Scoping Study Summary: International assessment of the value of Indigenous Knowledge to improve resilience to environmental change (Australia).

There were two main aims of this scoping study: (1) to provide an up to date survey of the current use of Indigenous Knowledge for building resilience to environmental change; and (2) to assess whether some of these strategies might be transferable by bringing together key stakeholders from different regions to share their experiences and management approaches. A summary of the outcomes of the longer report follows. For further information please check: sharingknowledge.net.au

1) Northern Australia is a vast landscape made up of a wide range of ecosystems, covering a terrestrial land mass of over 1.5 million square kilometres. Artifacts found in the north have been dated back 60,000 years, indicating that Aboriginal Australians are the oldest continuous living culture in the world.

Approximately 16 per cent of the land mass is owned by Indigenous Australians, which allows the connection of the traditional owners to their land and sea country to remain strong in many regions of the country. Traditional owners have been able to successfully reclaim their country since the famous Mabo native title decision in 1992.While early Indigenous native title decisions were primarily concerned with land rights, a recent High Court case over Blue Mud Bay has extended ownership to include sea country.

In Australian Indigenous cultures the health of country is crucial to the physical and mental health of the people responsible for it, but the importance of this relationship is difficult for many non-Indigenous Australians to understand. However, it is critical for planners and policy makers to understand the importance of the relationship between the health of country and the well being of its people and the direct and indirect impacts changes 'on country' can have.

Traditional owners (TOs) of Indigenous country, which includes both land and sea country, see themselves as custodians of their country for future generations. This is exemplified in the number of ranger groups working across Australia in 'caring for country' activities, which are a key feature of the Indigenous hybrid economy (particularly in remote areas).

The 'caring for country' approach uses Indigenous knowledge and western sciences to manage country, and has been in use by ranger groups for over a decade. The rangers provide services such as managing invasive weeds, feral animals, informal customs services, pollution control, removal of ghost nets and illegal fishing patrols. They also provide environmental services that include managing bushfires, wildlife management and facilitating western science studies.

Environmental interdependence is a mainstay for the majority of Indigenous people living in remote areas of Australia, influencing many facets of their daily existence. Many communities have managed to keep a significant degree of cultural coherence due to their distance from regular non-Indigenous communities and isolation from the monsoons making roads impassable.

However, with the growing outside pressures from a 'money' economy, the stresses of competing cultures and outside influences have caused significant social problems in many Indigenous communities. Local knowledge and cultural practice held by the traditional elders of these communities is often lost as elders of the current generation die. For a culture reliant on oral tradition, this is a massive loss, as the knowledge is often not recorded elsewhere.

The expected changes to climate in the coming years are likely to have significant impacts on remote communities. Direct threats to some communities caused by rising seas and bigger storm

tides, such as those in the Torres Strait located on low-lying islands, are only one of the more 'visible' impacts likely to occur in coming decades. Other likely impacts include fresh and saltwater inundation, favourable conditions for weeds and feral animals, increasing sea surface temperatures and ocean acidification (threatening fisheries), regular coral bleaching events, and a possible reduction of available moisture for some areas in the tropical north.
During the interviews for this scoping project it became clear that some areas of northern Australia, particularly the Kimberly, West Arnhem Land and Torres Strait Islands had active involvement with climate change related projects that were raising awareness about some of the western science projected impacts on their country. However, this information was not being systematically delivered to communities, and there was a large unmet demand for well-explained plain English summaries of these projected impacts. A couple of Aboriginal and Islanders had taken part in the ACF/Gore climate change training programme in the last two years and were endeavouring to make this presentation relevant for Indigenous Australians.

Other regions and groups stated that they had yet to take on climate change in depth because of resourcing limitations, lack of information and contacts or other priorities. Current projects vary in timeframe, funding, focus and extent to which they address issues of both IK and climate change, as well as the degree of local Indigenous ownership and control of the project.

2.)There was a clear preference for a series of regionally focused workshops across northern Australia as well as interest in sharing ideas between nations. It was considered important to identify key local and regional audiences in order to meaningfully locate and target these meetings. How these audiences were then engaged would depend on the purpose of the meeting i.e. information exchange about local examples and experiences of climate change as the basis for recording these as part of an ongoing knowledge sharing network.

Comments included that a workshop would also be useful if it was able to help identify local and regional climate change project opportunities (and constraints) and how to access resources and skills development to support these activities and facilitate ongoing engagement with funding bodies and project partners.

There was also recognition of the necessity of creating multiple access points for information exchange about climate change. These could include but not be limited to local radio talk back about people's perceptions and experiences of climate change in their local area, and as an opportunity to introduce some of the major issues underpinning climate change; 'on country' conversations with Traditional Owners in community languages about local experiences, past and present; school-based workshops to introduce key concepts and generate discussion and awareness; public meetings to identify local priorities and concerns; and looking at practical ways to place climate change issues within local/regional Indigenous organisational agendas and activities.

Past and current exploitation of Indigenous lands, cultures and identities have not endeared many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share their knowledge outside of their communities.

In the Australian context, interviews suggested that there was still a strong sense that the majority of current climate change activity was operating from a top down perspective. Often initiated by university and government research units, this activity appeared to emphasise urgent 'on country' action about issues many local people had not had a chance to learn about, let alone participate in. Timeframes were usually very short and processes of engagement often considered alienating, such as national conference based formats or short field visits, which did not offer an accessible platform for inclusion of local Indigenous voices or genuine opportunities for building local/regional networks.