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Green Iron may be  
the future but must  
learn from the past

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The new production of green iron may be the way of the future to reduce the climate impact of steel manufacture. It is however increasing the negative impact on Traditional Owners rights and the burden on them to accept these impacts for the greater global good.

Green hydrogen is the key to carbon neutrality of the steel-making process for green iron. Using renewable solar and wind energy, rather than traditional coal, the process is seen as a cleaner one. It could also be a more lucrative one with a recent report stating that *'if green iron replaces iron ore as a primary export, it could generate up to \$386 billion annually by 2060. By comparison, Australia's iron ore exports are typically around \$120 billion per year.'*<sup>1</sup>

The green iron process uses hydrogen instead of coal, combining iron ore with hydrogen gas. In this process, iron and water are made instead of the traditional coal powered blast furnaces that create and carbon dioxide. The iron ore required for this process however needs to be highly purified, so a separate process is required for sponge iron creation.

Together, the green steel process will require expansion of mining sites to include additional processing, continuation of current mining activity and an unprecedented increase in solar and wind energy generation sites. Together, we're looking at mine site expansion, maintained ore extraction and increased land use for energy generation. So, where does this come from and at what cost?

The Indigenous Estate includes Indigenous owned, managed or co-managed lands, or lands subject to other recognised Indigenous rights, including native title rights. The *Australia State of the Environment 2021* report places almost 60% of the Australian land mass within the Indigenous Estate and notes that this figure is continuing to rise.<sup>2</sup>

We have seen the rapid establishment of regulation and processes for green energy implementation arise at the federal, and state and territory levels. Offshore wind and onshore solar continue to pose significant issues regarding Traditional Owner rights. In most instances we see poor and inappropriate consultation too late in the project development process. Also concerning is the lack of genuine decision-making Traditional Owners have in these projects on their Country.

The new Australian Commonwealth Government *\$1 billion Green Iron Investment Fund* has been developed to support the development of new facilities and supply chains.<sup>3</sup> It is essential that any recipient funding is provided with strict Traditional Owner engagement, participation and authorisation processes. Namely, adherence to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), Benefit Sharing Agreements (BSA) and Traditional Owner representative institutions (TORIs).

It is important that in the race for net zero, Traditional Owners' rights aren't again sacrificed on the pyre of progress.

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<sup>1</sup> Ingrid Burford, C McMahon, M van Someren, F Hossain, B Scott, A Bruckner & A Zou, *A Green Plan for Australia: Securing prosperity in a decarbonising world*, The Superpower Institute (Melbourne: 2025) p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, *Australia State of the Environment 2021*, 'Country and Connections – The Indigenous Estate', 2021

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government Department of Industry, Science and Resources, *New fund will position Australia at the centre of the global green iron market*, 7 March 2025