



**AGROECOLOGY & FOOD  
SOVEREIGNTY ALLIANCE**

# **First Peoples First Strategy**

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## Acknowledgements

AFSA acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the First Peoples of what is now known as Australia. We acknowledge the Djaara, and the Gadigal and Bidjigal peoples on whose Lands this Strategy was principally drafted. Sovereignty was never ceded on this continent–this always was and always will be Aboriginal Land. We extend our deepest respect and gratitude to elders past and present for their continuing custodianship of Country.

# 01 About the Agroecology & Food Sovereignty Alliance

The Agroecology & Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA) is a farmer-led civil society organisation of people working towards socially-just and ecologically-sound food and agriculture systems. The democratic participation of smallholders, local communities, and particularly of Indigenous Peoples, in decision-making processes is integral to these efforts.

AFSA provides a balanced voice to represent smallholders' and local communities' interests at all levels of government. We connect smallholders for farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing, assist government in instituting scale-appropriate and consistent regulations and standards, and advocate for fair access for smallholders to local markets.

We are part of a robust global network of civil society organisations involved in food sovereignty and food security policy development and advocacy. We are members of the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), La Via Campesina (the global movement of peasant farmers), and Urgenci (the International Network for Community-Supported Agriculture). We also support the Australasian representative on the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM), which relates to the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

Our vision is to enable regenerative and agroecological farms to thrive. This has taken on an added salience in the face of the increasing impacts of the climate crisis and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Australians care more than ever about the way their food is produced and how and where they can access it, with a growing awareness of its social, environmental, and economic impacts. Nutritious food produced locally in ethical and ecologically-sound ways is increasingly in demand, and governments must facilitate and encourage the emergence and viability of agroecology and regenerative agriculture, thereby protecting the environment and human and animal health. Inextricable to this vision is the need to honestly and truthfully account for the land's needs. As such, AFSA works to increase understandings of and appreciation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples connection to and care for Country, the imposed coloniality on Country, and decolonising efforts therefore are areas of our concern. We aim to put First Peoples knowledges first in best practice of healing Country and sustaining life.

# *Country*

*Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place, such as one might indicate with terms like 'spending a day in the country' or 'going up the country'. Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind and spirit; heart's ease.*

(Deborah Bird Rose 1997: 7)

## 02 Why have a First Peoples First Strategy?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples occupy a unique position as the First Peoples of—what is now known as—Australia, and as the caretakers and custodians of Country for millennia. It is through this **custodial ethic**, ‘an ancient reciprocal relationship with nature; an ethic of looking after, stewardship, caring for, and the obligation to look after Land’ (Graham 2013: 2) that Indigenous peoples were, and continue to be, nurtured and sustained by the Land.

First Peoples have long articulated colonialism’s effect on Country: that it is hurt, and in need of healing. As we attempt to reset relations, we know that healing happens from the ground up, for ‘when you heal Country, you heal yourself’ (Graham 2021). These Indigenous notions of Country direct us to understand the ultimate life-giving, nourishing and nurturing role of Country in providing food.

Global food systems have been failing people for a long time, and the voices of Indigenous peoples are often obfuscated from the conversations of sustainable food systems they should be driving. Food sovereignty centres knowledges that are place-based, offering a political vision and framework for asserting everyone’s right to nutritious and culturally appropriate food produced and distributed in ethical and ecologically sound ways, and our right to democratically determine our own food and agriculture systems (Nyéléni 1996).

AFSA members practice regenerative and sustainable farming practices, many of which come under the term ‘**agroecology**’. Agroecology is a scientifically and experientially justified practice of agriculture that is sensitive to the ecosystems in which it is situated *and* that fosters the democratic participation of all peoples in the food system. Its original and still predominant practitioners are Indigenous Peoples and peasant smallholders the world over. Many of its advocates make a strong case for relying on Indigenous knowledges of their land and systems to produce sufficient food sustainably. Agroecology fundamentally aims to promote the deep ecological, social, and economic knowledge of First Peoples, peasants, and other small-scale food producers and custodians of Land. It puts decision-making power back in the hands of Indigenous Peoples and peasants and local communities. As the Nyéléni Declaration states, **agroecology is a key element in the construction of Food Sovereignty (2015)**.

Indigenous knowledges are reduced when expressed in the language of the coloniser: restating them in English cannot fully embrace custodial ethics, the complex kin relationships emanating from the Land, and the oral traditions attending them. We recognise this limitation, and incorporate this into our reflexive praxis when asking how First Peoples may be put ‘first’ in all our work.

AFSA aims to assert both Indigenous sovereignty, and food sovereignty. Placing Indigenous peoples’ sovereignty first embraces the principles of food sovereignty, and neither works to the mutual exclusion of the other. In practice, we are working with farmers and allies who are embracing and espousing a

custodial ethic to understand how they are currently, or may in future, be able to extend their care for land to care for its Original Custodians, bringing settler descendants full circle to find ways and means of restitution of land and rights to First Peoples. It is a priority for us to listen to First Peoples at every opportunity for guidance on our way, as well as embracing custodial ethics, locating our practices, and expressing solidarities with Indigenous traditional owners on each food sovereignty issue.

## Practicing Food Sovereignty on Unceded Lands

AFSA's First Peoples First Strategy recognises the impact of colonisation on Indigenous peoples, and the histories of colonialism that actively dispossessed Indigenous peoples, and continue to do so as Indigenous Australian lands remain unceded. The role of farmers in the settler-colonial invasion has direct and ongoing implications with that dispossession, as settler-colonialism is a 'structure' and 'not an event' (Wolf 1999). Where farmers continue to farm on unceded Land, and benefit from the ongoing settler colonial invasion, we must reckon with our positionality: that is, our position in relation to Indigenous Land, land that remains unceded, our relatedness to settler colonisers, and our relationship with Indigenous peoples, knowledges and ways of being.

For one, AFSA aims to increase understandings of Land as not simply a place to live and farm, but knowing the land as a '**nourishing terrain**' (Rose 1997), a place where a person belongs, where Indigenous peoples share kin, and in which mutual responsibilities to care for the land are grounded. This fundamentally changes responsibilities and obligations to Country, and is integral to the food sovereignty movement.

There are various complexities involved in settler descendants being on this land. To consciously think of oneself as a settler means being conscious that we live on an Indigenous People's Land. Importantly for the food sovereignty movement, this carries with it an obligation to support those defending their homelands (Snelgrove, Dhamoon and Corntassel 2014: 25), and to support ongoing attempts to 'unsettle the settler conscience' by 'staying with the trouble' of colonialism (Haraway 2016). As Maddison acknowledges, settlers have a particular responsibility entrenched in their position 'to use their racial and institutional privilege to share the burden of educating non-Indigenous populations, while also holding and creating space for Indigenous critical engagement in their work' (2019: xxxvii).

There is often an astonishing generosity from First Peoples in Australia towards settler descendants and other more recent migrants in the face of ongoing colonisation of unceded Aboriginal lands – a generosity Indigenous scholars have written is born of the same ways-of-being that are rooted in ethics of custodianship. Mary Graham, a Kombumerri person, and her settler colleague Morgan Brigg (2021) recommend moving forward with 'autonomous regard' between Indigenous and settler peoples, 'which

can be an ethical relation that acknowledges and sits with the brutality of dispossession through settler colonialism.’ We know as a historically and currently non-Indigenous led organisation, we still have a lot of deep listening, learning and acting to do.

## 03 Developing the Strategy

In developing the Strategy, AFSA has asked how to put First Peoples ‘first’ in all that we do. This requires us to ask what Land-centred ethical obligations in our considerations of what food sovereignty can and should look like in a colonised country like Australia.

AFSA’s First Peoples Strategy was drafted by the National Committee with input and feedback from First Peoples and AFSA members, including smallholders and researchers. We conducted a thematic analysis of First Peoples strategies across Australia relevant to grassroots organisations, government, universities, and NGOs. This included strategic objectives, actions and outcome measures, timeframes, evaluations processes and embedding Indigenous values and principles.

For several years, AFSA has been actively seeking input and guidance on how to strengthen knowledge of Indigenous connection, care for, and management of Land. We have been collectively building our knowledge of how these interrelate with agroecology in all its forms: as a science, set of practices, and a social movement, and how to build respectful relationships between settler descendants and First Peoples.

In developing the Strategy we drew from an extensive body of literature by First Peoples and Indigenous studies scholars. In so doing, we engaged with the literature regarding processes of ‘decolonisation’, the meaning of Land, Country and food (and nourishment) in Indigenous ways of being, the particular historical contexts of settler colonial societies like Australia, and current discourses in Indigenous political strategies of resistance, resurgence, and self-determination.

We also drew from our learnings at AFSA events that set in course the praxis of our engagement with the literature, putting First Peoples voices at the centre of discussions regarding food sovereignty for First Peoples on Land that always was, and always will be, Aboriginal. At the 2017 Food Sovereignty Convergence, Ngarigu woman, Ellen Mundy, spoke about her connection to Country. With input from other First Peoples in the room, Tony Boye joined Ellen to speak about the importance of connecting with Traditional Owners, building respectful relationships and understanding their ‘songlines’ and stories. This set the scene for the discussions to come, highlighting the need for a registry or ‘first steps’ page on the AFSA website to encourage landowners to engage with First Peoples and ensure the longevity of land and culture.

In the same year, AFSA hosted a [public conversation with Yuin man Bruce Pascoe](#) on Indigenous land management and regenerative farming. Pascoe spoke about respecting Country and connecting with Traditional Owners. He made it clear that conciliation, rather than reconciliation, will be a long and difficult process, and that with grace and open hearts we can look after this land, one another and the ancient culture and history of people embedded within it. Immediately after the 2017 Convergence

AFSA issued a [Statement of support for Uluru Statement from the Heart](#), a commitment which is renewed at each year's Food Sovereignty Convergence. These Convergence discussions set us on the direction that now manifests as the development of a First Peoples First Strategy.

In 2021, we hosted a [Solidarity Session on Indigenous Thinking with Appalech man Tyson Yunkaporta](#) in February, and another [Solidarity Session with settler farmer Murray Prior \(Nguurruu Farm\)](#) on collaborations on Country in September.

In 2023, AFSA established a First Peoples Focal Group to strengthen our solidarity with First Peoples and develop a mechanism for guidance on AFSA's work (see Focal Group for First Peoples Report section in the [2025 National Committee Report](#)). This work was led by Dom Chen (Gamilaroi woman), Jacob Birch (Gamilaraay man) and Josh Williams (Ngarrindjeri & Narungga man), closely followed by Kitana Mansell (Palawa woman) and Cal Callope (Butchulla, Anguthimri & Bindal woman).

In 2024, we amended our Constitution to remove the role of President and Vice-President and make AFSA co-led by First Peoples and Farmers, introducing a Focal Point for First Peoples (Jordan Nye) and Focal Point for Farmers (Tammi Jonas).

In 2025 we welcomed two new Focal Points for First Peoples elected by the First Peoples Focal Group – Cal Callope and Alex Ibarra (Kooma & Bidjara man).

# 04 AFSA’s First Peoples First Strategy

In line with the principles of the food sovereignty movement, we aim to enact the objectives of:

1. Actively supporting First Peoples’ food sovereignty through promotion, allyship, land sharing, and Paying the Rent.
2. Enhancing the cultural competence of AFSA National Committee and AFSA members by advancing the awareness and understanding of First Peoples’ stories and ongoing issues through trainings, ongoing conversations, and Solidarity Sessions.
3. Increasing members' ability to create connections with First Peoples in their local area and act in solidarity on local issues and struggles.

Strategic Objective	AFSA can contribute by:	Indicators in achieving objective
1. Actively support First Peoples’ food sovereignty	Offering free membership for First Peoples	Growth in First Peoples memberships
	Promoting stories of First Peoples’ food sovereignty on social media, including but not limited to during: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NAIDOC Week</li> <li>• National Reconciliation Week,</li> <li>• Invasion Day</li> </ul> and by conducting Solidarity Sessions with First Peoples individuals and organisations	Posting and publicising on AFSA’s instagram, facebook and individual NC members’ social media.
	Support land sharing initiatives	Collaborating in land sharing agreements, developing guidelines of best practice, and promoting educational activities about caring for and healing Country to AFSA members and allies, including at agroecology workshops and in Solidarity Sessions
	Paying the Rent	Rent is paid to Indigenous owned and led organisations, chosen through a transparent process with input from AFSA members
	Prioritise building connections with First Peoples’ organisations, especially in areas of land, biodiversity, youth, and women	Increase in number and quality of active relationships with First Peoples’ organisations
	Support Australia’s implementation of UNDRIP	
	Actively support Uluru Statement and ongoing truth-telling and moves towards Treaty led by First Peoples	
2. Advancing the awareness and understanding of First Peoples’ history and ongoing issues among the National Committee and members through trainings, ongoing conversations, solidarity sessions, and at Convergence	<b><u>National Committee meetings</u></b>	
	Acknowledging Country at all gatherings convened by AFSA and its members	Chair offers an acknowledgment of Country (and all present acknowledge the Countries on which they are located for online modalities)
	Committee member presentations on a prescient topic related to First Peoples at the start of each National Committee meeting	Presentations are made at each National Committee meeting

	Conducting a 'decolonising sharing circle' as a space for reflection and facing uncomfortable topics at Mid-Year and Annual Strategic Retreats	Decolonising sharing circles are held at AFSA Retreats
	Conducting a quarterly First Peoples First meeting	Meetings are convened
	Participating in training sessions run by a First Peoples organisation	All Committee members participate in training. Some members also participate in training
	<b><u>Food Sovereignty Convergence</u></b>	
	Ensure a place for First Peoples speakers	At least one Convergence session is led by First Peoples on topic they deem of concern to promoting Indigenous sovereignty
	First Peoples speak first in plenary	
	<b><u>Fair Food Week</u></b>	
	Developing a set of principles for event organisers to ensure First Peoples First and promotion of Indigenous sovereignty	Develop a framework or guidance – e.g. what are the minimum standards, different entry points e.g. always acknowledge country, Indigenous country, language guide
3. Increasing members' ability to create connections with First Peoples in their local area and act in solidarity on local issues and struggles.	<b><u>AFSA members</u></b>	
	Promoting stories and experience of cooperation between First Peoples and settler farmers through farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing and on social media	
	Share guidance on how to identify and support Indigenous owned businesses	Developing solidarity with organisations such as Trading Blak and Blak Business
	Develop a language guide for use in communications, e.g., social media and policy submissions, within the First Peoples First Strategy	Draft guide is ready by 2021 AGM

# 05 First Peoples First Strategy

## Implementation: monitoring, reporting and review

### **Monitoring**

AFSA's performance against the First Peoples First Strategy will be monitored on an ongoing basis. Accountability for implementation of the strategy, collecting data and reporting will sit with the National Committee, and be an ongoing responsibility of the National Committee.

### **Reporting**

AFSA will report progress to members every six months through member newsletters and will publish progress on its website.

### **Review**

The First Peoples First Strategy will be reviewed every six months. It will be reviewed with the continuous goal of keeping the Strategy relevant to the developments in the food sovereignty movement for Indigenous peoples, in Australia and abroad. We welcome and are grateful for collaborations with First Peoples and First Peoples organisations in reviewing the Strategy.

## 06 Terms

The First Peoples First Strategy is intended to be a ‘living document’. We aim not only to provide an outline of the Strategy, but to imbue it with a locatedness and dynamism all AFSA members can take up as part of our decolonising efforts. Our ‘coming to know’ is a praxis, and coming to heal relations between Indigenous peoples, settler colonisers and in particular farmers, is an ongoing process.

In our terminology, we aim to provide clarity around language used in the planning and development of the Strategy, and AFSA’s future communications both internal and external. The rationale is to avoid inadvertently excluding some readers by using terms without explanation – those which may only be familiar within some disciplines or cultures and not others.

We acknowledge our (mis)education and settler learning, and intend to delineate these definitions to support a process of all AFSA members’ settler unlearning – to unsettle the settler consciousness (Maddison 2019). Our intention is that this document does not privilege one knowledge system over another while recognising the primacy of Indigenous knowledges articulated by Indigenous Peoples. In the context of agroecology, we intend this document to assist in efforts to find a common language for communicating justice for First Peoples and mobilised responses to the multifaceted emergencies we are currently facing, to AFSA members and allies. We also recognise the complexities and nuances of language across contexts, timescales, disciplines and cultures and always invite collaboration through dialogue.

Agroecology	Agroecology is a scientifically and experientially justified practice of agriculture that is sensitive to the ecosystems in which it is situated and that fosters the democratic participation of farmers in the food system. Its original and still predominant practitioners are Indigenous peoples and peasant smallholders the world over. Many researchers make a strong case for relying on peasant and Indigenous knowledge of their land and systems to produce sufficient food sustainably (Scott 1998; Rosset & Altieri 2017; Anderson et al 2021; Liebman, et al 2020).
Country	‘Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place, such as one might indicate with terms like ‘spending a day in the country’ or ‘going up the country’. Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind and spirit; heart’s ease.’ (Rose 1997: 7)

Custodial Ethic	<p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples recognise that ‘the land is the Law’ from which everything is derived, and to which everything and everyone has an obligation of care – the First Peoples have what is called a custodial ethic (Graham 1999, 2012, 2021; Yunkaporta 2020; Martuwarra RiverofLife 2020; Loughrey 2020). Kombumerri woman Mary Graham (1999) strongly advocates for the adoption of this ethic by all Australians. Writing of how nonindigenous Australians might be able to embrace and practice a custodial ethic, Graham (1999, 107) says,</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">The best way of achieving these ends is to start establishing very close ties with land, not necessarily via ownership of property but via locally-based, inclusive, non-political, strategy-based frameworks, with a very long term aim of simply looking after land.</p> <p>Graham and others stress the need to ‘locate’ oneself, to have a relationship with land in order to listen and learn to be a good custodian. We believe Australia’s emerging agroecological farmers are doing this in very grounded ways as they work to heal country. The custodial ethic shares powerful convergences with the values and practices of peasant or smallholder agriculture, which together have substantial transformative potential. Peasant agriculture is based on ‘co-production with nature’ on a ‘self-controlled resource base’ (van der Ploeg 2013), a sustained use of ecological capital, reliance on (mostly) family labour, and relations of reciprocity, with a core value being sustenance for and reproduction of the farm unit and family (Chayanov 1966).</p>
Decolonisation	<p>Deborah Bird Rose asserts that guilt is related to ‘one’s own actions’, whereas responsibility is ‘the human condition of living with and for others’ (2004: 12) – making all non-indigenous people <i>responsible for</i> but not necessarily <i>guilty of</i> Australia’s often violent dispossession of Aboriginal people. Yuin man Bruce Pascoe, speaking at the Food Sovereignty Convergence at the Canberra City Farm in 2017 echoed Rose’s sensibility when he said, ‘Black people aren’t going anywhere. White people aren’t going anywhere. So what are we going to do about it?’</p> <p>Whereas Mayes (2018) criticises white assertions of belonging to Aboriginal lands as a continued colonial project that undermines Indigenous sovereignty, Trigger (2008) asserts a need for non-Indigenous belonging to country without further dispossessing the Original Owners.</p> <p>There is often an astonishing generosity from First Peoples in Australia towards settler descendants and recent migrants in the face of ongoing colonisation of unceded Aboriginal lands – a generosity they write that is born of the same relational ontology at the root of the custodial ethic. Graham and Brigg (2021) recommend moving forward with ‘autonomous regard’ between Indigenous and settler peoples, ‘which can be an ethical relation that acknowledges and sits with the brutality of dispossession through settler colonialism.’ In the same vein, Yunkaporta tells audiences</p>

	<p>‘don’t talk about your settler fragility all the time, think about your human becoming’ (2020).</p> <p>As Tuck and Yang write (2012), ‘decolonization is not a metaphor’ but a process of divesting from colonial power structures. In Tuck and Yang’s North American postulation, there can be no decolonising solidarity nor restitution without an unmitigated and material return of Indigenous sovereignty over land and life (See also Smith 1999).</p> <p>Taking our lead from First Peoples in Australia, we believe and hope that it is possible to achieve Indigenous sovereignty and food sovereignty for all consubstantially, by letting the land, our relations with it, and all the species that also relate to it be our guides.</p>
First Peoples	<p>AFSA recognises there are many accepted terms when referring broadly to First Peoples, including but not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Indigenous Peoples, First Nations Peoples, Traditional Owners, and Original Owners. Using respectful and inclusive language and terminology is an essential component of reconciliation and strengthening relationships between First Peoples and non-indigenous Australians. Language is active and dynamic, and can impact on attitudes, understandings and relationships in a very real and active sense.</p> <p>The First Peoples of this land now known as Australia have for thousands of years had unique communities with unique names - prior to Invasion there wasn’t a need for collective nouns or complicated terminology. After Invasion, the government required people to be defined and labeled for ease of governing.</p> <p>Given the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities across Australia, we should always seek guidance directly from First Peoples in our community about preferences and protocols in terminology. We note that many First Peoples do not like to be referred to as ‘Indigenous’ as they consider it too generic.</p> <p>Taking our lead from a point made by Tyson Yunkaporta that ‘nations’ in the modern world are riddled with issues that First Peoples may not want to associate themselves with, we have primarily adopted First Peoples in our language rather than First Nations Peoples when speaking broadly.</p>
Food Sovereignty	<p>Food sovereignty asserts the right of peoples to nourishing and culturally-appropriate food produced in ethical and ecologically-sound ways, and their right to collectively determine their own food and agriculture systems. The concept, more akin to a manifesto, incorporates a wide array of political and ecological projects. Its invention is commonly attributed to members of the peasant organisation La Via Campesina in 1996. They declare that the people who produce, distribute, and consume food should be in control of the mechanisms and policies of food production and distribution.</p>
Praxis	<p>The process of using a theory or practice that is learned in a practical sense. We encourage its incorporation with a reflexive and reflective practice while</p>

	engaging in decolonisation (See Rose 1996).
UNDRIP	<a href="#">United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples</a> - The Declaration is the most comprehensive international instrument on the rights of indigenous peoples. It establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world and it elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of indigenous peoples.
UNDROP	<a href="#">United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas</a>

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