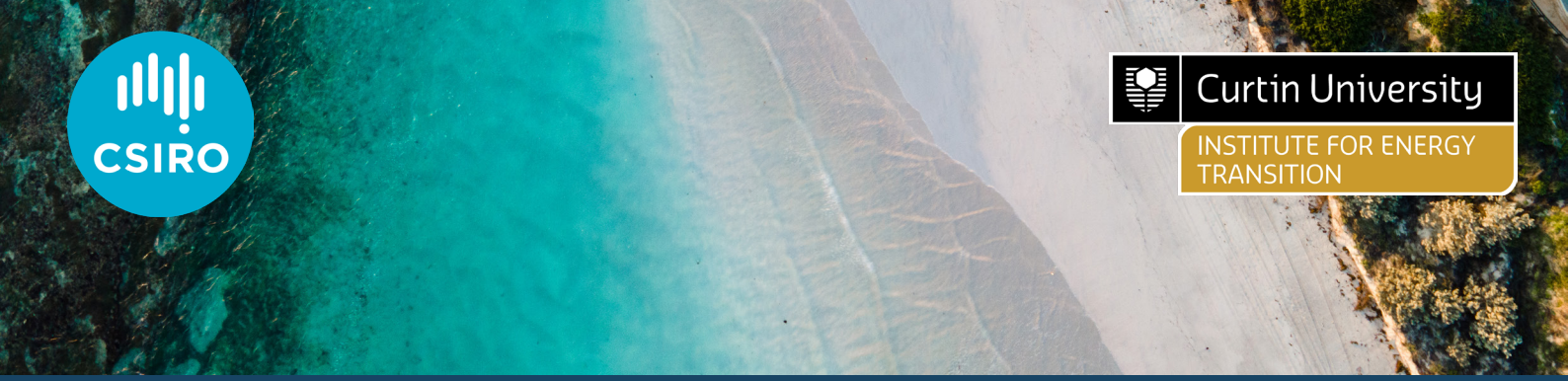

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Community wellbeing and attitudes to energy transition in the North Perth Basin: Yamatji

This joint CSIRO/Curtin University research project aims to provide an in-depth understanding of Indigenous community wellbeing and perceptions of energy developments, particularly gas, in the North Perth Basin located in the Mid West region of Western Australia (WA).

ON YAMATJI

The Yamatji Southern Regional Corporation (YSRC) is the representative Prescribed Body Corporation (PBC) of the Yamatji Southern Native Title Determination Area, working towards the strategic objectives set by the Directors whom the members appoint. Yamatji Native Title encompasses non-exclusive rights, and the Determination Area covers most of the Mid-West region of Western Australia across approximately 48,000 square kilometres, and including parts of the Shires of Meekatharra, Mount Magnet, Murchison, Upper Gascoyne, Cue, and Yalgoo, as well as pastoral leases. The YSRC encompasses several Indigenous groups with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The claim groups (Hutt River, Mullewa Wadjari, Southern Yamatji and Widi Mob) are represented by four Cultural Committees as part of the YSRC.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The Mid West region of Western Australia (WA) is currently host to several exploration licences for natural gas and geothermal resources along with prospective wind and large-scale solar developments. In this context of increasing energy developments in the region, the project aims to understand how these developments might affect the wellbeing of local communities, and the attitudes, perceptions and levels of acceptance towards onshore gas projects, carbon capture and storage (CCS), geothermal, hydrogen, wind, solar and other technologies.

KEY POINTS

- Ongoing efforts to protect cultural heritage and the environment highlight the importance of biodiversity, water sources, and access to Country for cultural practices.
- Education is seen as central to community wellbeing, with financial support for Indigenous students linked to broader energy and development initiatives.
- Economic sustainability is increasingly pursued through community-led business ventures, job creation, co-ownership of renewable projects, and benefit-sharing negotiations.
- Concerns persist around environmental degradation, water contamination, wildlife impacts, and the visual and social effects of energy infrastructure.
- Communities report consultation fatigue and emphasise the need for early, trust-based engagement with proponents to maintain social licence and alignment on project timelines.
- Cultural values must inform the decision-making processes related to energy projects.

IMAGE 1: Geraldton sands at sunset (Adobe Stock)

The Curtin Institute for Energy Transition led this this research from November 2024 to July 2025, with Federal Government funding provided through CSIRO's Gas Industry Social and Environmental Research Alliance (GISERA).The Yarn with YSRC officers focused on YSRC's perceptions, views, aspirations, and priorities regarding energy-related developments on Yamatji Country.

HOW WAS THE YARN CONDUCTED?

A technical presentation on current underground resource initiatives and how they operate was provided by an expert from CSIRO, which was followed by a discussion that addressed questions or points of clarification from participants. The Yarn explored experiences, feelings and knowledge of underground resource exploitation technologies, followed by views on impacts, costs, risks, and benefits of the initiatives; YSRC aspirations concerning those initiatives; perspectives on formal and informal decision-making processes and the importance of inter-personal trust; trusted information sources; views on climate change impacts and challenges; and visions and aspirations on energy transition.

While YSRC officers participated in the Yarn to support broad-based engagement and discussion, the findings and views expressed do not necessarily reflect the official views, policies, or positions of YSRC or its Board. The YSRC Board determines any formal positions on development proposals or energy projects accordng to its governance processes, and cultural protocols.

FINDINGS

Experience and knowledge

Participants had some experience with energy initiatives involving both underground and renewable resources, which informed their views on potential benefits and risks. However, limited knowledge of underground technologies restricted their understanding of long-term impacts on Country.

Community wellbeing

Wellbeing was closely tied to culture, biodiversity, and access to Country. Cultural heritage planning and education were seen as essential supports. Energy projects were accepted when aligned with cultural values and community priorities. One of the significant concerns raised during the Yarn was the rising cost of energy and its impact on the most vulnerable in the community, including members of the Yamatji Nation.

Economic dimensions

YSRC showed strong interest in culturally respectful economic development, including co-ownership of renewable projects, service delivery, and new enterprises. These were seen as ways to support jobs, training, and long-term community benefit, while maintaining existing roles like Ranger work.

Physical infrastructure

A lack of affordable housing and reliable services was affecting community wellbeing. Demand is expected to grow as new energy initiatives progress.

Visual impacts

Wind farms raised concerns about visual change, tourism, and wildlife. Oil and gas projects were viewed as less visually disruptive.

Environmental concerns

Pollution, water issues, and threats to culturally important species were key concerns, heightened by overlapping land uses. There was strong support for monitoring, protective planning, and a clear preference for renewables over fossil fuels in the face of climate change.

Political dimensions

Early, respectful engagement was considered critical to building trust and ensuring community input. Consultation fatigue and poor timing were common issues. Cultural awareness and better communication were seen as ways to improve relationships with industry.

Authors: Associate Professor Raquel Tardin-Coelho, Associate Professor Andrew Knight

Produced by Elena Perse for the Curtin Institute for Energy Transition (2025)

This research has been funded through CSIRO's Gas Industry Social and Environmental Research Alliance (GISERA) with contributions from the Australian Government's Department of Industry, Science and Resources. GISERA is a collaboration between CSIRO, Commonwealth, state and territory governments and industry established to undertake research on the impacts of onshore gas exploration and development on the environment, and the socio-economic costs and benefits. For information about GISERA's governance structure, projects and research findings visit https://gisera.csiro.au

CRICOS Provider Code 00301J