

Speech for Women's Climate Congress, 16th March, 2020

Felicity McCallum

ALLA

I dedicate this to the land and water ways of Australia. May our talking today awaken us to action, to **do something** for this place, and the planet more widely so it is safe, sustainable and flourishing.

In this part of the breakfast together, I will speak to 2 areas:

1. Climate change and bushfires of 2019-2020 through a lens of indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships
2. Community transitions before us

Good morning.

Bo wiyeaka kakilliko Awabakal, I acknowledge my Awabakal ancestors, kakilliko Ngunnawal, ngambri all ancestors of this place and Australia wide who connect here, Elders, as well as present and future leaders.

Yesterday, tens of thousands of Australians said, 'Enough'.

Violations of trust and institutionalised assault against women were outed, exposed in a momentous bid to flush away the flagrantly misogynistic political culture that formally, casually and systematically exploits/cripples Australian women.

Today, a recently scorched, raped land and set of ecosystems connected to it, scrambles to regenerate itself as it has done every day since the black summer bushfires. It lays down new bark over tender wounds, displaying its own undeniable signs of fragility and raw courage, baring its own soulful ailing symptomatology that equally screams 'Enough'.

5.3 million hectares of what is called the state NSW were incinerated during the black summer of 2019-2020.

Fires burnt 37% of NSW's national parks.

According to the CSIRO, 2019 we experienced the warmest and driest weather conditions since 1900.

The firestorms ignited from a combustion of climate change induced weather conditions and neglect of targeted care regarding vegetation in our forests. The inferno's dimensions dwarfed anyone's earlier notions of what was possible. Part of our country, Awabakal country was swallowed up in the Gaspers Mountain blaze which burnt more than half a million hectares, that was the record as the biggest fire in Australia's history. Staggering. Overwhelming. It was and remains traumatic for all of us.

Precious, ancient trees, unique habitats, native animals, birds, insects were incinerated. 7000 year old rock paintings by my Indigenous ancestors were scorched beyond being recognisability. Landscapes were destroyed and cultural, historical ways of knowing who we are were wiped out.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous people were mutually alarmed, terrified, shocked. We have this land in common. We relate to this land, we feel its humour, its tempo and its beauty and at this time, we felt its heat coming up through our feet. We coughed from the smoke going through our nostrils. By facing into the reality even though we naturally felt overwhelmed and shocked, we stumbled into a connection with each other which helps us know to our land better and tiles our way to greater Reconciliation.

I offer you the following as an example of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships in the face of the 2019-2020 bushfires.

Since the black summer bush fires, conservation scientists at Newcastle University, on Awabakal country, have been monitoring the brown tree frog whose populations start in the Watagan mountains and extend all the way down to Victoria.

From a western scientific point of view, the frog is an important barometer for the overall health of an ecosystem because it is both predator and prey. The vitality of a frog is a fairly reliable indicator on the purity of water systems and how well other living creatures are doing who are living in the vicinity. This team at Newcastle Uni told me two things.

First, that the brown tree frog enjoys a niche habitat in our Watagan mountains. However the large scale burning and reduction of brown tree frogs in southern NSW and Victoria means that the black summer fires were a bottleneck event for the species overall:

What is a bottleneck event?

A population bottleneck is an event that rapidly and drastically reduces the size of a population. The bottleneck may be caused by various events, such as an environmental disaster, the hunting of a species to the point of extinction, or habitat destruction that results in the deaths of organisms. The population bottleneck produces a decrease in the gene pool & Due to the event, the remaining population has a reduced capacity to be resilient in the face of future peril.

When the non-Indigenous Newcastle Uni scientists explained this for me and our Awabakal cousins, a moment of unexpected affinity occurred when they said to me that the invasion of Australia was like a bottleneck event for Indigenous Australians. I was grateful for the analogous thinking that had shown such an intellectual insight but moreso I was moved by the unself-conscious way that this conversation rolled out. Though I was thinking it, there was healing in her seeing and naming it. We were not Indigenous and non-Indigenous, we were just women sitting at a picnic table, sharing what we know, facing reality. By turning towards the painful deeper truths within this knowledge we were uncovering about the impacts of the fires, we reasoned things out, supported and connected to sustain the drive to do more. The brown tree frog elicited a response of relationship between us because we are not able to do such a great job on our own as we can with each other.

Climate protection, like Reconciliation is not a solution to evil but a response to it.

Unbeknownst to the Newcastle Uni mob, The frog has always figured largely in Awabakal lore, always teaching everybody about the nastiness of greed and the obvious necessity of sharing. At another time, you might like to look up the story of Tiddalik, a giant frog in the

Wollombi Valley, WHO, when overcome by a great thirst quenched it by drinking ALL the water from the Wollombi brook. But wait, the astonishing part of this story is that when the other animals realise that the frog has taken all the water for himself, they decide to make him laugh to get him to release his tummy so that the water returns to the brook.

As we start now to look at community transitions in the face of climate change, this story becomes really instructive.

There is a tenderness in the way that the other animals hold their relationship with the frog. Similarly, there needs to be a tenderness in the way those of us alarmed by climate change hold others to account in our relationships, especially with those who are not 'getting it'. Humour is not just about being funny, it about being warm, connected and forgiving. There is an economy and cleverness to humour, gentleness and humaneness that is key to our community transitions. They will happen faster if we can get along.

But importantly - We have to live in reality. We have to become people with large enough hearts and broad enough minds to steadily bear through, see through to what's what. We have to take risks, stop identifying with comfortable self-constructs and be ready to be a new people, even when that involves being publicly exposed. Faithfulness to the relationships we are forming and an unbridled sensibility of concern for the pain of 'the Other', especially when that is the pain of a person or indeed a part of nature like a tree, a magpie or crow, rather than an ostracising of them, is urgent. When we stop forgetting difficult realities as a way of coping and instead help each other, call on each other to be bigger people, we have changes afoot to be real civic society.

To finish, I would like everyone here to take a deep breath and with eyes open or closed, imagine your favourite natural place or animal, introduced or native to Australia. Really take the time to notice all those qualities that you love about this and what would happen if, metaphysically, you asked that part of the landscape or that animal for a virtue or quality that you need right now? It could be courage or it could be calm, or whatever it is that you perceive in this place/animal...and what if in reciprocal relationship you metaphysically express either symbolically or in internal words, the gift you are going to bring to it? It might be care or it might be advocacy, a voice, or it might be protection. And after a few breaths of feeling what that is like, you can open your eyes.

This is a totem relationships. All Australians can have this. We can let the land and animals, that is the part of our context bleeding the most at present to do with climate, lead. Isn't it time to connect here, to form agreements with our land, her animals and plants and ultimately with the people from here?

Everyone is charged with the calling to respond to climate change.

As we progress in the area of gender equity, we also expand our resources to address climate, racism and reconciliation and vice versa. By a holistic approach, **together**, we can all prosper.

Thank-you

