

Bec Horridge: Walla Wani. Welcome to Earth Matters Environment, Social justice stories from Australia and around the world. Produced at the studios of 3 Cr on Wurundjeri country in Naarm Melbourne and broadcast across this continent via the Community Radio Network.

What does leadership look like when it begins with responsibility rather than authority? How do first nations women continue to care for country, strengthen language, advocate for water, preserve culture in the face of increasing climate change impacts, and create spaces where communities can heal, lead and thrive? Today, we tune into another women's climate conversation, First Nations Women's Voices in Leadership, Responsibility and Caring for Country, Part one. Here's host, Celeste Ackerley.

Celeste Ackerley: So, it's a real privilege to be here and to be able to hold space for this conversation tonight. And I hope everyone leaves with a deeper appreciation for the strength, wisdom and leadership the first nations women continue to demonstrate every single day.

So I'd like to hand it over to Janet Salisbury. So she's a founder of the Women's Climate Congress. Janet, go for your life.

Janet Salisbury: Thank you very much, Celeste. It's great to see you here for this, what we think is a very important and heartfelt conversation about about strong women living country and about first nations women's voices in leadership, responsibility and caring for country.

I'm Janet Salisbury and I'm the founder of the Women's Climate Congress. I'm a Kentish woman from English ancestry and I'm joining you today from my home of over 40 years in Ngannawal, Ngambri country. I pay deep respects to elders past and present. The Women's Climate Congress started here in Nambra, building on the chorus of women's voices who'd been singing and speaking out for peace on earth and peace with the earth for over 20 years.

The black summer bushfires brought us together in grief and frustration with the political climate wars and in the certain knowledge of a need to rebalance power to act by women's voices, building on the courage of our spiritual great great grandmothers who bravely advocated for bold systemic change to end wars and prioritise the nurture of life and care for the planet over the rush for power and wealth.

So, we resolve to bring a uniquely women's voice and perspective to action on climate change, to shake up the status quo a bit and ensure that women in all diversity are not only represented in equal numbers in decision making, but also in influence and access to the policy agenda.

Now, here in Canberra, I live very close to a place called Karrajong Hill, which is, we are told, a sacred place for First Nations. People, particularly women. It was renamed Capitol Hill by the white settlers and is now the site of Parliament House. In the Women's Climate Congress, we like to think that the ancestral voices of first nations women and people are still sounding in the earth underneath the two chambers to remind the politicians of their responsibilities and that we, as women residents of this land can in some small way help sing up the songs of harmony for mothers on Earth.

In this vein, I just want to allow a moment of quiet meditation as we leave behind our busy routines and join women from around the country, and indeed around the world in this conversation. So I'm just going to say a few words from a poem that a friend of mine, Johanna McBride, wrote. She wrote it as a song, but I'm just going to say the words as a poem. And one of the verses was also written by another woman called Jill. So this poem goes:

Dear Earth, Planet Earth, will you be our home?

We need to protect you, reconnect with you.

Deep in our bones, you are our home.

Fragile lives, precious lives, all within the web.

We need to protect you, reconnect with you.

Deep in our souls, we are one whole.

From the start of the Women's Climate Congress, we've reached out, sometimes falteringly, as non-Indigenous women to first nations women. And we've been very honoured to learn from them.

This year we were able to access a little seed grant money to explore the notion of creating a First nations and non-Indigenous Women's Sisterhood network co designed with mutual love and respect to create common ground and friendship and to support the vital leadership of first nations women on environmental protection. Our project will brought Celeste and I together with some remarkable women, including two of tonight's guest speakers. And it's also taught us some truths about the resources, time and frameworks that are needed to do this work. And it is hard work and we're all in it together. So we're taking this time tonight to be together and to listen deeply to three first nations women who are working every day to sustain their culture and and their country against great odds. You can read more on our website.

So, the first of the women that I want to introduce you is Polly, Auntie Polly Cutmore, also known as Maria Cutmore, who is a Gamilaroi Wiri Anaiwan woman and a traditional owner from Moree in northern New South Wales. Her country includes the Mehi River, which flows through the Moree and joins the Giddea river and and wetland system to the south.

Polly started a native title application in 2016 and has challenged gas developer Santos in court and is a passionate advocate for first nations leadership in water management and cultural governance. She recently led a landmark Growing up on the Mehi Gathering in the Moree, bringing together Aboriginal women from across the northern Murray Darling Basin to share stories, strengthen connections and develop the Moree Statement, a collective call to government for stronger recognition of first nations authority, country and water rights.

The next person I'm going to introduce you to is Sandra Wusupp. Hello Sandra. Sandra is an Angkamuthi traditional owner, language keeper and community leader from Northern Queensland. Through her roles as Chair of the Angkamuthi Tribal Aboriginal Corporation, Director of the Eli Bauxite Mine Beneficiary Trust and the Apudthama Land Trust.

She contributes to many important decisions relating to country community governance, economic opportunities and protection of cultural and community interests. Sandra is a language keeper as well in her community, working to maintain and revive and strengthen a sleeping language. She's passionate about strengthening the voices of Aboriginal women and supporting women led projects her women led yarning circles on country, create spaces where women can reconnect with culture, strengthen relationships, share knowledge and support one another.

And thirdly, I'd like to introduce Barbara Barbara Ibira, who is a Sabai Kodal woman from Zenafth Kess Drawing on the cultural authority granted by elders and her frontline experience, Barbara began leading community driven climate resilience work in Xenathkess in mid-2025 with the founding of the not for profit organization Climate Collective Zenath Kess, a civil society response to climate adaptation in her region. Barbara's work blends policy, culture and storytelling and she also continues to elevate first nations climate leadership and women's climate leadership on a national and global scale outside of her islands, including at the UN FCCC climate conferences, the COPs, the international climate Conferences.

I've been incredibly privileged to meet Barbara as her organisation and the WCC are both founding members of a collective of women's organisation called the Feminist Climate Collective, collaborating to promote gender equal climate justice. Through this Barbara has also been collaborating with 1 million women on their she Powers campaign for a just transition to electrify households and she collaborates with other organizations so she's very busy woman.

So now I'm just going to introduce quickly Celeste as well. You already met Celeste briefly. I'm diverging from my notes slightly here so I've just got through to do something. Celeste is a proud trawl woolway woman from Truita in Tasmania and she's worked alongside Aboriginal owners and organisations and communities across Australia to support culturally informed approaches to conservation policy and leadership. She's also a very busy woman, undertaking a postgraduate study in policy and governance, particularly how first nations knowledge, governance and systems and community leadership can better inform public policy and environmental decision making. She loves facilitating women's

leadership initiatives and I can vouch for that because I've seen her in action, not just with our group, but other group and collaborative yarning spaces, bringing together her experience with deep commitment to creating respectful conversations that centre first nations voices. So I'm going to hand over with that to Celeste.

Celeste Ackely: Thank you. I'm going to ask this question to all three of you women. It's a yarn. So when you hear the word strong women, the living country, so living country, what do they mean to you? I'd like to start with Polly. What that means to me is my mother, my grandmother and all the women that come before me and my sisters and aunties that are standing with me, that are here today with me. That's what it means to me. And that we are standing here today because of their survival from yesterday and it was because of their resilience, their strength, and that's what it means to me on country, knowing who I am, where I'm from. Thank you, Sandra, I'd love to hear from you. Like, what does, you know, the word strong women living in country mean to you? What does that mean?

Sandra Wassup: Well, for me, strong woman means when you stand up and you're not afraid to stay quiet, you speak up and you see something's not right. And leaving country because you're always out there, you're pulsed, you know, you're always in touch with your country. It never, it never stops. It's who you are, your identity. And yeah, being the front, because we've got lots of women in the community, but, you know, it's go back to you, how you feel, your passion, you know, what do you think about it? You can't be a woman and just stay home or do nothing. It belongs to us and it's out there.

We have to stand out there and do this for our country, for our people.

Celeste Ackerly: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Thank you, Sandra. I always love that energy with you. I love it. So thank you so much for sharing, Barb. I'd love to hear your perspective on this as well. When you hear, you know, strong women living in country, what does that mean to you?

Barbara Ibuai: Oh, yeah. Good night, everyone. So lovely to be here. Thanks. Janet and Celeste, strong women. I think pretty much the same as what Aunty Polly said and what Sandra Say, I hear strong women and I think about my grandmothers because they just are always people. They're foundational to everything I do now. And given, you know, my time entering the space to do work of women, we're trying to help in our way to make the place better for everybody. It's that maternal instinct and it's that nurturing responsibility that we all have. So strength is looking after family, looking after people.

And, you know, with our beliefs and our values and our principles from first nations upbringing, that means country as well. We have a huge role to play as mothers and wives and nieces and sisters. In a nutshell, that's what strong women look like. It's just something that's just always existed. You're inherited and you also take on the responsibility without really being told to take it on. It's just something that we do. Thanks. Yeah, that's great. Thank you, Bob. No, you're right. It's just. It just happens. Right? You're just there. And this is. This is your world now. So thank you so much for those reflections. They're really

important to open up in this space. We're going to be leading into the conversations, these yarns now with these women. Yeah. So, Janna, I'd like to pass on to you now to take on the first conversation with beautiful Polly.

Celeste Ackerly: Yeah. Speaking for water, speaking for country. Polly, that's a great theme of your life and your work, it seems, and just little quote, australia is running out of water. Nature has taken over the timetable. These are words that were written in a report of the Wentworth Group of concerned scientists in 2005. Your work, Polly, is deeply grounded in your lived experience, cultural responsibility and water justice. And for you, I'm thinking nature hasn't taken over the timetable. It's always been the timetable. You have spoken about growing up on the Mihal river, about water as living, and about Aboriginal women's rights speak for water in country. Could you begin by taking us to the Mihal River? What was it like growing up there and what did it teach you about country, responsibility and who you are?

Polly Cutmore: Thank you, Janet and Yama, to everyone. I'm coming to you from Dubbo Rajuri country tonight. I'm visiting my family. I'm with my family. So, yeah, just like to let you know that growing up on the Mehi.

Well, I grew up on the mission in Moree and that was the Mehi River was, you know, right next to it, right next to the mission. So, you know, it was a part of who we were, we fished. That was everything to Us, we had to cross that to go to the cemetery. You know, it was where we swam, where we laid in the cool when it was hot. It was our identity of who I was. You know, I knew about the My river before I knew that there was a township. You know, I knew the river, what the river was and how important it was to who we were and who I was because, you know, that's who I am.

I identify with the place where I grew up. And I was born next to the Myai river in the Colonial Hospital in Moree. That hospital. We had our own separate hospital there. So, you know, I've always been separated, but I've always been connected to the Mya River. And so, you know, that's who we are. And right up until my age, now 64, I'm like, people identify me as, oh, she's from the Myai. That's Nim. Where Moree, where I'm from, the Myai river is also the one town that it goes through. Is Moree the only town that it goes through besides. Yeah, that's it. It's Moree. And then that it connects to the Gwaida, which is connected to. Then on, further down connects with the Murray Darling Basin and the Barwon, going on to Warrego, all the way down to all my mob.

Bec Horridge: You're listening to Earth Matters broadcast nationally across this continent via the Community Radio Network. I'm your show host, Bec Horage. Let's continue with the women's climate conversation. First Nations Women's Voices in Leadership, Responsibility and Caring for Country. Here's Janet Salisbury in conversation with Polly Cutmore.

Janet Salisbury: You talk about the river as though it's sort of a relative, a living. A living relative or a living part of your. Your family and your community there.

Polly Cutmore: Yes, it is who we are, who we identify with. You know who we are when they say, who are you? Where you come from? You know, we come from her, the My eye, you know, our sister there. That's who we are. And we are a part of that, you know, even with our DNA, my DNA, my family's DNA has been in that water way you for thousands of years in that ancient. We make up the DNA of that ancient riverway. So that's who we are. It's very special to us, even down to the mud that's in the river.

Janet Salisbury: So in your recent Mooree statement, and we can come to that a little bit more in a minute, the women, the elder women that you're speaking with describe themselves as daughters of the river and speak about reclaiming their rights to speak for water and country. So this was a women's thing to speak for water and country. Can you help us to understand a little bit what that means?

Polly Cutmore: Well, they're the mummies and the grandmothers of the children that learn to fish, swim, learn that that's the, you know, the river is something that we have to protect, but also, you know, we have to be very aware of what goes, what's in that water, and that the mothers, they had to carry water from their campsite, from the rivers to their campsites. You know, it was an odd slug for them to do some of that. You know, my aunties were talking about using their baby prams to push buckets of water from their camps, you know, to push up to 500 yards away, a long way away to the campsites anyway.

But they used a lot of stuff and, you know, they used it to wash, clean, swim, live, everything, you know, recreation, everything. It's everything to us, our waterways and rivers. So how do you describe that as being different to the way that governments and water systems treat the water? Well, we live with our riverways and waters. We don't. And it lives with us on the land. So we have to allow for the, you know, and it sustains us. So, we have to let that living structure go ahead if we are going to survive, you know, and for us to survive, it has to flow.

The river has to flow. What the government has done, they have divvied it up, cut, worked our country and even tried to patchwork our river system up with dams. Well, they do, you know, like now when you fly over country, all you see is patchwork blanket with glitter. And I don't know what it looks like, diamantes and all, you know, stuff there, but it's water. It's really blinding sometimes to see that that's water all in patchwork stuff. And it's not in the riverways. The rivers are dry. You can see in the veins of our river work systems that there is no water in there. You can see even eye up that there's no flow. It's green in some places you think, oh my God, what's going on here? But there's plenty of water all in the patchwork of what's gone down in, you know, with irrigation. And the settlers of what they bought here for, you know, that's what you see now. And that's the difference between us. They see it as an economic commodity that will bring in money for overseas productions and to get financial gain from that. We see it as a sustainable resource. Not just for my community, you know, for all the riverway systems and all the people that live along that system. And that's how we lived.

We've been living like that for hundreds of thousands of years. Hundreds of years before white man come, you know, that's how we worked. And after white man come, you know,

we still lived in that system. We made sure whatever was coming down at that river, even in times of flood, there was sheep, cattle and that was caught in the floods and they ended up on the mission. They also ended up in Navans too, you know. So yeah, it all sustained us too, besides everything else that came down. But yeah, that's what it means to us.

Janet Salisbury: Right. So recently you ran this event growing up on the Mihai where you brought aboriginal women together from right across the Murray Darling basin to talk about the water and your custodianship of the water. Why was it important that those conversations were particularly led by women?

Polly Cutmore: Yeah, well, why were they led because we've been left out of that conversation. And women are the ones that gave birth, you know, on these river systems and lived on these systems and we've been kept out of that conversation of what's going down with our water. There's been no conversation with us with putting this water and selling it off in on markets and licenses and do any of that. We didn't know a thing about that. And you know, we thought, yeah, you know, go out and you water stuff. But it's gone beyond that now. And so, you know, we, our women thought it was about time that their stories was being told and that because my aunties and that's who they are, my mother's sisters and sister in laws that were at this event and school friends, they were all there that that could come there. But it's about their past and how they and their families lived on that system, you know. And you know, some of them didn't even their supermarket, they didn't know what a supermarket, knew what a riverway and what that food system was. And they had to tell that.

It's important for our future generations to know how our women and our, our past people, how our ancestors lived off the system, you know, and what sustained us on that system besides white settlers. Yeah, what we see now because generations of now, my nephews and nieces and great nieces and nephews, they didn't see what it was like living off that river.

And you know, I would have brought communities and family together. They didn't see it. So now what they are going to see and hear, they'll be able to see in here is our elderly women tell them stories and they'll be able to tell them stories firsthand. You know, it's about passing on information to our generations which has been another lot of stuff that's been kept away from our gener, you know, for future generations. So it's about making sure that that is also sustainable too, you know, for future generations and let them know what's there.

Janet Salisbury: So, the Moree statement that came out of that meeting that you had that sort of sets out your requests to the Australian government to consult with you and what needs to happen.

Celeste Ackerly: Yeah, one thing that I find really hard, it's really hard, I think for other indigenous people it's really hard is that we know, and especially you, Polly, with water and generations of women with water, living with water, breathing water, drinking water,

they're in the, everything's to do with water and all the connections and systems that are intertwined like that.

What really strikes me is that there are sometimes people or institutions out there that don't understand that connection. They don't understand how deep it is in your DNA and that it can't be like you can't just stop feeling that way, you can't remove that. That's for you forever and for the future generations. And so I'm hearing that in the way that you're speaking. I can hear that in your voice, that connection to this space. It's so place based as often a lot of this is. But how important water is, the resource itself is so important. From women being young to women growing and having children, to generations and elders. It continues, that cycle continues. And so, I wanted to close your conversation, and I would like to ask you with the people that are listening tonight, what is something that you would hope that they'd carry away from this conversation about water and for the generations?

Polly Cutmore: Well, you know, it's something that we have to protect for future generations and make sure, you know, that we do look after it like we're all a part of it. It belongs to all of us, you know, it sustains us all. We've all got to live off clean water, you know, and we have to make sure that we watch what's going on within our communities and make sure that, you know, we start bringing back and spending time, you know, with your river systems, go out and live again. We know what it's like to live, you know, next to the river and know what comes out of it.

But, you know, maybe if we all get off the streets and back to our rivers and land, we might be better off, you know, than seeing what's going around because away from screens and that and seeing what's within the river and like I said, living off that, but you know, helping us. And also, you know, the mob from Western Australia and Polini's mob that are looking at putting the case together and like we will be looking at helping us, you know, to make sure that we are helped out with that there because we need all the help and resources that we can get because it's all been taken, you know, and what we're going to be doing is living off what we can get to help with this, to fight.

So, you know, please help us and walk with us. Let us lead. Let us lead. We have to lead this. It's our voices, it's our country, it's our DNA. You know, we're fighting for our DNA and we're fighting for our sister. So yeah, we have to lead this fight because, you know, it's our country, our fight.

Bec Horridge: Polly Cutmore

Thank you to all the speakers that were in this Women's Climate Conversation, hosts Janet Salisbury and Celeste Ackerley and guests Polly Cutmore, Sandra Wassup and Barbara Ebuai Find the Moree statement link on the Earth Matters homepage and more Women's climate conversations at the Women's Climate Congress website, where you can join the Women's Climate Congress. Find part two of this conversation in the next Earth Matters.

You've been listening to Earth Matters, Community Radio's national Environment justice program. If you missed any of today's show, you can find our podcasts at three cross. Earth

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