

Varuna The National Writers' House and  
Blue Mountains Writers' Festival  
**Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan**

NOVEMBER 2021 – NOVEMBER 2022



**VARUNA**  
The National Writers' House

BLUE  
MOUNTAINS  
WRITERS'  
FESTIVAL



2020 Copyright Agency First Nations Fellowship recipients: Mykaela Saunders, Gary Lonesborough, Travis De Vries, Alison Whittaker and Jeanine Leane with Amy Sambrooke and Veechi Stuart in Katoomba.

Photo credit: Friendly passer-by.



Darug man Chris Tobin and Gundungurra man David King held a smoking ceremony at The Jerra Studio Opening Monday 23 November 2020.

Photo credit: Maja Baska Photography.

# Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan

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# Message from Reconciliation Australia



**R**econciliation Australia welcomes Varuna The National Writers' House to the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) program with the formal endorsement of its inaugural Reflect RAP.

Varuna The National Writers' House joins a network of more than 1,100 corporate, government, and not-for-profit organisations that have made a formal commitment to reconciliation through the RAP program.

Since 2006, RAPs have provided a framework for organisations to leverage their structures and diverse spheres of influence to support the national reconciliation movement. The program's potential for impact is greater than ever, with close to 3 million people now working or studying in an organisation with a RAP.

The four RAP types — Reflect, Innovate, Stretch and Elevate — allow RAP partners to

continuously develop and strengthen reconciliation commitments in new ways. This Reflect RAP will lay the foundations, priming the workplace for future RAPs and reconciliation initiatives.

The RAP program's strength is its framework of relationships, respect, and opportunities, allowing an organisation to strategically set its reconciliation commitments in line with its own business objectives, for the most effective outcomes.

These outcomes contribute towards the five dimensions of reconciliation: race relations; equality and equity; institutional integrity; unity; and historical acceptance.

It is critical to not only uphold all five dimensions of reconciliation, but also increase awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, knowledge, and leadership across all sectors of Australian society.

This Reflect RAP enables Varuna The National Writers' House to deepen its understanding of its sphere of influence and the unique contribution it can make to lead progress across the five dimensions. Getting these first steps right will ensure the sustainability of future RAPs and reconciliation initiatives and provide meaningful impact toward Australia's reconciliation journey.

Congratulations Varuna The National Writers' House, welcome to the RAP program, and I look forward to following your reconciliation journey in the years to come.

**Karen Mundine**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Reconciliation Australia

# 1. Our business

## KEY VALUES:

Respect and inclusivity

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## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES:

Nurturing First Nations writing; Reflecting diversity

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Varuna is based in the Blue Mountains and sits on the traditional lands of the Darug and Gundungurra people.

Varuna is the only artist residency in Australia that is devoted exclusively to literature, and one of only a handful in the world. This focus has enabled the extraordinary creative output of many of Australia's best writers. Each year, numerous literary prizes and accolades confirm the calibre of Varuna's alumni.

Varuna is now an essential part of Australia's literary community. The spirit of generosity that sparked the creation of Varuna by Mick Dark (son of writer Eleanor Dark) 30 years ago, along with his belief in the importance of

writing and writers, continues to inspire the very best of Australian writing. Varuna's strategic mission is to support artistic excellence, diversity, community and sustainability and to continue to be part of an international network of globally significant artist residences, delivering literature that is distinctively Australian to a worldwide readership.

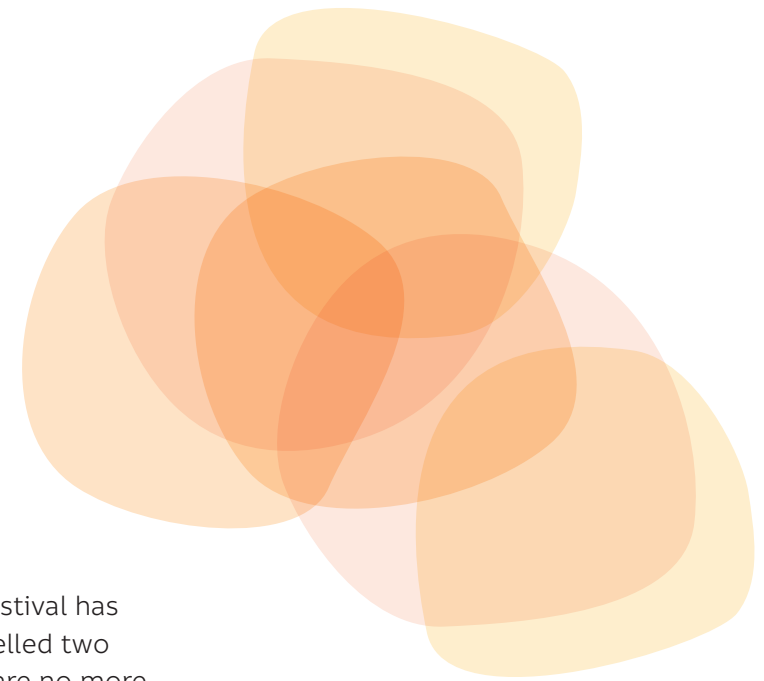
2020/21 has brought about significant change, not only to Varuna but to the world. The challenges faced – bushfires, pandemic and economic recession – have forced us to look closely at how we deliver our service to writers and enabled us to experiment in ways which we may have never

dreamt of. Our Blue Mountains Writers' Festival has been regrettably cancelled two years in a row. There are no more assumptions to be made, as we consider our programs afresh. This has given us new insights into the essential elements of our work and its authentic value to writers and audiences.

2020 has seen us build an accessible studio which opens up opportunities for writers with disability who have previously been unable to stay in residence at Varuna. This project has been a catalyst to consider a holistic approach to supporting diversity within our organisation, and key policy work such as our Disability Inclusion Action Plan and our Reconciliation Action Plan help

solidify our approach to this key strategic objective.

We are a small team of 5 part-time permanent staff, plus a handful of contractors. We have a valued cohort of around 40 volunteers that help out throughout the year, most intensely over the period of our annual Blue Mountains Writers' Festival. We currently have no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, but we do have representation on our Board and on our Disability Inclusion Advisory Group.



## 2. Our RAP

### VISION:

**To establish an active commitment to First Nations writers and audiences locally, nationally and internationally, that fosters respect and understanding and encourages engagement with Varuna's programs and events.**

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Built in 1939 by Dr Eric Dark and Eleanor Dark, the Varuna house is nearby The Gully, a culturally and ecologically significant place also located on the Seven Sisters songline. The Gully had always been a summer gathering place for Darug and Gundungurra peoples, but from the late nineteenth century it was home to many Aboriginal families and individuals who had been displaced by colonisation and settlement. Today, the descendants of those who lived at The Gully speak warmly of Dr Dark, and how he would regularly visit the community to provide medical care. We are honoured to carry forward the social justice legacy of Dr Eric Dark, Eleanor Dark and their son Mick Dark by

encouraging the spirit and vitality of First Nations writing nationally and internationally.

This Reconciliation Action Plan is Varuna's first, and represents important progression of our strategic objectives to reflect diversity and nurture First Nations writing. Our vision is to establish an active commitment to First Nations writers and audiences locally, nationally and internationally, that fosters respect and understanding and encourages engagement with Varuna's programs and events. This work is championed by both our Executive Director and Creative Director who together will lead a Working Group of staff and Board members to meet quarterly to ensure we

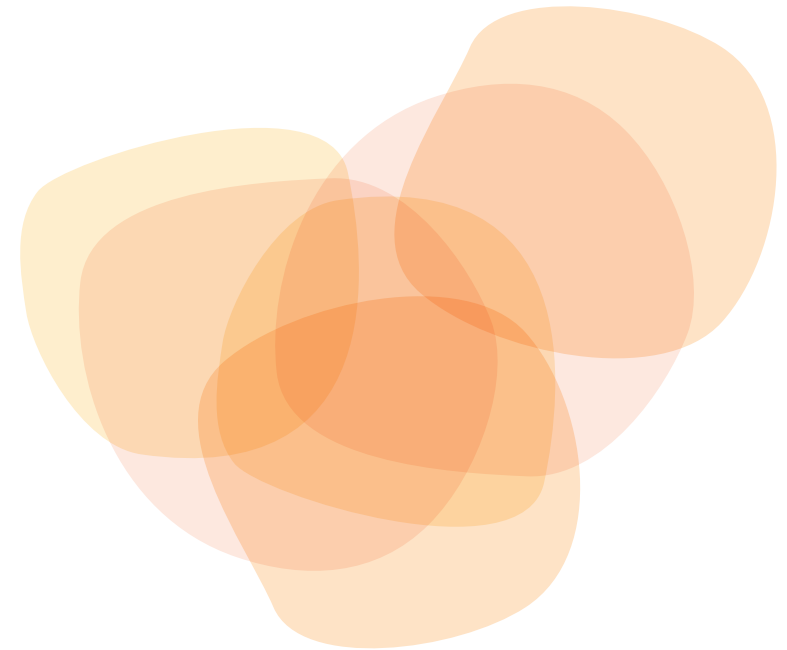
deliver this plan, track our achievements and develop future iterations.

Over the last three years we have established a very successful First Nations Fellowship with the vital support of Copyright Agency funding. This program has seen us partner with Magabala Books, Australia's leading Indigenous publisher, and seen six Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers come to stay and work at Varuna each year. Dr Peter Minter, Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Sydney, and Varuna Board member, has been our Copyright Agency First Nations Fellowships program consultant. This Fellowship has

now been integrated into our core program of Fellowships. Reflecting diversity is now front and centre in all our programming considerations.

Our strategic plan 2021-2024 outlines how we wish to build on this important work we have started and highlights 'Nurturing First Nations Writing' as a key objective. Our Reconciliation Action Plan is a key deliverable under this objective. We look forward to expanding the ways we encourage, support and promote First Nations writers and their stories.





## Our partnerships and current activities

Our most recent actions displaying our commitment to reconciliation have been:

- Seeking Elder/s to undertake Welcome to Country as a preface to all large-scale events and for groups of visiting First Nations writers
- Programming First Nations writers in our Blue Mountains Writers' Festival
- Consulting on appropriate Darug or Gundungurra names for our new studio and our sitting room area.
- Purchasing First Nations artwork for the house and expanding our First Nations book collection.
- Developing a business case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment within our organisation
- Expanding our offerings for First Nations writers to include online programs
- Working with local Gundungurra man David King to develop a plan and seek funding for the Varuna edible garden project

### 3. Plan: Reflect RAP NOVEMBER 2021 – NOVEMBER 2022

#### Relationships

| Action   | Deliverable  | Timeline  | Responsibility                                    |
|--|--|---|---|
| <b>Establish and strengthen mutually beneficial relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and organisations.</b> | » Continue to identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and organisations within our local area or sphere of influence.    | November 2021                                     | Creative Director & Executive Director            |
|  | » Research best practice and principles that support partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and organisations. | December 2021                                     | Strategic Initiatives Officer                     |
| <b>Build relationships through celebrating National Reconciliation Week (NRW).</b>   | » Circulate Reconciliation Australia’s NRW resources and reconciliation materials to staff.  | May 2022  | Strategic Initiatives Officer                     |
|  | » RAP Working Group members to participate in an external NRW event.   | May 2022  | Strategic Initiatives Officer                     |
|  | » Encourage and support staff and board to participate in at least one external event to recognise and celebrate NRW.                        | May 2022  | Executive Director                                |
| <b>Promote reconciliation through our sphere of influence.</b>   | » Communicate our commitment to reconciliation to all staff.   | November 2021, March 2022, May 2022, October 2022 | Executive Director                                |
|  | » Continue to identify external stakeholders that our organisation can engage with on our reconciliation journey.                            | December 2021                                     | Creative Director & Strategic Initiatives Officer |
|  | » Continue to identify RAP and other like-minded organisations that we could approach to collaborate with on our reconciliation journey.     | December 2021                                     | Creative Director & Executive Director            |
|  | » Display our RAP on our website   | November 2021                                     | Strategic Initiatives Officer                     |



| <i>Action</i>   | <i>Deliverable</i>  | <i>Timeline</i> | <i>Responsibility</i>                    |
|---|---|-----------------|--|
| <b>Promote positive race relations through anti-discrimination strategies.</b>                                    | » Research best practice and policies in areas of race relations and anti-discrimination.   | January 2022    | Executive Director                       |
|   | » Conduct a review of HR policies and procedures to identify existing anti-discrimination provisions, and future needs.   | February 2022   | Executive Director                       |
| <b>Establish authentic links with local Aboriginal communities through community-led projects and initiatives</b> | » Work with local Aboriginal communities to nurture connection through volunteering at the Gully Bushcare group and development of the Varuna edible garden project | December 2021   | Executive Director and Creative Director |
|   | » Scope a historical research project investigating Dr Dark's health care of residents of the Gully during the 1940s  | December 2021   | Strategic Initiatives Officer            |



| <i>Action</i>  | <i>Deliverable</i>  | <i>Timeline</i>          | <i>Responsibility</i>                    |
|--|---|--------------------------|--|
| <b>Increase understanding, value and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, knowledge and rights through cultural learning.</b> | » Develop a business case for increasing understanding, value and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, knowledge and rights within our organisation.   | November 2021            | Strategic Initiatives Officer            |
|  | » Conduct a review of cultural learning needs within our organisation.  | November 2021            | Strategic Initiatives Officer            |
| <b>Demonstrate respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by observing cultural protocols.</b>   | » Continue to develop an understanding of the local Traditional Owners or Custodians of the lands and waters within our organisation's operational area.  | December 2021            | Executive Director and Creative Director |
|  | » Increase staff's understanding of the purpose and significance behind cultural protocols, including Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country protocols.  | December 2021            | Executive Director                       |
|  | » Acknowledge Darug and Gundungurra custodianship when welcoming residents to Varuna, and at our public programs and events such as the Blue Mountains Writers' Festival  | January 2022             | Executive Director and Creative Director |
|  | » Continue to invite a local Traditional Owner or Custodian to provide a Welcome to Country or other appropriate cultural protocol at all our major events each year such as the annual Blue Mountains Writers' Festival and the Mick Dark Talk for the Future. | October 2022             | Creative Director                        |
| <b>Build respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories by celebrating NAIDOC Week.</b>  | » Raise awareness and share information amongst our staff about the meaning of NAIDOC Week.   | July 2022                | Strategic Initiatives Officer            |
|  | » Introduce our staff to NAIDOC Week by promoting external events in our local area.  | July 2022                | Strategic Initiatives Officer            |
|  | » RAP Working Group to participate in an external NAIDOC Week event.  | First week in July, 2022 | Strategic Initiatives Officer            |



## Opportunities

| Action   | Deliverable   | Timeline      | Responsibility                           |
|--|---|---------------|--|
| <b>Improve employment outcomes by increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruitment, retention and professional development.</b>                | » Update the business case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment within our organisation and seek funding to support this  | February 2022 | Executive Director                       |
|  | » Build understanding of current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing to inform future employment and professional development opportunities.   | February 2022 | Executive Director                       |
| <b>Increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander supplier diversity to support improved economic and social outcomes.</b>                                 | » Develop a business case for procurement from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned businesses.  | December 2021 | Strategic Initiatives Officer            |
|  | » Investigate Supply Nation membership.   | December 2021 | Strategic Initiatives Officer            |
| <b>Expand our networks of First Nations projects and arts organisations to support participation of First Nations writers in our projects and programs</b> | » Work towards a First Nations Language program in local schools e.g. Red Room's Poetry in First Languages  | April 2022    | Creative Director                        |
|  | » Seek opportunities to host prominent First Nations writers who may be visiting Australia/ and seek ways to engage First Nations writers in our international exchanges to expand opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. | February 2022 | Executive Director and Creative Director |
|  | » Continue to showcase First Nations writers in our Blue Mountains Writers' Festival program  | October 2022  | Creative Director                        |

| <i>Action</i>  | <i>Deliverable</i>   | <i>Timeline</i>    | <i>Responsibility</i>                                 |
|--|--|--------------------|---|
| <b>1. Establish and maintain an effective RAP Working Group (RWG) to drive governance of the RAP.</b>  | » Maintain RWG to govern RAP implementation.   | December 2021      | Strategic Initiatives Officer                         |
|  | » Draft a Terms of Reference for the RWG.  | December 2021      | Strategic Initiatives Officer                         |
|  | » Establish Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation on the RWG.                       | January 2022       | Strategic Initiatives Officer                         |
| <b>2. Provide appropriate support for effective implementation of RAP commitments.</b>   | » Define resource needs for RAP implementation.  | December 2021      | Strategic Initiatives Officer with Executive Director |
|  | » Engage Board in the delivery of RAP commitments.   | From December 2021 | Executive Director and Creative Director              |
|  | » Define appropriate systems and capability to track, measure and report on RAP commitments.       | December 2021      | Strategic Initiatives Officer with Executive Director |
| <b>3. Build accountability and transparency through reporting RAP achievements, challenges and learnings both internally and externally.</b> | » Complete and submit the annual RAP Impact Measurement Questionnaire to Reconciliation Australia. | 30 September 2022  | Strategic Initiatives Officer                         |
| <b>4. Continue our reconciliation journey by developing our next RAP.</b>  | » Register via Reconciliation Australia's website to begin developing our next RAP.                | August 2022        | Strategic Initiatives and Development Officer         |

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