

PRACTITIONER SUMMARY

ETHICS, VALUES & SOCIAL LICENCE FOR OFFSHORE WIND DEVELOPMENT

Preconditions for the Development of Offshore Wind Project

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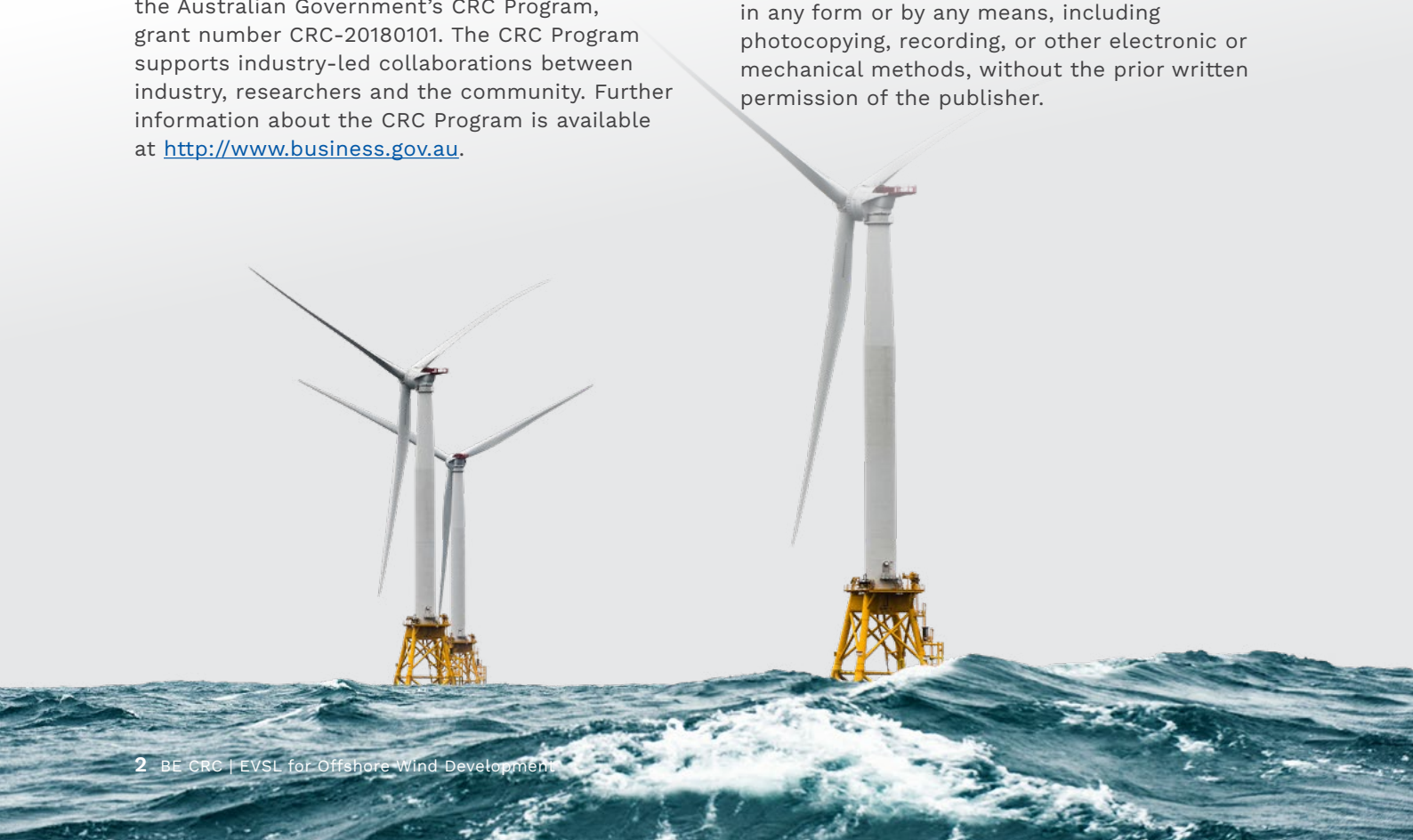
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Introduction

Renewable energy projects are central developments in our global aims toward climate change mitigation. This requires significant investment, development, and governance processes that are respectful of place-based cultures, values, and biodiversity.

It is important to fully understand the relevance of social acceptance in our journey towards the decarbonisation of energy systems. There has been very varied social acceptance associated with the siting of offshore wind developments and the associated infrastructure, as well as social and ecosystem impacts over time.

In the global political pursuit to renewable energy, the local socio-economic impacts of offshore wind projects have received little attention compared with biophysical or environmental impacts. This is mostly because the global aims and offshore locations have been assumed beyond the boundaries of local communities, with the only resistance also assumed from NIMBY voices saying, ‘not in my backyard’.

However, research across case studies involving renewable energy developments has consistently shown that beliefs about place (as location and meaning) play an important role in shaping community acceptance. More broadly, societal acceptance of wind energy projects has varied across landscape types, with projects often considered more acceptable when located in industrialised or military locations and less acceptable in locations regarded as pristine or wild. Communities which attach symbolic meaning to places and landscapes as ‘natural’ in character, are challenged by the siting of large-scale energy infrastructure that ‘industrialises’ or spoils the value they place on nature.

Key Takeaways

- △ **Affective (emotional) and cognitive (rational) responses from communities are important in place-attachment value making, with emotions still tending to dominate.**
- △ **Best practice engagement with local communities are inclusive of location selection, turbine design, farm development and compensatory/ownership aspects.**
- △ **Methods of engagement and invitations around ownership, aid in defining the ethical debate over compensation or bribery.**

Figure 1: Offshore Wind Ethical Principles

I. Environmental Sustainability

Protect sustainability, biodiversity, and ecosystem function.

II. Stakeholder Participation

Engage with local communities and stakeholders.

III. Fairness

Opportunities, risks, impacts, burdens, and benefits should be fairly distributed across stakeholders.

IV. Harm Prevention

Human rights and animal welfare should be protected and respected.

V. Beneficence

Deliver good outcomes that improve people’s flourishing.

VI. Trustworthiness & Accountability

Be trustworthy and have integrity.

VII. Place Attachment:

Respect local understandings & knowledges of place, environment and ecology.

Many contemporary developments – such as those occurring in Australia – do note the importance of social acceptance and have undertaken community engagement plans and activities, both for themselves and as requirements for developers (DCCEEW 2004). The best practice models for genuine community participation resemble those done in recent offshore wind developments along the coastlines of Maine, USA. In these cases there have been an intentional plan to engage and include communities in a two-way decision-making process concerning site selection, design, development, and compensatory or ownership aspects of the project.

In ethics, moral principles and values are used to guide our behaviours, including the way we make decisions, conduct activities, or pursue developments. Better understanding of ethical principles helps us identify the key priorities for policy making. ‘Best practice’ offshore wind development involves delivering on these principles and values.

Blue Economy Ethical Principles applied to Offshore Wind

Ethical principles are over-arching guidelines for acting morally, that direct attention to key ethical priority areas.

Figure 1 lists seven key ethical principles for offshore wind development. These cover six general Blue Economy Ethical Principles (see Cooper et al 2023; IEGL 2023), with the addition of a crucial new ethical principle for offshore wind ethics and social acceptance: *Place attachment*.

These ethical principles can be applied to distinct subjects to create more specific ethical values (IEGL 2023). For example, renewable energy is an important ethical value delivered by offshore wind. Its ethical significance derives from the ethical principle of Beneficence (making things better for the world) in application to the global population and environment.

Table 1 applies the seven Ethical Principles to relevant subject areas, showing the **key ethical promises and risks presented by offshore wind development**.

Some ethical promises can deliver benefits across many Ethical Principles. For example, a key promise of offshore wind developments are **knowledge benefits**. These can come in the form of improving our knowledge of different wind systems and their impacts; advancing technologies; improved awareness of ecologies (such as bird or whale migration routes); and incorporating local and First Nations knowledges.

Those knowledge benefits in turn can help better manage community expectations, local decision-making, and participation activities, and better deliver projects that are well-suited to a local ecosystem. In the offshore wind space, knowledge gains can have welcome benefits across all the seven ethical principles.



Table 1: Community promises/risks and Ethical principles

Promises / Risks	Subject	Ethical Principle
Renewable energy as a response to global temperature rises.	Global population Environment	Beneficence Sustainability
Community compensation and benefit agreements through a centralised fund, or ownership model.	Local community	Beneficence Fairness Participation Trustworthiness & accountability
Jobs creation & indirect (supply chain/tourism) benefits for communities	Local or wider community	Beneficence Fairness
Direct investment and project funding (paying for infrastructure improvements)	Local community	Beneficence Fairness
Knowledge benefits: Educational and scientific research programs; technological and environmental learning	Local community	Beneficence Sustainability
Habitat development	Environment	Beneficence Harm prevention
Impact on locals' sense of place Cultural, traditional and recreational values	Local community	Place attachment
Appropriate engagement with relevant stakeholders and local communities	Local community	Participation Place attachment Trustworthiness & accountability
Development of appropriate regulatory settings	Local or wider community Developers	Sustainability Trustworthiness & accountability
Impact on local economies: tourism, port facilities, commercial and recreational fisheries	Local community	Fairness Harm prevention
Ecosystem disturbances – marine life cycles and habitat loss	Environment	Harm prevention Sustainability
Collision risks with sea birds and mammals Noise pollution (impacting animal behaviour)	Local fauna	Harm prevention Sustainability



Ethical Theories

There are four main ethical theories that provide systemic ways of thinking about ethical principles:

- Δ **Consequentialist ethical theories** focus on the results of actions, with the ‘ends’ justifying the ‘means’. Results are judged by the increase in overall (sum-total) happiness and flourishing for sentient animals (especially humans). Some economics substitutes dollars for happiness as it is easier to measure. This may make it easier to see cross cutting benefits – such as where a healthy fishery aims to sustain tourism or the extraction of proteins by fishing.
 - » Consequentialist theories highlight *Beneficence*.
- Δ **Virtue ethics** asks not ‘what do we want from the natural resource?’ but, ‘what do we want from ourselves? This perspective acknowledges our role as important members of ocean systems.
 - » Virtue ethics theories highlight ethical custodianship and *Sustainability*
- Δ **Distributive justice** focuses on achieving a fair share of opportunities, risks, benefits and burdens across relevant groups. These approaches are often egalitarian (based on equality and equity), yet focused purely on human equality. They are ‘anthropocentric’ (focused specifically on humans, rather than animals and the natural environment).
 - » Justice theories highlight *Participation, Harm Avoidance and Fairness*.
- Δ **Biocultural ethics** is an ecosystem thinking that accounts for a place-based ethical model or co-evolution between humans and nature. It complements First Nations kinship world views which are ecocentric in nature. Whilst it considers human interest, it simultaneously respects an ecocentric moral view – demanding frameworks and policies that take into account the wellbeing and biodiversity of the ecosystem to be an end in itself – where humans are but one part of an interconnected web of life systems.
 - » Biocultural ethics focuses on *Place Attachment*.

Place Attachment

Since place attachment has featured so heavily in policy and community expectations, it is important to unpack what we mean by place, especially within this ocean space, and the kinds of ethical values it inspires.

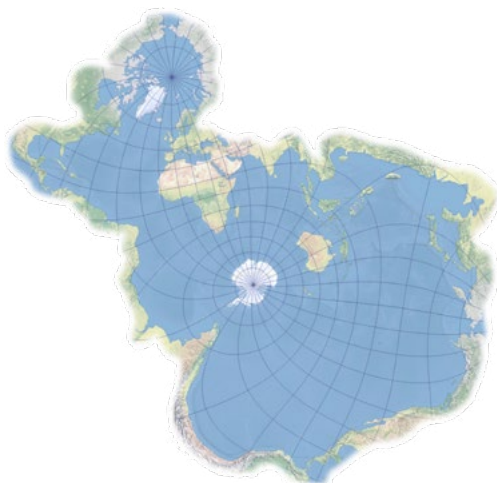
Place attachment is central to understanding community engagement involving the development of offshore wind. In research and practice it can be difficult to determine how best to define the affected communities. Some attempts use geographic locality based on distance or viewshed, social and political links, or other place-based constructions. We often see the promise of offshore wind as a global renewable solution, developed in national waters, managed by state governments, whilst affecting local communities.

Figure 2 shows the layering of these lenses which may confuse the way we define place and explore place-attachment during offshore wind project development.

Figure 2: Earth or Ocean: Which Community Lens?



Figure 3: The Spilhaus World Ocean Map in a Square



Global lens: If we placed Antarctica at the centre of our global map (Figure 3), the ocean clearly connects us all. From a less terrestrial lens, it is plain to see that our planet has one, united ocean. It makes sense that the last three decades has sought a global effort to decarbonise using the same ocean as a possible solution to anthropogenic climate change. Whole ecosystems, migrating seabirds, fish and cetaceans are alive to the sense of this one united body of ocean and are thus important indicators of human impact.

Regional lens: A regional lens to ocean place may be defined by national policies, or continental territories or the 200nmi exclusive economic zone. Unlike the interconnection and unity of the ocean, our regional lens is bound by politics and law, which can extend to the way in which we also border our states and their 3nmi coastal shores.

Local lens: Attention around the social licence to operate is often mostly concerned with and granted by local communities. Whilst this may be a step beyond the organisational reality of a modern globalised world, it is important to also think about the ecosystem of our oceans to which these local communities are an active part. The complexity in part is located in the interconnectivity of these local ecosystems, with the regional and global.

Ecosystems thinking was first understood as a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach which began during the 1970s with the study of ecology, and ecofeminism. The global discussion around ecosystem-based management has exposed the challenges and knowledge gaps around trying to know the oceanic ecosystems in their entirety. A focus on what we can manage – humans – has therefore become more central to the discussion. Ecosystems thinking has reunited humans with nature and included human activities and behaviours within thinking about our ecosystems and aims to collaborate multidisciplinary science models with human relationships with the sea – social, political, economic, and cultural. Place-attachment for local communities therefore is central to ecosystem-based management. Our human interests – economic, social and cultural – invariably influence the way we interact with the sea. This entails moral reasoning, and a call to re-examine our relationship with our ocean.

Ethical Ocean Values

Place attachment is an important ethical principle for offshore wind. The ocean-place demands a particular way of being with nature which coastal communities over time have come to reflect in their cultural practice, activities and ways of governance.

This human-ocean relationship is founded upon ethical values (Bossi 2020) which support the ethical principle of place attachment:

- △ **Interconnection** – the ocean is a united, unbound ecosystem of reefs, migrating species, and so forth. Boundaries in an ocean simply do not function in the same way as they do on land.
- △ **Ever-changing** – the ocean is in a constant state of flux with seasonal patterns and the added pressure from climate change. Our current governance structures assume a kind of permanence which is challenged by these changing environments and ecosystems in ways that ethical principles are not.
- △ **Transparency** – water appears clearest at the surface. At its deepest and darkest, our safety is dependent upon true and genuine supports.
- △ **Vulnerability** – the ocean is an enormous life-giving force we can live, work, and play with. However, one does not ride the wave in aim to control it, but rather ‘goes with’ the wave in hope to enjoy it. Human vulnerability is made visible: Drowning is always a real possibility!
- △ **Diversity** – oceanic ecosystems are dependent upon maintaining healthy diverse populations. We see this not only in nature, but in the pressure single species aquaculture places upon natural aquatic ecosystems, and also in the effects of overfishing, congested tourism, or in over-industrialising particular coastal spaces. This is also relevant in maintaining diversity in companies and technologies within blue economy industries.

Each of these values can be adopted by the individual, the community, and the ecosystem within which it functions (Bossi 2024). Fishers, divers, surfers are each vulnerable to the everchanging and forceful conditions of the ocean they enjoy. Rarely do they perform their activities without a spotter, friend, or colleague. Such vulnerabilities are shared by individuals, coastal communities as much as they are emerging blue industries.

The safety and resilience of coastal communities within an ever-changing and interconnected ocean-place, is ensured by the transparency they share and the reliance they develop within their interconnections. This community is not defined by subsistence, but is inclusive of individuals, families, schools, businesses, political decision making, tourists, industries, and other communities dependent upon trading with them, and so forth.

Additional Ethical Challenges

Qualitative indicators are, by nature, not readily quantifiable. If place is both a GPS coordinate and a mood that we occupy, then place can be both quantitative and qualitative. The values and meaning we attach to a place (also described as an ‘ethics of the particular’) therefore need to therefore complement the place in location. In community engagement, it is important to consider and evaluate both cognitive (rational) and affective (emotional) responses in culturally and environmentally sensitive places.

This is true for all community engagers – developers, regulators, and across all tiers of government. Both anger and pride for example can be felt by local communities – the first a response to perception of procedural and distributive unfairness, whilst the latter is in response to a symbol of progress and perceived benefits. Understanding, and holistically addressing these affective responses are key components to gaining support by local communities.

Benefits vs bribes concerns arise in the context of community benefit funds. These funds may be perceived as an attempt by developers to ‘buy’ support to obtain planning permissions. Locals might consider ‘their principles are not for sale’ in response to such ‘bribes’.

On the other hand, community benefit funds are presented as a means of creating greater equity, and for compensating local stakeholders for unwanted impacts (DTI Report 2007). While benefits schemes are not strictly bribes (they are not illegal and secret), they can in some cases exert an inappropriate influence on key decision-makers.

Ultimately, what constitutes compensation versus a bribe depends on many factors: the timing of the benefit, the substance (fund or in-kind) of the proposed benefit, the place of the benefit in a larger community consultation program, the independence and integrity of other parts of the governance system, whether the benefits are institutionalised and expected (or discretionary), and the nature of the agreement, and the impact of experience.

Politicisation of the offshore wind project as a symbol of progress via renewable technology versus whales and ecosystems has been emerging from the East Coast of the USA since July 2023, and has reached Australian shores across the Pacific.

This politicisation positions offshore wind as a symbol of progress via renewable technology versus the conservation of whales and ecosystems. This human progress versus nature debate is a very old one. Under the current climate crisis, it has been recoined as green versus green (that is, with environmental values on opposing sides of the question), or in this case, blue versus blue. In both countries, polarised two-party politics has supported opposing sides, irrespective of the other policies each maintain which may either support or oppose their side of the debate. This politicisation has also given rise to regionalism in the USA, where political ties secure regional energy supply (Bidwell, 2022). We are yet to see this in Australia; however state governments have certainly entered the debate.

While offshore wind developments are located in national waters, the impact on local views, economic activities, environment and ecology, and ports and infrastructure can be very localised to coastal communities.

Kinship worldviews are often associated with First Nations ethical systems. In these animals, plants, environment and even weather patterns share in a relationship continuum with themselves – they all are kin.

This kind of eco-centric thinking is motivating the US and Australian voice for migrating mammal species. Whilst academic literature has been focussed on the offshore wind project impact on seabirds (Reid et al, 2023), local communities and conservationists have focussed their attention on the many whale species that have not yet recovered from whale hunting. After surviving whaling there are some species still which have continued to endure a long list of additional industrial impacts: seismic testing, shipping, oil and gas.

“ These whales have already continued to co-exist with a lot of disturbances...”

Dr Pete Gill, Biologist



Australia is ringed by whale migration routes, feeding and breeding grounds for many species of whales, from Cairns to Broome, and around Tasmania through the Bass Strait and between Kangaroo Island and mainland South Australia. A unified ocean, with changing currents, depths, and which is already under pressure from climate change, means anticipated knowledge gaps at the intersection between whales and offshore wind developments.

Ambition of the development of offshore wind projects proposed along Australia's coast has been flagged with caution. Whilst the world needs climate change mitigation, and the federal government targets renewable energies, the speed and scale at which Australia chooses to develop its offshore wind projects is important. Consistent with an ecosystem-based plan, biodiversity both above and below the surface would help ensure the kind of research and development, political transparency, and community engagement that would exemplify the ocean ethics we have already established. Without any offshore windfarms in Australian waters, research so far supports curbing ambition in support of cautious development with a focus on filling place-based knowledge gaps for the greater good of the ecosystem.

This provides reason to diversify our approach to the development of renewable ocean energies and the technologies required. It may be that a multiplicity of companies and technologies would best sustain the diversity of development to ensure a best fit technology and approach to the various ecosystems along the Australian coastline and along our changing ocean. Alongside this approach must be a strong role for research and monitoring to gain the knowledge of an overall package of approaches that works in the Australian context. This cautious approach reflects the value of knowledge sharing and development.

Ethical Best Practice

Ethical best practice includes a combination of social science values with ethical ones. Communities are best understood as key stakeholders in the offshore wind development process – right from the beginning and as early as site selection.

Like all stakeholder engagement practices, achieving social acceptance is dependent upon building relationship with communities, which address and are guided by normative ethical criteria – sustainability, animal welfare, inclusivity, equity, and a responsiveness to the place-based values of diversity, interconnection, vulnerability, flux, and transparency.

Ethical best practice requires:

- △ Attending to the seven key blue economy ethical principles, and in particular Place Attachment
- △ Making mutual learning accessible
- △ Creating appropriate community benefits.

Dr Sarah Klain has extensively researched the offshore wind developments in Maine, USA and operationalised ethical best practice for community engagement and building support and trust. Communities are included into site location and design process – influencing the formation of the design of the turbines and the farm.

For Klain, there are two necessary components:

1. Making mutual learning accessible

- △ Provide readily available and appropriate information (fact sheets, interactive web portals).
- △ Design deliberative learning opportunities.
- △ Time stakeholder engagement a year or more before site selection.
- △ Enlist bridging organisations to act as liaisons between communities and developers.
- △ Incorporate facts derived from science, engineering, and local knowledge (including First Nations knowledges).

2. Creating appropriate community benefits

- △ Carefully define who (usually people living nearby, or most impacted), what, and how (Figure 4).
- △ Aim to address the mismatch between offshore wind development and local costs – perceived, potential, local environment, likely impact to views, pre-existing activities like fishing and anticipated future uses – regional + global benefits (decarbonisation, diversified energy sources).

Figure 4: Developing appropriate Community Benefits

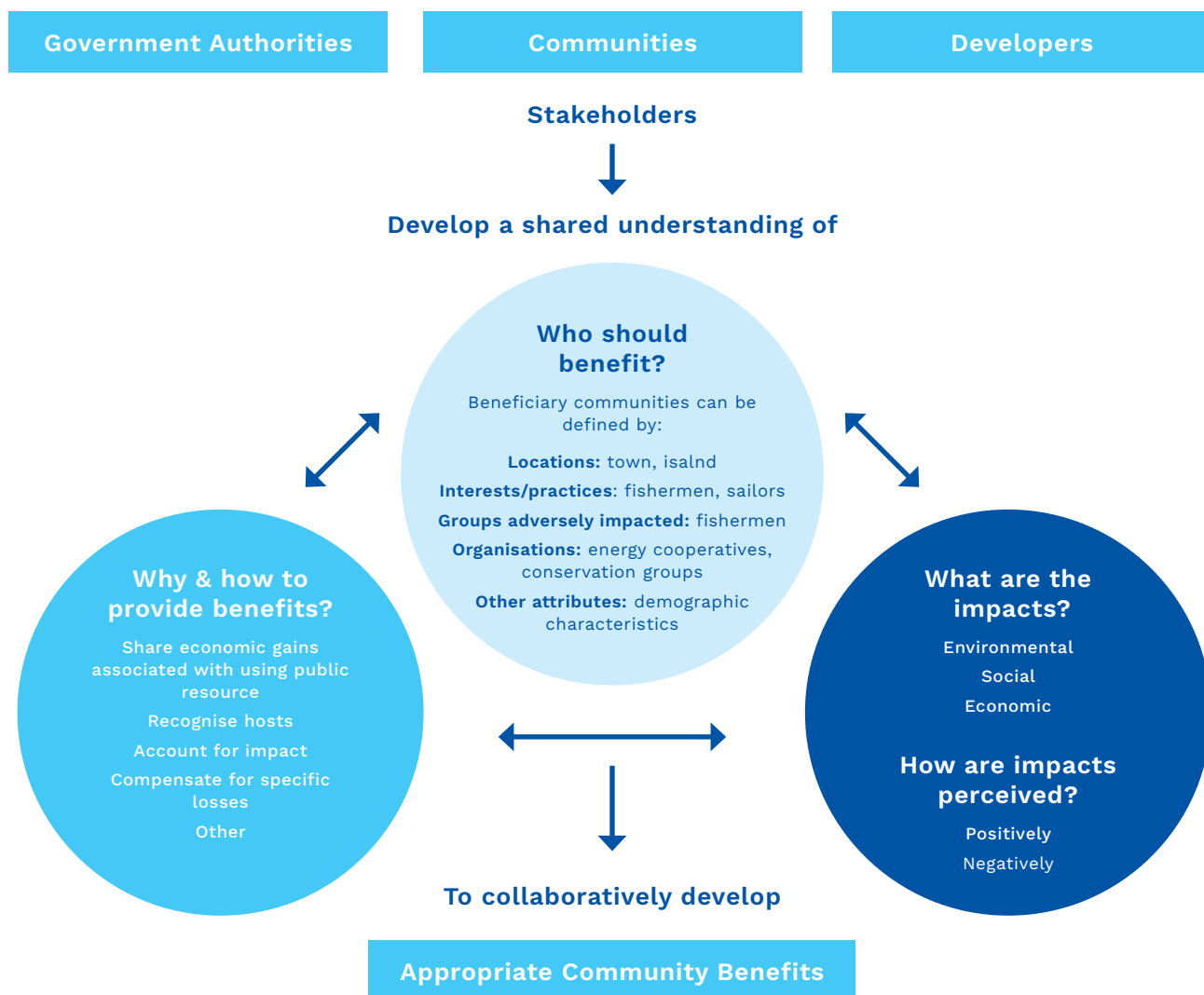


Figure 4 captures how to best develop appropriate community benefits collaboratively, by Klain (2015). All stakeholders (government authorities, communities, and developers) are required to develop a shared understanding of:

- △ Who should benefit?
- △ What and how to provide benefits?
- △ What are the impacts? And how are the impacts perceived?

Participatory processes involving extensive stakeholder engagement can be resource and time intensive, however, this initial investment can result in lower long-term costs with potentially fewer delays and may reduce the risk of litigation costs (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). We have already seen the community tensions and campaigned polarisation of communities in Australia when opportunities for genuine community consultations from the beginning of the site selection process was missed. Moving forward, social acceptance will require greater community participation.

Building a foundation of both knowledge and trust is crucial for the success of renewable energy technologies. Klain (2017) says that making deliberative learning accessible and providing clear community benefits can help ensure:

1. Decision-making processes around these projects are inclusive, effective and perceived as fair
2. Local, scientific, and political knowledge is considered
3. Projects that are considered appropriate after an analytic-deliberative process are properly sited.

First Nations Perspective

There has been little research to date on cultural licences to operate with respect to offshore wind projects. In August 2023 Jonathan Kneebone released a response to the recognition of First Nations peoples as rights holders of the sea and the foreseeable impact this visibility will have on ocean projects.

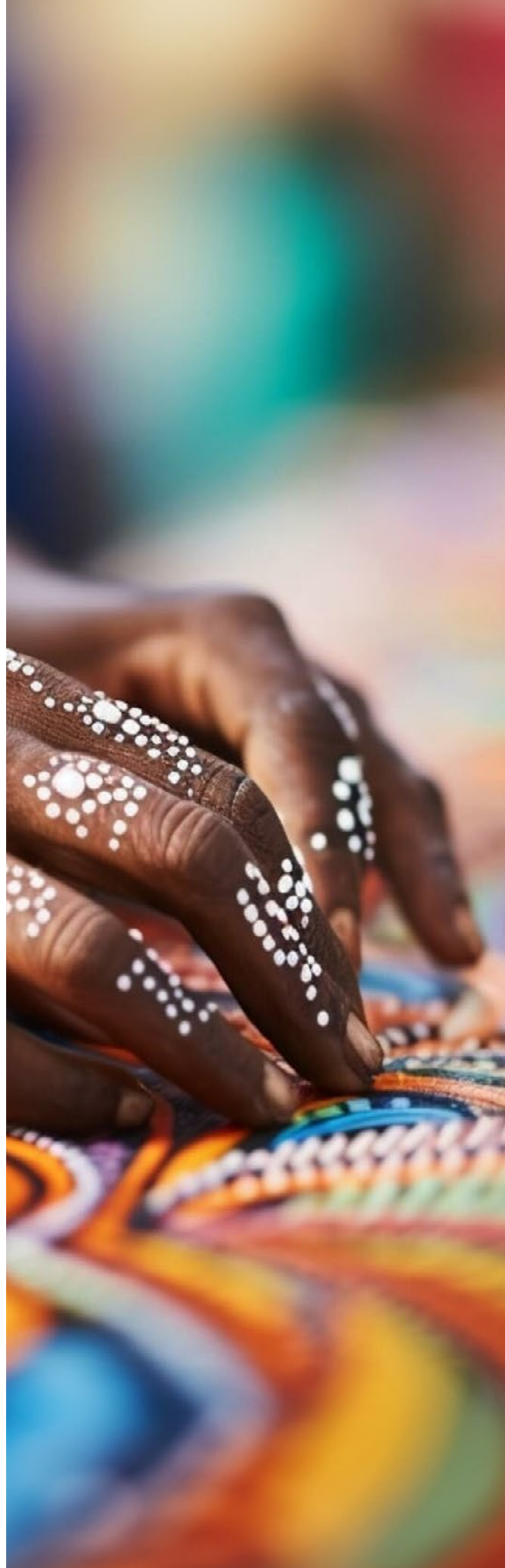
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Just as the courts found with land, marine areas have been owned and cared for by First Nations for millennia through complex systems of responsibilities and management of rights including ownership, use, ceremonies, and exclusion of others. There is an ongoing relationship with both that ethically, and legally should not be ignored. ...A recent court case recognises rights holders of the sea. First Nations people are no longer just the passive hosts of projects or a mere regulatory hurdle to be jumped over as quickly as possible.

”

Kneebone advises that risk conscious financiers are increasingly insisting on the treaty-based Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) Agreement outlined by the [UN Human Rights Office](#).

This is an ethical commitment, since the Australian Government is yet to create investment certainty for offshore wind proponents that demonstrate an end to the myth of terra nullius. It is important to remember that First Nations communities and family groups are diverse and thus each require respectful consultation to capture this plurality. The inclusion of First Nations Peoples can complement and even enhance strategic, creative and innovative ways to sustainably manage resources and development in and on our oceans (see BECRC Project ‘Cultural Licence to Operate in the Blue Economy’).





Conclusion

This Practitioner Summary has explained the importance of place attachment and its associated values within oceanic places and for coastal communities.

It has synthesised many of the overseas dialogues to best reflect an Australian narrative. We have focussed on developing ethical ocean values and the way in which they both support a global ecosystem-based management plan as well as the place-attachment experienced by local communities. We have also endeavoured to demonstrate how these intrinsic values can set a foundation for an appropriate offshore wind development which reflects the community and ecosystem within which it operates. We have summarised some ethical concerns around the offshore wind development debate and offered some key points in thinking through those challenges. We have also offered a First Nations perspective on ocean country and the way in which it impacts the blue economy. We have included what we believe to be best practice for community engagement so far, with a comparable example to adapt for our own Australian narrative.

Recommendations

- △ Decision-makers should consider carefully the range of ethical principles applicable to offshore wind energy, and the potential ethical risks that a given technology in any given locale might present.
- △ Social acceptance should not be assumed. There should be an overall, coherent plan for community engagement across all relevant layers of government and industry.
- △ Community engagement should happen early in the process, and at all points must be appropriately aligned with the decisions being made at that point.
- △ The policy-making process should prioritise opportunities for trustworthy and independent research and learning, and knowledge-sharing between community and developers.
- △ The management of adaptation pathways and energy transitions ought to be respectful and reflective of the dynamic quality of the place – the changing ocean, its ecosystem already under pressure, and its relationship with a local community.

Further Reading

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