

## **Culture at the Centre of National Adaptation**

*The National Cultural Policy must enable the conditions for climate adaptation*

Submission for the Australian National Cultural Policy by Dr Jen Rae, Claire G. Coleman and Anne-Marie Te Whiu on behalf of Centre for Reworlding.

### **Preparedness**

*“Only a crisis — actual or perceived — produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.”*

- Milton Friedman, cited by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine*

Climate disruption is no longer hypothetical. The question is not whether transformation will come, but whether we have built the relationships, cultural capacity and public imagination needed to respond before crisis determines the outcome for us. The National Cultural Policy must enable the conditions for preparedness.

### **Adaptability**

*“Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face.”* - Mike Tyson

In a time of cascading ecological, social and economic instability, policy cannot be rigid or extractive. We need adaptive cultural frameworks that can learn, respond and evolve in real time alongside rapidly changing conditions when contexts change.

### **Originality / Imagination**

*“We can’t expect people to recognize something they’ve never seen before”*

- Lorne Michaels, portrayed by Gabriel LaBelle in *Saturday Night (2024)*, a documentary on the 50 years of Saturday Night Live.

The climate era demands forms of cultural policy, governance and collaboration that do not yet fully exist. Incremental reform alone will not meet this moment. We must create the conditions within the National Cultural Policy to imagine and prototype futures beyond the limits of the systems that produced the crisis.

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### **About the Centre for Reworlding**

The Centre for Reworlding (C∞R) is a 100-year focused Indigenous-led cultural organisation working at the intersections of culture, art, climate adaptation and collective futures. C∞R was Co-founded by Dr Jen Rae (Métis) and Claire G. Coleman (Noongar) and shaped through collaborations with artists, climate and disaster professionals, diverse communities and institutions across Australia and internationally. C∞R cultivates the conditions for

transcultural, transdisciplinary and place-responsive collaborations to unprecedented ecological, social and cultural challenges.

We engage with cultural ecosystems that strengthen adaptive capacity, participation and future-making within the climate century through a relational practice we call 'reworlding'. Reworlding is a deliberate and emergent methodology underpinned by Indigenous worldviews and cosmologies that unifies creative practice, public engagement, research and policy via our collaborations and partnerships.

Claire G. Coleman is a Noongar award-winning writer, poet, essayist, collaborator and critic that spans community arts and cultural development, experimental arts, theatre and visual arts. Her debut novel *Terra Nullius* enriched our national discourse and stands as a watershed moment in Australian literature. Claire's powerful contributions have already had a recognised transformative impact on Australian creative practice through her practice, participation in advocacy and boards, education and mentoring as well as through her activism on human rights, justice and Indigenous self-determination.

Dr Jen Rae is a Canadian Métis born-Australian artist, researcher and cultural strategist working across culture, climate and disaster adaptation through transdisciplinary, place-based and relational practice. Their work bridges cultural practice, policy and international collaboration, advocating for culture as vital infrastructure in responding to the climate crisis.

Anne-Marie Te Whiu is an Australian-born Māori writer, editor, weaver and cultural producer of Te Rarawa descent whose practice centres Indigenous collaboration, storytelling and cultural sovereignty across Australia and Aotearoa. Through two decades of festival direction, publishing and curatorial leadership, she has become a vital voice in creating platforms for First Nations and diasporic artists, weaving relational cultural practice with community building and social change.

## **C∞R Nationally and Internationally**

The Centre for Reworlding is a consortium partner within **Creative Climate**, Australia's federally funded peak body for arts and climate action. Through this work, we contribute to national conversations on climate adaptation, cultural policy, creative practice and systems change, while advocating for culture and the arts to be recognised as essential practices to climate action, public life, resilience and long-term transitions.

Our work is also deeply connected to international cultural and climate networks. Dr Jen Rae serves on the Steering Council for Global Activism and is on core drafting committee for the first Culture Global Stocktake (CGST) developed alongside the UNFCCC Marrakech Partnership Accelerator process toward COP31. The Culture Global Stocktake brings together practitioners, policymakers, researchers, Indigenous leaders and cultural organisations from across the world to address the growing recognition that climate adaptation and transition cannot succeed through technical solutions alone. Evident in the is CGST and other UNFCCC processes is the underrepresentation of the Oceanic and Southeast Asia perspectives, where culture is live and climate impacts are ever present.

In 2025, Dr Jen Rae presented at COP30 in Belém through programming connected to the Entertainment + Culture Pavilion and was a keynote and workshop presenter at the Global

Platform on Disaster Displacement in Geneva, advocating for the role of culture and the arts in climate action, adaptation and collective resilience.

Across COP30 and related UNFCCC processes, there is growing international recognition that climate change is not only an environmental or technical challenge, but a cultural, civic and relational one.

There is increasing international recognition that culture is not peripheral to climate response. Culture shapes how societies understand risk, sustain belonging, negotiate change, carry knowledge across generations and imagine viable futures.

As an organisation grounded in Indigenous leadership, relational practice and long-horizon thinking, C∞R approaches cultural policy as more than sector development.

**We see cultural policy as part of the wider task of building the social, civic and cultural conditions through which communities can endure disruption, navigate transition and participate in shaping just and regenerative futures.**

Our submission reflects this perspective.

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## **Relationship to Revive**

This submission strongly aligns with the ambitions of Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place, particularly its commitments to First Nations leadership, cultural participation, artist livelihoods and strong cultural ecosystems.

Our contribution seeks to **deepen these foundations within the context of the climate century**. While Revive establishes an important framework for Australia's cultural future, climate disruption now requires cultural policy to also be understood as adaptation policy. This includes recognising culture and the arts not only as sectors or industries, but as part of the social, civic and relational conditions that enable communities to navigate disruption, sustain belonging and participate in shaping collective futures.

This submission extends Revive through:

- a stronger climate adaptation lens across all policy areas
- recognition of cultural ecosystems as essential adaptive systems
- long-term and place-based approaches to resilience and transition
- transcultural and Oceanic regional perspectives
- broader measures of public value beyond market metrics
- conditions-based policy approaches that support participation, trust and cultural continuity over time

We see this work as complementary to Revive and part of the next stage of developing a National Cultural Policy responsive to national and international ecological instability, social transition and intergenerational futures.

Australia's adaptation and future resilience will depend not only on energy systems, emergency management and physical infrastructure, but on the cultural conditions that allow people to understand change, sustain belonging, maintain trust, carry knowledge across generations and imagine viable futures.

Climate adaptation is not only technical or economic. It is cultural, relational and civic.

Culture shapes how communities interpret risk, respond to disruption, care for one another, participate in public life and navigate transition. Without these capacities, adaptation measures struggle to gain legitimacy, endure over time or reach those most affected. The question is no longer whether culture has a role in adaptation. It is whether policy will recognise and support the conditions required for that role to be realised.

Any contemporary cultural policy must be grounded in the authority, custodianship and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose knowledge systems and relational approaches to Country offer vital guidance for the climate century.

Australia is uniquely placed to contribute leadership in how cultural knowledge, adaptation and relational care can shape responses to the climate century. At the same time, Australia exists within a broader Oceanic and regional context shaped by interconnected climate futures. Relationships with Pasifika peoples, Māori communities, Southeast Asian neighbours and global Indigenous networks are increasingly important to how knowledge, adaptation and cultural continuity are shared across borders and generations.

A contemporary National Cultural Policy should recognise these interconnected realities.

The recent A New Approach report found that Australia ranks 25th out of 31 OECD countries for expenditure on recreation, culture and religion as a share of GDP, while Federal per capita cultural expenditure has fallen to its lowest recorded level. Red lights are blinking across the dashboard. Long-term underinvestment is weakening Australia's cultural capacity at precisely the moment communities require stronger systems for adaptation, participation, belonging and collective resilience.

The task of policy is therefore not simply to fund activity, but to cultivate the conditions through which culture and the arts strengthen national adaptive capacity.

# Enabling Conditions for National Adaptation Centring Culture

## 1. Conditions for cultural continuity and knowledge transmission

Support intergenerational, place-based and community-led cultural practices that sustain knowledge, belonging and continuity during periods of disruption and transition.

This extends Revive's *First Nations First* pillar by recognising First Nations cultural authority not only as foundational to Australian identity, but also to adaptation, relational governance and long-term ecological care.

Australia's National Cultural Policy should recognise cultural continuity as a national adaptive capability. This includes sustained support for First Nations cultural authority, language revitalisation, Elders, community knowledge holders and regional cultural ecosystems. Climate disruption threatens not only infrastructure and environments, but memory, identity, ceremony, belonging and social cohesion. Cultural policy has an essential role to play in strengthening the systems through which knowledge is carried across generations and communities remain connected during periods of instability and change.

### Immediate mechanisms:

- Fund long-term intergenerational cultural programs led by communities and Elders;
- Support regional and remote cultural infrastructure beyond major metropolitan centres;
- Invest in First Nations-led cultural governance and custodianship initiatives;
- Establish sustained support for language, oral histories and community archives;
- Recognise libraries, performance venues, galleries and cultural centres as trusted civic and resilience infrastructure; and,
- Support cultural continuity initiatives across climate-affected communities.

## 2. Conditions for participation and public imagination

Support artists, cultural workers and community organisations as facilitators of dialogue, experimentation, collective learning and future-making.

This aligns with Revive's vision of participation while extending it beyond audience engagement toward collective learning, public imagination and civic adaptation.

Adaptation requires public participation. Communities need spaces to process uncertainty, negotiate transition, build trust and collectively imagine viable futures. Artists and cultural workers already undertake this work across Australia, often without stable support or recognition. A noteworthy case study is Arts House's *Refuge* project (2016-2022) recently profiled in the World Cities Culture Report 5<sup>th</sup> edition ([cultureactioneurope.org](http://cultureactioneurope.org)).

Culture enables societies to make meaning during periods of disruption. It creates the social conditions through which difficult transitions can become participatory, legitimate and enduring rather than imposed or extractive.

### Immediate mechanisms:

- Embed artists and cultural workers within local, state and federal government, resilience and environmental agencies;

- Fund creative facilitation roles within community adaptation and recovery processes;
- Support long-term participatory arts initiatives focused on disaster preparedness, climate transition and civic dialogue;
- Establish place-based cultural resilience labs in regional communities;
- Create rapid-response microgrants for cultural recovery following disaster events; and,
- Support public storytelling, gathering and collective learning initiatives led by artists and cultural workers.

### **3. Conditions for relational and place-based adaptation**

Invest in long-term, iterative and collaborative work that builds trust, resilience and adaptive capacity over time.

Many of the most important adaptive outcomes cannot be achieved through short funding cycles or transactional project models. Trust, collaboration and social legitimacy are built relationally and over long timeframes.

Policy should support methodologies that are emergent, place-responsive and capable of evolving alongside changing community needs and ecological conditions.

#### **Immediate mechanisms:**

- Establish multi-year place-based cultural resilience funds;
- Support adaptive and iterative funding models rather than rigid output-only reporting;
- Invest in regional creative preparedness, recovery and transition hubs;
- Resource peer-learning and sharing networks across communities and sectors;
- Support long-term partnerships between cultural, environmental, research and community organisations; and,
- Fund community-led experimentation and demonstration projects that can later scale nationally.

### **4. Conditions for transcultural and transdisciplinary collaboration**

Support collaboration across cultures, generations, sectors and knowledge systems, recognising that complex ecological futures require diverse expertise and relational approaches.

Climate adaptation cannot be addressed within sector silos alone. Effective responses require collaboration across arts, science, education, planning, health, environment and community sectors, while also enabling meaningful exchange across cultures and knowledge systems.

Australia's future is deeply connected to the broader Oceanic region with shared climate realities. Cultural policy should support our deep and ancient relationships with Southeast Asian neighbours, Moana Peoples and Pasifika Nations such as Aotearoa NZ, Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu acknowledging an ongoing legacy rich in mutual respect, cultural exchange, trade and migration. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are located within these oceanic highways that have and always will connect rather than divide First Nations peoples belonging to the region.

#### **Immediate mechanisms:**

- Create cross-portfolio funding initiatives between arts, climate, health and education sectors;

- Support First Nations-led collaborative governance and design processes;
- Fund transcultural exchange and mobility programs across the Oceanic region;
- Invest in intergenerational knowledge exchange initiatives;
- Support regional hubs that broker partnerships across sectors and communities;
- Embed creatives within regional transition authorities and adaptation planning processes; and,
- Importantly, support translation and interpretation mechanisms to enable these ecosystems to effectively collaborate and communicate.

## 5. Conditions for cultural livelihoods and public value

Recognise artists and cultural workers as contributors to national adaptive capacity and develop sustainable employment pathways that reflect their civic, social and cultural value.

This deepens Revive’s commitment to the “Centrality of the Artist” by recognising artists and cultural workers as contributors to national adaptive capacity and civic resilience.

Climate is the biggest threat to the cultural ecosystem in Australia. Artists and cultural workers generate public value far beyond market metrics alone. Their labour contributes to social cohesion, wellbeing, participation, learning, recovery, experimentation and resilience.

Yet Australia’s cultural workforce remains economically precarious. **Policy cannot expect culture and the arts to support adaptation and collective resilience while simultaneously hollowing out the conditions that make this work possible.**

The recent A New Approach report found Australia ranks 25th out of 31 OECD countries for cultural expenditure as a share of GDP. Federal per capita expenditure has fallen to a record low despite sustained population growth.

### Immediate mechanisms:

- Expand minimum pay standards across publicly funded cultural programs;
- Develop living-wage pathways for artists and cultural workers;
- Support artist-parents in accessing childcare and child participation in creative residencies and touring;
- Create employment pathways across councils, schools, libraries, health and resilience sectors;
- Support long-term community-embedded cultural roles in regional areas;
- Establish secondment pathways between cultural organisations and government agencies; and,
- Include artists and creatives within national green jobs and future workforce strategies.

## 6. Conditions for broader measures of impact

Move beyond narrow economic metrics to include wellbeing, cultural continuity, social cohesion, civic participation and adaptive capacity within evaluation frameworks.

Current policy settings often privilege short-term outputs and market return over long-term social and civic value. These narrow understanding of what culture contributes during periods of ecological and social disruption.

Assessment frameworks should recognise that many adaptive outcomes are relational, emergent and cumulative. Generated and sustained creative methodologies, relationships, trust, participation, belonging and continuity are not secondary outcomes. They are foundational conditions for resilient societies.

**Immediate mechanisms:**

- Expand cultural funding KPIs beyond attendance and economic return;
- Integrate adaptable and self-determining wellbeing, resilience and participation indicators into cultural investment frameworks;
- Support mixed-method evaluation models and/or methodologies including story, relational outcomes and longitudinal evidence;
- Develop cultural indicators within national adaptation reporting frameworks;
- Measure trust, belonging and participation as adaptive assets; and,
- Publish national case studies demonstrating public value beyond market metrics.

## **Conclusion**

Australia has an opportunity to lead by recognising culture and the arts not as peripheral sectors, but as essential contributors to national adaptive capacity within the climate century. This requires more than symbolic recognition. It requires policy settings that cultivate the conditions through which communities can participate in transition, sustain cultural continuity, strengthen social legitimacy and imagine shared futures.

This also means recognising artists and those working across the broader cultural ecosystem whose labour, knowledge and practices help communities navigate crisis and imagine different futures.

When cultural ecosystems are strong, communities are better able to endure disruption, navigate transition and create more just, collaboratively connected and dynamically resilient futures. At a time when many systems are under strain, culture remains one of the few spaces where people can gather, grieve, adapt, experiment and collectively reimagine what comes next.

Revive established an important foundation for recognising the value of culture within Australian public life. The next stage is ensuring cultural policy is equipped to respond to the realities of the climate century on our cultural ecosystem and civic society, and, capable of supporting the long-term work of adaptation, resilience and transformation led by artists, cultural workers, communities and knowledge holders nationally and within our region.