

What makes a good partnership with Traditional Owners



Strong partnerships with Reef and catchment Traditional Owners are based on trust and deliver benefits for Country, culture, and community. Attributes of a good partnership were identified by the collective experience of Reef and catchment Traditional Owners in attendance at the Great Barrier Reef Foundation's Traditional Owner Grants Gathering in 2025.

A foundation of a good partnership should be established at the start with shared goals and visions based on the following key principles:

1. Respect and Recognition

- Recognising Traditional Owners as the custodians of Country, culture, and knowledge
- Acknowledging Traditional rights, interests, and connection to land and waters
- Respecting Traditional Owner authority, values, and decision-making
- Respecting cultural protocols and frameworks
- Recognising the strength of Traditional Knowledge

2. Trust and transparency

- Building trust through genuine collaboration and transparency
- Two-way sharing of information openly and honestly
- Setting clear expectations on roles and responsibilities
- Being upfront about limitations, timelines, and challenges

3. Self-Determination

- Ensuring Traditional Owner leadership and involvement on decisions that affect their Country
- Creating opportunities for Traditional Owners to define goals, priorities, and outcomes

4. Long-term commitment

- Ensuring ongoing mutual support
- Building partnerships for the long term - not just project-based
- Supporting training, capacity building, and employment for Traditional Owners

5. Cultural Safety

- Creating safe spaces where Traditional Owners can speak freely
- Respecting cultural authority and decision-making processes
- Being culturally aware and capable

What do we expect when partnering with Traditional Owners

1. Start from the beginning

- Establish and understand cultural protocols and who has the right to speak for Country
- Begin by deeply listening to Traditional Owner aspirations and concerns
- Engage frequently, in person and on-Country
- Engage early before decisions are made
- Future thinking from the beginning

2. Culturally empowered processes

- Design programs together that incorporate work and data important to us
- Embrace locally driven and place-based approaches
- Establish joint governance structures
- Create flexible and adaptable project plans together

3. Fair benefits and resourcing

- Support community-led initiatives and employment pathways
- Ensure fair and equal remuneration (wages, travel, time and expertise covered)
- Provide adequate resources for Traditional Owner organisations to participate meaningfully

4. Clear agreements

- Consider data sovereignty and ICIP in data sharing agreements
- Document understandings in transparent, culturally appropriate agreements
- Include conflict resolution processes and mechanisms for review
- Ensure agreements reflect both cultural values and legal requirements

5. Outcomes & Evaluation

- Focus on positive outcomes
- Prepare to evaluate what's changed
- Celebrate success

Questions for partners to ask themselves

- Have Traditional Owners been involved from the beginning?
- Are roles, expectations and benefits clear to all parties?
- Have we empowered Traditional Owner-led decision-making and project delivery?
- Is there a plan for long-term engagement and capacity building?
- Are communication and capacity building mechanisms in place?

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