

## Original Article

# If the land's sick, we're sick:\* The impact of prolonged drought on the social and emotional well-being of Aboriginal communities in rural New South Wales

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To report Aboriginal communities' views of how prolonged drought in rural NSW has affected their social and emotional well-being, and of possible adaptive strategies.

**Design:** Content analysis of issues, priorities and adaptive strategies raised in semistructured community forums.

**Setting:** Rural centres across NSW.

**Participants:** Aboriginal people, service providers and other stakeholders. Voluntary participation by invitation with consent to record discussions.

**Results:** Three themes (containing six issues) emerged: (i) impacts on culture (harm to traditional family structure, culture and place; bringing shame to culture); (ii) sociodemographic and economic impacts (skewing of the population profile; loss of livelihood and participation; aggravation of existing socioeconomic disadvantage); and (iii) loss. In addition to continuing well-being programs that were already successful, proposed adaptive strategies were: capturing the spirit of Aboriginal knowledge and traditions; knowing your land; and Aboriginal arts.

**Conclusion:** Prolonged drought presented substantial and unique adversity for rural NSW Aboriginal communities, compounding existing, underlying disadvantage. Drought-induced degradation of and, sometimes, the necessity to leave traditional land drove people apart and disrupted Caring for Country activities. Some people reported despair at not being able to discharge cultural obligations. At the same time, the drought prompted increased love of and concern for land and a renewed enthusiasm for expressing connectedness to land through all forms of art. Modern Aboriginal and wider community well-being programs helped frame a response to drought alongside traditional Aboriginal dreaming and cultural approaches to emotional health and well-being.

**KEY WORDS:** climate change, drought, indigenous, mental health, psychiatric.

## Introduction

Connectedness to healthy land is essential for Aboriginal health and well-being:

Our identity . . . remains tied to our land, to our cultural practices . . . Destroy this relationship and you damage – sometimes irrevocably – individual human beings and their health.<sup>1</sup>

Caring for Country activities (time on country; annual grass burning; gathering food and medicines; ceremony; protecting sacred areas; and artwork<sup>2</sup>) are an important form of connectedness to land. Recent studies among Aboriginal residents of Arnhem Land have shown superior health outcomes among those participating in Caring for Country.<sup>2,3</sup> These benefits extend to

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\*Address by Ms Bonnie Johnson, Aboriginal family worker, Mental Health Family Support Program, Centacare, Lake Cargelligo, New South Wales, initial consultation workshop, Orange, July 2008.

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**What is already known on this subject:**

- Aboriginal people live with endemic, historically based, whole person, whole community disadvantage and yet have retained formidable resilience.
- Active caring for land is associated with wide-ranging benefits for Aboriginal health and well-being.
- Prolonged drought undermines individual, family and community well-being; communities need integrated social and well-being services to meet its challenges.

mental health or, as Aboriginal people prefer, 'social and emotional well-being' (used hereafter).

Like the rest of the world, Australia's natural environment is under threat of continuing, even irreversible climate change.<sup>4</sup> In Australia, more variable and extreme weather conditions will mean mainly extremely hot and/or violent weather:<sup>5</sup> in the context of climate change, we can no longer think of drought as a one-off disaster.<sup>6</sup> This poses substantial risks to our land (the hottest, driest inhabited continent on earth) and, therefore, to the opportunity for Aboriginal people to undertake Caring for Country activities.

Human health, even survival, is at risk, particularly among the world's most vulnerable people;<sup>7</sup> in Australia, significant impacts on social and emotional well-being might be expected in rural and remote communities.<sup>8</sup> These will eventuate through multiple pathways,<sup>5</sup> especially by contributing to the erosion of the physical environment on which economic and social well-being depend, exacerbating the disadvantage that typifies these communities, especially their Aboriginal members.<sup>9</sup> There has also already been drought-related loss of private and public sector employment opportunities,<sup>10</sup> particularly for Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal people's social and emotional well-being is of particular concern;<sup>11</sup> despite notoriously unreliable data,<sup>12</sup> psychiatric morbidity rates, including suicide, are markedly elevated among these Australians.<sup>13</sup> Yet, although we know how important is connectedness to the land for Aboriginal people, and of the potential for climate change to further harm the land, no academic consideration has been given to how prolonged drought might affect Aboriginal social and emotional well-being.<sup>8</sup> Nor have Aboriginal people spoken for themselves on this topic.

The aims of this paper are to summarise (i) some ways in which Aboriginal people believe prolonged drought

**What this study adds:**

- Prolonged drought has adversely affected Aboriginal social and emotional well-being by disrupting culture, creating sociodemographic and economic pressures and inducing loss.
- Aboriginal people have responded with a renewed commitment to care for the land.
- Appreciation for modern well-being programs together with Aboriginal dreaming have created a vision of greater connectedness to land, to each other and to other Australians.

**TABLE 1:** Location of forums, numbers of participants and number of communities nominated by participants as requiring supplementary assistance

Location	Number of participants	Rural NSW communities requiring assistance†
Orange	39	6 identified
Lismore	31	4 identified
Dubbo	46	8 identified
Albury	23	4 identified
Tamworth	15	5 identified
Sydney	12	N/A
Total	166	27 different communities identified as requiring assistance

†Communities not named to protect privacy. N/A, not applicable.

might impact on their social and emotional well-being in rural and remote NSW and (ii) possible adaptive strategies people proposed or had tried.

## Method

Between July and September 2008, at the height of the 'Big Dry', consultative forums were convened across rural NSW under the NSW Health Rural Adversity Mental Health Program (Table 1).<sup>14</sup> A statewide forum was held in Orange, followed by one forum in each of four regional centres.

Government, non-government and community stakeholders were invited by letter to attend the forums, with multiple follow-up telephone calls. Participants were Elders and key community members, as well as representatives from various Aboriginal organisations, such as

Aboriginal health and the Aboriginal Lands Council, and from a range of other organisations, including churches, health and medical organisations, primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions (including teachers), charities, housing, police and local councils.

Each forum followed approximately the same format, beginning with an Aboriginal community worker presentation and, where available (Orange, Dubbo), a presentation by a consultant psychiatrist on healing and resilience in Aboriginal communities. Participants then discussed the *implications for social and emotional well-being confronting Aboriginal communities in the face of drought and other rural adversities*. Next, participants discussed strategies that might help address the issues they had raised and listed (i) communities that might need supplementary assistance and (ii) the issues these communities faced, which participants prioritised. In one community, participants also identified local programs that might be suited to partnership service-delivery approaches. Following the forums, in March 2009, Aboriginal health coordinators met in Sydney to further discuss the issues raised. Discussions were recorded contemporaneously on butchers' paper and later transferred to Word files. These records were then made available to participants.

Using the method proposed by Carley,<sup>15</sup> to create 'concept maps' (considered preferable to textual or code-based analysis for data gathered from open-ended questions), we identified the top six issues raised at the forums and organised them into three themes. Each issue was assigned a priority reflecting the priority suggested by the participants at the forums and our records of which issues were most commonly raised.

## Results

Participants volunteered their appreciation that the impacts of continuing drought on Aboriginal people's social and emotional well-being were being acknowledged by Aboriginal communities and the wider community. Bringing Aboriginal and other Australians together to combine skills and 'yarn' had given 'meaningful expression of partnership' and a sense of unity, vision and clarity. Aboriginal workers, in particular, were seen as able to assist all participants to understand each other.

### Effects of prolonged drought

Participants noted that their principle struggle is to retain identity, connection and culture, raise living standards, gain land rights and be free to care for country and heritage. Issues of drought were seen as woven into this overarching imperative.

### 1. Impacts on culture

*Harm to traditional family structure, culture and place (priority #1)* Many participants stated that there was damage to tradition and culture associated with climate change-related impacts on the land. For example, participants felt that traditional men's roles were threatened by drought-related loss of habitat and wildlife and its impact on seasonal work. With drought compromising the availability of much wildlife and plant life, many species were no longer widely available. Further, in some places, land had been fenced off, newer pastoralists had denied access to the land or the drought had dried up rivers. Where this had occurred, rivers and land that were traditional meeting places or used as hunting and food gathering grounds were no longer accessible. These factors together contributed to a diminution of traditional practice and culture and associated source of positive identity, particularly for Elders and older community members.

*Bringing shame to culture (priority #6)* Some participants stated that drought-related impacts on communities were affecting social and emotional well-being and lowering self-esteem by promoting antisocial behaviour. Increased use of alcohol was thought to have led to a rise in aggression, violence and conflicts within communities, with some anecdotal evidence of increases in suicide. These increases in antisocial and risk-taking behaviour were associated with bringing shame to Aboriginal culture, with people beginning to mistrust each other, gossip maliciously and turn against each other.

### 2. Sociodemographic and economic impacts

*Skewing of the population profile (priority #2)* With continuing drought, it was reported that increasing numbers of working-age people were moving to regional centres or staying longer in bigger cities. Often, grandparents were left behind to undertake caregiving responsibilities, leaving smaller centres with concentrations of very old and very young people and those with other barriers to moving away, such as poor health.

*Loss of livelihood and participation (priority #5)* Drought has compromised employment opportunities, with a differentially severe effect on Aboriginal people. With farmers unable to afford farm labourers, there has been reduced seasonal work and, thus, a noticeable increase in reliance on government income support. While pastoralists and farmers were entitled to government compensation schemes, there were no such

schemes for farm employees, many of whom are Aboriginal. For example, in Kamilaroi Country around Moree in northern NSW, where cotton once employed around 200–300 Aboriginal people, it now employs eight. These losses have been associated with a decrease in people's ability to buy basic items, such as food, or gifts for special occasions. Notably, this also impacts on culture (see theme 1): for men and women, paid work is associated with purpose, identity, security and the ability to contribute to and participate in community and cultural activities.<sup>16</sup> Without money, people could not, for example, afford fuel to travel to communally important sporting events<sup>17</sup> or 'sorry business' (funerals).

*Aggravation of existing socioeconomic disadvantage (priority #3)* Related to damage to the population profile and economic opportunity, some participants noted widespread concern that the drought was aggravating other, existing socioeconomic disadvantages. These included lack of (culturally appropriate) housing, overcrowding and reduced attention to home maintenance, such as drainage and plumbing. Drought-related damage to the agricultural economic base of local areas was also reducing local services. For example, some local businesses and services, such as banks, post offices and schools, had closed. There were also reduced health services, check-ups and related services, especially those provided by Aboriginal health workers (Aboriginal people have expressed a preference for Aboriginal service providers<sup>18</sup>).

### 3. Loss and grief (priority #4)

Aboriginal people struggle every day with meeting even the simple requirements of living, a struggle which has its roots in endemic, historically based, multifactorial disadvantage. Continuing severe drought, with the cultural and geographic dislocation and loss of country and identity that it brings, has deepened already-present feelings of grief, loss and guilt. Participants reported that a number of communities were suffering despair, helplessness and hopelessness, and that there was a general mood of despondency among Aboriginal community members.

#### Adaptive strategies

Participants described the value of local and state-funded community-based Aboriginal health promotion programs that would support general social and emotional health during drought. These included programs such as Auntie Jean's statewide Elder-led program, which helps people take care of their own long-term health problems,<sup>19</sup> the 'Pitstop' program for Aboriginal

men's health, and the annual 'footie knockouts' that are particularly effective in targeting youth health behaviours.<sup>14</sup> They also identified three kinds of activities that might more directly address the effects of drought.

#### *Capturing the spirit of Aboriginal knowledge and traditions*

People spoke of the way in which integrating Aboriginal dreaming (knowledge, obligations and traditions) into looking at (understanding the totality of the physical characteristics of the land) and looking after land was breathing life into a renewed respect for the importance of the lands, water, plants and animals and of connecting with them. People shared stories about local activities that had been organised to help people remember how Aboriginal culture is connected to land; and they explained how these activities had helped people learn about and share their culture with other members of their communities.

#### *Knowing your land*

Participants acknowledged that state and local governments had entrusted land to local Aboriginal communities so that traditional custodians could care for their sites and heritage in partnership with the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Museums. This has resulted in increased access to traditional lands and greater freedom to care for them which had, in turn, helped larger numbers of people to spend time on and get to know their land.

#### *Aboriginal arts*

Aboriginal culture and connectedness to healthy land are being revitalised through the arts. Painting, printing, photography, film, theatre, music and dance have all featured in artistic responses to prolonged drought. This is considered appropriate and desirable.

## Discussion

Our consultations indicated that drought was affecting Aboriginal well-being in six related ways: damaging traditional culture; skewing the population profile in smaller centres; exacerbating underlying grief and trauma; undermining livelihoods and participation; aggravating socioeconomic disadvantage; and creating a context for behaviour that brings shame to culture. Solutions proposed were: continuing to support general Aboriginal health promotion programs; Aboriginal dreaming, that can nourish a remembered connectedness to land; Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together to care for the land; and encouraging

Aboriginal arts to flourish. For example: (i) *Rekindling the Spirit* is a Bundjalung community movement providing activities, such as camps, that empower Aboriginal people to find their own way to spiritual, emotional, sexual and physical healing;<sup>20</sup> and (ii) the Wiradjuri people host the River Dreaming Festival at Kelso, on the Macquarie River in Bathurst, to bring people together on country. Aboriginal people and other Australians can attend a twilight performance of the Wiradjuri creation story of the Platypus and activities telling of local environmental initiatives.<sup>21</sup>

Aboriginal people live with endemic, historically based, intergenerational whole person, whole community disadvantage.<sup>22–25</sup> It is difficult to separate what might be the effects of drought from the weight of endless struggle. Nevertheless, this is an essential research task. From a policy perspective, it is evident from this study that there are many well-being programs that Aboriginal people feel will be helpful in the face of drought. They have also suggested initiatives related to caring for country during drought that could heal both land and people. However, these are fragments of a solution, not an integrative, community-wide approach to addressing the impact of drought on well-being.

With climate change driving underlying drying, we must expect longer, more severe droughts; we must plan long term for future droughts,<sup>6</sup> knowing that they will cause continuing adversities. However, Aboriginal people might also obtain unexpected benefits,<sup>26</sup> such as easier access to abandoned land for caring for country purposes and, where some residents might have decided to leave communities, making housing cheaper, the possibility of returning to extended family.

## Limitations

Our findings are based on a small, non-random sample of participants who lived in or could afford the time or money to travel to regional centres. Senior employees from larger agencies were overrepresented while grassroots-level workers and those from smaller agencies, remote-dwelling people and Aboriginal community participants were underrepresented, limiting the generalisability of our findings. Nevertheless, those who contributed had considerable local expertise and were well accepted within the Aboriginal community. Additionally, the solutions proposed were consistent with best practice in Aboriginal social and emotional well-being.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite sampling limitations, this study has shown that prolonged drought affects Aboriginal communities in unique, culturally specific ways. Mainly, these are adverse but unanticipated opportunities might arise.

Indeed, Aboriginal participants in this project reflected a sense of being heard, of ‘Ganma’: ‘If you listen to us, we’ll listen to you’;<sup>27</sup> Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can work together to care for the land in drought and to connect with it in ways that are, for everyone, socially and emotionally healing.

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