

Traditional Owner Grants Gathering Report



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1 Background and context

The Reef Trust Partnership (RTP) facilitated the largest ever single investment in Traditional Owner Reef Protection (\$51.8M). Since 2018, 65 Reef Traditional Owner groups have partnered with the Great Barrier Reef Foundation (the Foundation) to deliver on the RTP and ensure transformational systems change. These efforts have been led by Reef and catchment Traditional Owners, through a co-design process, ensuring that projects are shaped and guided by Traditional Owner knowledge, priorities, and leadership.

Over the seven years of RTP funding, the Foundation has supported 93 Traditional Owner-led projects that have delivered significant and meaningful outcomes for Reef Country, culture and community. The Great Barrier Reef Foundation Traditional Owner Grants Gathering (the Gathering) provided a critical opportunity for Traditional Owner grantees to come together with Foundation staff and Traditional Owner governance members, to engage in peer-to-peer exchange, share learnings and celebrate the positive impacts of their work under the RTP.

Over three days in Cairns, from 18-20 March 2025, 90 representatives from 27 grant recipient organisations, representing more than 90% of the RTP Traditional Owner-led granted projects, were welcomed to the Gathering. Some organisations represented multiple Traditional Owner groups, and several had held more than four grants since 2019. This event was the first, and only time, that these grant recipients met to share their achievements and discuss future steps. The grant recipients were joined by 17 current and retired Traditional Owner governance members, staff of the Foundation and a select set of partners (for one session only on the final day).



1.1 Co-designing the Grants Gathering

The Foundation's work and planning with Traditional Owners is underpinned and guided by a co-design action framework. Within this framework the Foundation and the Traditional Owner Advisory Group (TOAG) co-designed the Gathering, drawing on input from each of the Foundation's three Technical Working Groups (TWGs). Using the co-design principles of prioritising relationships, sharing power, building capacity and using participatory means, allowed Traditional Owners and the Foundation together, to identify, discuss and agree on the tone, intent and shape of the Gathering. It also created an environment where Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Indigenous pedagogies) could be put at the heart of the Gathering's design.

The design team's experience showed that drawing on these pedagogies by prioritising peer-to-peer relational learning, storytelling and experiences—would more likely result in a culturally cognisant and engaging workshop for Traditional Owners. Also, at the heart of the Gathering's program was an intention to elevate the voices of Reef Traditional Owners by facilitating opportunities for them to showcase their leadership and achievements under their granted projects.

The Gathering's program was designed to allow for the variety of Traditional Owner and Reef outcomes to be unpacked and showcased by grantees through presentations, hands-on activities and participatory workshop-style discussions. The intention was to engender reflection, celebration, knowledge sharing, networking and relationship building and reaffirm the undeniable place that Traditional Owners and their communities have in leading the care and restoration of the Great Barrier Reef and its catchments. The program further provided a platform for Traditional Owners to discuss future and shared aspirations—creating space to identify potential partnership opportunities, and expand their leadership, engagement and representation in delivering positive outcomes for the Reef and its catchments.

Finally, the Gathering's program provided an opportunity to highlight the role of each of the Foundation's Traditional Owner Technical Working Groups (TWG's) as both co-designers of the grant program and as critical actors driving systems change. The Crown-of-thorns Starfish and Reef Restoration and Adaptation Science TWG (COTS/RRAS TWG) focussed their presentation on their work bridging the divide between culture and science—a theme reflected in many granted projects through the blending of Traditional Knowledge systems and western science.

The Integrated Monitoring and Reporting (IMR) TWG directed their focus at the Gathering to the piloting of the Strong Peoples: Strong Country (SP-SC) framework—implemented through two separate grant rounds. A panel discussion on the data economy at the Gathering targeted this emerging opportunity that has been enriched by the pilot projects. Valuable data collected and safeguarded by Traditional Owners which sits at the core of the SP-SC framework could be leveraged by Traditional Owners as an asset.

The final technical working group—the Healthy Water TWG—took the opportunity at the Gathering to undertake a soft launch of the Healthy Water Toolkit and outline the ripple effects of advocacy that have been created in the water quality sector. The toolkit helps Traditional Owners to understand, move into and operate more confidently in this sector and to build on the momentum achieved under the RTP.

Each of these sessions have been discussed in more detail in section two of this report.

The Grants Gathering program, and the care with which it was designed and implemented, demonstrated that co-creation—founded on strong, trusting relationships with Traditional Owners—did result in a workshop environment where participants felt culturally safe to engage in peer-to-peer learning, present their work, and share their experiences openly and honestly.

2 Technical Working Group achievements

2.1 Culturally managing Country: bridging the divide between culture and science

Since 2020, members of the Foundation's COTS-RRAS Technical Working Group have been bridging the divide between culture and science, creating pathways and spaces for other Traditional Owners to walk and to elevate their voices, especially in the scientific and research sectors. As a partnership between the Foundation and the Australian Institute for Marine Science (AIMS), this TWG co-designed and engaged in several important initiatives that will carry forward into the future.

At the Gathering, COTS-RRAS TWG members outlined how they drew on their lived experiences and cultural knowledge to provide ongoing advice to the Reef Restoration and Adaptation Program (RRAP)—informing the governance of RRAP and the deployment of pilot restoration and adaptation technologies. Members also shared that the co-designed Healing Country and Helping Country grant programs resulted in 27 grant opportunities, and \$7.09M in funding for Traditional Owner organisations. Utilising this funding grantees bridged the divide between culture and science, by leading and engaging in two-way knowledge sharing with researchers and other partners. Some stories of how they did this were shared in the *Culturally Managing Country* session detailed in Section 3.



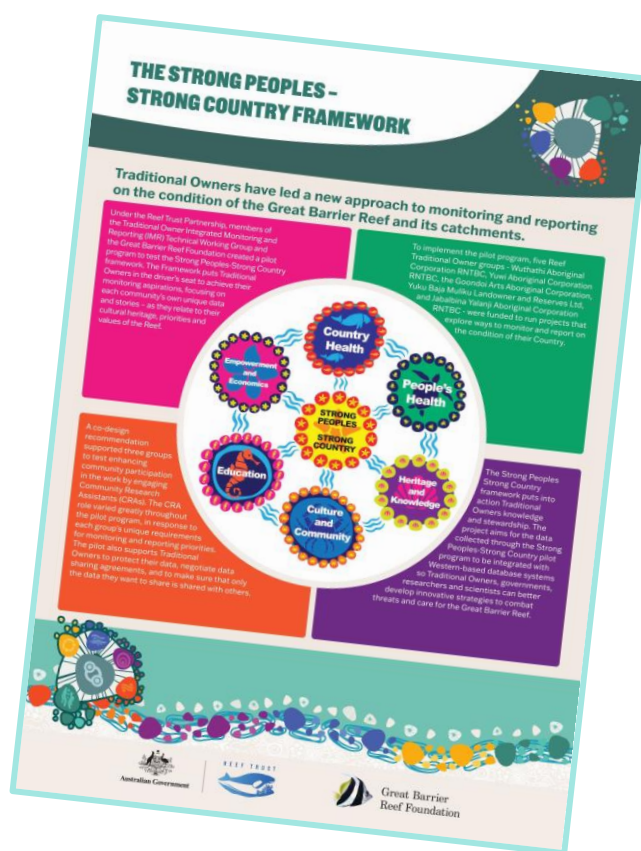
Members of the COTS-RRAS TWG outlined that the co-design of the COTS Leadership Training program and ongoing guidance to the RRAP's Indigenous Futures Project helped ensure that these, and future programs appropriately prepare, support and upskill Traditional Owners to engage with the technologies and interventions historically delivered by researchers and scientists.

Finally, members highlighted their leadership in the development of a Biocultural Risk and Opportunities Assessment Framework (BRAf) with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). By applying their own cultural lens, Traditional Owners will use this framework as a tool to assess the risks and benefits of the deployment of RRAP technologies on their own Country. This tool is applied prior to any deployment decisions being made and helps ensure that Traditional Owners are aware, informed and involved in decisions made about the deployment of technologies on their Country.

This session emphasized the unique and integral role that Traditional Owners have had for millennia in caring for Country, and the applicability and value of their own Traditional Knowledges and contemporary experiences in spaces typically dominated by Western science.

2.2 Piloting the Strong Peoples - Strong Country framework

The Integrated Monitoring and Reporting (IMR) TWG have been guiding a pilot program that tests the Strong Peoples–Strong Country (SP-SC) Indigenous Heritage Monitoring Framework. The framework was developed in 2017-18 as part of the Reef 2050 Integrated Monitoring and Reporting Program and designed by an expert group of Reef Traditional Owners, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, James Cook University (JCU) and the CSIRO. Grounded in Traditional Owner perspectives and values, the SP-SC Framework is intended to monitor the health and condition of the Reef and how it is inter-connected with the wellbeing and quality of life for Reef Traditional Owners. This is a critical interrelationship reflected in the framework's six hubs—people's health, Country health, empowerment and economics, heritage and knowledge, culture and community, and education. The framework draws on subjective and objective data to create a holistic view and has 45 indicators covering all six hubs.



At the Gathering, IMR TWG members detailed that together with the Foundation, they co-designed a program to test the efficacy of the SP-SC Framework on-the-ground with Traditional Owners. Pilot studies were carried out by five Reef Traditional Owner groups, with the RTP funding enabling wrap-around support for the piloting organisations. This support included wages and training for a Community Research Assistant, assistance to identify local monitoring indicators, and support to develop data sharing agreements. Data sharing agreements are critical for the safe sharing and safe keeping of Traditional Knowledge and as Traditional Owner organisations strive to be self-sustaining and increase their collection and monitoring of data about Country and community, the data economy rises as a potential income-generating opportunity to explore.

The IMR TWG members outlined that each granted Traditional Owner group piloted the SP-SC Framework by developing a set of their own indicators and aligning these to the six hubs. They collected data at specific intervals to determine the health and wellbeing condition and to track trends within community and on Country. At the Gathering some of those Traditional Owner grantees shared their experiences of piloting the framework, detailed in Section 3.

2.3 A Healthy Water Toolkit for Traditional Owners

Early in its inception, the Healthy Water Technical Working Group (HW TWG) identified the need to build Traditional Owner capacity in the water quality sector to better access and be more competitive in mainstream water quality funding opportunities. They also established that increasing the visibility of Traditional Owners as actors in this sector could facilitate more opportunities for Traditional Owner-led projects. This thinking helped shape the direction of the TWG and their achievements.

At the Gathering HW TWG members provided participants with an overview of their achievements under the Foundation's Healthy Water program. This included the co-design of two grant funding rounds, planning and implementation of two Healthy Water forums, and drafting the Healthy Water Statement advocating for Traditional Owner interests with respect to water issues. Importantly, they also highlighted how the value of Traditional Owner's efforts in Healthy Water, has facilitated a ripple effect, positively impacting network creation, restoration work, partnerships and Indigenous leadership.

At the Gathering members of the HW TWG also held a soft launch for the Healthy Water Glossary, a Water Rights Factsheet, a Catchment Diagram, and a Water and Culture diagram—four of the key products developed under the Healthy Water Toolkit. The aim of the Toolkit is to provide a set of tools that can support Traditional Owners as they build their capacity and move more freely into the western styled water quality sector. It will also help Traditional Owners to better understand and harness the myriad of terminology relating specifically to Great Barrier (GBR) water quality, assist them to determine what water quality work could be undertaken on their Country and to develop their own Water Quality Road Map. Importantly, the Toolkit can also provide a lever for Traditional Owners to continue creating meaningful, long-term partnerships with others in the water quality sector. Through these relationships Traditional Owners can continue to lead the way in two-way knowledge sharing, highlighting the cultural values of Healthy Water and at the same time elevate their voices and role as leaders.



3 Traditional Owner stories of impact

3.1 Stories from the stage

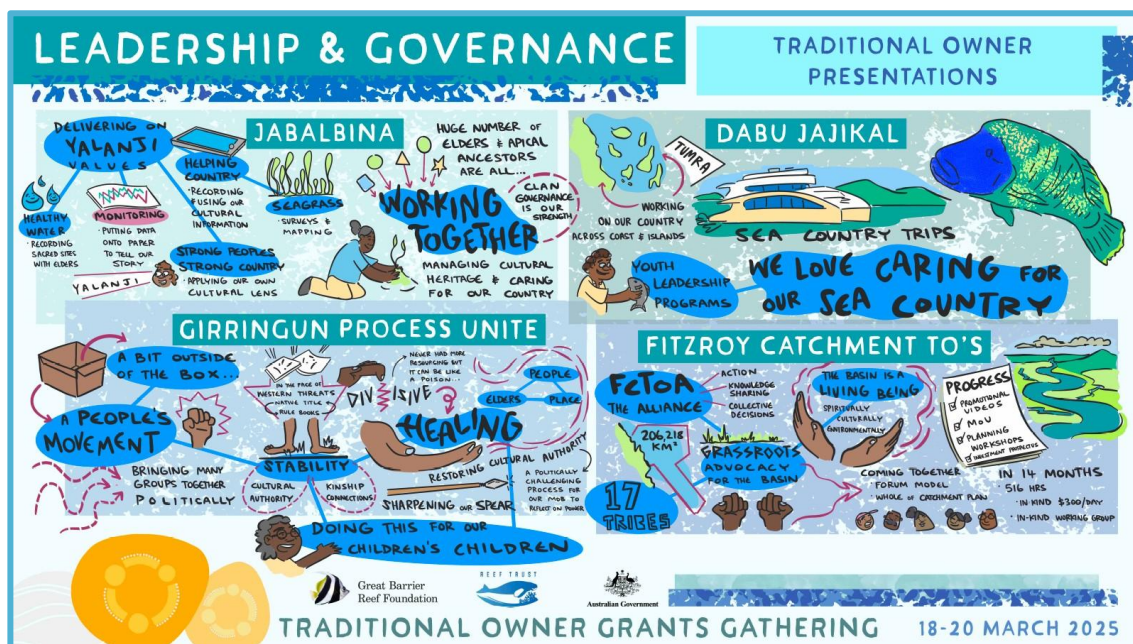
An increase in Reef Traditional Owners' capacity and engagement in contemporary Reef management can be attributed to some of the formal and informal channels, opportunities and experiences that the RTP has provided. The Gathering was one of those opportunities, providing a platform that elevated the voices of Traditional Owners as leaders, innovators and drivers of change in their own right, and ensuring a culturally cognisant environment to share their stories, their way.

Ten Traditional Owner groups chose to give a 10-minute on-stage presentation to the entire Gathering. Digging deeply into their projects, Traditional Owner presenters openly shared their methods, their challenges, achievements, and critically, the importance of their projects to Country, culture and people. Their presentations were heard across three separate sessions—grouped according to themes relevant under the RTP and into the future.

Session: Leadership and governance

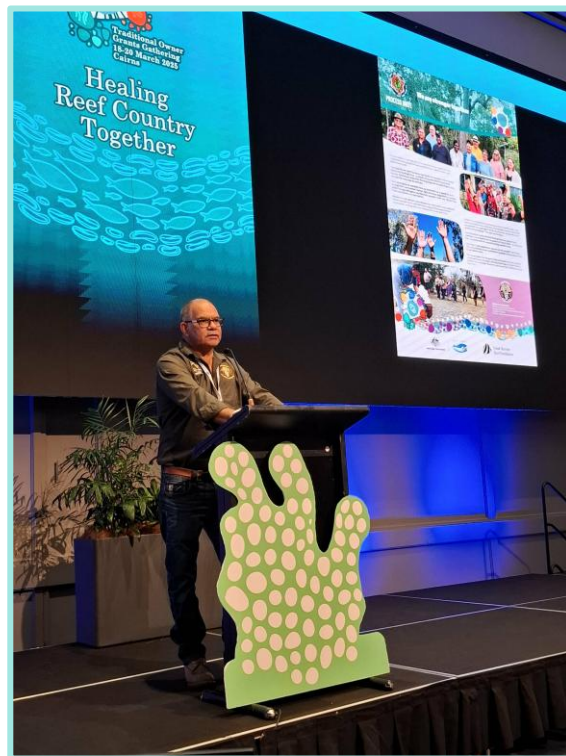
This session of the Gathering explored the approaches of four Traditional Owner organisations who have utilised and RTP grant to enhance their internal leadership and governance systems. Several of the groups detailed how they have developed or advanced alliances and governance systems across multiple, neighbouring Traditional Owner groups—demonstrating the collective responsibility of caring for Land and Sea Country in action. All four projects illustrated how their leadership and ongoing commitment to strong governance has enabled Traditional Owners to deliver better protection and healing for the Reef and its Catchments.

Members of the **Fitzroy Catchment Traditional Owners Alliance (FCTOA)** shared their establishment story with the Gathering's participants, demonstrating that efforts focused on developing strong governance arrangements supports the self-determination of Fitzroy Basin's Traditional Owners, and safeguards Country, people and culture into the future. Comprised of 24 representatives from the 17 Traditional Owner groups within the Fitzroy Basin, the FCTOA advocates for and influences policy, planning and action that impacts the Basin as a living entity. The groups' long-term goal is to enable co-governance of the Basin, and by successfully partnering with Greening Australia to secure an RTP Helping Country grant FCTOA have taken the next steps to embed their governance model and begin co-developing a whole-of-catchment plan.



In contrast the **Girringun Aboriginal Corporation** (Girringun) who work with the nine Traditional Owner groups of the southern Wet Tropics region, are soon to celebrate 30 years of governance and meaningful outcomes for Country and Traditional Owners. Their presentation of the Process Unite program highlighted the criticality of ensuring long-standing governance systems and processes are revisited, reviewed and refreshed collectively. Process Unite maintains that Traditional Owners are stronger together, and that culturally-led collective impacts can create systemic change and greater self-determination. Participants heard that Process Unite has been working group by group to reaffirm and reinvigorate the unified approach that Girringun was originally founded upon. They have utilised the RTP grants to engage with individuals, Traditional Owner organisations and communities, face-to-face and often, to understand their views, discuss the past and the future and garner their buy-in to shared futures and plans. To date 20 representatives have joined the Unity Working Group, demonstrating solidarity to the future.

Girringun's presentation was powerful and demonstrated that umbrella organisations that work with multiple groups, can re-unify and rebuild strength by drawing on strong, culturally-informed processes to restore cultural authority collectively address obstacles.



Girringun's Phil Rist shares the Process Unite story

Women are integral to the care and healing of Country, and their voices and rightful role as leaders are increasingly heard and respected within and outside their communities. Representatives from **Dabu Jajikal Aboriginal Corporation** (Jajikal) detailed how they established a Women's Healthy Water Cultural Values Unit under their RTP grant. The Unit is a recognition of Jalunji women's connection and responsibilities related to water and aims to further develop young women's leadership. At the Gathering they described the Unit as a governance initiative, focused on women's integrated, cross-Country management of healthy water cultural values. They outlined that by utilising the tailored cultural heritage database developed by Jalunji women, they are leading Reef island surveys to identify and document cultural water trails and gathering sites.

Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation (Jabalbina) are also elevating the voices and leadership of young Eastern Kuku Yalanji women, and their presentation described how Traditional Knowledge sits as the foundation of Jabalbina's data collection systems. The presenters outlined how the involvement of Elders, given their connection to apical ancestors, is critical to building intergenerational understanding and management of cultural heritage, and specifically for the documentation of sacred sites. Clan

governance is also a key mechanism helping community to collaboratively document Country and ensure the safekeeping of precious Traditional Knowledge.



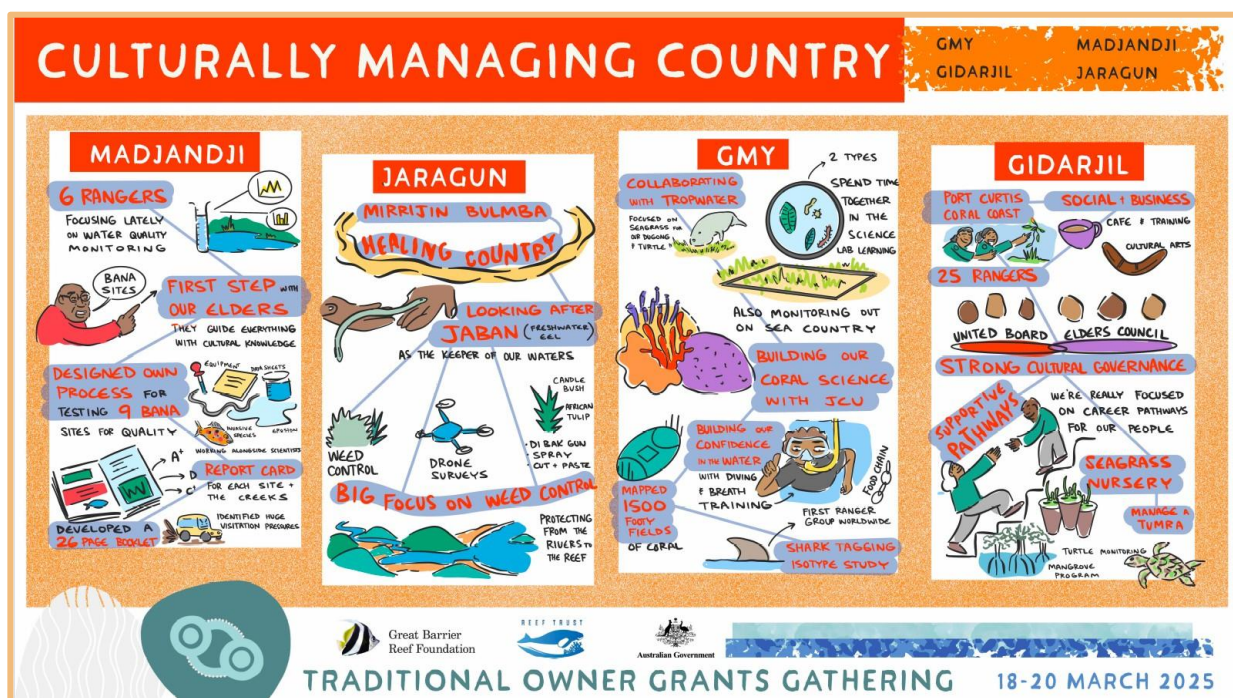
The women of Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC; Pamela Salt, Trudy Salt, Octavia Cobb-Fischer, Erica Stanley and Allira Alvoen, presenting project work being undertaken on-Country

Session: Culturally managing Country

For time immemorial Traditional Owners have culturally managed Country. It goes without saying. Today however, in many places Traditional Owners are working in partnership with other land managers and require skills and knowledge to blend cultural and contemporary ways of caring for Country. Understanding and knowing Country means Traditional Owners bring their own unique approaches when blending the two knowledges—traditional and western. Four groups shared their approaches with the Gathering, demonstrating how they are collaborating with partners such as James Cook University to collect and share data and apply contemporary skills in cultural landscapes.

Wanyurr-Majay Country is located south of Cairns around Babinda. The **Madjandji Aboriginal Corporation** (Madjandji) provided the Gathering with a detailed presentation of their work under a Healthy Water grant. They demonstrated the Madjanji Healing Waters Report Card system, designed to record and monitor water quality and the health of nine catchment creeks which run through Country in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. The Report Card combines cultural knowledge with scientific data, outlining significant species and other key information, to provide an assessment of the overall cultural and environmental health of the site. Rangers developed the report cards in collaboration with Madjandji Elders - the keepers of cultural knowledge - and in consultation with scientists from BirdLife Australia, CSIRO and James Cook University. Copies of the report cards shared by Madjandji could be used as a template for other Traditional Owners when establishing or running their own water quality monitoring programs.

Jaragun Ecoservices (Jaragun) have been an active environmental organisation for more than 10 years and they shared how the Wanjuru-Yidinji rangers have been key drivers in the revegetation of Babinda Creek, which flows out to the Coral Sea. With support and guidance from Wanjuru Elders, Jaragun Ecoservices have undertaken extensive weed control and re-planting of native vegetation drawing on cultural knowledge and utilising the scientific skills of rangers in water quality testing, drone surveillance, agricultural chemical use, controlled burns and rainforest plant and bird identification. The implementation of these catchment-based projects are critical to the water quality of the Reef and have driven positive outcomes for the Wanjuru-Yidinji people through their sustainable management of Country.

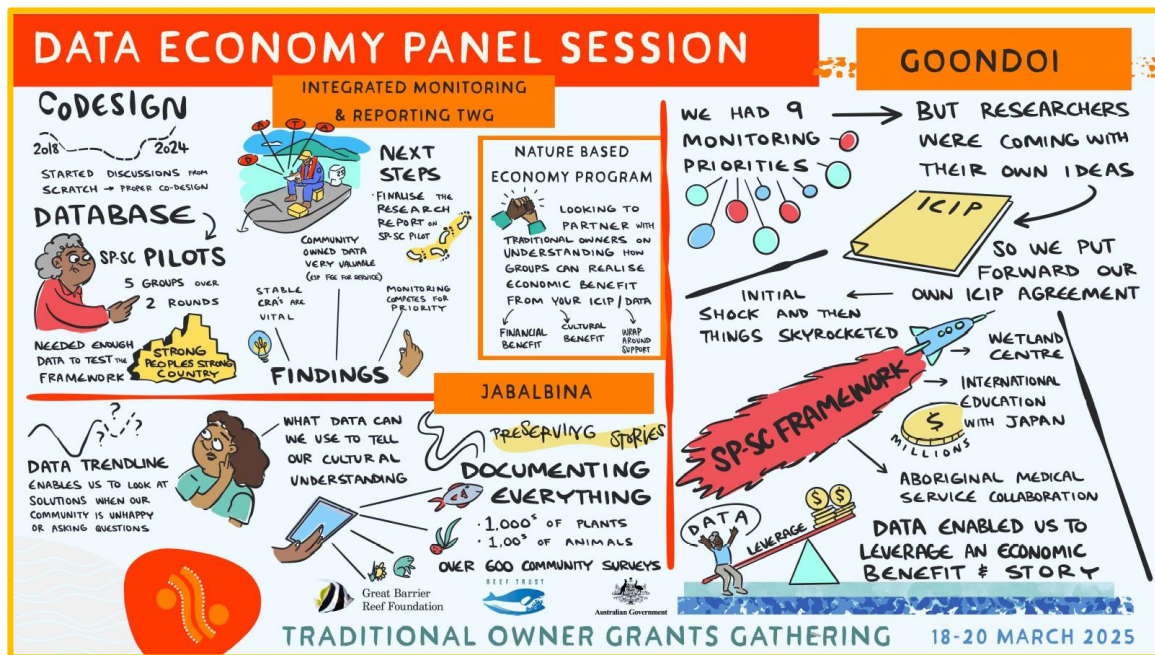


Although a relatively new organisation, the **Gunggandjii-Mandingalbay Yidinji Peoples PBC (GMY)** are also making positive in-roads for Country and community, particularly in the Yarrabah area. Four Gunggandjii and Mandingalbay Yidinji rangers explained how GMY are increasing their knowledge and skills to ensure healthy Sea Country through genuine partnerships, building connections and upskilling rangers to lead the work. In collaboration with James Cook University's TropWater, over several days on a liveaboard vessel GMY used their grant to upskill rangers in coral and seagrass identification, photo-mosaicking, data collection and validation techniques and freediving. They found significantly healthy seagrass meadows along the local beaches, Crown-of-thorns Starfish were not present, and there were no signs of coral bleaching—all of these areas flagged for future monitoring by GMY Rangers.

The **Gidarjil Development Corporation (Gidarjil)** have been a strong and active presence in the southern area of the Great Barrier Reef for more than 20 years and recipients of several RTP grants. Guided by their Elders Council and the Port Curtis Coral Coast Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreement (TUMRA) Steering Committee, Gidarjil outlined how the grants have supported them to engage rangers in training and to develop employment opportunities for Traditional Owners on Country—resulting in Gidarjil Land and Sea Rangers seeing potential new career pathways open up for them. Gidarjil rangers have led seagrass mapping, turtle and mangrove monitoring, water quality management, revegetation and cultural burns. Gidarjil have also established the first Indigenous-owned and run water laboratory in Australia—an enormous achievement that could assist them in the data economy. In closing their presentation, Gidarjil noted that their unified board with strong cultural governance has been foundational to their success over the preceding 25 years.

Session: Preparing to enter the data economy

Both the **Goondoi Arts Aboriginal Corporation (Goondoi)** and **Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation (Jabalbina)** piloted the Strong Peoples-Strong Country (SP-SC) framework. As detailed in Section 2 the SP-SC framework was developed as a tool for Traditional Owners to monitor cultural heritage values and the health of the Reef, people and Country. During a panel session on the data economy Traditional Owners from Goondoi and Jabalbina shared their experiences piloting the SP-SC Framework on Country and the social, cultural and economic benefits stemming from the program. They demonstrated that there are opportunities for Traditional Owners who are collecting, managing, and monitoring data related to the health and condition of the Reef to engage in the mainstream data economy according to their values, priorities and aspirations. The piloting of the SP-SC framework sets a standard for Traditional Owners in this space.



Jabalbina outlined how their data collection via interviews and community engagement is helping to record and preserve valuable Traditional Ecological Knowledge for use in monitoring. They emphasised the importance of communicating the project progress and findings back to Elders and the wider Traditional Owner community.

Goondoi's Community Research Assistant (CRA), shared how his work in the SP-SC pilot program has allowed him to follow in the footsteps of his Elders, and given him confidence to enrol in a university degree. This sparked discussions amongst Traditional Owners about future pathways and sustainable funding.

The pilot programs implemented by Goondoi, Jabalbina and others generate a highly valued resource—community owned and collected data. If willing, Traditional Owner organisations can seek out fee-for-service business opportunities with this data, but would require dedicated, ongoing resources and capacity to prioritise monitoring and data collection.

3.2 Stories from the floor

Traditional Owner groups and the Foundation created approximately 50 posters that showcased the variety of achievements made with the support of the granted RTP projects. While some Traditional Owner groups opted to present their work from the stage, almost every group were comfortable speaking to their posters 'from the floor'. Over the three days of the Gathering, dedicated sessions and meal breaks provided opportunity for Traditional Owners to engage peer-to-peer at their posters and share their achievements.



The poster sessions generated much discussion and interaction amongst participants.

Dabu Jajikal
Aboriginal Corporation

**Women lead the way
in caring for Jalunji Country**

"We grew up on the sea, on the reef, on the islands -
camping and hunting with our parents. We've got
sacred sites out on the sea, not only on land. The
sea is very important to us because it knows us."

- Elden Lizzie Olliar

Our members are deeply committed to Sea and Reef
management. Over the last few years, since Dabu Jajikal
Aboriginal Corporation was set up, Jalunji women
have been working on their landrights. Traditional
land and care for Country, Torres Strait Traditional
and women's knowledge systems, they have led
the design and implementation of a variety of
sustainable initiatives and systems which have
fostered partnership and collaboration
with government stakeholders.

Jalunji women have also led surveys
to identify and document cultural
water trails, gathering sites and
practices and the importance
of a Jalunji Country Jalunji women
clubhouse. Country Values Unit
are establishing a Women's Healthy
Water Country Values Unit which
aims to further women's leadership
and safety in caring for women and
work with other Indigenous women
engaged in water management.

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Reef Foundation**

National Government

These informal sessions also encouraged Traditional Owners to discuss methods and practices, facilitated networking, and created space to explore potential collaborations. For example, two Traditional Owner groups talked about the benefits and possibility of establishing a Junior Ranger exchange program between each of their Countries.

Indigenous cultures are deeply visual, with art and performance as key vectors in the transmission of knowledge and culture. The Gathering's Short Film Festival was another powerful way for Traditional Owners to connect visually with other people's Country and learn about their approaches. With a diverse set of films covering Butchulla and Gidarjil in the south, through to Wuthathi and Balnggarrawarra in the north and several in between, the film selection provided glimpses into the variety of Traditional Owner projects granted under RTP.



Produced by Traditional Owner groups or co-produced with the Foundation, the series of approximately 13 short films highlighted Traditional Owner's leadership, custodianship and their initiative in caring for and restoring Reef Country and catchments. Many of the short films featured Elders sharing their wisdom, rangers engaged in field work and in many cases, the collaboration with scientific and other partners. Some also featured Junior Rangers and youth, highlighting the importance of facilitating intergenerational knowledge sharing.

4 Co-evaluation of Traditional Owner-led Granting

The RTP Traditional Owner Reef Protection grant programs were co-designed specifically to facilitate implementation of Traditional Owner-led and determined projects and to support the delivery of outcomes that align with Traditional Owner priorities and aspirations for Country. A critical aspect of the co-design of such programs was to provide opportunity for co-evaluation and ensure that recipient voices are heard and experiences are captured and incorporated.

The Gathering was a key opportunity to begin co-evaluating the Foundation's grant processes—which had resulted in more than \$7M investment into Traditional Owner-led projects across the reef and its catchments. Grant recipients shared their experiences through critical reflection of the granting process, telling stories of impact and highlighting the outcomes for their communities and Country.



They workshopped two key evaluative questions. The first asked grantees to *identify any changes or impacts they have experienced in the delivery of their projects and to share what they consider as 'indicators of success'*. Their responses covered several key themes, including that:

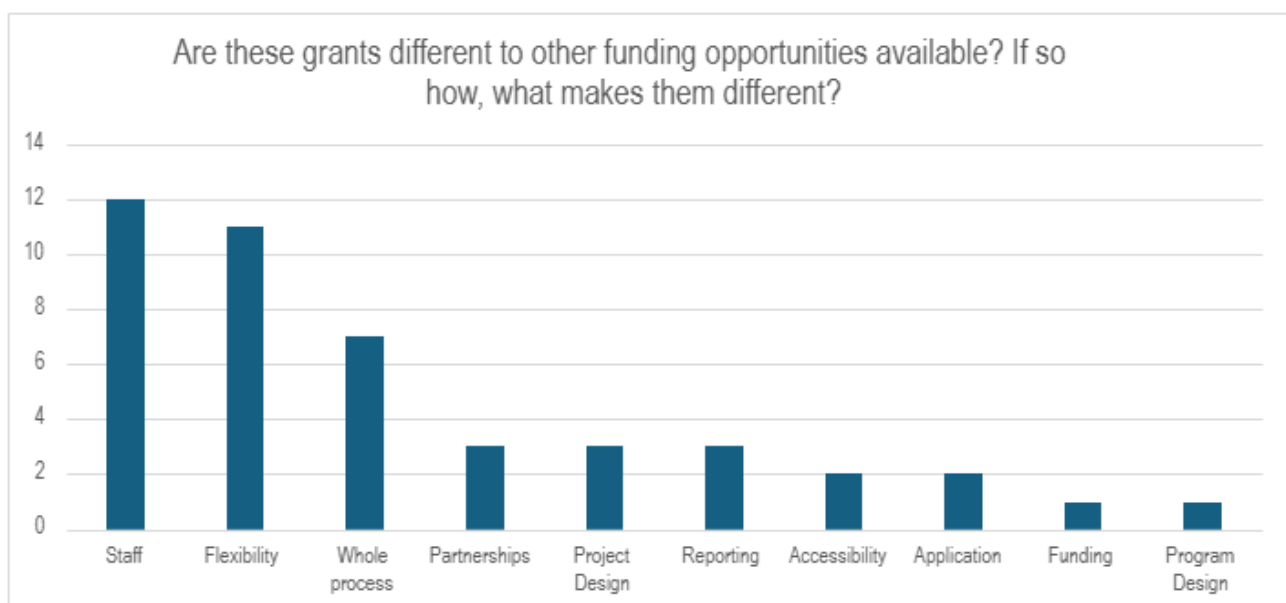
- restoring health of Country and providing opportunities for Elders and youth to be on Country, helps to heal Country, revive culture and has increased engagement amongst the wider community
- capacity building initiatives, including skills training and education, have expanded employment opportunities and diversified career pathways for Traditional Owners
- leading projects has broadened the number of partnership opportunities—increasing mainstream partners' awareness of cultural values and Traditional Owner's capabilities, as well as improving their cultural competence
- the integration of western science with Traditional Knowledge has facilitated a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of Country, enabling Traditional Owners to address their priority concerns by drawing on multiple knowledge systems
- Traditional Owner-led projects have fostered a stronger sense of ownership and self-determination among Traditional Owners, and have increased their representation in environmental conservation leadership roles

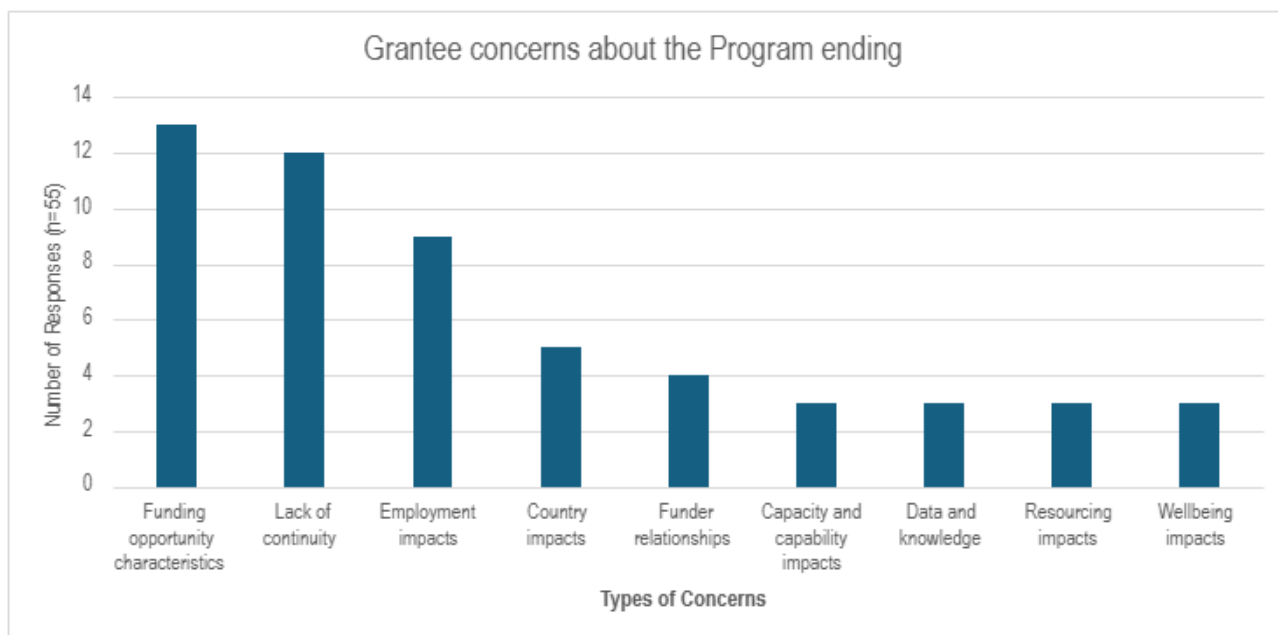
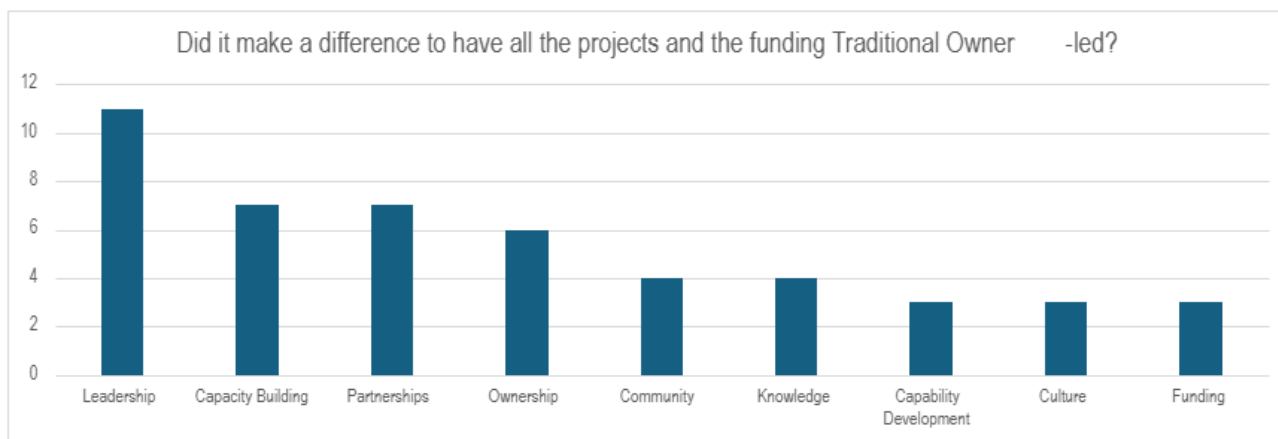
Responses to the second question ‘*What will it take for everyone to be working on Healing Country together?*’ are shown below.



Mentimeter survey responses to the question 'What will it take for everyone to be working on and healing Country together'?

The feedback from these sessions has now informed evaluation of the Foundation's granting processes as part of the larger co-evaluation of the Traditional Owner component of the RTP. The graphs below display responses to a series of other questions addressed in collaborative round-table sessions at the Gathering. The reflections from these sessions will also be considered in the development of both a co-design standard of practice for granting of Traditional Owner-led projects, and an engagement toolkit for partnering organisations. The latter will help partnering organisations to continue creating and building meaningful partnerships with Traditional Owners now and into the future.





Data source [GG Evaluation analysis.xlsx](#)

5 Looking to the future

5.1 What do Traditional Owners want from partnerships

Partnerships are critical to Traditional Owner-led protection and restoration of the Great Barrier Reef. It has been demonstrated through the RTP that meaningful partnerships can contextualise the work of Traditional Owners, build confidence and competence, provide capacity building and career pathways, and advance the delivery of projects that heal Country. At the Gathering, Traditional Owners engaged in a round of open discussions to reflect on ‘lessons learned’ and how these insights could be applied to future funding sources or partnership agreements. Select representatives from the Queensland Government’s Office of the Great Barrier Reef and World Heritage, Geoscience Australia, Indigenous Business Australia, TropWATER (JCU) and the Australian Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water were invited to sit at the table with Traditional Owners for a session about partnerships.

Participants listed organisations that they were partnered with, then shared thoughts and experiences regarding ‘*what makes a good partnership*’ and ‘*what messages are important to share with future partners*’. Some key and consistent themes emerged from these discussions—genuine partnerships through co-design, succession planning and transparent two-way communication—demonstrating the clarity of expectations that many Traditional Owners have for partners, including the Foundation.

Genuine partnership through co-designed projects and contracts

Funding opportunities for Traditional Owners are typically restricted to pre-planned projects determined by the funding organisation. Traditional Owners were clear during this session ‘*we know what Country needs and the work that is required to heal it*’, yet both the grant funding opportunities and the contract development process remain restrictive and one-sided. They outlined that funding programs require co-design to determine which activities will be prioritised, to define roles and responsibilities, and co-plan budgets and timeframes. Traditional Owners shared that the co-design standards set by the Foundation should be built more widely into granting systems and processes, to provide better recognition of Traditional Owner priorities and allow room for negotiation to support their aspirations. A belief, shared by many grantees, is that this will result in effective and genuine partnerships.



Grantees lay out their advice on what makes good partnerships

Traditional Owner's feedback made it clear that genuine partnerships must go beyond funding cycles and deliverables and be grounded in mutual respect and cultural understanding. Co-design partnerships for example, foster two-way comprehension and appreciation of differing and common values.

Grantees also outlined that payment for Traditional Owners should include fair and justified wages for organisational staff, appropriate consultation fees for Elders, and reimbursement for the hospitality that is foundational within Indigenous cultures. Hospitality, a sometimes intangible and value-driven aspect of Indigenous cultures, is often unrecognised and many organisations do not understand these to be essential.

Succession Planning

Traditional Owners shared that organisational succession planning and strategic thinking must be considered and appropriately planned for in the initial stages of a partnership. This aids in the creation of long-term sustainability and surety that the work will result in meaningful outcomes for Country and for community. The continuity of Traditional Knowledge, organisational leadership, and cultural practice across generations is of deep value. The engagement of Indigenous youth, their prospects for training, working on-Country, networking opportunities, and understanding of future career pathways should all be part of Traditional Owner partnership discussions and deliverables.

The short-term nature of funding cycles, limited availability of funds and often narrow scope of funding opportunities, can result in Traditional Owner groups juggling concurrent partnerships with several organisations—each partnership with its own set of agreements to manage. In addition, Traditional Owner organisations are managing competing reporting processes and timelines, while continuing to complete deliverables on time, usually with limited staff resources and objectives. This can create resource and administrative stress and sometimes confusion. It is another obstacle to navigate while trying to plan and build a future centred on self-sustaining, Traditional Owner-led programs for Country.



Transparent and two-way communication

Traditional Owners shared that ongoing, regular and agreed in-person communication across the duration of a project are essential to building successful and genuine partnerships. A power imbalance can be created when partners only have awareness of their own internal communication and reporting, but do not consider the ways in which Traditional Owners need to report and engage with their own community to follow cultural protocols and maintain cultural authority. Additionally, partners who prioritise spending time on Country with Traditional Owners, and who engage in face-to-face meetings, demonstrate their seriousness and commitment to building meaningful two-way partnerships. Listening,

engaging genuinely, and prioritising relationships is an understanding that partners must embed in their thinking and way of working with Traditional Owners.

Finally, Traditional Owners shared some key points about what they would like to see in the near future:

-  partners prioritising the ongoing development of their own cultural competency
-  partners increasing their use of Cultural Frameworks
-  standardised agreements for Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property
-  more training and upskilling opportunities made available
-  granting of place-based authority to Traditional Owners.

Invited partners listened closely to Traditional Owners' experiences and expectations and were receptive to the feedback provided. There was recognition that their cultural competency training often lacks detail on how to create and maintain good partnerships with Traditional Owners. Both partners and Traditional Owners discussed and agreed that the compilation and provision of increased resources about how to implement co-design and co-development, would be highly beneficial to improving partnerships.

Overall, this session provided a unique opportunity for Traditional Owners to engage directly with partnering organisations on their terms—an element that is often lacking in the funding process. The session clearly demonstrated the significance of meaningful partnerships for Traditional Owner groups—providing insight into how to foster strengthened partnerships with Traditional Owners now and into the future.

5.2 A Nature Based Economy

In a forward-looking session, the Foundation introduced its recently established Nature Based Economy (NBE) program to expose participants to the concept of NBE and to advise that the Foundation is seeking to recognise and support Traditional Owner's insights into the Reef NBE space. The insights and reflections gained at the Gathering will help shape the direction of the long-term NBE initiative.

This session built on the data economy panel discussion, where the opportunity to leverage data collected by Traditional Owner organisations and enter the nature-based economy with a fee-for-service model, was highlighted. Goondoi Aboriginal Arts Corporation provided an example of how they had scoped and developed several diverse nature-based businesses—outlining some of the benefits and challenges.

The announcement of the NBE program was welcomed by attendees as a pathway that could contribute to more self-sustained Traditional Owner organisations. More than 35 participants registered interest in follow-up engagement.

Appendices

Appendix A. Traditional Owner Grants Gathering Program



Acknowledgement

The Great Barrier Reef Foundation extends its deepest respect and recognition to all Traditional Owners of the lands on which we work, including the Great Barrier Reef and its Catchments. First Nations Peoples maintain a unique, unsevered and strong spiritual and cultural connection to their land and sea Country; and we pay our respects to their Elders, past and present.

 Monday 17 March 2025	
Time	Details
From 2.00pm	Check in - Pullman International Hotel 17 Abbott Street, Cairns
3.30-5.00pm	Registrations Open - Tully Room, Ground Floor, Pullman International
6.00-8.30pm	Casual Dinner - Soy Kitchen Street Food, 41 Wharf Street, Cairns Across from the road from Pullman International @ Reef Casino. GBRF staff will meet you there!



Tuesday 18 March 2025

Time	Details
6.00am	Casual Breakfast - Coco's Restaurant, Ground Floor, Pullman International
8.00am	Registrations Open - Outside Grand Ballroom, Ground Floor, Pullman International
Grants Gathering Program – Day 1 Grand Ballroom, Ground Floor, Pullman	
8.45am	Welcome/Acknowledgement of Country <i>Traditional Owners of the wider Cairns area</i>
9.15am	Welcome to the Grants Gathering <i>Malcolm Mann, MC & Traditional Owner Advisory Group (TOAG) Member</i> <i>Karin Gerhardt, MC & GBRF Director, Traditional Owner Programs</i>
9.45am	From 2018 to now: co-designing RTP for Traditional Owners <i>Anna Marsden, GBRF Managing Director</i>
10.00am	Meet the GBR & Catchment Traditional Owner groups (Activity)
10.30am	Morning Tea
11.00am	Participant Map & Directory
11.15am	Project Presentation Session 1: Leadership & Governance <i>Girringun Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>(Process Unite)</i> <i>Fitzroy Catchment Traditional Owner Working Group</i> <i>Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Dabu Jajikal Aboriginal Corporation</i>
12.15pm	Lunch
1.15pm	Yarning. Connecting. Crafting. (Activity)
2.00pm	Poster Session 1 – Small groups yarning about each poster. <i>Dabu Jajikal Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Laura Rangers</i> <i>Balnggarrawarra (Normanby Station)</i> <i>Bromley Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Buda Dji Development Association</i> <i>Development Corporation</i> <i>(Djabugay Tribal Aboriginal Corporation)</i> <i>Kyerrwahdha Thingalkal Land Trust</i> <i>Mamu Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Mungalla Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Mandubarra Aboriginal Land and Sea – Junior Rangers</i> <i>Rinyirru (Lakefield) Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Wuthathi Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Yuku Baja Muliku Landowner and Reserves</i> <i>Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Fitzroy Catchment Traditional Owner Working Group</i> <i>Girringun Aboriginal Corporation – Process Unite</i>
3.00pm	Afternoon Tea
3.30pm	Short Film Festival - a selection of Traditional Owner produced videos
4.30pm	Wrap up of Day 1 & overview of Day 2
End of Day 1	
6.30pm	BBQ Dinner – Mezzanine level, Pullman International



Wednesday 19 March 2025

Time	Details
6.00am	Casual Breakfast - Coco's Restaurant, Ground Floor, Pullman International
Grants Gathering Program – Day 2 Grand Ballroom, Ground Floor, Pullman	
8.30am	Arrival Tea & Coffee
8.45am	Acknowledgement of Country & welcome to Day 2
9.00am	<i>Culturally Managing Country: bridging the divide between culture & science</i> <i>Traditional Owner Crown of Thorns Starfish (COTS) / Reef Restoration Adaption Science (RRAS) Technical Working Group Members</i>
9.45am	Project Presentation Session 2: Culturally Managing Country <i>Gidarril Development Corporation</i> <i>Madjandji Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Gunggandji and Mandingalbay Yidinji Peoples PBC Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Jaragun Ecoservices</i>
10.45am	Morning Tea
11.15am	Co-evaluating Traditional Owner-led Granting (Activity) <i>Karin Gerhardt</i>
12.45pm	Lunch
1.45pm	Poster Session 2 – Small groups yarning about each poster. <i>Wulgurukaba Leadership Group</i> <i>Yuwi Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Jaragun Ecoservices</i> <i>Mandubarra Aboriginal Land and Sea - Seagrass</i> <i>Madjandji Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Koinmerburra Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Juru Enterprises</i> <i>Gidarril Development Corporation</i> <i>Dawul Wuru Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Binthi Landholding Group Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Balnggarrawarra (Melsonby Rangers)</i> <i>Darumbal Enterprises</i> <i>Goondoi Arts Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Gunggandji and Mandingalbay Yidinji Peoples PBC Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Juunjuwarra Aboriginal Corporation</i> <i>Girringun Aboriginal Corporation – Intergenerational learning</i>
2.45pm	Afternoon Tea
3.15pm	The Healthy Water Toolkit Soft Launch <i>Healthy Water Technical Working Group Members</i>
4.00pm	Wrap up of Day 2 & overview of Day 3
End of Day 2	
5.30pm	Bus from the Pullman to the Gala Dinner @ Tanks Art Centre, Cairns
6.00 - 10.00pm	Gala Dinner with Special Guests – Black Image Band <i>Dress – Smart casual that you feel represents your Country or home.</i>
8.45 - 10.40pm	Bus back to Pullman International <i>8.45pm, 9.30pm, 10.00pm, 10.20pm & last Bus is 10.40pm!!</i>



Thursday 20 March 2025

Time	Details
6.00am	Casual Breakfast - Coco's Restaurant, Ground Floor, Pullman International
Grants Gathering Program – Day 3 Grand Ballroom, Ground Floor, Pullman International	
8.30am	Arrival Tea & Coffee
9.00am	Acknowledgement of Country & welcome to Day 3
9.15am	Data Economy Panel Session <i>Data Systems</i> <i>Strong People-Strong Country Case Studies</i> - Goondoi Arts Aboriginal Corporation - Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation <i>Emerging data opportunities – Karin Gerhardt</i>
10.15am	Morning Tea
10.45am	What are you looking for from Partners? (Activity) Reflections on the event and how you would like to see learnings applied when you get back home...
12.15pm	Grants Gathering Wrap-up
End of Day 3	
12.30pm	Lunch & departures



Appendix B. Participating Traditional Owner Organisations

Traditional Owner Organisations
Balnggarrawarra Rangers (Melsonby)
Balnggarrawarra Rangers (Normanby)
Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation
Dabu Jajikal Aboriginal Corporation
Darumbal Enterprises
Dawul Wuru Aboriginal Corporation
Buda Dji - Djabugay Tribal Aboriginal Corporation
Fitzroy Catchment Traditional Owners Alliance
Gidarjil Development Corporation
Girringun Aboriginal Corporation
Goondoi Arts Aboriginal Corporation
Gunggandji and Mandingalbay Yidinji Peoples PBC
Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC
Jaragun Ecoservices
Juunjuwarra Aboriginal Corporation
Kyerrwahdha Thingalkal Land Trust
Koinmerburra Aboriginal Corporation (late apology – projects represented)
Laura Rangers
Madjandji Aboriginal Corporation
Mamu Aboriginal Corporation
Mandubarra Aboriginal Land and Sea Incorporated
Mungalla Aboriginal Corporation for Business
Rinyirru Aboriginal Corporation
Wulgurukaba Leadership Group
Wuthathi Aboriginal Corporation
Yuku-Baja-Muliku Landowner and Reserves
Yuwi Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC