**Climate Change and a First Nation Community**

**By Polly Cutmore (Barawaa)**

Yaama everyone

I’d like to first acknowledge the traditional owners of this country where I stand today, the elders past, present and future.

My country is in northern New South Wales, Australia, from lands of the Gamilaraay, Wirriyaraay, Jukumbul and Anaiwan peoples.

Thank you for asking me to speak today about a topic that is very close to my heart, my community and the future.

We’ve seen the evidence that global heating is upon us now. This is a cause of great concern for myself and our community of Moree.

Moree is located in the northern part of the state, just go over the mountains and keep driving for eight hours, past all the wheat and cotton farms, past the coal mines, and onto the flat and dry floodplains of the Gwydir and Mehi rivers.

That’s where I was born and bred, on an Aboriginal Station as they called it then, next to the Mehi River. The river was an important part of our lives for its food, washing, drinking and relaxation and keeping cool. On hot days that’s where you find the majority of the community from the top to the bottom.

We were a close community who looked after each other and always kept an eye out for each other.

This is because we lived in a community where us blackfellahs were subject to a racial class system. And we were at the bottom, subject to discrimination, violence, and incarceration. It was very difficult to lead a life most of you are accustomed to today. We certainly weren’t recognised as the First People and our way of life was not respected, we were just cheap labour.

But that made us survivors, because we had to be. We’ve noticed the changing climate over the last 200 years because the landscape was changed to suit the colonisers in a dry country with their thirsty crops and hoofed animals. They made the country harder to live in.

It doesn’t surprise me that the Government of this country has not planned for our future in the context of global warming. The way Europeans put everything into boxes means they leave out some of the boxes which may be important. At a local level, there have been some actions to mitigate the impacts, but generally in my community there is little awareness or readiness for what may come.

Moree is already a very hot place in summer and some like older people, the sick, the frail and children are already suffering. Our local pool has been closed down off and on since the rivers dried up in 2019. At the same time, the new water-ski park opened up 7 km south of town using the water that should have gone into the swimming pools and continued to run off into the river.

2019 was also the year when they had a water-skiing championship on their artificial lake, at a time when there was no flow in the river and the fish were dying.

This lake was a gift for the privileged elite of the town to themselves. By comparison, our lives were never that easy. There were few options for most blackfellows then and now - they kept us poor and at the bottom.

Most housing today is community houses or flats, often owned by the Local Land Council or other government agencies. They are often 40 or 50 years old, little boxes usually fibro, asbestos or board, with very poor insulation and air conditioning.

Most Land Council houses have no air conditioning at all and those that do, like my own mother’s and sister home - they had to provide their own. My sister has to keep it turned off as much as she can because, like many, she can’t afford the electricity. These homes are heat boxes – built at a time when there was no consideration to minimise heat impacts on the people that lived in them.

On hot days many of our people go to great lengths to avoid the heat, they go to the river or go to cool buildings like the hospital, Centrelink office and library just to sit out of the sun. In fact, Government advises people to do this on extremely hot days.

I remember Mum’s routine to beat the heat when I was a child. This involved going to bed early when the sun went down, getting up very early like 4am in the summers to start the day. She’d start the washing machine first, then she start cleaning the house and do the kids lunches for school by 6 am. Along with Dad we’d left the house by 8am and Mum would go shopping to get fresh food and to prepare for dinner.

She would have a sleep during the hottest part of the day and then after 3pm would get us kids dinner when we came back from school. We were all in bed by 8pm.

During the school holidays Mum worked, often in the cotton fields, chipping weeds with her friends and I would come along. It was hard work in the hot sun and we used to drink lots of water, there was no shade, except our hot cars where we would sit and try and catch a breeze where we could. Blackfellahs learned to work quick so they could take time off in the hottest part of the day.

The only solution to the housing problem as I see it would be major investment to improve housing resilience to heat, building new homes with improved solar design.

The other worrying aspect for First Nation communities is the impact on the environment itself from a heating climate.

We have a special relationship with the environment, our country. It is the source of our identity as people, everything about our culture, spiritual ideas and family relationships are all tied to country. It is part of Our Law that country be looked after and handed on to the next generation. I believe it is what you whitefellahs call, ‘inter-generational equity’.

To see our country suffering brings me great sadness. The farming monocultures, water extraction, land clearing, the loss of all our animals – it has made our country less able to adapt to a changing climate.

The lack of water in our rivers has added to the problem. Less flow means water relationships across the landscape are affected, with less groundwater, fewer wetlands, and increased dust in the air. All this affects the availability of food and our ability to sustain our food systems.

We can see that our environment is already out of whack. Grasses, which are an important source of grain, are not flowering at normal times. The heat and cold snaps delay flowering and the plants suffer from heatwaves. I know this from my cousin, Kerry Saunders who is trying to establish a native grain business. But for us, obtaining land which can be turned to native food production is not an easy task.

But we know some of the answers. First Nation people in this country have lived through climate change before, during the last ice age. It changed the country forever, made it drier, but we survived with a very developed sense of the importance of looking after the country. That is what we have to do now.

To survive, we need to:

1. Restore our rivers and waterways so that they regain their natural function and enrich the landscape;
2. Turn to native sources of foods, these are after all the best ones to grow in this country. Native grasses are one good example, they mulch the soil, they are water efficient, heat hardy and they improve the soil with their deep root systems;
3. Plant more forest to replace those lost, groves of native fruit trees, more urban trees for shade; and
4. Make the rivers full of ducks, fish and yabbies and native grasslands full of kangaroos, emus and Plain Turkeys.

Fixing country needs to become a big focus for as a nation if we are to make it through this. For us, caring for country brings healing and purpose - after all it is Our Mother, if we look after her, she will look after us. This has been proven by 60,000 of practice and remains true today whether you are indigenous or non-indigenous.

Now with a climate crisis, we all may have to be survivors. We know our culture will have something to offer. Maybe it’s time to slow down and listen to us.