

Traditional Owner relationship focus for better impact assessment outcomes

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Abstract

As part of the assessment and approvals process for offshore oil and gas activities in Australia, Woodside Energy consults with Indigenous Peoples through a range of Traditional Owner representative institutions. Woodside has established a dedicated Indigenous engagement team to lead these efforts and help deepen the company's understanding of cultural heritage values. Drawing from decades of experience, the engagement team prioritises establishing and continuing long-term relationships with Indigenous communities through their representative organisations, rather than limiting interactions to transactional communications.

A collaborative approach has been developed through the implementation of a number of methods. Traditional Owners have shared knowledge with Woodside in relation to culturally significant species and places, allowing these important considerations to be addressed in Environment Plans. This commitment to ongoing, respectful relationships supports better impact assessment outcomes across a wide range of locations and activities.

Introduction

Woodside Energy is a global energy company, headquartered in Western Australia. Woodside is active in a range of places including Australia, Senegal, the USA and Mexico, with oil and gas development and production, new energy and lower-carbon services¹ and other activities.

Environmental impact assessments, known as Environment Plans (EPs), are a key permitting document for Woodside's offshore activities in Australian waters. The EPs cover a range of activities - seismic surveys, geotechnical and geophysical surveys, drilling, construction, operations and decommissioning. A conscious decision to focus on building long-term relationships with Indigenous Peoples through Traditional Owner representative organisations has supported detailed impact assessment and follow-up processes that support conducting our offshore activities in ways that manage potential risks to cultural values and heritage features.

Consultations with relevant persons

For each petroleum activity, Woodside defines an Operational Area – the geographic area where the activities in the EP are proposed to take place. As the work methods are developed, another geographic area called the Environment that may be affected (EMBA) is defined. The EMBA is the output from modelling unplanned hydrocarbon releases, and represents a compilation of a range of hydrocarbon release modelling trajectories which incorporate wind, wave and current action along with the properties of the particular hydrocarbon. The EMBA estimates how far hydrocarbons may travel if no response measures are undertaken. The EMBA can thus have a broad geographic extent, depending on the type of hydrocarbon modelled.

¹ Woodside uses this term to describe technologies, such as CCUS or offsets that could be used by customers to reduce their net greenhouse gas emissions.

The regulations for EPs for activities in Commonwealth waters require consultation with “relevant persons” defined as (in part) “a person or organisation whose functions, interests or activities may be affected” by an offshore petroleum activity². Until late 2022, although EMBA modelling was undertaken, consultation with relevant persons was focused on those potentially directly impacted by the activities – for activities far offshore this was primarily government agencies with regulatory jurisdictions overlapping the Operational Area, fisheries organisations, and other oil and gas operators.

Changes in consultation expectations

A court case in 2022 changed how Environment Plans are developed. Mr. Tipakalippa, a Traditional Owner from the Tiwi Islands off the north of Australia, alleged that due to Tiwi Islanders’ longstanding spiritual connections to the ocean or “sea country” he was a “relevant person” and should have been consulted on a particular company’s Environment Plan. The court found that even though there was no native title or other legal interest in the sea country, the Tiwi Traditional Owners did have interests in the area and thus should have been considered as relevant persons for consultation for that particular EP.

For Woodside, approvals for some projects were delayed as the impact of the decision was reviewed and Woodside’s consultation approach was revisited. The Woodside Indigenous Affairs team made a conscious decision to focus on building long-term respectful relationships with Traditional Owner organisations relevant to our Australian offshore activities. Woodside believes that Indigenous Peoples, cultural heritage and industry can successfully coexist and that Traditional Owners and Custodians can help us to understand, manage and protect cultural values.^{3, 4}

Woodside took the EMBA as one element for defining “relevant persons”. In the case of Traditional Owner organisations, this includes those with native title claims or determinations overlapping or coastally adjacent to the EMBA. For one example EP, the revised approach to identifying relevant persons identified 23 Traditional Owner organisations as relevant for consultation, as compared with zero Traditional Owner organisations identified as relevant for consultation in the pre-2022 EP. This demonstrates changes in consultation expectations following the *Tipakalippa* decision. Woodside consulted on 12 Environment Plans in 2025 – and with each one having a different EMBA, this resulted in consultation with 46 Traditional Owner organisations in 2025, with some groups consulted for multiple Environment Plans throughout the year.

From these numbers it is clear that a robust approach is needed to enable consultation with a large number of Traditional Owner organisations on multiple environment plans. Through a relationship-focused approach we have tailored our consultation methods to support the development of impact assessments.

Relationship-focused approach

Woodside has built a dedicated Indigenous engagement team, with members that have experience in working with Indigenous communities across Australia. The engagement team has a designated “relationship holder” for each Traditional Owner organisation – providing a personal connection and communication channel rather than a generic corporate email

² *Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage (Environment) Regulations 2023* (Cth) reg 25(1).

³ There is diversity within the Indigenous communities in the areas where we are active. When communicating with a wide audience, Woodside uses the term “Indigenous Peoples” to refer to Traditional Owners and Custodians.

⁴ Cultural Heritage – Tangible and intangible aspects of Indigenous culture, including sites, stories, objects, knowledge and traditions that hold ongoing significance.

address, and supporting the development of respectful relationships over time. The engagement team seeks opportunities to meet with Traditional Owner organisations on a regular basis even when Woodside is not seeking feedback on an environment plan – part of building relationships and understanding areas of mutual interest. This involves a lot of time on the road and in the air – including to remote areas of Western Australia, to the Northern Territory, and to coastal Victoria. The engagement team seeks to maintain regular contact with Traditional Owner organisations through phone calls, text messages and emails as well.

Through these relationships we seek input on how Traditional Owner organisations wish to be consulted in relation to our activities, and co-design consultation on a case-by-case basis. This includes seeking advice on appropriate cultural protocols, how consultation is structured, and who else should be consulted, for example elders or other knowledge-holders. It is understood that some material is culturally sensitive or gender restricted, and thus opportunities are provided for that information to be shared in a way that protects these restrictions. The Indigenous engagement team seeks to meet face-to-face where possible. The meetings include a range of Woodside representatives who can answer questions on the day – such as project technical specialists, representatives from the Indigenous engagement team and Woodside’s cultural heritage advisers. Through consultation, Woodside seeks feedback on potential risks and impacts to cultural values, any concerns raised by the community about our activities, and how we could may be able to work together to address or manage their concerns. These meetings are beneficial because Woodside hears directly from the community about what is important to them in relation to our activities.

Tailored communication

The methods of sharing information with Traditional Owner organisations have also been informed by feedback that has been received. Part of the consultation methodology is to issue information sheets to relevant persons – which describe the potential activity, where and when it is expected to take place, and what the potential impacts may be. In response to feedback about the complex technical jargon used in the information sheets, the consultation process has been updated to include the development of a “plain English” summary information sheet – conveying the same information but in a more accessible format. A range of short informational videos has also been developed, illustrating the types of offshore activities that are undertaken, and how information shared during consultation is used to inform the development of EPs.

Through developing relationships with Traditional Owner organisations and consulting on multiple activities with the same Traditional Owner organisations, Woodside’s consultation communications now seek to confirm that cultural information previously shared remains accurate and appropriate for continued use.

Woodside understands that Traditional Owner organisations often apply decision-making through consensus, and have many competing priorities and objectives, and thus decisions around sharing information and participation in consultation can require more time in comparison to consultation periods for non-Indigenous stakeholders. In response to this, project plans include an increased duration for consultation with Traditional Owner organisations, determined on a case-by-case basis. Communications with Traditional Owner organisations also emphasise that Woodside remains open to feedback on offshore activities at any time during the life of the activity.

In the Pilbara region of Western Australia, the period through approximately December to February each year is “Lore Time” – a period where Traditional Owners engage in cultural activities and ceremonies. Out of respect for the importance of these cultural traditions, consultation with Pilbara groups does not take place during this time. This period is now built into project schedules – project approval timelines recognise that “no-consultation period”.

Impact assessment outcomes

Through applying a relationship focus and responding to feedback on the methods of consultation used, Woodside has incorporated a broad range of cultural information provided through consultation into EPs, and developed appropriate risk mitigations.

For example, in Victoria multiple Traditional Owner organisations shared the importance of eels to their culture. Eels had not been identified as a potentially affected species, as they did not show up as a listed threatened or protected marine species. Following this feedback on the cultural significance of eels the team assessed potential impacts to eels from light and noise associated with the planned offshore activities.

During another consultation in Victoria Traditional Owners shared the cultural importance of all species of whales, and the existence a whale songline – an intangible cultural landscape extending along the coast of Victoria. In response the implementation plans for the activity were updated to include a requirement for Marine Fauna Observers to be onboard the project vessel for the whole project duration, not just during migration periods as previously planned. The project induction material was also updated to include information about Indigenous cultural values associated with the project area.

Conclusion

In 2025, the offshore project permitting process resulted in Woodside consulting with 46 Traditional Owner organisations about offshore activities – although many groups were consulted multiple times about different activities. This high cadence of consultation requires a robust, repeatable approach to consulting on technical topics with a diverse audience. Woodside values long-term relationships with Indigenous communities through their representative institutions, and the implementation of a number of measures to develop and maintain relationships has supported improved impact assessment and mitigation detailed in Environment Plans.

These measures include providing a dedicated relationship holder, giving a name and face to contact; travelling and seeking to meet on a regular basis even when not seeking to consult on an EP; developing tailored consultation material; respecting the nature of collective decision making; and seeking to confirm previously supplied material remains relevant and correct.

This approach has resulted in the EPs incorporating information about cultural values held by a range of relevant Traditional Owners, including culturally significant species and mitigations to protect them.

These methods and a commitment to maintaining ongoing respectful relationships with Traditional groups have delivered better impact assessment outcomes across a broad range of offshore activities.