



2023 Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum Report

5-7 SEPTEMBER, PUDAKUL BILLABONG,
LIMILNGAN-WULNA COUNTRY, NORTHERN TERRITORY



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The growth of our network

Indigenous women across the Northern Territory have been designing and driving the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network over the past 5 years, with support from Mimal Land Management. In 2019, Rembarrnga, Dalabon, and Mayili Elders invited women caring for Country from across the Northern Territory to meet at Bawurrbarnda in Central Arnhem Land. Here, women from 32 ranger groups articulated our shared vision:

“We are strong Indigenous women of the Northern Territory. We stand united as one strong voice. We commit to a network that gives equal power to the rights of all our women. Strong Women means Healthy Country.”



Our 2019 forum at Bawurrbarnda



Our 2022 forum on Eastern Arrernte Country

Today, this network is known as the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network, and is proudly hosted by Mimal Land Management.

In May 2021, over 260 women from across the Northern Territory met at Banatjarl on Jawoyn Country for another Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum. Elders, healers, artists and community workers joined women rangers at this forum, and set out how we can support each other to uphold our vision by collaborating, communicating, and advocating together as a network. They formed our Message Sticks Group to meet every two months, maintain communication across the network, and plan our next forum.

In 2022, women gathered for our third Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum at Inteye Arrkwe on Eastern Arrernte Country. Here, over 200 women worked together to design a strategy. Women outlined how with adequate support, different layers of our network can work together to uphold our shared vision and achieve our advocacy, collaboration, and communication goals, by taking these priority actions:

- continue Northern Territory-wide forums
- support Indigenous women working as mentors in our communities and organisations
- facilitate women's caring for Country exchanges
- secure training for women in the network to advocate for themselves

- advocate for dedicated women's spaces in communities
- create best practice principles for employing women caring for Country
- develop a communication plan and tools for the network
- support regional women's healing camps
- join a national forum for women caring for Country
- develop ethical sponsorship and partnership policies for the network
- formalise a transparent governance structure for the network.

In 2023, 200 women once again made the journey from towns, remote communities, and outstations, to gather for our fourth Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum, and put our priorities into action!

This time we gathered from 5-7 September at Pudukul on Limilngan-Wulna Country. Our hosts shared why it is significant that women do this work on their Country:

"We are super privileged to be hosting this . . . because it's aligned to our cultural responsibility for caring for Country. Wulna women are the speakers and nurturers of Country as we believe our creator is female and we call her the Oolgabah."
– Lynette Kenyon



Our 2021 forum at Banatjarl



Our 2023 forum at Pudukul

2023 Forum logo story

The 2023 forum logo has been designed by Jasmin Daly. Jasmin is a Ngangiwumirri Labarganyin woman from Fish River. She has also worked as a ranger at Mimal Land Management in Central Arnhem Land, and has helped plan the 2023 Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum as part of the Message Sticks Group.

To design the 2023 forum logo, Jasmin travelled to Pudukul on Limilngan-Wulna Country to speak to the Kenyon family, the 2023 forum hosts. Together they explained that:

“This logo is about women helping each other.

It is mostly women who hunt freshwater turtle. We are gathered for our forum on the hunting ground of wetlands’ people. Our ancestors have been hunting on this land for thousands of years: our mothers, and our grandmothers.

Turtle Dreaming belongs to our land and our people. It is sacred for us and plays an important part of the turtle Dreaming story of the Pudukul area.

Dilimin Langan (the sand palm) is a woman’s plant, it is used to make skirts, headwear, nets, dilly bags, baby baskets and mats. It is also the woven string wrapping around the logo. It symbolises all the women that have come together to create our network: we are woven and bonded together. We are creating a strong voice, empowering each other. We are Strong Women for Healthy Country.

Maimai (all coming together), Manngulan (on Country) at Litpull (the Pudukul Billabong here!)”



Planning our 2023 Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum

At our previous forum on Eastern Arrernte Country, Kitana Shaw, Jody Kopp, Helen Wilson, Dianne Stokes, Madeleine Dixon, Charmaine Mingirrirr, Julie Roy, Sheila White, Karen Noble, Gennivea Aplin, Rosemary Potts, Sophia Simon, Virginia Nundhirribala, Serena Bara, Nikita Puruntatameri, Marbine Austral, Gladys Meilbirr, Solodi Buthanguliwuy, Charlene Bangarr, Nyemburr Mununggurra, Andrea Andrews, Josephine Brinjen, Shantelle Miller, Vanessa Murray, and Jasmin Daly all stepped forward as our Message Sticks Group.

This Message Sticks Group worked across all our priority actions over the course of six meetings in the lead up to our 2023 forum. They also gathered on Limilngan-Wulna Country in May to meet with Traditional Owners, plan our forum, identify key partnerships, review our code of conduct, and design the forum facilitation plan. Many Message Sticks Members also stepped up as forum facilitators!



Where we travelled from



WOMEN FROM 34 RANGER GROUPS JOINED OUR FORUM:

Anangu Luritjiku Rangers (CLC)	Ltyentye Apurte Rangers (CLC)	Tjakura Rangers (CLC)
Anmatyerr Rangers (CLC)	Mardbalk Rangers (NLC)	Tjuwanpa Women Rangers (Tjuwanpa Outstation Resource Centre Aboriginal Corporation)
Akityarre Rangers (CLC)	Mimal Rangers (Mimal Land Management Aboriginal Corporation)	Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park Rangers
Aputula Rangers (CLC)	Minyurnai Rangers (from Bandjalang Country in NSW)	Utopia Rangers (CLC)
Arafura Swamp Rangers (Arafura Swamp Rangers Aboriginal Corporation)	Murnkurrumurnkurru Gurindji Rangers (CLC)	Waanyi-Garawa Rangers (NLC)
Djelk Rangers (Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation)	Muru Warinyi Ankkul Rangers (CLC)	Wagiman Rangers (NLC)
Garawa Rangers (NLC)	North Tanami Rangers (CLC)	Walungurru Rangers (CLC)
Gajerrong Rangers (NLC)	Thamarrurr Rangers (Thamarrurr Development Corporation Ltd)	Wardaman Rangers (NLC)
Gumurr Marthakal Ranger	Timber Creek Rangers (NLC)	Warddeken Rangers (Warddeken Land Management Ltd)
Kakadu Rangers (Parks Australia)	Tiwi Land and Marine Rangers (Tiwi Resources)	Warlpiri Rangers (CLC)
Kulumindini Rangers (NLC)		Warnbi Rangers
Li-Anthawirriyarra Sea Rangers (Mabunji Aboriginal Corporation)		Yugul-Mangi Rangers (NLC)

WOMEN FROM THESE ORGANISATIONS ALSO JOINED US:

Akeyulerre Healing Centre	Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation	Northern Territory Government – Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security
Arnhem Land Fire Abatement NT	Northern Land Council	Our Watch
Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup	Northern Territory Aboriginal Investment Corporation	Rise Up
Bush Heritage Australia	Northern Territory Government – Child and Youth Mental Health Team	Triptic
Central Land Council		University of Queensland – School of Business
Conservation Management		Word Wildlife Fund – Australia
Indigenous Carbon Industry Network		

Program

	Tuesday 5th					Wednesday 6th					Thursday 7th					
7am – 8am	Breakfast															
8am – 9am	Putting our Strong Women for Healthy Country Strategy into action Yarn 1- Advocate for dedicated women’s spaces in our communities Yarn 2 - Support each other with advocacy and mentorship Yarn 3 - Schedule women’s caring for Country camps and exchanges Yarn 4 - Design communication tools to share knowledge and information Yarn 5 - Promote best practice principles for employers of women caring for Country Yarn 6 - Investige joining a national forum Yarn 7 - Progress Transparent Governance					Putting our Strong Women for Healthy Country Strategy into action					Reporting back to each other on our actions against our Strong Women for Healthy Country Strategy					
9am – 10am											Renew the different roles and responsibilities within our network and renominate our Message Sticks Group					
10am – 11am																
11am – 12pm																
12pm – 2pm	Lunch															
2pm – 3pm	Presentations					Presentations					Presentations					
3pm – 4pm	Rise Up program <i>With Tanyah Nasir</i>	National Forum Research project <i>With Message Sticks, UQ, and WWF-Australia</i>	Support remote mental health <i>With NT Child and Youth Mental Health Care Team</i>	Walking and talking on Country <i>With Pudukul Aboriginal Cultural Tours</i>	Art space <i>With the Kenyon family</i>	Rise Up program <i>With Tanyah Nasir</i>	National Forum Research project <i>With Message Sticks, UQ, and WWF-Australia</i>	Support remote mental health <i>With NT Child and Youth Mental Health Care Team</i>	Walking and talking on Country <i>With Pudukul Aboriginal Cultural Tours</i>	Art Space <i>With the Kenyon family</i>	Rise Up program <i>With Tanyah Nasir</i>	National Forum Research project <i>With Message Sticks, UQ, and WWF-Australia</i>	Support remote mental health <i>With NT Child and Youth Mental Health Care Team</i>	Bushtucker collection walk and cook up <i>With Pudukul Aboriginal Cultural Tours</i>	Art space <i>With the Kenyon family</i>	
4pm – 5pm																
5pm – 6pm	Free time					Free time					Free time					
6pm – 7pm	Dinner															
7pm onwards	Northern Territory Travelling Film Festival					Storytelling around the campfire					Launch 4th Artwork in forum art series Perform Strong Women for Healthy Country Song Karaoke					



Welcome to Country

Throughout Monday and Tuesday, women arrived by car, bus, and plane from 36 different towns, communities and outstations across the Northern Territory to Pudukul Billabong on Limilngan-Wulna Country. For some women this was a joyous return to a special place, and for many it was their first visit. We were all welcomed by the Kenyon family. They explained where we had gathered:

The Kenyon family also made sure we felt safe and comfortable on their Country. They performed their smoking ceremony for each and every one of us as women arrived throughout the beginning of the forum, and blessed us with their water. They watched over us throughout the forum, joined in with our work, and connected with us as family:

Each day of the forum women took collective action, building on our work at previous forums. To do this, we spent Tuesday and Wednesday mornings spread across seven yarns focusing on different actions identified at previous forums. These yarns were facilitated by our Message Sticks Members and other strong women, including our supporters and volunteers. We had the opportunity to switch between yarns every hour, so we could contribute to all actions if we chose to. On Thursday morning, we reported back on our progress to all women at the forum.

“We’d like to welcome you onto this Country here, which is my grandmother’s Country, of Wulna... and you’ve been on Wulna Country for a little while if you’ve come out of Darwin, so it starts back at the Howards Springs lights in that region, and then it comes through Coolalinga, comes all through here through Humpty Doo and makes its way out to Mary River, and from there it also goes down in that direction, heading down to Manton Dam.”
– Selena Kenyon

“I never dreamt that we would be in a spot where we’re hosting for such an amazing forum. It was family on the Message Sticks that went ‘oh aunty we should have the forum here, because we have such a beautiful Country, and we’re in the wetlands, and we should be sharing a bit of, you know, our culture and our landscape with everyone’ and she said ‘I think this would be a really great place to have the forum’. But to have so many strong women all in one spot imagine all that power and all the learnings all the teachings all the sharings, you know, all the goodness that will come from this forum!”
– Lynette Kenyon





Advocating for dedicated women's spaces in our communities

In 2022 we identified different kinds of women's spaces in our communities, such as women's shelters, centres, cultural sites, healing spaces, camps, and forums. Women agreed they need more support and recognition, and that advocating for them should be a priority of their Strong Women for Healthy Country Network.

At our 2023 forum, women worked together to build a clear picture about why we need women's spaces to stay safe and strong, and made a plan to use our evidence to stand up for women's spaces at a policy level. This yarn was facilitated by the Miliwanga Wurrben and Josephine Brinjen from Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup, together with Tracy Minniecon, Catriona Elder, Rachel Pascua, and Lisa Dietrich at Our Watch, a national advocate for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children. Women worked together to build a clear picture about why we need women's spaces to stay safe and strong, and made a plan to use our evidence to stand up for women's spaces at a policy level.

Women reported that domestic violence in our communities is often approached with a lack of:

- proper consultation and involvement of Elders in all aspects

- interpreters, cultural support, and customary healing
- adequate police response
- access to secure shelters for both men and women
- appropriate housing solutions
- holistic support for families, including young people and men.

Women said that dedicated spaces for Indigenous women allow us to uphold:

- our customs, cultural protocols, and Lore, including grandmothers' Lore and grandfathers' Lore
- traditional policing
- our connectivity to everything
- our Elders' knowledge and wisdom.

Women said that when we lead in creating and maintaining women's shelters, centres, cultural sites, healing spaces, camps, and forums, we are able to:

- practice two-way healing, counselling, mental health support, and substance abuse treatment
- support each other with mentoring and healing on Country
- educate our communities and non-Indigenous people about our Culture.

Together women agreed on this unified statement:

"There are no words in Indigenous languages for 'domestic violence'. It is a balanda term. Domestic violence came with colonisation and its legacy is intergenerational trauma. Now women tell us it happens all the time and it happens everywhere.

We wish to take care of domestic violence in our own way with our own Lore. We wish to use traditional ways, not only working with women, but, men, children, the entire family, not one-on-one, all together.

At the end of the day women need a safe house. There is a lack of safe houses for Indigenous women and children that are led by Indigenous women with Indigenous supporters and Elders. The safe house should be a place for women to sit down all together and talk and support each other.

In addition to safe houses there needs to be healing on Country. Women's sacred spaces are safe spaces. They are spaces of deep connection

and healing and traditional spirituality. If we do this we can come up with traditional measures and women can speak with one voice.

Keeping families together is important so we need to have healing on Country for men as well. We need to bring back grandmothers as important role models for girls and boys. Balance is very important. We need to be working together with police, health clinics and NGOs.

We know we need to heal both women and men on Country and with both men and women Elders and with safe women's spaces."

Women said they want to keep working with Our Watch to share this story and stand up for women's spaces in our communities. Women committed to work together to share this statement with both the Northern Territory and the federal governments through letters and petitions, but also with their communities through illustrated resources in both English and Kriol.

Supporting each other with advocacy and mentorship

At our previous forum, we committed to securing training to learn new skills to stand up for ourselves and each other. The Rise Up program is designed, developed, and delivered by and for Indigenous women to grow these skills. Some strong women have already completed this program, and wanted other women in our network share in this experience.

For this reason Tanyah Nasir, Joanne Nasir, and 2023 Northern Territory Female NAIDOC Elder of the Year Barbara Nasir, joined our forum to share an introduction to the Rise Up program. Many strong speakers joined this yarn, offering their encouragement and support to women looking to grow their confidence! Together they shared healthy ways to look after yourself when others try to get you down. They supported each other singing out:

"No shame, be game!"

Tanyah helped participants reflect on learnings from these sessions:

Tanyah: "We've got to be careful we're not making ourselves too small, down with the ants, because everyone will walk all over us. So we've got to make sure now we're getting rid of this shaming. So no more ants! We've got to be? This was somebody in another group now, she said? What did she say?"

Josephine Grant: "Wedgetail eagles!"

Tanyah: "Yes! We don't want to be ants, we want to be a wedge tailed eagle! And when do we start?"

Josephine: "Today!"

Anyone can visit www.tanyahnasir.com.au/riseup.html to learn more about the Rise Up program!





Scheduling women’s caring for Country camps and exchanges

At our 2022 forum, women agreed we can use our forum as an opportunity to share the women’s events we already have planned in our communities, invite others to join us, and find out what support they would need from employers and our network for their safe travel. To do this, the Message Sticks Group developed a check list and an expression of interest form.

At our 2023 forum, this session was facilitated by Jana Daniels from Yugul-Mangi Rangers, Nikita Puruntatameri from the Tiwi Land and Marine Rangers, and Fiona Webb from the CLC support staff team. Together, they helped women:

- list all women’s events happening in their communities throughout the year
- complete expression of interest forms to host a women’s caring for Country exchange
- suggest future camp and forum locations.

“All our applications got filled out, finally from last year, compared to this year we got more applications for ranger exchange. Everyone is interested and keen to share knowledge and exchange knowledge, which is good.”
– Nikita Puruntatameri

If your organisation is interested in support from the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network for hosting a ranger exchange, please get in touch at swhc@mimal.org.au to request an expression of interest form.

“We’ve got a lot of lists. It’s like a big big list here, a calendar of all the projects and all the upcoming events we’ve got happening, we didn’t expect this big list.”
– Jana Daniels



Designing communication tools to share knowledge and information

At our 2022 forum, women agreed that creating a communication plan and tools for our network is a strategic priority. We said we need to make sure that communication within and from our network is culturally responsible, and to work together to put tools and processes in place to make sure no one is left behind.

At our 2023 forum we followed up on this action, by designing processes to support our digital communication to share our successes, learn from each other, and stay informed about our network. These yarns were facilitated by Kylie Burn and Ziian Carey.

During these sessions we took great care to unpack how we can use digital communication tools in a way that is accessible and inclusive, and how we can protect our cultural protocols, privacy, security, and intellectual property rights.

Over the course of three days, we identified useful digital communication tools for our network to develop, who we would use them to connect with, and what processes we would need to put in place:

	Why	What		Who	How
Social media channels	We want to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> share our stories and our work with the world engage with the next generation of women caring for Country. 	We can share: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> messages, photos, videos and interviews on Facebook, Instagram, and Tiktok. 		We can reach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> young people Indigenous women in our network Indigenous women considering joining our network our supporters people interested in our work people who have never heard of our network before. 	We would: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> manage our social media channels centrally by through our Strong Women for Healthy Country Team invite women caring for Country to submit short videos and stories about their work from their phones to a central poster only post submitted stories and videos if everyone featured agrees and signs a consent form edit our videos to include our logos, songs, and branding.
Home page	We want to show the world: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> who we are as a network where to find more information how to join or support us. 	We can share: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> our group photo, our vision, photos and quotes from our Elders, our Strong Women for Healthy Country Song, and forum art links to more information about our network on the rest of our public website and to the private Strong Women for Healthy Country portal login page a feature for women to register their interest in coming to the next forum and joining the network a place for people and organisations to make donations or register their interest in becoming regular supporters. 		We can reach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> young people and school children Indigenous women considering joining our network our supporters people interested in our work. 	We would make our homepage: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> easy to find with a QR code formatted for both desktop and phone.
Public website	We want to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> teach a national and international audience about our network and have our voices heard share information and resources to empower Indigenous women caring for Country and people. 	We can share: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a map showing the different communities where Indigenous women in our network are from links to Northern Territory organisations we work with that support Indigenous women caring for Country, community, and people our forum videos, reports, and other Strong Women for Healthy Country resources and publications links for women in remote communities to connect with essential services and mental health support. 		We can reach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> young people and school children Indigenous women considering joining our network our supporters people interested in our work. 	We would not include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> any personal or public information anywhere on our website.
Private Strong Women for Healthy Country portal	We want to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> have a safe space for women in our network to connect with each other and our supporters. 	We can share: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> access to printable newsletters with updates about our network and forums a feature to order T-shirts, bags, and other merchandise a feature to ask questions about our network and forums a feature to register for our forums access to different kinds of chatrooms mentorship support contact information member profiles and pictures a link to our Strong Women for Healthy Country Archive. 		We can reach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indigenous women in our network who could have full access eligible and authenticated supporters who have successfully applied for partial short-term access. 	We would need: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indigenous women in our network to log in to the portal with a personal account and password our Message Sticks Group to agree on a transparent process for our supporters to apply for access to some features of the private portal men and people under 18 years of age to not be eligible to apply for this access to give employers partial access to register their staff for our forums to moderate chat rooms to keep them safe.
Strong Women for Healthy Country Archive	We want: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> our videos and photos to help us share our stories with other women in our network, our communities and families and to keep our knowledge strong. 	We can share: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> an archive that is private and secure for us to upload, store, access, and/or download our photos and videos. 		We can reach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indigenous women in our network. 	We would need: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> our archive to only be accessible through the password-protected private Strong Women for Healthy Country portal our Elders to agree on guidelines for anyone using the archive that set out a strong informed consent process, underpinned by our cultural protocols and intellectual property rights women to go through the guidelines for using the archive or watch a video that explains them when they sign up for their personalised login and password to give all archive users a warning that photos and videos may feature people who have passed away women uploading photos or videos to the archive to confirm that they have sought permission from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditional Owners or custodians of any sacred sites that could be in the photos or videos people who are in the photos or videos the family of any people who have passed away in the photos or videos holders of any intellectual property that could be documented in the photos or videos holders of any copyright to the photos or videos to take down photos and videos if permission is withdrawn or put on hold.



PROMOTING OUR BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FOR EMPLOYERS OF WOMEN CARING FOR COUNTRY

"Being one person, you cannot do it on your own. So, if you get women from different parts of the NT, that share the same problems we have, that will make a big change."
– Annette Miller





Promoting best practice principles for employers of women caring for Country

Principle for employers to uphold:

FLEXIBLE WORK SCHEDULES

Practices that support women caring for Country:

- › Provide flexible workhours, as well as part-time and casual positions.
- › Consider important events such as school holidays and ceremony during work scheduling.
- › Provide childcare.
- › Give women opportunities to include their children and Elders in their work activities.
- › Provide safe and legal ways to transport children of different ages in work vehicles.

"We haven't done much cultural awareness training for a while. Just helps them to get a better understanding of Kakadu and the different clan groups within the park, cultural protocols and importance of sites, and sacred sites, that they might go to."
– Catherine Ralph

Principle for employers to uphold:

RESPECTFUL WORKPLACES

Practices that support women caring for Country:

- › Uphold people's diverse cultural and gender identities.
- › Provide cultural awareness training for new support staff and managers.
- › Develop and implement a domestic violence policy.
- › Make space for cultural protocols in workplace policies, processes, inductions, dress codes, and codes of conduct.
- › Ensure all staff know how to recognise and report different forms of abuse both inside and outside of the workplace.

Principle for employers to uphold:

REPRESENTATION IN DECISION-MAKING

Practices that support women caring for Country:

- › Support women to join steering committees, boards, planning groups, and other decision-making groups.
- › Include gender quotas into the Terms of Reference of decision-making groups.
- › Allow women to speak their truth and maintain their cultural integrity at meetings.
- › Listen to women when they speak.
- › Include women in planning and decision making within work teams.
- › Support women to make decisions in private where this is cultural protocol.
- › Recognise women as experts of their own Country and follow their direction in decisions that impact on their Country.

"I know, because I've done that. I'm on one of the steering committees for Nyinkka Nyunyu, for culture. I'm one of the board members for Julalikari. And that's why when I go back and I always teach all my family to talk about all this, that's why I encourage them. Even though I'm the Elder too, I do all this, and help my people and speak for them."
– Annie Morrison

"Having child care and meals in place during training: the last time went out with learning on Country with Mimal. We went out with Emma and the boys, the young students, and we took them to Warddeken, at Noni. We had story nights with the young kids at Warddeken, telling them the Dreamtime stories, and the culture ways for the boys, how they learn their culture songs. They provide food for the kids and for ourselves, and they provide bush foods. We went out seen the rock art. We saw the rainbow serpent sleeping inside the rock, it was like a cool air conditioning, and the kids like it! So that's my story."

– Priscilla Dalywater

Principle for employers to uphold:

DEDICATED TRAINING

Practices that support women caring for Country:

- › Provide a range of training opportunities for women in all aspects of caring for Country beyond land management.
- › Support women to do training together and bring their Elders and mentors.
- › Have childcare and meals in place during training.
- › Engage female trainers.
- › Provide training opportunities in remote communities to reduce time away from family.
- › Support women in remote communities deliver on the job training to each other.
- › Include women's families in celebrating their training achievements.

Principle for employers to uphold:

DEDICATED RESOURCES

Practices that support women caring for Country:

- › Have dedicated infrastructure in place for female staff, such as a women's bathroom, office, meeting space, and storage facility.
- › Ensure women have equal access to a safe and functional vehicle.
- › Employ female support staff and mentors.

"They do one man and woman, but they all help, the mentors. As long as they are working together, you know? Them two help that person together, that will be good, because for some people, they don't like getting on the phone, to ring up for help, they do not know who is at the other end. So, they might have a form to fill out, you know? Forms to fill out. Fill out a form, they get someone to chase it up, look for them after, and do follow up."
– Josephine Grant





At our 2022 forum, we committed to creating guidelines for employers to help women caring for Country feel safe and supported at work. Since then, our Message Sticks Group has reviewed all the practices women have shared at our previous Strong Women for Healthy Country Forums, meetings, and workshops, that they said helped them feel safer and more supported at work. These are compiled on pages 24-26.

From these suggestions, the Message Sticks Group identified overarching principles for our employers to uphold. We said we need our employers to protect and support us with respectful workplaces, dedicated resources, dedicated training, flexible work schedules, representation in decision making.

“We changed the structure of doing it from the grass roots up, rather than implementing it from the corporate side down. And it’s working.”
– Shantelle Miller

At our 2023 forum, women from across the Northern Territory worked together to validate these best practice principles so employers can better understand our needs in the workplace. These yarns were facilitated by Jen Ansell from ALFA NT, Cyan Earnshaw from Conservation Management, and Brittany Hayward-Brown from Bush Heritage Australia.

We also shared our stories of both our struggles and changes we have seen in our workplaces with each other, to help us feel strong standing up for our principles:

“It was amazing to hear that, you know, they’re still fighting for these changes. And it’s still something that as Aboriginal people we’re struggling against. And it’s the system that we’re not benefitting from. And we all have this fire in our belly to kind of help each other find the solution. Because we knew the impacts. Because we’ve lived it.”
– Armani Francois

Over the course of three days, each Best Practice Principle was discussed in depth. 70 women spoke up and shared their experience during this process. During these sessions, we could each choose a few supportive practices compiled on pages 24-26 to share our ideas on. Some practices were talked about more often than others. Practices that were repeatedly raised by more than six women at our forum were requests for employers to:

- provide a range of training opportunities for women in all aspects of caring for Country beyond land management.
- give women opportunities to include their children and Elders in their work activities.
- listen to women when they speak.

Listening to women sharing their perspectives, we learnt that we have many struggles in common.

We also learnt that there are key differences between the organisations that we work for, and recognise that different approaches will work best for different employers.

It was valuable for us to learn about our different workplaces, communities, and situations, to better understand each other:

“I was sitting down looking at all the workgroups, and I saw young women there, sitting there, questioning, wanting to speak out loud. And that’s what I wanted to see, you know, women sharing their knowledge, and understanding each other, even though we come from different communities.”
– Annette Miller

As we continue to learn from each other, we can keep adding to our best practice principles for employers to support women caring for Country.



Investigating joining a national forum

In the lead up to our forum, Gennivea Aplin, Marbine Austral, Andrea Andrews, Vanessa Murray, and Sheila White from our Message Sticks Group formed a research team together with Ree Jordan, Miriam Yates, and Terry Fitzsimmons from the University of Queensland's School of Business, and Rosie Goslett-King and Romola Stewart from WWF-Australia. They designed a research project to work towards a national forum that strong women in our network previously set as a priority. To prepare for this investigation, this team articulated the purpose of the research: the purpose of the research is to build a national forum, to amplify the voices of all women caring for Country and people, and create a safe space for us to continue the brilliant work we do.

In our morning sessions of our forum, the women in the research team facilitated yarns for us to learn more about the research purpose and process, and how to get involved. Women who joined these yarns said:

Building a national forum with women caring for Country across Australia could empower us to support each other, share knowledge and make our voices heard. We believe Indigenous women have the power to unite their communities in a support network and drive change. We know there are valuable programs and projects across Australia run by strong women that

we would like to learn about. We also acknowledged our own responsibility to support women beyond the Northern Territory, sharing our knowledge and culture with them. Getting together with women caring for Country across Australia would draw a lot of attention from decision makers, funders, media, and the public to our solutions for issues in our workplaces and communities. We are hard to ignore when we stand united with a big mob of voices. Together we could show the world that caring for Country is a cultural practice, women need to be strong in our culture to care for our country.

A national forum for women caring for Country would need to be designed by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. For a national forum to empower us, it needs to be designed by strong women who can create change. We would need to work with women across different states and territories to develop a shared vision statement and agenda. Women from other parts of Australia will need to decide for themselves who should be involved in this design process together with women in our own network. The process should be inclusive for all strong women caring for Country from different generations, not just women formally employed as rangers.

Organising a national forum requires a location, hosts, an organising committee, funding, and strong partnerships. The location of a national forum will determine much of the event's logistics and cost. The host organisation would need dedicated funding and staff that work with an organising committee. They would also need strong partnerships with women's employers to ensure they are supported to participate in the process, and to engage with national media outlets so that women across Australia are aware of a national forum.

"I believe that if we do have women from different states, our strong women's voice will become more stronger. I want to cry today, because there are women that I worked with, that helped us through this journey. And grey, we've gone grey doing all these things! But, I feel we are getting to that stage of becoming one voice and we know where to go we know were to run. You know, the young ladies know where to go, where do they seek help."
– Annette Miller

We need to make sure our network in the Northern Territory is strong first. We want to lead by example, and establish our own network as a strong and professional organisation with the capacity to strategically engage with a national forum. We need to make sure that no women in our own network in the Northern Territory are left behind.

The research team also conducted over 40 interviews with strong women at our 2023 forum at Pudukul!

During interviews, women were asked:

- **Why did you attend the forum?**
- **What is a strong woman and what is their role in the community?**
- **How can we get those with the power to act on what we say?**
- **How could a national forum help our voices be heard?**
- **Is there anything else you want to share?**

Our Message Sticks members explained how the recordings of the interviews will be stored, and that our research partners at the University of Queensland and WWF-Australia will also have access to them to help us investigate how we can amplify the voices of all women caring for Country.



Progressing transparent governance

At our previous forums, we agreed we want to design how our network should function and what decision-making processes should support this, before deciding on a legal structure to underpin our network. Mimal Land Management has proudly been auspicing our network while we work this out. In 2022 we entrusted our Message Sticks Group with the responsibility to explore different options to build our own independent organisation to support our network, and report back to us on what they learnt.

During the morning sessions at our 2023 forum, Jody Kopp from the CLC and Maddi Ginnivan from APO NT facilitated yarns about transparent governance. We could learn about what the Message Sticks Group has been working on through the Aboriginal Governance and Management Program, and give direction for next steps towards building transparent governance for our network.

Across three days, 88 women joined these yarns. Many women shared their extensive governance experience working on boards and committees. Together, we learnt about:

- steps involved on our journey towards incorporation
- different types of legislation we could incorporate under
- legal rights and responsibilities of our members, directors, and staff.

“Last year we talked about governance, so that the pressure wasn’t continuing to be on Mimal, that we could become our own incorporated body. And the reason why you want to do that is to be able to do other things that we know that are important: so that we can apply for funding, we can help our sisters that are in more remote areas, we can do exchange camps also, but with money that has come from the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network.”
– Jody Kopp

Revisiting what women have said at previous forums and what our Message Sticks Group has learnt since, we agreed that:

- Forming an Aboriginal Corporation will help us work together towards our shared goals and vision.
- We want our network to grow, with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women working together in solidarity towards our shared goals and vision.
- Only Indigenous women with connection to Country in the Northern Territory should be able to participate in the governance of our network.
- Our Message Sticks Group should continue to include women from different generations, with a diversity of backgrounds, work experiences, and cultures.
- Our future Board of Directors should not replace our Message Sticks Group, but can be part of our Message Sticks Group instead.
- Our future Directors need to have the right experience and skills to take on this big responsibility for us.

Many women felt that some issues require further research and discussion:

- How can we strengthen the regional representation of women in our network’s governance?
- How can we make sure our Elders can continue to guide us when we incorporate?
- How can we mentor the next generation of women to step forward into our Message Sticks Group and our future Board of Directors?

Our Message Sticks Group needs to work through our feedback and questions, and find out more details about the processes and rules that we would need to follow, so that we can make all make informed decisions about our network’s governance. The next step on our journey towards an incorporated network, is for Indigenous women with a connection to Country in the Northern Territory to endorse a rulebook when we are all gathered together. Our Message Sticks Group can use our direction and feedback to draft a rulebook that allows us to make collective decisions the way we want to. We can go through this draft rulebook at our next forum, and decide if it is ready for us to incorporate with.



Our Message Sticks Group

On the last day of our forum we once again reaffirmed and physically acted out how the different layers of our network support each other to address our priorities, achieve our goals, and realise our vision.

Under the close supervision of Rembarrnga and Dalabon Elder Annette Miller, Indigenous and non-Indigenous women all stood side-by-side in a large circle. We all committed to walking together and supporting each other. We paused to thank everyone for travelling to our forum and supporting us, and to applaud women who joined the Message Sticks Group previously for their hard work planning, preparing, and facilitating our 2023 forum.

Women were then asked to take a step towards the center of the circle if they are Indigenous, and another step if they are connected to Country in the Northern Territory (even if they have a Territory border running through their Country). We applauded these women too for their work keeping everyone on track towards our shared vision and goals.

Women were then asked to take another step towards the center of the circle if they are interested in joining Message Sticks Meetings, and another step if they are committed to joining Message Sticks Meetings every two months.

All the concentric layers of our circle represent the different layers of our network: all are formed by strong women, taking on different kinds of responsibility within our network to support each other. Annette checked in with all of us asking if we recognise anyone in the center of the circle who we know and trust, if this inner group included all the diversity we need in our Message Sticks Group, or if there are people missing. Once we were confident the right women to support us until our next forum were surrounded by us, these women stepped forward to introduce themselves as our current Message Sticks Group!

“We’ve built a family, a good relationship between communities. And that makes it even more, more... powerful. It’s there, you can feel it when we’ve been in these three days that we share.”
– Annette Miller

RESPONSIBILITIES OF OUR MESSAGE STICKS GROUP

At previous forums we gave our Message Sticks Group the following responsibilities:

- maintaining communication throughout our network, sharing information between each other, our organisations, communities, and all strong women in our network
- planning our Strong Women for Healthy Country events and activities, such as our forums
- preparing proposals to all of us strong women in the network, and making decisions about our network in between forums
- working closely with Mimal Land Management to understand how to transition our network into an independent organisation, and share this information with all strong women in our network
- working together as a united voice, advocating for women caring for Country and our network.

MEMBERS OF OUR MESSAGE STICKS GROUP UNTIL OUR NEXT FORUM

Amelia Turner, Jody Kopp, Helen Wilson, Madeleine Dixon, Mia Mulladad, Lilly Tjiweri, Selina Kuitja, Renita Armstrong, Armani Francois, Lynda Lechleitner, Sheila White, Karen Noble, Gennivea Aplin, Audrey Mardbinda, Sophia Simon, Jana Daniels, Roselyn Raymond, Nikita Puruntatameri, Marbine Austral, Charlene Puruntatameri, Annie Puruntatameri, Gladys Meilbirr, Sylvia Yipininy, Josephine Brinjen, Miliwanga Wurrben, Shantelle Miller, Vanessa Murray, Emmalena Barrett, Corrine Coombes, and Christine Tchemjiri all committed to being part of our Message Sticks Group until our next forum. Some of these women have been part of our Message Sticks Group before, and some joined our Message Sticks Group for the first time:

“It wasn’t until I came to this I realised how the roles are for Message Sticks. And my heart was pounding, and I knew I should step forward and give it a go. My dream is always just to be a ranger, and having a crew of other women rangers, and were all on the boat, and all driving and taking turns doing stuff. I’d love to see more rangers in my area and then we all come to this forum.”
– Emmalena Barrett



Presentations by and for strong women

Each day of our forum, women from different communities and organisations presented on the work they have been doing. Some of us are accomplished public speakers, and some of us are just starting out learning these skills. Our forum is a safe space for us to build each other's confidence to share our stories, struggles and accomplishments:

"I have come out of my shell. I'm more outspoken. If I've got something, yes, I'll share. But, because I feel the strength of the other women around me. It just makes me feel at peace because I'm not the only one carrying this load. You know, they are helping me with my journey."
– Gennivea Aplin



Some of us have been able to come to many forums and practice speaking in front of a crowd over a number of years. Our hard work is showing:

"There were some women that was here in 2019, and today there's some of them are here still with us. And I've seen changes with them, you know, becoming confident and having that power to speak up. And that's what I want to see, women standing up strong."
– Annette Miller



Protecting Country from invasive weeds

As women caring for Country, many of us work hard to protect our Country from environmental damage:

“If you look afterim Country, Country will look after you. Us mob as protectors, we got to make sure we look afterim. But you got to look afterim to share with everybody not just your own little tribe but just human race. Because you know we got good water, we got flowing river, the Country is plenty. And all the native plants and animals, they’ve got their purpose of being here, and our purpose is to protect. Our old people bin look afterim, and make sure it’s not disturbed.”
– Sheila White

It’s not just those of us who are employed as rangers who want to protect Country from invasive species and other environmental threats such as climate change. When our Message Sticks Group first met with Limilngan-Wulna Traditional Owners to plan our forum, they learnt that they share this deep concern. During their meeting, women started discussing their work managing weeds in particular. Our forum hosts suggested we invite Michelle Franklin from the Northern Territory Government’s weeds branch to our forum, so we can discuss what we are seeing on our homelands with her and learn more about the latest weeds to look out for. Michelle came armed with information and resources to support our work protecting Country!

Walking and talking on Country with Pudakul Aboriginal Cultural Tours

Our forum hosts took us on guided walks through their Country. They generously shared their passion caring for Country through their successful family owned and operated business. They also shared their knowledge about fibre collection, bush tucker and medicine:

“We think maybe because we’re all Aboriginal people we don’t have anything to share. But no, we have a lot to share. Just that connection: we all know those plants and that bush medicine, you know? And yes, that experience it’s like, reinforcing as Aboriginal women we’ve got that knowledge.”
– Norma Benger



2023 Strong Women for Healthy Country Artwork

We were able to go to the art space throughout our forum, at any time. Here, we could draw inspiration from our collective art pieces from our previous forums, with both the Gundung Mural from our 2019 forum at Bawurrbarnda, and the Message Sticks from our 2021 forum at Banatjarl on display. Many of us continued to add to the circles of connection we started painting at our 2022 forum at Ross River.

At our 2023 forum at Pudakul, we also worked together on a new collaborative art piece and we were able to learn and share weaving techniques together with the master weavers from the Country

on which we were gathered! This process was designed and guided Marguerite Hayes, Norma Benger, and Lynette Kenyon:

“We’ve had the opportunity to run a weaving workshop as part of the forum. There’s seven little breakout sessions, and seven little tents on the ground for all the participants to go off to. So, we’re going to put seven circles within the net. And then we’re going to join them and show how all the women connected throughout the forum.”
– Lynette Kenyon

They put great care into preparing all the materials:

“We’ve dug up natural brown [haemodorum] from the ground and from the top you get a purple colour. We got some yellow kapok balls which we boiled up. All of it is being boiled on the fire. And yes, we’ve just put the fibre in and then hung it up. So, we’ve got it all hanging up, then we start making. Just being with, connecting to, other nations that are gathered here with us, and all women, and so you know it is really comfortable. Because weaving is women’s business. So yes, it has fit in perfectly.”
– Norma Benger

We then had the opportunity to learn how to make rope from the Dilimin Langan (the sand palm) under the close tutelage of Marguerite Hayes. Many of us joined in this process:

“Everyone’s had a go at making fibre. So, every person that’s made some fibre, made some string, and given it to mum to continue on has contributed to this piece.”
– Norma Benger





Throughout our forum Traditional Owners wove the threads of our labour together into a shared artwork. Clearly they had been paying close attention to all the actions we were taking in our yarning circles, because when they presented the 2023 forum art piece on our last night at the forum, we saw all our hard work reflected back at us:



“So we’ve made a beautiful masterpiece for you using the seven yarning circles. We’ve managed to write them up on a little leaf for you. And so, this is basically every woman that has been a part of doing the weaving with us. And all the little bits and pieces we gathered, we put this piece together for you.”
– Lynette Kenyon

We then all took turns placing one of our paintings from previous forum artworks in the sand around the new forum artwork.





Practicing self-care

An important reason for many of us to travel to the forum, is to find respite from the struggles we face and responsibilities we carry in our communities.

“Forums like this with just women takes that stress and burden of family life away for you to be you. And it brings that light that’s been there. That backbone of that family is showing what they are and who they are and the strength that they carry.”

– Lynda Lechleitner

To make sure women could find relief from stress at our forum, we dedicated a space and time in our forum program to look after ourselves. In the steamy September afternoons, we could cool off and decompress alongside the pool at Pudukul. We could rest our feet, swollen from travelling, in salt baths. We could even get our hair done by Lee and Tarlisha from Industrie Hair, who went above and beyond knowing that it is difficult for many of us in remote communities to access a hairdresser!

Our supporters helped us make sure we had all the products we needed to be comfortable. Share the Dignity is a women’s charity working to make women’s health more equitable, who gave each of us coming to the forum a range of essential products towards this. Our partners at KKT sourced donations of beautiful products from Aesop and Wondering Folk Rugs to make sure this space was truly relaxing.

We also invited the NT Child and Youth Mental Health Team to join our forum again, to learn more about supporting each other and looking after ourselves when we do not have access to mental health services, as is true for many of us living in remote communities. Matilda Herben joined us to share her professional assistance, support, and advice in both private and group sessions.

Practicing self-care is a critical part of our forum, and what helps it be such a safe space for women. We believe that coming together to practice self-care at our forum makes a meaningful impact on women who are struggling back at home:

“For the younger generation of women to know that there are, there is a place for women to go and sit and be... free. And just sit and have a yarn. Or you don’t have to: have a cup of tea, you know! But we all feel so safe here. One big network just keeping us all together and making us feel we want to be a part of it, you know. We want to stay here. We want more of it.”

– Gennivea Aplin



Balmy evenings

During our forum, Traditional Owners looked after us sharing food from Limilngan-Wulna Country! Many of our Elders took the time to show us how to prepare different kinds of bushtucker. We enjoyed a delicious bushtucker feast!

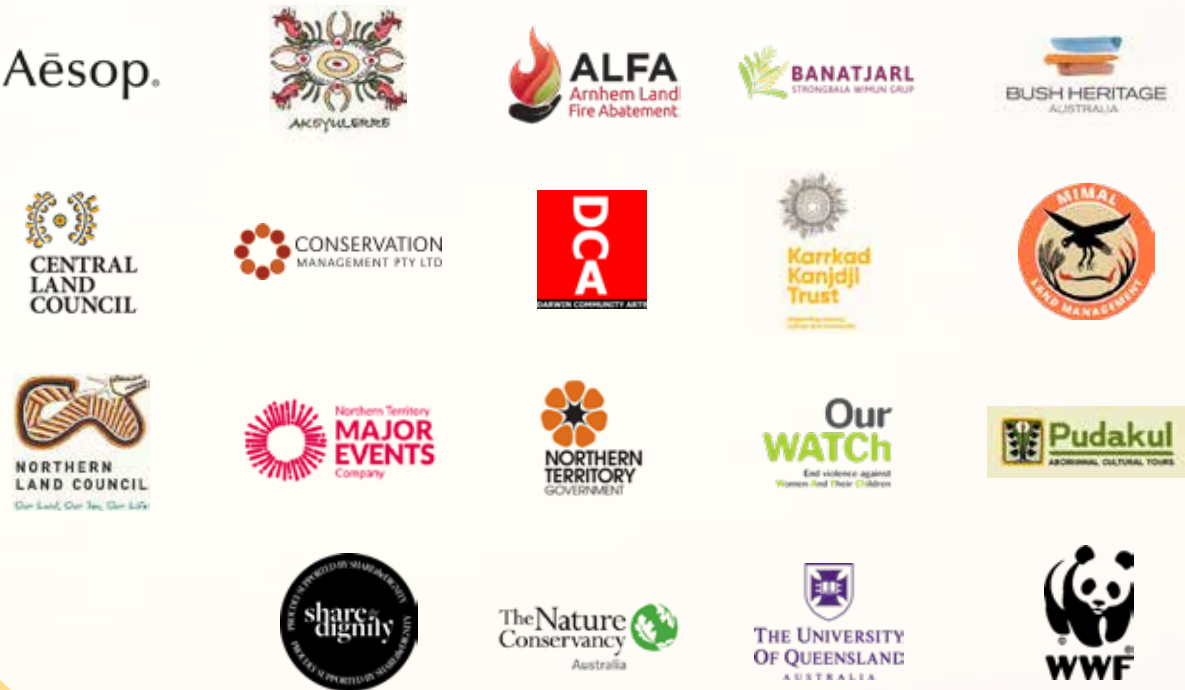
With food in our bellies, we spent our evenings at the forum sitting around the campfire, telling stories, and singing songs. Some of these songs are deeply sacred to us, and some are songs we made together, like our Strong Women for Healthy Country Song!

On Tuesday night we enjoyed our very own film festival, with an outdoor movie screen reaching up towards the tree tops! We watched important stories from strong women across Australia. This film festival was curated by Britt Guy from Creative Accomplix.

On our last night of our forum, we reflected on our hard work, and prepared ourselves for saying goodbye the next morning. Some of us were happy to just sit under the stars and soak up the music. By contrast, some of us bravely stepped up to the microphone to sing the songs we chose for them! Our karaoke host Natalie Leysley also graciously serenaded us with her own songs into the night.

Thank you!

We are grateful for the generosity of our supporters:



Over 200 women caring for Country from across the Northern Territory contributed to the 2023 Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum Report, with facilitation from Miliwanga Wurrben, Josephine Brinjen, Tracy Minniecon, Catriona Elder, Rachel Pascua, Lisa Dietrich, Tanyah Nasir, Joanne Nasir, Barbara Nasir, Jana Daniels, Nikita Puruntatameri, Fiona Webb, Kylie Burn, Ziian Carey, Jen Ansell, Cyan Earnshaw, Brittany Hayward-Brown, Gennivea Aplin, Marbine Austral, Andrea Andrews, Vanessa Murray, Sheila White, Rosie Goslett-King, Ree Jordan, Miriam Yates, Jody Kopp and Maddi Ginnivan. This report was prepared by Kate van Wezel, with photographs by Milly Hooper. It was designed by Carly Cord-Udy, reviewed by the Message Sticks Group, and published in Darwin, Australia, by Mimal Land Management Aboriginal Corporation.

“WE ARE STRONG INDIGENOUS WOMEN OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY.

**We STAND UNITED as
ONE STRONG VOICE.**

**WE COMMIT TO A NETWORK
THAT GIVES
EQUAL POWER
to the RIGHTS of
ALL OUR WOMEN.**

**STRONG WOMEN means
HEALTHY COUNTRY.”**

Strong Women for Healthy Country Vision Statement