

1 May 2020

Ms Karima Bennoune
Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights
United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures
Palais des Nations, 1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland

Dear Ms Bennoune

Mandate of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights – Response to Questionnaire on Cultural Rights and Climate Change

Australia ICOMOS NSCES (National Scientific Committee on Energy and Sustainability) has prepared the following response to the Questionnaire on Cultural Rights and Climate Change as requested in your letter dated 30 March 2020.

Negative impacts of climate change on culture and cultural rights

Q1. Climate change has affected marine ecosystems and the world's seafood supply now and in the future. Ocean warming has significantly affected fish supplies worldwide – a major source of protein for traditional communities.

In Australia, climate change has impacted on the natural food supply of fish, particularly in inland rivers that have dried up during increasingly lengthy periods of drought. This has impacted on Indigenous communities reliant on this food supply, as well as those living in rural communities.

Q2. Climate change has had a considerable impact on Australia's World Heritage Listed Great Barrier Reef – a major cultural resource in Australia. Corals inhabiting tropical coral reefs are thermally sensitive and can only tolerate small temperature ranges. Warmer water temperatures have resulted in coral bleaching. This is the result of coral expelling algae (zooxanthellae) living in their tissue, thereby causing coral to turn white. Up to 25% of Australia's Great Barrier Reef has experienced severe bleaching, while 35% was been moderately bleached. This has had a profound impact on the natural environment and tourism. This major site is being watched and monitored by scientists and marine biologists. Meanwhile, a concerted effort needs to be made to reduce global carbon emissions to lessen the rise of ocean temperatures and ocean acidification.

Positive potential of culture and cultural rights to enhance responses to climate change

Q4. Climate change has exacerbated drought and increasingly devastating wildfires in Australia in recent years because of increased drought and dryness, coupled with higher temperatures for large parts of the year, in diverse regions of Australia. This has affected Indigenous and non-indigenous people throughout Australia and their cultural heritage, particularly in outer urban and rural areas.

Cultural burning by Australian Indigenous peoples over millennia has sustainably managed country to avoid damaging wildfires and loss of species and also sustain traditional sources of food, medicine and raw materials. The cultural burning, as small area 'mosaic' burning, takes place on cue from changes in the seasons, flora and fauna, however these markers are changing because of climate change. Also, the 'windows' for cultural burning are narrowing because of climate change, making it far more difficult to effectively manage country.

The value of cultural burning has been more widely recognised in Australia following the 2019-2020 bushfires. It is being promoted as a possible response to the devastating bushfires. The value of Cultural burning has been documented in the publication by Victor Steffensen: 'Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia' and promoted by the work of the Firestick's Alliance <https://www.firesticks.org.au/>.

Q7. The **ICOMOS CCHWG (Climate Change and Cultural Heritage Working Group)** in its recent publication [The Future of Our Pasts: Engaging cultural heritage in climate action](#) is aiming to bridge the gap between climate science and cultural heritage. Members of NSCES provided peer reviews of the publication.

The **ICOMOS ISCES (International Scientific Committee on Energy and Sustainability)** comprising cultural heritage professionals is involved in the ICOMOS International Work Group on the SDGs and climate change.

In 2018-2019, members of the **Australia ICOMOS NSCES (National Scientific Committee on Energy and Sustainability)** have given lectures on the intersection of cultural heritage, the SDGs and climate change, at symposiums and events in Japan, Taiwan, China and Australia; radio interviews on the impact of climate change to cultural heritage and on the application of the Sustainable Development goals to cultural heritage; and have been involved in organizing a workshop 'Caring for Country' for GA2020 in Sydney in October 2020.

Q8. The **GA2020 (ICOMOS General Assembly 2020) Caring For Country organising committee** including members of Australia ICOMOS NSCES (National Scientific Committee on Energy and Sustainability) and other Australia ICOMOS members, are organizing a workshop 'Caring for Country' on caring for country and cultural heritage in Indigenous Australia and the Pacific in the face of climate change. The committee have contacted Indigenous people across Australia and the Pacific to invite them to participate in the workshop and discussions. Although GA2020 and the workshop is now unlikely to proceed in its original form and timing because of COVID19, it is proposed to hold a series of online talks and discussions on 'Caring For Country' projects across Australia and the Pacific in preparation for a future workshop when it is able to be held. The aim is to encourage support networks to be established and climate mitigation amongst Indigenous people across the region involved in Caring For Country and cultural heritage places.

Should you wish to discuss any of the above matters, or require further clarification, we would be more than happy to discuss with you. In which case please feel free to contact me by email.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Wilson

Co-Convenor

Australia ICOMOS NSCES (National Scientific Committee on Energy and Sustainability)

Email: helenwilson29@yahoo.com.au