

Indigenous People find their voice at UN Conference

BY CARLI WILLIS

Indigenous affairs advocates who travelled to a United Nations conference in Geneva say strengthening international relations has helped them cultivate more opportunities for their communities.

Gudang Yadhaykenu, Wakai Aragan (Badu) and Koedal (Saibai) clan man Alex Wymarra said he was already in Europe when he was told by a friend the United Nations was holding its Expert Mechanism on Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) conference in Geneva that week.

The EMRIP was established by the United Nations Human Rights Council to help provide expert advice on the rights of Indigenous People.

Mr Wymarra, founder and chair of the Treaty Council Worldwide (TCW), contacted Paris-based colleague, Baramadagal woman and TCW legal advisor Jayne Christian to ask her to go with him.

"A lot of First Nations peoples don't really get to hear about this, it's a shame, but should be promoted more," he said.

He said he helped to

establish the TCW and had been fostering relationships with Indigenous Nations overseas for years.

"I think there are ways of closing the gap and creating jobs through international engagement," he said.

"You talk about the Voice and I think internationally this is the Voice."

Mr Wymarra and Ms Christian arrived at the five-day conference on the last day.

Registrations had closed the week before, and they didn't have a pass to enter.

But despite their unannounced arrival staff worked quickly to gain them entry and, they said, what they would learn from that day was well worth the trip.

Ms Christian said news quickly spread that Indigenous people from Cape York and Wagga Wagga had arrived and they received a warm welcome.

"From the moment Alex and I were being taken in, we were referred to as sovereigns," she said.

"We come from this bubble (in Australia), where by and large we are not acknowledged as sovereigns of our own nations.

"When you are forming those relationships, having



(L-R) Alex Wymarra, Jack Collard, Jesse Martin, Annika David & Jayne Christian. Pic supplied.

conversations and it's in that capacity, I think that's an experience a lot of mob don't have – being empowered and being treated as you know yourself to be."

Ms Christian said once in the event, UN delegates told the pair there were funding options available to provide First Nations people with financial assistance to attend these events.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

(DFAT) also said there were several funding opportunities available to First Nations People which included: UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples, the Convention on Biological Diversity voluntary fund and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Voluntary Fund for Accredited Indigenous and Local Communities.

The National Indigenous Australians Agency

(NIAA) said in 2022 they provided \$150,000 funding to the Indigenous Peoples Organisation-Australia to support more inclusive, meaningful and informed First Nations international participation and engagement, including at United Nations forums.

Ms Christian said she learned a great deal from Indigenous leaders from across the globe, and where they were on their treaty and reconciliation journeys.

"I quite often can feel defeated in terms of any kind of power-sharing arrangement ever coming into fruition for any of us in Australia," she said.

"But it really broadens your own mind when you speak to people who confirm and validate that it is a hard process and it's a long process.

"When you make these connections, you can go 'oh, that's where we're at' or 'that's what we need'.

"It just that makes it all seem possible."

The two were able to provide written statements to help inform the outcome of the conference, the theme of which was *Indigenous Peoples, human health, planetary and territorial*

health and climate change: a rights-based approach.

Mr Wymarra said he would continue to raise awareness about the event.

"We got aspirations now to just beat the drum with Indigenous delegates from around the country to bring it on, get over there," he said.

"Let's do it and get our voices out and heard.

"Our people [need] to know they can reach out internationally and get the recognition that we need, our sovereign recognition."

Read more about the UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples at – <https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-us/funding-budget/indigenous-peoples-fund>

Read more about the Convention on Biological Diversity voluntary fund at – <https://www.cbd.int/traditional/fund.shtml>

Read more about the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Voluntary Fund for Accredited Indigenous and Local Communities at – <https://www.wipo.int/tk/en/igc/participation.html>

Read more about the Indigenous Peoples Organisation-Australia at – <https://indigenouspeoplesorg.com.au/>