



# AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL  
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

## National Native Title Conference 2016

### Report on the Indigenous Youth Forum

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## Overview

The National Native Title Conference 2016 (the conference) was co-convened by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and the Northern Land Council, and hosted by the Larrakia people in Darwin, Northern Territory, 1-3 June 2016.

With the success of past Indigenous talking circles, such as the men's and women's circles at the conference each year, and a growing level of recognition of the importance and value of Indigenous youth voices in the native title sector, this year's conference program became host to the inaugural Indigenous youth forum.

The forum, comprising two talking circles held on the first and last day of the conference, aimed to maximise the potential attendance of conference delegates under the age of 35 years. The forum was facilitated by Natalie Rotumah, CEO of NTSCorp, and attended by 24 delegates from the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. Also in attendance was Professor Taiaiake Alfred, international keynote speaker and Professor of Indigenous Governance and Political Science at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. Professor Alfred led discussions around cultural resurgence and confidence and provided an international perspective on the issues discussed by the delegates, using his extensive experience advising First Nations governments on Indigenous land, governance and youth issues. The delegates shared their native title experiences and aspirations, and examined the barriers to their participation in the native title sector. The delegates then explored ways of overcoming the barriers to achieve increased youth involvement in the sector.

## Sharing experiences and aspirations

Many of the youth delegates present felt disengaged with their native title organisations, communities and land. Despite their geographical spread, the delegates reported experiencing similar issues and concerns, primarily relating to this lack of involvement in and knowledge of the sector.

The majority of delegates were native title holders, and the remaining delegates were claimants. Despite this, there was a significant lack of engagement with native title processes. Six out of the 24 attendees were members of their Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC); with only two delegates directly involved in their PBC. Many delegates had not been involved in the prosecution of their native title claim and most were not involved in the management of their native title rights and interests. Delegates found that living away from their native title lands caused significant challenges, including difficulty involving themselves in PBCs or communities.

Despite the feelings of disengagement expressed, delegates reinforced the value and importance to them of their country and native title rights and interests and their

desire to learn more about native title. The delegates acknowledged their respect for their past and present leaders, while asserting their rights to manage and exercise their native title rights and take on leadership roles in the future.

*My aspirations are that I would learn more about what my rights are as a land claimant. As a recognised one, and learn more about the native title process itself. – Kayannie Denigan*

*My aspiration around native title is to help my family secure native title. I've made promises to my old people that they want to move back out on country. So I see it as a personal mission to make sure they get back there. – Sara Slattery*



**Figure 1: Delegates share their experiences of native title. Credit: Andrew Turner, AIATSIS.**

## Identifying barriers

The majority of delegates were not yet born or were young children when native title was recognised as a common law property right in *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* in 1992 and the *Native Title Act (Cth)* was enacted in 1993. For some delegates this meant that they viewed native title as an 'older person thing', and felt that their parents' and grandparents' generations were advocating on their behalf.

*Growing up I haven't really had that much involvement with the native title process just because that's been my dad's, and his generation that's been going on for 20 plus years. – Jedess Hudson*

Because of this, the delegates had not engaged fully with the native title system and its processes, and felt that this lack of exposure meant that they did not have the appropriate knowledge (or access to it) to be involved in the decision-making processes that affect their native title rights and interests.

*There aren't many resources for young people to find out about their land and their native title and it's all hidden away, there's no openness around that. – Thaarramali Pearson*

Feelings of shame about speaking up or having their opinions or ability to contribute devalued by senior group members was another barrier identified by delegates. Delegates also identified problems with the inter-generational transfer of knowledge and power and a lack of skills to comfortably assert themselves.

*That's where I see native title for young people is, you know, it's about empowering young people to really step into that and, you know, be empowered rather than just be brought down, cause a lot of those issues might be raised is, you know, fear of standing up because of, you know, the seniority and all of that. – Mark Munnich*

Another significant barrier was the limited opportunities for capacity building and native title related training offered to young people.

## Overcoming barriers

Delegates were joined by Professor Taiaiake Alfred who offered an international perspective on youth participation in Indigenous land rights and native title movements. Professor Alfred is a member of the Bear Clan from the Kahnawá:ke community in the Mohawk Nation of Canada. Professor Alfred drew on his involvement in Canadian and Australian youth forums to advise the delegates on ways of navigating land rights regimes and building cultural confidence.

*The youth have the responsibility, just like any other Indigenous person to find out what their responsibilities are in the here and now and going forward, and how they honour the sacrifices of their ancestors and their responsibilities within our culture. – Professor Taiaiake Alfred*

Delegates used Taiaiake's extensive experience to further explore the options for increasing youth participation in native title processes. Most of the delegates live away from their native title lands, and are not members of their PBC. For some, this compounded the barriers identified.

Professor Alfred emphasised the importance of cultural confidence and personal rootedness to withstanding the negativity of politics within the native title sector, noting that there are ways of becoming culturally confident on an individual level despite being physically removed from country. This can be achieved through reinvigorating language and traditional cultural practices, and decolonising family and inter-personal relationships.

Professor Alfred commented on the difficulties concerning the transfer of knowledge and capacity building within native title groups, acknowledging that leaders in any space are unwilling to relinquish power (whether consciously or not). The delegates considered that they have skills, ideas and perspectives to contribute to their native title communities, and recognised that they have a shared responsibility with senior members of their groups to respect, foster and take advantage of the experience of young people. Professor Alfred reinforced this notion, arguing that young people need to assert their right to become the next generation of leaders and challenge and renew the existing institutions and structures within their groups.

Professor Alfred also emphasised the importance of networking with peers to provide support to each other and share knowledge to foster capacity building and cultural confidence driven by young people as a collective.

*The youth forum is a brilliant idea; it's for this generation to take on the responsibility and to lead the next generations to come. – Jarrod Black*



**Figure 2: Delegates with Professor Taiiiake Alfred and Natalie Rotumah. Credit: Andrew Turner, AIATSIS.**

A number of strategies for supporting Indigenous youth to better engage in native processes were identified, including:

- Becoming members of their PBCs;
- Establishing a network of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to communicate with, learn from, and support each other;

- Continuing the youth forum at each Native Title Conference and incorporating presentations by and specific to young people into the broader conference program;
- Creating opportunities for learning through partnerships with other organisations such as the Federal Court and government departments;
- Inviting training opportunities for young people within communities and native title groups;
- Greater focus on succession planning on boards.

In order to resolve some of the issues identified, delegates discussed the possibility of creating a national network of young Indigenous people, aimed at creating a sense of belonging for youth operating in the native title space and to support increased youth participation in the sector. The Indigenous youth forum gave the delegates an opportunity to learn from each other, and the group decided to establish a network to continue the work started at the forum, to support each other and other young people to learn more about native title, and to build their capacity to contribute to the space. The delegates set out their goals for the network in a statement of principles (see Attachment A). The group also plans to grow its members and meet annually to support and encourage increased youth engagement with native title.

*[T]here is definitely a lot to learn and it's good to...come together and realise that we are kind of in the same boat and we kind of look to each other for strength and for the vision to come together and to move forward. – Jedess Hudson*

## **Attachment A:**

### **National Native Title Conference 2016 Youth Forum**

#### **Statement of Principles**

The young people at the conference acknowledge and respect the contributions of current and past leaders while asserting their right to be active in native title and take leadership roles in the field.

#### **Vision**

To build future elders today

#### **Who are we?**

Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and men

#### **What do we want?**

- To understand, engage and participate in our native title processes, rights and benefits.
- To create a network for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to identify each other, to communicate and build relationships with each other.
- To build a forum where knowledge, opportunities and experiences are shared.
- To engage with the major native title stakeholders, representative, regional and national bodies.

#### **Goal**

To continue the network established at the National Native title conference 2016, with the goal of convening a meeting of the network annually.