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The Impact of Climate Change on Aboriginal Communities and The Part Mental Health Practitioners Play in Promoting Resilience and Healing

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Abstract
This is where climate change creates some serious problems to the Aboriginal communities because they face environmental, cultural and social impacts. Extreme weather, changing landscapes and temperatures are causing a threat to traditional livelihoods, community health and cultural survival. The effect of these disturbances is usually an increase in previous health weaknesses in the mind, and psychologically responsive treatment is necessary. Mental health professionals can be very valuable in the recovery process as they merge conventional knowledge with therapeutic actions, resiliency, and adaptive approaches that respect community values. The paper examines the secondary effect of climate change on Aboriginal communities and the most aspiring practices as far as mental health professionals are concerned regarding sustainable recovery and cultural resilience support.
Keywords: ***Climate change, Aboriginal communities, resilience, mental health, recovery, cultural continuity, environmental impacts, community adaptation, traditional knowledge, psychosocial support.***

1.Introduction
Climate change has become one of the most urgent questions of modernity and this issue has fundamentally altered the landscapes, disrupted ecosystems, and endangered the cultural continuity. In the case of the Aboriginal people in Australia, the effects are both environmental as well as very social, emotional, spiritual and cultural. These mounting impacts on physical safety, food security and mental health as demonstrated through the more frequent and severe occurrence of natural disasters like drought, bushfires and floods, have exacerbated threats to health and wellbeing, they have also shifted the strong and deeply pronounced reciprocal relation to Country that forms the foundation of Aboriginal identity and contributes to Aboriginal resiliency and wellbeing. Country is regarded as a living being under the Aboriginal worldview, endless, with neither start nor finish, a piece of continuity of which people, animals, land, plants, water and skies are all intertwined(1). The consequences of Country being poor are also the consequences of being poor to her people. Climate change has consequently presented complexoidal mental experiences, including Solastalgia, eco-grief, or eco-anxiety, which are the expressions of this discomfort after being overwhelmed by the disturbing effects of environmental degradation that erodes the sense of home and belonging. The difficulties caused by climate change are especially pronounced in rural, regional and remote Aboriginal communities, which are already economically and socio-economically disadvantaged, with limited access to healthcare. Evidence of the degree of environmental destruction was provided by the Black Summer bushfires of 2019/2020 and the incompetency of the traditional response. More than one billion animals were killed in the country, sacred cultural sites and native plants were destroyed and the traditional knowledge of managing the land responsibly was not taken into account in the major fire prevention approaches. These incidences caused displacement of various Aboriginal families, which sometimes took many years and revealed lack of preparedness, relief assistance, and mental health services during disasters. The end of conventional cultural burning has been cited by many to have led to a build up of forest fuel, adding to the intensity of the recent fire which has made a case of the land management capability of Indigenous people in climate adaption. In addition to the physical destruction, disasters have a knock-on effect: the destruction of native bush tucker and medicinal plants reduces the possibility of practising their culture, establishing and running community enterprises, and passing on generational knowledge that adds to the feelings of dispossession and perhaps even reinforces the trauma. In this regard, mental health personnel can play a critical role in accompanying Aboriginal communities but in a sense to be and not to dictate, to come as nearly indigenous workers who do not ignore local culture, who are respectful of local rules of etiquette, who incorporate traditional knowledge in healing and resiliency promotion practices(2). To be effective, support should recognise that Aboriginal Social and Emotional wellbeing (SEWB) is not confined to Western clinical understanding of mental health and refers to more than

kinship, spirituality, cultural identity and responsibility to Country. It also requires acknowledging the potential danger of the phenomenon of collective trauma or the fact that the whole community develops psychologically after collective tragedies. Community-based interventions may involve supporting community-based recovery initiatives, building the reconnection with cultural practices including art, dance, and storytelling, and with Elders and knowledge holders to rebuild and tend to Country.

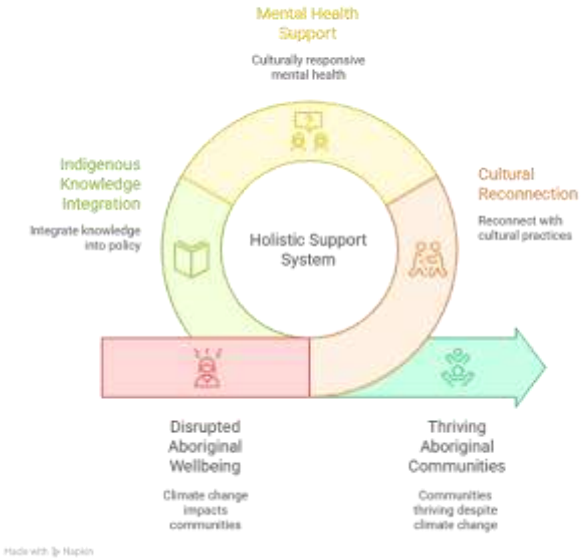

FIGURE 1 Climate Change and Aboriginal Wellbeing

The future potential of multidisciplinary partnerships involving collaborations across the boundaries of public health, Indigenous knowledge, and environmental science to develop climate resilience can be seen in programs such as the Healthy Environments and Lives (HEAL) Network. In addition, mental health practitioners need to adjust their practice to variations across Aboriginal nations-recognizing that every Country has its own stories, relationships and priorities-in line with adopting cultural responsiveness as a practice; an act, not a one-time skill. Not simply reflection and flexibility, but also taking a stand in the pursuit of structural change to can counter the social inequalities that serve to compound the vulnerabilities to climate. In numerous instances, the Aboriginal communities have been innovating in climate adaptation such as reintroducing cultural burning to tracking ecological changes but their input is not recognized in policy and practice. Through collaborations with these societies, recovery can be an opportunity to enhance identity, independence and multigenerational resilience through the efforts of mental health professionals. What is in store is unknown; the climatic outlook tells of intensified weather extremes, ecological baselines moving, and continuing social issues. Nevertheless, with the focus on Aboriginal voices, respect of cultural authority and integration of healing within the foundations of Country, there could be hopes to have futures where communities are not only surviving the climate change, but thriving despite it(3).

2.Aboriginal Australia's Mental Health, Cultural Resilience, and Environmental Change

The Australian continent, representing the physical and cultural landscape, is the setting that has become a subject of changes in climate patterns, gathering up unprecedented pressure on the aboriginal population, redefining not only the physical and cultural landscape, but also, transforming the cultural, spiritual and psychological landscape, the fabric of the community life. The increased temperature, irregular rainfall activities and the increased frequency of extreme weather patterns have worsened challenges with food security, water security, house stability and physical health as well as severing long established cultural traditions connected to Country. To an Aboriginal, a people whose worldview rests on the continuity of their relationship to the land and thus to the community and therefore self, effects of environmental change extend far beyond impact on the environment. Breaking down of familiar landscapes destroy the spiritual and cultural ties that have built resilience, and thus lead to the convoluted emotions surrounding issues like Solastalgia (the discomfort of ecological loss, when people stay in their home

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environment), eco-grief, and eco-anxiety. These circumstances do not exist as abstract hypotheses but are lived realities of disengagement, depression, and cultural displacement especially when they overlook the traditional knowledge systems in the management of their environments. Socio-economic disadvantage, in addition to historical dispossession, furthers the exposure of Aboriginal people to vulnerability with displacement in the homelands by climate pressure likely leading to poverty, loss of cultural connection and poor community integration. In contrast to purely environmental accounts, the Aboriginal understanding of the problem of climate change goes beyond a single disruption: the issue is centred around the destruction of biodiversity, degradation of intergeneration knowledge transfer, and the loss of possibilities of self-determined economic development. An example is when bush medicines and native bush tucker resources are destroyed in bushfires: along with valuable, life sustaining resources, is the loss of bodies containing untapped knowledge of ancient cultures and the resulting consequences to health and economies(4). This defeat is felt down through the community identity, where the capacity to come together, prepare, and share indigenous food and medicine constitute an important part of social stability, and self-esteem. There is no escaping the influence of mental health consequences in regard to these cultural shocks; it is not unlikely that communities that have suffered recurrent climate-based crises will bear the effects psychologically, not least through an increase in depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide risks. The dimension of this challenge is reflected in the fact that the biggest obstacle is collective trauma, or an event of trauma that affects whole communities because of a single or recurring catastrophic event. However, as serious as these effects can be, there is also something in Aboriginal communities that can be listed as a strength as well because Aboriginals are the first to adapt and handle climate changes with resilience. Conventional land management methods, including cultural burning, have already provided effective ways to keep wildfire intensity and ecological regeneration, but these remain under-employed in the whole picture of environmental policy.

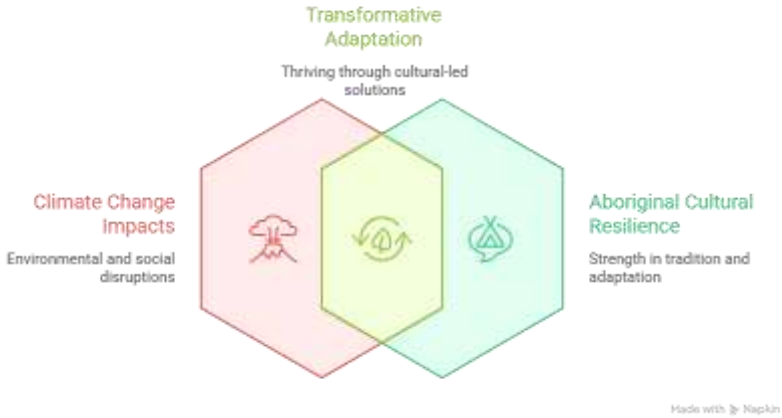

FIGURE 2 Where Climate Action Meets Cultural Resilience

Programs such as the Firesticks Alliance have been helping to fill this gap, connecting Aboriginal traditional knowledge-holders and their counterparts in the modern land management sector to transfer ancient methods of combatting fire to new problems. On the same note, the community based environmental monitoring and biodiversity protection schemes show that the Aboriginals can be innovative in their approach in management of environmental challenges without compromising their culture. The realities compel mental health professionals to broaden their notion of care by combining the healing power of reconnection to Country and culture, as well as, any and all conventional therapeutic procedures. Cultural responsiveness determines how to engage effectively and this is not a fixed skill but a continuous process of respect, reflexivity, and responsiveness to the needs and setting of the community(5). Mental health services need co-design with Aboriginal communities with such recovery initiatives serving to build cultural identities, regain agency, and intergenerational resilience. Such a strategy may involve funding cultural camps, storytelling initiatives, language renewal and the incorporation of traditional healing practices into treatment programs. Collaboration among Aboriginal Elders, community leaders and health practitioners may help to make sure that not only clinical but also culturally-significant mental health approaches are used. More so, acknowledging the Aboriginal knowledge in the environmental governance is necessary not only to ecological results but also to community welfare. Integrating Aboriginal voices into climate

adaptation planning, policymakers will have a chance to develop a solution that resonates with the cultural priorities and leads to an increase in control over land and resources by the community. Education systems can also play their part, with Aboriginal ecological knowledge taught in the curriculum to engender more general cultural awareness and regard leading to a generation better able to live sustainably with the environment. Though climate change brings increasing danger, it also offers a way to re-envision resilience not as an alignment with a pre-disaster status quo, but as transformation that fortifies cultural identity, fosters community connection and increases ability to adapt to continuing change. The ability to recover the environment and revive culture is perceived as indistinguishable in this vision and mental wellbeing is interpreted as a state of personal and group wellbeing based in the health of Country. The route to the future needs more than disaster response; it needs structural reform in the manner that Australia acknowledges and utilizes Aboriginal knowledge, power, and leadership. This covers funding Aboriginal-owned organisations to spearhead climate resilience initiatives, redesign environmental laws to empower cultural authority over land and fixing socio-economic disparities that increase climate-strength. Especially mental health professionals have a unique opportunity to make the case and be part of this change, and through their performance work across the divide between clinical intervention and cultural belonging. They can assist the Aboriginal communities to not just withstand the impacts of climate change but also design their ways toward prosperous futures since they have adopted a holistic approach that respects the intrinsic connection between the environment, culture, and health. Finally, the flexibility of Aboriginal Australia in responding to environmental change rests in a national decision to revere country as much more than an asset to be controlled-it is a relative, a teacher and an identity source. It is not only environmental, vital, but protective of culture and psyche so that future generations will inherit not only a habitable climate but a living culture.

3.Healing and Spiritual Ecology: Restoring Health via Culture and Land

To the Aboriginal peoples, Country is more than just geographic connections-it is a dynamic relationship that supports the identity, spirituality, wellbeing, and social connectedness. This relationship which can be termed as a kinship system understands the land, waters, skies, plants, animals and people as having a continuous system of relationships that have mutual obligations of care and respect. Country in this world-view is neither an impassive backdrop, nor an inanimate object, but a living, life source relative, and bearer of story, law and generational presence that specify belonging. The people that find their physical nutriment, their cultural significance and their spiritual advice in the Country are a part of the same organism and, in the absence of Country, the people suffer in the emotional, physical and cultural sense. Defleshing of sacred sites, loss of customary food sources, or diminishing of indigenous species are not only ecological losses, they are breaks in the spiritual and cultural fabric upon which wellbeing depends. These disruptions are capable of undermining self-determination, adding to secrets of intergenerational trauma, as well as intensifying the predisposition to mental health issues. Following intense weather events, e.g. the Black Summer bushfires and post-fire floods, numerous aboriginal communities have described a feeling of loss so deep it feels like a loss of a loved one as familiar cultural landscapes are transformed out of recognition(6). This emotional costs are added when displacement to homelands is needed, since the sense of being connected with the Country cannot be severed with the sense of cultural belonging; displacement can result in feeling of being as unhomed culturally, despite having physical comfort of shelter. Mentally, such disconnect may appear in the form of depression, anxiety, substance misuse and in rare cases, suicidal thoughts, particularly when it occurs to the youth to whom the cultural heritage appears to be under threat. However, the very landscapes have fantastic healing capacity. Cultural burning, celebratory gathering, song, dance, and storytelling are not just heritage, but active, dynamic ways that both rebalance an ecological world and balance an emotional world. The revival of such practices enables communities to regain agency, impart knowledge to the next generation and reassert the idea that they are caretakers of Country. To the health professionals, the understanding of the therapeutic effect of such connections implies abandoning the biomedical models and embracing the holistic model that can incorporate the environments restoration with psychosocial care. This may be in the form of enabling access to cultural locations as part of recovery or funding on-Country healing camps, or linking with Elders to incorporate cultural procedures into mental health services. Notably, different Aboriginal nations have different relations to their lands and waters, unique histories, language and customs; the provision of such support must thus be locally-specific and consider the heterogeneity between and within communities. The spiritual ecology, that is, the realization that both cultural and environmental health are inseparable is a pathway into this approach, because the approach decorates practitioners to respond to the totality of an individual life

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situation as opposed to individual symptoms. This can be strengthened by the policymakers, establishing the Aboriginal governance in land management and planning disaster recovery, where the cultural authority as well as the technical expertise must be acknowledged. This is not merely a matter of consultation, it is a question of real power-sharing, in which the knowledge systems and decision-making processes of the Aborigines are appreciated as being equal in, and in many instances, far more contextually informed than anything in the Western scientific paradigm. Giving education and training to non-Indigenous mental health professionals must entail their immersion in local cultural protocols, histories, and ecological knowledge with other aboriginals that create mutual understanding and trust. In addition to health provision, community-generated economies like cultural landscape restoration and protection projects, including native plant nurseries, place-specific language revitalisation, and youth ranger programs, have the double value of being an economic driver and resilience building resource. the direct work to take care of country enables communities to fix and reverse environmental harm, simultaneously rebuilding cultural identity and building group self esteem. These efforts are also against the deficit-based discourses that tend to pervade Aboriginal health conversations in favour of strengths, resourcefulness and continuity of custodianship(7). When the context of climate change accelerates, as it is currently the case, spiritual ecology incorporated as part of resilience planning does not only protect cultural heritage but also increases resiliency. Healthy Country sustains healthy people; this long held principle championed by Aboriginal cultures is increasingly appearing in international discourse about health as necessary in ensuring long-term wellbeing. It is difficult to translate this knowledge into complete policy, funded and implemented change that will ensure this wisdom is not left on the periphery but at the centre of climate and health solutions. Since the environmental future is uncertain in Australia, the restoration of the Country and culture should not be viewed as respective activities, but rather as one, closely interconnected process that would serve as a way of healing the motherland and its inhabitants.

4.Regional Upheaval and Emotional Healing Despite Environmental Deprivation

In Aboriginal Australia the health of the people and the health of Country form one interconnected relationship and one cannot be removed without harming the other. This profound interdependence implies that the issue of climate-driven disasters, whether it is bushfires, floods, or extended droughts, is an environmental crisis, as well as a culture-level, and, in fact, a deep psychological process.

FIGURE 3 The Cycle of Health and Country in Aboriginal Australia

The dismissal of culturally relevant landscapes, either through places of spiritual worship, family trees, places of hunting and gathering or other, can be greeted with grief and trauma akin to family loss. Such locations are breathing repositories of cultural memory, identity, and spirituality in that their destruction or devastation breaks the tie the people have with ancestral heritage. Following the Black Summer bushfires, numerous reports of anguish by Aboriginal people did not just centre on the physical devastation on property and infrastructure but also in the loss of the living spirit of Country. Those losses increase the likelihood of the so-called collective

trauma, or a psychological damage to a whole community, as the researchers call it. This traumatisation is compounded where environmental degradation adversely affects ancestral routines of looking after Country that are common in ensuring both ecological system balance and social wellbeing. Loss of skills to access bush tucker, perform ceremony, and educate the young on the land will cause community erosion of cultural continuity and thus disempowerment and identity loss. This separation may present itself through increased cases of depression, anxiety, substance abuse and even self-harm, especially the younger generations who struggle with their uncertain future as a specific culture(8). The psychological consequences are not even; they depend on the magnitude of environmental destruction, on how the community can get access to its resources and on the robustness of the current cultural networks. What has been consistent across contexts though, is that healing has to be done both to the people and the land. Rebuilding exclusively physical one misleads recovery processes because they overlook the necessity of cultural restoration and base their efforts on building physical infrastructure only. Mental healthcare providers in such environments have to adopt a comprehensive, culturally attuned paradigm of care; one that acknowledges Country as a source of distress in the event that it is damaged (and as an indispensable resource of recovery). This may involve the practice of on-Country counselling, cultural renewal activities (storytelling, song, and dance), or working with the Elders to see that recovery plans are based in traditional law and knowledge. These practices recognize that social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) of Aboriginal peoples is not solely limited to the individual but, as well, to family, kin, community, culture, spirituality and ancestry. Adverse psychological effects of environmental disruption can be diffused to some extent with interventions that fortify cultural identity, including those based on place and language programs, youth ranger programs, and cultural burning education. Notably, such programs should be community-driven, and the mental health professions should act as guides instead of recovery leaders. It is important to earn the amounts of trust, as the majority of Aboriginal communities do not trust the government and external agencies. Practically this involves being sensitive to the local priorities, seeing that cultural processes such as lengthy procedures are respected and delivering service in ways more in tune with the community rhythms and not according to institutional deadlines. It also entails pushing through policy channels, to pursue the involvement of Aboriginal voices in environmental planning, disaster management, and health service design, where the cultural requirements can be inculcated within preparedness and recovering schemes. The environmental loss environmental loss has given relevance to the need to take preventative measures as well, through mental health. When Aboriginal ecological knowledge is considered in land and water management, including in the form of cultural burning, controlled harvesting, and seasonal monitoring, communities will be able to ensure that the potential impact of climate is further reduced as well as ensure active episodes of stewardship over Country. Not only does this preserve ecology but it also strengthens cultural resilience causing a positive feedback loop that gives a good country great people. At the same time, the identification and naming of the phenomena like Solastalgia and eco-grief can legitimise the emotional state of community members and give words to speak about the psychological aspect of the change in the environment. To mental health professionals, it implies being ready to see cases involving cyclical and persistent grief as areas have to contend with repeated climate-related occurrences. Recovery is never linear, it is a process of constant negotiation between loss, adaptation and renewal. As mental health strategy and cultural restoration strategies converge, then the possibility exists to repurpose existing environmental crises to ensure that they instead become moments of heightened identity and communal activity(9). Finally, to attend to the psychological impacts of climate change in Aboriginal contexts must include a model of “care that is as interconnected as the bond between people and Country is itself” - a model that regards cultural continuity, environmental stewardship and mental health, not as parallel areas of concern, but as compartments of a unified, living space.

5.Conclusion

The cumulatively increasing effects of climate change on Aboriginal peoples require a response way beyond the scope of the traditional disaster-recovery model, and into the interconnected domains of cultural preservation and wellbeing, mental health and environmental management. The destruction of sacred landscapes, biodiversity, and the traditional food and medicine sources across rural, regional and remote Australia not only changes the ecosystems but the prerequisites of social and emotional wellbeing. The existence of environmental degradation as a personal, collective, and spiritual injury means that Aboriginal peoples who cannot separate themselves, their identity, and Country experience a range of complex biopsychosocial effects including Solastalgia, eco-grief, and collective trauma. And through the pain and the upheaval, right in the middle of it, there also exists an ongoing

depth of cultural resilience that is based on knowledge systems that are developed in tens of thousands of years. Veteran ways of doing things like cultural burning, seasonal harvesting and ecological narrating are not remnants of yesterday but rather the tactics of adaptation and healing; tactics that can be used to inform the wider society of Australia as pertains to it own climate anxieties. This means that mental health workers, policymakers, and environmental authorities should adopt a holistic, culture-sensitive model that acknowledges the interdependent relationship between human beings and Country to realise this potential thoroughly. This includes co-designing recovery and adaptation action with Aboriginal communities; ensuring that cultures display an authority in decision-making, and insuring that mental health care reflects the values, protocols, and rhythms of each individual community. It implies the movement of a deficit perspective to the one focused on strengths and recognizing Aboriginal leadership, autonomy, and ingenuity. It also needs a long term investment in long-term approaches that build on the synergy between environmental restoration and psychosocial support as the healing of the land and the people are two complementary pursuits. There are ways to radically transform the conversation about climate change in Australia; to harness trust and local knowledge and allow climate resilience initiatives to interface with cultural renewal; so that not only are the immediate evils of climate change averted but entire new avenues towards bright futures are opened up where not only are aboriginal communities not dying out in the upheaval of an environmental disruption; rather they are involved themselves in shaping the reaction, in preserving their own heritage and in developing their own recovery potential across the generations. It is a huge challenge, and huge opportunity as well--to turn the national response to climate into a response with a depth of Aboriginal wisdom, the urgency of environmental change and at its core, the truth that healthy Country is the source of the healthy people.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare

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