

The Arrilla Circle



A quarterly communicate exclusive to Arrilla Digital, where authors of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent share their life experiences in order for us to walk in the shoes of another.

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How can we better empower First Nations businesses and communities? As Awabakal woman and Chief Executive Officer at Supply Nation Kate Russell explains in this edition of The Arrilla Circle, we can start by walking alongside First Nations businesses. Better understanding the values and culture that drives their success will benefit us all and better connect us to this land we call Australia.

Why walking alongside First Nations businesses is good for all Australians

Since 2009, Supply Nation has facilitated more than \$20 billion in procurement spend. In 2023-24 alone we supported \$4.6 billion in spend between our members and suppliers. This represents an increase of \$500 million from the previous year, contributing directly to prosperity and jobs growth with greater positive social outcomes for First Nations people and communities.

That procurement spend also benefits Australia's leading organisations that do business with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enterprises. How? Working closely with First Nations businesses helps governments, corporates and non-profits connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and understand the values and culture that drive their business.

So while Supply Nation helps the procurement teams of Australia's leading organisations do more business with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enterprises to help First Nations people and communities prosper, the bigger picture is we help all Australians to prosper.

To explain the bigger picture, let me take a step back to describe a bit about who I am, and who we are as Australians.

How we belong to this land

Who am I? My home is Awabakal Country, on Western Lake Macquarie. Whenever I return there, I'm always overwhelmed by my bond to this place, a sense of

connection, of identity. This is where I belong, where generations of my ancestors lived over many tens of thousands of years.

Who are we? We are a nation forged through the colonisation of its original inhabitants and shaped by migrations of peoples fleeing political and economic oppression and warfare, first from Europe and more recently from South-East Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

For many Australians, this means culture may be grounded elsewhere and while we all call Australia home, our connections and ancestors can lie far from our shores.

But not for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We should always celebrate our multicultural heritage and our rich stories of migration that have helped Australia become the vibrant society it is today. By the same token, though, we should also recognise that Australia will never reach its true potential until we understand the deep and profound spiritual connection to Country held by our First Peoples; and the role we can play in creating a more enlightened, fairer and sustainable future for all.

Walk with First Nations Australians, walk in our footsteps

In understanding your own belonging to this land, I invite you to walk with First Nations Australians, walk in our footsteps to learn our ties to the land, our connections to waterways, mangroves, deserts, plains, mountains and seas. And hear the voices and legacies of Elders and ancestors that live on through us.

I invite you to understand that our custodianship of this land has never been severed, and even though our traditional values and spirituality have been misunderstood, devalued and ignored by many that have settled here, our knowledge and responsibilities remain. I invite you to consider that my people are the original custodians of our land, and we share it with others because Country needs all Australians to be respectful caretakers, just as Country takes care of us.

Custodianship takes many forms, and custodianship through business is no exception. First Nations-led businesses across all fields of endeavour are thriving, creating jobs and opportunities for all Australians. In fact, First Nations-owned enterprises are now a major force in innovation and entrepreneurship, driving prosperity in communities in Broome, Weipa, Launceston – anywhere and everywhere.

Economic empowerment – by the numbers

Supply Nation was formed on the belief that economic empowerment can provide First Nations peoples with the means to achieve a more prosperous and stable future.

Supply Nation plays a unique role in verifying First Nations businesses and supporting the procurement of their goods and services from the government, corporate and non-profit sectors.

In 2024, we celebrated our 15-year anniversary. Supply Nation now has more than 5,500 verified First Nations suppliers on our Indigenous Business Direct database. More than 800 corporate, government and non-profit members are now listed

with us, and committed to embedding First Nations businesses in their supply chains.

Our 2024 [Legacy Research Report](#) reveals that our supplier numbers have increased steadily at 41 per cent per annum, indicating the establishment of more First Nations businesses and their desire to expand their visibility and reach. It also indicates a strong entrepreneurial spirit that is having a positive impact on our economy.

Member numbers grew at 25 per cent per annum, also providing evidence that governments and corporate entities are receiving a good return on investment from both membership and First Nations procurement.

In 2023-24, a total of 284,864 contracts were awarded, with the largest contract valued at \$91 million between a resources company and a facilities management business.

There were 713 contracts valued at over \$1 million each, with 22 per cent of those being awarded to businesses owned by First Nations women and 89 per cent being awarded to small- and medium-sized enterprises.

Supply Nation has long advocated for a change to the current definition of a First Nations business as 50 per cent *ownership* under the Commonwealth Government's Indigenous Procurement Policy. The recent announcement by the Prime Minister in his [Closing the Gap speech](#) to increase ownership requirement to 51 per cent alongside a control component is timely. Supply Nation goes further, and considers First Nations ownership, *management and control* in our definition.

Our research shows that despite representing only 30 per cent of our database, certified suppliers (51 per cent or more Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander *owned, managed and controlled*) received almost three times more contracts than registered suppliers (at least 50 per cent Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander *owned*). This is a significant difference in contract success rate and suggests procurement is likely to be directed towards certified suppliers, with majority First Nations ownership, management and control.

We also know that Supply Nation members with a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) spent a much greater amount with First Nations businesses at \$3.8 billion compared to \$776 million for members without a RAP.

The strength and diversity of the First Nations business sector cannot be underestimated. On the Supply Nation database, we have providers who supply everything from cookies to cryogenics, t-shirts to tunnelling. Our businesses are pushing boundaries in cybersecurity, aerospace and professional services. So, no matter your needs, there is a very good chance it can be delivered by a First Nations business.

Walking alongside First Nations businesses

There's also much that corporate Australia can learn from walking alongside First Nations businesses and understanding the values and culture that drive their success. Those that have procured from First Nations businesses have told me that they've not only received a sound product or service but also valuable lessons.

They've learnt to be more people-centric in their dealings with others, which has created greater loyalty across their staff and customers. They've broken stereotypes about First Nations peoples in terms of what they're capable of and this has inspired better relationships on the path to reconciliation.

I encourage you to take the time to reflect on how shared ideals, values and an enduring connection to Country can drive sustainable economic growth, and hopefully result in a real sense of purpose and belonging that strengthens this country's potential for all that call it home. ■

Photo courtesy of Supply Nation.

To make your impact by connecting with First Nations Australia through business, visit <https://supplynation.org.au/>

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