

RAINFALL AND WATER AS CULTURAL DRIVERS

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Traditional Nyoongar inhabitants of southwest Australia understood relationships between rainfall and river flow and the importance of the water cycle to the connectedness of all living things. The Nyoongar creation story or 'Dreaming' featured a spirit man, a spirit woman, a snake (the Waugal) and all the spirit animals and plants that would later inhabit their 'garden' paradise. Nyoongars called this garden 'Boodja' which translates as country.

The dreaming imbedded at its core, a deep sustainability ethic with humans being selected by all living creatures to be the Carers-of-Everything. The great snake spirit or 'Waugal' formed the rivers, wetlands and lakes as it moved across and under the landscape. Through the Waugal story, Nyoongars understood the complexity of catchment boundaries and knew where every drop of rain falling on the land surface flowed and ended up.

Nyoongars appreciated the variability of rainfall over time under the influence of 6 seasons and adapted harvesting and management of the landscape to various climatic cycles. Cultural boundaries related to catchment boundaries. Travel was possible across the landscape within catchment boundaries provided certain cultural protocols were upheld, but permission or acknowledgement had to be gained when travel crossed over catchment boundaries.

Much can be learned from the sustainable management principles used effectively by Nyoongars for many thousands of years. Elements of this wisdom include: a systems approach in which the interconnectedness of all things was considered, a multi-disciplinary and multi-scale approach where the circle-of-elders maintained, refined and passed on what they learnt by observing and by doing. This was a seamless integration of education, spirituality and land management, all "in tune" with the rhythm of the land.

Daairn dookanuny (Introduction)

Nyoongar culture has evolved for more than 47,000 years based on the spoken word, art, rituals, dances and songs. Although there was a comprehensive recording system that used message sticks and art supported by symbols, much cultural information was not written down or recorded in writing. In this presentation, we will follow the time-honoured traditions of our ancestors and rely mainly on our verbal presentation.

The body of this written paper presents a series of linked themes which, when considered together, provide an opportunity for a greater depth of understanding.

There has been a long tradition of anthropologists and others compiling information about Nyoongar culture (Bates, 1936, 1938). Much of this information has ended up in books, scientific journals and museum vaults depicting a dying or dead culture. Many of these writings have been heavily influenced by the cultural background, experience and training of the authors.

More recently however, a range of more illustrative materials has emerged, celebrating indigenous culture as a vibrant living guide to Nyoongars and Wadjelabs (white fellas) alike (Dann 2005, Bennell 2005, Bennell and Garlett 2005, Nannup 2004, 2006a, 2006b, Wallum and Kelly, 2006).

Unfortunately translations from indigenous languages to English often lose some of the rich nuances of the original meaning. We feel that in this paper it is appropriate that Nyoongar language be used to describe certain themes and ideas. Approximate interpretations of language are also provided.

Moondang-ak Kaaradjiny (*In the beginning*)

- Nyidiny In the beginning, the cold dark time, there was a spirit man, a spirit woman and a large spirit snake. Sound familiar? Spirits representing all the plants and animals were present in this place before everything became real.
- Waugal The serpent spirit Waugal, or shaper of the land was responsible for initiating geomorphic processes For forming hills and valleys for outlining wetlands, rivers and estuaries.
- Djindalade borong-kep After certain events and a profound realisation, the great spirit woman's tears fell on the land for a very long time. This was the genesis of rainfall, of river flow, of the oceans. The drops of rain followed the path of the great Waugal.

Moondang bando-biny (*Beginning of social and natural order*)

- Boodja Everything became real at Katanyiny (now called Katanning). Animals, plants and humans. Living creatures as they became real, moved around and positioned themselves in the landscape. They shared country. Shared a spiritual sense of place. A veritable 'Garden of Eden'.
- Jippy joppie boodja This term represents the rhythm of the land. The seasonality of rainfall and river flow. The rise and fall of groundwater. The spring flush of flowers, the annual migration and breeding cycles of birds, fish and other animals. The land's heartbeat, it's rhythmic breathing; in-out, in-out. Every watercourse was understood, the patterns of flood, of flow and famine were all a natural part of the rhythm of the land.
- Bonar koondarm Six seasons emerged (Figure 1). Animals and plants responded to the rhythm of the land. There were six diets for people based upon the availability of animals and plants and their seasonal cycles.
- Djookapra Humans were anointed by all the spirit beings to be the carers-of-everything. All living things pledged to offer themselves to help humans in their quest. The one condition was that humans could use each of the species as they saw fit but not until there were no individuals of the species left. This means that the maintenance of biodiversity and sustainable land management principles were embedded at the very core of Nyoongar culture. **This was the law!**. A sophisticated clan moiety system outlined rules of marriage and association and maintained human genetic purity and social cohesion.
- Bibbulman Nyoongars were now able to fulfil their destiny as the carers of everything. Humans spread across the southwest and formed 14 clan groups. The Nyoongar people occupied the land, Bibbulman Country, which extended in a line from Geraldton to Merredin and almost to Esperance. The rhythm of this land demanded movement. Movement across the landscape in response to seasonal cycles. Humans understood the need for movement across the landscape. Rituals and important cultural events were based on human migration along walking trails, in response to Jippy joppie boodja.

Jennabiddy (*Footpaths, songlines, connections, trails, corridors*)

Karri waankiny The ancestors provide lessons for life. Ritual movement across the landscape provided opportunities for ceremonies, for rebuilding links and connections, for reconfirming social order, for teaching, for lifelong learning and for spiritual practice. Clans moved freely within catchment boundaries provided certain cultural protocols were followed. Permission was required if catchment boundaries were crossed.

Midar First there was the law then stories then song, dance and art and movement. The movement relates to jippy joppy – the rhythm of the land. There was seamless integration between sustainable land management, education and spiritual practice.

Yalga benung (*Now and the future*)

Danju dabacarn Together, steady steady. A future recognising the need for a shared dreaming based on mutual respect and inclusiveness. Recognition of the role of a circle-of-elders (circle-of-wisdom), an integrated, holistic, participatory and multi-disciplinary approach to natural resource management. A learning system, learning by doing, scenario planning and evaluation, seamless integration of land management, education and spiritual practice as a sense of place.

Maintenance of biodiversity and cultural diversity as an obligation, as a reason for existence. The principles of sustainability embedded at the very core of all our institutions. Institutions integrating through time, across disciplines, farmers, land managers, educators and religious leaders working as a seamless integrated whole. It can be done.

If it is to be, it is up to me.

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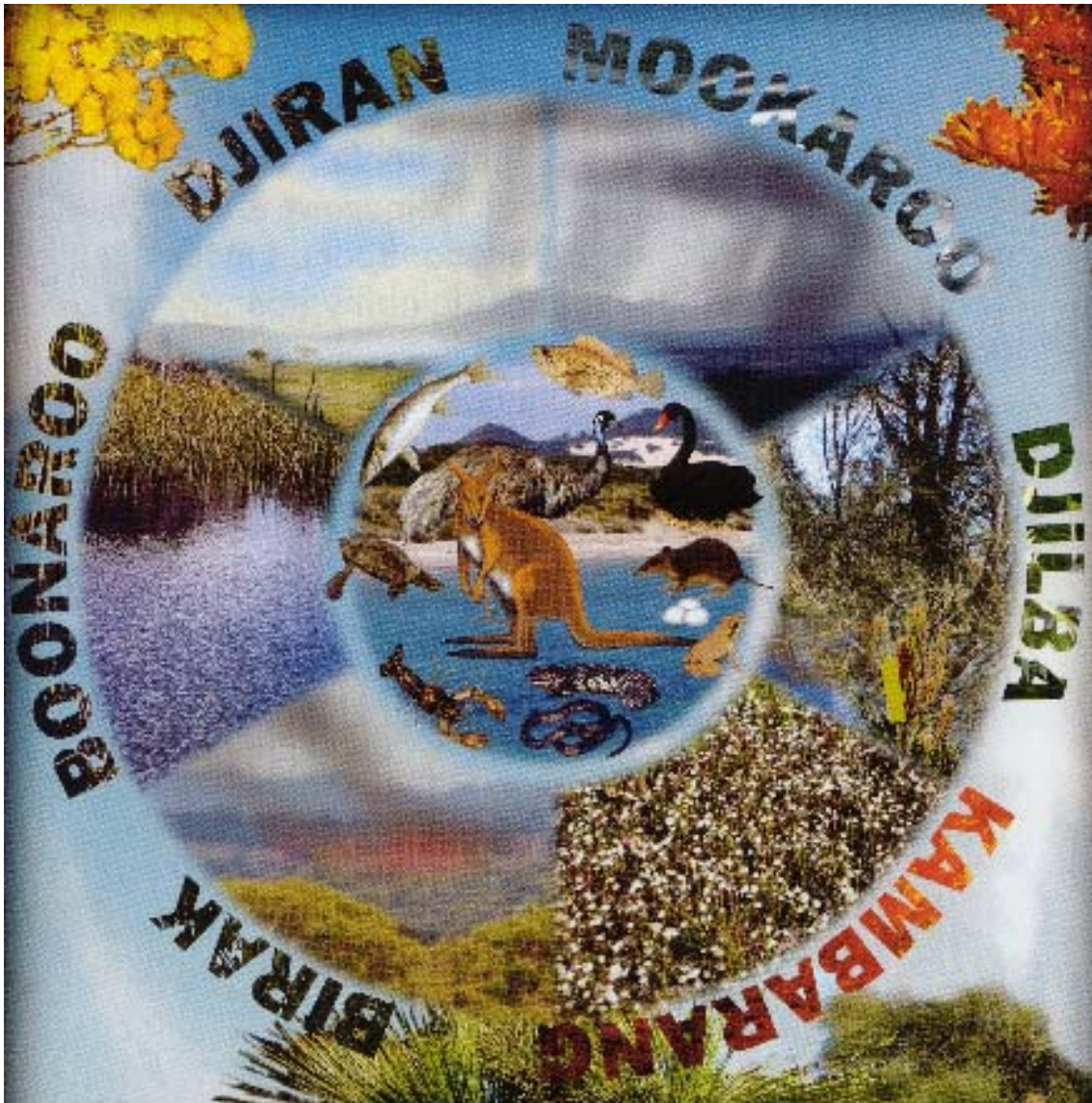


Figure 1 Jippy jopyy boodja (Rhythm of the land, six seasons, six diets).