

ADDRESS TO THE AUSTRALASIAN RADIATION PROTECTION SOCIETY (ARPS) CONFERENCE 2023

Right-way, Two-way Science and New Solutions on Hazardous Waste **Jade Ritchie, General Manager Business Development**

Good morning. It's great to be on Yugambah Country. I pay my respects to Yugambah Elders past and present.

I'm speaking today about coming together for Country. I'm coming at this from the perspective of an Aboriginal woman, and also someone who has a professional and personal commitment to managing hazardous waste safely.

I've got a bit to say today, so for ease I'll break it into five themes:

- Who am I?
- What is the conundrum?
- Why do we need to do better?
- What is possible?
- How can we come together for Country?

Who am I?

I am Jade Ritchie. I am from the Bunda Clan of the Gooreng Gooreng Nation. My nation is large. We span from the saltwater to the freshwater. Our landscape is varied. From the volcanic rock along the coastline, to the fertile red dense fields of soil, to the rocky outcrops and caves in the more western parts.

If you fly over my land now it looks like a beautiful, living, patchwork quilt, the cane farms making perfect green squares, bare fields ready for replanting providing the contrasting red. The rows of crops like the delicate work of a seamstress, bringing the pieces together. The ocean provides a magnificent frame for this vista, with the Burnett and Mary Rivers winding in and out. If I still my mind long enough, though, I can see past the last few hundred years of settlement, the plotted, fenced, and titled farms fade away. The roads, powerlines and rooftops of houses blur and vanish, and I stop looking and start feeling Country. *Binna narla*—it means to listen with your heart.



I then feel the movement, the life, the pulse that Country has. I feel, more than think, about the way Country, that particular Country, has provided for my family, for my ancestors, for tens of thousands of years. My family eats from the ocean, from the freshwater creeks and from the land, the varied landscape aligned with the needs of the seasons. My ancestors did not live nomadic lives of randomness. Not at all. They lived in tune with the seasons, the cycles, the availability of food sources, water and the different shelter requirements to deal with the change in elements at different times of the year. And though development and a different way of living have impacted this, we still know. There are things that we were born knowing and there are things our old ones taught us. All of this knowing continues our connection to Country and, as our knowledge grows in the western ways as well, we are finding new ways to protect and care for our Country. Together, the two knowledges are required, and equal value should be placed on both of the knowledge systems.

I am a mother, I am an Aunty and therefore I am an educator. I am of an age where my obligations are twofold. I am obliged to listen to my Elders and start to pick up the load from them as it becomes their time to slow down, and I am obliged to care for, teach and plan for the future of the young ones.

My father is a knowledge keeper in my family. And whilst I feel I had a fairly typical urban upbringing, I now realise more overtly that along with teaching us how to read books and ride bikes, Dad also ensured we knew about fire management, how to find food and how to sustain the ecosystems we are part of. Just recently I was on a road trip in Queensland and childhood memories came flooding back. We'd pulled up to use a public restroom in a park and I came across a massive Burdekin Plum tree. I was so excited to pick up the small bitter fruits from the ground, give them a dust off and hook in. I hadn't eaten one in years. Roadtrips with Dad were a literal 'moving feast'. He'd stop when he found a guava tree, he'd stop for plums, prickly pear if we were on a coastal road. He'd take us down to the water and break off whole rocks covered in oysters and throw it onto the fire. There was always a fire – to keep the midgees away and to cook the food. Dad had me throwing dillies off the old bridge pylons to catch muddies as soon as I was big enough to climb down when the trains went by.

As well as food, Dad taught us a lot about water: where to find it, how to store it and in more recent years, how to ensure water security, now that we share our land with so many others who clearly do not value it the way we do.

It has been incredibly important for us to ensure the next generation grow up with this knowledge and that they are able to navigate the increased complexities of land and sea management we experience now.

I am raising two beautiful teenagers in the Northern Territory. We've been living on Larrakia Country for the last 11 years. My son, Jack, will be 13 next month. He recently wrote an essay for school and described how spoilt kids are in the Territory to have world famous sunsets at Mindil Beach in their front yard and Kakadu National Park in their backyard.



Even though I'm not bringing my children up on my ancestral lands, they have fully embraced their responsibilities to respectfully care for the Country they live on. Jack takes this so seriously that he is a Junior Kenbi Ranger. Jack's close friend is the grandson of the Ranger Coordinator, and the two young boys were taken out with the rangers when they did some burning off a few years ago. That hooked them. From there they wanted to know more and do more, so the boys organised a junior ranger camp. Forty kids and parents camped at Charles Darwin Point for three days while the kids learnt about land and sea management along with general life skills and how to look after each other, working in that environment. The parents learned a lot too.

Not only did it pique the kids' curiosity, making them willing learners, it also gave them confidence—confidence to delve into the knowledge they were born with. You see, our kids hear the news too. It's often reported that school attendance and achievement are lower in the Northern Territory. Our kids often hear the statistics, either through the news, or around the yarning circles of their Elders trying to change the systems that result in those statistics, statistics that suggest they are more likely to go to prison than to university. What our kids need to hear is that they are the first scientists, that they come from generations of knowledge keepers, and that this is still their land to care for and they know how to do it.

We need to keep our young ones curious and keep the knowledge alive.

What is the conundrum?

My people have maintained a sustainable connection to Country for over 60,000 years. We were the first scientists. We are keepers of knowledge. But we too now grapple with new problems, problems that our ancestors did not experience. And it is for this reason that we must invest in two-way science. We must get this right.

The *Australia's Indigenous land and forest estate (2020)* dataset, from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, shows that a total of:

- 134 million hectares of land in Australia (17%) is Indigenous owned - of this, 22 million hectares is forest;
- 174 million hectares of land in Australia (22%) is under some form of Indigenous management; and
- 337 million hectares of land in Australia (44%) is subject to other special rights for Indigenous people.

These areas of land are not mutually exclusive: there is substantial overlap between Indigenous owned land, Indigenous managed or co-managed land, and land subject to other special rights.

Here's the important bit. The intersection of these attributes confirms the total area of land in the Indigenous estate in Australia as at 2016 was 438 million hectares, or **57% of the total land mass**.



So, very simply, for most of us in this room it means the work we do is on Indigenous land. It is for that reason I implore you to see Indigenous custodians as partners in the work you do rather than just another stakeholder.

This is the approach we've taken at Tellus Holdings. We're in the business of hazardous waste. Waste is a growing concern, not just in our nation but globally. Here's why:

- Australians produce 2.95 tonnes of waste per person per year;
- That's over 76 million tonnes of waste produced every year, just from our small country;
- The Latimer Report tells us that in 2019-2020 Australia generated around 7.4 million tonnes of **hazardous** waste, which is about 10% of all waste generated globally; and
- Each sector, even the fast-growing and popular renewables sector, has a waste problem to solve.

The conundrum we now face together is the tension between national interest and local benefit or impact. How do we negotiate that "pain point"? We need global solutions to deal with hazardous waste, including low-level radioactive waste, but in a way that reduces, not causes, harm to Country.

And the reality is that the safest place to manage waste, particularly radiation waste, relies on remoteness, stability, lack of underground water and geological barriers like clay, salt, and granite. So, for Tellus in particular, and for many of you here today, it's imperative that we approach this conundrum **with** communities, and with two-way knowledge and right-way science at the forefront of our thinking.

It's also important to remember that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people our own health and wellbeing is intrinsically linked to the health of Country. If Country is sick, we are sick.

Why do we need to do better?

We need to ask ourselves, honestly, what is the current relationship between the radiation sector and Indigenous communities? As someone who has discussions about low-level radioactive waste in Aboriginal communities, both in the top end and central Australia, I can tell you that we have work to do to build and/or rebuild trust.

Prior to joining Tellus, I had a public service career that spanned 20 years. I worked through all three levels of government, spending half of that time in youth justice, a few years in major projects and the remainder in Aboriginal Affairs. It was while I was the Director of Economic Development and Major Projects in Arnhem Land that I met Nate Smith, the CEO of Tellus. I had been made aware of a waste issue in Arnhem Land, many of them in fact, and went to a local Aboriginal Business in Darwin looking for a solution and they introduced me to Tellus. It was during our first meeting that we realised our goal was the same – to clean up Country and further, to ensure that any new activity on Country was done in a way that was safe and considerate of Country and its custodians. I became aware of the conundrum, and



I wanted to be part of the solution.

As I said before, for custodians, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in general, the health of Country is intrinsically linked to our health as individuals and our collective health as a community. When land or sea is sick, we are sick and right now the report card on both is not great.

The *Closing the Gap* report says that to accelerate improvements in life outcomes, programs and services need to be designed, developed, and implemented in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have called for a community-led, strengths-based approach, one that values their experience.

The same approach is required to achieve better outcomes for the health of Country, and this is where our sector and the way we operate can make a huge impact, either negatively or positively, depending on our approach. Recognition of First Nations knowledges opens up a new way of working together by placing the same value on both sciences. One is no more important than the other and, ideally, they co-exist to give us the best solutions.

Recently, our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities suffered another devastating blow and set back. We asked to be recognised in the constitution through a Voice to Parliament—and this was denied.

I will speak for a moment about the referendum, not an analysis of the result but of the fact that the principles of listening and working in partnership with the community were precisely things that the Voice sought to address. Now that opportunity has been lost at a national level, we will need to pick up that work, and that is where the current opportunity sits. We can use the proposed decision-making methodology that puts the simple act of listening at the fore. We need to create overarching systems and a sector-wide commitment that will allow for better outcomes.

When we strip back the politics, we can all agree that listening and good advice result in better outcomes on the ground. We know that when we're making decisions, whether that be at home or at work, the best approach is to do our research, get the data but then to also talk to people who've had that experience before; and we also seek the advice of experts. Data, lived experience and expert advice are the ingredients of good decision-making.

So, when it comes to program or project design, particularly projects on Country, it makes sense to include the experience and voices of Indigenous people right at the outset. This has not been done well in the past and has led to disastrous outcomes for people and Country, as well as fiscally poor decisions that have cost the taxpayer.

I'll give you an example; recently we've been in discussions with native title owners about a new Tellus project, [our proposed Chandler deep geological repository near Alice Springs](#). The custodians of the land we are wanting to use were the first people we started the conversation with. Our belief is that, if they don't want the project, then there is no



project.

This early and open dialogue helped us build a meaningful relationship based on trust, and also resulted in us receiving good advice on the layout of our construction footprint. This will ensure the safety of sacred sites and save us capital.

Had we not received the advice at the beginning we could have built in the wrong area, and it would have been a costly mistake to correct. This early interaction has also given us an entirely different perspective on not just the considerations, but also the opportunities in that entire region. The custodians have had connection to that particular land and its water sources for tens of thousands of years so it makes total sense that they would have valuable knowledge that we can all benefit from.

The other principle I encourage you to commit to is truth-telling. To do better in this space we have to acknowledge what has happened in the past. I assume this room is filled with scientists and researchers, so you'd understand the benefit of evaluation and applying learnings to improve something. We can only improve on the relationship and our way of doing things if we're honest about how it's been done before.

At this point, I want to remind you of the conundrum, which is the tension between national interest and local benefit or impact. How do we negotiate that pain point? How do we come together for Country? We need global solutions to deal with hazardous waste, including radioactive waste, in a way that reduces, not causes harm to Country. And we must approach the problem and the solution with the agreed position that Indigenous communities are partners in this, because we are intrinsically linked to Country, we hold knowledge that can be helpful in this space, and we own over 50% of the land mass. Waste is a massive pain point, and it is also a massive economy.

What is possible?

We have seen a shift over recent years: an increase in partnerships, in co-design, in community led decision making. These are not just empty government terms. We do know that, when done right, good outcomes can be achieved, but the examples are still too few and far between.

We've certainly seen successful examples in the carbon emissions space that uses methodology that acknowledges and utilizes two-way science. Just as it's applied to managing greenhouse gases, we could apply the methodology to the management of radiation.

What else is possible when we start unlocking tens of thousands of years of knowledge? An interesting exercise we just went through at Tellus was to completely deconstruct all of our operational positions to see how we could increase Indigenous employment. Our discussions with community confirmed what we had suspected: not everyone wants to drive a truck!



For instance, we realised the alignment between some of our positions and the duties of a ranger. Ranger programs in some areas are the backbone of the community, the sweet spot of economic participation in a meaningful way that aligns with cultural obligations. Last week, half of our exec team were again in Central Australia and again it was reconfirmed to us that the community wanted to see investment in STEM programs for their young ones. The aspirations and potentials of Indigenous communities are diverse and complex. What is possible when we change our way of working to align with community aspirations and culture?

How do we come together for Country?

The “how” needs to be negotiated on the ground with local parties, but there are a number of principles that can guide us in the right direction. There are well established cultural, legal and standard procedures. The key things to remember are these:

- Indigenous input is not a value to be brought to the table—it is a commercial asset and should be treated as such;
- We’re still learning, so let’s learn together;
- We’re still in the conundrum: we are in a developing sector and therefore have the opportunity to be proactive in our engagement. This should not be a tacked-on afterthought. This type of approach has led to the legacy issues we’re all still dealing with now. We can reshape the relationship and the narrative; and
- There are national frameworks available to us—one I’ll point to is *Our Knowledge, Our Way* from the CSIRO and its partners.

In conclusion, our focus should always be on the next generation. What we can do is set the policy and agenda. We can lobby together, as we have common ground. We can partner in ways that are mutually beneficial and we can build systems now that will be enabling for the next generation.

We are just planting the tree now: we must water it, keep it safe from being cut down, so it can provide the shade for the next generation.

But to plant the seed alone is not enough. We must tend to it, invest in it. A tangible way we can do that is invest in education and training. Be clever about that. Make it inclusive of remote kids. You’ll have to think outside the box: for example, not just science degrees, but micro credentials too. Find ways to unlock the knowledge that already exists in some children. Keep them curious, include them, listen to them—and set the example of how we can come together for Country, using right-way, two-way science.

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