

# Why Indigenous communities need a seat at the table on climate

May 17 2022, by Ray Minniecon

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There's growing recognition that Indigenous communities are among the most [vulnerable to the effects of climate change](#) and that traditional

ecological knowledge is vital to [adapting to environmental changes](#).

As part of a series of [video stories](#) on faith and the environment, The Conversation spoke to [Ray Minniecon](#), an Anglican Aboriginal pastor based in Australia and an Indigenous elder at NAIITS, an Indigenous learning community. Minniecon shares his perspective on the role Indigenous knowledge can play in [environmental protection](#) and on his attendance at the COP26 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in November, 2021.

The interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

**Within Christianity there's the notion of [caring for God's creation](#). As an Indigenous Christian, how do you view that idea?**

For Indigenous peoples, we want to make sure that we're the ones who hold the knowledge of our ancestors. So we should be the ones who help our own people come to grips with the things that are important to us as Indigenous peoples. And so we're building upon our assets, not on our deficits, and the assets that our ancestors have left us are very powerful. We can directly look after and care for our creation and teach people the right way of living in relationship with each other, all of God's creation and with our creator. We've got a lot to learn to achieve that goal today. But we also got a lot to teach others from our ancient wisdom. And I think it comes out of the ministry and message of reconciliation.

**What do you mean by reconciliation in this context?**

It means reconciliation, not with nature, not only with each other and with our past and our histories, but also reconciliation with our environment. Reconciliation with our creator. It is really one of the key agenda items for all of humanity at this particular stage in our human history.

## **Do you think that people connected to the Aboriginal tradition saw the current state of environmental destruction coming?**

We did ask ourselves, who gave these people permission to come and invade our country and do all this destruction not only to our land, but also to the people itself? We've had to learn their language to say, When are you going to stop your destructive policies and practices and start listening to us and take notice of how we looked after land and how we prevented these big things like bush fires and other kinds of things from the wisdom our elders passed on to us?

We've had [mitigation strategies](#) embedded in us, because for us the land already has laws. And we've abided by those laws that were there. And they are good laws, they're perfect laws, and they tell us how to look after land. The land is alive. It has spirit and voice. Our brothers, sisters, grandparents—they're the ones who tell us who we are and how we can look after each other. That's why I say at COP26, as an Indigenous person, our hopes are shattered by the ways in which these nations actually try to convince us, deceive us into saying that they have the solutions to climate change when they are the ones who are destroying our environment and created this mess.

## **What was your experience at the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (COP26), and what did you take away from it?**

The experience left me disillusioned. Indigenous peoples have been at the forefront of climate change destruction, but we don't have a seat at the table. We've tried to make our voices heard to ensure that people realize that the fossil fuel industries and other extractive policies and developments are always harmful to Mother Earth and also harmful to our human existence.

Indigenous people have looked after our country and environment for the last 60,000 years, and we've kept it in pristine condition, because we knew what we had to do to protect it. Our Mother provides us with everything we require and everything we need. And it's only in the last 200 years that we have seen the incredible devastation and degradation and the destruction of our environment in so many powerful ways that it's left us feeling very sick spiritually, mentally and physically.

But it's those who have colonized Indigenous nations that have the loudest voices. The Australian Pavilion at COP26 was supported by the fossil fuel industries, the coal mining industries. Those extractive industries say that they are the ones who are going to give us the solutions to climate change. And I just found that what they were saying was so hypocritical and deceitful, and it left me feeling depressed and with a lot of questions in my mind. I just felt like I came away with no hope at all. But I didn't lose my faith. My faith in God is there.

## **What do you think needs to happen for Aboriginal voices to be heard? What would that look like?**

Well, first and foremost, we need an official seat at the table—the G-7, G-20 and these international conferences and gatherings where these issues are debated and discussed. The corporations or nations that come together for events like COP26 invite us, but they're the ones who really are not listening to our voices. I feel like a token.

The policies and practices based on the wisdom of our elders that we put in place here in our country for the last 60,000 years made sure that we could protect Mother Earth and live in harmony with all creation. If some of those wise strategies from our cultural understandings could be implemented quickly, perhaps we could arrest the damage we are doing to our Mother and make the immediate changes for the better of all

humanity before its too late.

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