



Great Barrier  
Reef Foundation  
*Traditional Owner Partnerships*

# HEALTHY WATER, HEALTHY COUNTRY, HEALTHY PEOPLE

HEALTHY WATER STATEMENT BY GREAT BARRIER REEF  
TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS - NOVEMBER 2022

**CHANGE THE SYSTEM!** Too much time is spent meeting in separate rooms and not enough time is spent learning, designing, or deciding together as neighbours across the Reef. We as Traditional Custodians demand change to the systems that continually fail the environmental integrity of our Country. We have seen people come and go on our Country and yet we are still here, saying the same things! As neighbours and partners across the Reef, we are in this together, it's everyone's responsibility to respond to the ringing alarm from the degradation and toxicities unbalancing our life source – WATER! It's about the quality of the water, not just the quantity. Dilution is not the solution to pollution. Water is life. We no longer want to see the richness of our Country degraded, smothered by sediments, and affecting our food and water systems, our ways of life, our culture.

**CAN YOU HEAR THE ALARM BELLS?** Stop, listen and turn down the other distractions concealing the alarm. Let's be convinced that we are equipping ourselves with best management and goalposts set for healthy water, healthy ecosystems and healthy Country in the Great Barrier Reef. We need honesty and constructive discussions about applied practices because the honest truth is: our direction needs re-correction as the vital veins of water running through the system still carry overloaded sediments and introduced toxins. It's time to change the current of irreversible damage, stop ignoring our people who have the longest environmental conservation and protection record in the world for the benefit for your future generations. Our solution is to address the ill-equipped system to enable Traditional Custodians' ways of knowledge and application into modern-day caring for country practices. This is a true step towards reconciliation, that requires **courage and leadership** to change policies and legislation to enable Traditional Custodians guidance towards healing and restoring the connectivity of Country and its people. We need an agenda for enabling meaningful partnerships with real outcomes for Traditional Custodians, their country and their local communities that ensure a **holistic feedback loop** of looking after Country. We know our success stories of Indigenous leadership restoring Country. We all need to be open to building more and more success together.

**THE TIDE IS NOW TURNING** to Traditional Custodians for answers on how to heal and restore the flows of Country. Australia has an opportunity to reconcile with its poor environmental past and show leadership on a global path of reconciliation, with the aim to bring us all together and heal Country. Look, listen and learn from Traditional Custodians, it's time to have genuine commitment in partnering with us and respecting our rights to be at the table of governance bodies in a legitimate way to improve the system. We have Indigenous rights to have healthy water and we have rights to have seats at the regulation and planning tables of management for a healthy country. Why waste your time contesting our Indigenous rights when resources could be better spent on constructively discussing the required shift in practices and updating actions? Traditional Custodians need **accountability** built into the system that aligns with improving water health so that red flags are met with real change as we have all seen the lack of impact from voluntary pledges.

**THE TIME IS NOW!** Moving forward we need to be deciding together as neighbours across the Reef. We understand there are complexities to working across the Reef. Rather than be overcome by the weight of the system complexities, we need to focus on maximising all levers of **leadership, learning and accountability** in order to minimise the overlooking of our potential for success. It is crucial that the weight of complexities is met with the weight of all proactive and necessary actions. We need to hear the sound of our future generations enjoying the Reef, not the sounds of alarm bells. Be part of the wave of change!

**"WE ARE BORN IN WATER, WE COME FROM WATER,  
WE LIVE AS WATER, WHEN WE DIE WE BECOME WATER."**

MALCOLM MANN - REEF TRADITIONAL CUSTODIAN

## ACTIONS:

- Courage and leadership to change policies and legislation to enable Traditional Custodians' legitimate co-management for shared decision-making across the Reef and catchments
- An agenda for enabling meaningful partnerships with real outcomes for Traditional Custodians that ensures a holistic feedback loop of looking after Country
- It's everyone's responsibility to respond to the gaps and weaknesses in the system
- Stop ignoring our people who have the longest environmental conservation and protection record in the world and remove the silence from our past actions and repeated calls – we need your courage to break the status quo
- Improve the system by synchronising leadership, management and people, and upholding our rights and responsibilities to seats at the regulation and planning tables
- Maximise all levers of Indigenous leadership, learning and accountability to steer us towards **Healthy Water, Healthy Country, Healthy People**

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