



First Nations people including youth come together to work through issues and solutions calling on government to act – Yamatji on Country 2023

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Mr Peter Windie, YMAC Chairperson –Yamatji Regional Committee speaking at the 2023 Yamatji on Country

Student involvement in the 2023 Yamatji on Country was once again a highlight of the annual meeting that took place on Wednesday 20 and Thursday 21 September in Geraldton. Presented by Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation and held at Bundiyarra Aboriginal Community Aboriginal Corporation, the two-day event attracts First Nations people from the Mid-West, Gascoyne and Murchison regions.

Students from five high schools, through speeches, paintings and digital recordings, highlighted youth issues and spoke of what is needed to help First Nations young people and their families thrive. Their [Youth Statement](#), developed through two pre-event workshops, address topics including Youth Substance Use, Racism, Lack of Culture, Home Environment and Intergenerational Trauma leading to Violence.

Participating schools included Geraldton Senior High School, Champion Bay Senior High School, Nagle Catholic College, Geraldton Christian College, and Carnarvon Community College.



They presented on both days to community members and invited guests including the Commissioner for Children and Young People Ms Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, Member for Geraldton Lara Dalton, Greens Senator Dorinda Cox and Parliamentary Secretary, Mr Yaz Mubarakai MLA, representing Premier of Western Australia Roger Cook.

Trevor Farrell, a student from Nagle Catholic College shared how Yamatji on Country last year gave him the courage to confront racism at his school by reading the same speech he gave at last year's meeting at a school assembly in front of the students who once put him down.

"What has changed for me since last year is that I used to be afraid to speak up but now I feel more culturally stronger, more culturally safe, more equipped to deal with racism and I have become a stronger leader. I learnt my voice is powerful and by speaking up, I am being a voice for generations," Trevor said.

Participant Dr Charmaine Green said the meeting provided an opportunity for community members to voice their concerns that translated into a collective Call for Action Statement to local, State and Federal government representatives and parliamentarians in attendance.

"The time is right, and the time is now to strengthen how all levels of government decision makers respond to our collective Call For Action Statement, they need to take up real action and respond beyond idle talk as a matter of urgency demonstrating and cementing their commitments to working with Yamatji communities and Yamatji people", Dr Green said.

The [2023 Call to Action Statement](#) seeks support for community to achieve self-determined and place-based governance through:

1. A Yamatji on Country Reference Group
2. Advocacy and System Navigation
3. Supporting and Listening to Young People

It also seeks commitment from government to report annually against the Call to Action, so that community can measure progress and work together to create change. The statement identifies action needed across the following areas, which align with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap:



1. Racism
2. Housing & Accommodation
3. Police & Justice
4. Education
5. Employment, Training & Economic Development
6. Health & Wellbeing

The Midwest Aboriginal Organisations Alliance (MAOA), with a membership of 17 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), was identified by community members present as an existing group that - with government support - could become a registered corporation and take on the role of a Peak agency for the region.

Mr Peter Windie, YMAC Co-Chairperson – Yamatji Region shared the hope that, through the Call to Action, that ACCOs and government agencies will have further grass-roots evidence to adopt new ways of working, help attract better support for their services, and strengthen discussions with decision-makers.

The meeting also featured updates from YMAC on the status of Aboriginal cultural heritage laws. Representing the WA Premier was Parliamentary Secretary Yaz Murabakai who responded to the Call-to-Action Statement and recognised how important this meeting was, where people get to engage with government directly, an opportunity to work together to improve conditions for Aboriginal people.

During Q&A, YMAC CEO Simon Hawkins asked Mr. Murabakai if he could explain why non-contentious, simple amendments to the 1972 Aboriginal Heritage Act such as increased penalties and a modern definition of cultural heritage can't be used in the recycled 51-year-old laws. Mr Murabakai took the question on notice and promised he would follow up on a response to the question upon his return to Perth.

On day one leading advocate for the 'Yes Vote' Thomas Mayo, spoke of real change through the referendum. In his speech, he called out for First Nations communities to do everything they can to encourage their friends and families to vote yes at the referendum on 14 October, saying, "There has been so much misinformation out there to divide us, but if we win the Referendum with a Yes vote, we will have a structure in place to hold decision-makers to account and have the ability to create opportunities for the healing of our people, and better opportunities for our children. We must do something different for real change to happen. And that means putting a voice in our constitution."



Western Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People, Ms Jacqueline McGowan-Jones praised the students for articulating their concerns through their paintings and mentioned how the Department of Education's Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework can assist government schools to work with the children and to better engage their communities.

"The Cultural Standards Framework gives examples of activities the schools can do to engage their community and provide holistic, culturally responsive services.

But the way to work through that framework is to sit down with community, ask the parents of the kids, ask them to bring their Nannas, invite the Elders, go to organisations in Geraldton like Bundiwarra, and Streeties, and ask them for help on how to do this properly."

Although discussions with Parliamentarians took up most of day two, attendees were also treated to a performance by students from Geraldton Primary School singing in Wajarri language and a dance performance by students from Geraldton Senior High School.

Review the [Youth Statement](#) and [2023 Call to Action Statement](#).

Visit www.ymac.org.au for event updates, videos and photographs.

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Further images available upon request.

Pronunciation Guide:

Yamatji – Yam-aht-gee; **Marlpa** – Marl-pah; **Bundiwarra** – Bun-dee-ya-rah

About Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation

Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC) is the Native Title Representative Body (NTRB), delivering native title and other services across the Pilbara, Mid West, Murchison and Gascoyne regions of Western Australia. YMAC is run by a First Nations board of directors, representing several native title groups, each of whom have their own language, culture, traditions and protocols. YMAC services include native title claim and future act representation; heritage services; executive office, community, and economic development assistance; land administration, and natural resource management support.