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Communication

Exploring Aboriginal Perspectives on Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Climate Change Mitigation in Remote Central Australia

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Abstract

Achieving national greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction goals requires recognising the lived experiences and knowledge systems of remote Aboriginal communities, who contribute least but are most affected by climate change. This study explored awareness and perceptions of GHG emissions in a very remote Aboriginal community in Central Australia. A qualitative, cross-sectional study was conducted using a staged communication approach that combined visual tools (videos and posters) with a yarning circle. Nine community members (67% women; aged 28–82 years) participated in a session co-led by a local Aboriginal cultural navigator and an Aboriginal researcher. The study examined community understanding of GHG emissions, local emission sources, environmental changes, and the role of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in shaping responses to climate change. Participants noted shifts in local weather patterns, particularly more intense heat events, and did not initially link local environmental changes to GHG emissions. Visual prompts helped participants connect emissions with key local sources, including diesel generators, poorly maintained vehicles, and waste burning. TEK was emphasised as central to interpreting environmental change and maintaining health and cultural continuity; however, extreme hot weather has disrupted TEK practices. Despite having limited familiarity with Western scientific terminology, participants demonstrated an intuitive understanding of climate change and its drivers. Building GHG literacy grounded in TEK and co-designed with communities can strengthen culturally relevant community-led mitigation strategies in remote Aboriginal contexts.

Keywords: traditional ecological knowledge; climate literacy; community-based mitigation; remote Indigenous communities; low-carbon practices; co-designed engagement; decarbonisation

1. Introduction

The Australian government has recently set a 2035 target to reduce emissions by 62–70% below 2005 levels, building on the legislated goal of net zero by 2050 [1]. Pathways to achieve this target include expanding clean electricity, accelerating electrification and efficiency, scaling up clean fuels such as renewable hydrogen, supporting emerging technologies, and increasing carbon removals [1]. In remote Australia, key contributors to GHG emissions include the heavy reliance on diesel fuel for electricity generation, long travel distances for essential services, and high supply chain reliance [2–4]. In the Northern Territory (NT), research has shown that stationary energy (mainly diesel-based electricity generation) and transport are the dominant GHG emission sources [5]. While some

communities have adopted hybrid solar–diesel systems, comprehensive updated counts of communities operating such systems are not publicly available, and overall reliance on diesel generation remains substantial [6].

There have been a few initiatives in Australia that have explored low-emission pathways for remote communities. The Resilient Communities and Livelihoods Asset Integration Model (ReCLAIM), developed in partnership with two very remote Aboriginal communities, illustrates how residents were exploring strategies to improve energy and resources efficiency, encourage resource sharing and limit resource use, which can reduce fuel consumption and, in turn, lower associated GHG emissions [7]. Cultural burning practices have also demonstrated the potential to reduce the risk of high-intensity bushfires, which can lower GHG emissions in northern and arid Australia [8]. In addition to such community-directed strategies, programs such as Bushlight have shown how custom-designed solar-battery systems can reduce diesel dependence and enhance energy security in Aboriginal communities in remote Australia, while also delivering economic benefits, such as lower household energy costs and improved reliability [9].

This study adds to the growing literature in this space by specifically exploring how community members in a very remote Central Australian Aboriginal community understand GHG emissions and climate change, and how TEK informs their responses. Understanding Aboriginal perspectives is crucial for developing effective and culturally appropriate mitigation strategies that sustain low-carbon development pathways.

2. Materials and Methods

We employed a qualitative approach (participatory, staged communication and engagement) to explore the understanding of GHG emissions within a Central Australian Aboriginal community. Data collection started with open-ended questions related to residents' observations of the changing environment and general questions about climate change. This was followed by a demonstration of publicly available visual engagement tools, such as educational videos ([link](#)) and posters from international organisations (e.g., the United Nations), designed to explain climate change and GHG emissions (and their sources). This approach aimed to prompt participants to reflect on climate change and link GHG emission sources to everyday life. The next stage, conducted immediately after the visual engagement session, involved a yarning circle, a collaborative discussion process that prioritises Aboriginal ways of knowing and relationship building [10]. Sessions were co-facilitated by a local cultural navigator (a community-based researcher) and an Aboriginal research team member (G.B.), who had substantial research experience engaging with communities in Central Australia. The cultural navigator translated research processes and questions into the local language when required for participants. As a token of appreciation for participants' time and contribution, each participant was provided with a \$50 prepaid power card voucher.

We audio-recorded sessions (with informed consent), transcribed verbatim and analysed the responses using a deductive approach [11]. NVivo software (NVivo 14) facilitated systematic organisation and coding. M.B. coded the yarning transcript, and any discrepancies were collaboratively discussed with G.B. to ensure respectful interpretation and reach consensus.

Ethics approval was granted by the NT Human Research Ethics Committee (NT HREC 2024-4797).

3. Results

Participants ($n = 9$) ranged in age from 28 to 82 years, with the majority aged 65 years and older. Most participants were female (67%). This demographic mix provided a range of perspectives on local changes to the weather and the environment.

3.1. Community Observations of Climate Change

All elderly participants readily described changes to weather and seasonal patterns, such as shorter cold periods and hotter days. These reflections arose naturally, without the need for visual prompts.

"...longer the winter times ... start to warm up, not as cold as what it used to be." [P1; Female, 75]

"...if it's really hot ... it stays hot and for longer; the weather is changing." [P8; Male 70]

Participants expressed concerns about the impact of changing local environments on people's health and well-being.

"No nature, we are not protected." [P2; Female 82]

"Without nature, people might struggle." [P4; Female, 70]

3.2. Visual Tools Bridging Understanding: Interpreting Smoke as Emissions

While climate change was widely observed, participants did not initially link these changes to GHG emissions or use the term climate change.

"...things are familiar in picture, but we never have been thinking about this, the first time I get to know about this..." [P9; Female, 28]

"It's not something our mob think about or knows about." [P5; Female 68]

When videos and posters were introduced, participants began associating smoke with the idea of emissions, using it as a visible symbol of GHGs.

"I can link bush fire smoke with greenhouse gases... when the sun comes out... those gases get heated and emit more temperature..." [P9; Female, 28]

"Yeah, smoke (bush fire smoke) makes everything worse." [P2; Female, 82]

3.3. Sources of Smoke in Remote Community Life

Participants identified everyday contributors to smoke and emissions, such as diesel generators, old vehicles, cooking fires, and waste burning.

"Cars moving around the community and going to town that are not well serviced and produce more smoke." [P4; Female, 70]

"Diesel generator out in the community makes some smoke." [P7; Female, 35]

"When they (community members) do that rubbish burn makes a lot of smoke." [P5; Female, 68]

3.4. Mitigation Through Traditional Practices and More Education

When the discussion shifted towards TEK, specifically bush medicines and bush tucker, participants became more engaged and spoke without prompts. Community participants emphasised the importance of passing on TEK knowledge to younger generations.

"We take kids to the bush visits, we show them country, teach them how to pick bush medicines." [P1; Female, 75]

Some participants shared that traditional healing was mostly preferred over Western medicine for specific injuries and illnesses. Participants engaged in traditional practices indirectly identified barriers to adopting low-carbon lifestyles and treatments, noting that warmer weather limited access to bush plants throughout the year and made outdoor activities such as hunting increasingly difficult during the summer months.

"I use more bush medicine than clinic, and our mob is still going for hunting, but it's difficult now in this weather." [P3; Male 75]

All participants were keen on further yarns and education, including understanding how climate change would affect their community in the future.

"The people need more education around so they can understand greenhouse gas and other things around climate change." [P6; Male, 65]

4. Discussion

4.1. Community Perceptions and Climate Science

Participants had limited familiarity with Western scientific terminology but were able to link climate change to increasing temperatures and smoke. Table 1 shows consistency between community experiences and regional climate, energy, and health datasets.

Table 1. Community insights compared with supporting datasets (selected examples).

Community insight (this study)	Corroborating dataset/evidence	Source
"...if it's really hot..., it stays hot for longer..." [P8]	Australia has warmed by ~1.5 °C since 1910; Central Australia has experienced an average of 113 days with temperatures of 35 °C or higher and 33 days with temperatures of 40 °C or higher annually during the period 2020–2024.	BoM & CSIRO State of the Climate 2024 [12]; BoM Climate data of Alice Springs [13].
"Diesel generator... makes smoke" [P7]	Remote communities across NT use about 25 million L of diesel annually for electricity generation (~67,000 t CO ₂). Diesel for power generation is the largest component of the remote community emission profile (2.7 t CO ₂ -e/capita/yr).	Infrastructure Australia [6]; Stewart et al. 2016 [5].
"Cars... not well serviced... produce more smoke" [P4]	Motor vehicle use was another major source in community carbon profiles (4.84 tCO ₂ -e/capita/yr).	Stewart et al. 2016 [5].
"...rubbish burn makes a lot of smoke" [P5]	Waste burning contributes to particulate pollution; more than 70% of remote communities in NT lack formal waste management systems.	Clifford et al. 2015 [14]; NT EPA reports.
"...bush fire smoke makes everything worse" [P2]	Indigenous-led fire management in the Central Western Desert has been modelled to abate ~ 1000,000 t CO ₂ -e annually from a project area of 500,000 km ² through cool-season burning and reduced high-intensity wildfires.	Burrows 2014 [15].

4.2. Mitigation Approaches and Knowledge Systems

Climate change mitigation strategies in remote communities have so far largely focused on technological solutions, such as adopting renewable energy, improving household and infrastructure energy efficiency, and reducing waste [5,7,14]. There is a clear need to acknowledge TEK in climate change mitigation, such as savanna burning [8] and the role of various cultural healing practices that are low-carbon in nature as an alternative to Western scientific treatments. Remote communities face reduced access to climate information compared with urban populations, which exacerbates vulnerability and underscores the importance of locally grounded approaches [16]. Introducing climate and GHG emission literacy into remote communities requires a shared understanding of terminology and local practices. Previous studies have also shown that while mainstream climate discourse often struggles to connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, place-based knowledge and cultural connections to Country provide a foundation for community-led climate action [17,18].

4.3. Culturally Grounded Engagement

Combining culturally appropriate yarning with visual tools facilitated discussion and comprehension, particularly where barriers to climate change literacy existed. While the yarning process itself was culturally grounded, the visual materials were externally developed and not locally tailored. This experience highlighted the limitations of relying on global climate education resources, which often present climate change in a distant or doomsday framing that may not resonate with remote Aboriginal communities, who contribute minimally to global emissions. This underscores the need for co-designed, Indigenous-aligned educational tools that convey climate change through strength-based narratives grounded in Country, culture, and collective responsibility. Developing such resources would ensure cultural relevance, emotional resonance, and local ownership of climate knowledge, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of climate change education. This approach also demonstrates the value of Aboriginal-led methodologies in local-scale environmental and climate adaptation initiatives [19,20].

Participants identified diesel generators, motor vehicles, and burning waste as everyday contributors to GHG emissions, reflecting broader systemic issues of energy insecurity, limited transport options, and inadequate waste management in remote NT communities [3,7,14]. In addition, bushfires were described as a major and highly visible source of smoke, with participants linking fire to poor air quality and hot weather. These insights are consistent with research showing that unmanaged fires in Central Australia contribute substantially to GHG emissions and degraded air quality, while Indigenous-led fire management reduces high-intensity bushfires and generates cultural, health and climate benefits [8,15,21]. In this context, smoke from bushfires emerged in community discussions as more than a sensory experience, serving as a powerful reference point for understanding emissions and environmental change. However, it is essential to recognise that not all forms of smoke carry the same meaning or consequences. In Aboriginal contexts, cultural smoke produced through cleansing practices and cool-season cultural burns carries spiritual and ecological significance and should be understood as a source of healing and stewardship rather than pollution [21,22]. Recognising these distinctions is essential for culturally informed discussions on climate change mitigation and air-quality management.

4.4. Role of Traditional Ecological Knowledge

TEK featured strongly in discussions, particularly regarding bush medicine, bush foods, fire management and intergenerational teaching on Country. TEK served as a practical guide that informs health, guides seasonal activities, and supports responses to hotter conditions and reduced access to bush plants. These insights illustrate how lived knowledge connects climate, culture, and well-being [19,23,24]. Recognising Aboriginal knowledge systems alongside Western climate science can strengthen the acceptance and adoption of climate strategies in remote communities [25].

4.5. Implications for Remote Health Practice and Policy

The findings suggest three opportunities. First, as highlighted earlier, climate awareness programs in remote communities should build on TEK, using co-designed visual tools and locally relevant language and imagery. Second, education must extend beyond awareness to include capability-building activities such as monitoring emissions and long-term planning with communities and service providers. In this, local organisations/service providers, including Aboriginal ranger groups (land management), schools (education and youth engagement), art centres (cultural expression), and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs; healthcare) are well placed to deliver these initiatives in ways that reflect community priorities and strengthen self-determination. Third, investment in clean energy and waste management has the potential to reduce GHG emissions while delivering co-benefits such as improved air quality, better health, energy security, and economic benefits, including lower household energy costs [26].

4.6. Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

A strength of this study is that it demonstrates how abstract concepts and terminology, such as GHG emissions, can be translated into meaningful local terms (e.g., smoke) through culturally grounded methods. By embedding TEK in these discussions, the study provides a practical model for integrating TEK with Western climate science to support community-led mitigation strategies in other remote contexts.

This pilot study was conducted in one remote community. Data was collected through a single yarning session. Findings, therefore, cannot be generalised. Participants' responses may have been influenced by translation and the use of visual aids. In addition, the focus on GHG emissions did not capture the full spectrum of impacts on climate change or the wider benefits of climate adaptations. While not a limitation of this study, the absence of publicly available, community-level emissions inventories for Central Australia highlights a critical evidence gap. Although NT-wide data and selected community profiles exist [5,6], this gap underscores the need for community-based, mixed-methods research to generate locally relevant emissions data.

5. Conclusions

Remote Aboriginal communities hold first-hand knowledge of environmental and climate change. A shared understanding of climate change mitigation pathways could be achieved by using familiar terms that people are accustomed to, rather than relying on Western scientific jargon. This pilot study shows that culturally safe visual yarning can translate abstract concepts such as GHG emissions into legible terms, with smoke as a meaningful symbol to discuss environmental change and human impacts. It is also essential to recognise that some forms of smoke, such as those associated with cultural burning and cleansing, have spiritual, ecological, and social significance that support caring for Country and community well-being. TEK therefore provides both a cultural and practical foundation for action. However, extreme hot weather conditions undermine the application of TEK and low-carbon traditional healing practices, increasing reliance on carbon-intensive health care. Supporting Indigenous-led approaches that integrate TEK and cultural practices into climate change mitigation will strengthen environmental and community resilience while contributing to Australian net-zero emission reduction targets 20250.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

- GHG Greenhouse Gas
- TEK Traditional Ecological Knowledge
- NT Northern Territory
- ReCLAIM Resilient Communities and Livelihoods Asset Integration Model
- HREC Human Research Ethics Committee

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