Culturally Significant Entities

Summary Report

Resilient Landscapes

Grass trees in Western Australia. Photo: Imagevixen/stock.adobe.com

Overview

The recognition of species and ecological communities of cultural significance to Indigenous Australians (culturally significant entities; CSE) presents a key opportunity to value Indigenous Knowledge and integrate traditional management practices into land and sea management.

At present, there is no consistent national definition of a culturally significant entity, and CSE are not considered by policy makers in the same way that other entities, such as threatened species, are considered.

This project highlights the importance of collaborative and Indigenous-led management of CSE in biodiversity conservation and natural resource management. This will empower Indigenous Australians to lead the decision-making that informs conservation and strategic land-use planning.

Elicitation of Indigenous Knowledge

A range of collaborative research methods were used throughout the project. Where possible, methods were led by Indigenous collaborators to ensure mutual benefits were achieved for all participants. The project was grounded in four key principles that empower Indigenous peoples to drive positive outcomes for biodiversity and people on Country.

These were:

1. to benefit the Indigenous community

2. to be undertaken for and with the Indigenous community, in line with their aspirations, needs and interests

3. to promote Indigenous cultural values

4. to be emancipatory

Triangulation of data sources

Data were collected from three sources (Figure 1):

- primary quantitative and qualitative data from workshops
- secondary data from case studies
- linked data from existing programs and agencies such as National Project Steering Committee (NPSC) and Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW).

Data was brought together through a triangulation process to combine and consolidate the results. This allowed the project team to formulate findings, develop conclusions and identify opportunities to inform the future management of culturally significant entities.
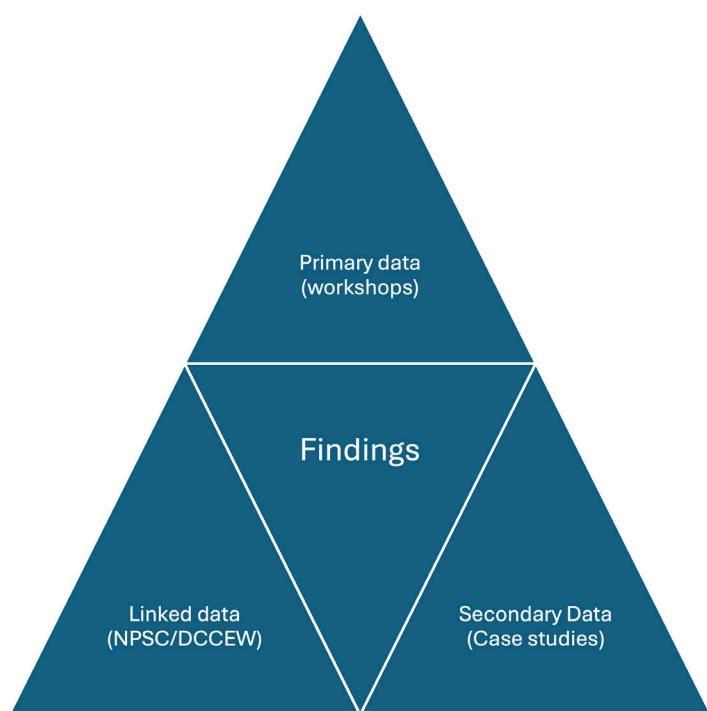

Figure 1: Triangulation of data from three sources to inform the project findings.

Workshops to define and support CSE (primary data)

Traditional Custodians, Indigenous land and sea managers, land and sea councils, Indigenous researchers and other key Indigenous stakeholders actively participated in developing a definition of CSE and advancing recommendations for legislation and policy reform to support CSE. The workshops sought to achieve consensus on the definition of CSE and the delineation of biocultural objectives and measures that could inform policy development, planning and assessment.

Development of case studies (secondary data)

To develop a national awareness of CSE, in-depth case studies from across Australia covering a variety of species and ecological communities were produced in partnership with Indigenous Knowledge-holders.

Indigenous-led governance (linked data)

The project used a governance model led by Indigenous people, with an Indigenous Leadership Group (ILG) and Indigenous-led National Project Steering Committee (NPSC). Members of the ILG and NPSC were selected based on their expertise and experience. NPSC included senior staff from Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW). The Indigenous experts assisted by promoting the concept of CSE within communities, at conferences and at other Indigenous gatherings. The Indigenous experts communicated workshop findings and elicited place-based examples and case studies of CSE.

The triangulation process resulted in three outputs:

1. a national definition of CSE defined by Indigenous Australians

2. agreement by Indigenous experts on the biocultural objectives that would be used to identify CSE

3. recommendations for legislative and policy reform to recognise CSE.

The project was undertaken with Human Research Ethics endorsement (approval HRE2024-0132) from Curtin University.

Key Findings

Over a 12-month period the project engaged with 300 individuals at six workshops, co-developed 21 case studies for CSE and obtained guidance from ILG, NPSC and DCCEEW on 15 occasions.

1. A national definition of CSE defined by Indigenous Australians

Throughout the engagement process, Indigenous participants repeatedly raised concerns about the clarity and accessibility of the draft definition for CSE. Consequently, a concise definition with explanation notes has been adopted.

> Culturally Significant Entities (CSE) are species and ecological communities to which Indigenous Australians attribute cultural value, and which are critical to their relationship with and adaptation to Country (land, water, sea and sky).

Explanatory notes:

1. International terms including Cultural Keystone, Culturally Important Species (CIS) or Culturally Significant Species (CSS) – excludes objects/subjects that are not purely a single plant or animal. Cultural Keystone Species (CKS) – keystone has an established definition in the ecological literature and is already used in the ecological community which may cause excessive confusion.

2. Culturally Significant Entities (CSE) are a place-based cultural assets, which are a birthright, and have both tangible and intangible value.

3. CSE are recognised as animals, plants and ecological communities (land/water/sky/sea). They may be:

   • spiritually or culturally important in creation stories, songlines, cultural pathways or trading routes

   • ecological communities that encompass abiotic elements such as wind, soil and fire

   • totems for Nations, tribes, groups, families or individuals

   • a source of food or medicine

   • materials for tools or implements to undertake customary activities and traditional practice

   • indicators of the health of Country

   • used for ceremonial activities.

The entities that become designated as CSE may also be:

   • listed as Matter of National Environmental Significance (MNES), i.e. threatened species or ecological communities under state or national legislation, or

   • widespread or abundant, or

   • an invasive species (native or non-native/introduced), also termed a culturally significant threat or threatening process.

4. It is fundamentally and inherently important to recognise Lore in the designation and management of CSE, which takes primacy over law.

5. The sustainable management of CSE led by Indigenous Australians is fundamentally important to maintaining Indigenous culture, traditional practice, language and knowledge systems.

6. The wellbeing of Indigenous Australians is inherently linked to CSE and consequently so is the condition of Country, Kin and Knowledge.

7. The community culture of Indigenous Australians is not homogeneous and there may not be cultural and/or community consensus regarding what are CSE, even within the same community, language group, Indigenous representative body or national organisation. Thus, the designation of CSE must be determined and supported by consensus among the members of a community with the cultural authority (including gender roles) and knowledge to speak for community (typically Elders) for whom the entity has spiritual, cultural, customary or symbolic value.

8. CSE are considered assets in the community. Some communities may wish to assign an economic value linked to cultural accounting and cultural licenses.

9. While CSE can be designated as a species, it is essential the species is considered within its ecosystem, and cultural mapping needs to be undertaken to consider how CSE are interconnected and linked to the constituent elements of Country.

10. Creation-time species from lore/creation stories should be recognised as CSE with intangible values; these CSE are critical to intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge and lore.

2. Indigenous support for using biocultural objectives to identify CSE

As CSE gain recognition, advocates are translating cultural values into a set of criteria to assist policymakers in developing meaningful policies and programs to empower Indigenous management. There are three interconnected domains to simultaneously consider when assessing if an entity is a CSE: Indigenous Australians (Kin) manage the Indigenous Estate (Country), which sustains the entities (Knowledge).

A key project finding was collective support for proposed biocultural objectives associated with the identification and collaborative management of CSE (Table 1). Redesigning monitoring platforms and evaluation processes (i.e. MERIT, conservation strategies, funding objectives) to encompass Indigenous-led metrics, including but not limited to biocultural objectives, will result in a collective benefit to the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians and inherently the state/condition of the natural environment.

Domain	Objectives
Country	Improve cultural land and seascape health and protection
	Improve cultural and spiritual connection, health and wellbeing
Culture	Increase Indigenous Knowledge transfer in a culturally secure manner
	Promote Indigenous Knowledge as the first science
Kin	Empower Indigenous-led governance structures
	Emphasise cultural responsibility and autonomy for Country

Table 1: Indigenous-led objectives for the identification and collaborative management of CSE under the interconnected domains for assessing CSE.
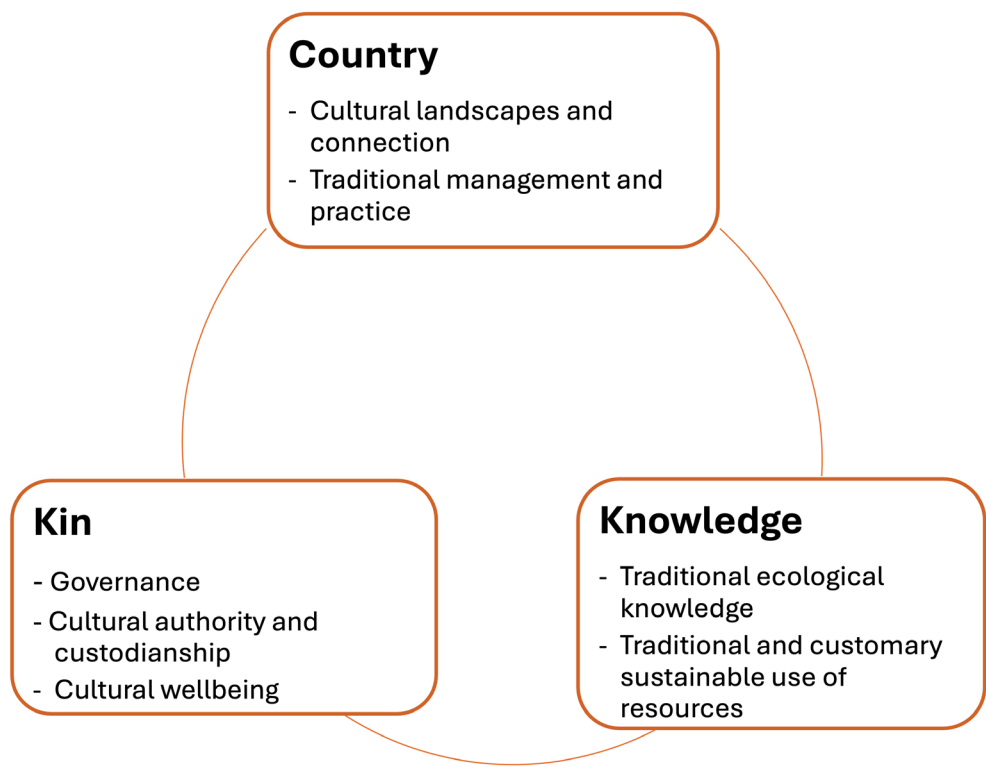

Figure 2: The three interconnected domains for assessing Culturally Significant Entities.

3. Legislative and policy reform recommendations for the recognition of CSE

During the engagement process, targeted questions regarding the implementation of short-, medium- and long-term actions to improve the recognition of CSE in both legislation and policy settings were addressed. These questions were framed around levers for change being, program and policy design, legislation reform, and enabling actions. Our findings emphasise the need for action to shift policy makers' view of Indigenous Australians as stakeholders to recognising them as rightsholders, as CSE are a birthright.
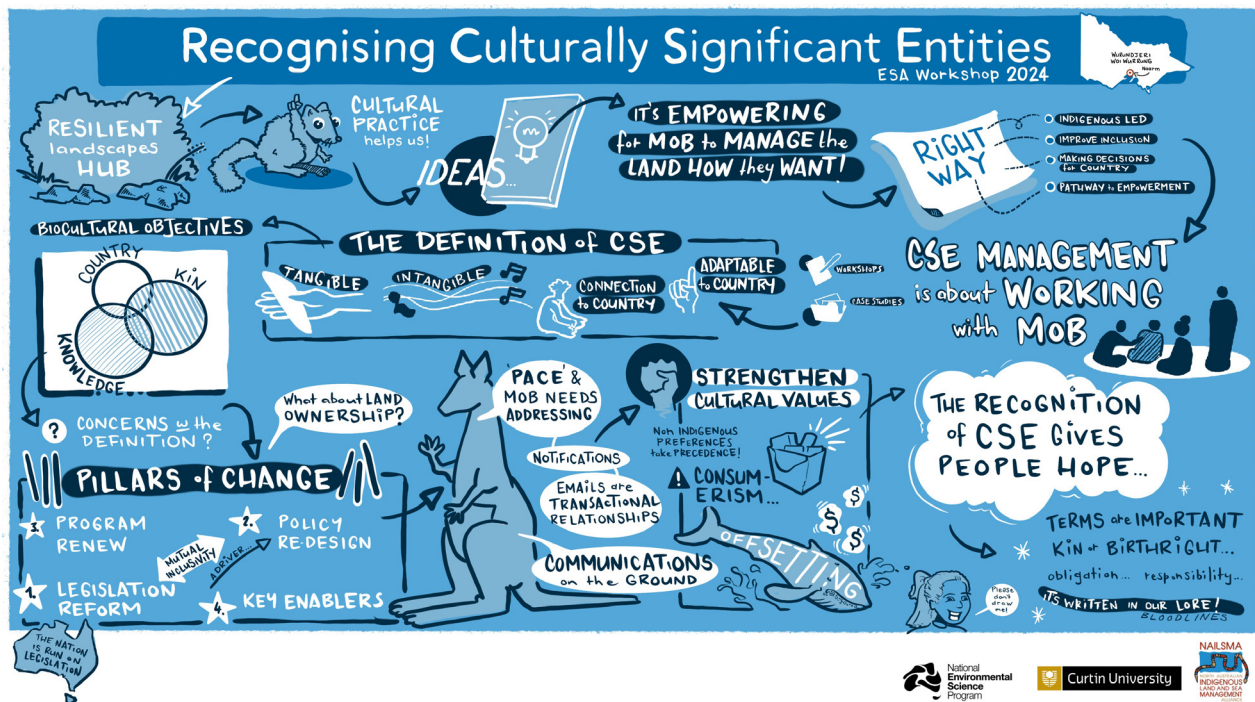

Figure 3: A graphic scribe from a Culturally Significant Entities workshop.

Workshop findings and elicitation outputs indicated the following priority actions to improve the recognition of CSE:

Short term (0–3 years)

- **Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge** - Planning documents (i.e. strategic plans, recovery plans) to include Indigenous engagement and participation.

- **Indigenous science teams** - Establish an Indigenous Knowledge and Science Team within government department and environmental organisations with a remit to influence, champion and promote Indigenous inclusion. The following roles were suggested:

  - Senior Scientist – Indigenous Science integration
  - Indigenous Science Partnerships
  - Indigenous Knowledge Brokers
  - Indigenous Science Practitioners.

Medium-term (3–7 years)

- **Indigenous representation** - Improving Indigenous representation during decision-making process was consistently ranked as the most impactful policy change required to support Indigenous inclusion. Indigenous Australian representation should be mandated during all nomination, assessment, approval and funding processes linked to the Matters of National Environmental Significance.

- **Landscape and seascape approach** - Mandate the integration of Indigenous Knowledge into all landscape-based management, protection and planning mechanisms.

- **Monitoring and evaluation** - Biocultural objectives and place-based indicators are adopted in monitoring and evaluation programs.

Long-term (7+ years)

There was widespread support for legislative reform to improve the recognition of CSE, with key actions including:

- **Indigenous Land and Sea Commissioner** - Establish an identified statutory position within environmental legislation with decision-making powers relating to Indigenous interests and rights.

- **Designating CSE as Matters of National Environmental Significance** - Environmental legislation to recognise place-based CSE as a new category of environmental significance. The subsequent listing of CSE should not impinge on any cultural practice, including traditional take, sustainable use and other customary activities.

- **Alignment and implementation** - National and state legislation moves to ratify international obligations to improve the rights and interests of Indigenous Australians, with recognition and implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) including the Nagoya Protocol.

Additional Considerations

- **Climate change** - The importance of integrating CSE into climate change modelling, mitigation and adaptation strategies.

- **Data and knowledge management** - Need for better data collection, national datasets of case studies, and the management and curation of CSE knowledge, including intergenerational transfer and the role of Elders as knowledge holders.

- **Self-determination and Treaty** - Issues of self-determination, treaty rights and sovereignty need to be considered in the development of policy and/or legislation.

Recommendations

There was a strong and consistent message from Indigenous experts and stakeholders: *The recognition of CSE requires a shift towards greater inclusion of Indigenous perspectives, knowledge and governance in environmental management and policy.*

A key recommendation for government departments and environmental organisations is to prioritise the implementation of the key actions as described above. In doing so, project participants highlighted the importance of effectively resourcing the actions, as well as the need for two-way capacity building and on-ground engagement to ensure all stakeholders are equipped to benefit from the recognition of CSE.

Further information

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