



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE
CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY**

(Reference: [Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism](#))

Members:

**DR M PATERSON (Chair)
MS J CLAY (Deputy Chair)
MR E COCKS**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

WEDNESDAY, 14 SEPTEMBER 2022

**Acting secretary to the committee:
Ms K Mickelson (Ph: 620 50199)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 12.34 pm.

HUGHES, DR CAROLINE, Co-Chair, Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee

BELL, MR WALLY, Committee Member, Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee

BROWN, MS ROSLYN, Committee Member, Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee

THE CHAIR: I would like to begin by welcoming everyone here today and declare open the second of two public hearings by the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity into the Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism.

Before we begin, on behalf of the committee, I would like to acknowledge that we meet today on the lands of the Ngunnawal people. We respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

This was a self-referred inquiry that started on 14 December 2021. The committee has received 30 submissions, which are available on the committee website. Today the committee will hear from the Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee. Thank you very much for all taking the time to appear here today.

Please be aware that the proceedings from today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live.

I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement that you would have been sent earlier. Can I confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of this statement?

Ms Brown: Yes.

Dr Hughes: Yes, I do.

THE CHAIR: We would like to ask you some questions. It would be great to hear from Dr Hughes about the role of environmental volunteers in caring for Country in the ACT.

Dr Hughes: From the Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee perspective, the Ngunnawal people are the traditional custodians and owners of the ACT. The ACT is an island on Ngunnawal country and, in regard to the role that we play on Country, we are hosts. We are the caretakers of all environmental matters in the ACT. We welcome volunteers in the role that they play in caring for Country, as long as they are working with the Ngunnawal people in that regard.

THE CHAIR: How do you think we could attract more volunteers to work with Ngunnawal people and your caring for Country group in the ACT?

Dr Hughes: So acknowledging the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians needs to be very strong from a government perspective, and it should not waver. Acknowledging the role of the United Ngunnawal Elders Council in talking to that peak body, as well as to the Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee, encouraging volunteer organisations to reach out to both groups and looking at opportunities to work in partnership with us.

MR COCKS: Given the nature of today's hearing, I would like to add my personal acknowledgement of the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the land and acknowledge my family's long history in this area and the complexity of our relationship as well.

I am very interested in the size of the volunteer base in Canberra that is involved in caring for Country and what sort of barriers there are—whether you have enough people and whether you would like to see lots more people involved. What does that look like, from your perspective?

Ms Brown: It is a bit difficult getting volunteers amongst the oppressed, who are of the lowest socio-economic scale in this country. I do not mean to be rude to anyone, but it was not Aboriginal people that destroyed the climate here. It was the colonists that have done this—for millennia. I am not disrespecting anyone. My father was white.

Do not put too much on us, and we can be a support base for you, rather than looking to us for volunteers. Most of our people are really impoverished, and we do not get really high wages ourselves—and plus my age, and I have back injuries. I am saying that about myself, so you understand the community and people of my age bracket, and a bit lower and higher. Maybe we can work on working together one day with volunteers from our community in the future, but we need to prioritise other issues that need to be fixed.

Dr Hughes: And that includes employment—

Ms Brown: Employment.

Dr Hughes: It is one thing to have volunteers—and we know that for many years, under the commonwealth, there was a commonwealth development employment scheme and the CDEP program. Whilst the intention of that was good, unfortunately it also oppressed our people. So gainful employment and appropriate recognition of work to remediate what has been done to this country is really important for us as Ngunnawal people.

We are willing to work with volunteers from other groups, and non-Indigenous people, and, yes, we see that as vital in them working collaboratively with us and taking the lead from us; however, in regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people volunteering, whilst some of us are able to do that, in some capacity—some minor, for some more—for the majority of our people, it is about gainful employment.

MR COCKS: It sounds like there is a real barrier to Aboriginal people being able to volunteer due to social and economic circumstances.

Dr Hughes: Yes, exactly.

MR COCKS: So not having a job can be a barrier to going out and doing other things.

Dr Hughes: Exactly.

THE CHAIR: Did other members have anything to add?

Mr Bell: I am on the board of Landcare ACT. If you have any knowledge about how the Landcare movement operates, it is totally a volunteer effort by all community members. One of my tasks, I believe, is to try and get us, as the traditional custodians, to engage with those organisations, and they are established all over the place. There is one in every suburb just about. That requires no money. It is just your time that they are asking for.

I am guessing that people are looking at this as more of a paid engagement, so that might be a bit different to the way Landcare operates. They are one of my favourite organisations, because of the fact that they are caring for Country just the way we used to do it.

THE CHAIR: To follow on from that, we did have a lot of Landcare groups and environmental groups who gave evidence in this inquiry, and all of them said how much they did want to engage Ngunnawal people and Ngunnawal knowledge in their practice. So how do we strengthen that and support that?

Mr Bell: I think that is going to be a very hard task because of the fact that a better understanding of the functionality of the Landcare movement needs to be established with the Ngunnawal people. There are other non-Ngunnawal people out there as well that do not understand that movement at all, so maybe it is failure by Landcare to try and get that message across.

I do my bit. I go out there all the time with Landcare groups, and I introduce them to the land, if you know what I mean. That is, to me, one of the most important roles I can play—by making those people more aware of our connection with the land itself.

Dr Hughes: I come from a background of education, of vocational education, and I really believe that education is the salient ingredient towards successful relationships with all people. I believe that the government could fund training, Ngunnawal-specific training, for the volunteer groups—that there be specific dates throughout the year and that funding is provided to appropriate Ngunnawal elders to provide training about the Ngunnawal people and our culture on Country, and that includes language and information about the peak bodies and the connection to environment.

It is wonderful what Mr Bell is doing with Landcare, and there are many of us that do volunteer work, but we all cannot do volunteer work. There are only so many of us. Therefore, we have a responsibility to the rest of our community who are not in positions where they are gaining contracts or other ways of being paid that allows them to take on volunteer duties.

As I said, like Mr Bell, I too am very proud of the work that I do on a volunteer basis, but to help bring about change in the world is ensuring there are opportunities for our younger people as well, and it starts at school.

THE CHAIR: Can we speak more about how young people could be involved? For example, if it were recommended by this committee that there be some kind of specialised Ngunnawal caring for Country training for ACT volunteers, how would you foresee that young people could be engaged in that in terms of a paid-type role, and how important would that be?

Dr Hughes: Personally—and the other members may have different perspectives or may agree—as I said, I come from an education and training background, so I see a role for CIT, the public provider, in providing formal qualifications that then lead to their school certificate in year 10 and year 12. It could even start with informal training at a younger age in primary school—so getting young people thinking about the environment and caring for the environment would be really important.

That could be through school-based apprenticeship programs—ASbAs. There are a whole range of systems that are already in place, and it is a matter of bringing them together and formalising them.

Ms Brown: I can see new initiatives like having family fun days—caring for Country, fun days—and all of us being reimbursed. That helps to pull community together, especially if we have the children with us and parents and grandparents are able to teach the children with the volunteers. I think that would be a great introduction to Ngunnawal Caring for Country through families, but elders would also have to be reimbursed and so would the younger adults.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Brown: That would be a great introduction, I think, and to promote it widely—that it is for the Ngunnawal people.

Dr Hughes: It is the cultural activities that are happening on Country as well, whether it is basket weaving or the making of message sticks and so on. There is a whole raft of material that could happen. It is about caring for Country but also what you are giving back to Country.

THE CHAIR: Absolutely. As Mr Bell suggested, there is almost a Landcare group for every suburb these days, which is fantastic, but how do we then take the next step with, particularly, non-Indigenous volunteers and educate them in Ngunnawal knowledge?

Dr Hughes: That is right. That is why having those opportunities throughout the year—cultural awareness training and cultural competency training by Ngunnawal people in helping others understand about Ngunnawal culture and our connection to environment and our responsibilities, being the traditional custodians here.

It is really important that the naming is right as well—that we do not call it “Aboriginal cultural awareness training” or “Aboriginal culture in Ngunnawal

country”. It is always Ngunnawal Country.

THE CHAIR: Absolutely. Mr Bell, did you want to say something?

Mr Bell: Yes. I have been doing management work for a long time. I mentored the last ever Aboriginal Green Army team. That Green Army is now defunct of course. They have taken away the funding. I have done other programs under the ACT government for land management and all that sort of thing. People get trained up and they get fully qualified, but at the end of those programs, there is no employment. That has always been a big downer, in fact. You have got this nice, younger generation who are wanting to learn all these skills, but when it comes to the end of the program there is nothing for them to go into.

It is those sorts of situations that I think should be looked at and rectified as soon as possible. It is fine to say, “let’s get people out there on Country volunteering”, but people are also, as everybody has already said, looking for full-time employment as well.

THE CHAIR: Absolutely.

MR COCKS: Building on that, it sounds like there is really a space for some pragmatic initiatives around making sure people have a pathway into something meaningful that also gives them the opportunity to volunteer as well. That is what it sounds like you are saying.

Mr Bell: Yes.

Dr Hughes: You plant a seed, and a strong gum tree will grow, but you have to nurture it.

MR COCKS: Yes. I now want to move on to a different issue. Some time ago there was media around the Ngambri people reaching out about feeling like they had been locked out of engaging in the volunteer space. Taking that as an example and a starting point, are there ways we can make sure everyone feels engaged and like they have the opportunity to contribute to the ACT’s environment and building things up?

Ms Brown: I would like to speak on behalf of the United Ngunnawal Elders Council’ I am also a member of this committee. For many years, the United Ngunnawal Elders Council lobbied the ACT government to fund a genealogy so that we could put this Ngambri business to rest. They funded the genealogy, but then government took control of it and locked the elders council out of it.

What happened with the genealogies, as far as we know, is that the Government Solicitor put a block on the genealogies, yet we were offered a treaty in 2017. The genealogies had been going long before 2017. They offered us a treaty in 2017, and we have not got the genealogies completed so that we could put to rest this Ngambri business. The truth-telling is in the genealogies. It is not our fault that those people are not recognised as the traditional owners. We tend to our identity; we cannot tend to theirs, and we are not going to.

If you are worried about it, you have to attend to them yourself. From our side of it, we are the Ngunnawal traditional owners of this Country, and we are sick of being punished because of it and hunted because of it. I advise government to look into that—why they are not recognised. We do not stop anything. If you can find anything that is in the Ngunnawal writing to stop people—please look for it! You will not find it. We do not attack these people. In fact, it is them attacking us.

Government has got to grow up, release the genealogies of which they are a part. Their matriarch, Matilda House, is a part of the genealogies too. Does what I am saying to you make sense?

MR COCKS: Yes, and I do understand that background. What I am trying to work out is whether there are ways we can expand the base of people who feel they are engaged and the number of people who we have who can contribute to environmental volunteers.

Ms Brown: The trouble with that is: they are claiming our land. I find it an insult that you are asking us to cooperate with them. We cannot hand our identity over. It has been stolen since Captain Cook landed. We are just getting our language back. We spoke a pidgin English. We speak English and Ngunnawal at home. We were not able to put full sentences together. This is the Ngunnawal language. Talk to the linguists at the ANU. They know whose land it is, but people prefer not to listen to us.

The only way we can see out of this is the unlocking of the genealogies in which that group has had their genealogy come through. Government needs to deal with it—

Dr Hughes: Just to go back in history, Ms Brown, Aunty Agnes, Fred Monaghan and others were very keen, back prior to 2002, in bringing people together to vote on how to spell “Ngunnawal” on our lands. That particular group that identifies as Ngambri, were very assertive in wanting to spell “Ngunnawal” with one “n”, and we know linguistically—

Ms Brown: No, it was two—

Dr Hughes: Sorry—with two “n’s”. We know, linguistically, it is with one “n”; however, with the spirit of collaboration in bringing them together with us, it became two “n’s”. One of the things that Roslyn and others of Ngunnawal Country have said is that if there is any query whatsoever about whose country you are on, drive outside the ACT and drive back in again and see the signs. Those signs went up. Those people who are stating that it is not Ngunnawal Country—they are under that sign, yahoing with their arms up in the air, celebrating the double “n” in “Ngunnawal”.

We are not interested in saying that this is not Ngunnawal Country and trying to help people, after many years of multiple personalities, in saying that it is not Ngunnawal country, when it is. It is very clear: Roslyn talked about the genealogy; and there is also a native title claim that will be coming, as well, that is very clear in its research that this is Ngunnawal Country.

MR COCKS: Going back to my original question, it sounds like there are very deep and long-standing issues that probably go beyond the scope of this committee to—

Dr Hughes: We do not have an issue. The issue, like Roslyn said, comes from the other side. We are not interested in an argument with them or with anybody. We are just asserting our cultural rights on our lands.

THE CHAIR: We are coming to the end of our session today, but I want to reiterate, on behalf of the committee, that we are the Committee for Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity in the ACT Legislative Assembly, and we would really like to continue to engage with your committee on an ongoing basis and build the relationship, because it is really important that your voices are heard and that we can take this as evidence today and build it into our report.

I thank you, on behalf of the committee, for your time today.

Dr Hughes: I would like to also say djan yimaba in our beautiful ancient language, which is “thank you”, and offer to the standing committee to be the very first—and demonstrate to the volunteers—to attend a cultural awareness training based on Ngunnawal culture, towards Ngunnawal cultural competency.

THE CHAIR: We would love to do that. We will chat further to you about that. That would be fantastic.

When available, a proof transcript of what we have discussed today will be sent through to witnesses to check and see if there are any errors in the transcription.

The hearing is now adjourned. Thank you very much for your time today.

The committee adjourned at 1.01 pm.