

Amber Roberts



00:00

Today on



Helga Svendsen 00:00

the take on board podcast, I'll be talking with Amber Roberts. Amber is a non executive director of Greenpeace, Asia Pacific. And she's also the chair of the nominations Committee, which is how I came to meet her. Amber is the manager of PwC indigenous consulting, and formerly worked with the Australian Human Rights Commission, reconciliation Australia and the Diversity Council of Australia. Welcome to the take on board podcast. Amber.



00:26

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.



Helga Svendsen 00:30

It's so great to have you here, Amber. Because the reason I've asked amber to be with us today is because in the Facebook group, I was asked to explore a couple of questions.

One was around when and how and whether to do an acknowledgement of country at the start of meetings, and secondly, to explore board and company capacity to contribute to indigenous reconciliation. So I'm conscious that we're already a few minutes in Amber, and I haven't done an acknowledgement of country. So I'm wondering whether you might be able to do that for us, and then we can have a conversation about it,



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of course, thank you. So I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land in which we meet today. So I'm in Sydney. And so the traditional owners, the medical people of the era nation, and I'm conscious Helier, your at in Melbourne, which would be the rerun three people of the Kulin nation. So I acknowledge those nations and peoples and their elders past present and those who are yet to come. Thank you.



Helga Svendsen 01:33

Thank you. And it reminds me amber that i have i've never acknowledged country on any of my podcasts. And indeed, the question arose about acknowledging country at meetings, how should it be done?



01:48

Yes, it's a good question. And it's something that often comes up in the work that I do. I guess, probably, if I could go back a little bit, if before I answer that question, have you been asked by your podcast followers? what the differences are between acknowledgement to country and



Helga Svendsen 02:08

had a welcome? I haven't. And in fact, you know, even before we go there, I've given your brief bio, but can you just give us a bit about you? So Amber, just tell us a little bit about yourself?



02:20

Sure, no worries. So I'm an Aboriginal woman. I grew up in Far North Queensland on the accident table ends in rain forest country, my family have had a couple of generations of fostering. So my father, auntie and uncle were fostered in the 1950s, from Brisbane, and their father, my grandfather was fostered also from Brisbane in the 1920s. So I think it's

important when I introduce myself of that history, because it is a quite an important part of Australia's history and Aboriginal history. I, I have traditional connections to Central Northwest Queensland, but because of the history of fostering and generations of fostering, I don't really have to, I don't really have family connection that I know of there. So my place and where I call home, and I'm most connected to is the rain forest country in Far North Queensland. So I think that's really important, because when introducing yourself include and I think this is very important, when someone provides a welcome and acknowledgement country is to acknowledge the place where you grew up, and where you're most connected to. I think that's a really important part of identity, and acknowledgement of the traditional learners of Diana, which you are most connected to. So that's me in terms of my identity, I'm a mom, have two beautiful girls. And my partner is also from far north Queensland. So we based in Sydney, often, we keep the connection going for our children back to North Queensland. In my career, as you mentioned, I've mostly worked in in have worked in a number of different areas, but always advocating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and better outcomes and opportunities for Aboriginal people.

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Helga Svendsen 04:32

Fantastic. And I know that that's also mentioned very briefly at the start, and but that you and I met through your board role at Greenpeace, Asia Pacific, and I'm on the General Assembly there, and you and I work together on the nominations committee. And I know from that work there, also how strong you are in, you know, representation, and so on. So thank you for the work you do there. And thank you for being here to have this conversation as well.



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No worries. Thank you.

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Helga Svendsen 05:00

What we touched on earlier about before we get into acknowledgement and should shouldn't be done. You're absolutely right. Let's talk about what's a welcome what's an acknowledgement? Can you give us the the one on one there.



05:13

Thank you for that question earlier. Yeah, so the difference between a welcomed country

and acknowledgement country, I guess I'll start with a Welcome to Country is a protocol for welcoming visitors to country, which has been part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's culture. For thousands of years, since of millennium. They were more than 250 languages spoken traditional indigenous languages spoken in Australia before 1798 with over 800 dialects. So there's many traditional liner groups. And I guess it's really important to acknowledge that anywhere in Australia is Aboriginal land. So welcome to country is where an elder or a person an Aboriginal person who has been given traditional have been given permission to provide a welcome provides a welcome to the visitors coming into their country. And the overarching reason for that is so that they, they are offered safe passage, I guess, and protection for their spiritual being while they are in that country. So it's such an important protocol. And then acknowledgement country is an opportunity for anyone to show respect for traditional owners and their continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to that country. So an acknowledgement can of country can be done by Aboriginal people. And it can be done by an on indigenous people. There are no real set protocol wording for an acknowledgement to country. But there are many examples of scripts, I guess you could say that can help people to provide an acknowledgement to countries they're unsure.

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Helga Svendsen 07:20

It's an interesting question, or an interesting aspect, I guess, around the scripts, certainly, in the Facebook group, when this question was raised about, do we acknowledge how do we acknowledge there is a real, I guess, want to be able to do it in a really genuine way? Rather than just the script? What's your advice to board members about how to do it in a way that is genuine and sincere? and getting it right as well?



07:50

It's hard because some people, I guess the level of education in this country has been quite limited in with regards to the history of Australia and Aboriginal peoples. And I guess, why acknowledgement of country countries is important is that because of this long history of I guess, exclusion in, in history books in the Australian thumb in, in policies, and there's so many social and economic areas across the sort of country that have excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. So I think in terms of providing an acknowledgement, as I mentioned a little bit earlier, it's really important to understand place. And I do agree, I think the more genuine, you can provide an acknowledgement to country, the better. However, some people, I guess, not confident, or maybe afraid, they might say the wrong thing, when they provide their acknowledgement to country. So sometimes having a script is useful when someone is starting out. If you haven't done that done it before, a script is useful. But the more that you someone does it, the more confident you will be to

provide an acknowledgement. And as I mentioned, faces really important. So for example, some of the best acknowledgement to countries I've heard, when someone has taken the time to think about what they they're going to say in the acknowledgement before a meeting, often well racing around with back to back meetings. And sometimes we just don't properly take that time. But I think it's important to do so. And some of the best acknowledgments I've heard is when people have taken that time, and maybe even if it's like a walk along the river as you're coming to work, or something that acknowledges the place that you're in, and taking that in and weaving that into an acknowledgement, I think is really great. If someone is confident enough to do that,

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Helga Svendsen 10:27

I'd noticed that when you spoke about your place, and that that's important. So can I check there? Or that might be one or both? Is it about the place that you are acknowledging? Or is it about your place in your history?

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10:41

That's a really good question. And I think it can be both, to be honest, I think so often, and I didn't do this. But often when I introduce myself, I introduce the traditional liners of the land of which I grew up on the because I didn't grow up on traditional country, so that the land, traditional owners of the land, where I grew up is an Argentine country and their rain forest peoples. And so I think it's so important for people to personalize their acknowledgement countries as well. So it's about the person providing the acknowledgement to country. And it is also about the place,

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Helga Svendsen 11:28

right? So could be both or Eva,

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11:31

the acknowledgement to country about the place in which you're meeting is very important. That's the primary sort of purpose of the acknowledgement. But if you can personalize your connection to the place that you're meeting, or acknowledge where you're from, that's really important to

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Helga Svendsen 11:51

actually at the Greenpeace board, if I can ask how does it work? Where does the chain acknowledge country? How does it work at that board?



11:58

So often, it will, the chair of the board will provide an acknowledgement country at the start of board meetings. And then at our AGM, I have for the last couple of years provided an acknowledgement to country. I think there's room for those meetings, particularly AGM and I think this is quite this would go for most AGM. I think it really is important for those really significant meetings to have an a, an elder, traditional elder of that land where you're meeting to provide a welcome. So acknowledgement to countries and welcome to countries when usually happen at the very start of any meeting. So before the formalities start,



Helga Svendsen 12:48

it's a great point. And for for people listening, we amber and I had a conversation before we started recording about whether we do the acknowledgement right at the start of the spawn or opera done the introduction, and it would have been a little unusual to do it without the context. But by the same token, potentially should have been done right at the start. I think I'm hearing there, Amber.



13:06

Yes, yeah, that's right. I think it is really important to have that acknowledgement or welcome at the start of the meeting. And then I think at significant meetings, as I mentioned, like AGM, it is good to have, traditionally, now welcome you to country at meetings, light board meetings, which happened sort of quarterly or regularly, you could have both, but often, we would have an acknowledgement to country by the chair and our meetings at Greenpeace.



Helga Svendsen 13:42

So one thing we are just about to introduce at one of my boards is doing an acknowledgement of country at every meeting, which doesn't happen regularly. Now it doesn't sound but not at all. And the way we are planning on doing it is rotating it around the different board members or different board member will do it at each meeting, which we are hoping will bring a bit more of I guess that connection and preparation for it as it gets moved around the different directors.



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Yeah, that sounds like a great approach. Because from what we've been talking about the person providing the acknowledgement country gives a different perspective might give a different perspective to the other. So I think that's a great approach



Helga Svendsen 14:26

at Greenpeace or in other organizations that you've seen. What about committee meetings? Or even team meetings? Should there be an acknowledgement at all of our gatherings no matter how big or small or how regular? What's your advice there?



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Yeah, that's a good point. And good question. It's hard to say. Ideally, personally, I think we should be having acknowledgement to countries at all our meetings. But sometimes it can become lack a script and be quiet, generic, I guess that every meeting. And so it is hard, I guess it does come down to the I guess how regular these meetings are. But if they are quite regular, at PwC is indigenous consulting, we have a team meeting every second week. And we do still do an acknowledgement to country and different team member does it at each meeting. Because we wrote rotate the chair. Anyway. So the chair does the acknowledgement if I could quote paragraph of MC Dodson. So he described what the meaning of country is, and that it's more than ownership or connection to land. So just to give a little bit more context around, primarily Welcome to Country, the protocol, local Welcome to Country and how this has, I guess, evolved into knowledge meant of country, because I guess, acknowledgement of country is quite a contemporary thing. But he's quite talking more about what more than just ownership or connection to land. He says, when we talk about traditional country, we mean something beyond the dictionary definition of the word. for Aboriginal Australians, we might mean homeland, or tribal or clan area. And we might mean more than just a place on the map. For us country as a word for all the values, places, resources, stories, and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features. It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains. While they may all no longer necessarily be the title holders to land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait on Island, Australians are still connected to the country of their ancestors. And most consider themselves the custodians or caretakers of that land. I just wanted to say that for this podcast, so give us this, the protocol of it of acknowledgement, or in particular, Welcome to Country, some contextual and meaning sort of deeper meaning, no, that is beautiful. And it is a beautiful way of giving that context. I know at an event that I was running recently, the acknowledgement that I did at the start certainly kind of referred to I guess, the stewardship of the country that Aboriginal people have had for millennia. And

that given I do work around governance and stewardship, it's kind of it's giving that

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Helga Svendsen 17:49

lens to it as well. And the quote that you've just given us is really around that stewardship and connection to the land, which is so much more deeper than a then ownership, which is probably just our perception of things and our rules and laws, and not those that have been in place for the last millennia, that indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have paid for our land. Okay, for that land. I shouldn't say Alan, should I paid for that land?

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18:17

Yes, yeah. So lovely quote, I think from Professor Nick Dodson.

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Helga Svendsen 18:22

Yeah, it's beautiful. Thank you. It's a beautiful way of sharing it and really summing it up. I wonder if we can move a little bit because the other query that I had been asked about is how boards can really contribute to indigenous reconciliation. You know, what's the board role in that? And often it's working through a Reconciliation Action Plan, which I have no doubt is an important part of it. There might also be other parts as well. So what's your advice to boards in who want to contribute to indigenous reconciliation? What's your advice on where they should start? And what are some of the things they should consider as a board?

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19:01

Some interesting question. And I think as we mentioned, before, organizations often Reconciliation Action Plans are the first. And sometimes the only sort of initiative related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that the organization is involved in. And Reconciliation Action fans actually have one of the minimum elements of rap, as it's called, often called, have a requirement to have Welcome to Country and acknowledgement country protocols for the organization. So that's a minimum element of a rap. And it helps, I really do think that helps organizations embed this protocol and articulate when where they would provide an acknowledgement to control, you engage an elder to provide a Welcome to Country. But at the board level, I think, having conducting acknowledgement to countries that meetings I think that's a important part of learning and following, I guess, protocol and acknowledging the people, traditional

miners, where the board is meeting, there's a number of different ways, I guess you can build the knowledge of board members around Aboriginal interested Islander peoples and engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. And one of the ways is to you can bring in an elder to talk to the board. I think that's a great idea, because it's always nice to have face to face contact and conversation and have create a safe space to ask for board members to ask questions I may not necessarily would ask Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, I think there is a role for board members to be I guess, champions, which can be attached potentially to. So if the organization has a wrap board members you are I often see in some organizations where board members are the champion of that organizations rap, and help be communicate to others, other board members or other boards or other organizations, because everyone has there are networks around reconciliation around the development of a rap. So wraps, I see. There's different levels of wraps. And I guess there's different intentions of organizations when developing a rap. I think there's it's broadly goodwill and good intentions. But it really comes down to what the core objective is, I think, for wraps is to contribute to organizational change, and contribute to reconciliation broadly, internally and externally with within the organization sphere of influence. But I think it really is ultimately organizational change sort of document which or tool, and that takes time for any organizational change to happen. I think board members can be champions and for moving towards better opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. That's quite broad, because there's so many. Unfortunately, there's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face a number of socio economic barriers. And I generally, and statistics are great in a number of areas like justice and health, for example, board members, often so influential, not only at the board level, but with then our networks and other boards, they might be on organizations they work for. I've said that a bit. But I do think if board members are able to be champions, and constantly having a conversation, I'm surprised every now and then. But there was a very low level of education about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples general generally. Even myself as an Aboriginal woman, I, I went through all my schooling, not really hearing any teachers say anything about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people except some historical sort of aspects and mythological stories, like the rainbow serpent, all to click the flop frog or something. So the education wasn't really there, and it wasn't deep at all. So I learnt from family, from friends, through my career in working in Indigenous Affairs, and over the years sort of built my knowledge and say that I can't speak on behalf of all Aboriginal people either. So I think, like I know my beard and can contribute where I can. But I think it's important to be champions.

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Helga Svendsen 24:35

Yeah, which all of us can do whether we're not Aboriginal board members can also

champion these issues. It doesn't need to just



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be Lyft.



Helga Svendsen 24:44

To Aboriginal people to always be the voice. I have one other possibly stupid question for you. And but I'm going to ask it anyway. Using indigenous versus Aboriginal books, the rules there, I think, if I understand incorrectly in Victoria Aboriginal is used quite a bit more than sometimes in other states. But I would love to hear from you what what's the rules around it?



25:08

Yeah, it is tricky. And it's a good question, because it's a tricky one.



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And I feel so stupid. That's



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my preference, honestly, would be wherever possible use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people



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rather than indigenous peoples.



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However, insane that indigenous peoples is, I guess, used when talking about got global indigenous peoples. So in that context, using indigenous peoples is make sense. And it's appropriate. I have noticed, I'm from far north Queensland, and so touched at all and it Ireland's not too far away. But they're, they're not too far away. And so in North

Queensland, for example, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags are flying at events. And it's quite common to use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander was further down south, like in Melbourne, like you mentioned, Aboriginal is used. And it makes sense to represent Aboriginal people, I guess, at using the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander that's inclusive of all Australia's first peoples. But it is important, I think, to acknowledge and understand that interested Islander peoples and Aboriginal Australian people's different cultures and different peoples. Sometimes that's forgotten or glazed over. Because there are very different distinctions between the two cultures, ideally, abusing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples it is all First Nations peoples, those terms are quite a being used more and more.

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Helga Svendsen 27:18

Fantastic. That is, so it's Yeah, handy for those of us that sometimes are trying to get it right, but just not sure which way to get it right. And but this has been so useful. I know. I mean, like I say people asked for this topic to be raised, and that some of the advice and information you've provided is just so practical and useful for people. So I'm wondering what is one of the main points you want people to take away from this conversation today?



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I guess the first one is to understand the differences between a Welcome to Country and acknowledgement to country. And reconciliation has some guidance around that. I think it's also important to understand place, and where you are, and really take that time to really think about the environment, the natural built environment around you. Before providing an acknowledgement to country, many people I understand. Some people are, I guess, scared of saying the wrong thing, or not confident to provide an acknowledgement. And I think because of skip being scared of saying the wrong thing. I think it's important to have a go and try and, and utilize scripts or something that can help building the confidence to provide acknowledgement to countries

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Helga Svendsen 28:56

saying something, even if you're not quite sure if you're going to get it right. likely to be better than saying nothing at all. Yes, yeah. So even if it's not quite right, if it's genuine and authentic, it's going to be okay is my guess.



29:10

Yes, that's right.



Helga Svendsen 29:12

I was going to ask you for a resource that you might recommend to the community. You've already talked about some resources from reconciliation, Australia, and I'll make sure that we put a link to reconciliation Australia in the show notes for today's episode. Is there any other resource that you'd like to suggest for the community?



29:29

There is one and I think it's related to governance, but I think it provides some good information, it covers acknowledgement to country and welcome to country but other things. The indigenous governance Institute has a toolkit, which I believe was developed with reconciliation Australia, and it provides lots of great information for to have a look at. It primarily relates to indigenous governance. But I think it can be useful for boards and board members, as well. Better to better understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of doing and being and, and decision making roles. I think that would be really useful for listeners.



Helga Svendsen 30:23

Absolutely. That sounds fantastic. I'll definitely make sure I put a link to that in the show notes as well. And finally, if this were a board meeting, there would be an action sheet that comes from it. What's one or two actions that you can suggest for the community to do to, you know, to make progress around these issues?



30:41

Hmm,



30:42

yeah, I think I think the first thing to do is if you don't know, the traditional owners with on the lands of which you live and work, find out, I think it's also important to even go a little bit further to find out the traditional owners of the land on which you grew up. And I think it's important, as mentioned through this podcast to understand who you are from the

land that you're in place where you are, and that will help build confidence to provide acknowledgement. I think that's one of the takeaway things I think building confidence also to, to provide an acknowledgement if if you haven't, listeners haven't ever provided one or would like to sort of be more become more confident developing the script can help.

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Helga Svendsen 31:42

Yes, and maybe their own script rather than one from others or working from one of the other scripts that's provided. Yes, yeah. That is fantastic. Amber, thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it. I know that I am going to put some of these to good use, I'm going to go and find out the traditional owners of the land where I grew up as well and do a bit of exploration around that so that I can, I hadn't thought before about making a stronger connection to place in terms of acknowledgement of country. So that's definitely something I will take on. So thank you so much for sharing. I really appreciate it. And I know that people are going to take a lot from our conversation today.



32:24

No worries. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.