

Statement of Connor Wright

Name: Connor Wright

Date of birth: 17/03/1998

Date: 20 March 2025

1. My name is Connor Wright and my cultural name is Djindjbad. My pronouns are he/him and I am 27 years old. I am a Larrakia man and lived in Darwin situated on Larrakia country for the first 17 years of my life. I moved to Melbourne (Wurundjeri country) at 17 on a scholarship for university studies and have been in Melbourne ever since. I am now in my final year of my Masters in Climate change and policy. My hobbies include running, hiking, reading, skiing and playing games like board games and computer games with friends and family.
2. While Darwin is the capital city of the Northern Territory, it's still a small town community on the coast. It's tropical which is quite different to the majority of where most people live in Australia. It is heavily affected by monsoonal storms and cyclones which are exacerbated by the effects of climate change.
3. Growing up there, we would head to the beach, go swimming at waterfalls in Litchfield National Park and go camping with family and friends. I would spend time being out on country with my Larrakia grandmother and growing up surrounded by family. Larrakia people have the longest running land claim in Australia in history of 45 years, which was only settled in December 2024. For context a land claim refers to the legal process through which Indigenous groups seek recognition of their traditional ownership and rights to land that was taken from them during colonization. Land claims and Indigenous rights and interests to their land in Australia is known as Native Title. Native Title claims are generally made under specific legislation, the Native Title Act 1993.
4. Through the Land Trust Corporation, we were given a small section of land out past Coolalinga. This land backs onto a river and estuary and is situated between mangroves and grasslands. With my grandmother, aunties, uncles, we would collect periwinkles, longbums, fish and mudcrabs in the mangroves and cook them up. I still have a lot of family in Darwin including my mum, grandmother and uncles.
5. I am making this statement in support of my joint complaint to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Climate Change detailing how Australia is violating mine, and other young people's human rights.
6. My own knowledge and experiences are the reason I am filing this complaint with some listed below:

- i. Indigenous Australians are not well known or recognised on the world stage. Due to this, our rights can be very easily violated.
- ii. Through my analysis and experience of Australian policy both domestic and international, my country has a proven track record of promising much on climate change but delivering very little.
- iii. This issue doesn't just affect Australian youth; it affects young people all around the globe. Australia is one of the highest contributors to global CO2 and also exports a lot of fossil fuel products that in turn contribute to other countries emissions. Australia's failure to meaningfully meet their own NDC commitments affects youth on a global scale, including me.
- iv. I'm privileged to have been given such a great education and experiences and therefore it is my moral obligation to protect Indigenous people and Australian youths' human rights – utilising my skills and experiences to do this complaint.

Climate change and my studies and career

7. My undergrad major was in chemistry and a lot of my electives were environmental science based. I was always aware of climate change, but the impact and scale came to me later. The big turning point came when I was working as an environmental consultant.
8. I was an environmental consultant for two years and it's part of the reason why I wanted to do my Masters. As a consultant, I was working in sustainability and compliance auditing, and I was getting data from the oil and gas industry on how much they were polluting. I found in my checklists that they were operating within the legal frameworks, but morally I felt disgusted at the sheer levels they were allowed to pump out every quarter. That was the reason I started my Masters in Climate Change and Policy. That was the pivotal moment.

Climate change as a secondary form of colonisation

9. When I first learned about climate change, I remember talking about it on the grand scale of the environment, which is quite fast, but from a human perspective can appear quite slow leading to thinking of it more in the abstract. Learning about climate change on a deeper level put these environmental changes into perspective – the higher heat, the seasonal shifts (especially in a place like Darwin), changes to behaviours of animals, the monsoons becoming more intense and the periods of seasons shortening and lengthening in certain areas as well.
10. From an Australian perspective, the seasons in Darwin are wet season (November-April) and dry season (May-October) but we have our own cultural seasons as well. They are **Balnba** (rainy season; Balnba gulugi bigarrk - big rain coming in November, December), **Dalay** (monsoon season in January, February, March), **Mayilema** (speargrass, Magpie goose egg and knock 'em down season in March, April), **Damibila** (Barramundi and bush fruit time in April, May, June), **Dinidjanggama** (heavy dew time in June, July, August), **Gurrulwa gulugi** (Season of 'big wind' in July, August, September) and **Dalirrgang** (Build up time in September, October).

11. Some of the impacts on culture are seen through these seasonal shifts. We have a lot of more seasons than the Western lens of Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring. That might work for European countries, but we have a very different climate and environment here. Most Indigenous cultures I am aware of, they have at least more than 4 seasons. With more seasons there is less room for variabilities, so when you have seasonal shifts, it affects culture dramatically and affects our ability to engage in cultural timelines. For example, if the barramundi meeting and bush fruit flowering shift to later in the year, this takes everything out of sync. We use environmental indicators to know when to engage with our cultural practices. This throws everything out cascading into a whole array of new changes.
12. With seasonal shifts, there are new stresses on the environment and cultural practices involving plants and animals. Climate change affects Indigenous communities' ability to be effective stewards of the environment as they have been. I worry about being able to effectively engage in that in the future, that weighs pretty heavily on my mind. I am in here in Melbourne to get things moving and rolling in hopes of benefiting indigenous communities, including my own.
13. All of this is a secondary form of colonisation and degradation of culture. If you want to be charitable, governments of the world might not intend for this to happen, but it's still destroying culture and cultural practice with essentially no consequences. Those governments can also claim some level of deniability that they are not intending this to happen. But failure to alleviate these scenarios in any meaningful way is destroying my culture and all indigenous cultures globally.
14. But at the end of the day, will my land still be there? I am worried about sea levels rising and environmental degradation on my country. I have never been in a true cyclone in Darwin, but I have experienced tropical lows. Under the effects of climate change natural disasters such as cyclones are set to become more frequent. If you were to visit Darwin, you'd notice the coast brushed with mangroves. These plants are quintessential for a lot of Australian coastal landscapes, and they protect the coast from storm surges, erosion, are biodiversity hotspots and even improve water quality. With climate change impacting mangroves, it has a cascading impact on the food web, and it's very bad - it's essentially destroying country. Sea level rise also affects mangroves. If you look at root systems, the whole plant can't survive underwater. Their root systems are designed for the tide coming in and out, they are sensitive to temperature extremes and with the increase in natural disasters such as cyclones, prolonged physical damage also becomes a risk. Couple this all with ocean acidification and I'll ask again, at the end of the day, will my land still be there?
15. The multinational oil and gas company INPEX has a site at the harbour in Darwin that in its impact statement to the Northern Territory Government said it would be only emitting 500 tons of volatile organic compounds (VOC's). A report last year found this to be a gross understatement as in 2023 it emitted 3,900 tons. Almost eight times the amount it stated to the government for approval worse yet the year before it was 11,000 tons emitted.¹ Yet, nothing is done. VOC's have been linked to cancer² and such high levels of pollutants can cause headaches, drowsiness, nausea and exacerbate asthma attacks. My elders, those younger than me and those with serious health

¹<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-06-14/inpex-ichthys-lng-plant-darwin-nt-vocs-emissions-increase/103668268>

² <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38320440/>

conditions will be the most heavily affected here. So, I ask an even more harrowing question, will my air still be there?

'It's a prison of knowledge': climate change impacts and their cost

16. Even just in Melbourne, I can talk about longer summers and shorter winters. Our ski seasons and degradation of ski fields in Australia nearing a total collapse of the sport. We are seeing less intense winters and more intense summers, with shorter winters and longer summers. Melbourne is more temperamental now. Living in Melbourne for nine years, I've seen how it's changed, it has only gotten more chaotic and unpredictable.
17. Climate change has changed how I live my life, with the high variability in winter and summer, preparing for the day is difficult in Melbourne. Some days it is 40 degrees and then it is 20 degrees in about two seconds. How do you plan your day around that? For people with chronic health conditions, how is this going to affect them?
18. Another serious issue here in Australia is that our building codes are not up to scratch for the weather we experience. Every single rental I have lived in for the last 9 years has been like that. For summer, if you are lucky enough, you can choose to run the air con to cool down, but that comes with the stress of: affecting the grid, high power bills, and if you use a non-renewable energy source then you are then you still contribute to the problem. If you don't have air con, then you might have to vacate your house and, in a heatwave, you'd have to leave for days on end.
19. There have been times I have to leave home because you can't stay there. I am privileged and am able to access places where I can go when it's too extreme at home, but I know a lot of people don't have that.
20. During the Black Summer Bushfires in 2019-2020, my asthma was going crazy. I was in Melbourne and the sky was lit up like an orange a sunset for the whole day. There was smoke in the air, and the thing about bushfire smoke is that it's not just carbon, there are other harmful toxic chemicals in the air too. So, this smoke heavily affects people with illnesses.³ My symptoms during that time include shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, coughing, and just living off my inhaler. At that time, I didn't know I could get a mask to help. There are mental health impacts and stress of having asthma too. There has only been one time in my life that I have had to go to hospital for asthma. So, through the bushfires I was thinking, 'do I have to go to hospital?' 'will there be long term damage?', 'is this going to affect my whole day, week, month, life?'.
21. I try not to think about the future, and I try not to think about how climate change will affect my asthma too. I am not currently planning on purchasing respiratory systems or not being able to leave the house. But it could be a possibility for me in the future, if these climate change impacts get worse.

³ <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Grattan-Institute-submission-Victorian-Inquiry.pdf>

22. My sister was living in Brisbane during the 2022 Brisbane floods. This had a direct impact on me as my mental health was impacted due to concerns for a family member. Luckily, she was unharmed but events such as that will only become more frequent as climate change progresses.⁴
23. Climate change gives me a pessimistic attitude, and it stops me from making any long-term plans. I consider myself very lucky to be able to understand what future scenarios can happen and can access certain resources. For example, Climate Central have a website where you can get a map about future sea level rise. Success in Australia often looks like buying a house. There is a benefit in having equity and stake in a financial market by buying one, and for something like that, I can look up sea levels rise. So, when other young people are planning on buying a future house, prospective areas could be impacted by climate change, and they don't know about it.
24. It's a bit of prison having the knowledge about climate change. You can't not think about it. When you are aware of systems and systems thinking, you cannot think about just one thing, it will cascade into another, and then another. This comes up for things like government policy decisions. It's not great for mental health. It's a spiral and the impacts are not even immediate. Being a young person, I am seeing older politicians making these decisions about things that will maybe happen in 30 years' time. So, the final consequence will come, and they won't even be there for it. It's frustrating and makes me angry. I know the Australian Government can do more on climate change.
25. The prison of knowledge is formed from the effect that there is climate change inaction from the Australian Government. It's not just punishment for me; it's for young people of every age around the globe. We have politicians that are pushing 70 to 80 who don't have to think about these risks. This isn't something that has to pass their mind. Punishment for what? Punishment for being young and having a future.

Australian Government and climate change

26. While the Australian government has committed to cut emissions by 43% (of 2005 levels) by 2030. Despite this the government is continuing to approve more and more oil and gas projects. The reality where these projects come to fruition and Australia still meets its NDC targets seems to rely upon offsetting from LULUCF. Australia has been able to use the manipulation of a historical baseline (first 1990 then 2005, both years with high levels of land clearance) to continue to claim significant emission reductions. Australia's reporting and transparency is less rigorous. For instance, LULUCF in the EU must be subjected to independent review by the UNFCCC while this is not the case in Australia. This reliance on LULUCF to meet its targets while also being able to manipulate through a "baseline and credit system" and lack of independent review and transparency is extremely concerning especially to youth that will believe the government is on track to reducing its carbon emissions. I would call upon the Special Rapporteur to pressure Australia to adhere to similar rules and regulations when it comes to LULUCF reporting and do away with the baseline of 2005. This is also without considering all the secondary emission the Australian government allows with being a major global exporter in coal and gas.

⁴<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-02-28/brisbane-floods-anniversary-buyback-scheme-retrofit-building/102029134>

27. In approving so many new coal and gas projects and on paper manipulating its CO₂ reduction the Australian government is actively ignoring and violating the human rights of not only its own citizens but that of other countries as well.
28. I'm equally very disappointed in Australia's lack of inclusion of indigenous voices in the formation of climate policy. Especially with indigenous Australians being one of the most vulnerable groups to climate change and one of the most heavily affected. I wrote a Policy Paper on this that calls for the formation of Indigenous and Torres Strait lander climate change council with veto power. You can read it here: <https://www.globalvoices.org.au/post/enhancing-indigenous-engagement-in-australian-climate-policy>.
29. This was also in response to Australia's love of advisory committees that have virtually zero influence or power in our decision-making practices. For example, the Queensland Police First Nations Advisory Board. After its formation in 2022 every member of the board was dismissed in February 2024 after Queensland police repeatedly refused to meet and enact recommendations.
30. Currently Indigenous groups in Australia also have no say on whether or not oil and gas projects happen on native title land as outlined in the *Native Title Act 1993*. We also have no say here; in an act we fought so hard for we are still choked out of our land and rights.
31. With a federal election coming up I am worried for the future of Australia's climate commitments Especially with the opposition leader Peter Dutton been seen attending a talk with Australia biggest mining moguls and Australia's richest woman Gina Rinehart and shouting slogan "make our bank accounts great again".⁵
32. Australia is contributing to the violation of many articles under UN declarations (that they are signatories to) due to their continued inaction on climate change. For the reasons that I have outlined in my statement above, they are violating my right to life, my right to culture and they are failing to prevent the continued destruction of my culture.

Another question to pose after all this is why is Australia a signatory on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights yet without its own domestic human rights charter?

The Australian Government not only has a moral obligation but also a legal one to remedy these violations by contributing much more than it already is to fight the increase in global climate change.

I confirm the contents of this statements are a true and correct record of my evidence.

Connor Wright

Name:

Signature:

20/03/2025

Date

⁵ <https://thenightly.com.au/business/mining/make-our-bank-accounts-great-again-gina-rinehart-declares-as-she-calls-on-liberals-to-step-up-c-16848696>