

Culture and Identity

FIRST NATIONS
CULTURAL RESOURCES

Good practice guidance

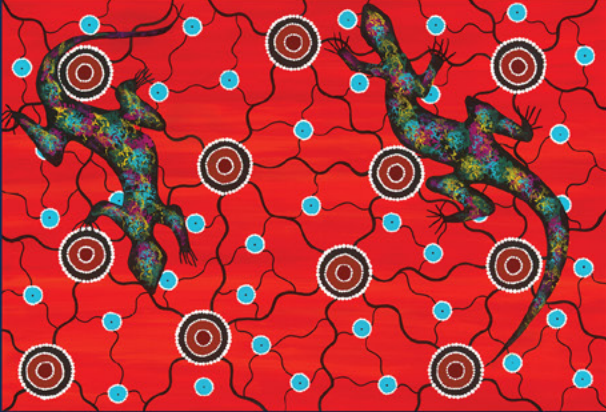


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Artwork Details

Title: *Country*

Artist: Graham Toomey
Wurrumunga Clan of Wiradjuri Nation/
Wongaibon Nation

About: *Country holds a spirit which is old and at all times this spirit heals me, protects me and guides me. When I'm on Country, I feel this old spirit speaking to me and singing to me. The Goanna is the Wiradjuri's people 'totem' which connects us to our creators, ancestors and to our Identity. The Goanna's protect us and guide us through life.*

This artwork captures male and female Goanna's wandering across Country, ensuring all is well and the people are safe. The artwork depicts the colour of the earth along with ancient tracks, which connects clans to each other. The artwork also features old water holes where spirits linger, welcoming those who wish to drink from these old water holes, once they have paid respects and asked for permission.



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge Country and pay our respects to the Traditional Owners across Australia. We pay our respect to them and to Elders past and present. We acknowledge the self-determination, resilience, and strength that provides inspiration, care, and support for Aboriginal communities. We also recognise that Aboriginal Peoples have and have always had a strong connection to Country and that their culture is a living Culture that provides richness and cultural value to their communities.



Kamilaroi Country

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Acknowledgements

Barbara O'Neill

Barbara O'Neill CEO, is a proud Dunghutti Woman, raised on Bidjigal Country in NSW. Barbara has worked for eight years for a Community organisation as the Aboriginal Caseworker and as a qualified Indigenous Trauma and Recovery Practitioner. Many of her clients have been Care Leavers. Barbara also sits on the Walama List headed by Justice Warwick Hunt of the NSW District Court. Her capacity is as a Respected Older Person. Barbara has been published in the NSW Jurisprudence Magazine. The subject was Trauma, and the work is now in the New Judge's Handbook and can be found as an Academic article in various search engines.

Barbara has a Bachelor of Indigenous Knowledge majoring in Aboriginal Health and a Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Trauma Recovery and Practice as well as a Diploma in Counselling. Barbara is currently engaged in a Master's in counselling. Building journeys of understanding for the non-Indigenous communities via evidence based and trauma informed practice is a passion for Barbara.

Graham Toomey

Graham Toomey is a freshwater man from the Wurrumunga Clan of the Wiradjuri nation and also of Wongaibon Nation. Graham has been the CEO at Gunawirra for the last five years, which is an Aboriginal Community-led organisation in Rozelle. Graham has been with Gunawirra since 2010. In 2010, Graham was Gunawirra's cultural advisor and cultural facilitator who educated and guided staff while also working with the board and management on creating a safe and culturally appropriate place with policies and processors. Gunawirra is supporting over 25 mainly Aboriginal preschools across Sydney and NSW through health and educational programs. Graham has a Diploma of Aboriginal studies and is a practicing visual artist, designer and consultant.

Graham has strong Community ties with the Redfern and Inner West Aboriginal communities as well as rural NSW. Graham has been working as a cultural and art consultant, advisor, facilitator across Sydney for over 20 years and has a wealth of Aboriginal cultural knowledge, contacts and experience.

The Centre for Volunteering

Zac Harold

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Glossary

Please be mindful that all people and communities are different. Some communities will have different preferences and meanings for some terms. It is important to ask the individuals and communities that you are working with what terms to use to refer to people, places, and things.

First Nations peoples:

'First Nations peoples' is a term used to represent peoples who are Indigenous to a place. In these resources, First Nations peoples is used specifically to refer to the First Nations people of Australia and is adjacent as a term to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A range of different terms are used in different Communities, including 'First Nations', 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal', and/or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders', and different people prefer different terms. Throughout these resources, 'First Nations', 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander(s)' and 'Indigenous Australians' are used interchangeably. This reflects how these communities refer to each other and themselves. It is vital that you always consult with the Elders of a Community when you are working or volunteering in a Community and ask people how they would like to be addressed. Be mindful that some people do not like certain terms being used to refer to them (e.g. 'Indigenous' is often not preferred because of its association with government labelling).

Country:

'Country' refers to an area of land or sea on which Aboriginal peoples have a traditional or spiritual association. It has a broad meaning which can cover Land, Area, Connectedness to Place/ Sea/Sky/Land/Animals/Plants, Lore, and Community.

Reconciliation:

'Reconciliation' refers to the ongoing journey to create a positive and constructive relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples.

In a just, equitable, and reconciled Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will have the same life chances and choices as non-Aboriginal children, and the length and quality of a person's life will not be determined by their racial background.

Nation:

'Nation' refers to a culturally distinct group of people from a culturally defined area of land.

Kinship:

'Kinship' means identity and belonging in/through a complex system of social connectedness that covers responsibilities, roles, and reciprocal bonds. Within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations there are clan groups and within clan groups there are family groups. Kinship is at the heart of Aboriginal culture which links people to one another.

Elders:

'Elders' are highly respected Aboriginal peoples held in esteem by their communities for their wisdom, cultural knowledge and Community service. They have gained recognition as a custodian of knowledge and lore. Age alone does not determine whether someone is recognised as an Elder in their Community.

Lore:

'Lore' refers to the responsibilities, customs, practices, and cultural knowledge that the Aboriginal peoples learned from the Dreamtime. Aboriginal lore was passed across the generations through knowledge, songs, stories, and dance and it governs all aspects of traditional life.

Mob:

'Mob' is a colloquial term identifying a group of Aboriginal peoples associated with a particular place or Country. It is used to connect and identify who an Aboriginal person is and where they are from. Mob can refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family, relatives, and/or Community.

Community:

A First Nations 'Community' contains people who work together to advocate and support each other to maintain their Community. The Community shares and builds a sense of cultural identity and belonging that ensures the Community respect each other's differences and values. The same sense of belonging in Community is what connects people to the many relationships they develop. Community Elders and leaders within Community, work together with Community to make decisions that best serves and represent the Community.

Culture:

'Culture' is a broad term. It includes cultural knowledge, traditional practices, ways of understanding the world, and methods of expression such as language, celebrations, and events. Culture also relates closely to Country. It is also best to avoid using the term 'lost' when referring to Culture (and/or language) as it passes over the current First Nations cultures and the survival of current First Nations peoples.

Sorry Business:

'Sorry Business' refers to the process of the whole Community coming together to share grief and the wider period of cultural practices

following the death of a Community member. This allows communities and individuals to mourn the loss properly. This period can last days, weeks, and even months.

Welcome to Country:

A 'Welcome to Country' is delivered by Traditional Owners, (or First Nations peoples who have been given permission from Traditional Owners) to welcome visitors to their Country. It is a protocol which welcomes visitors a safe passage and protection of their spiritual being during their journey while on the Country of a specific First Nations people group.

Acknowledgement of Country:

An 'Acknowledgement of Country' is an opportunity for anyone (First Nations Person(s) and/or non-Indigenous person(s)) to show respect for Traditional Owners of Country and the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country.

Self Determination:

'Self-determination' is the ability to have power and control over your own affairs. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, this means being able to make decisions that affect Community and being able to practice culture.

Self-determination is about being empowered and having freedom and dignity. It also involves recognising and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as First Nations Peoples with their own decision-making and knowledge systems. Self-determination for Indigenous people is a human right recognised by the United Nations.

Stolen Generations:

'The Stolen Generations' refers to a period in Australia's history where Aboriginal children were removed from their families through government policies. This happened from the mid-1800s to the 1970s.

These children were taken by the police; from their homes; on their way to or from school. They were placed in over 480 institutions, adopted or fostered by non-Indigenous people and often subjected to abuse. The children were denied all access to their culture, they were not allowed to speak their language and they were punished if they did. The impacts of this are still being felt today.

There are currently more than 17,000 Stolen Generations survivors in Australia. Over one third of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are their descendants. In Western Australia almost half

of the population have Stolen Generations links.

The children, grandchildren and future generations of the Stolen Generations may experience disconnection from their extended families and culture and have high levels of stress. This creates a cycle of trauma, known as Intergenerational Trauma, where the impact is passed from one generation to the next.

Sovereignty:

For First Nations peoples, sovereignty is a spiritual meaning that restrains them to their ancestral lands, (Country or "mother earth"). First Nations peoples were born from their Country and remain attached and connected at all times.

First Nations peoples were self-governing with their own ancestral laws, social structures and systems in place. Sovereignty was never ceded by First Nations peoples, meaning they never consented or agreed to give their country to the invaders, or agreed to live under someone else's laws.

*"... since spiritual belief is completely integrated into human daily activity, the powers that guide and direct the earth are believed to exist with all human life".
The first owners of the land were ancestral beings whose "creativity and incorporation into the land provides the basis for our sovereignty".*

Aileen Moreton-Robinson, in Jack Latimore, *Sydney Morning Herald*

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About

These resources have been produced in partnership between Aunty Barbara O'Neill and Graham Toomey, and The Centre for Volunteering. Resource topics and insights have been informed by both The Centre for Volunteering's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group and non-Indigenous members of the NSW volunteering sector.

Developed through a co-design process with Aunty Barb and Graham, the resources seek to ensure that non-Indigenous volunteer-involving organisations are well placed to understand, support, engage and build strong relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

This information is designed to support people who coordinate, manage and lead volunteers in building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by providing introductory knowledge to better understand Culture, access reliable information and appropriately work with Community.

To build on these resources it is essential to continue to do the work of listening, learning and being an active supporter of Community. Transparency, honesty and being genuine are keys to long lasting relationships.

Non-Indigenous volunteer-involving organisations should look to build principles of Aboriginal self-determination into ways of working and program delivery. This includes ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are involved in program design and decision-making on services which affect them. Contact your local Aboriginal Community to gather information about your local area.

Introduction

Australia is made up of many different and distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, each with their own culture, language, beliefs, and practices.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are the first peoples of Australia, meaning they were here for thousands of years prior to colonisation.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples have always been in Australia since the land was created. On mainland Australia, the Dreaming is a system of belief held by many First Nations peoples to account for their origins. In the Dreaming all-powerful beings roamed the landscape and laid the moral and physical groundwork for human society.



Wiradjuri Country

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What is Culture?

Culture is a broad term. It includes traditional practices, ways of understanding the world, and methods of expression such as language, celebrations and events. Culture is connected with Country, which refers to an area of land or sea on which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a traditional or spiritual association. Spirituality is a way of understanding life and connection with others. Individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have specific spiritualities that are connected to Country and Community.

Culture and spirituality can be expressed through many contemporary and traditional forms including language, dress, kinship, social norms, stories, music, song, dance, visual art, literature and film. Through these practices, culture can provide a sense of belonging that contributes to individual and Community wellbeing.

Aboriginal peoples' lives were governed by Lore, the Skies and the Land. An example of Culture is a version of the Dharawal calendar that describes the observable rhythms of Country as the six seasons:

Burran Hot and dry, Male kangaroos aggressive, Meat forbidden, Weetjellan blooming.

Marrai'gang Wet becoming cool Quolls seeking mates Lillypilly ripens.

Burrugin Cold and frosty, Echidna seeking mates, Burringoa flowering, Shellfish forbidden.

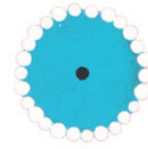
Wiritjiribin Cold and windy, Lyrebird building mounds, Marrai'uo flowering.

Ngoonung Cool, getting warmer, flying foxes gather, ceremonial time for the D'harawals.

Parra'dowee Warm and wet, Eels make their way down rivers and creeks, Kai'arrewan blooming.

From Destination NSW. Connecting with Country/Strategies for connecting with Country 2. Dharawal seasons cycle (adapted from Bureau of Meteorology)

To understand who First Nations peoples are, you need to understand the background first. What this did to us First Nations peoples and how they have tried ever since to survive and receive Cultural recognition.



Aboriginal Cultural History

Aboriginal culture has deep connections to the past. First Nations peoples have cultural traditions, practices history, and continuity. They have always had spiritual connections with their Ancestors, Country, Family, Songlines, Traditions along with Lore and cultural responsibilities. Their responsibilities have endured in many forms, like Caring for Country, preserving language and culture.

Aboriginal peoples have been in Australia for between 50,000 and 120,000 years. There were approximately 300,000 Aboriginal people living in Australia when the British arrived in 1788. There were approximately 500 dialects and 260 distinct language groups. First Nations peoples lived in small family groups and were semi-nomadic, each family lived in a specific area and walked Australia according to the seasons. Each Mob had their own Story and Culture. Peoples would come together for Ceremonial, trade and social reasons. It has been passed down in stories that up to 500 people gathered at the one time.

Membership within each family or language group was based on shared language, and cultural obligations and responsibilities and birthright. Relationships within groups:

- This was predetermined through categories of responsibilities and obligations to the group and to family.
- Unlike the Europeans, the people built semi-permanent dwellings; as a society of hunters and gatherers great importance was placed on relationships to family, group, and Country rather than the development of individual farms.
- Aboriginal peoples are also relatively non-materialistic. Social, religious and spiritual activities are of the highest importance.

*"The environment was controlled by spiritual rather than physical means and religion was deeply tied to country."*¹

*"The physical environment of each local area was created and shaped by the actions of spiritual ancestors who travelled across the landscape. As a consequence of the actions of the Dreaming Living and non-living things existed. Helen Milroy speaks about the importance of land as part of the Dreaming: "We are part of the Dreaming. We have been in the Dreaming for a long time before we are born on this earth and we will return to this vast landscape at the end of our days. It provides for us during our time on earth, a place to heal, to restore purpose and hope, and to continue our destiny."*²

¹ Ronald M Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt. *The world of the first Australians*. (Adelaide: Rigby, 1992); Richard Broome. *Aboriginal Australians*. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994).

² Pat Dudgeon, Michael Wright, Yin Paradies, Darren Garvey and Iain Walker. Aboriginal Social, Cultural, and Historical Contexts. In: *Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice*, edited by Pat Dudgeon, Helen Milroy and Roz Walker, 4. Canberra: Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014.



Identity

Individually and collectively, Country is fundamental to Aboriginal peoples. Concepts of Indigenous land ownership are not a fit for European legal systems. For example:

- Boundaries were validated by the Dreaming creation stories.
- Each person belonged to certain territories within the family group and had spiritual connections and obligations to Country.
- No one would even think that they owned any of the land. We belonged to the land.
- First Nations peoples experience the land as a richly symbolic and spiritual landscape rather than merely a physical environment. Spirituality is based on a oneness with the natural environment.

- Although academically, men have been acknowledged as having the primary responsibilities for the spiritual activities of groups, women's roles in traditional contexts have been neglected considering how these were disrupted during colonisation.

Complex and sophisticated kinship systems placed each person in relationship to every other person in the groups.

*"The kinship system also considered people external to the group. This practice became important during colonisation, when Aboriginal people attempted to bring outsiders into their kinship systems, particularly through relationships with women. Kinship systems determined exactly how one should behave towards every other person according to their relationship, so there were codes of behaviour between each person outlining their responsibilities and obligations towards others. For instance, a man had responsibilities to the Social, Cultural and Historical Context nephews; he taught them hunting skills and led them through initiation. Kinship relations determined how food and gifts should be divided, who were one's teachers, who one could marry. In a sense, an individual was not alone; kinship systems placed each person securely in the group."*³

*"People had designed roles according to age and gender. For example, a man's role involved skills in hunting as well as cultural obligations that were important to the cohesion of the group. Likewise, a woman also had an important role; she provided most of the food for the group, was responsible for early child rearing, and also had cultural obligations. Reciprocity and sharing were and still are important characteristics in Aboriginal society. Sharing along the lines of kinship and family remains an important cultural value."*⁴

³ Berndt & Berndt, *The World of the First Australians*.

⁴ Ibid.

Freshwater Peoples

The following text has been adapted from the ABC Science article titled [*Way of the water lilies: Where science meets the billabong.*](#)

An Aboriginal Elder born and raised in the remote Northern Territory town of Ngukurr, on the banks of Arnhem Land's Roper River. Growing up, her Elders would take her out bush with them to practice their traditions. People from the Ngandi language group took part in a variety of activities, including swimming among the water lilies, collecting bush food and medicine, and conducting ceremonies.

"Our leaders were strong. We didn't let white people stop us from having our ceremonies. It is our identity," she said.

She describes billabongs as "supermarkets" – full of plants and animals that can be eaten. Water lilies, also called 'yarlbun', were particularly important.

"We used to get lots of lily roots, lots of lily pods and even the stems. We'd bring them back to Ngukurr and I'd help my grandmother grind the lily pods to make dampers," she said. However, she has noted that things have changed since colonisation. "I am a native of Australia so I have seen how things have changed since I was a little girl."

In her culture, humans are deeply connected, the same as the land, the plants, the animals, the rivers and the billabongs. Two billabongs, Nalawan and Namaliwiri, are part of a songline on her country:

"My dreaming went to those billabongs and they are significant ... they are in my ceremonies."

She says these billabongs were sung into existence by an ancestral sand ridge goanna spirit called "motolo" that started at Parsons Range. "It started from there and came all the way right down to Namaliwiri and then on to Nalawan and then crossed the river and met up with another goanna. Then they passed each other. My dreaming went south, the other went west," she said.



Desert Peoples

The following text has been summarised from the ABC Gold Coast titled [*Indigenous ranger's quest to preserve Simpson Desert knowledge and 60,000-year-old history of his people*](#).

A Wangkangurru Yarluyandi Elder from south-west Queensland speaks about the preservation of the 60,000-year-old culture, life, and history of his people in the Simpson Desert. The Simpson Desert is home to extensive Aboriginal knowledge including Songlines and Dreamtime stories, as well as a range of artefacts that include stone tools, fighting shields, burial grounds, and humpies.

He lives in Birdsville on the edge of Munga-Thirri National Park, and has been a Wildlife ranger since 1994. He has discovered numerous sites and artefacts left behind when his people moved out of the desert about 120 years ago.

"From Birdsville to Poeppel Corner to Dalhousie Springs way over in the west there are stone tools, stick humpies, mikiris [native wells], grinding stones, fighting shields, fire places and burial grounds," he said.

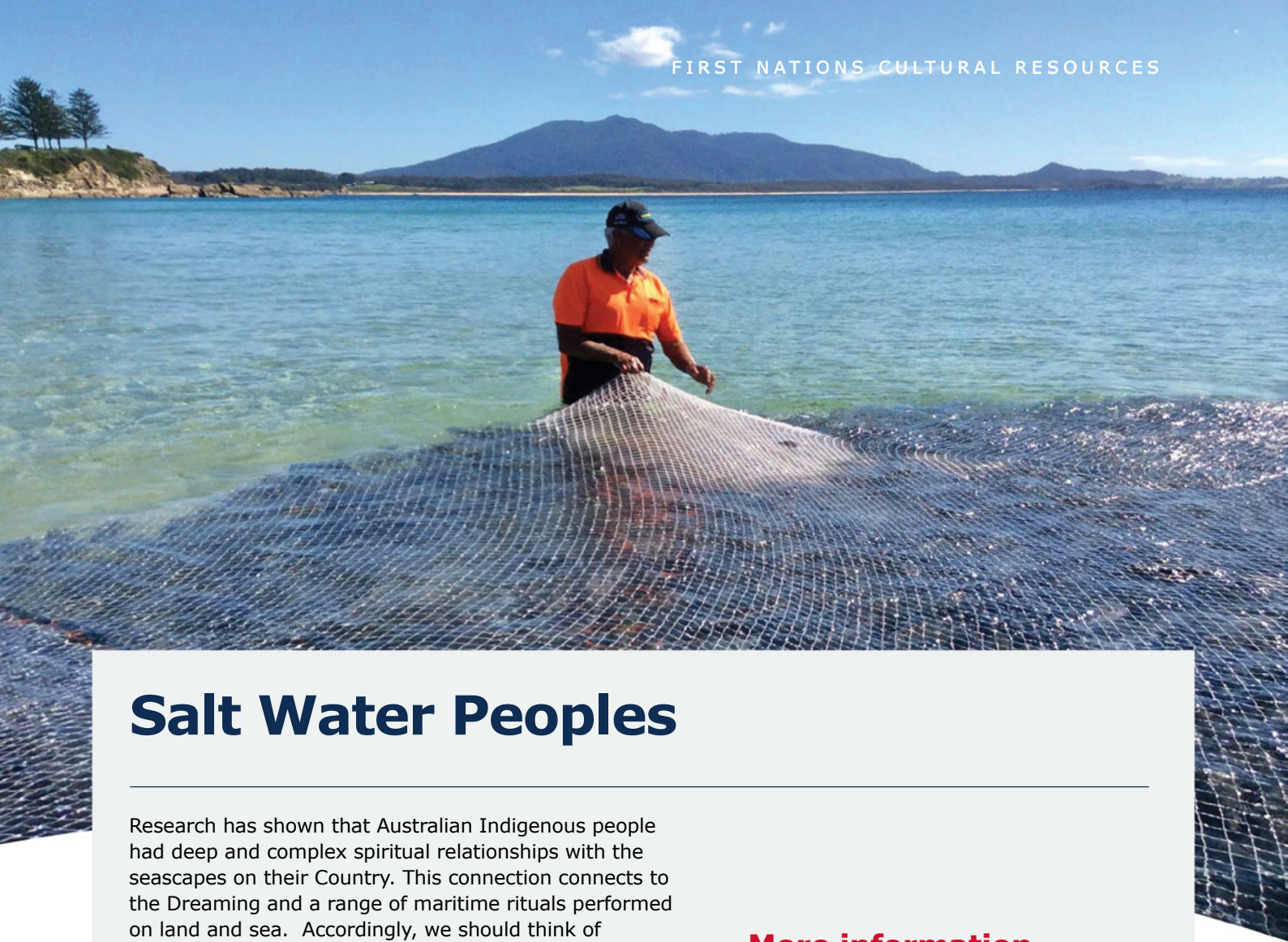
He does not want the knowledge he has gathered over his lifetime to be lost with him and he plans to store it in a "keeping place" database to be used by his people.

"When I finally get to the place of my ancestors it's not what I take with me, it'll be about what I leave behind and that's what drives me," he said. "I so often see it on the news ... 'Oh, we have just lost another legend and we didn't get all his stories'. I don't want that to be me."

However, this is more complicated when it comes to certain types of knowledge. "The songlines and storylines and the Dreamtime are all a little different and I can only explain what I know so through this process ... I want to learn more about the whole thing too," he said.

The traumas of colonisation and the Stolen Generations have also had an impact on the preservation of knowledge and culture. "When we were kids we were taken away from our oldies and told not to meddle with that 'devil talk' ... if a white fella saw you saying g'day in lingo the next day at school you could cop the cane and all that. I know some of the stories, I know how some of it works and all that but the songlines are the most important bit for traveling across the country or going from place to place... If we don't record this and make this available for Australia it would be a sad loss in the history of Australia and the history of the Simpson Desert and the history of the Wangkangurru people."

Nevertheless, he is determined to preserve the knowledge and culture of his people. "There's a lot of stuff out there and I'm not going to pretend I know, but I do know this, that I have to go and get all that together and leave it behind in this database and I've got a good team of people that I have been talking with," he said. "To connect that country and my people is hugely important for me and I think it's hugely important for the rest of Australia to understand how we lived out there and why we lived there and why we still call it home," he said.



Salt Water Peoples

Research has shown that Australian Indigenous people had deep and complex spiritual relationships with the seascapes on their Country. This connection connects to the Dreaming and a range of maritime rituals performed on land and sea. Accordingly, we should think of seascapes on Aboriginal Country as 'spiritscapes' as well, places deeply immersed in Culture and connection to Country.⁵

More information

[ResearchGate.net](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325111111)

⁵ Ian McNiven, "Saltwater people: spiritscapes, maritime rituals and the archaeology of Australian indigenous seascapes," *World Archaeology*. 35, no. 3. (2004).

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