



MEDIA RELEASE

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REEFTO APPOINTS FIRST YOUTH LEADERS TO SHAPE THE FUTURE OF SEA COUNTRY



(Left to right: Reef Youth Circle Members Jamay Deshong, Leon Yeatman and Jameliah Illin)

The Great Barrier Reef Traditional Owner Taskforce (ReefTO) is starting 2026 with a significant milestone, welcoming three young Reef Traditional Owners to its inaugural Reef Youth Circle.

The announcement delivers on a commitment made to young people at the Sea Country Forum in March 2025, where young Reef Traditional Owners called for meaningful involvement in decision-making about the future of Sea Country in the Great Barrier Reef – not just to be heard, but to lead.

ReefTO has made youth empowerment and self-determination central to its approach to Sea Country management, and the establishment of the Reef Youth Circle represents that commitment in action.

The inaugural Reef Youth Circle members are:

- **Leon Yeatman Jnr** – A proud Gunggandji and Lower Coastal Yindiji man from Yarrabah, bringing experience from community work, biosecurity and fishing industries.
- **Jamay Deshong** – A proud Koinjmal woman with ties to Butchulla and Kabi Kabi / Gubbi Gubbi Country, focused on ensuring youth and Traditional Owner voices lead environmental decision-making.

- **Jameliah Illin** – A proud Bindal, Nywaigi and Wakaya woman, passionate about healthcare and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The Reef Youth Circle will work alongside the ReefTO Taskforce and Coordination Unit to design youth activities, create content, and build leadership skills while bringing cultural knowledge and lived experience to ReefTO's work.

ReefTO Taskforce Co-Chair Duane Fraser said there is a significant gap in succession planning between young people and today's leaders.

"Too often, our young people don't get the chance to step into the process, to speak, and to shape the future with their perspective. They have a right to be at the table, not just as observers, but as leaders," Mr Fraser said.

"The Sea Country Alliance will soon be theirs to carry."

For Reef Youth Circle Member, Jameliah Illin, the initiative represents something long overdue.

"This is the first time in a long time that Traditional Owners had the opportunity to create a space specifically for youth – where we can be creative and really target what matters to young people," Ms Illin said.

"We're working alongside Elders and the Taskforce, but we've got our own space to lead. It's really refreshing to see, and it's so important for us to have that."

Leon Yeatman Jnr said his motivation comes from thinking about future generations.

"I'm doing this for my kids and the next generation, but also for our whole clan and the Traditional Owners up and down the coast. We share this reef and I want to show my boys that their dad is out here doing this work, not just for them, but for our community," Mr Yeatman said.

"We need that understanding and exposure about looking after Sea Country."

Jamay Deshong said she's looking forward to learning from the experience and knowledge of Taskforce members.

"Everyone on the Taskforce is respected in their communities and they've been doing this work for a long time. What I want to learn from them is their mentorship – the way they think is so holistic, visionary and strategic," Ms Deshong said.

"They deal with Western organisations that don't always value cultural knowledge, and the way they navigate that with such composure is something I aspire to. They're proud people doing work they believe in, and that's what I want to create too – something I can be proud of."

The Reef Youth Circle represents a practical step toward self-determination, with young people actively shaping programs, policies and priorities rather than responding to decisions made by others.

ReefTO's approach reflects a growing recognition across environmental and conservation sectors that young Reef Traditional Owner voices must lead decision-making about Country, bringing both cultural knowledge and contemporary perspectives to complex challenges facing the Great Barrier Reef.

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About ReefTO:

The Great Barrier Reef Traditional Owner Taskforce (ReefTO) is a Traditional Owner-led, grassroots initiative that honours decades of work by Elders to assert their cultural authority and rights to Sea Country. ReefTO works to achieve Traditional Owners' aspirations for the health, management and protection of the Great Barrier Reef and interconnecting Country through genuine partnerships. The ReefTO Taskforce is responsible for overseeing delivery of the Reef2050 Traditional Owner Implementation Plan, with three key objectives: establishing a Sea Country Alliance, delivery of strategic policy and capacity building actions, and monitoring and reporting on how Traditional Owner actions are being implemented across the Reef by ReefTO and other agencies.