



Natural
Hazards
Research
Australia



NATIONAL
INDIGENOUS
DISASTER
RESILIENCE

Colonial Load and Cultural Conflict

Understanding the experiences of First Nations staff and volunteers in Australia's emergency services, land management and resilience sector

Researchers

NIDR **Bhiamie Williamson and Zoe Schultz**



National Indigenous Disaster Resilience

National Indigenous Disaster Resilience (NIDR) is a research program at Monash University. Established in 2022, NIDR has quickly established itself as a leading national research program, and the only research program dedicated to investigating and quantifying the impacts that major disaster events have on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

NIDR is grounded in an understanding that climate change is producing more frequent and severe disasters. Despite the growing recognition that major disasters disproportionately impact Indigenous peoples, there is a little evidence and knowledge regarding how these events impact Indigenous peoples in ways that are different to other Australians. There is also little information or knowledge on Indigenous priorities during major disaster events.

NIDR aims to address these gaps, while challenging dominant discourses that focus on vulnerabilities alone, and focus on First Nations knowledge and leadership in disaster resilience and recovery.



NIDR Research Projects

Current

- Foundations in Indigenous Disaster Resilience (NHRA funded)
- **Colonial Load and Cultural Conflict (NHRA funded)**
- First Nations Women, Cultural Fire Knowledge, Wellbeing and Memory (NHRA funded)

Past

- Enhancing relationships between Aboriginal communities and emergency services in South Australia (SAFECOM)
- Aboriginal experiences of the 2022 floods in Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales (RMIT)



NIDR Team

Colonial Load and Cultural Conflict researchers



Bhiamie Williamson

PROGRAM LEAD

Bhiamie is a Euahlayi man from north-west New South Wales. He has studied and worked with Indigenous communities throughout Australia, Canada and the United States, and has a history advising and researching in the disaster resilience sector. He has been widely published, writing about the unique impacts of disasters on Indigenous peoples.



Zoe Schultz

RESEARCH FELLOW

Zoe is a Gamilaroi and Malaysian-Chinese woman from south-east Queensland. She has previously worked in planning and transport roles at the local government level, and has studied a Master of Disaster Risk and Resilience in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Zoe is committed to supporting work that strengthens the safety and wellbeing of Country, communities and our cultures.



Lucy Connoles

SENIOR PROGRAM COORDINATOR

Lucy grew up on Wiradjuri Country in Albury and spent most of her high school years living on Arrernte Country in Alice Springs. She has worked with First Nations communities on Native Title, Treaty and health and wellbeing projects in community engagement, project coordination, and policy roles. Lucy enjoys working collaboratively to develop projects and events tailored to community values and aspirations.



Nell Reidy

RESEARCH FELLOW

Nell is a settler-descended researcher with a focus on trauma-informed and healing-centred engagement. She is an experienced facilitator who has engaged in collaborative research with Indigenous communities across Australia for more than seven years. Nell prioritises trusting and respectful relationships to develop research priorities and positive outcomes for communities.



Alex Perlinski

SENIOR RESEARCH OFFICER

Alex is a policy professional and researcher from Brisbane with experience working in emergency management at the state and Commonwealth levels. He holds a Master of Public Policy from the Australian National University, where he studied contemporary and Indigenous governance. Alex is focussed on supporting a future consistent with health, diversity and justice for all human and ecological communities.



Colonial Load and Cultural Conflict

The Colonial Load and Cultural Conflict project is funded by Natural Hazards Research Australia.

From 2025 to 2027, this nationally-focused project aims to investigate the representation, experiences and sector-specific causes of colonial load and cultural conflict among current and former First Nations staff and volunteers in Australia's emergency services, land management and resilience sector (the sector).

Through the project, we will:

- Describe Indigenous participation in the sector.
- Identify sector-specific causes of colonial load and cultural conflict.
- Develop recommendations to foster safer, inclusive and welcoming workplaces where First Nations people can flourish.



What is Colonial Load?

Colonial load is the **additional, often unpaid, load** placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to educate, guide or support non-Indigenous people on Indigenous history, culture, inclusion and reconciliation.

Without appropriate support, this can lead to:

- Burnout
- Isolation
- Stress
- Other wellbeing issues

It is important to recognise this as **colonial load**, rather than cultural load, as the provision of free labour is not a cultural obligation and should not be treated as such.



What is Cultural Conflict?

First Nations people may hold **different ethics, morals or values** to their colleagues and agency/organisation.

Cultural conflict is used to describe instances where Indigenous ethics and morals **misalign, are not known or respected, or are dismissed**, in western emergency services, land management and resilience agencies.

Without appropriate support, First Nations people may experience conflict with their:

- Colleagues
- Family
- Community
- Obligations to Country



Why is this project needed?

- ✓ There are challenges **sourcing, recruiting, and retaining** skilled First Nations staff and volunteers in the sector, which is also contributing to a declining emergency services volunteer workforce in Australia.
 - ✓ We know Indigenous communities **feel safer** when there is an **Indigenous presence**.
 - ✓ A lack of data and information suggests that First Nations people are **underrepresented** in the sector.
 - ✓ We need to understand how to create **safer, inclusive and welcoming** workplaces to strengthen First Nations leadership and participation in the sector.
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Timeline

March 2025 – March 2027

Data Collection

**EMPLOYMENT
AND
VOLUNTEERING
DATA**

**NATIONAL
SURVEY
(OPEN IN 2026)**

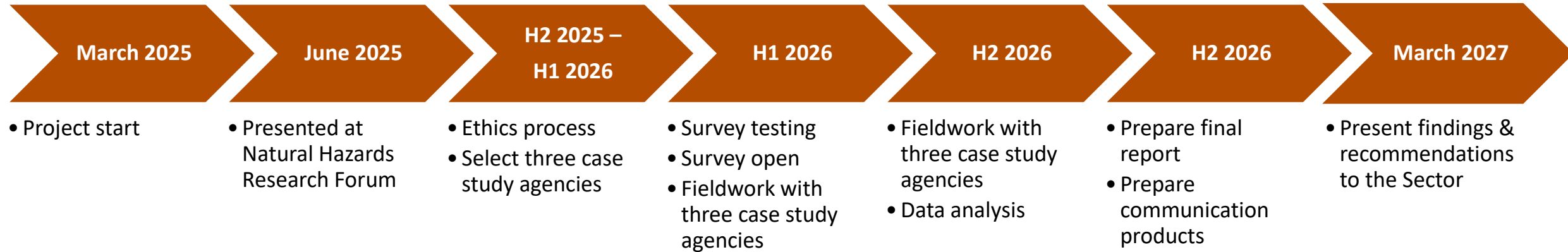
**INTERVIEWS AND
FOCUS GROUPS**

Final Output

To foster safer, inclusive and welcoming workplaces where First Nations people can flourish, by enhancing Indigenous leadership and representation.



Project Timeline



H1 = First half of 2025 or 2026
H2 = Second half of 2025 or 2026



Case Study Agencies



NSW Rural Fire Service
(NSW RFS)



Fire Rescue Victoria
(FRV)



To be confirmed



Alignment with Reconciliation Action Plans



Action 6. Demonstrate respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by observing cultural protocols.

Action 8. Improve employment outcomes by increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruitment, retention and professional development.

Action 8. Demonstrate respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by increasing cultural safety within FRV.

Action 9. Improve employment outcomes by increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruitment, retention and professional development.



What data are we collecting?

Employment and Volunteering Data

High-level data on First Nations staffing and volunteering

Identify current and former First Nations staff and/or volunteers

Interviews and Focus Groups

Carry out interviews and focus groups with First Nations staff and/or volunteers in each case study agency

National Survey

Invite current and former First Nations staff and volunteers to complete a survey about their experiences in the sector



How can other agencies help with this project?

Help us by providing **high-level data** on First Nations staffing and volunteering from your agency



This will help us to create a **knowledge base** of First Nations staff and volunteers across **different agencies** and **jurisdictions**



How could the future look?

- ✓ **Reduced challenges** in sourcing, recruiting, and retaining skilled First Nations staff and volunteers, contributing to a **more diverse** and **resilient** sector.
 - ✓ Increased feelings of **safety** within Indigenous communities through **stronger Indigenous leadership** and **participation** in the sector.
 - ✓ **Improved representation** of First Nations people across **all levels** of the sector, including leadership.
 - ✓ **Safe, inclusive, and welcoming workplaces** where First Nations people feel **valued** and **supported** to flourish in their roles.
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Interested in this project?

Contact us at nidr@monash.edu

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