

Indicator 6.5d: Resilience of forest-dependent Indigenous communities to changing social and economic conditions (2024)



This indicator provides a measure of the extent to which forest-dependent Indigenous communities are able to respond and adapt to change successfully. Resilient forest-dependent Indigenous communities will adapt to changing social and economic conditions, ensuring they prosper into the future.

Context and definitions

Reporting community resilience to changing social and economic conditions differs between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Employment opportunities and income-generating activities have broad importance, however, cultural resilience is often an over-arching consideration for Indigenous peoples. Maintaining livelihoods for Indigenous people often includes intangible social and cultural dimensions as well as tangible economic activities.

This Indicator therefore draws on insights gained from social science literature and census data, and is structured along a spectrum of cultural and economic dependencies that support the resilience of Indigenous communities.

Indigenous people and communities in Australia include both Aboriginal people and communities and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

Preferences in terminology when referring to Australia's First Peoples vary, and have changed over time. Consideration of Indigenous peoples in *Australia's State of the Forests Report* and associated products is inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. The term Indigenous peoples and communities is also used for consistency with the titles of indicators, datasets and [Australia's framework of criteria and indicators](#).

The number of people directly employed in forest and wood products industries is used here as an indicator of the economic dependence of Indigenous communities on forests.

Information on the resilience of forest-dependent communities to changing social and economic conditions is presented in [Indicator 6.5c](#).

Cultural dependence of Indigenous communities on forest-based activities

The deep connection of Indigenous peoples to their ancestral landscapes is central to well-being (Kingsley et al. 2013). Many Indigenous people place strong cultural significance on native forests, and activities that occur on forested land. Access to native forests enables Indigenous people to maintain or reconnect with cultural values, strengthening their connection with land and the past (Feary 2007; Feary et al. 2010; 2012; Hunt 2018). This strengthens individual and community resilience.

The cultural use of native forests allows Indigenous people to connect with ancestral landscapes through activities such as hunting, collecting bush food, use of fire, collecting materials for arts and tool-making, and sharing stories and social ceremonies. Native forests are places where new generations of Indigenous people can learn traditional knowledge about Country and its values, thereby contributing to the cultural resilience of their communities. This strengthens Indigenous mental health and personal wellbeing (Feary 2008). Cultural dependence on forests is particularly strong when the forest involves Country for which a particular Indigenous community has customary responsibility (Ganesharajah 2009; Kingsley et al. 2013).

Cultural burning is an example of a cultural, forest-based practice that engenders individual and community feelings of well-being and satisfaction. Embedded in millennia of traditional activities, it forms a core part of

Indigenous cultural identity and pride, including staying connected with the land and with each other. Using fire involves intricate traditional knowledge passed down from generation to generation, and is nested in ancient spirituality, customary laws, traditions and social organisation. Cultural burning facilitates community gatherings and collective activities, allowing for story-telling, advocating values and enacting traditional roles in communities. Indigenous fire management practices have a crucial purpose of maximising plant and animal food resources and managing the environment from which they are drawn (Gott 2005; Fletcher et al. 2021).

Economic dependence of Indigenous communities on cultural forest-based activities

Generally, the most resilient Indigenous communities are those in which economic development incorporates customary laws and values. Natural resource management activities and culture-based employment, such as with Indigenous land management programs, provide economic, health and wellbeing benefits to communities (Kingsley et al. 2013; Garnett et al. 2016). These are particularly important in remote communities with limited access to commercial industries.

A range of forest-based activities provide economic benefit as well as facilitating cultural connections to forested areas, including:

- Cultural heritage assessments associated with forest management activities may be legislative requirements, and provide opportunities for Indigenous people to earn income and to reconnect with and conserve culturally significant places.
- The Indigenous Ranger program, part of the Australian Government's Working on Country program, incorporates customary law and values into land management (Garnett et al. 2016).
- Savannah fire management for carbon credits relies on the application of cultural fire knowledge to undertake early dry-season burning and limit late dry-season burns, with income generated from associated carbon emissions reductions used to improve the well-being of Indigenous people connected to that land (Altman et al. 2020).
- Wattle seed harvesting for commercial purposes (predominantly gundabluie, *Acacia victoriae*) by Indigenous women across South Australia and the Northern Territory is based on traditional practices (RIRDC 2014).

Together with financial security, other benefits of cultural forest-based employment include strengthened individual self-confidence and self-esteem, better lifestyle choices, improved health and wellbeing associated with outdoor activity, and involvement in meaningful work. The benefits of being employed often extend to the individual's immediate and extended families. For Indigenous people, broader community benefits include stronger community leadership, positive role models for younger generations, and stronger bonding between elders and younger generations that facilitates the passing on of traditional knowledge (Van Bueren et al. 2015; Stoeckl et al. 2019).

Economic dependence of Indigenous communities on forest and wood products industries

Economic dependence on forest-based activities is difficult to quantify because of the diverse ways in which Indigenous people may be engaged in forest-related employment. The number of people directly employed in forest and wood products industries is used here as an indicator of the economic dependence of Indigenous communities on forests.

In 2021, there were 25 Local Government Areas (LGAs) with more than 2% of the Indigenous workforce directly employed in the forest and wood products industries (Table 6.5d-1, Figure 6.5d-1), with a total of 1,478 Indigenous people nationally (0.6% of the total Indigenous workforce). Some of the LGAs with higher numbers of

Indigenous employees in forest and wood products industries included Snowy Valleys in New South Wales, Roper Gulf, West Arnhem and East Arnhem in the Northern Territory, and East Pilbara in Western Australia.

The proportion of Indigenous persons working in forest and wood products industries increased in 14 of these LGAs between 2016 and 2021 (Table 6.5d-1). This may reflect increased opportunities to provide advice and services to commercial forestry operations, or acting on an opportunity where forest resources become available. Decreases may be due to changes in the forest and wood products sector as a whole, or the availability of employment in other industries.

Table 6.5d-1: Number of Indigenous people employed in forest and wood products industries and proportion of workforce by Local Government Area with more than 2% of the Indigenous workforce employed in the forest and wood products industries, and jurisdiction

Jurisdiction	Local Government Area	Number of Indigenous people employed in forest and wood products industries, 2016	Number of Indigenous people employed in forest and wood products industries, 2021	Proportion of Indigenous workforce employed in forest and wood products industries, 2016 (%)	Proportion of Indigenous workforce employed in forest and wood products industries, 2021 (%)
New South Wales	Bega Valley	6	12	2	3
	Bellingen	6	10	5	5
	Oberon	7	17	12	22
	Richmond Valley	9	15	2	3
	Snowy Valleys	15	33	10	13
Northern Territory	East Arnhem	21	23	2	2
	Roper Gulf	13	33	2	5
	Tiwi Islands	4	9	1	3
	West Arnhem	27	29	4	4
Queensland	Cassowary Coast	14	20	2	2
	Cook	18	14	7	5
	Gympie	11	19	3	3
	Maranoa	5	14	2	3
South Australia	Anangu Pitjantjatjara	10	12	3	4
	Yunkunytjatjara	20	13	13	5
	Mount Gambier	6	8	3	3
	Murray Bridge	8	8	12	11
	Wattle Range	8	8	12	11
Tasmania	Circular Head	28	17	6	3
	Dorset	3	8	6	9
	West Tamar	3	9	2	3
Victoria	East Gippsland	13	12	4	2
	Glenelg	3	15	2	7
Western Australia	East Pilbara	3	25	0	5
	Laverton	0	14	-	22
	Wyndham-East Kimberley	0	15	-	3
Australia		1,099	1,478	0.6	0.6

-, insufficient data to calculate statistic.

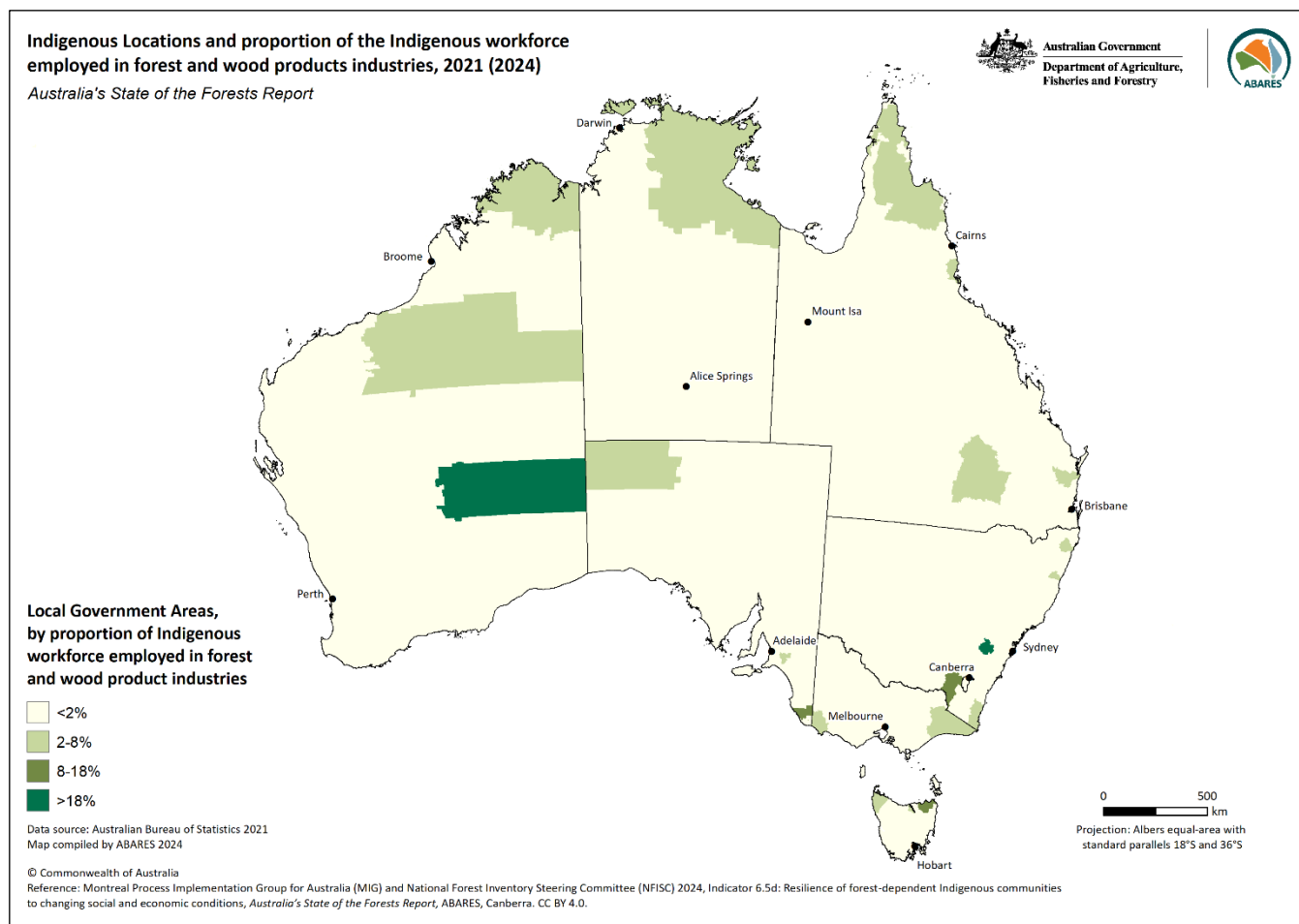
2016 LGAs are best fit to 2021 LGAs, Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS).

Australia total is the sum of all LGAs in Australia, including those that have less than 2% of the Indigenous workforce directly employed in the forest and wood products industries.

Source: ABARES, based on ABS census data (ABS 2016, 2021a).

[Click here for a Microsoft Excel workbook of the data for Table 6.5d-1.](#)

Figure 6.5d-1: Local Government Areas, by proportion of Indigenous workforce employed in forest and wood products industries, 2021



[Click here to download a high-definition copy of Figure 6.5d-1.](#)

Characteristics of Indigenous workers

Factors such as an individual's skills, age, education and financial resources are key influences that support adaptability and positive wellbeing outcomes. There is also a strong link between increased education levels, and improved employment and health outcomes for Indigenous people (Commonwealth of Australia 2018). Employment is associated with improved wellbeing and living standards, and benefits individuals, associated families and broader communities. Demographic information about Indigenous people employed in the forest and wood products industries can therefore be used to understand their resilience to change in forest and wood products industries.

Indigenous worker median age, qualifications and financial resources vary across the Local Government Areas (LGAs) with more than 2% of the Indigenous workforce employed in forest and wood products industries (Table 6.5d-2).

- The median age of the Indigenous forestry workforce was 34 years, ranging from 23 to 44 across the 25 LGAs.
- In general, younger employees can find it less challenging than older employees to find alternative employment.

- Workers had higher levels of non-school qualifications (such as certificates and diplomas) in Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara and Murray Bridge (South Australia), Snowy Valleys (New South Wales), and Dorset (Tasmania) than in other LGAs.

Nationally, many Indigenous persons work in higher skilled occupations (Table 6.5d-3). For example, in Roper Gulf (Northern Territory) the majority work as ‘professionals’, while in Snowy Valleys (New South Wales) the majority work as ‘machinery operators and drivers’. Low skilled and high skilled work is commensurate with qualifications and experience.

The skills and work experience gained in forest-based enterprises or occupations can assist Indigenous people to obtain employment in other sectors. For example, Indigenous ranger programs have contributed to preparing Indigenous people for subsequent careers (Van Bueren et al. 2015; Stoeckl et al. 2019).

Table 6.5d-2: Characteristics of Indigenous communities and workers in Local Government Areas with more than 2% of the Indigenous workforce employed in forest and wood products industries, 2021

Jurisdiction	Local Government Area	Number of Indigenous people employed in forest and wood products industries, 2021	Characteristics of Indigenous workers in forest and wood products industries		
			Median age (years), 2021	Number with non-school qualification, 2021	Proportion with non-school qualifications (%)
New South Wales	Bega Valley	12	34	4	33
	Bellingen	10	43	0	0
	Oberon	17	23	6	35
	Richmond Valley	15	38	4	27
	Snowy Valleys	33	40	17	52
Northern Territory	East Arnhem	23	40	4	17
	Roper Gulf	33	37	12	36
	Tiwi Islands	9	38	3	33
	West Arnhem	29	35	5	17
Queensland	Cassowary Coast	20	40	5	25
	Cook	14	34	4	29
	Gympie	19	30	6	32
	Maranoa	14	44	3	21
South Australia	Anangu Pitjantjatjara	12	39	6	50
	Yunkunytjatjara	13	34	6	46
	Mount Gambier	8	26	6	75
	Murray Bridge	8	43	0	0
	Wattle Range	17	31	4	24
Tasmania	Dorset	8	34	5	63
	West Tamar	9	33	3	33
	East Gippsland	12	28	5	42
Victoria	Glenelg	15	29	5	33
	East Pilbara	25	33	8	32
Western Australia	Laverton	14	33	0	0
	Wyndham-East Kimberley	15	30	7	47
	Australia	1,478	34	693	47

2016 LGAs are best fit to 2021 LGAs, Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS).

A non-school qualification is a certificate, diploma or advanced diploma, bachelor's degree, graduate certificate or graduate diploma, or postgraduate degree.

Australia total is the sum of all LGAs in Australia, including those that have less than 2% of the Indigenous workforce directly employed in the forest and wood products industries.

Source: ABARES, based on ABS census data (ABS 2016, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a).

[Click here for a Microsoft Excel workbook of the data for Table 6.5d-2.](#)

Table 6.5d-3: Number of Indigenous workers employed nationally in forest and wood products industries by occupational categories, 2021

Category of occupation	Number of employees
Managers	120
Professionals	253
Technicians and Trades	246
Community and Personal Service	11
Clerical and Administrative	118
Sales	17
Machinery Operators and Drivers	323
Labourers	370
Other	20
Total	1,478

Categories are from ANZSCO, the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ABS 2022b).

Other comprises 'inadequately described' and 'not stated'.

[Click here for a Microsoft Excel workbook of the data for Table 6.5d-3.](#)

Supporting information for Indicator 6.5d: Resilience of forest-dependent Indigenous communities to changing social and economic conditions

Data sources

Forest and wood products industries are defined here using the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC) 2021 categories for forestry industries and wood products industries: 030 Forestry and Logging; 051 Forestry Support Services; 140 Wood Product Manufacturing, not further defined; 141 Log Sawmilling and Timber Dressing; 149 Other Wood Product Manufacturing; 150 Pulp, Paper and Converted Paper Product Manufacturing, not further defined; 151 Pulp, Paper and Paperboard Manufacturing; 152 Converted Paper Product Manufacturing.

Data are not readily available on the economic dependence on forests resulting from other forest users such as apiarists, graziers, and ecotourism operators, and thus these activities are not considered in this Indicator. Other indirect business activities connected with forest and wood products industries, such as input suppliers, training providers, transport contractors and timber wholesale businesses, are also not considered.

Data were drawn from:

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) (2016). *Census of Population and Housing*, Census TableBuilder, accessed 15 December 2022. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) (2021a). *Census of Population and Housing*, Census TableBuilder, accessed 15 December 2022. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

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Defining resilience

Resilience has been defined in a culturally specific context as “The ability to have a connection and belonging to one’s land, family and culture, therefore an identity” (Usher et al. 2021), and characterised as the connections within identity, culture, spirituality, access to traditional lands, environment, sense of belonging and connectedness (Kickett 2011; Young et al. 2019). However, the value that Indigenous peoples place on the different benefits from forests may vary depending on the local context, and the connections and values of each community.

Cultural burning as a forest-based activity

Australia’s Indigenous people have used fire to manage landscapes for thousands of years. In modern times, the application by Indigenous people of landscape management skills using fire is called ‘cultural burning’. This typically involves small-scale, low-intensity patch-burning during the cooler months of the year, when fire is easily controlled and does not reach the canopy (Feary 2020).

Cultural burning engenders individual and community feelings of well-being and satisfaction. Being embedded in millennia of traditional cultural activities, it forms a core part of Indigenous cultural identity and pride. Using fire involves intricate traditional knowledge passed down from generation to generation, and is nested in ancient spirituality, customary laws, traditions and social organisation. Cultural burning keeps Indigenous people connected with Country and facilitates community gatherings and collective activities, allowing for storytelling, advocating values and enacting traditional roles in communities.

Case Study 6.5d-1: Traditional Indigenous burning and koalas on the south coast of New South Wales

The bushfires of 2019-20 in Australia had significant impacts on communities, families, and the natural environment. Many human and animal lives were lost. The total area of forest burnt in these bushfires was 8.5 million hectares.

In New South Wales, the south coast towns of Cobargo and Quaama experienced significant damage from these bushfires. To the west of these towns is Biamanga mountain, a place of significant Indigenous cultural heritage. The recent history of Biamanga mountain includes struggles between environmental and conservation principles, Indigenous cultural heritage, and the forestry sector, including following the establishment of the woodchip mill at Eden in the early 1970s.

For Indigenous people, the koala totem has played an important role in limiting bushfire threats. Dan Morgan, a cultural fire practitioner working with Firesticks Alliance, described what he witnessed as the Black Summer fires reached the top of Biamanga mountain. The fire “just sat down, and they trickled around here for more than a month”. He evoked it was “like the old spirits of the land just sat that fire down and protected the koala habitat” (ABC 2022).

Reflections drawn from areas of the NSW south coast (Gulaga and Biamanga National Parks) demonstrate the connection and care for Country that is critical for Indigenous people’s wellbeing and resilience:

Stories, songs and ceremony for south-eastern Australia indicate the koala has an important role as a creation ancestor, director of migration for ancestors and wise counsellor. The koala is also connected to women’s knowledge and responsibilities for Gulaga, Wadbilliga and Dignams Creek areas through spirit entities that inhabit these areas and have connections to the koala. (Wesson 2003).

We will help protect them [koalas] from fire by applying low intensity burns in small patches in appropriate locations surrounding identified areas of koala activity to provide low-fuel buffers against wildfire. Our traditional burning practices will help us achieve this. We will also carefully consider the location of koala activity areas when planning responses to wildfire and try to minimise the impacts of wildfire and back-burning in these areas (OEH 2014).

The [Gulaga and Biamanga] Boards will support efforts to improve knowledge about where koalas are and what Country is important for them. They will support monitoring programs that assess how they are going. The Boards will also support koala habitat rehabilitation in areas near to and between the Mountains so that koalas have more Country to expand into. (OEH 2014).

The local impacts of the Black Summer bushfires were surveyed by the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment between April and October 2020, in the northern section of Biamanga National Park (NP) and in catchments to the west and east of Lizard Road, which forms the boundary between Biamanga NP and Mumbulla Flora Reserve. Koala pellets were found at 14 of 75 grid sites in the North Biamanga survey area and at two of the 55 grid sites in the Mumbulla survey area. The survey team also found koala pellets at other locations in the survey areas outside the grid sites, including pellets from a female koala and juvenile in each survey area. The koala population in these areas is now being surveyed on an ongoing basis with various stakeholders including

Indigenous owners, neighbouring landholders, agencies, universities, and the local Koala Action Network, which is supported by the Far South Coast Landcare Association (NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment 2021).

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More information

Learn more about [Criterion 6 of Australia's State of the Forest Report](#).

Web agriculture.gov.au/abares/forestsaustralia/sofr/

[Download a Microsoft Excel workbook of the data presented in Indicator 6.5d.](#)

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land and sea, waters, environment and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, their culture, and their Elders past and present.

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