Aboriginal Languages Trust

NSW GOVERNMENT

Research Report

# Access to Country for Language Teaching and Learning

# Acknowledgement

The Aboriginal Languages Trust acknowledges the Custodians of the land on which we live, work and learn. We pay our respects to Aboriginal Peoples who have cared for this land and its Languages for time immemorial.

We acknowledge that the ongoing existence of Aboriginal Languages across New South Wales is a testament to Aboriginal Peoples' deep connections to Country and unique Knowledge of their lands.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and we acknowledge the leaders of today who share the Languages of Country for the continuity of their Cultures.

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### Cultural Advice

Aboriginal People are advised that this document may contain images or names of deceased people.

### Capitalisation

The Aboriginal Languages Trust capitalises words that have distinct meaning for Aboriginal People. We do this as a sign of respect and note that it may vary from capitalisation used in Standard Australian English. These words include: Aboriginal, Indigenous, First Nations, Language, Culture, Community, Country, Custodians, Songlines, Lore/Law, Knowledges, Ancestors, Old People, Aboriginal People/s.

# Artwork Narrative

## ‘The Voice of Country’

### By Gumbaynggirr and Bundjalung artist Amy Allerton

At the beginning of creation, the land gave birth to Language, a living force, spreading out far and wide, connecting us to our creator, our Ancestors, our Country and our Culture.

The voice of Country speaks to us through the water, the earth, the stars and the spirits of those past, present and future. The winds of Language travel through each tribe and Nation, it is diverse and yet it is one, bringing strength, Knowledge and healing.

“The Voice of Country” tells the intertwined story of Identity and sovereignty. It represents the foundation of Language which is ingrained in Culture, Community and Country across NSW, and speaks of the unyielding resilience of the world’s oldest living Culture.
It shows the inseparable nature of the physical, intellectual and spiritual manifestations of Language that shape the identity of Aboriginal Peoples and connects them to each other and the land.

“The Voice of Country” is an invitation for all peoples to come together in partnership to share in the dawn of a new, enriched and thriving future, where Language is heard, people are seen, connection is strengthened, and Culture is celebrated.

# Contents

SECTION 1

# Glossary and definitions

Note: Aboriginal people may have different interpretations and meanings for the below terms, however the definitions provided here are to give context to the report.

**Aboriginal healing** – Aboriginal healing refers to the healing from intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal people as a collective. Aboriginal Peoples' healing is a holistic process, which addresses social, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs and involves connections to Culture, family and Country. Healing works best when solutions are Culturally strong, developed and driven at the local level, and led by Aboriginal Peoples.[1]

**Ancestral connection -** Ancestral connection is associated with family and Cultural ties to a specific geographical area through Country and people's generational connection to that Country through kinship.

**Caring for Country** - Aboriginal people draw on Lores and traditional knowledge systems passed down and inherited by Ancestors through the generations. These Knowledges tell us how to care for Country to ensure the health of the lands, waterways, seas and skies. Aboriginal people have had a deep personal, spiritual and Cultural connection to the land from time immemorial. It is a core belief that if you look after Country, Country will look after you.[2]

**Country** - Country is the term often used by Aboriginal peoples to describe the lands, waterways, skies and seas to which they are connected to. There are specific boundaries that are measured by natural features of Country, an example can be a river system or mountain range. The term Country contains complex ideas about Lore, place, custom, Language, spiritual belief, Cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity.[3]

1 https://healingfoundation.org.au/?s=aboriginal+healing

2 https://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/research_pub/benefits-cfc_0_2.pdf

3 https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-

**Creation story** - Creation stories hold traditional knowledge from the Dreaming and custom beliefs systems held by Aboriginal Peoples. The creations stories have a blend of scientifically verifiable events from the past which corresponds to Aboriginal Peoples belief systems, tales of morality and life lessons. Some creation stories talk about the events of the last ice age with long extinct animals that roamed the land at that time.[4]

**Cultural knowledge systems** – Aboriginal Peoples have a wealth of intergenerational Cultural knowledge passed down through oral traditions through generations. This knowledge manifests in both intangible forms and material Culture, including traditional knowledge and Cultural expressions, oral traditions, dance, Language, medicine, as well as tools and artworks.[5]

**Dreaming** - The Dreaming is Aboriginal People's understanding of the world and its creation. Passed down from generation to generation through storytelling, the Dreaming shares beliefs that are connected to Country. These stories include creation, rules for "living, social regulations, ethics and morality". The Dreaming encompasses the past, present, and future and is non-linear. [6]

**Indigenous sovereignty** - Indigenous sovereignty refers to the inherent rights of Aboriginal Peoples derived from spiritual and historical connections to Country. Indigenous sovereignty is a right of each Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Nation as they are defined by Country.[7]

**Kinship** - Kinship is the dynamic and complex system that defines where a person sits within the extended family structure. Aboriginal Culture is based on the Kinship structure of relationships and obligations. Kinship is a way of being and how a person identifies themselves with Country (land, waterways and sky) and who they belong to.

**Language Reclamation** - Language reclamation is "a larger effort by a community to claim its right to speak a language and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives"[8].

4 https://museumsvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/about-us/creation-stories/

5 https://read.alia.org.au/file/1390/download?token=BPJMCDia#:~:text=Indigenous%20peoples%20have%20a%20wealth,well%20as%20tools%20and%20artworks.

6 The Dreaming | Common Ground

7 https://antar.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Sovereignty-Factsheet.pdf

8 Leonard, Wesley Y. 2012. Framing language reclamation programmes for everybody's empowerment. Gender and Language 6(2), 339-367.

**Law** – The term law is a concept that was first introduced to Aboriginal people during colonisation. It is a system of law and government that does not recognise or acknowledge traditional Aboriginal Lores.

**Lore** - Lore refers to the stories, customs, beliefs and spirituality of Aboriginal People passed down from the Dreaming. Lore is passed down through generations and guides and defines how Aboriginal People live their lives every day which includes how to look after Country and how knowledge is passed on.[9]

**Self-determination** - Self-determination is about Aboriginal people having control over their own lives and Communities. It is the right of Aboriginal Peoples to freely determine their political status and economic, social and Cultural development. The outcomes of self-determining processes must correspond to the free and voluntary choice of the people concerned.[10]

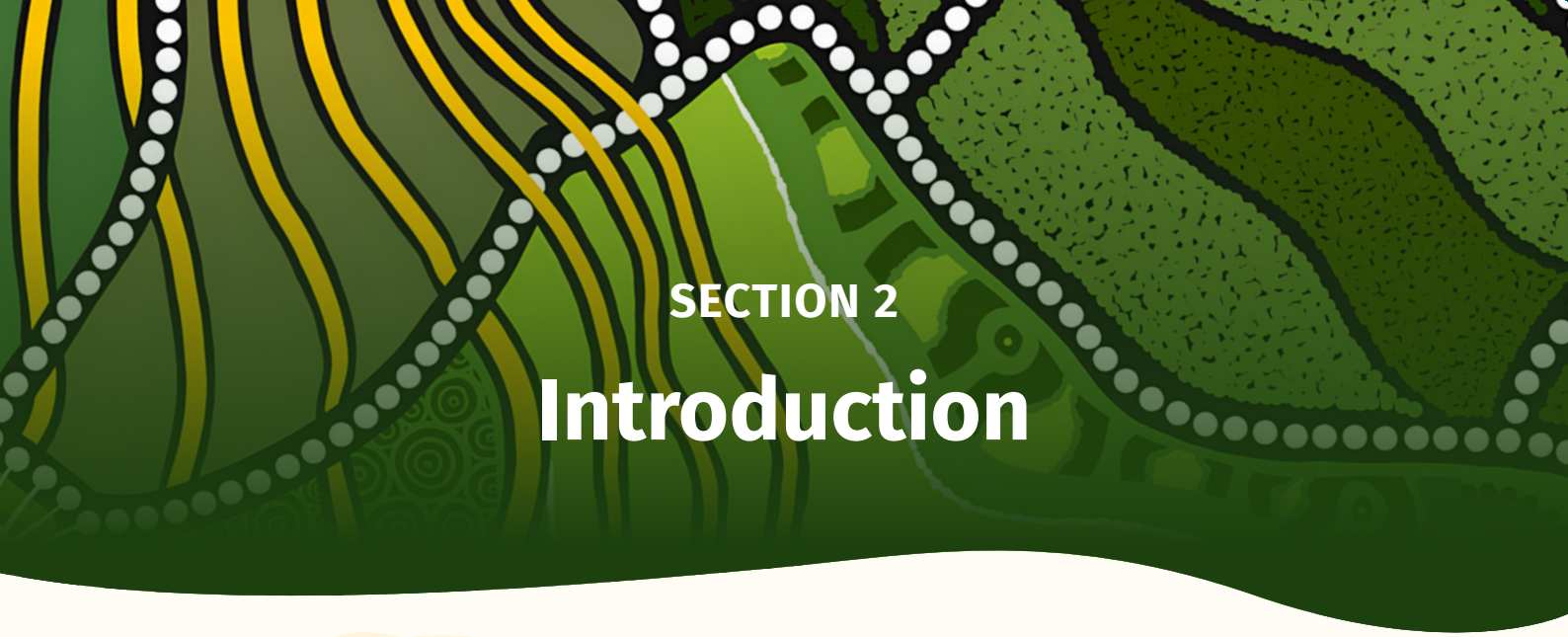
**Spiritual connection** – Some Aboriginal people describe spiritual connection as the core of Aboriginal being and identity. It is their Kinship connection with the environment and one another. Aboriginal Lore and spirituality are intertwined with the land, the people and creation, and this forms Culture and sovereignty. Aboriginal Spirituality is the foundation of Culture and Community, and spirituality and beliefs are tied heavily to the land and how to live and care for Country.[11]

9 https://www.workingwithindigenousaustralians.info/content/Culture_4_The_Law_and_the_Lore.html#:~:text=The%20term%20'law'%20is%20a,peoples%20learned%20from%20the%20Dreamtime.

10 https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/self-determination-and-indigenous

11 https://deadlystory.com/page/culture/Life_Lore/Spirituality

Djiiban | Gujaga Foundation



SECTION 2

# Introduction

> **Country is vital because our Language and Culture comes from Country.**
>
> **- JARWIN CAREY**
> **Gumbaynggirr Language knowledge holder**

Country is more than just the physical environment, a commodity or property to own or use. It is a place that is synonymous in identity with its People and Language. It holds sites and articles of creation, which are the physical representation of a Peoples' origin and existence. Country is often personified and lives in reciprocal relationship with its People, a relationship that is defined through Kinship. In this way, Country holds great Cultural significance and sense of belonging for Aboriginal People.

Geographically, Country is made up of the lands, airways and waterways of which Aboriginal People are connected to. Country runs within family lines, creating kinship relationships with every part of it, and Culture is practiced and maintained through that relationship with Country. Language and Culture belong to and are one with Country. When Language is spoken on Country, it hears, and it responds.

In 2021, the Aboriginal Languages Trust (the Trust) undertook comprehensive consultation with Aboriginal Communities across New South Wales (NSW) to understand their priorities and needs for revitalising their Languages. Aboriginal Language Communities emphasised the integral connection between Language, Culture and Country, and called for better access to Country to teach Language and Culture. Language teachers and practitioners asked about the availability of land estates for Language and Cultural practices and described having to jump through many hoops to access Country and safe spaces to teach Language on Country.

In response, the Trust committed to undertaking research that would:

- Explore the connection between Language and Country, highlighting the importance of access to Country as an integral learning environment
- Identify options for how Country can be accessed for Language teaching and learning
- Explore barriers to and identify opportunities for Communities to access Country for Language teaching and learning
- Identify different ways that Aboriginal Communities are accessing Country for Language teaching and learning, and share their experiences
- Make recommendations for improvement of access to Country pathways

This report is structured around six main sections:

1. A review of the academic, grey and web-based literature on the topics of Aboriginal Languages and Country, Language revitalisation and on-Country learning.
2. The research methodology and an overview of the six case study Communities interviewed for the report, each accessing Country using different methods.
3. The research findings, broken down into three areas: key themes, benefits and barriers.
4. Case studies from six NSW regions showing examples of different ways that Aboriginal Communities are accessing Country for Language teaching and learning.
5. Ways in which Country can be accessed in NSW.
6. Recommendations on how to improve access to Country for Languages work.

GGFS students | BMNAC

SECTION 3

# Literature Review

The purpose of this brief literature review is to provide background and context to the topic of Aboriginal Language teaching on Country.

For this review, academic and grey literature (including news articles and plans and reports published to the websites of Aboriginal organisations and schools) were reviewed for information about and examples of how Aboriginal Communities in Australia are accessing Country to teach their Languages. Literature authored by Aboriginal people was given preference above non-Aboriginal authors so that Community perspectives could be prioritised. Specifically, this literature review sought to answer the following questions:

**What does the published literature (academic and grey) tell us about the learning and teaching of Aboriginal Languages on Country?**

**How have Aboriginal people in NSW described their experience of regaining access to Country?**

**What are the different approaches to teaching Language on Country in Australia and what examples exist?**

**What does the literature tell us about Aboriginal Peoples' right to learn Language on Country?**

This literature review does not seek to cover the long, complex and ongoing story of Aboriginal land rights in Australia, how Aboriginal people and Communities have fought tirelessly for ownership and access to their lands, and how that ownership and access has sometimes been regained. For more information on these topics, see the existing published information available at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council and NSW Government.

# 3.1 Country is teacher, it holds the knowledge

> **When we listen deeply, we allow our Language to come alive in us, because it's alive in the Country.**
>
> **DR LOU BENNETT**
> **Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung woman**

To fully immerse yourself in learning you must not only see what it is you're trying to learn, but - as Dr Bennett describes - deeply listen (Milton, 2023). You need to understand the context, history and future of the place that learning sits within. Kulin woman Margo Neale, with her co-author Lynne Kelly, explain that place and learning are linked, because knowledge is written in the land. "Learning for me...was in stories, visiting country, knowing family, seeing ceremonies, and, above all, understanding the connected matrix of all this knowledge" (2020, p. 117).

How a person learns is strongly influenced by their identity and worldview, and for Aboriginal Peoples, both elements are inextricably linked to Country. In a study undertaken in North Western NSW, Tyson Yunkaporta (Apalech) identified eight ways of learning and teaching Aboriginal Languages in schools that are all grounded in Country, including one way specifically called 'land links'. In this way of learning, Country and place are central to maintaining the Cultural integrity of Language learning. In practice, the student group involved in the study mapped a local story across the local river system, labelling landmarks, animals and sites (Yunkaporta, 2010). Students not only learnt their Language, stories and parts of Country, but also compared neighbouring Languages and Culture where their Country connected with others.

Many Aboriginal people have given definitions of Country and what it means for them. Gemma Pol, Wiradjuri, Ngemba and Paakantji writer explains "Country is fundamental to First Nations identities and goes far beyond the physical. Country embodies all aspects of First Nations existence - Culture, Language, spirituality and Law [Lore]. First Nations People have a deep interconnectedness with Country. It isn't just the land around people. Country is us. We have a meaningful reliance on one another where we don't just take, but we give. Country provides for and nourishes us, while we manage and sustain Country through Culture and Ceremony" (Pol, 2021).

Country is a "primary knowledge-holder and teacher" for many Aboriginal educators (Spillman et al 2022, p. 14). Yankunytjatjara Anangu woman and Language educator Karina Lester explains "Language is in the land and having that knowledge is having knowledge of that Country" (First Languages Australia, 2016). Each Country holds information about Language, Culture, song, Kinship and Lore – it encompasses an Aboriginal worldview and therefore holds its own learning systems (Jackson-Barrett [Whadjuk Nyungar] and Lee-Hammond, 2019; Children's Ground, 2023).

**Djiringanj Elder Uncle Warren Foster describes his first experiences of learning Language as a child**

> "The first sort of Language we learnt as kids was when we came down to the lake and we'd swim as kids. The first Language we learnt was bimbala ('blood cockle shellfish')"
>
> (Aboriginal Languages Trust, 2024).

Country offers lifelong learning, from the learning that begins for a child in its mother's womb, continuing into adulthood when an Aboriginal person can gain a greater understanding of the intricacies of where ecological knowledges and Cultural obligations intertwine (Callaghan [Worimi] & Gordon [Ngemba], 2022). This method of teaching has maintained "social and ecological wellness and balance for millennia" (Spillman et al, 2022).

For Aboriginal students, learning on Country and from Country embodies a learning style that their Ancestors have thrived on. Fogarty (2010) points to the practical outcomes of learning on Country, which include increased student engagement and attendance, increased knowledge of and therefore care of Country, and stronger employment prospects. Others have noted the support it provides to the social and emotional wellbeing of young children, and the focus on place, Culture and identity which gives learning meaning to Aboriginal students (Jackson-Barrett & Lee-Hammond, 2019; Godinho et al., 2017). As the recent MK Turner report states "we need our kids to grow up learning in their Language and in a place where their identity is strong" (Children's Ground, 2023, p. 70).

**Language holidays | Gujaga Foundation**

# 3.2 Aboriginal people's experience of regaining access to Country in NSW

Probably the most significant point in the history of land rights in NSW was the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* ("ALRA"). The ALRA established three levels of land councils – state, regional and local (although the state body had been previously established as specialist lobby group [NSWALC, 2024]) that could buy private land, make claims on unused Crown land and be granted freehold title to remaining former Aboriginal reserves (Parbury, 2005). Since the enactment of the ALRA, there have been more that 50,000 land claims lodged, and as at 2022, more than 38,000 were still awaiting determination (Audit Office of NSW, 2022).

Despite the considerable delay in the processing of land claims, where there are published examples of land handed back, Aboriginal people have described the importance of being able to practice their Culture on Country again. One recent example of this was the 2022 hand back of Bulagaranda (Mount Yarrowyck), 30km west of Armidale, to the Anaiwan people. Anaiwan woman Cheryl Kitchener said "Honestly there's no words that you can actually articulate to explain the joy... It's a beautiful art site that tells the story of our cultural landscape, and we can share that now in a meaningful way" (Ingall, 2022).

The *Commonwealth Native Title Act 1993* has also paved the way for many Aboriginal Communities in NSW to regain access to land and water that they have traditional connections to. Recently, Ngemba, Ngiyampaa, Wangaaypuwan and Wayilwan Peoples had native title recognised on a 95,000 square kilometre area of Country in Western NSW. The claim recognises the Communities' rights to "hunt, fish and gather resources, the right to access and camp on land and right to protect places of cultural and spiritual importance" (Marlan, 2024).

**On the determination, Ngiyampaa Elder Aunty Elaine Ohlsen said**

> "...we need to know who we are and where we come from and where we are in this country".

**She also hopes that the future generation will continue to engage with Country.**

> "Hopefully, this will encourage them to stay connected to their country, heritage, and culture, and to carry on the hard work we've done".

Joint Management Plans, which are partnership arrangements between the State of NSW and the Aboriginal owners and Custodians of a national park or reserve are another mechanism that Aboriginal people have used to access Country and have their unique relationship to land and role in caring for Country recognised.

The Mutawintji Lands, in Far Western NSW, is the site of one Joint Management Plan. The Lands, which include Mutawintji National Park, Nature Reserve and Historic Site and is a place rich in historical and Cultural values, is managed under a Joint Management Plan with the Mutawintji Board of Management (the Aboriginal owners) and NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW NPWS, 2024). One of the key priorities that the Board have identified in the Plan is "to value our country and each other so we can promote, learn and teach Wiimpatja ['Aboriginal people'] culture to our children and the rest of the world" (Mutawintji Board of Management and NSW NPWS 2013, p. 5). When the Mutawintji State Conservation Area almost doubled in size in 2019 because the Board purchased an adjoining station, Traditional Owners described their feelings of hope, connection and belonging to the place. Leroy Johnson, Barkindji and Malyangappa man, expressed the importance for future generations. "We want to get our kids, our old people and everyone to do stuff on the land and start practicing culture" (Volkofsky, 2019).

Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) are areas of land and sea Country managed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Groups through an agreement with the Australian Government. The IPA program has been running since 1997 and there are currently 85 dedicated IPAs across Australia (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2024). 22,000 hectare Mawonga Station IPA is currently managed by Winangakirri Aboriginal Corporation representing the Ngiyampaa Wangaaypuwan clan groups (Winangakirri Aboriginal Corporation, 2022).

At the time of the land hand back Mawonga Station IPA Manager Lawrence Clarke said "Having your country back to care for, it's like caring for family. If country is sick you look after it, heal it, like you do when caring for sick family" (Bush Heritage Australia, 2021). The IPA site is not only a place of significant Cultural and environmental conservation, but is host to Cultural camps and the Ngiyampaa Language Project which includes a dictionary project, placenames project and a Keeping Plan for artefacts found on site.

Further information about these and other ways that Aboriginal Communities are accessing Country are provided in the section of this report: Ways of Accessing Country.

**Tree gum, Murruwarri Country | Lacey Boney**

## 3.3 Approaches to teaching on Country

Schwab and Fogarty (2015) describe traditional Aboriginal teaching methods, "where young people spend time on traditional lands, in the company of Indigenous adults with responsibility for those lands, learning about Culture and Country, the relationships of various groups to Country and one another and the roles and responsibilities in relation to that Country they will one day be expected to assume" (p. 3). Aboriginal Communities around Australia are accessing Country as both classroom and teacher – taking school-aged children on 'bush trips', teaching about bush tucker, hunting, weather, seasons, ceremonial and creation stories, plants and landscapes, stories, skills, knowledge and values from that Country (Angelo & Poetsch, 2019; Jackson-Barrett & Lee-Hammond, 2019).

The literature shows a number of examples of Language being taught on Country as part of regular education, especially in the Northern Territory (NT) and Central Australia, both of which have long histories of bilingual education in schools, although some NSW examples were also found. Some of these examples are detailed here.

Van Gelderen and Guthadjaka [Gatjirrk Warramiri] (2019) explain how place-based education at Gäwa Homeland, on Elcho Island NT, plays a fundamental role in child development, especially in Warramiri Language and literacy. Local people hold an underlying philosophy that there isn't a clear line between 'home' and 'school', and that learning continues to happen in both formal learning and Community life. Warramiri Language is integrated as part of a 'learning through country' approach in which Language and seasonal knowledge are taught and learnt together, including caring for the land, hunting and collecting food and learning Yolŋu law (Lore). The authors also found many examples of the concept of 'Country is teacher', perhaps best explained by Rrurrambu (1980, cited in van Gelderen and Guthadjaka 2019, p. 68) "the land contains our information about our traditional way of life. It's written there. It's like a library for our people and children".

The Yuendumu School design their entire Language and Culture curriculum around the Warlpiri Theme Cycle, which covers 12 themes relating to Kinship, Country, Dreaming and Ceremony, among others (Yuendumu School, 2023). This bilingual school focusses on Warlpiri Language for the first years of schooling until English is introduced from year three onwards. Disbray and Martin (Walpiri) explain that classes are taken out on Country throughout the year to learn about the Theme for that term. Elders and other family members are involved in teaching the children to "sing the place" and tell stories. "Going out with family on country is central to learning in the school program" (2018, p. 38). All year levels participate in bush trips, on-Country visits and Culture nights together because the whole school is focussed on the same Theme, but with different levels of complexity of learning for different years. The School has created an instagram page to showcase their Learning in Country program (@yuendumkuurlu_learningcountry). The page features images of students undertaking activities on Country such as hunting for and preparing food, learning from Elders, learning about weather systems and participating in Ceremony.

In Central Australia, the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC), an Anangu-run organisation that leads the strategy for the education of Anangu in the ten Anangu schools across the NT and South Australia, centres Language and Culture in education and identifies that "All students engage in learning on country as part of their formal education" (PYEC 2022, p. 26).

This priority is seen as integral to the organisation's vision of Anangu students being "strong and confident in their spirit with culture and knowledge expertise in their land, Tjukurpa, language and family". Also in this region is the Ltyentye Apurte Catholic School, where Arrernte Language teacher Carmel Ryan teaches (cited in Angelo and Poetsch, 2019).

**Ryan speaks of the benefits of taking students out on Country as part of their learning.**

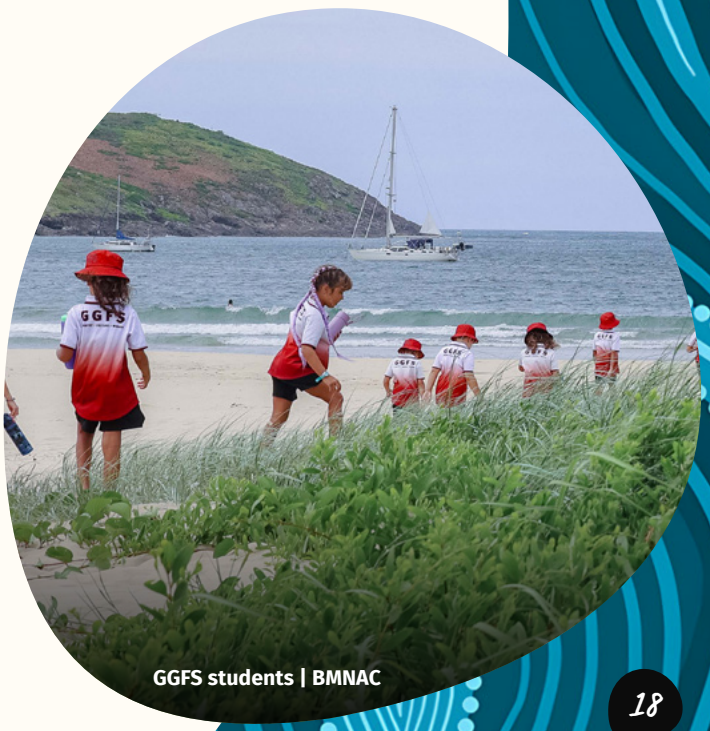
> "Bush trips are best in the middle of the year. It's the best time for me to show them the Country, and everything that is growing out in the bush. I teach about which kere [meat food] and merne [plant food] and bush medicine is in season. We talk a lot about [different parts of the Country], the Traditional Owners, the stories for that Country"
>
> (p. 15).

In NSW, the Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School (GGFS), a Gumbaynggirr Language bilingual school, centres learning on three values: Wajaarr ('Country'), Guunu-warluuny ('Culture') and Miindalay-gam ('Wisdom'). The website outlines the importance of Country to Language "Country holds our language, our kinship, our lore, our stories, our Songlines and our ceremonial places... It is our classroom, our teacher" (GGFS, 2024). Later in this paper, GGFS will be explored as a case study where various types of Country are accessed for students' Language and Cultural education.

The Gomeroi Culture Academy, a Cultural leadership program for young Aboriginal people in Tamworth, includes on Country learning as part of their regular program to support and inspire future leaders. "Speaking in Gamilaraay enhances listening and communication skills, and helped students develop a stronger understanding of the relationships that exist on Country" (Gomeroi Culture Academy, 2023). Whilst on Country students are learning the names and stories of plants, animals and fish from Cultural mentors.

On the NSW Mid-North Coast, preschool students learn about koala conservation and through it Gathang Language, song and dance as part of the Guula Gimbay program. The program teaches children to care for koala and their habitat through deep listening on Country, but also taps into traditional ways of learning through song and story (Sati, 2023).

The Aboriginal Languages Trust is aware of many other examples in the state of NSW where Language is being learnt and taught on Country, however few of these have been documented in the existing literature. This report seeks to highlight more of these examples.



GGFS students | BMNAC

# 3.4 The right to learn Language on Country

The fight for recognition of Aboriginal Land Rights in NSW and Australia has been ongoing since British arrival. Unlike western commercial perspectives which see land as a commodity to be bought and sold, the literature shows that for Aboriginal people, Country is central to Language and Culture, and an essential part of traditional knowledge systems and teaching practices.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which was endorsed by Australia in 2009, states that:

### Article 14

**Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning;**

**and**

### Article 26

**Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired (Article 26). (United Nations, 2007).**

These rights have been recognised to differing degrees in educational settings around the world (Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga, 2020; British Columbia Government, 2018). In Australia, the education system has been criticised for failing First Nations students through a lack of Culturally responsive pedagogy (Morrison, Rigney [Narungga, Kaurna & Ngarrindjeri),

Hattam & Diplock, 2019; Children's Ground, 2023). Jackson-Barrett and Lee-Hammond (2019) explain that mandated curriculums and national testings are "ways in which government exerts control over teachers, families and children in order to control and perpetuate certain forms of knowledge, affording significance to some types of knowledge over others" (p. 38-9).

**Callum Clayton-Dixon, Anaiwan man and Language practitioner, says that Aboriginal land and Language rights go hand-in-hand, and advocates for a holistic approach to reparations and funding in NSW that includes Languages, self-determination and land justice.**

> "If Australian society accepts that Aboriginal people have an intrinsic right to regain our knowledge of language and culture, together with our roles and responsibilities as custodians of our traditional lands, it necessarily follows that we need to regain open access to our traditional lands as well"
>
> (Clayton-Dixon, 2017).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics, educators and the families they work with know the benefits that learning on Country can have for children and have called for First Nations-led on-Country learning to be embedded in education systems.

Dr Shayne Williams, a Dharawal, Dhungutti and Gomilaroi man (2011) wrote that on Country teaching and learning is a best-practice model for Indigenous Languages and Cultures, as it is inclusive of all Language learners, from beginners through to highly proficient speakers.

The NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group has highlighted the need for schools to "value and support learning experiences on, through and from Country" (NSW AECG, n.d.). The Group has also called for increased access to Country for Aboriginal Language, Culture and heritage education, stating that "Aboriginal education must also be connected to Country, because it is on Country that our Language, Culture and heritage are based" (NSW AECG, 2018, p. 13).

Dr Laurie Bamblett (2018), a Wiradjuri man, has called for Aboriginal education policy reform that includes returning teaching to Country and a plan for land-based Cultural restoration, with learners having the opportunity to actively experience and participate in Aboriginal Culture, rather than just learning about it.

The MK Turner report (Children's Ground, 2023) envisions a future of First Nations education in which Aboriginal children are equipped to be "independent, multilingual, creative thinkers who are connected to their responsibilities to the land and to people" (p. 49). Their Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe learning framework outlines the five Arrente Practices of Teaching, of which being on Country is one.

Cronulla Dance | Gujaga Foundation

In this section we have outlined the current literature describing the importance of Country to Language teaching and learning, with examples of where Country is both the classroom and teacher for many Language Communities. This review has also shown that Aboriginal people have a right to access Country for their education and that their educational experience can benefit greatly from learning on Country.

It was apparent through this literature review process that, although the Aboriginal Languages Trust is aware of many examples of Language learning on Country in NSW, few have been documented and therefore NSW Aboriginal Communities' needs and aspirations for Language learning has been somewhat overlooked. This paper seeks to raise awareness of the importance and need for more on-Country Language learning and provide examples of how Country is being accessed throughout NSW for teaching and learning Languages.

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SECTION 4

# Research methodology

## 4.1 Methodology

This report is written in context of the worldviews and standpoints of the authors, Britt Jacobsen and Allara Pearce. Allara has strong kinship connections to both the Victorian and New South Wales Aboriginal Community. Her family Cultural connections include Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung, Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri – Wailwan. Allara brings a wealth of Cultural knowledge as a Cultural insider[12] in terms of working for the rights and social justice of Aboriginal People, following in the footsteps of her family who have contributed to the social and Cultural well-being of Aboriginal Communities at local, state and national levels. Britt is a non-Aboriginal woman of Danish and Irish heritage who has worked with and for Aboriginal Communities in NSW and their Languages for the past 10 years. The authors acknowledge their backgrounds and how these guide the approach to and methodology of this study.

This research project sought to address the following questions:

1. What is the connection between Language and Country?

2. How can Country be accessed for Language teaching and learning?

12 Burnim M. 1985. Culture bearer and tradition Bearer: An ethnomusicologist's research on gospel music. Ethnomusicology 29(3)432-447; Kelly RF. 2015. Dreaming the Keepara: New South Wales Indigenous cultural perspectives, 1808-2007 [PhD Thesis]. The University of Newcastle; Hodgetts J. 2023. Guthi Girrmara 'Stirring Up Songs': reawakening archived Wangaaypuwan and Wiradjuri songs to inform our culture, language and identity [PhD Thesis]. The University of Newcastle.

3. In which ways are Aboriginal Communities in NSW accessing Country for Language teaching and learning?

4. What are the barriers to and opportunities for NSW Aboriginal Communities to access Country for Language teaching and learning?

To answer these questions, a literature review was undertaken to understand what had been published on the topics of Language learning and accessing Country. The review considered academic, grey and web-based literature and especially sought literature that was authored by, or quoted, Aboriginal people.

Researchers then undertook on-Country interviews with Aboriginal Language practitioners from six different Language Groups across NSW. Language Groups were chosen to demonstrate different ways of accessing Country for Language teaching. Geographically dispersed Language Groups based in metropolitan, regional and remote areas were included. The information gathered from these interviews was used in two ways:

1. To develop case studies that showcase how different Aboriginal Language Communities are accessing Country; and

2. To undertake thematic analysis and identify the benefits and barriers to accessing Country for Language and Cultural practice.

To gather contextual information, researchers also met with representatives from nine NSW government departments or agencies that have responsibility for some form of land management in NSW or are involved in the process of granting access to Country. These were National Parks and Wildlife Service, Crown Land Aboriginal Land Strategy, Crown Land Aboriginal Outcomes, Local Land Services, Marine Estate, Aboriginal Affairs Policy, Evidence and Insights, Aboriginal Affairs Cultural Heritage, Forestry Corporation and Local Government NSW. The research included an interview with the NSW Aboriginal Land Council to understand the role of the NSW Land Rights network in assisting Communities to access Country for Language practice.

# 4.2 Types of Country Accessed

### Anaiwan Country
Anaiwan Country is known to the local Community as cold Country, located on the New England Tablelands. It is home to Nēwara trees (Peppermint gums), the Chandler River system and various wildlife including the Regent Honeyeater and Yiwang ('snapping turtle').

### Worimi Country
Barrington Tops is situated at the intersection of Worimi, Wannarua and Guringay Countries. The Biyan Biyan area at Barrington Tops is home to native cherry, lilly pilly, figs and a rare, endangered orchid (Bularr-Gulga Watuun). The mountains are covered in various species of alpine gum, with the weather reaching to low temperatures of -17 degrees with snow in the cold season.

### Gumbaynggirr Country
Gumbaynggirr Country on the Mid North Coast of NSW encompasses sea Country, mountain ranges, rainforests, rivers, estuaries and coastal headlands. It's one of the only places in NSW where the Great Dividing Range meets the Pacific Ocean and includes significant island formations just off its coastline. Gumbaynggirr Country is home to over 20 protected species including humpback, blue and southern right whales and wedge-tailed shearwaters.

### Ngiyampaa Country
Baiame's Ngunnhu, otherwise known as the Brewarrina Fish Traps (one of the oldest human constructions in the world) sits at the heart of Ngiyampaa Country on the Barwon River. The area is rich in bush tucker across scrub, river and stone Country.

### Baakantji, Ngiyampaa and Mutti Mutti Countries
In Far West NSW Lake Mungo is situated across three Countries, those of the Baakantji, Ngiyampaa and Mutti Mutti Peoples and is home to several dried lake beds dating back 50,000 years, which once contained fresh water. The landscape includes sprawling grey-blue shrub which is a type of salt bush.

### Dharawal Country
Dharawal Country extends from Coastal Sydney down through the Illawarra to the Shoalhaven region. One of the largest Dharawal Communities, is the La Perouse Aboriginal Community on the northern headland of Gamay (Botany Bay). Despite being an urban area, the nearby National Park contains rare eastern suburbs banksia scrub which is listed as an endangered ecological species. As saltwater people, Dharawal people have a deep Cultural and spiritual connection to the ocean.

SECTION 5

# Findings

## 5.1 Key findings

### 5.1.1 Relationships

Without strong relationships between Aboriginal Communities and landholders, many of the Language on Country programs reviewed for this research project would not exist.

Some relationships are formal, in the form of an agreement or licence that recognises Aboriginal Peoples' rights to speak Language and undertake Cultural practice with and for Country. Relationships between Aboriginal People and Communities and government departments have created opportunities for Communities to teach Language on Country, run Language camps and Cultural tours on Country, start social enterprises and create economies that invest back into Language programs. For example, Bularri Muurrlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation's (BMNAC) formal relationship with NSW Forestry Corporation gives them Custodianship of Orara East State Forest in Coffs Harbour. Here on this Culturally significant site, BMNAC runs their Giingan Gumbaynggirr Cultural Experience tours and the Nyanggan Gapi ('perfect coffee') cafe, generating income which is invested back into growing their Gumbaynggirr Language programs.

Lake Mungo

Some of these formal relationships, such as Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) and Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) involve negotiations and consultations with multiple government departments. Having 'go to' people within government agencies can make the process easier, having someone who can explain how access works, manage the paperwork and be called on when questions arise. Although there are several examples of successful Community–Government relationships, finding the right person within a government department or maintaining relationships when key people leave their roles creates barriers.

Other relationships are informal, especially arrangements between Aboriginal Communities and private landholders. These relationships, often formed through the help of a third-party government department or other organisation, are the conduit for Aboriginal People to teach Language as it relates to different aspects of Country. This has been especially important where there are Culturally significant sites, artifacts, plants or other parts of Country that cannot be found elsewhere. It was through informal relationships with private landholders that Lacey Boney, a Murrawarri Ngiyampaa Language practitioner, was able to organise an on-Country learning experience for 60 women and girls at Angledool Station near Lightning Ridge.

In all but one example collected for this project, Aboriginal People were the ones to reach out to government in the first instance and navigate their way through departmental processes to begin to form relationships. Most research participants reported having difficulty finding the right person to speak to within government departments, placing an unnecessary burden on the Aboriginal stakeholder to contact a number of departments, agencies and government employees before obtaining the information needed. Some had established successful arrangements that then fell apart when a regional manager or other key government representative moved on.

Relationships between Aboriginal Communities and private landholders have proved to be mutually beneficial. Aboriginal Peoples are able to access privately owned land for Language and Cultural practices, and private landholders have the opportunity to learn about the history of the land and protecting the local environment from the local Aboriginal Community.

## 5.1.2 Language Knowledge Systems

Aboriginal Knowledges – Language, dance, song, storytelling, ceremony and more – are all part of a complex interconnected system that is rooted in Country. These Knowledges cannot be effectively taught and learnt without the presence of Country. This is the basis of Aboriginal learning systems that have been in place for thousands of years and through which oral Language and Cultural Knowledges have been successfully passed down from generation to generation. Language is supported and strengthened by Country, and the revitalisation of Language revives traditional Knowledges of how to care for Country, creating a reciprocal relationship. Aboriginal Peoples have a spiritual connection to Country which is strengthened by these Knowledge systems, and which underpins Aboriginal Cultural identity.[13]

Every Aboriginal Language practitioner who participated in this project described Country as both the Language classroom and the Language teacher. Practitioners explained that Language is part of a system of Knowledges, something that cannot be taught independently of other aspects of Culture. Country provides endless opportunities for learning when it is experienced in its entirety. Seasonal indicators - for example, when a certain tree is in flower or when a particular animal is active - can be the basis for an entire lesson that includes Language, Culture and Country knowledge, all in one setting.

Colonial impacts on traditional knowledge systems have created barriers for Communities to pass on Languages, and the restrictions for Communities to access Country have disrupted strong oral traditions. While Communities are striving to revitalise these traditional learning systems, Aunty Michelle Perry, a Worimi Elder and Gathang Language practitioner, spoke with disappointment about having to learn about aspects of her Language and Culture through a government department, rather than through her Elders in a traditional on-Country setting.

Gujaga Foundation

13 Described by co-author from her standpoint as a Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung, Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri – Wailwan woman, and informed by the participants of this research project.

Similarly, Uncle Warren Clark, Baakantji Elder, described how he was not allowed to learn his Language as a child as his family feared he would be stolen for speaking it. The sense of grief and loss brought about by the disruption to Language teaching is still evident to this day, however Language practitioners also described the healing element of being on Country and connecting with one another through Language.

Nevertheless, Language practitioners reported teaching Language as part of an intricate system of Country-led activities that include storytelling, weaving, plant Knowledges, bush tucker and environmental care. Some described their own experiences as learners, explaining that they themselves could absorb Language best through song and dance. When Gujaga Foundation bring new Dharawal Language tutors on board, it's important that they spend time on Country, visiting significant sites and learning the traditional stories and Language of those places.

Language learning and care for Country go hand in hand. Many communities are reviving the traditional practice of Cultural burning of Country, which has benefits for the health of soil[14], plants and animals[15], and Language teaching is an important part of this practice. When Aunty Michelle Perry organised a Cultural burn to take place at Barrington Tops to prepare Country for the endangered orchid Bularr-Gulga Watuun, the group spoke and sang in Gathang Language and performed a dance specifically created for the orchid. The purpose of the song was to promote the regeneration and growth of the endangered orchid, bringing Songlines and Language together with Country. Over 60 people participated in that event.

GGFS student at Diggers Beach | BMNAC

At the Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School, Jarwin Carey regularly takes students out on On-Country days where Language is embedded in lessons about the wellness of Country, plant and animal diversity, waterways, the impacts of agriculture and residential development, wildfires and much more. Jarwin explains the breadth of content included in these school lessons, "these are just some of the things that Country can teach us".

14 https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2024/research-shows-indigenous-cultural-burning-promotes-soil-health-ecosystem.php

15 https://www.firesticks.org.au/about/cultural-burning/

When Nēwara Aboriginal Corporation take young people out on Country, even if there isn't a specific Language class, Language is embedded in everything they do, from talking about the Nēwara trees (New England Peppermint) which are unique to Anaiwan Country and their medicinal purposes, to cray-bobbing (catching yabbies) in the creek. At every opportunity, Language becomes part of the lesson.

### 5.1.3 Cultural responsibility and obligation to Country

Aboriginal people's Cultural responsibilities to Country are grounded in their long-standing interconnections with Country, evidenced by Cultural knowledge systems such as storytelling, the Dreaming, Lore, dance, Songlines, Kinship, Ceremony and many other ways. Language is woven through all of these Cultural systems and binds its people back to Country.

**As Maddy Hope-Hodgetts, Ngiyampaa Language practitioner puts it**

> "it's talking to Country in Language, singing on Country and caring for Country. And finding a space [to practice this] – we're going to look after that space".

This connection to Country reinforces the link between Aboriginal people's sense of belonging and identity and their responsibilities to their Culture and Community.

Through this connection to Country comes an obligation to take care of the land. For many Aboriginal people, important Cultural practices such as Cultural burns or bush medicine play a vital role in ensuring Country is healthy and protected. When Country is sick, so are its people. When its people care for Country, Country takes care of them. There has been a consistent theme throughout this project when engaging with Language practitioners and Aboriginal organisations around the spiritual and ancestral connection that Aboriginal people have to Country and their roles and obligations within their Community. Many Language practitioners spoke of their Cultural roles and responsibilities and obligations to future generations to ensure the knowledge and identity is continued.

Nathan Brennan, Gumbaynggirr Language practitioner from Ngiyambandigay Wajaarr Aboriginal Corporation, speaks about his sense of responsibility to young people to educate and support them on their journey into careers to care for Country. "It's about building that connection - Custodianship of Country. We talk a lot about that responsibility to Country and reciprocity". As young people gain a deeper understanding of their duty

to care for Country, they share this knowledge with others and can change attitudes in broader society about the importance of Aboriginal Peoples' role in environmental management. Nathan explains that it's powerful when Aboriginal children learn this while they're young, as it becomes a way of being and their knowledge will continue to grow as they get older.

On Anaiwan Country in the New England region of NSW, young people are invited to take part in Language and Cultural practice on the Nyambinga Kyuna ('Our Country') bush block. Here they learn that Country is essential for the Cultural practices they've learnt to love, so if something threatens that place, they're more likely to protect it.

**Callum Clayton-Dixon, Anaiwan Language Researcher, explains,**

> "It's that development of connection to Country through Language that reinforces and increases that feeling of responsibility to care for Country and protect Country".

When Aunty Michelle Perry, Gathang Language practitioner, held a camp and Cultural burn at Barrington Tops National Park to promote and regenerate the growth of the endangered Bularr-Gulga Watuun orchid, it was important to include all age groups so that Language and Cultural knowledge of caring for Country could be shared. Traditionally, it would have been the role of particular knowledge holders and Elders within the Community to continue passing information onto the next generation. However, Aunty Michelle talks of how, in the past, Cultural practices and customs were denied and this resulted in the disruption of oral traditions and Cultural Knowledges being lost.

Aunty Michelle Perry

Aunty Michelle has needed to incorporate new ways of teaching and learning Culture and understanding of Country to ensure future generations can continue to uphold their obligations to Country. When young people understand this important role bestowed on them, they gain a deeper connection to the land and care for the Country their grandparents and Ancestors once looked after.

### 5.1.4 Future generations and continuing legacy

A common theme that has arisen throughout the research is the prominent role of future generations in continuing to uphold and pass down Cultural values and understanding of Language and Country. Part of this is honouring the efforts of Aboriginal people who came before and fought for land and Language rights. Language practitioners who participated in this project spoke of the need to invest time in young Aboriginal people to increase their Cultural knowledge and strengthen their Cultural identity, which then builds their connections with Country and Language.

Traditional Knowledges of Country have been passed down for countless generations, according to strict Lores, which have kept Culture strong and nurtured relationships between people and the land. Through this system, knowledge is protected and enduring, and as Elders mentor young people and those young people grow within their Communities, they also pass on knowledge, and the cycle continues. A young person is not so much defined by age, but rather by their readiness to step into a leadership role and to continue the legacy of those who have come before them. Learning and sharing knowledges contributes to overall social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal people[16] and contributes to the spiritual, Cultural, family and Community connections a person has.

**Nathan Brennan, Gumbaynggirr Language practitioner says**

> “Teaching kids to value what our Old People valued for so long, what our role is in that system, we’re not separate from it. [Teaching them] responsibilities through kinship and protecting species that we have kinship connection to. Re-establishing those systems”.

In traditional knowledge systems, each person has a unique and important role to play in taking care of the land, waterways and skies. Their learning might start with gaining an understanding of the Cultural values and systems of Country and learning Dreaming stories about Country. When they learn these stories, they inevitably learn Language about Country, and this reinforces Cultural significance and the obligation each person carries, to take care of and protect it. Through this learning journey, young Aboriginal People gain a greater understanding of the relationship between Language and Country.

16 National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023 | NIAA

Aunty Michelle Perry speaks of the importance for Aboriginal People to get out on Country, as men and women have different roles as knowledge holders and teachers within the Community. She explains

> “the future generations will be the future knowledge holders and will become the teachers someday”.

Aunty Michelle also acknowledges the disruption of traditional knowledge transfer and has restarted these traditions to ensure the continuation of Country and Language Knowledges.

It is well documented that the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and Communities, as part of the Stolen Generations, caused significant trauma and severed family and Community connections, breaking traditional cycles of Language and Cultural learning[17].

Uncle Warren Clark, Baakantji Elder, speaks about how there were many Baakantji Language speakers in his family when he was growing up and he had wanted to learn his Language, but his family feared the consequences.

> “If I started speaking the Baakantji Language, the system would have taken me away.”

Today, many Aboriginal people are reconnecting with and teaching Language as part of their healing from past and present traumas inflicted upon them. Reestablishing kinship ties and mentoring young Aboriginal people can also create a healing space for both young people and Elders or older Community members. Lacey Boney, a Ngiyampaa Language practitioner who has coordinated Language ngurras (‘camps’) for young people in the Brewarrina area has experienced the profound effect of these connections. “The Elders were most wanting to learn Language because they weren’t allowed to speak it when they were younger” Lacey explains. At these ngurras, where Elders and young people sat side

Yuwaalaraay Ngurra | Lacey Boney

17 https://healingfoundation.org.au/who-are-the-stolen-generations/

by side on Country to learn Language, deep relationships were built between the generations as they shared their personal stories. “They open up more out on Country. It’s part of that healing. It’s something that connects you forever.” Not only are these young people reengaging in Cultural practices such as speaking and learning Language and caring for Country, but they are also building their Cultural values, knowledge and identity through these connections.

Many of the Language practitioners we interviewed for this project have dedicated decades of their lives to the revival of Language and Culture and fighting for the rights of Country. For them, it is imperative that young Aboriginal people take up their roles as future leaders and knowledge holders.

**Cultural burn at Biyan-Biyan**

# 5.2 Benefits and outcomes of teaching Language on Country

## 5.2.1 Benefits for teachers

Language teachers who participated in this study reported several benefits to centring teaching on, and with, Country.

Language teachers explained that when they are on Country, they have a much greater curriculum to draw from than when they are teaching in a classroom environment. They reported being more spontaneous in their teaching and being able to adapt lessons to include Language relating to the topics being presented by Country that day – the tracks of a certain animal that is active at that time, or environmental changes demonstrated by differences in vegetation and waterways. When Language is taught it can be a lesson in Culture, science, geography, mathematics and other subjects, all combined in one. Teaching Language on Country means teaching in a context-relevant setting where students are fully immersed in the experience of learning.

All Language teachers found students to be highly engaged when on Country, making teaching a more enjoyable experience and allowing stronger relationships to develop between students and teachers. Comparing both on Country and classroom teaching settings, there is a noticeable difference in the attention span and behaviour of students. Maddy Hope-Hodgetts, who teaches Ngiyampaa Language and dance in the Nyngan and Brewarrina areas, explains “for a few weeks we did the dance group inside and the kids were way more disengaged, kept checking their phones, going off in little groups. But when we were at our dance circle out on Country, they didn’t want to leave it”. Teaching on Country provides a more Culturally relevant learning environment for Aboriginal students where they are able to use all their senses to experience learning.

> “[It’s] good in a classroom but you only get the four walls with the words on the board… I would rather take them out on Country that way they can see things…that’s the best way to do it”
>
> Uncle Ivan Johnson, Baakantji teacher told us.

Yuwaalaraay Ngurra | Lacey Boney

Teaching on Country goes beyond using teaching materials from a set learning plan and gives teachers the opportunity to transfer Cultural values to learners. Lacey Boney, who has coordinated a number of Language camps on Ngiyampaa, Murruwarri and Yuwaalaraay Countries has witnessed this firsthand, observing how strong relationships have been built between Elders and youth through being on Country together, sharing Language and understanding each other's stories. Through this, stronger Communities are being built where young people are nurtured within their learning environments.

On Country teaching also helps teachers and learners to strengthen their Cultural identity. When Gujaga Foundation take new Language tutors out on Country as part of their training, it's important that the tutors experience Country themselves.

As Bradley Hansen, Dharawal Language Lead explains

> "they're more intrinsically motivated, [have a] proudness of being about to teach it. And if they're ever asked, they are able to give evidence of who they are and where they're from and where they've learnt it. I think that's a powerful thing".

### 5.2.2 Benefits for learners

Many of the Language practitioners interviewed for this study described themselves as both teachers and learners. In a Language revival context, even very proficient Language speakers continually seek to grow their Language capability and the people we spoke with could therefore describe their own experiences as a learner and as a teacher.

When on Country, learners are generally in a positive state of mind, are less distracted than in classroom learning settings, and reported being able to absorb Language more easily.

> Everything just sinks in better because you have a clear mind"

Jarwin Carey, Director of Languages at BMNAC explains.

Add to this the health benefits of being outdoors and active rather than sitting at a desk, and the wellbeing benefits for learners are obvious.

Language teachers and learners also described the spiritual significance of being on Country and increasing their depth of connection to the land as important to their Language practice. “There’s a difference to how you feel spiritually when you’re on the sand or the dust or the dirt. That’s why I prefer to be out on Country” Ngiyampaa Language practitioner Maddy Hope-Hodgetts told us. “I didn’t realise I was learning so much stuff from just going bush everyday... I feel like I can talk my Language and there’s somebody there listening to me. You have that feeling more when you’re on that Country.”

When Language and Culture are brought together on Country, space is created for healing, and Language practitioners told us how they have witnessed this firsthand.

**Lacey Boney, spoke of the bonds formed between Language camp participants, and how Elders and youth were able to share their personal stories and create deeper connections, aiding in the healing journey.**

> “They feel safer to open up on Country.”

These interactions between Elders and youth strengthen the sense of belonging to Community, which reinforces Cultural identity situated on Country for these young people.

Language teachers reported that learners are more willing to participate in Language learning activities when on Country than in other learning environments. They described an eagerness from students to speak Language, join dance groups and participate in ceremony without the inhibitions created by a closed-in space.

Maddy explains,

> some people are too shame to get up and dance, but when you’re out there you’re not worrying about who’s around you”.

Susan Briggs, who supports Language projects at Nēwara Aboriginal Corporation, has witnessed the same thing

> “Just watching, even the smaller kids who came and sat next to you, they pulled out the clapsticks. It’s that participation and it’s involuntary too, it’s just like you’re drawn into it. I just think if you were somewhere else, like in an enclosed area in town, it wouldn’t have had the same impact. The fact that people came out here and they were able to camp out here and really take it all in and be part of it, it just proves that this space is needed”.

This greater participation leads to a more enjoyable learning experience for learners and teachers.

Aboriginal Language learners respond well to the experiential style of learning offered on Country, where they can be fully immersed in the sensory aspects of the landscape. Uncle Warren Clark explains “Kids can relate to Country better, can see, touch and feel things...like even the different types of bushes like saltbush. You can’t just run down to the supermarket to grab a packet of salt. It’s about utilising Country and utilising the bush medicines”.

Uncle Ivan Johnson, Baakantji teacher, adds

> “They can actually see it and identify it next time they are out on Country”. This style of learning is not confined to the limitations of learning from a book or screen, igniting learners’ senses and understanding of Language meaning in its natural environment.”

Lake Mungo

On Country learning is the way in which Aboriginal Languages have traditionally been passed on from time immemorial, making it a more natural learning style for many Aboriginal people. Bradley Hansen from Gujaga Foundation explains “Me as a learner myself, to be able to go out and learn what may have been traditionally taught before colonisation and how it was taught, through different forms – it could have been dance, art... and just to learn from those experiences and what life would have been like. It’s good for me, how it’s passed down through certain people. I think those people who hold certain Knowledges must have been trusted with that knowledge, which is what I’ve learnt, and then they’ll pass that on to people they trust. And to share that by doing it as an experience and not as sit down and have someone tell you. I think that’s important- that you experience it firsthand”.

### 5.2.3 Benefits for Country

Country can benefit greatly when Aboriginal people use and teach Language as part of their connection with it. Language is encoded with traditional Knowledge of environmental systems, and when this knowledge is shared and used, it can be applied to caring for Country and the environment.

Bradley Hansen, Dharawal Language practitioner explains

> “People always ask for translations of generic words, such as wind. But traditionally there would have been a word for each direction of wind. You’ve got to look at in context – which way is the wind going, so you might have to walk a different way or shelter a different way”.

Bradley told us that it’s the same for different types of bark and native species in the area – the Language for different elements of nature includes information about the ways to use them.

Through learning Language on Country, Aboriginal people develop stronger relationships with it, reinforcing their Cultural responsibilities and obligations to care for Country. On Anaiwan Country in the New England region of NSW, young people are invited to take part in Language and Cultural practice on the Nyambinga Kyuna (‘Our Country’) bush block. Here they learn that Country is essential for the Cultural practices they’ve learnt to love, so if something threatens that place, they’re more likely to defend it. Callum Clayton-Dixon, Anaiwan Language Researcher, explains “It’s that development of connection to Country through Language that reinforces and increases that feeling of responsibility to care for Country and protect Country”.

Language practitioners we spoke with want to see young Aboriginal people take on careers in environmental care so that they can become advocates for Country. Jarwin Carey, Gumbaynggirr Language practitioner, looks forward to the day when more Gumbaynggirr people work in places like Forestry, National Parks or marine care. “When they take on these jobs, the way that they think about Country will be different to all the other scientists and marine scientists out there today.”

GGFS students at Diggers Beach | BMNAC

> “If you look after country, the country will look after you.”[18]

It is this inherent connection between Aboriginal people and Country that instils the responsibility to communicate with and look after Country. Country is at the centre of Aboriginal knowledge systems and Cultural practices, and this has been evident throughout this research project. Many Language practitioners told us that caring for Country is showing respect for Country, and if you take care of Country it will take care of you. The importance of nurturing the two-way relationship between Aboriginal people and Country cannot be overlooked. Country is not only where Language comes from, but also the holder of creation stories and the resting place of Ancestors. Nurturing Country nurtures all these elements, and this is fundamentally important for Aboriginal people.

Language practitioners also spoke of Language having a rejuvenating and reawakening effect on Country. Maddy Hope-Hodgetts, Ngiyampaa Language practitioner explains that speaking Language on Country

> wakes up all the Old People there and the spirits, and it’s bringing back Culture. There’s not gonna be a house built or a mine there. It’s bringing back Country for its purpose”.

18 https://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/research_pub/benefits-cfc_0_2.pdf

Aunty Sharon Edgar-Jones shared a story of when she gave a Welcome to Country to an audience of 15,000 people at an event at a vineyard, and as she said a word in Wannarua Language, she asked the audience to repeat it.

**Aunty Sharon described the experience of Language being heard across the venue, and that she thought the place was "a bit greener when we left".**

> "Country's been waiting to hear us again. We talked to Country for thousands and thousands of years and it's probably laying there thinking "why have they gone so quiet?"."

For many of the people we spoke to, Country comes alive with Language.

### 5.2.4. Benefits for Language

Language practitioners told us that access to Country is vital for Language to be strong and healthy. In NSW, many Aboriginal Languages are being reclaimed and revived, with Aboriginal Communities across the state urgently working to grow the number of Language speakers and the breadth of Language spoken. When Language can be taught and learnt on Country, the revitalisation of Language is able to flourish more freely and authentically. Being on Country is an act of Language reclamation, sovereignty and self-determination.

Callum Clayton-Dixon, Anaiwan Language Researcher speaks of his experience teaching Language on the Anaiwan-owned Nyambinga Kyuna ('Our Country') bush block. "We've gone from having this sort of breadth of possibility of what we can do in terms of Language and Culture revival locally [indicates small amount] to having this much [indicates large amount]. Just because of this place." Callum explained that Language and Culture programs have been able to advance quickly due to the access to Nyambinga Kyuna for teaching, and that students are learning Language in greater depth than what they would in a classroom environment.

Language practitioners also spoke about how learners can retain information and respond better to the environment on Country.

**Bradley Hansen, Dharawal Language practitioner spoke about the understanding and relationship that Aboriginal People have to Country is different from western perspectives.**

> “You’re thinking in a different Language. You’re not thinking as an English [speaking] person, you’re thinking as a Dharawal person. That’s your perspective on how you see Country. That’s how you’re going to treat and walk amongst Country.”

When Country is well and being cared for, there are more opportunities to use Language, and therefore the Language benefits by being spoken more frequently and in more contexts. Take the endangered Bularr-Gulga Watuun orchid, for example. Because the orchid is currently being cared for by local Aboriginal people at Biyan-Biyan, there are more opportunities to use Language to talk about it, the fire that promotes it and the land it grows on. However, if a species becomes extinct or parts of Country are destroyed, will the words associated with it continue to be used, or will it also become obsolete? Language is strong and healthy when Country is strong and healthy.

Languages Week | Gujaga Foundation

# 5.3 Barriers and challenges to accessing Country

## 5.3.1 Navigating Government departments

Many of the Language practitioners we spoke with for this project had experienced difficulties navigating government departments, including who to contact and/or the right person to speak with within a government department to access land. Government departments and agencies at both state and federal levels regularly change names, are merged to form new departments or are transferred to sit under a new government cluster, which makes it difficult to keep up with which department or agency is responsible for which type of land. Aboriginal Communities need to be able to build relationships without the fear of losing access to Country with the turnover of public servants.

Where Aboriginal Communities have been able to successfully navigate government departments, this is usually due to relationship and trust built over time between key people in the Community and in government. Having a direct contact with the right person in the relevant government department has simplified access for Language on Country initiatives, such as the Language and Culture camps held by Aunty Michelle Perry at Barrington Tops National Park, which came about after Aunty Michelle was approached by the Biodiversity team at NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service to bring Cultural knowledge to the care and protection of the endangered Bularr-Gulga Watuun orchid. However, examples like this appear to be rare and, in most instances, the Language practitioner takes on the laborious task of phoning and emailing various departments and contacts in search of the right person to speak to.

Participants in this project also described having to navigate through unnecessary government bureaucracy and administration to gain access to Country.

Cultural burn at Biyan-Biyan

Nathan Brennan of Ngiyambandigay Wajaarr Aboriginal Corporation explains

> “We need streamlined access. Not too complicated. Quick turnaround, user friendly”.

For Aunty Michelle Perry, the Biodiversity team at NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service handled all paperwork, including applications for permits, on her behalf, making the process simpler and, ultimately, leading to a successful Language on Country event.

### 5.3.2 Restrictions impacting fishing, hunting and other Cultural practices

Traditional Aboriginal ecological knowledge carries within it a profound understanding of sustainable living systems and the relationship between Country and Peoples. This includes sophisticated understanding of how to maintain the wellbeing of Country and how to live through reciprocal, balanced relationships with plants and animals.

However, these traditional knowledge systems are often at odds with government policies which set restrictions around bag and size limits when it comes to fishing, or land access for hunting.

As Jarwin Carey, Language Director at BMNAC explains

> the land tells us it’s time to harvest more shellfish during that period, but there are government-imposed limits and certain areas you can’t gather shellfish from, even though it’s a significant site for Gumbaynggirr people”.

At BMNAC, part of their work is educating the broader public about sustainable harvesting of plants and animals, but having their Custodianship of Country respected within government policies continues to be a barrier.

Similarly, policies that have been implemented in the name of conservation restrict Aboriginal Communities' ability to practice Culture on certain types of Country. For example, it is illegal to hunt native animals and collect plants in NSW National Parks[19]. These laws directly contravene traditional Aboriginal Lore and Cultural values which may require Aboriginal People to hunt particular animals or use particular parts of plants during different seasons. "We wanted to go out there and cut coolamons, we want to have an overnight camp, we want to actively use Country and enjoy Country. We had to provide a proposal, had to ask permission. We were told 'this is what you're confined to'" says Callum Clayton-Dixon, Anaiwan Language practitioner.

### 5.3.3 Experiences working with shire councils and local government vary

Local city, municipal, regional and shire councils (local government areas) are responsible for the management of land that may include public parks, beaches, campgrounds and other land that is generally intended for public access and use. Many of these sites have Cultural significance to local Aboriginal people and provide the right place on Country that is needed for Language learning.

As with other areas of government, Aboriginal Community experiences with accessing local-government managed land varies. Some Language practitioners that participated in this study had developed good relationships with their local councils over several years, making access to Language teaching sites simple and straightforward. Others struggled to develop relationships with their local council and had to notify them every time they wanted to use the space, which inhibits the ability to build collaborative relationships between council and Community. There were also concerns raised about how well Country is looked after when it's frequented as a public place, and one Language practitioner worried about having to clean up the site every time they went there to teach Language and Culture.

19 https://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/conservation-and-heritage/care-for-parks/illegal-activities#:~:text=Vandalising%20or%20stealing%20park%20infrastructure,picking%20flowers%20or%20collecting%20plants

### 5.3.4 Accessing private land

Language practitioner experiences with accessing privately held land varies as much as landholders themselves. Language practitioners have had some success negotiating directly with landholders to teach Language on Country, sometimes with the assistance of a third party. For example, the Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School were supported by the Biodiversity Conservation Trust to connect with private landholders who had biodiversity on their land. The School can regularly take students to these properties, one of which they have been given a key to access at their discretion. BMNAC, the umbrella Aboriginal Corporation under which the School sits, also met private landholders who participated in their Cultural tours and were able to develop relationships that led to invitations to private properties to access significant sites and Cultural objects.

Similarly, Mungo Lake National Park is surrounded by privately held land or Crown land held under Western lands leases. Uncle Ivan Johnson, Baakantji Language practitioner, has been able to develop relationships with some surrounding landholders to access land for Cultural practice.

Language practitioners had the most difficulty where land was held by a business or entity such as a university. Language practitioners spoke of being asked to pay a fee to access the site or having severe restrictions on what activities they could undertake whilst on site. One Language practitioner felt that this form of gatekeeping was due to the local area not having a large Aboriginal population, and therefore Aboriginal Language and Cultural practices were poorly understood by the wider community.

### 5.3.5 Environmental damage

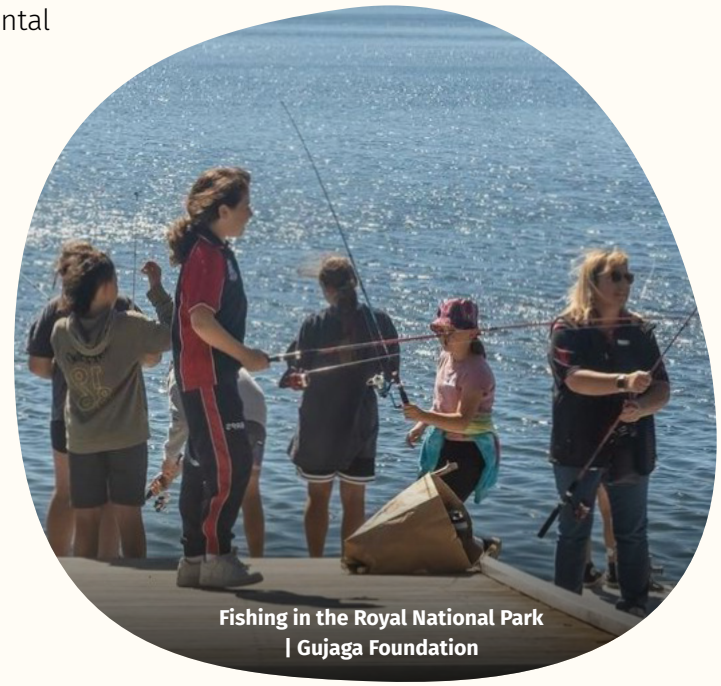
As discussed in section 5.1.3, Language practitioners spoke of their Cultural responsibility to care for Country and their obligation to ensure Country is healthy and protected. When Country is sick due to environmental damage, Language cannot be taught as it normally would.

Djiiban (Jibbon Head) at Royal National Park is a significant site for Dharawal people, and millions of people visit the Park each year to see ancient rock carvings depicting Culturally significant animals and spiritual beings, made by Dharawal Ancestors. The Gujaga Foundation regularly takes Language tutors to the site as part of their training, to experience it firsthand and learn the stories of that place on site. However, Bradley Hansen from Gujaga Foundation reported that upon arrival they often find old furniture, beer cans and rubbish strewn around the site.

Vandalism and littering are not the only issues affecting Gujaga Foundation's ability to access their Country for Language teaching and learning. Industrialisation and pollution have changed the Dharawal landscape significantly, changing the flora and fauna of the area. Gujaga Foundation still perform a sea eagle dance, even though they report that sea eagles no longer live in the area due to the proximity of the airport and planes in the skies of Gamay, Botany Bay. The Language and dances for sea eagles are maintained, but the animals are no longer there. Significant changes to Country like the loss of sea eagles from the airways alters the natural course of Language use.

Introduced animals have also caused significant environmental damage. Aunty Michelle Perry, Gathang Language practitioner, spoke of the destruction to land and plants at Barrington Tops caused by wild horses and pigs. Caring for the endangered Bularr-Gulga Watuun orchid has become central to Aunty Michelle's Cultural practice at Barrington Tops, but the area that the orchid grows in is under threat from introduced species.

When Country has been subject to environmental damage, this not only causes distress to the Aboriginal people who have the Cultural responsibility to care for it, but it also diminishes opportunities for Language learning to take place by destroying a vital element of traditional knowledge systems.



**Fishing in the Royal National Park | Gujaga Foundation**

SECTION 6

# Case Studies

## 6.1 Anaiwan

Photo by Nēwara Aboriginal Corporation

## 6.2 Dharawal

Photo by Gujaga Foundation

## 6.3 Gumbaynggirr

Photo by BMNAC

## 6.4 Baakantji at Lake Mungo

## 6.5 Ngiyampaa, Murrawarri and Yuwaalaraay

## 6.6 Gathang at Biyan-Biyan

Photos by Nēwara Aboriginal Corporation
Creek at Nyambinga Kyuna

# 6.1 Anaiwan

> **It's the development of connection to Country through Language that reinforces and increases that feeling of responsibility to care for and protect Country"**
>
> **- CALLUM CLAYTON-DIXON**
> **Anaiwan Language Researcher**

"If you look on Wikipedia it says that the Anaiwan Language is extinct" Nēwara Aboriginal Corporation's Susan Briggs tells us. Although Susan grew up as an Anaiwan person on Anaiwan Country, she couldn't learn Anaiwan Language, songs or dances until recently.

In 2016, a group of enthusiastic Anaiwan people decided to do something about the state of their Language and formed the Anaiwan Language Revival Program, setting out to unarchive and reclaim their Language. Since then, the group have gone from strength to strength, and today own their own Nyambinga Kyuna ('Our Country') bush block where they teach and practice Language and Culture.


Callum Clayton-Dixon

Callum Clayton-Dixon describes Nēwara's approach as "taking the path less travelled". From the outset, Nēwara wanted to drive the Language revitalisation process themselves, so were determined to put a dictionary and grammar together independent of non-Aboriginal linguists and be able to operate independent of government or philanthropic grants.

Nēwara had tried to access parts of Anaiwan Country for Language and Culture work but kept coming across barriers. Although there are nature reserves managed by NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service on Anaiwan Country, most are land-locked by private land which meant Nēwara couldn't access them. Conservation requirements also meant that Nēwara couldn't undertake a range of Cultural practices on the land.

> "We wanted to go out there and cut coolamons, we want to have an overnight camp, we want to actively use Country and enjoy Country."

Nēwara had also tried to access land held by other institutions but continued to come across obstacles for what they wanted to do.

An Anaiwan Elder, who had been part of the project from the first meeting, had always talked about the possibility of buying a block of bushland to be "our Anaiwan homeland". As they continued on their Language revival journey, Nēwara continued to have conversations about owning their own block of land. It was these conversations, coupled with the frustration of barriers encountered to access Country, and inspiration from other Aboriginal Groups who had fundraised to buy blocks of land, that gave the group the impetus to start their own fundraising campaign.

## Fundraising and buying their own bush block

Nēwara's plan to fundraise money to buy their own block of land took several months of planning, preparation, campaign video editing, press release writing and other campaign logistics. An opportunity presented to rent a shopfront in the Armidale Mall at a reduced rate, and Nēwara decorated the space with posters, a TV screen with their campaign video and other resources.


Sharnae teaching Language

Callum explains

> “We tapped into our network of allies locally to help go and put posters around town, spread the word. It was really a culmination of all the work, the reputation building we did since 2016 as a Community group”.

Nēwara launched their campaign 17 January 2022 and over the following weeks, raised nearly $400,000 in donations. Part of the success of the campaign was using multiple promotional channels – not just social media, but also the shopfront, posters and radio interviews.

While there were no suitable properties on the market at the time, a local woman had seen the promotional material and heard Nēwara team member Dave Widders interviewed on ABC radio and got in contact with a potential property.

By 1 March 2022, Nēwara was the proud owner of a bush block they named Nyambinga Kyuna (‘Our Country’). Later that year, they started running six-week Language and Culture programs.

Callum explains how being on Country helps them to integrate Language practice and Cultural learning. “We’ll take the kids for a walk and show them these trees here – they’re Nēwara trees (New England Peppermints). We’ll stop and explain that, that it’s the name of our organisation, that it’s unique to Anaiwan Country, what its medicinal purposes are… just being out on Country and getting to know that one word, getting to know that tree, that speaks to the difference between looking at a picture of that book in a classroom.”


Susan Briggs

Another common activity on Nyambinga Kyuna is hunting for thambana ('cray-bobs' or 'yabbies') in the creek that runs through the property. As they do this, Anaiwan Language is all around them in the names for the animals, plants, creek and land. Nēwara have also developed a learner's book and flash card set called Yaka Ayina ('I saw') which teaches readers about animal names on Country.

Now, Nēwara run camps for Anaiwan people who come from all over NSW to reconnect with their Country. Their November 2023 camp attracted 50 people, the youngest being three years old and the oldest 84. The team are now seeing a lot of Anaiwan people who don't live on Country either connecting or reconnecting, thanks in part to the Nyambinga Kyuna property. The Nēwara team note the importance of passing on knowledge to others and see it as their job to maintain the Language and Culture work.

Susan also speaks to the importance of caring for this Country, and the Anaiwan peoples' responsibility to look after this piece of land.

**She talks of future plans to remove introduced trees from the property and plant more Nēwara trees.**

> "It's part of our Custodianship. The beauty of it is that we know that it's here and that it's ours. It's up to us as individuals to take on board what Nēwara has to offer the Anaiwan people."


Bush at Nyambinga Kyuna

Photos by Gujaga Foundation
Dance at Bondi Beach



# 6.2 Dharawal

**Being able to walk on that Country and hear the stories that have been passed down has been significant for our Language educators. It's better to experience it than to read about it."**

**- BRADLEY HANSEN**
**Gujaga Foundation**

Dharawal Country, which extends from Sydney Harbour down to the Shoalhaven, is rich in Culture and history for Dharawal people. Prior to the protectionism era, Dharawal people moved freely across their traditional Country, passing on Language and stories from generation to generation. Within this broader Cultural area, one site with particular significance is Gamay in Sydney, otherwise known as Botany Bay. The importance of this site increased when, in the 1880s, Aboriginal people living in traditional camps around Sydney Harbour and Botany Bay were relocated to the northern part of Gamay by the Aborigines Protection Board.

Despite the significant impacts of invasion, colonisation and protectionism, Dharawal people have continued to live and practice Culture on their Country. It's here that the Dharawal Community at La Perouse have been reviving and teaching their Language since the 1980s.


Bradley Hansen is the Dharawal Language Lead at Gujaga Foundation, an organisation set up to "instil a strong sense of Cultural identity and belonging in the children of the La Perouse Aboriginal Community"[20] (Gujaga means 'small child' in Dharawal). Part of Bradley's role is training and coordinating Language educators who teach in around 50 preschools and schools weekly. There are currently 13 Language educators, with the goal of increasing this number to 30 in the next three years to keep up with the demand for Language classes.

Part of the training that all Dharawal Language educators undertake is to spend time on Country visiting significant sites and learning the stories of these places, so that they can share them from firsthand experience. These sites include Djiiban (pronounced 'gee-bun'), also known as Jibbon Head, at Royal National Park and Gang-man-gang (Windang Island) near Wollongong.

## Traditional Owner Recognition

The La Perouse Aboriginal Community was established in 1883 as a permanent Aboriginal settlement on the northern headland of Gamay through the actions of the NSW Aborigines Protection Board. The remaining Aboriginal people from camps around Sydney Harbour and Kamay at that time were relocated there.

In the late 1890's Aboriginal people living at La Perouse were described by anthropologist R.H. Mathews as follows:

> "For more than 20 years there has been a camp of aborigines near the village of La Perouse, on the northern shore of Botany Bay. They comprise of all that remains of the descendants of the native tribe that occupied the district at the time of the English occupation of New South Wales in 1788".[21]

20 https://www.gujaga.org.au/about

21 Robert Hamilton Mathews, Papers of Robert Hamilton Mathews, National Library of Australia, MS8006, Series 3, Box 3, File 3.

Today, the La Perouse Aboriginal Community is home to the descendants of the Dharawal speaking people who were relocated here. Despite this ancient and unbroken connection to Coastal Sydney, recognition as the Traditional Owners of this Country is remarkably rare.

**According to Ash Walker, CEO of the Gujaga Foundation**

> “it is extremely frustrating to see non-Aboriginal people and Aboriginal people from other areas seek to tell our story on our behalf. Through the teaching of language and culture linked to our Country, the Gujaga Foundation provides Traditional Owners of Coastal Sydney a platform to tell our story in our way”.

## Accessing national parks for Language educator training

Djiiban sits within Royal National Park, which is managed by NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, just south of Sydney.

Djiiban is home to ancient rock engravings made by Dharawal Ancestors, depicting Culturally significant animals and spiritual beings. One engraving tells the Dreaming story of Burriburri the humpback whale, a significant ancestral being for Dharawal people. The site has become an integral place for Dharawal Language Educator training and, as Bradley explains, the educators need to go there and experience that part of Country firsthand to be able to tell the stories and use the Language of that place.

Bradley and the Gujaga team have held Language and Culture camps for schools at Royal National Park, with the 2023 camp attracting over 120 students.

**Bradley told us**

> “We did storytelling, Language, weaving, fishing, learning some traditional plant Knowledges, bush walks, shell art and other artworks”.

Lapa Dance

## Accessing national parks in NSW

There are more than 895 national parks and reserves in NSW, covering more than 9.5 per cent of land in the state. Most national parks can be accessed freely by the public, though currently 45 national parks have motor vehicle entry fees.

Some activities are illegal to undertake in national parks, such as lighting fires, hunting or collecting plants. Always check with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service before you visit to ensure you won't be breaking the law.

Some national parks are under Joint Management with Aboriginal Communities, which means the Community and NSW Government have a written agreement about how the park is managed. See page 78 of this report for more information about Joint Management.

For more information visit https://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/

## Gang-man-gang (Windang Island), managed by local council

Gang-man-gang is the place of a significant story for Dharawal peoples. The Gujaga Foundation take Language educators there to hear and experience the story. "If they've experienced it themselves, they're more intrinsically motivated and they have a proudness in being about to teach it. If they're ever asked, they're able to give evidence of who they are and where they're from and where they've learnt it. I think that's a powerful thing."

Bradley says

> "They're comfortable in their own identity and where they belong to be able to teach a Language that was almost lost".

Languages Week


Language holiday

## Environmental damage to Country


La Perouse Tour

During school holidays, Gujaga Foundation often runs Language and Culture activities for Dharawal kids, but this comes with its own challenges. Living in inner Sydney, the La Perouse Dharawal Community experiences another major barrier to accessing Country - environmental damage of their land.

One example of this is in creating shell artworks, which the women of the La Perouse Community have a long history of. Sadly, La Perouse women can no longer use many of the shells collected from La Perouse beaches as pollution from the shipping industry in Botany Bay has caused the bleaching of the shells.

Similarly, the Community have a dance specifically for the sea eagles that once lived at Gamay, but due to the proximity to the airport and increase in air traffic and pollution, the sea eagles no longer reside there. Bradley explains that it's important they continue to teach the dance and tell the story of the sea eagle to uphold the tradition and mark that this is also sea eagle Country.

Being able to learn Language and Culture on Country, in ways that they were taught before colonisation, and with people who have been trusted with that knowledge, is important for the Gujaga Foundation.

Bradley says

> "Me as a learner myself, to be able to go out and learn what may have been traditionally taught, how it was taught, through different forms – it could have been dance, art... it's good for me".

It is this experience of learning on and from Country that gives a greater connection and sense of identity for Dharawal people.

The La Perouse Community are hoping to expand their Language teaching in the future to aid in the revival of the Dhawaral Language. Bradley says "I know that's going to take time. But we've got to invest in it. I think the educators that we're teaching now... in 15-20 years' time, we're hoping for it to be in a healthy status, so that people are speaking it a lot more, especially in the La Perouse Community".

Photos by BMNAC
GGFS students

# 6.3 Gumbaynggirr

“

## Land is part of the Language knowledge system”

**- NATHAN BRENNAN**
**Gumbaynggirr Language practitioner**

Ngiyambandigay Wajaarr Aboriginal Corporation (NWAC) is an organisation that aims to get Gumbaynggirr people back on land and sea Country to enable the transition of Cultural and Language Knowledges. Their work spans many areas across healing, Country and Community, and they are the Custodians of the Gaagal Wajaarr ‘Sea Country’ Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) located in the coastal region of Coffs Harbour.

## Gumbaynggirr Indigenous Protected Area

The Gaagal Wajaarr Sea Country IPA includes lakes, lagoons, mangroves, reefs, rivers, estuaries and headlands in the area. It is home to over 20 protected species including humpback, blue and southern right whales[22].

22 https://ngiyambandigay-wajaarr.org.au/sea-country-ipa/

NWAC employs five Land and Sea Rangers whose role is to manage and protect Cultural and environmental values within the IPA. They also run a range of education programs and have a close connection with Bularri Muurrlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation (BMNAC) and the Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School (GGFS), the first Aboriginal Language bi-lingual school in NSW.

## What is an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA)?

IPAs are areas of land and sea Country managed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups. IPAs deliver biodiversity conservation outcomes through voluntary agreements with the Australian Government.

IPA Custodians have multi-year funding agreements with the Australian Government, though many supplement this funding through fee-for service activities, private or philanthropic support.

For more information go to: https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/environment/indigenous-protected-areas-ipas

Nathan Brennan, Director and Public Relations Officer at NWAC explains that

> “the land is part of the Language knowledge system, along with Culture, ceremony and dance”.

Both land and sea Country hold Gumbaynggirr stories, so it’s important that the Community has access to these places.

BMNAC are an organisation that runs a number of initiatives to ensure that the local Aboriginal Community, and especially young people, are ‘two-path strong’ – strong in both Cultural identity and educational success. Jarwin Carey, BMNAC’s Director of Languages, talks about On Country days with GGFS students and how taking the children fishing is a great way to connect them with Language and Culture. “The kids might feel like they’re not learning, but they

GGFS students at Diggers Beach

are. They gain Language and knowledge about weather systems, tides, winds, swell direction, different types of fish." These On Country days also involve bush tucker walks and learning Gumbaynggirr songs and dances. Jarwin explains that this is all part of teaching students to read Country, which includes learning about seasonal indicators, when Country needs fire or is sick, the diversity of trees and animals and the agricultural and residential impacts on Country. "There are so many things that Country can teach us."

GGFS students at Niigi Niigi

One of the difficulties faced during these On Country days is that there are government-imposed limits to how many fish or shellfish can be taken at a time. This contrasts with Gumbaynggirr ecological knowledge which tells the Community when it's time to fish or harvest, and when it's not. Another barrier has been finding the right person to talk to in government departments to get access. Sometimes the processes are complicated and lengthy.

## Niigi Niigi (Sealy Lookout), Orara East State Forest

BMNAC has a NSW Forestry Corp permit which gives them Custodianship of Orara East State Forest, a place of Gumbaynggirr sacred and significant sites. This means they can look after Country at the same time as using the land to teach Language. Here on this Culturally significant site, BMNAC runs their Giingan Gumbaynggirr Cultural Experience tours and the Nyanggan Gapi ('perfect coffee') cafe, generating income which allows them to continue to grow the school and create employment pathways for young people. On the Cultural Experience tour, participants learn about Gumbaynggirr Country and Culture through Language, story and dance performed by the Giingan Yiiliwiyay Girrwaa ('happy dance group'). While Language and Culture is shared with visitors, Gumbaynggirr people can proudly showcase their Culture and identity with the outside world.

## NSW Forestry Corp permits

Forestry Corporation of NSW, a state owned corporation, are responsible for managing NSW's State forests, including environmental sustainability, tourism and renewable timber production[23]. Their Aboriginal Heritage and Partnerships Team are keen to get more Aboriginal people back on Country for Language and Cultural practice.

Under the *NSW Forestry Act 2012*, anyone can access a State forest for recreational purposes however some activities require a permit, such as hunting or collecting food, organised events such as camps, and running a commercial enterprise. There are usually no costs involved in gaining a permit for Aboriginal Cultural practices and Forestry Corp recommend gaining one so that they can ensure the safety of those accessing the forest.

For more information go to https://www.forestrycorporation.com.au/

## Private land

Another way that the GGFS are accessing Country is through relationships with private landholders, which were established through the Biodiversity Conservation Trust (BCT). The BCT partners with private landholders in NSW to enhance and conserve biodiversity. Through this connection, GGFS are able take kids out on parts of Country that they otherwise wouldn't have access to.

Accessing different parts of Gumbaynggirr Country allows Jarwin and the GGFS team to pass on knowledge about different types of land and the Language related to it. An important topic that that Jarwin and the team have been able to teach kids about on private land is fire. This includes when Country needs fire, Cultural burning and the impact of wildfires. Once again, Country is the teacher. Some properties also have significant sites or artifacts that cannot be found elsewhere, and both the private landholders and the Gumbaynggirr Community have interests in ensuring the Country is protected from wildfires to maintain the safety of these sites.

GGFS students

23 https://www.forestrycorporation.com.au/about/who-we-are


GGFS students with Jarwin Carey

In the future, GGFS are hoping to enter into private treaties with private landholders. Nathan says

> “I think there are a lot of landholders who would be open to letting mob access Country. There’s nothing stopping a landholder entering into a private treaty with an Aboriginal organisation. It could be an informal, non-exclusive agreement. It’s not legally binding but it’s a show of goodwill”.

## What is a private treaty?

While still a relatively new concept, examples of agreements between private landholders and Aboriginal Communities are popping up across Australia. These agreements can take many forms, but they are usually written documents that outline how the Aboriginal Community and the landholder will utilise the land together, putting the interests of Country first. It will usually include land access, co-management or return of lands to the local Aboriginal Community and may also include economic benefits such as the ability to establish Cultural tourism or other enterprises.

To see an example of a private land-sharing agreement in action, see Yambulla, an agricultural property on the NSW-VIC border where landowners and a local Aboriginal organisation are creating space for Communities to reconnect with the land and give open access. https://www.yambulla.com.au/


Photos by Aboriginal Languages Trust
Uncle Ivan Johnson and Uncle Warren Clark with Britt Jacobsen and Allara Pearce

# 6.4 Baakantji at Lake Mungo

**"Kids can relate to Country better, can see, touch and feel things...it's about utilising Country and utilising the bush medicines."**

**- UNCLE IVAN JOHNSON**
**Baakantji teacher**

The Willandra Lakes region in Far West NSW is the traditional land of the Baakantji, Ngiyampaa and Mutti Mutti peoples. The Lakes are rich with history dating back at least 50,000 years and once contained fresh water before drying up roughly around 19,000 years ago. What is now left are several dried lake beds that contain saltbush, bluebush, mallee trees, cypress pine and grasses.[24] Amongst the sandy beds are the remains of ancient feasting sites, campfires, and stone tools.

24 https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/parks-reserves-and-protected-areas/types-of-protected-areas/world-heritage-listed-areas/willandra-lakes-region

Mungo National Park, part of the Willandra Lakes region, is a place of Cultural significance as it provides a unique window into the changing climate and Aboriginal people's relationship with the environment and land over many thousands of years. The discovery of the ancestral remains of Mungo Man and Mungo Lady in 1968 and 1971 provided some of the earliest evidence of Cultural practice of the oldest cremation and ceremonial ritual burial in the world.[25]

Here on Country, Uncle Ivan Johnson, and Uncle Warren Clark, both proud Baakantji men, are seeing that Baakantji Language and Culture is being passed down to younger generations, just as Uncle Warren's grandmother once did. Uncle Warren remembers his Baakantji Elders who were Language speakers who held many traditional stories of the Lake Mungo area including stories passed down of megafauna that existed in the area and how Aboriginal people had "campfires on the river – to keep the giant animals away". Uncle Ivan and Uncle Warren now want to ensure these stories are told by their people forever.

Artefacts at Lake Mungo

## Upholding Cultural knowledge systems and practices

Both Uncle Warren and Uncle Ivan have strong Cultural and professional connections to Mungo National Park. Uncle Warren started working at Lake Mungo under NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service as the Senior Field Officer in 1996 and many years later was appointed the Executive Officer of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Committee. Uncle Ivan holds two roles – as a schoolteacher and Aboriginal Park Ranger at Mungo National Park.

During his time with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Uncle Warren wanted to have more Language in the Discovery Ranger Program at Mungo, so a linguist was hired who worked with the Baakantji and Ngiyampaa Languages. He fondly recalls spending a week camping under the stars with the linguist and rangers from the three Aboriginal Nations of the area as they worked out how to bring more spoken Language back to Country.

25 https://ia.anu.edu.au/biography/mungo-man-27704

Uncle Ivan often takes primary school students out to Lake Mungo to teach them Language from that Country and the deep Cultural significance and history that it holds. Through his teaching on Country, Uncle Ivan has observed how kids can relate to Country better as they can directly experience the environment around them.

Uncle Ivan described the time he took a group of year 7 students out on a tour of Lake Mungo and one of the students came up to him the following week and said,

“Mr Johnson! I took my mother and father out here and showed them everything you taught me”. It’s the importance for learning Language on Country for that continuous learning to happen within the students’ homes, to share the learnings with their families. “He wouldn’t have done that if he was just sat in a classroom environment” Uncle Ivan explains.

**Uncle Ivan spoke about his preference as a schoolteacher teaching Language out on Country.**

> “In a classroom you only get the four walls with words on the board but I’d rather take the kids out on Country so they can see, hear and feel what I am teaching them... that’s the best way to do it.”

In Uncle Ivan’s experience, young learners are more engaged when they’re out on Country and more receptive to learning. “Kids can relate to Country better, can see, touch and feel things...like even the different types of bushes like saltbush. You can’t just run down to the supermarket to grab a packet of salt. It’s about utilising Country and utilising the bush medicines” Uncle Warren explains.

Uncle Ivan also teaches young people Cultural knowledge such as identifying animal tracks, different types of vegetation and the importance of caring for Country. All this knowledge is intertwined with Baakantji words, making Lake Mungo a significant place for Language to be brought back into regular use.

Artefact at Lake Mungo

While Uncle Warren reflects on stories and Cultural practices passed down by his Elders, he wishes he had been able to learn more Language from them but spoke of the fear of welfare systems when he was growing up and the impact it had on him learning his Language

> “If I started speaking Baakantji Language the system would have taken me away”.

## Mungo Stories: Connecting to Country Mobile App

Uncle Ivan and Uncle Warren have worked with the Sharing Stories Foundation to develop the Connecting to Country Mobile App.26 The Sharing Stories Foundation visited Lake Mungo to document the animals, Cultural significant sites, extensive Cultural history and ongoing connection that Aboriginal people have to Country. The app was designed alongside the Baakantji, Mutti Mutti and Ngiyampaa Communities to provide an on-Country experience through arts media and augmented reality experiences at Culturally significance sites in the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area.

Both Uncle Ivan and Uncle Warren presented the Connecting to Country Mobile App at the Puliima Indigenous Language and Technology Conference in August 2023. The App is scheduled to be released in 2024.

## Accessing Lake Mungo for Language and Cultural practice

The local Baakantji people have worked hard to maintain their access to the Lake Mungo region and continue to uphold their rights to practice Language and Culture on this Country.

For a time, Lake Mungo National Park was managed under a Joint Management agreement between NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and representatives from the three Traditional Owner groups (the Baakantji, Mutti Mutti and Ngiyampaa Peoples). Currently, these groups are represented on the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Advisory Committee[27] and the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage First Peoples’ Consultative Group. This Advisory Committee provides advice to government ministers, other government agencies and NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service on the management of the property. In total there are 18 members who represent relevant interest groups, including those from scientific disciplines and private land holders.

26 Connecting to Country Mobile App - SharingStories Foundation

27 https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/parks-reserves-and-protected-areas/types-of-protected-areas/world-heritage-listed-areas/world-heritage-area-advisory-committees

A third advisory group is the Willandra Landholders Group which is made up of private landholders from across the Willandra region. Lake Mungo is surrounded by privately owned land or Crown land held under Western land leases. Uncle Ivan has developed relationships with some surrounding landholders in order to access land for Cultural practices. However, the responsibility lies with him to make contact and request access to these parts of Country. For Cultural practices like hunting kangaroo, this must be done on private land as it is illegal to hunt in NSW national parks. As Uncle Ivan explains "There's no Country really that we can access in Willandra, unless we get permission off the landowners to do it".

## What are National Parks Joint Management Plans?

A Joint Management Plan is a partnership arrangement between the State of NSW and the Aboriginal owners and Custodians of a national park or reserve. Joint Management Plans acknowledge the unique relationship that Aboriginal people have to their land and their role caring for Country. Under a Joint Management Plan, both parties work collaboratively to manage the park or reserve. Joint management aims to protect and sustain parks and reserves and support Aboriginal Culture and practice.

## How are they formed?

Joint Management Plans are formed through engagement between an Aboriginal group and NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. There are many types of partnerships (for example, Aboriginal ownership and leaseback agreements, Memorandums of Understanding and Indigenous Land Use Agreements). Once the need/desire to implement Joint Management has been identified, both parties work through a process to obtain endorsement from the Aboriginal Community and NSW Government and set up the operation of the park.

For more information about Joint Management Plans, visit: https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/parks-reserves-and-protected-areas/park-management/aboriginal-joint-management

For Uncle Ivan and Uncle Warren, their main goal is getting more Aboriginal people out on Country at Lake Mungo to learn about its rich history. They are committed to ensuring that Language, Culture and stories of the region are passed on to younger people, just as their Old People did for them. They hope to see greater Aboriginal involvement in the management of the area, so that Country can be cared for according to traditional Cultural values and maintained as a place for future generations to continue their learning.

Photos by Ngungilanha
Maddy and Lacey at the dance circle

# 6.5 Ngiyampaa, Murrawarri and Yuwaalaraay

> **We get our strength from our Old People when we are on Country learning"**
>
> **- MADDY HOPE-HODGETTS**
> **Ngiyampaa Language practitioner**

Lacey Boney (Murrawarri Ngiyampaa) and Maddy Hope-Hodgetts (Wangaaypuwan Ngiyampaa Wiradjuri) are both passionate about engaging youth in Language and Culture. Although they live over two hours' drive from each other, the two come together regularly to plan events and workshops for young Aboriginal people of the Brewarrina and Bogan Shire areas.

In 2022, Lacey coordinated three Language Ngurras ('camps') for women and girls, each held on different Countries. The Ngurras brought together Elders, Language sharers, knowledge holders, women and girls from across the region to teach and learn Language, song and dance, increase Cultural knowledge and continue to practice the Cultures of each of the three Nations.

## Merriman Station, Brewarrina, owned by the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC)


Maddy and Lacey at the dance circle

Merriman Station is a 16,624 hectare pastoral property on Ngiyampaa Country at Brewarrina, NSW. The property has 15km of Barwon River frontage and many significant Ngiyampaa sites and was traditionally a place of women's business. The property is currently owned by the ILSC, who acquired it in 2006 in response to requests from a local Aboriginal group, and subsequently ran a successful shearing school for young Aboriginal people[28].

In addition to its Cultural significance, Merriman Station was the ideal venue to host the first Ngurra as it has accommodation and kitchen facilities to host up to 20 people. Lacey initially contacted the ILSC via email, then after a phone conversation she received the go ahead to access the site for the camp.

Twenty-one women and girls participated in the Ngurra, where they learnt Ngiyampaa/Wailwan Language as well as four dances and two songs in Language. These included a butterfly dance and pelican dance in which women would sit on the banks of the Barwon River, watching the pelicans and learning to fish. Aunties-in-Residence shared their own stories of that place, which were then translated into Language with the plan of turning them into songs. Participants also learnt how to give a Welcome to Country in Language.

## Who are the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC)?

The ILSC are an entity established under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005. Their role is to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities to acquire and manage Country to achieve economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits[29]. The ILSC regularly purchases properties throughout Australia to return to Aboriginal Communities, and often works in partnership with Communities to create economic opportunities from these properties.

For more information about the ILSC, visit: https://www.ilsc.gov.au/

28 https://www.brewarrina.nsw.gov.au/f.ashx/Merriman_EoI_-(002).pdf

29 https://www.ilsc.gov.au/

## Burban Grange Station, Culgoa National Park

The second Ngurra was held on Murrawarri Country at Burban Grange Station at Culgoa National Park in Weilmoringle, NSW. The National Park is known for its wide grassy floodplains, red river gums, coolabah woodlands, billabongs and rivers.

As a National Park under Joint Management, Lacey had to apply to access the site, which involved presenting the proposed Ngurra to the Joint Management Committee. At that meeting Lacey talked about Murrawarri Language and how important it is to engage youth in Language learning. Lacey described the process as "nerve wracking" but, as she had relatives amongst the Committee members, didn't need to spend time building a relationship in the first instance. As Lacey described "If someone from elsewhere came in and requested access, it would be hard. They want to know the individual, they'd say 'come back to the next meeting'".

Engaging the Joint Management Committee had additional benefits, as they wanted to play an active role and were able to identify people and resources to support the camp, especially when their main Language teacher was cut off by flooding.

The Ngurra brought together 10 women and one girl, who shared stories and knowledge of caring for Country. Being on Country allowed Language Sharer Aunty Josie Byno to teach Language names for parts of Country including trees and plants. Elders shared their own stories of growing up on that Country and walking between the station and Goodooga. These stories allowed for more Language sharing and learning that was connected to that place.

## Goodooga Central School (NSW Department of Education) and Angledool Station, a privately owned property

The third Ngurra, on Yuwaalaraay Country was held at Goodooga Central School with a visit to Angledool Station. Goodooga Central School was not the first choice for the camp, but as flooding restricted access to other sites, Lacey reached out to the Principal of the school for help. The Principal was supportive but there were additional school staff to bring into the project including a youth worker and qualified lifeguards to oversee participants when they swam in the school's pool. The school grounds were available during the mid-term break, so Lacey took the opportunity.

Brewarrina women's dance circle

Despite flooding being a major inhibitor at the time, around 60 girls and women participated in the camp. To bring more time on Country to the program, Lacey organised for participants to visit Angledool Station, a privately owned property that belonged to friends of one of the camp's Language Sharers, and who were happy to grant access for the visit. Angledool Station had previously functioned as a shearing hub and Lacey's grandfather had sheared there. Today, the station is largely pastoral, but Yuwaalaraay connections are not far from sight with scar trees, shell middens and other artefacts regularly found throughout the property, and the tools that Yuwaalaraay women would traditionally use for fishing and hunting became part of the learning experience[30][31]. Participants were also taken to a significant Cultural site where they learnt the story of the freshwater turtle, a totem of the Yuwaalaraay people.

**Lacey explained that being on Country was part of healing for the women and girls who participated. She gave examples of some participants opening up about traumas they had experienced, and how being on Country together brought people closer together.**

> "They feel safer to open up on Country... the kids too, if the Community knows the struggle of that child, they will look out for them."

Maddy has found it more difficult to access Country in Nyngan where she currently resides and runs fortnightly dance workshops for families. "I was going to a public campground where I had to ask permission every single week... It would be good just have somewhere where I can set up a circle and know we can go there anytime." Maddy puts this down to a small Aboriginal population in Nyngan and the local community being unaware of Aboriginal Cultural practices.

**Maddy is determined to raise the town's awareness so that younger generations don't have to endure the same battles**

> "I feel obligated now, I'm going to change it."

30 https://dharmae.research.uts.edu.au/items/show/154

31 http://migrationmemories.net.au/html/lightningridge/treweeke1.htm

Photos by Aboriginal Languages Trust
Community gathered at Biyan-Biyan

# 6.6 Gathang at Biyan-Biyan

## Being on country - it's the way you learn with the connection to the land"

**- AUNTY MICHELLE PERRY**
**Gathang Language practitioner**

In September 2023, a Cultural burn was held at Biyan Biyan Plain at Barrington Tops, believed to be the first on this site since colonisation[32]. For many of the 60 Aboriginal Community members that took part in the burn that weekend, it was their first time being on that Country.

For Aunty Michelle Perry, a proud Worimi woman residing on Worimi Country at Karuah, it was the first opportunity to get back on her grandmother's Country and to walk in places she hadn't had access to before. Aunty Sharon Edgar-Jones, a proud Wonnarua and Gringai woman whose family connections are from the Allyn River, participated alongside her family.

32 https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/after-50-years-this-patch-of-worimi-country-was-healed-by-fire/mxac13x6b

Aunty Michelle and Aunty Sharon, who both work on the reclamation and revival of their Languages, felt it was important to bring Language back to Country for this significant event. Aunty Sharon has written beginner guides for Wannarua Language which are used in Community Language classes. Alongside Aunty Michelle, Aunty Sharon has helped deliver Language classes in Gathang.

Aunty Sharon explains

> “In everything I’m doing I’m trying to make it linguistically accessible to Community members.”

## Bringing Language and Culture back to Barrington Tops

Biyan Biyan (Barrington Tops Plain) is part of the Great Dividing Range in the Northwest of NSW. It is a significant place for the surrounding Aboriginal Communities; the Worimi people of the south-east, the Biripi people of the east and the Wonnarua people of the southwest. Biyan Biyan is made up of both National Park and State Forest.

In partnership with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Aunty Michelle, Aunty Sharon and 60 Community members visited Biyan Biyan to encourage the regrowth and sustainability of the endangered Bularr-Gulga Watuun orchid (Diuris caillitrophilla) which had been impacted by environmental damage at the site, partly due to wild horses and pigs causing damage to Country.

**Aunty Sharon Edgar-Jones watching the burn at Biyan Biyan**

Some of the female Community members had written a song in Gathang Language to encourage the regeneration and growth of the orchid. Prior to attending the Cultural burn, Community members had been learning this song and practising at home. The song encouraged the fire to burn for the Bularr-Gulga Watuun to bloom. “When we were on Country singing to the Bularr-Gulga Watuun we strengthened our connection to Country” said Aunty Sharon.

Aunty Sharon Edgar-Jones and Aunty Michelle Perry

Aunty Michelle explained that it was the Biodiversity team in NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service that initially approached her about bringing Cultural knowledge, and especially that of women, to the site to care for the endangered orchid. The Biodiversity team then applied for a permit on the Communities' behalf to have access to Country for the Cultural burns. "Biodiversity mob – [they have] pull with the agencies and are able to navigate the government systems behind the scenes to assist with Community access to Country" says Aunty Michelle. Building this relationship between the local Communities and NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service has meant they were able to access Country which they hadn't had access to for a long time.

## Importance of being on Country

Aunty Michelle and Aunty Sharon spoke on the importance of being on Country.

> "It is a grounding and healing place of belonging for mob and it's a way to learn with the connection to the land".

They also highlighted the integration of Cultural practices such as Songlines, dance, storytelling and Language, with their connection to Country.

Aunty Sharon reflected on the event and remembered

> "Hearing the humming and singing through the smoke, makes you feel emotional. Those are the experiences you can only have on Country with Language".

Aunty Sharon had previous experience going out on Country with schools to teach kids about bushtucker and incorporating Language. "Being able to be outside and to relate the Language to the land to which you are on is brilliant – when they are outside you can be really spontaneous in response to your surroundings, instead of a forced environment."

Aunty Michelle and Aunty Sharon speak about the sense of belonging that is part of the experience of being on Country for Cultural practices such as Language teaching and learning.

Aunty Michelle explains

> “Language has context from being able to connect the dots through your senses...for both learners and teachers it provides a more hands-on approach than in a classroom environment by being surrounded by resources on Country”.

## Passing down of Culture and Language knowledge systems

Aboriginal people have a deep spiritual connection to Country which is strengthened through Cultural knowledge systems and practices such as storytelling. Traditional Knowledges are passed from one generation to the next and are carefully protected. However, colonial impacts on these traditional Knowledge systems have created barriers for Communities to pass on Language and Cultural Knowledges. With Elders getting older and some information that was once held being lost, Aunty Michelle spoke about her Community adapting to new ways of learning Cultural knowledge, including learning about the endangered orchid at Biyan Biyan through her work with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. “I’m grateful to be involved with the National Parks mob but it is also sad I’m learning my knowledge through them and not passed down through my Elders”.

However, Aunty Michelle and Aunty Sharon both feel strongly about reviving traditional knowledge systems as part of their Cultural obligation and responsibility to Community and Country.

**This includes revitalising Language and the transfer of Cultural knowledge to future generations, to give the young people a sense of belonging.**

> “We want to get women out on Country first as the women are the teachers mostly... and getting our young ones out on Country... so then we can pass it down to our younger generation and they become the teachers when we’re gone.”

## Future of Language and Country at Biyan Biyan

Aunty Michelle and Aunty Sharon both hope to continue practicing Language and Culture on Country so that they can build their Communities’ knowledge and experience of the local seasons and engage in more Cultural burns at Biyan Biyan. “We want to take more mob out on Country to utilise it as a healing place for both mob and Country.”

SECTION 7

# Ways to Access Country

## Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs)

IPAs are areas of land and sea Country managed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Groups. IPAs deliver biodiversity conservation outcomes through voluntary agreements with the Australian Government.

IPA Custodians have multi-year funding agreements with the Australian Government, though many supplement this funding through fee-for service activities, private or philanthropic support. The Australian Government is expanding investment in IPAs between 2023-28 and new Indigenous organisations are being brought on board to participate in the program.

Groups interested in creating IPAs should visit: https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/environment/indigenous-protected-areas-ipas

## NSW Forestry Corporation permits

Forestry Corporation of NSW is a state-owned corporation responsible for managing NSW's State forests, including environmental sustainability, tourism and renewable timber production[33]. Their Aboriginal Heritage and Partnerships Team are keen to get more Aboriginal People back on Country for Language and Cultural practice.

Under the *NSW Forestry Act 2012,* anyone can access a State forest for recreational purposes however some activities require a permit, such as hunting or collecting food, organised events such as camps, and running a commercial enterprise. There are usually no costs

33 https://www.forestrycorporation.com.au/about/who-we-are

involved in gaining a permit for Aboriginal Cultural practices and Forestry Corporation recommend gaining one so that they can ensure the safety of those accessing the forest. For more information go to https://www.forestrycorporation.com.au/

## Private land

Private land refers to land that has been bought or leased by a private party, such as an individual, family or organisation. Each Australian state and territory has its own legislation regarding land and property. Trespassing, or entering a property without the property-owner's permission or lawful reason, is considered a criminal offence in NSW[34].

## What is a private treaty?

While still a relatively new concept, examples of agreements between private landholders and Aboriginal Communities are becoming more common. These agreements can take many forms, but they are usually written documents that outline how the Aboriginal Community and the landholder will utilise the land together, putting the interests of Country first. It will usually include land access, co-management or return of lands to the local Aboriginal Community and may also include economic benefits such as the ability to establish Cultural tourism or other enterprises.

To see an example of a private land-sharing agreement in action, see Yambulla, an agricultural property on the NSW-VIC border where landowners and a local Aboriginal organisation are helping Communities to reconnect with the land and give open access. https://www.yambulla.com.au/

## Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC) properties

The ILSC are an entity established under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005*. Their role is to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities to acquire and manage Country to achieve economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits[35]. The ILSC regularly purchases properties throughout Australia to return to Aboriginal Communities, and often works in partnership with Communities to create economic opportunities from these properties. For more information about the ILSC, visit: https://www.ilsc.gov.au/

34 https://jbsolicitors.com.au/trespassing-in-nsw/

35 https://www.ilsc.gov.au/

## NSW National Parks

There are more than 895 national parks and reserves in NSW, covering more than 9.5 per cent of land in the state. Most national parks can be accessed freely by the public, though currently 45 national parks have motor vehicle entry fees.

Some activities are illegal to undertake in national parks, such as lighting fires, hunting or collecting plants. Always check with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service before you visit to ensure your activities are lawful.

For more information visit https://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/

## What is Joint Management of a National Park?

A Joint Management Plan is a partnership arrangement between the State of NSW and the Aboriginal owners and Custodians of a national park or reserve. Joint Management Plans acknowledge the unique relationship that Aboriginal People have to their land and their role caring for Country. Under a Joint Management Plan, both parties work collaboratively to manage the park or reserve. Joint management aims to protect and sustain parks and reserves and support Aboriginal Culture and practice.

Joint Management Plans are formed through engagement between an Aboriginal Group and NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. There are many types of partnerships (for example, Aboriginal ownership and leaseback agreements, Memorandums of Understanding and Indigenous Land Use Agreements). Once the need/desire to implement Joint Management has been identified, both parties work through a process to obtain endorsement from the Aboriginal Community and NSW Government to set up the joint management of the park.

For more information about Joint Management Plans, visit: https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/parks-reserves-and-protected-areas/park-management/aboriginal-joint-management

## Local Aboriginal Land Council owned land

There are currently 120 Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs), each constituted over a specific area in NSW. LALCs hold land that has either been granted as part of a claim made under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983,* or that has been purchased commercially[36].

36 https://alc.org.au/land_council/

LALCs may use their land for any number of purposes as decided by their members. To find out about LALC owned land in your local area, contact your local LALC as per the NSW Aboriginal Land Council network https://alc.org.au/land_council/

The NSW Aboriginal Land Council, who work in cooperation with LALCs, can also provide assistance with accessing land on which a claim has been made but not yet determined, by liaising with relevant government departments.

## Local city, municipal, regional and shire council owned land

Local Councils are responsible for an area that may be made up of a group of suburbs, a town or a rural area[37]. Land managed by Local Councils may include public parks, beaches, campgrounds and other land that is generally intended for public access and use. However, under some circumstances Local Councils may also lease or licence land to another party for specific purposes[38].

Each Local Council has its own policies about accessing and using public Council land for different purposes. It is a good idea to check with your Local Council if you need pre-approval or a booking to hold a gathering or undertake other activities on Council land.

For a list of Local Government boundaries and contacts visit: https://www.olg.nsw.gov.au/public/find-my-council/local-government-area-boundaries-and-mapping-information/

## Native title

Native title refers to recognition of the rights and interests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People have in their lands and waters under Australian law. The *Commonwealth Native Title Act 1993* allows claims to be made over certain types of land, such as vacant Crown land, national parks and state forests[39]. A formal process is undertaken to identify and authorise the Native Title Claim Group and undergo case management by the relevant state government. There are a number of potential outcomes of Native Title claims including Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), Indigenous Land Use Agreements (see below) and Consent and Litigated Determinations (made by a court).
For more information about Native Title in NSW see http://www.ntscorp.com.au/

37 https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/about/Pages/Local-Government.aspx

38 https://www.olg.nsw.gov.au/councils/land-management/leases-licences-other-estates/#:~:text=Generally%2C%20it%20is%20land%20intended,other%20estates%20over%20community%20land.

39 http://www.ntscorp.com.au/about-native-title/

## Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs)

Indigenous Land Use Agreements are another form of agreement, entered into voluntarily, between a Native Title Group (although a Native Title claim does not need to have been made on the land[40]) and other bodies, usually government departments. These ILUAs set out the agreed terms to the use and management of land and waters and may include matters such as access to an area, future development of the land and compensation for loss or impairment of native title[41]. Some ILUAs are perpetual (the agreement stands forever) while others are for a specific length of time.

In NSW, the Department of Environment and Heritage is responsible for ILUAs. Find out more at https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/parks-reserves-and-protected-areas/park-management/aboriginal-joint-management/how-aboriginal-joint-management-works/indigenous-land-use-agreements

## Travelling Stock Reserves

Travelling Stock Reserves (TSRs) are a network of land pathways that were established in the 1800s for moving stock (cattle or sheep) around the state. There are more than 6500 TSRs on Crown land in NSW, and around 30% of these are controlled or managed by Local Land Services (LLS) NSW[42].

TSRs cover and cross land that is significant to Aboriginal Peoples in NSW and many were established on biodiversity corridors. They include camping reserves, watering places and many other types of land.

The *Local Land Services Act 2013* allows for TSRs to be used for recreational purposes between sunrise and sunset, though there are restrictions on certain activities such as camping and timber removal[43]. In some regions, Aboriginal Communities have built relationships with LLS Regional General Managers which has allowed them to use TSRs for Cultural practice.

For more information on Travelling Stock Reserves, contact your nearest Local Land Services office via https://www.lls.nsw.gov.au/i-want-to/contact-my-local-office

40 http://www.nntt.gov.au/ILUAs/Pages/default.aspx

41 http://www.nntt.gov.au/ILUAs/Pages/default.aspx

42 https://www.lls.nsw.gov.au/help-and-advice/growing,-grazing-and-land/travelling-stock-reserves

43 https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2013-051#pt.6

## Marine Estate/Sea Country

The NSW Marine Estate is made up of the state's estuaries, coastline and waters, all of which have significance to Aboriginal Peoples. It also includes the five NSW Marine Parks which were established to protect and conserve the biodiversity of specific marine environments. The NSW Marine Estate Management Strategy 2018 - 2028 acknowledges the coastal Aboriginal Nations that have a connection to Sea Country and seeks to address physical threats to the environment (e.g. pollution and loss of habitat) which, in turn, threaten the practice of Aboriginal Cultures[44].

While the coastline and marine waterways are generally accessible to the public, there may be restrictions or limitations around certain activities, such as fishing and collecting shellfish. The Aboriginal Cultural Fishing Interim Access Arrangement sets out daily limits. Applications for authority to take fish and aquaculture permits can also be applied for via the Department of Primary Industries NSW website. Native Title and Indigenous Land Use Agreements may also impact access and fishing.

For further information contact NSW Marine Parks at contact.us@marine.nsw.gov.au or read more about Aboriginal fishing at https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/aboriginal-fishing.

**La Perouse Beach | Gujaga Foundation**

44 https://www.haveyoursay.nsw.gov.au/management-nsw-mainland-marine-park-network

SECTION 8

# Recommendations

To remove barriers to accessing Country, government departments and agencies that have responsibility for land access in NSW must:

1. **Establish and nurture respectful and meaningful relationships with Aboriginal Communities at a local level and actively seek to understand their needs for accessing Country for Language and Culture practices.** Adequate time needs to be taken to build relationships on strong foundations, so that real collaboration and partnerships can be formed over the long-term. Discussions about access to Country should occur on Country, rather than in government offices, to ensure all parties can have an equal say in decision-making with the interests of Country at the forefront.

2. **Access to Country roles should be built into each government department, and where possible, for each region, to specifically enable access to Country and to provide a key liaison point for Aboriginal Communities regarding accessing Country.** These must be Aboriginal identified roles. The name and contact details of this person needs to be made available, so that Communities have a person they can contact directly with questions and to seek support with navigating government processes.

3 **Review policies and processes for Aboriginal people to access Country in consultation with Aboriginal peoples at local levels.** Every effort should be made to streamline processes, reduce administrative burden, waive costs of permits and access fees and support Communities to gain access for Language and Cultural practices.

4 **Value traditional Aboriginal scientific knowledge systems and practices alongside western scientific knowledge when developing or reviewing policies and practices relating to how Country and environment is cared for.**
This includes:

a. Understanding Aboriginal seasonal calendars that hold traditional knowledge about weather patterns, sustainable harvesting of food, animal breeding seasons and plant lifecycles
b. Recognising traditional Aboriginal ecological knowledge and practices
c. Acknowledging Aboriginal people's Cultural responsibility and obligations to care for Country

5 **Create senior leadership positions for Aboriginal People to lead and provide specialist advice in relation to accessing Country for Language and Cultural practices.** These roles must have the authority and ability to make executive policy-related decisions so that Cultural knowledge is valued and protected and Aboriginal Peoples' rights to care for Country are upheld.

6 **Increase investment and funding programs for organisations and projects that utilise Country for Language teaching and learning.**

To support ongoing access to Country, government departments and agencies, private entities and any group or person possessing large land holdings in NSW should:

7

Recognise Article 31 (1) of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples[1], which states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.

8

Recognise, promote and support private treaties and agreements between private landholders and Aboriginal Communities that outline how the land can be accessed and utilised, putting the interests of Country first.

# Notes

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