

# Environmental Stewardship Resurgence in Walbunja Land and Sea Country

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For several decades, members of the Walbunja community have worked to strengthen their capacity to influence the development and environmental management decisions across their land, freshwater and sea territories. Located along the NSW South Coast, the lands and seas for which the Walbunja are the caretakers have been heavily transformed by settler colonial processes since early periods of invasion. Over time, the progressive urbanisation and privatisation of their Country led to further dispossession, limiting their movements and access to important sites, traditional food, medicine and material, heavily impacting the Walbunja community members' capacity to perform their ceremonies, economy and customary responsibilities. Today, Walbunja territories are facing increasing development pressures notably from urban expansion and gentrification, tourism, commercial fisheries and so on.

The devastating bushfires of 2019/2020 that deeply scarred Walbunja territories also led to a growing awareness in the settler population of the value of Indigenous knowledge and land management (especially cultural burning) practices to



From left to right: Annick Thomassin, Adam Nye and Tayla Nye on Walbunja Country. Photo: Jack Chatfield

prevent such disasters. Despite this increased awareness, genuine understanding in the wider settler population of how these management practices are intricately connected to First Nations standpoints, philosophies and aspirations, remains extremely limited. Moreover, the extent to which the public comprehends the need to significantly transform its way of relating to, and engaging with, the lands, waters, seas and non-humans is also unclear.

Walbunja's everyday sovereignty is being progressively activated

through, among other things, the actions of a small environmental ranger team attached to the Mogo Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC). With the support of their land council, the ranger team is working tenaciously and with little resources to restore their environmental custodianship responsibilities and reinscribe Walbunja lifeways, place names, stories, values and aspirations across the region's land-, sea- and urban-scapes. Lack of secured funding means that a large part of their work has consisted of

providing mainstream ecological services such as water quality testing, weed removal and pest control to subsidize other custodianship responsibilities.

The **Environmental Stewardship Resurgence in Walbunja (Yuin Nation) Land and Sea Country** initiative led by Mogo Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) funded in 2020 through the initial AIATSIS Indigenous Research Exchange scheme is a collective action research effort toward making Walbunja practices, philosophies and connections to Country visible. It is based on a partnership between the Mogo LALC, ANU's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) and Western Sydney University's Institute for Culture and Society (ICS). This project builds on the grassroots Seachange pilot initiative (2015-2019): an earlier action-research partnership between the Mogo LALC and CAEPR.

The Seachange pilot focused on co-developing training material and upskilling the rangers to co-design and conduct a survey documenting the cultural significance and biodiversity of their coastal environment.

The current project is providing opportunities for our Walbunja community researcher team members to enhance their mapping, surveying, analytic and reporting capacities, further expanding their toolkit to document, restore, reclaim and enact their stewardship practices.

Throughout this project, the team has interviewed local Elders and other key community members. Working with community members, the team has produced sketch maps of sites of significance to Walbunja's interconnected cultural history and spirituality. Some filming and audio recordings have also been conducted to complement

the sketch maps. The projects' questionnaires were developed by the team and adapted to different interlocutors. Most of the interviews were realised by Walbunja team members, and a few others by or with our academic colleagues.

As Walbunja Elder Uncle Keith Nye explains, there are names, stories, and connections with every headland, every bay, beach and paddock. This project's findings highlight the significance of Walbunja's contemporary engagement with their land and sea for their livelihood and wellbeing, despite the multifaceted challenges posed by ongoing colonial processes. By making such engagement visible, we are participating in demonstrating the strong connections between Walbunja peoples and Country, and the need to manage their territories holistically in a manner that is inclusive of its custodians.



From bottom left to bottom right: Kim Spurway Jake Chatfield, Adam Nye, Adam McCarron, Sherrie Nye McCarron and Janet Hunt sketch mapping at MogoLALC temporary office. Photo: Annick Thomassin

Cherokee Professor Jeff Corntassel (2012) argues that the processes of everyday resurgence are inscribed in daily actions to maintain, revive and reimagine meaningful life projects and environmental custodianship responsibilities. The project thus weaves together aspirations to genuinely increase Walbunja's participation in the governance of their territories and supports their everyday resurgence through environmental stewardship practices articulating work on Country and Walbunja philosophies.

This research offers an important opportunity for our team of younger Walbunja colleagues to spend time with many of the regions' Elders. Hence, this project strongly focuses on intergenerational transmission of knowledge, something the younger Walbunja value enormously, appreciating the opportunity to learn and record the stories for future generations. For the non-Walbunja members of the team, this project consistently reminds us of the privilege of deepening our understanding of the relationships among Walbunja Country and people.

As mentioned above, one of the key objectives of this research is to develop tools to help shift non-First Nations peoples' understanding of Country and

their own responsibilities they hold towards it, and the non-humans constituting it. To get a sense of what the current level of understanding of Walbunja culture and Country is among the wider region's population, the Walbunja researchers have also prepared a questionnaire and have been interviewing members of the non-First Nations community.

We hope to continue to document the benefits offered and challenges posed by collaborative mapping and digital storytelling to support the resurgence of environmental custodianship in Walbunja land and sea Country. Through follow up interviews with non-Walbunja residents, government representatives, and visitors to Walbunja Country we want to explore whether the articulation and interaction of these complementary digital platforms can shift the settlers' and visitors' understanding of the South Coast's land and sea and the responsibilities they also hold towards Country. Can the knowledge shared through this project enable non-Indigenous inhabitants and visitors to the South Coast to start feeling and understanding the region as Walbunja Country? By sharing the research findings with non-First Nations peoples who also call Walbunja Country home, we hope that this project will open their eyes and enable

new relationships to emerge – so that Walbunja can renew connections with areas of Country that have become out of bounds because of the privatisation of the land. As landholders begin to understand the enormous loss of knowledge and relationships such exclusion means to Walbunja, we hope new opportunities will open up to restore such relationships.

After what has been nearly two years of a very tumultuous period for both the community and the research project, we are now slowly wrapping up. Some of our project's outcomes will be presented at the AIATSIS Summit in May 2022. An enticing multimedia online storytelling platform is also currently being created and will be made available online later this year.

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### **Cited reference**

Corntassel, J. (2012). Re-envisioning resurgence: Indigenous pathways to decolonization and sustainable self-determination. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1): 86-101.



A family of ducks navigating their entry into the water, Ngunnawal Country (Canberra). Photo Dora Bowles