



Cultural Gardeners - Australian Cultural Alliance for Climate Justice,  
2026-27 Pre-Budget submission  
The Hon. Dr Jim Charmers MP  
Treasurer of Australia Department of the Treasury  
Langton Crescent,  
PARKES ACT 2600  
30th January 2026

### **URGENT ACTION NEEDED**

Dear Minister,

The Cultural Gardeners - Australian Cultural Alliance for Climate Justice welcomes the opportunity to make recommendations for the 2026-27 Federal Budget.

#### Request for Budget Assistance

To scope the **Service for Country in the Climate Era program** (see below), we seek a government investment of \$500,000 over two years. This funding will be used to:

- Consult with First Nations Elders and leaders to ensure the program is embedded in strong sharable cultural values
- Identify key sites where this program can be piloted, prioritising places who are already experiencing the devastating impacts of major Climate Events
- Establish strong relevant cross departmental relationships with Office for the Arts, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water; the National Indigenous Australians Agency, the National Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Defence and the Department of Home Affairs to weave connection between policy and civic application through this program
- Develop a rigorous plan with clear deliverables to pilot and scale this program

The Cultural Gardeners is convened by CLIMARTE (Vic), Arts Front (Qld) and Pippa

Bailey (NSW). We represent over 340 arts and cultural workers in all states and territories deeply concerned with taking action on the converging planetary climate and ecological crises. Humanity faces the combined catastrophes of ecosystem collapse, mass extinction of vital biodiversity unique to this continent, and the rapid degradation of critical ecosystems. Australia is at the forefront of these converging crises.

We champion First Nations principles of Caring for Country and the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Our approach is uniquely Australian to respect and forefront the great diversity of First Nations people across Australia whose 60,000 years+ of continuous culture honours a unique relationship and responsibility for Country and people.

As Ellen Van Neerven, a Mununjali Yugambeh poet, editor and activist beautifully articulates; “As First Nations people, we have so often said that if Country is sick, we are sick too. That’s why healing is connected to all aspects of our lives and we cannot have a healthy future unless our Country is being taken care of.”

The poly crisis is threatening Australian society and way of life on many fronts, amplified and accelerated by the deteriorating health of the natural world. The Cultural Gardeners recognise that we cannot continue to operate in the systems and structures we know and feel empowered by, and expect different results.

As a creative response we are adapting our approach to this submission process with a specific project that we believe will help focus on cultural transition at a time when our country needs to unite, engender greater intercultural understanding, tell our stories in our places and improve respect and care for our unique natural environment in partnership with First Nations people. We are mindful of engaging the majority of the Australian population who live in urban settings to understand the systems on which our lives and livelihoods depend. This aligns to the REVIVE Cultural Policy and adds the missing ecological and climate emergency lens.

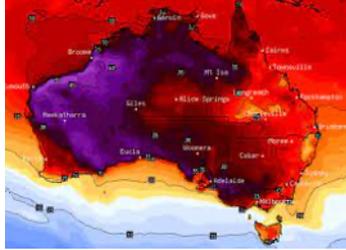
The following project proposal could be a cornerstone of a world leading **Climate Effort**, akin to the War Effort of World War II, a coordinated mobilisation of society’s resources, towards the support of an economic and cultural transition. This prepares for and mitigates disaster, rehabilitates ecosystems and deepens connection and care for this Country and each other at this critical moment.

You have repeatedly called for courageous and ambitious ‘big’ ideas. This proposal meets that challenge. We need to mobilise people within a multilateral care framework with clear direction and purpose.

# Service for Country in the Climate Era



Ashburton River flood, WA 2021



Heatwave in Australia, January 2024



Deepwater fires, Queensland 2018

## Brief description

A one-year intergenerational national program for school leavers, people transitioning their careers and retirees to build community resilience through service in 4 areas: Care for Country (natural environment), Care for vulnerable people (and all people), Care for culture and creativity, and Care for civil society and being a good citizen; all aligned to First Nations protocols and led with First Nations people.

As humanity hurtles towards ecosystem collapse, in an economic model and mindset driven by perpetual growth, this intervention forms part of a reset towards transition. Ideally participants are paid a minimum wage, introducing a universal basic income (UBI), adapting *Work for the dole* programs and applying values led practical experiential learning to help shape and influence our systems and strengthen civil society.

This is an early-stage concept, evolved from extensive cultural, climate and community experience plus exploration of systems change, in conversations with Elders, family, colleagues and friends. The need for making ambitious change to address converging crises that sets new agendas could not be more urgent.

## Why?

- Accelerating Climate Crisis, species extinction and ecosystem breakdown, evidenced in the Interdepartmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report, with United Nations (UN) and many others calling for radical action towards decarbonisation, transition, and a low carbon future.
- Mitigating converging crises - youth despair, gig economy and insecure employment, mental health and well-being crises, addiction to technology, growing numbers of climate refugees, a decline in volunteering and need for greater community cohesion at both the local and special interest levels.
- Prioritising First Nations First and cultural knowledge holders to develop shared practise of protocols and engender greater understanding to benefit all Australians.
- Planning for a just transition and systems change through culture, environment, and social care, towards an equitable low carbon society - called for by many.
- Redirecting labour to reduce consumption, to reduce emissions and meet Paris Agreement targets and UN Sustainability Development Goals (soon to include culture).

- To develop ongoing practical skills and adaptive solutions at scale through a national program.
- Engage citizens in strengthening Australian society in positive action and reimagining a liveable future.

*“What I’m trying to encourage fellow Australians is to feel this land, connect with it, build a relationship. Your DNA is now part of this cultural landscape. You are part of this memory” Anne Poelina, Nyikina Warrwa leader*

### **How?**

- Engage First Nations led organisations, cultural organisations, government departments, relevant think tanks and NGO’s to scope the program and identify pilot places that reflect different communities/constituencies.
- Work with relevant federal government departments to identify challenges and opportunities.
- Identify funding partners and champions to strengthen and test the case.

### **Proposed schedule**

3 x 4month program segments in Care for Country, Care for people, Care for culture and creativity; with civil society components offered across the year. At least one segment to be undertaken in the participant’s local area. At least one other segment to be undertaken away from home in a different type of setting.

### **What could this Service for Country mean for Australia at this time of converging crises?**

Leadership through strong values and in-person practical skills development, led by First Nations Elders, leaders and protocols of Care for Country, Care for Kin, Respect for Elders and responsibility for future generations. A strengthened civil society underpinned by understanding democratic systems, conflict resolution and the importance of collaboration in times of crisis. This program will:

- Start with First Nations Elders, Rangers, Community Leaders (funded consultation) to articulate values, principles, and protocols.
- Develop cohesion through learning about local culture and place-based community-led approaches in every state and territory.
- Engage young people, all levels of Government, NGO’s, academics, and businesses in co-designed collective impact processes to shape the program, focused on new horizons.
- Prioritise marginalised voices and perspectives.
- Assess existing services, exploring how to adapt them and utilise learnings and resources.
- Incorporate projected climate impacts and other transition modelling, weaving across sectors.
- Identify training needs, including principles of democracy, disaster preparedness, emergency response and creative adaptation.
- Adapt evaluation tools, considering tangible and intangible outcomes.

### **Priority next steps**

- Intensive research and consultation through existing place-based initiatives: identifying relevant First Nations Elders, leaders and other experts, existing studies, areas of urgent environmental and social need, in dynamic response to rapidly changing conditions.
- Explore international models of National service (E.G. France,) and how these could be introduced/adapted into the Australian context and this new agenda

- Set up and host co-design symposiums that bring top down and local expertise together in a collective impact model.
- Cost several scenario models – (E.G Nurangga Country SA, Kuku Yalangi Country, Qld)
- Develop/adapt tools to assess needs and benefits to participants (individuals and organisations)
- Explore potential partnerships and develop diverse funding model with 3 layers of Government, potential delivery organisations, sponsorship and philanthropy
- Deliver a costed plan for this New National Service with ready-to-go pilots to test and settings to test them in (at least 3 settings).

#### Other benefits

- Australia's understanding of our unique First Nations culture, environmental biodiversity and cultural diversity will be enhanced through participant engagement.
- Older and new migrants are engaged to learn about Australian culture, environment, and values.
- Cohorts specifically trained in disaster preparedness and response, ready for new events.
- Values led programs disrupt and influence aggressive for-profit business models and shift attitudes to community wealth and place-based solutions, integrated into national strategies.

*“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in service of others.” Mahatma Gandhi*

With love and imagination for a better future,  
Pippa Bailey (on behalf of the Cultural Gardeners)