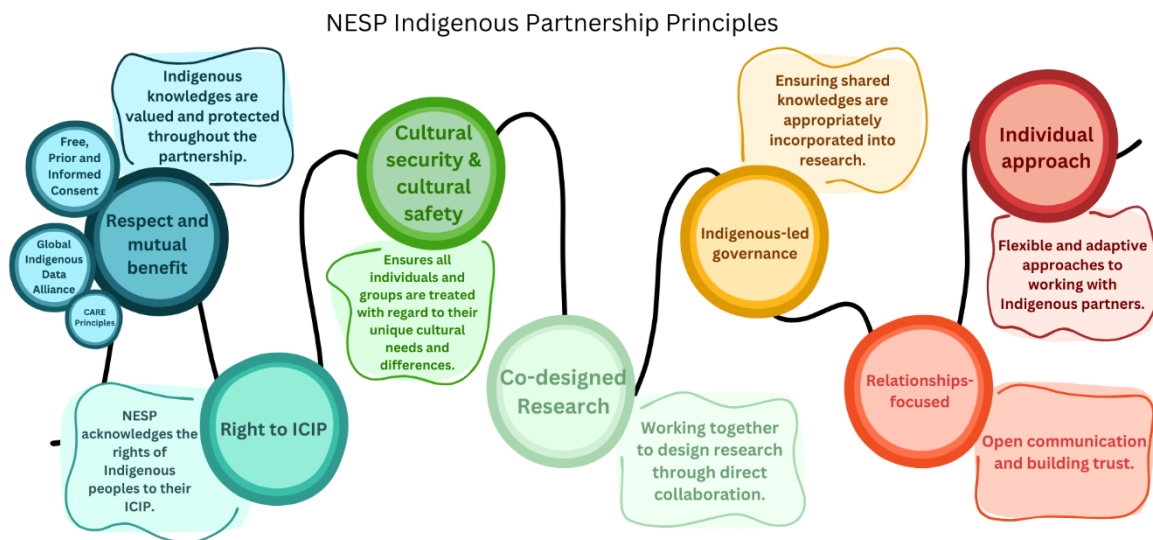


Figure 1. NESP Indigenous Partnership Principles

Respect and mutual benefit

Respect and mutual benefit are critical to achieving a successful partnership. Relationships are built over time, with on-going communication. It is essential to understand Indigenous aspirations and goals through taking the time to co-design, co-implement and co-evaluate research.

Knowledge held by Indigenous peoples should be valued and protected throughout the partnership. The program, hubs and individual researchers must ensure all legal obligations are understood before collecting information (including Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)) and be guided by the objectives of the Global Indigenous Data Alliance (GIDA).

Right to Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property

NESP acknowledges the rights of Indigenous peoples to their Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP).

Any Intellectual Property Rights will be incorporated into ICIP, in accordance with Article 31 of the *United Nations declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples*. These obligations are mandated in the NESP funding agreements with each hub. All project and program management staff should undertake appropriate ICIP training, for example through True Tracks®.

Cultural Security & Cultural Safety

This is about ensuring research partnerships are supported by sound cultural security frameworks and culturally safe practice with Indigenous peoples.

Prior to any engagement activity, NESP researchers must demonstrate due diligence by participating in cultural-capability training. Hubs must ensure cultural security frameworks are in place and commit to cultural safety to provide a greater level of confidence for Indigenous peoples, both on Country and within NESP research institutions.

Co-designed Research

There is greater value for all partners for research that is co-designed. All research should address Indigenous-identified research priorities. Benefits from research undertakings are to be shared with Indigenous communities.

Consultation with Indigenous peoples and communities must be conducted before or within the same timeframes as other stakeholder engagement to inform research at appropriate phases. For case study examples of co-created research see [Our knowledge our way in caring for Country](#).

Indigenous-led governance

Indigenous-led governance provides program level oversight of the successful design, implementation and evaluation of partnerships. Indigenous-led research is designed from initial concept to communication through direct co-design with an Indigenous community, organisation, group or individual.

The NESP Indigenous Knowledge Brokers and the Indigenous Facilitation Network can provide advice to ensure that shared knowledge is appropriately incorporated into research.

Relationships-focused

Regular, relationship-focused communication builds trust in the partnership. It is a key responsibility of each hub to communicate outcomes and research results to participating Indigenous peoples and communities.

Communication of scientific outcomes must be undertaken in a form that is acceptable. This means that it is fit-for-purpose to the intended audience, engaging and in a format that is easily accessible. Hubs have Communications and Knowledge Brokering Strategies, as well as Indigenous Partnership Strategies to ensure consistent messaging and outline dispute resolution mechanisms.

Individual approach

Using tailored approaches to partnerships increases the chance of achieving shared benefits between individual partners. Hubs are encouraged to use a flexible, adaptive approach that is tailored to the needs and capacity of Indigenous partners. Cultural sensitivities and aspirations must also be considered.

Any research project on or about Country will have an impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Researchers funded through NESP should consider how their research project may impact or be of interest to Indigenous Australians.

The [Three-Category Approach](#) is a useful method to help determine the appropriate level of research partnership and engagement. It categorises three levels of Indigenous engagement and outlines a pathway to improving relationship building and communication processes. A [Researcher Workbook](#) has been designed to assist researchers to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations, and communities more meaningfully and appropriately in research projects.

Embedding Indigenous Partnership Principles

Principles

The NESP Indigenous Partnership Principles need to be considered at each stage of the partnerships cycle (refer to Figure 2) and should be applied when building new partnerships or maintaining existing ones. This includes when partnering for Indigenous-led research. Key stages are:

- scoping and building a partnership
- managing and maintaining a partnership
- reviewing and revising a partnership
- sustaining the outcomes of a partnership.

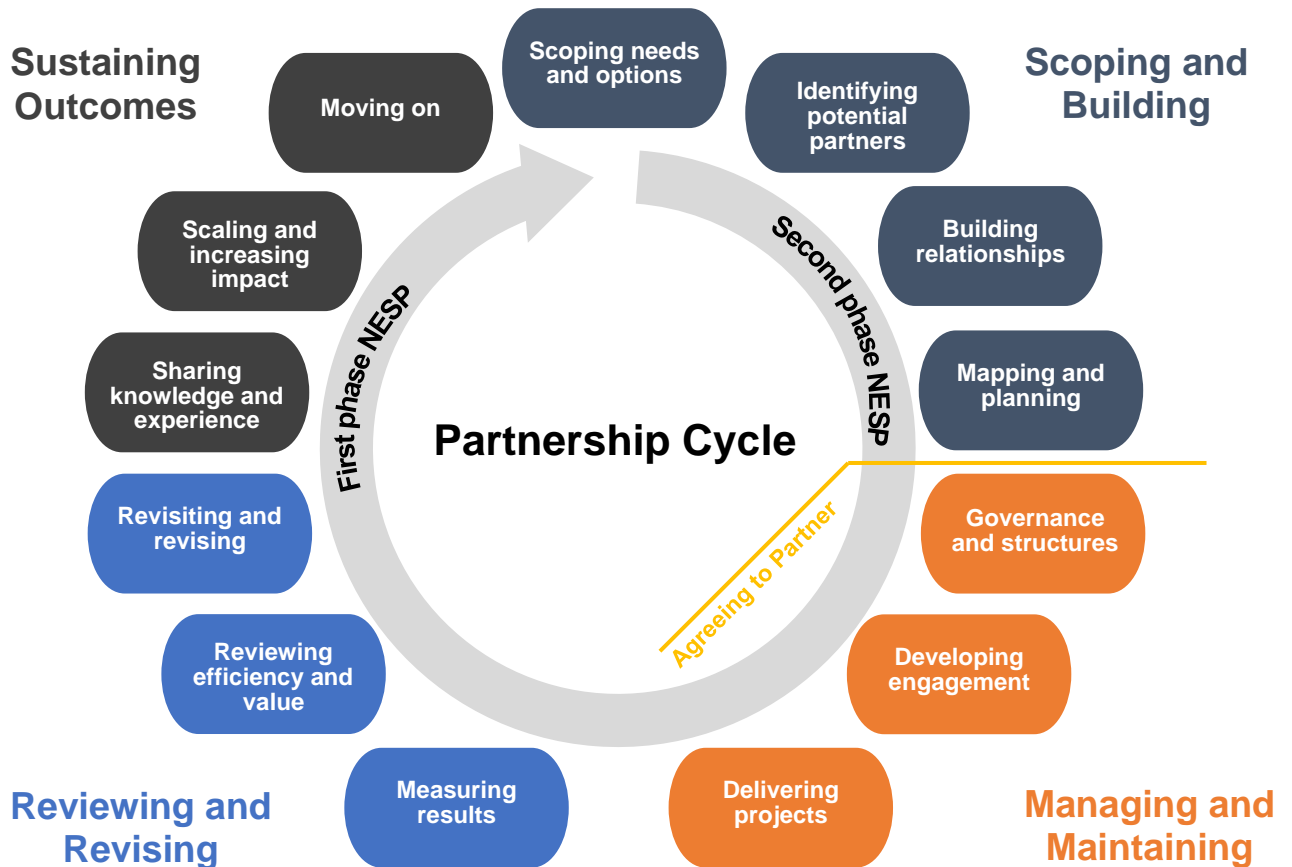


Figure 2. Partnering cycle (adapted from Partnership Brokers Association)

Building strong partnerships and facilitating positive knowledge exchange in the NESP design, development and implementation phase enables identification of areas and issues of social, economic, cultural and spiritual significance to Indigenous communities. Early and meaningful engagement removes the need for assumption and improves opportunity for appropriate consideration and integration of Indigenous benefit in research development.

Scoping and building a partnership

The scoping and building phase of the partnership cycle (Figure 2) focuses on:

- scoping needs and options
- identifying potential partners
- building relationships.

During this phase it is essential that the individual approach principle is used in developing Indigenous partnerships. This means identifying Indigenous people with rights and interests in a place, especially Indigenous people authorised to speak for a place, considering that Indigenous people will have differing degrees of knowledge about heritage places and their importance.

It is important to note that men's and women's businesses are separate in Indigenous culture. Both men and women with rights and interests in an area should be identified because they may be responsible for different places and values.

It is imperative to:

- identify interests of surrounding Indigenous communities. Activities that affect water flows, for example, will require consultation with upstream and downstream Indigenous communities.
- understand the rules. It is critical to identify, understand and adhere to any processes or protocols that Indigenous people have established for consultation to ensure relationships are trusted and enduring.
- develop new consultations for new projects. Consultation should be undertaken for each new project unless Traditional Owners and other interested Indigenous communities agree that this is not necessary.
- be flexible and allow enough time. The business of family, community and Country is a priority for Indigenous communities and meetings may be cancelled with little or no notice. Flexibility and sufficient time to engage must be factored in.
- privacy and confidentiality concerning aspects of Indigenous peoples' personal and cultural affairs should be respected during all aspects of research, especially when they seek to maintain the secrecy of particular areas of Indigenous knowledge.

Managing and maintaining a partnership

The contribution of Indigenous people to research does not stop at consultation. A critical component is the deeper engagement and participation in activities that help embed cultural perspectives, build Indigenous capacity, and establish enduring partnerships between researchers and Indigenous communities.

Once the partnership has been established, the mapping and planning phase of the cycle begins. As outlined in Figure 2 this phase is focused on:

- governance and structures
- developing engagement
- delivering projects.

A cultural advisor or consultant can assist with the delivery of this phase. This is someone who can teach about local customs and norms and is involved throughout the research process, providing advice about views and cultural values, beliefs and practices, and associated protocols that need to be followed. The advisor/consultant will have an understanding of the views, cultural values, beliefs and practices of the participants. They may be a person from the participating group or community, or a professional or academic person, and the role may overlap with that of cultural broker. They may work with the Hub Indigenous Facilitator who will oversee the management of the project.

The program employs Indigenous Knowledge Brokers to build a network with Indigenous communities around Australia and understand their environmental research needs. The NESP knowledge broker team works across all hubs to implement these principles and:

- help deliver the environmental research needs of Indigenous peoples and build Indigenous research capacity.
- develop resources to support the building of appropriate and meaningful Indigenous partnerships in environmental and climate research.
- review NESP Hub annual research plans and annual progress reports to ensure best-practice Indigenous-led research.
- advise the NESP Hub leadership team on creating and maintaining a culturally safe working environment.
- review and update these NESP *Indigenous Partnership Principles*.
- support Indigenous Facilitators to build partnerships between Indigenous Australians and NESP researchers, including delivering Indigenous-led projects.
- organise and support quarterly meetings of the Indigenous Facilitation Network and host monthly drop-in sessions.

Reviewing and revising a partnership

In the reviewing and revising phase of the partnerships cycle (Figure 2), Indigenous partnerships should be critically evaluated while:

- measuring results
- reviewing efficiency and value
- revisiting and revising.

In conducting research, Hub researchers should first ensure that:

- Free, Prior and Informed Consent is obtained in a culturally appropriate manner from all research participants and stakeholders before undertaking research with and about Indigenous peoples and communities (for further information see the *AIATSIS code of ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research* and *The Nagoya Protocol on access and benefit-sharing*);
- all information on the intended and actual aims, processes, activities, uses and outcomes of the research are effectively clearly communicated in appropriate ways to promote open and honest exchange between researchers and Indigenous peoples and their communities;
- participants are made aware that consent given by them regarding their participation in the research may be withdrawn at any time during the life of the project; this can be withdrawn for any reason at any time and for a reason that they can choose to keep confidential.
- there will be ongoing consultation and negotiation with participants at research design and commencement, during the life of the project and following its completion; and
- clear information is available to all participants about where and how to raise concerns or complaints about the conduct of the research.

Sustaining the outcomes of a partnership

In the wrap-up stage of a project, the focus should be on sustaining outcomes. In this phase Indigenous Partnerships look to:

- sharing knowledge and experience
- scaling and increasing impact
- moving on.

Indigenous people have an expectation that research involving them, or their traditional land and sea Country will be attributed to them and a right to be informed. Depending on the nature of the research, attribution might include payment for research work, authorship of training materials, presentation opportunities and joint publications. This includes ensuring that outcomes are captured and that project outputs are reported back to community and agreed. There should be opportunities for Indigenous participants to represent and promote research work and findings at conferences and other fora, including joint authorship and public presentations. Similarly, provision must be made for researchers to increase their Indigenous cultural awareness and competence through formal and informal means.

Evaluation of Indigenous Partnership Principles

The application of these Indigenous Partnership Principles will be evaluated at the NESP Program level in accordance with the NESP Monitoring and Evaluation plan.

Principle	Performance measures
Respect and mutual benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Degree to which Indigenous peoples' perceptions involved with hub research and attitudes towards research are positive.
Right to Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and proportion of ICIP agreements signed for co-designed and led projects (i.e., Indigenous initiators and leaders, co-researchers and collaborators).
Co-design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and proportion of projects fulfilling identified research and management priorities of Indigenous research-users (provide case studies). Number of Indigenous partners who have remained interested and committed to the project (number of returning Indigenous partners, and progress of partnership).
Indigenous-led governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report on how Indigenous people are represented in NESP governance structures. Number of existing Indigenous governance structures engaged in guiding NESP projects (Indigenous advisory committees, etc.).
Relationships focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of joint projects, conference/workshop presentations and co-authored publications with Indigenous peoples. Number of consultation and planning meetings held with Indigenous people and organisations (including who they represent). Number and type of communication products or activities that were used to communicate research results with Indigenous people, and for the benefit of Indigenous research-users.
An individual approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of Indigenous people and or Organisations (non-rangers) who have participated in meetings or field work (including who they represent). Number of Indigenous people employed (in casual, non-ongoing and ongoing full-time or part-time roles) or Indigenous-owned organisation engaged on contract. Examples of increased cultural understanding of non-Indigenous people in the hub (number of staff who have recently undergone cultural awareness training, number of staff engaged in projects with Indigenous partners).

The Three-Category Approach for research projects

The [Three-Category Approach](#) is a useful tool that hubs can use to guide their development of research projects. It is designed to assist researchers to form stronger relationships and encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and inclusion in research projects on Country.

The Three-Category Approach recognises there are differences in the level of partner involvement in research. This could be due to capacity constraints, the nature of the research, or narrow interest (for example niche research, low general-interest topic). These categories were originally developed by Stan Lui and the NESP Tropical Water Quality Hub and have been redeveloped in 2023 by Samantha Coates and Stan Lui.

Category 1: Indigenous - Led

Category 1 projects are Indigenous-led research designed from initial concept to communication through direct co-design with an Indigenous community, organisation, group or individual. Indigenous-led research means a majority of the project research leaders are Indigenous Australian individuals or organisations, and project governance includes majority (more than 50%) Indigenous representation and genuine decision-making role in the project. Category 1 projects are co-designed with Indigenous leaders and work towards an application of caring for Country. To complete a Category 1 project, researchers are guided by Indigenous leadership and stewardship from concept to co-design. Researchers collaborate on the work and communicate the outcomes together to achieve the following objectives:

- Through an Indigenous-led collaborative process, ensure research is relevant and beneficial to Indigenous Australian communities and organisations and builds capacity of Indigenous Australians to undertake research that is a blend of Indigenous knowledge and Western science.
- Ensure research is conducted according to the highest ethical standards and Indigenous people are adequately represented in project governance and decision-making.
- Provide opportunities for Indigenous Australian employment, building capacity through transfer of skills, sharing knowledge, and increasing cultural awareness amongst all parties (including opportunities for students, postgrads, and other paid roles for employment of Indigenous people (cultural advisor, consultant).
- Through an Indigenous-led collaborative approach, effectively communicate research results, and share knowledge with Indigenous communities, organisations, groups or individuals.

Category 2: CO-DESIGN

Category 2 projects are co-designed and communicated through a collaborative process with at least one Indigenous community, organisation, group or individual. For genuine partnership purposes, this level of project requires up to 50% Indigenous representation in the governance of the project.

A Category 2 project will be expected to:

- Identify Indigenous communities, organisations, groups, or individuals that are impacted by or have an interest in the research within the project area.
- Through a co-design process, ensure research is relevant and beneficial to Indigenous Australian communities and organisations, builds capacity of Indigenous Australians and creates opportunities for Indigenous Australians to undertake research or work on the project.
- Ensure research is conducted according to the highest ethical standards and Indigenous people are adequately represented in project governance and decision-making.
- Provide opportunities for Indigenous Australian employment, building capacity through transfer of skills, sharing knowledge, and increasing cultural awareness amongst all parties (including opportunities for students, postgrads, and other paid roles for employment of Indigenous people (cultural advisor, consultant).
- Develop a process to effectively communicate research results and share knowledge with Indigenous communities, organisations, groups, or individuals.

Category 3: COMMUNICATE

Category 3 projects do not directly engage with or benefit from Indigenous peoples or their knowledge. The outcomes of the project are communicated and shared with Indigenous Australians impacted by or interested in the research project.

NESP acceptable circumstances for a Category 3 research project include: Literature reviews, data base modelling or desk top study design, narrow interest (for example, niche research, low general-interest topic).

A Category 3 project will be expected to:

- Identify Indigenous communities, organisations, groups, or individuals that are affected by or have an interest in the research within the project area.
 - Where possible and appropriate, coordinate with Indigenous communities, organisations, groups, or individuals within the project area to communicate research results with community through engagement activities (for example, present results to community at a community information day).
 - Where possible and appropriate, contact Indigenous people and organisations and provide details of forums, workshops, newsletters, publications, and other engagement activities associated with the project.
-

Evaluation of projects

Each hub can self-assess the success of the implementation of the above approaches through the evaluation criteria for the Three-Category Approach provided in the [Three-Category Approach Researcher Workbook](#).

Examples of stakeholders

There are additional committees and stakeholders that can provide advice to NESP. Below is a non-exhaustive example list of stakeholders that may need to be individually engaged.

Hub	Primary	Secondary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Universities, scientists and researchers Indigenous Network Facilitators Hub staff and partners Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Area staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Departmental policy-makers Indigenous Advisory Committee Identified policy-makers in other federal government departments, such as the National Indigenous Australians Agency State/territory and local governments, and Natural Resources Management practitioners Indigenous land and sea managers (Native Title Prescribed Bodies Corporate, Aboriginal Land Councils, Indigenous Corporations) Industry, including environmental, agriculture and the finance sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General public (particularly professional networks) Environment non-government organisations Heritage & Environmental consultants and their peak organisation (EIANZ) Peak bodies representing biodiversity and land management practitioner (Ecological Society of Australia, Australian Academy of Science)