

# AdaptNSW Forum 2023: navigating uncertainty together

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of publication.

The AdaptNSW Forum was held in December 2023 in Sydney on the lands of the Gadigal of the Eora Nation and attracted more than 350 participants. The forum explored ‘navigating uncertainty together’ that included subthemes of new narratives, systems transformation, scientific and cultural knowledge and managing risk.

The future is inherently uncertain. However, climate changes and recent consecutive and severe weather events are pushing many individuals, communities, organisations and governments beyond the levels of uncertainty we may previously have been comfortable with. In the forum’s opening address, The Hon. Penny Sharpe MP said that the NSW Government had legislated net zero emissions by 2050, along with an emissions reduction target of 70% compared with 2005 levels by 2035.<sup>1</sup> This was a positive opening that highlighted the importance of multi-partisan support for effective action on climate change.

## Embracing imagination and creativity

Aligned with the themes of new narratives and systems transformation, the conference program included several interactive workshops and presentations on the critical roles of creativity, imagination and the arts to facilitate reflective and transformational thinking about individual and societal values. Embracing creativity and imagination allows us to consider unconventional or alternative options in planning and implementing future adaptation approaches. It can also give space to consider the needs of ‘non-human animals’<sup>2</sup> and ecosystems and how their needs can be embedded in adaptation. While creative activities might seem awkward at first, this discomfort is an important step in working outside of comfort zones to engage differently with complex problems.

The forum encouraged participants to reflect on what climate adaptation means in our professional roles, but also what it means spiritually and emotionally as individuals living in a changing world. With levels of climate anxiety on the rise globally<sup>3</sup>, Dr Chloe Watfern explored the psychological implications of engaging with climate change on a regular basis, the importance of mental health and wellbeing, and the role of the creative arts in personal and community resilience.<sup>4</sup>

## Disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation and sustainable development

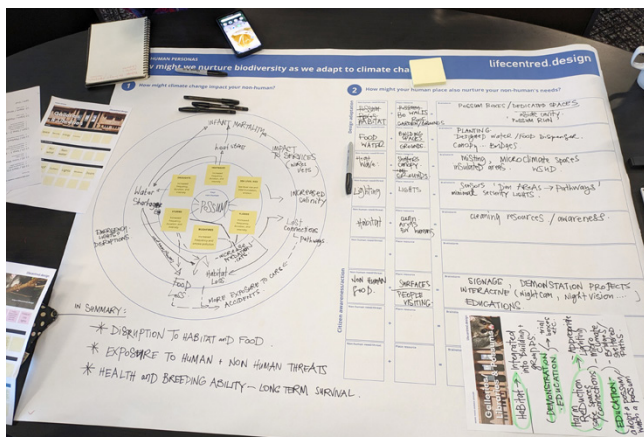
The forum presented a range of extreme events and issues, including the floods in the New South Wales Northern Rivers, the implications of extreme heat in urban areas and the role of bushfire science in bushfire planning. These examples highlight the need to draw out and elevate the interconnections between disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation and sustainable development. The United Nations Global Assessment Special Report 2023<sup>5</sup> states that ‘growing inequalities and pressures on the planet... are reversing hard-won development gains’. Thinking about risks systemically<sup>6</sup> shows that the complex challenges of disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation and sustainable development are perpetuated and exacerbated by similar and often the same forces.<sup>7</sup> In turn, the ways society might address these challenges also shares similarities, such as reducing social and economic inequalities, rehabilitating lands and waterways and improving land-use planning and building practices.



The AdaptNSW Forum explored 'navigating uncertainty together'.  
Image: Isabel Cornes

## What I took away from the forum

It is critical that we navigate uncertainty together. This means embracing moments of awkwardness and seeking out different ways of thinking. It also means continuing to work at building relationships, collaborating and breaking down departmental, sectoral, research and state and territory silos. Finally, the forum also reiterated the importance of improving understandings of uncertainty and how we might better communicate and cope with uncertainty into the future.



Creative activities were an important step in working outside of comfort zones to examine complex problems.  
Image: Isabel Cornes

## Endnotes

- Rose T (2023) *Net zero by 2050 and interim target of 70% emissions reduction by 2035 passed by NSW Parliament. The Guardian, 30 November. Retrieved [www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/nov/30/nsw-greenhouse-gas-emission-reduction-targets-law-net-zero-2050-2035-details](http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/nov/30/nsw-greenhouse-gas-emission-reduction-targets-law-net-zero-2050-2035-details).*
- The term 'non-human animals' was a term raised and used at the forum.
- World Health Organization (2022) *Why mental health is a priority for action on climate change. Retrieved: [www.who.int/news/item/03-06-2022-why-mental-health-is-a-priority-for-action-on-climate-change](http://www.who.int/news/item/03-06-2022-why-mental-health-is-a-priority-for-action-on-climate-change).*
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