

# 2024 Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum Report

3-5 SEPTEMBER, CRAB CLAW ISLAND, LARRAKIA COUNTRY,  
NORTHERN TERRITORY



## 2024 forum logo story

The 2024 forum logo was designed by our host Zoe Singh:

*“Kenbi is the name of a sacred crocodile and swimming hole here. The swimming hole here is a didgeridoo. When the old man mermaid blew on the didgeridoo, it sent water to all the islands around this area. The crocodile travelled down the coast, visiting the sacred sites. The crocodile is a totem from this Country, it’s my mum’s dreaming. I dreamt of this crocodile, and when I woke up, I made this drawing with a lead pencil.”*







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# Executive summary

## BACKGROUND

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.”*

In 2021, 260 women gathered at Banatjarl on Jawoyn Country, and formed their Message Sticks Group to maintain their network in between forums. In 2022, 200 women gathered at Inteye Arrkwe on Eastern Arrernte Country and worked together to design a strategy and identify collective priorities for our network. In 2023, 200 women gathered again at Pudukul on Limilngan-Wulna Country, and put these priorities into action!

In 2024, 260 women reunited at Crab Claw Island on Larrakia Country for our fifth Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum to continue our collaborative art, music, bush medicine making, healing, self-care, and storytelling. We also shared our achievements and challenges caring for Country and community with each other and learnt new skills. This forum was an opportunity to build transparent governance for our network, one of the priority actions identified in our Strong Women for Healthy Country Strategy.

## BUILDING TRANSPARENT GOVERNANCE

After being welcomed to Country by Zoe Singh and her family, we listened to our previous forum hosts who helped us reflect on where our network has come from, why we are forming our own independent corporation, and what decisions we needed to make at this forum about our governance.

Our Message Sticks Group made sure our decisions were well informed. They worked together with the Aboriginal Governance and Management Program team to share information about the incorporation process. They stepped us through all the different parts of the rule book we asked them to draft for our proposed corporation. They took the time to go through all our questions together with the rest of the facilitation team, and to follow up with us. By the end of the forum, 135 eligible women had registered to be founding members of the proposed Strong Women for Healthy Country Network Aboriginal Corporation! So many women made the effort to endorse our draft rule book in writing, far surpassing ORIC’s requirements to register our proposed Aboriginal Corporation!

At this forum, we also started visualising our organisation and communication structure, building a code of conduct, and formalising our Message Sticks nomination process. 36 women stepped forward as our new Message Sticks Group during our Message Sticks Ceremony. We also held our first board elections, where 10 women were elected to be the first directors of our proposed corporation!

## ART AND DESIGN

Building our own corporation means we need a logo! At our forum we created a lot of different symbols and artworks for our logo. Sisters Cyan Lee and Mikayla Earnshaw digitally pulled these designs together for us.

We also continued our collective forum art series, by working together to create our 2024 forum art piece. This work was facilitated by the Bábarra Women’s Centre, and resulted in 3 towering banners, monumentalising our members, neighbouring sisters, and supporters who all joined forces to build this network and uphold our vision.



## RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Strong women in our network have continued their research towards a national forum in partnership with our supporters at the University of Queensland's School of Business and WWF-Australia. At our forum we learnt about the work of the research team so far, their achievement in winning the Australian Research Council award, and how this can support us to make our voices heard on a national level. 29 women joined in the research at our forum, sharing our perspectives during interviews on how to empower women caring for Country.

This forum was also supported by the Digital Woman Ranger Group, in an exciting new partnership with CSIRO. Together they created a tech space at our forum for us to learn and share our digital skills, so we can tell our own stories with all the information we collect working on Country.

## MEETING OUR FUNDING PARTNERS

Our forum was a unique opportunity for us to get to know our funding partners from the Karrkad Kanjdji Trust, Northern Territory Government, The Nature Conservancy, and WWF-Australia who have supported the growth of our network over the past 5 years, as well as our new funding partners from the Judith Neilson Foundation and the Northern Land Council's Community Planning and Development Match Funding Program.

## SELFCARE AND WELLBEING ZONE

Our forum offered us respite and space to look after ourselves. We could simply cool off in the swimming pool, give ourselves a pedicure, or even book in for a haircut with Industrie Hair.

We could also meet and yarn with the social and emotional wellbeing team, including our social worker and counsellor. Many of us joined a weaving circle. Some of us brought our own materials to make bush medicine, while others learnt under the guidance of the Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup.



# Planning our 2024 Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum

At our previous forum in 2023 at Pudukul on Limilngan-Wulna Country, Amelia Turner, Jody Kopp, Helen Wilson, Madeleine Dixon, Mia Mulladad, Lily Tjiweri, Selina Kulitja, Renita Armstrong, Armani Francois, Lynda Lechleitner, Ann White, Karen Noble, Gennivea Aplin, Audrey Mardbinda, Sophia Simon, Jana Daniels, Roselyn Raymond, Nikita Puruntatameri, Marbine Austral, Charlene Puruntatameri, Annie Puruntatameri, Gladys Meilberr, 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.

Since then, this Message Sticks Group has been working across all our strategic actions: advocating for women caring for Country and our network, speaking up on social media, engaging with our employers and decision makers, and presenting at Territory, national, and international conferences. Many Message Sticks Members also worked alongside our supporters, building and strengthening valuable long-term partnerships, and preparing our forum activities for us.

Some drew on their work with the Digital Woman Ranger Group, securing their participation across our next three forums, so we can support each other, and have a space at our forums to learn and share digital skills and knowledge, and connect with other women using digital tools on Country.

Some Message Sticks Members continued working closely alongside the University of Queensland and WWF-Australia, on how to make our voices heard at a national level. They met in person three times over the past year to analyse interviews with women in our network, and to prepare more questions to ask us at our forum. The research team secured funding from the Federal Government over the next three years, opening the door to a national forum becoming reality!

Some Message Sticks Members worked alongside our funding partners at the Karrkad Kanjdji Trust and The Nature Conservancy to increase the network's capacity as it continues to grow. All Message Sticks Members worked together to secure matched funding and facilitation support for this forum through the

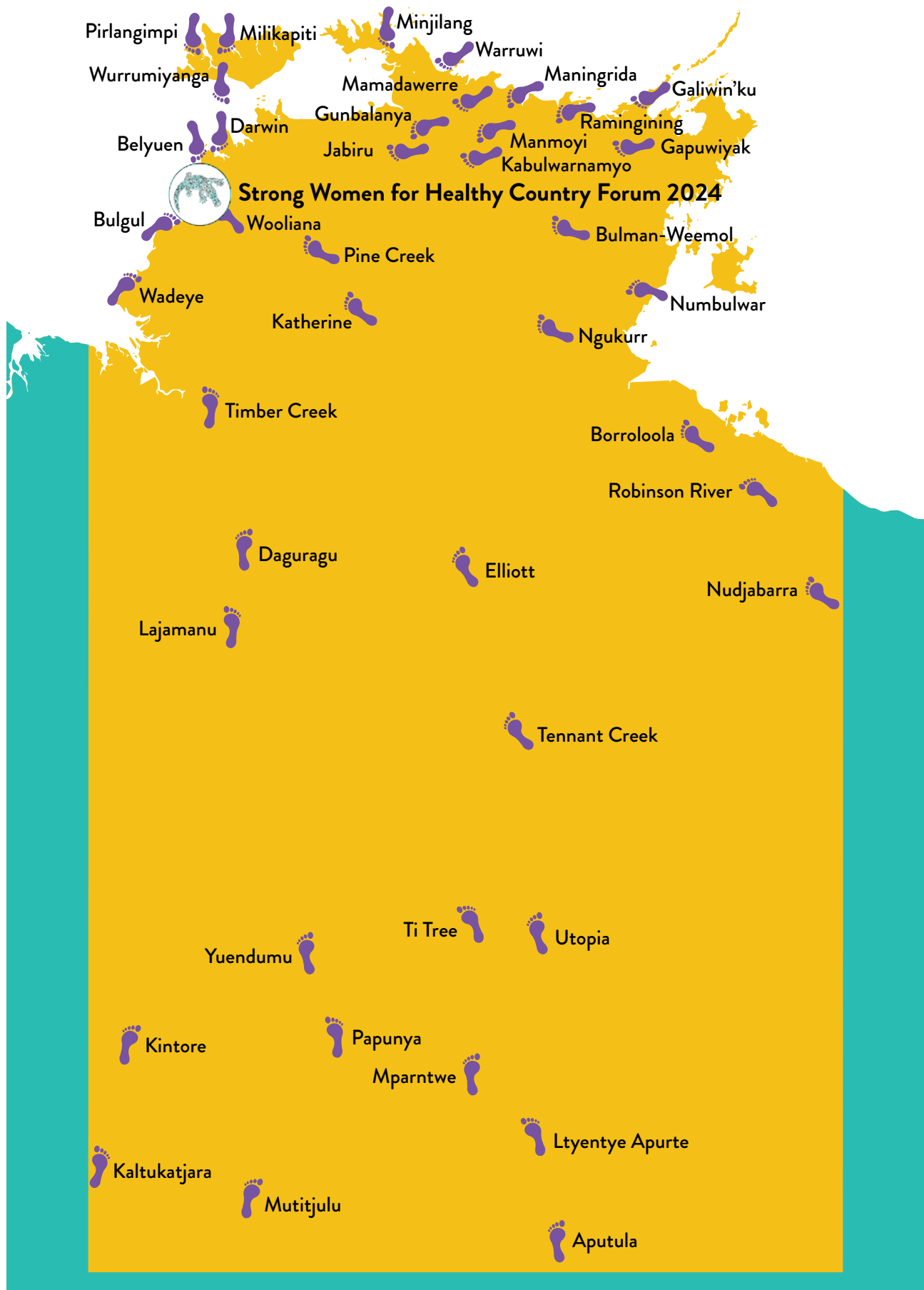
## Strong Women for Healthy Country Network







## Where we travelled from





## WOMEN FROM 39 RANGER GROUPS IN THE GATHERED AT OUR FORUM:

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| Adjumarllarl Rangers (DEMED Aboriginal Corporation)            | Kenbi Rangers (NLC)   | Nantawarrina IPA Rangers (Nipapanha Community Aboriginal Corporation in South Australia) |
| Anangu Liritjiku Rangers (CLC)                                 | Kulumindini Rangers (NLC)                                   | Timber Creek Rangers (NLC)   |
| Anmatyerr Rangers (CLC)  | Larrakia Rangers  | Tiwi Land and Marine Rangers (Tiwi Resources)  |
| Aputula Rangers (CLC)  | Li-Anthawirriyarra Rangers (Mabunji Aboriginal Corporation) | Thamarrurr Rangers   |
| Arafura Swamp Rangers  | Ltyentye Apurte Rangers (CLC)                               | Waanyi-Garawa Rangers (NLC)  |
| Bulgul Rangers (NLC)   | Malak Malak Rangers (NLC)                                   | Wagiman Rangers (NLC)  |
| Djelk Rangers (Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation)               | Mardbalk Rangers (NLC)                                      | Walpiri Rangers (CLC)  |
| Garawa Rangers (NLC)   | Mimal Rangers   | Walungurru Rangers (CLC)   |
| Garngi Rangers (NLC)   | Murnkurrumurnkurru Gurindji Rangers (CLC)                   | Wardaman Rangers (NLC)   |
| Goldfields Community Services Rangers (from Western Australia) | Murru-Warinyi Ankkul Rangers (CLC)                          | Warddeken Rangers  |
| Jawoyn Rangers (Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation)     | Mutjун Rangers (Gong-Dāl Aboriginal Corporation)            | Utopia Rangers (CLC)   |
| Kakadu Rangers (Parks Australia)                               | North Tanami Rangers (CLC)                                  | Yugul Mangi Rangers (NLC)  |
| Kaltukatjara Rangers (CLC)                                     | Numbulwar Numburndi Rangers (NLC)                           | Yurriyangem Taam Rangers (from Western Australia)  |

## WOMEN FROM THESE ORGANISATIONS JOINED OUR FORUM TOO:

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| Aboriginal Governance and Management Program   | Galiwin'ku Women's Space                        | Parks Australia                               |
| Arnhem Land Fire Abatement NT Ltd.             | Goha Indigenous Planning and Development        | Royal Flying Doctors Service                  |
| Babbarra Women's Centre                        | Indigenous Desert Alliance                      | Stars Foundation                              |
| Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup                | Judith Neilson Foundation                       | The Nature Conservancy Australia              |
| Borrooloola School Learning on Country Program | Karrkad Kanjdji Trust                           | University of Queensland – School of Business |
| CatholicCare NT                                | Katherine Women's Information and Legal Service | Volunteering SA&NT                            |
| Central Land Council                           | Munipi Arts                                     | WA Parks and Wildlife                         |
| Digital Woman Ranger Group (CSIRO)             | Northern Land Council                           | WWF-Australia                                 |
|  | NT Parks and Wildlife                           | Yurriyangem Taam Aboriginal Corporation       |
|  | Orange Sky                                      |   |



## Welcome to Country

On Monday 2 September, hundreds of women made their journey to Larrakia Country. As more and more women arrived at Crab Claw Island, the wind picked up. Some of us were struggling to pitch our tents! Zoe Singh was waiting patiently for us by the ocean with her family, some of whom had just started their new job with the Kenbi rangers.

As the hot air cooled down, we all made our way onto the beach, where Zoe welcomed us onto her Country. We followed her down to the shoreline, where she blessed us with the water so her Country would know our scent.

Zoe kept us safe on Country during throughout our forum. Some of our Elders could not walk to the ocean, so she brought the sea water to them in a cup to introduce them to Country. Some of us arrived after dark and she repeated the blessing the next day. Some weavers went travelling through her Country to collect pandanus, and she always sent Larrakia women along to watch over them.







## TUESDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 2024

Breakfast

Housekeeping

Wellbeing check-in

Listening to our founding Elders: sharing our network and forum journey

Morning tea

Rule book forest opening

Lunch

Presentations by and for strong women

|                  |           |                      |                                 |                               |               |                     |
|------------------|-----------|----------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Rule book forest | Art space | Bush medicine making | Digital Woman Ranger tech space | National forum research space | Selfcare zone | Network logo design |
|------------------|-----------|----------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|---------------------|

Wellbeing check-in

Housekeeping

Dinner

Strong women sharing their stories around the campfire

# WEDNESDAY 4 SEPTEMBER 2024

Breakfast

Housekeeping

Wellbeing check-in

Listening to our Message Sticks Group

Morning tea

Rule book forest

Building on our rule book with our own policies and processes

Lunch

Presentations by and for strong women

Rule book forest closes

Art space

Bush medicine making

Digital Woman Ranger tech space

National forum research space

Selfcare zone

Network logo design

Housekeeping

Dinner

Message sticks ceremony

Celebrating our Message Sticks





# THURSDAY 5 SEPTEMBER 2024

Breakfast

Housekeeping

Wellbeing check-in

Listening to our board nominees

Morning tea

Voting for our proposed board of directors

Lunch

Board of directors election outcome announcement

Presenting our favourite logo designs for our network

Get ready for  
1980's disco

Art  
space

Bush  
medicine  
making

Digital  
Woman  
Ranger tech  
space

National  
forum  
research  
space

Selfcare  
zone

Wellbeing check-in

Housekeeping

Dinner

2024 Forum artwork launch

1980's Disco



## Our network and forum journey

On the first morning of our forum, we sat down and listened to our founding Elders and our previous forum hosts. With MC support from Michelle Dunscombe from the Bidjerna Butj Uni, they explained our network's history, where our forum has travelled to, and what decisions lie ahead of us. They helped us understand why we are forming our own organisation, and what steps we could take at our forum.

Our founding Dalabon, Mayili, and Rembarrnga Elders from Mimal explained how in **2019**, 140 women caring for Country across the Northern Territory gathered at Bawurrbarnda in Central Arnhem Land and put their shared vision into words:

*“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.”*

Rembarrnga and Dalabon Elder Annette Miller explained that since that first forum, Mimal has continued to support our network, and it has doubled in size:

*“I wanted women to join because we identified, many of us shared the same experiences, often facing issues in the workplace while caring for Country. This made it difficult to continue our duties at work. I saw women being disempowered, without the appropriate mechanisms in place to assist women during their time in need. Many of these struggles were observed and experienced everywhere, and identified during our forums.”*

Jawoyn Elders from the Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup shared with us what it was like to host our **2021** forum. They explained that this forum brought 260 women together. Some were working as rangers, but we were also joined by healers, artists, Elders, and women looking after communities in different ways. It was at this forum, that women formed the Message Sticks Group, to keep our network on track in between forums, and there was a significant Message Sticks' art piece created at Banatjarl that symbolised this big step for the network.





We then held a minute of silence for Mrs T. Ryder who hosted our third forum at Ross River on Eastern Arrernte Country in **2022**. Her family then spoke about this forum, where 200 women designed a strategy for our network, that sets out how strong women can support each other to uphold that shared vision by getting together, sharing information, and standing up for each other as a network. It was at this forum that we identified our strategic priorities to:

- keep gathering at our Territory-wide forums
- support women getting together through caring for Country exchanges
- support women getting together through healing camps
- work with women in other states and territories towards a national forum
- support women mentoring each other
- support women to advocate – or stand up - for each other, their work, and their network
- stand up for women’s spaces in remote communities
- create and share best practice principles for employers of women caring for Country
- make a communication plan and tools for women in the network to share knowledge and information
- build good partnerships for the network with our supporters, and make an ethical policy for us to work together
- build an independent governance structure to support our network, so women caring for Country across the Northern Territory can make transparent and informed decisions together.

In **2023**, we gathered for our fourth Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum at Pudukul on Limilngan-Wulna Country. At Pudukul, 200 women worked together to put these priorities into action! They also asked our Message Sticks Group to draft a rule book for us to review, so we can form our own organisation.

In **2024**, we were welcomed onto Larrakia Country by Zoe Singh and her family with the Kenbi Rangers for our fifth forum. Our founding Elders and Message Sticks Group worked together to explain to us that we needed to make important decisions about our governance at this forum. Together, they helped us understand that since that first forum in 2019, this network has grown with support from Mimal. During that time, women coming to the forums agreed to take on responsibility for this network by forming an independent Aboriginal Corporation.

*“Mimal will always be there, even when this network incorporates, to support the network to stand on its own feet and keep on track towards our shared vision.”*

- Annette Miller, Rembarrnga and Dalabon Elder

Our fifth forum was a landmark opportunity to take our next steps by registering our founding members, reviewing our draft rule book, forming our next Message Sticks Group, and nominating our proposed board of directors.



## Our rule book forest

At our forum, our Message Sticks Group helped us review the draft rule book they had prepared for us, so that we could decide for ourselves if we want this to be the founding rule book for our corporation. To do this, our Message Sticks Group literally walked us through our draft rule book, in the rule book forest! Here large banners were stretched out among the trees, explaining our draft rule book along side artworks created by women at our previous forums.

While we waited our turn to go on a tour of the rule book forest, we could watch a slideshow about our rule book with a voice over from our Message Stick Members Nikita Puruntatameri, Marbine Austral, Jody Kopp, and Corrine Coombes.

We can look back at the slideshow here:

<https://vimeo.com/995692881/547980a02d>

Shantelle Miller, Jody Kopp, and Lynda Lechleitner then worked with the rest of our Message Sticks Group to guide us through our rule book forest.

A whole team of supporters and volunteers helped answer our questions and document any issues we wanted to discuss further, including Alys Stevens, Kylie Burn, May Bury, Francesca Noakes, Jen Ansell, Margie O'Brien, Delphine Moise-Elise, Em Raso, and Ritsuko Maeda.

We could then make an informed decision for ourselves to sign up as founding member of the proposed Strong Women for Healthy Country Network Aboriginal Corporation. Once we registered our membership, we could also choose to endorse the draft rule book that our Message Sticks had prepared for us. All these steps needed to happen in writing, so we can prove to ORIC that our rule book is supported by our proposed members. This big job was done by another team of volunteers and supporters, including Sue Phoo, Caitlin Woods, as well as Cathy Robinson, Cara Penton, Amanda Lilleyman, Kelly Schmitt, and Justine Murray from the Digital Woman Ranger Group.

By Wednesday afternoon, we shared a tearful and proud moment when Annette Miller announced that enough eligible women had endorsed the draft rule book to meet ORIC's requirements for the proposed Strong Women for Healthy Country Network Aboriginal Corporation!











## Rule book forest frequently asked questions

In our rule book forest, we asked our Message Sticks Group a lot of questions about our draft rule book and incorporation process:

### **DO YOU NEED TO BE A RANGER TO BE A MEMBER?**

No. Our rule book just says you need to be an Indigenous woman, over 18 years old, with a connection to Country in the Northern Territory. This is because women at our previous forums have agreed there are many different ways to care for Country. You do not need a job as a ranger to be caring for Country.

### **HOW DO WE DEFINE CONNECTION TO COUNTRY IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY?**

Our rule book says women should have a connection to Country in the Northern Territory, but does not specify what that means. If we decide to include a specific definition of connection to Country in our rule book in the future, our members need to agree at our AGM. Women at our forums have said that while our network should focus on women of the Northern Territory, it should also be inclusive of women from the stolen generations, and women with a border running through their Country.

### **WHY DOES OUR RULE BOOK INCLUDE A THREE YEAR TERM FOR OUR DIRECTORS?**

When our Message Sticks Group drafted this rule book, they proposed a three year term for directors, so our board of directors would have time to build up their experience. For our rule book to include the three year term for directors, we will need to apply to ORIC for an exemption of their 2 year maximum term for directors.

### **WILL OUR DIRECTORS NEED A DIRECTOR ID?**

Yes. This is a legal requirement of our directors.

### **CAN YOU BE A DIRECTOR OF MULTIPLE ORGANISATIONS AT ONCE?**

Yes. There is no law, policy, or rule preventing anyone from being our director and being a director of another organisation at the same time. If there is a conflict of interest between the two organisations, our directors would need to declare it.





### WHAT WAS THE ROLE OF THE ABORIGINAL GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT PROGRAM IN SUPPORTING OUR NETWORK?

The team at the Aboriginal Governance and Management Program has supported our network over the past two years. At our 2022 forum, we asked our Message Sticks Group to look at our options for forming our own organisation to support our network, and report back to us. To do this, our Message Sticks Group joined the Aboriginal Governance and Management Program to learn more about incorporation, and reported back to us at our 2023 forum. We then asked our Message Sticks Group to draft our rule book for us so we could form our own Aboriginal Corporation. We renewed our MoU with the Aboriginal Governance and Management Program, and asked them to focus on supporting the Message Sticks Group to draft our rule book for us to review.

### WILL OUR DIRECTORS AND OTHER MESSAGE STICKS MEMBERS RECEIVE GOVERNANCE TRAINING AND LEARN ABOUT OUR MONEY STOREY?

Yes. Our network has been awarded a Northern Territory Government Aboriginal Ranger Grant for women to receive governance and financial literacy training at board of directors meetings and Message Stick Meetings until our next forum.

### WHAT ARE OUR NEXT STEPS TO INCORPORATE?

The next step to incorporate is to apply to ORIC with our register of women who signed up to be members, the draft rule book they endorsed, and the board we nominated. Our board will then need to work closely with Mimal to transition our network into our own independent corporation.

We also spoke a lot about how the different layers of our network should work together and share information, how we should centre our values and cultural protocols in everything we do, and discussed the role of our Message Sticks Group within our network. We had follow up yarns about these issues on the Wednesday at our forum, which are summarised on pages 20-25 of this report.

## Our organisation's structure and communication

In our rule book forest, we asked a lot of questions about how our supporters, members, Message Sticks Group, and board of directors will all work together and communicate as a network, and especially how we will make sure that we listen to our Elders.

These processes have not been included in our rule book, so that we can keep developing them to suit our network as we continue to grow. On Wednesday 4 September, we started some of these important conversations. The session about how the different layers of our network communicate with each other was facilitated by Kylie Burn and May Bury from the Northern Land Council's Community Planning and Development Branch, and builds on the digital communication plan we designed for our network at our previous forum in 2023.

### STRONG COMMUNICATION WITH OUR ELDERS

We agree that our Elders are our leaders. We said we need to make sure their voices can be heard in our governance structure. During this forum, Elders joined our membership, our Message Sticks Group, and our board of directors.

This forum we asked our next Message Sticks Group to think of more ways to listen to our Elders and support their leadership within our network. We

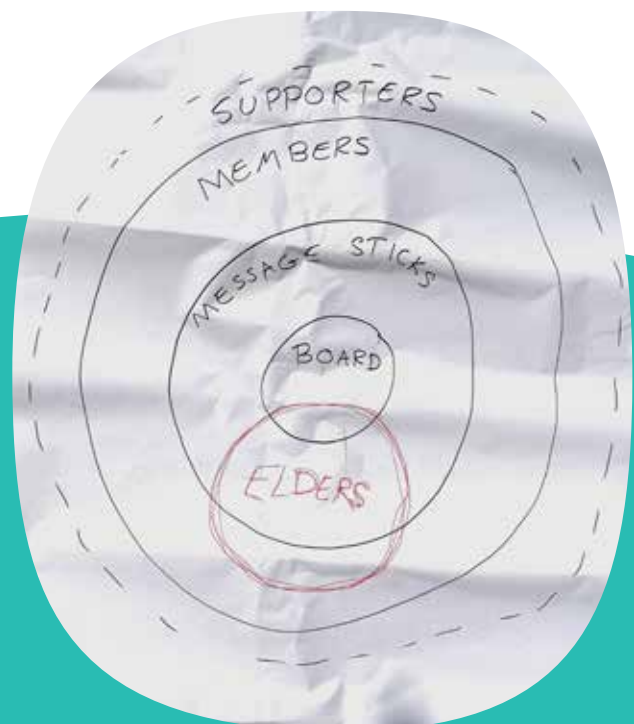
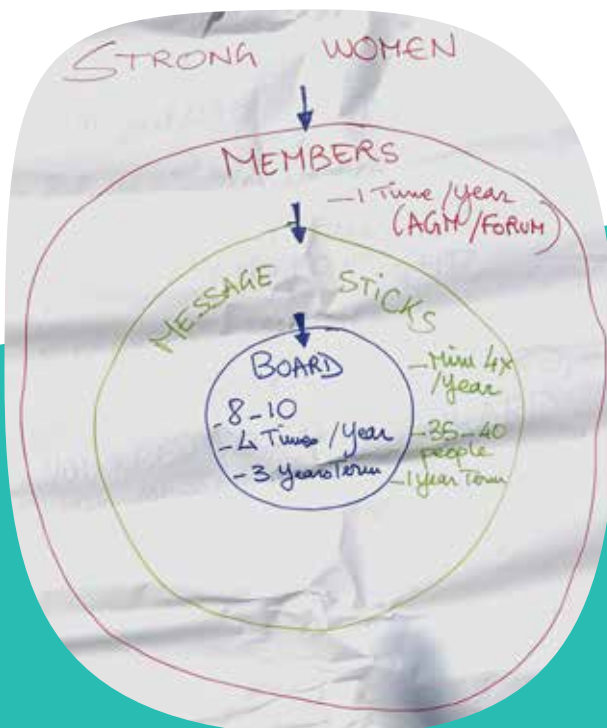
suggested visiting aged care facilities, creating visual resources to keep our Elders updated and share their stories, and our Message Sticks Members sitting down and yarning with our Elders.

We also discussed the idea of creating an Elders' subcommittee in the future, to work alongside our Message Sticks Group and our board of directors.

### STRONG COMMUNICATION WITH OUR MEMBERS

In addition to the members meetings and notices set out in our rule book, our digital communication plan from our 2023 forum proposes an online private Strong Women for Healthy Country portal with a personalised login, that gives us access to newsletters, chatrooms, and information about our network and forums, and a secure Strong Women for Healthy Country archive.

This forum, we also discussed having online zoom meetings for members, and visits to different communities, primary schools, and high schools to talk to future members of our network and show them different career pathways caring for Country.





## STRONG COMMUNICATION WITH OUR MESSAGE STICKS GROUP

In our rule book our Message Sticks Group is called a 'sub-committee of the board'. Our rule book does not set out how often they should meet, we can make our own rules about this. Over the past three years our Message Sticks Group has been meeting online every two months, with a quorum of 10 Message Sticks Members. This forum we agreed our Message Sticks Group should continue to meet at least 4 times per year (online or face-to-face) and that members need to join our Message Sticks Group before nominating to be on our board.

We also agreed our Message Sticks Members should give us regular updates over email, phone, the Strong Women for Healthy Country website and social media channels. They can also report back to us and share stories regularly with power point presentations.



## STRONG COMMUNICATION WITH OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

We have said our directors should be part of our Message Sticks Group. This is not documented in our rule book, but it is what we have agreed on together as a network. We even discussed calling our board of directors our "action sticks".

We want our board of directors to be contactable. They should give us regular updates. Some of us suggested a Strong Women for Healthy Country Radio Channel for our directors!

## STRONG COMMUNICATION WITH OUR SUPPORTERS

At previous forums we agreed we want to build solidarity with Indigenous women in other states and territories, non-Indigenous women, and partner organisations. While we agreed that only Indigenous women with a connection to Country in the Northern Territory can make decisions about our network and become members of our corporation, we also agree that we want to walk side by side with our supporters towards our shared vision.

In addition to the social media channels and website in our digital communication plan, we discussed sharing our story and our work over TV, Radio, community notice boards, and promoting our Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum Reports.

Our strongest tool to build solidarity with our supporters is still to spend time with them on Country. We can still choose to invite some of our supporters to our events and forums, even if they are not members of our corporation.



# Starting the conversation about our code of conduct

At this forum, we yarned about how we can centre our own values and cultural protocols in all our communication, collaboration, and advocacy practices as a network. We agreed that in addition to our rule book, we need a code of conduct.

We want our code of conduct to be so strong that people outside of our network can look at it as an example to learn from. We said we want to illustrate our code of conduct, and make a video about it, so that everyone can understand how we agree to work together as a network.

On the Wednesday of our forum, we started listing our shared principles on which to build our code of conduct. This session was facilitated by Francesca Noakes from Arnhem Land Fire Abatement NT Ltd. We began by looking back at what women had said at previous forums, and then added our new ideas:

**Respect Country:** uphold cultural protocols, work alongside Elders and Traditional Owners.

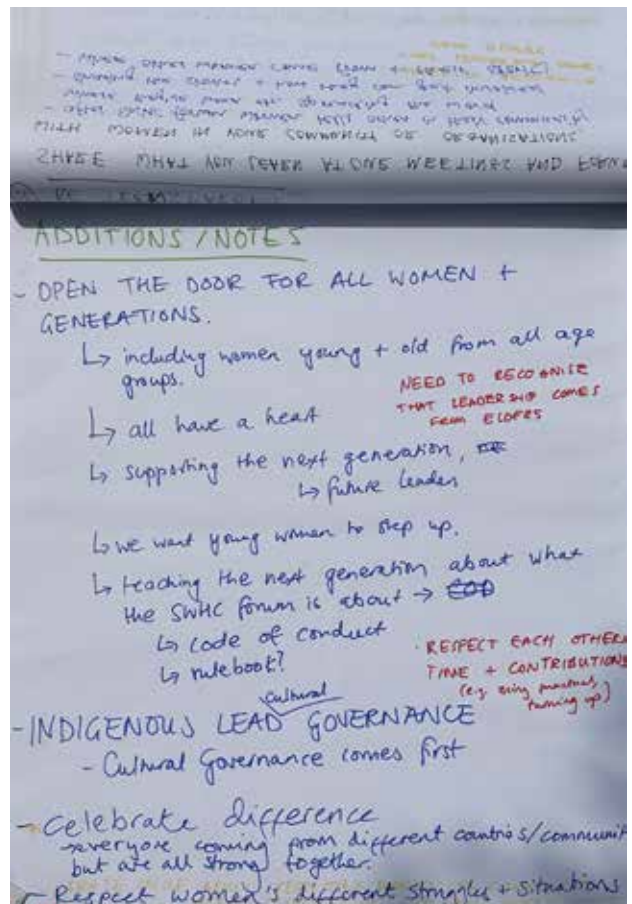
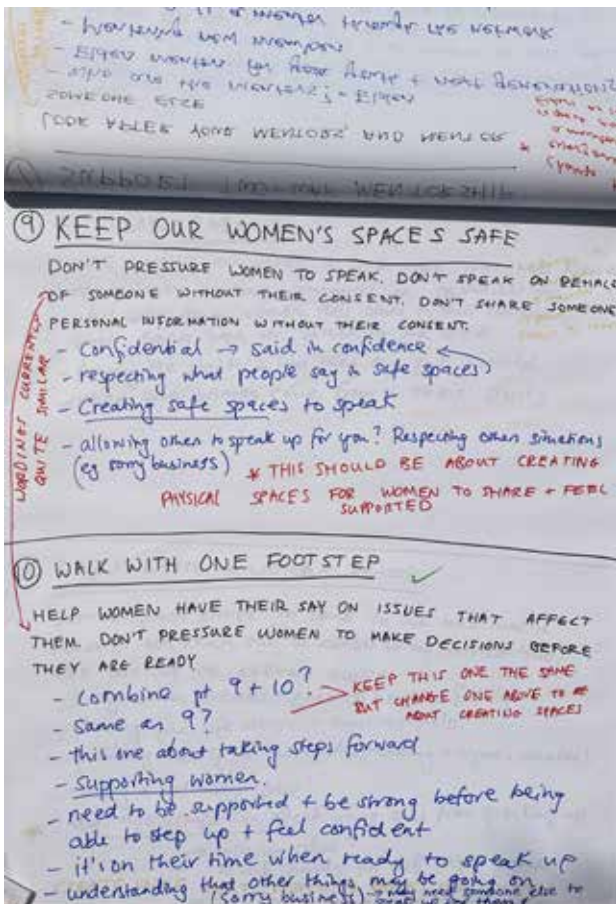
**Respect strong women, Elders, and knowledge holders:** make all women caring for Country feel welcome in our network.

**Listen from the heart:** support women to speak their truth and maintain their cultural integrity.

**Lead with love:** stand up for women caring for Country.

**Lift each other up:** if you have a platform to speak, share it with another woman. Create opportunities for women to speak.

**Keep our voice united:** if you are sharing a message on behalf of our network, check with our Message Sticks group first.







**Support two-way mentorship:** recognise that everyone is a mentor and respect our Elders as leaders.

**Don't be shame, be game:** share your collective and personal achievements, and celebrate the achievements of other women.

**Create safe spaces for our women:** respect what is said in confidence, and what is said in a safe space. Don't pressure women to speak or share.

**Walk with one footstep:** help women have their say on issues that affect them. Don't pressure women to make decisions before they are ready. Don't speak on behalf of someone without their consent.

**Be transparent:** share what you learn at our meetings and forums with women in your community or organisation.

**Don't leave a woman behind:** support each other to come to our meetings and forums, and reach out to women if you notice they are missing or keeping quiet.

**Respect women's struggles:** understand that women are living in different situations, experience challenges, and go through sorry business. Find ways to support them and respect their needs.

**Open the door for all women and generations:** include women from all age groups. Recognise that leadership comes from Elders, and support the next generation as our future leaders.

**Respect each other's time and contributions:** be on time for each other, show up for each other, honour your commitments.

**Centre Indigenous-led cultural governance:** keep cultural governance at the forefront of our decision making.

**Celebrate difference:** stand strong together with all women from different cultures and communities.



## Formalising our Message Sticks nomination process

On the Wednesday morning of our forum, we sat down to learn about our Message Sticks Group. With MC support from former Message Stick Member Andrea Andrews from the Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup, our 2023-2024 Message Stick Members took turns to introduce themselves, and explained their responsibilities looking after our network in between forums, sharing information within our network, planning our forums, and standing up for our network, sharing our work.

Women also shared their personal experience being part of the Message Sticks Group. They gave examples of the opportunities they had to meet new people, travel, and learn new skills, and share their knowledge. Our Message Sticks Members were also transparent about how difficult some of the work can be, with a lot of meetings and a big responsibility for our network.

They made sure that we all understood that each forum, women can nominate themselves to be part of the Message Sticks Group during a ceremony where women step forward into different roles within our network.

Over the past two years, this process has been guided by Rembarnga and Dalabon Elder Annette Miller from Mimal Land Management, who gathers everyone at our forum into a big circle. We can then choose to step forward into different responsibilities for our network, until we are all surrounding our new Message Sticks Members in the centre of this circle. She then checks with everyone in the circle that we can see someone we know and trust in the centre.

Because our Message Sticks Group is such a key part of our governance structure, and we all agreed everyone interested in being on our board of directors should join our Message Sticks Group first, we set time aside during this forum to make sure our Message Sticks nomination process is transparent.

To do this we sat down with Annette Miller herself to through the entire process, before participating in the Message Sticks Ceremony that evening. Facilitation for this session was supported by Alys Stevens from Warddeken Land Management Ltd. Together, we agreed to add some steps to the process to make sure that:

- all women choosing to step forward to join our Message Sticks Group have already registered as members of our corporation
- women feel comfortable to take a step back if there are a lot more than 35 women joining the Message Sticks Group
- our Message Sticks Group includes women from different types of Country in the Northern Territory.

Together we agreed on this Message Sticks nomination process:

The MC gathers everyone to stand in a circle at the forum.

The MC thanks the work of the current Message Sticks Members, and explains they can decide for themselves if they want to step forward again or not, just like everyone else in the circle.

The MC shares our vision:

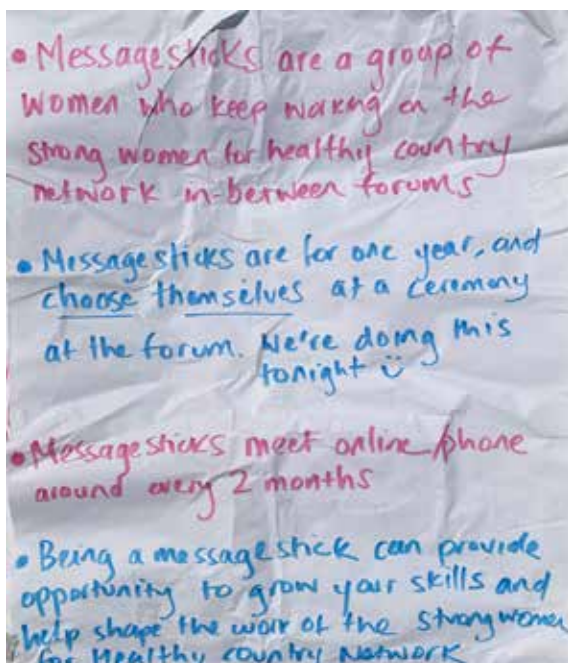
***“We are strong Indigenous women of the Northern Territory. We stand united as one strong voice. We commit to a network that gives equal power to the rights of all our women. Strong women means healthy Country.”***

The MC asks:

- 1. Can every person committed to upholding our vision please step forward?**

The MC explains we will be asked more questions, and we should only step forward if we want to and are comfortable.





The MC acknowledges our non-Indigenous supporters, and asks:

**2. Can all Indigenous women please step forward?**

The MC acknowledges Indigenous women from other parts of Australia who have joined our forum, and asks:

**3. Can all women with a connection to Country in the NT please step forward?**

The MC thanks the upcoming generation of strong women, and asks:

**4. Can all women who are 18 years or older please step forward?**

The MC asks:

**5. Can everyone who has already signed a membership form for our Aboriginal Corporation please step forward?**

The MC thanks our members, and reminds us that:

- We can stop where we are, or choose to step forward as a Message Sticks Member for one year.
- The Message Sticks Group is responsible to look after our network in between forums, share information within our network, plan our forums, and stand up for our network and our work.
- Women who want to nominate to be on the board, do need to be a Message Sticks Member, but board nominations and elections happen in a separate process.

The MC asks:

**6. Can all women interested in joining Message Sticks Meetings please step forward?**

The MC asks:

**7. Can all women who can commit to meeting online every 2 months, with no sitting fees, please step forward?**

The MC asks:

**8. Can all members of the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network Aboriginal Corporation raise your hand if you see someone in the centre of the circle who you know and trust?\***

The MC asks:

**9. Can all members of the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network Aboriginal Corporation raise your hand if you see enough Elders and young women in the centre of the circle?\***

The MC asks:

**10. Can all members of the Strong Women for Healthy Country Network Aboriginal Corporation raise your hand if you see enough women from saltwater, freshwater, and desert Country in the centre of the circle?\***

If more than about 35 women have stepped into the centre of circle, the MC reminds us that we are aiming to have 35 members in our Message Sticks Group, and that we have the opportunity to join the Message Sticks Group each year. The MC would then ask:

**11. Are there women in the centre of the circle who already have a lot of women from their area with them in the middle, who can take a step back?**

If there are still more than 35 women in the centre of the circle, the MC can ask:

**12. Are there women who have someone with them in the centre of the circle who they have mentored, who can take a step back?**

The MC congratulates the new Message Sticks Group, and asks them to take turns to address the rest of the forum!

*\*If not all members' hands are raised, the MC follows up: **If you don't have your hand up, is there someone you know who could step forward?***

## Our Message Sticks Ceremony

On Wednesday evening, Annette Miller helped us physically step out how we support each other through the different layers of our network, and swiftly MCed the Message Sticks nomination process we had discussed during the day.

As the sun set over the ocean, Enid Gallagher, Stephanie Anderson, Lynda Lechleitner, Armani Francois, Jody Kopp, Karen Noble, Ann White, Shantelle Miller, Corrine Coombes, Nikita Puruntatameri, Sarah Nundhirribala, Eunice Woods, Kelly Wauchope, Teresa Burrburr,





Marcia Gerrard, Tedisha Bush, Catherine Ralph, Staneil Russell, Roslyn Raymond, Kerry Anne Campbell, Rosiena Brown, Anne Marie Waistcoat, Yvonne Draper, Helena Raymond, Emmalena Barret, Amelia Turner, Mia Mulladad, Helen Wilson,

Vanessa Murray, Christine Tchemjiri, Gennivea Aplin, Jana Daniels, Joanne Pomery, Shannon Palmer, Marbine Austral, and Desley Jones stepped forward as our new 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!





## Electing our board

Our new Message Sticks Group had their first Message Sticks Meeting on the last day of our forum. They met with independent governance advisors Cissy Gore-Birch, Alys Stevens, and Jen Ansell to go through the legal responsibilities of directors.

By morning tea 12 women had nominated to be on our board. Because we agreed to have between 8 and 10 board members when we endorsed our rule book, this meant we could have our very first board election! All board nominees bravely stepped up to the microphone to introduce themselves, with MC support from Cissy Core-Birch.

A team of skilful independent volunteers supported our elections. They checked that all voters were eligible members, who had not voted yet, before giving us our cup with 10 tokens. They showed us into our private voting booths, where 12 buckets were clearly marked with polaroid photos of all our candidates. We needed to spread our 10 tokens evenly across the 10 candidates we wanted to see on our board. Our independent volunteers stayed with us to help us if we made a mistake. The voting booths stayed open into the afternoon.

When our founding members of our proposed corporation finished voting, our volunteers could start counting the votes. They counted all our votes twice. We could go and look at the voting process any time.

By the late afternoon, Cissy-Gore Birch and Annette Miller announced our proposed first board of directors for the next three year term:

- Ann White
- Lynda Lechleitner
- Jody Kopp
- Shantelle Miller
- Nikita Puruntatameri
- Armani Francois
- Karen Noble
- Stephanie Anderson
- Enid Gallagher
- Corrine Coombes.

We can get in touch with these members by reaching out to [members@swhcnetwork.org.au](mailto:members@swhcnetwork.org.au) or calling 0499 004 944.

Cissy and Annette also acknowledged Helen Wilson and Shannon Palmer's big achievement submitting their nomination to be on the board, and thanked them for their commitment to our network!







Ann White



Enid Gallagher



Jody Kopp



Lynda Lechleitner



Karen Noble



Shantelle Miller



Armani Francois



Stephanie Anderson



Nikita Puruntatameri



Corrine Coombes

## Designing our network logo

Building our own independent corporation means we need our own logo!

At our forum, we thought deeply about what our network means to us when we created a lot of different symbols and motifs for our logo. Sisters Cyan Lee and Mikayla Earnshaw digitally pulled these together for us into four different designs for us to consider for our network logo.

At the end of our last day of the forum, after we had worked hard to make important decisions for our new corporation, DJ Teghan Hughes helped us open our lungs and shout out to our favourite logo artwork!

Our next step in finalising our logo, is following up with artists to ensure cultural protocols are followed when including their designs from saltwater, fresh water, and desert Country.

We look forward to launching our logo for our new independent corporation with our members, and hope to use our logo to promote our network all over the world!











## Art space

Following previous years where women created beautiful collaborative artworks representing our histories and connection, the 2024 forum saw another magnificent artwork come together.

A series of three pieces of fabric, all reaching five metres in length, became the backdrop to one of the most significant moments in our network's history, as we placed our handprint in the symbolic 'hand river' that flowed between each piece.

We made this mark upon signing up to become founding members of our Strong Women for Healthy Country Network Aboriginal Corporation. Our sisters who had travelled from other states and territories, and our non-Indigenous supporters, placed their handprint in complementary colours alongside ours, to mark their solidarity in joining us at this forum and sharing this landmark moment with us.

Gracing the banks of the 'hand river' are over one hundred beautiful unique images. These images were hand crafted at the event using lino-cutting techniques under the wonderful guidance of Maningrida's Bábbarra Women's Centre artists Raylene Bonson and Abigail Namundja.

Raylene and Abigail supported us to translate our precious stories into designs. They were also the artists who dyed and printed the silk scarves gifted to all past and present Message Stick Members.

The passion and dedication shown to the forum artworks is testament to the power of art to share and carry the stories of women, our Country, lives, and communities, and the connection we foster each time we gather for our Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum.









## Selfcare and wellbeing zone

Our forum gives us respite and space to look after ourselves. We could cool off in the swimming pools, give ourselves a pedicure, or even book in for a haircut with Industrie Hair. Share the Dignity supported our forum again with a wide range of essential women's health products.

We also made our own traditional bush medicine to share with each other and take home with us. Many of us brought our own materials and knowledge with us to share, and some of us simply wanted to learn from our Elders. There was a dedicated fire in the main forum area throughout the afternoon for us to work around together. The Banatjarl Strongbala Wimun Grup looked after this space for us.

Many of us decompressed by joining a weaving circle. Here we could connect with each other, and listen to our Elders telling us stories. Master weaver Roslyn Malngumba Guyala form Gapuwiyak supported this important activity.

Many of us met with the social emotional wellbeing team. At our forum, our Strong Women for Healthy Country Counsellor Chrissy Grant and Social Worker Natasha Maher worked alongside clinical psychologist Stephanie Cochrane, Aboriginal mental health practitioners Karen Moyle and Billy-Jo Wesley, and yoga instructor Tiffany Begs who shared ideas for how we can support each other, look after ourselves, and access essential services.







If you need urgent mental health support, the following services are available 24 hours a day, every day:

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| Emergency Services   | 000          |
| Mental Health Assessment Team  | 1800 682 288 |
| Lifeline (phone counselling service)                                 | 13 11 14     |
| Beyond Blue (phone counselling service)                              | 1300 224 636 |
| Suicide Call Back Service  | 1300 659 467 |
| Thirrili (support for families impacted by suicide)                  | 1800 805 801 |
| Yarnsafe (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis support line) | 13 92 76     |

If you want help from our network to connect with ongoing mental health services in your area, please email [yarn@swhcnetwork.org.au](mailto:yarn@swhcnetwork.org.au) or call 0400 990 212.

If you are looking for mentorship support from other strong women in our network or want to have a yarn with a Message Sticks member, please email [mentor@swhcnetwork.org.au](mailto:mentor@swhcnetwork.org.au) or call 0477 405 164.





## Digital Women Ranger space

The Digital Women Rangers started in 2022 as a collective of women rangers, support staff, and scientists to support Indigenous women to tell stories about Country using data. With support from CSIRO and the Telstra Foundation, the Digital Woman Rangers support women to learn digital skills from each other on Country, in a culturally responsible way.

Many women in our network have worked with the Digital Women Ranger Group before, and some are part of their steering committee called the Digital Boss Ladies. They suggested our forum as a good place for more women to connect with and learn from the Digital Women Rangers.

In response to feedback from younger rangers at our previous forums, we asked the Digital Women Rangers to help create a space at our forum for women to practice and share their technical skills working as rangers. The Digital Women Rangers

became a forum partner and ran workshops for us to share ways we use digital technology to tell stories about Country. They also provided equipment and tutoring for us to hone our mapping skills. On Wednesday they presented to all of us about their work, and we were able to meet the Digital Boss Ladies who had their steering committee meeting.

To learn more about the Digital Women Rangers and how to connect with them, we can visit:

<https://healthycountryai.org/women-rangers.php>

[https://neslandscapes.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/DigitalWomenRangersProgram\\_final-report.pdf](https://neslandscapes.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/DigitalWomenRangersProgram_final-report.pdf)

<https://www.facebook.com/DigitalWomenRangers>







## National forum research space

Strong women in our network have continued their research towards a national forum in partnership with our supporters at the University of Queensland and WWF-Australia since 2023. Gennivea Aplin, Marbine Austral, Andrea Andrews, Vanessa Murray, and Ann 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 Stuart from WWF-Australia. This year Bianca McNear from WWF-Australia joined the research team too.

At our 2023 forum, we yarned with the team about why we want a to connect with women caring for Country across Australia, and what this process needs to involve for it to empower us to support each other, share our knowledge, and make our voices heard on a national level. We also participated in interviews about what we want to see in a national forum.

This year the team reported back to us on their work since then. They had met three times over the past

year to help each other understand what women at our forum shared in interviews, work out how to share our story so decision makers listen to us, and prepare for our 2024 forum.

The big news they had to share with us is that they have been awarded three years of federal funding, through the Australian Research Council. This purpose of this funding is to investigate how to support the leadership and collective advocacy of women caring for Country across Australia over the long term. Based on our feedback at previous forums, the research team drafted their own purpose statement:

*“We are hard to ignore when we stand united with big mob voices. Together we can show the world that caring for Country is a cultural practice: we need to be strong in our culture to care for our Country.”*





The research team also conducted two different types of interviews with 29 women at our 2024 forum. Some of us helped the researchers map out what policies, processes, funding arrangements, and institutional barriers shape our work and lives caring for Country. Some women shared our perspectives on how we become strong women, and what support we need to be able to continue to care for Country.



The next step in the research is to connect with women caring for Country in other states and territories, and to expand the research team. This forum we were excited to be joined by the Nantawarrina IPA rangers in South Australia, and the Goldfields Community Services Rangers and the Yurriyngem Taam Rangers from Western Australia.

We look forward to working with more women caring for Country in other states and territories in the future, and learning how we can support each other.







Thank you!

WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR THE GENEROSITY OF OUR SUPPORTERS:



This project is supported by FRRR, through funding from the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund.













# “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.”**

*Over 260 women caring for Country across the Northern Territory contributed to the 2024 Strong Women for Healthy Country Forum Report. It was designed by Carly Cord-Udy with photographs by Milly Hooper, and reviewed by the Message Sticks Group.*