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# **Incorporating Indigenous Australian Knowledge and Perspectives into Planning Practice**

## **Past, present and future**

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The history and contemporary practice of land-use planning and place-making by Indigenous Australians is poorly understood by academics, students and practitioners in the field of urban and regional planning in Australia. This is despite recent high-profile events which have increased the profile of Indigenous peoples' rights, such as the recognition of native title by the High Court in *Mabo v the State of Queensland [No. 2] (1992)* 175 CLR 1 and The United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007), and Commonwealth policy and reconciliation discourses. Further, little impact has been discernible arising from the adoption of reconciliation policies by government bodies, planning authorities and the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA). This paper reviews this lack of progress and discusses why this is a problem for Australian planners which needs to be addressed.

The paper reviews the present Australian historical and socio-cultural context in terms of collaboration with traditional land owners as it relates to contemporary planning practice. It considers ontological, epistemological and axiological differences between the dominant western model of planning and Indigenous models, and the challenges this presents. A case-study documenting past, present and future planning practices at Lake Condah in South West Victoria which is the Country of the *Gunditjmara* and *Budj Bim* will bring to life these topics through the documentation of Indigenous planning practices prior to and post European arrival. It offers a vision for the future of planning with Indigenous communities. The paper envisages a future which values and incorporates Indigenous place-making and planning, which goes far beyond the tacit acknowledgement of traditional owners commonly observed around Australia today.

**Keywords:** Indigenous planning; *Gunditjmara*; *Budj Bim*; Lake Condah; reconciliation

## Introduction

Period and contemporary town planning histories of Australia commence at the European colonization or invasion of this continent. Underpinned by settlement patterns and models, surveying strategies and theoretical world views, they articulate that life – and thus ‘planning’ – on the Australian continent commenced through dreams in the United Kingdom about what to impose on an “empty continent”; thus initiating the terra nullius myth that has perpetuated much of Australia’s ‘history’ and thereby its planning ‘history’.

The dichotomy is that the Australian continent was settled some 100,000-60,000 years ago, resulting in a landscape of mixed semi-sedentary and permanent communities of approximately 250 countries each with their own language. ‘Settled’ and ‘semi-sedentary’, as European-derived terms, muddy historical and contemporary literature about Australia as they are predicated upon European development preconceptions and in particular about generic appraisals of Aboriginal occupancy of the Australian continent (Williams 1988).

Thus a colonized Eurocentric translation of Australia’s pre-colonial and post-colonial planning histories exists and the decolonized narrative is little expressed or investigated. The irony is that while the essence of contemporary ‘planning’ is to consciously devise, execute and monitor strategies, policies or plans that are linked to land-based activities and or resources, such a strategy, plan and policy occurs within Indigenous cultures that historically curated (and in certain parts continue to curate) the Australian continent before and since the invasion (Gammage 2011).

As an example, the Gunditjmara people of south-western Victoria are, and continue to be, the antithesis of this contradiction and are incorrectly mapped into these Eurocentric definitions. In their eyes, they do not ‘own’ their ‘country’ but rather are the custodians of this land on behalf of ancestral beings who created this environment, with Budj Bim integral to their narratives and ‘laws’ (Dixon 1996).

‘Country’ is also an Aboriginal term as it embodies both the tangible and the intangible, as well as the before, now and after, and the below, here, and above realms of both day and night. Thus, a contrasting definition to the Eurocentric definition that assumes a rural swath of landscape with artefacts and citizens reflective of some tangible relationship(s) and pattern(s). Thus the Gunditjmara perceive their role as a cultural planner sustaining and guiding the health of the landscape or ‘country’ to which they have been vested responsibility.

To the Gunditjmara people of western Victoria in Australia in the custodianship of their landscape and process of landscape planning, “we continue our heritage” to the quote the Acting Chief Executive Officer of the Gunditj Mirring Aboriginal Traditional Owners Corporation, Damein Bell.

To secure rights over this ‘country’ against ongoing claims of others on it, the Gunditjmara have strategically engaged with European systems of land tenure and heritage valuing as vehicles to achieve their objectives. Thus in recent times the Gunditjmara community have recognized that it

has become necessary to 'own' land title in accordance with European land conventions to reinforce and achieve these custodianship responsibilities. Thus, they are 'playing' the Eurocentric 'game' respecting and adapting the Western ideals but strategically seeking to achieve their cultural responsibilities to continue, maintain and enable their 'country'. Their historical acts of land manipulation and planning to craft a unique hydraulic engineering system resulted in an advanced internationally-significant terrestrial aquaculture system, with associated native vegetation and wildlife management regimes, creating a particular landscape unique in Australia for which they sought and now have a 'National Heritage Landscape' designation. The former is further evidenced in the writings of Gammage (2011) in his advocacy of Indigenous informed land management regimes and planning systems

The Gunditjmarra, therefore, are seeking the re-establishment and legitimization of their integrated knowledge system as a planning and land use management plan and suite of strategies.

### **Where is the Western Colonisation of Australia now?**

The taproot is the root of the tree that goes the deepest. In my family taproots are really important because, as my mother always says, 'We didn't get here by ourselves. We have others to thank for that and we should acknowledge it'. Those family members that make up the taproots are still very much alive and living with us today, and this reinforces a sense of self, belonging, and place. Never forget your taproots because they'll never forget you - Tjalaminu Mia (Mia 2007: 208).

Australian planners, environmental designers and land managers are beginning to embrace an informed and shared practice of knowing Aboriginal notions of 'country' and in turn an understanding of what that means to land and water stewardship and professional practice across Australia. These are extremely important and challenging times for Australian planning systems and their educators and practitioners.

Historically, non-Indigenous scholar Debra Bird Rose's seminal *Nourishing Terrains* (1996), addressed the now defunct Australian Heritage Commission's (AHC) urgent and poignant inquiries into the assessment and quantification of cultural landscape (tangible and intangible) values and their associated land and water attributes across the Australian landscape. Rose (1996: v) was specifically commissioned to "explore Indigenous views of landscape and their relationships with the land," in the temporal context of debates about 'wilderness' and how such a classification of land was to contribute to the AHC's charter to identify and conserve 'National Estate'. Her treatise offered an informed cultural land planning and management conversation with Aboriginal Australia. Through her eyes, 'culture and landscape' were inclusive of Aboriginal knowledge systems of sustaining environmental values and their associated obligations and cultural rights for being. This documented line of argument confounded traditional perceptions in the AHC at the time that accepted transformative understandings of the Australian environment and, landscape (wilderness or otherwise). Rose's thoughts about 'country' however opened up a deeper discourse about Australian 'space' and what could be shared and learnt about Aboriginal relationships and associations with Australian cultural landscape systems.

Rose poignantly revealed to Australian popular culture that in Aboriginal knowledge systems, everything is alive and everything is in relationships; past, present, and future are one, where both

the physical and spiritual worlds of 'country' interact. Thus in Aboriginal culture, the 'Dreaming' is an ongoing celebration and reverence for past events: the creation of the land, the creation of law, and the creation of people. Stories historically and orally vested to Aboriginal peoples from the 'Dreaming', inter-weave that everything comes into being through story, and that 'Dreaming' is their ancestors. All things exist eternally in the 'Dreaming'; the 'Dreaming' is alive. Thus, the individual is born to 'country', not just in 'country', but from 'country', and his or her identity is inextricably and eternally linked to the 'Dreaming'. Rose (1996: 1) suggested:

In Aboriginal English, the word 'Country' is both a common noun and a proper noun. People talk about Country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to Country, sing to Country, visit Country, worry about Country, grieve for Country and long for Country. People say that Country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, and feels sorry or happy. Country is a living entity with a yesterday, a today and tomorrow, with consciousness, action, and a will toward life. Because of this richness of meaning, Country is home and peace: nourishment for body, mind and spirit; and heart's ease.

As observed by Revell and Milroy(2013), Australian space is not emptiness, a void to be filled, or a neutral place for action. Rather, space through the Indigenous lens is imagined – called into being – by individuals, families, and the cultures of which they are a part. Yet we experience a double spatial jeopardy in Australia, which is the oldest intact environment (120,000 years) in the world, and the oldest Indigenous culture in the world (60,000+ years). These spatial qualities negate uniformity and featurelessness within 'country'. They also allow 'country' to speak for itself. Indigenous peoples humanize their environments because of their (non-material) 'country' relationships and their abilities to sense the resources of 'country' itself.

Importantly, *Nourishing Terrains* (1986) now indelible mantra -- "If you are good to Country, then Country is good to you" – eventually has become revelatory to the planning and design academies and professional institutions of Australia, and elsewhere. This text came at a critical time for Australian planners where the study of both ancient and contemporary biophysical and human ecological systems were overtly staring at one another, desperately seeking to understand the specificity of reciprocal environmental and social meanings and their associated ecological relationships. Above all, 60,000 + years of Aboriginal caring for 'country' was beginning to make sense to Australian planners, and the professional inquiries and relationships Rose (1986) helped to set up were to change bi-cultural Australian planning practices forever. The cogent fact that *Nourishing Terrains* (1986) arrived in Australia only 27 years ago in the 'Nation's' collective 60,000 year history should be extremely significant to Australia's planning histories, and might we say unconsciousable to Australia overall.

Today, despite some isolated regional achievements, Australian bi-cultural planning practices have much to learn from other First Nation groups across the globe. Notably, Canadian and New Zealand planning institutions have well-advanced, culturally-inspired educational programs, professional policies and accountable practices offered and operated by Indigenous professionals and their communities for the betterment of bi-cultural (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) communities.

Professional cultural protocols, ethics and respectful ways of working and engaging with 'Indigenous Ways' are paramount to these successful bi-cultural planning systems (Havermann 1999; Walker

2004). Professional (and everyday) matters of cultural competency, inclusiveness, respect and equity are important, yet they somewhat pale against a greater de-colonised understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing, planning and managing land and community.

Matters of cultural sustainability, endurance of stewardship and custodial care and generative practices of creative land, water and sky planning and design are significant primarily because they are understood as a set of overdue de-colonised processes rather than necessarily any collection of re-colonised product. Planning ‘outcomes’, physically tangible, ‘real’, or manifested otherwise, are important yet they are not to be sacrificed by short-cutting or ignoring ‘proper’ cultural ways, socialisations and associated rights of engaging with living ancient and contemporary cultural obligations and custodial practices amongst family, community, land, water and sky. Planners are finally learning that there are only certain people who can speak and work for certain country. And at times, these rights cannot be shared in a bi-cultural planning realm.

Indigenous Canadian cultural theorist and scholar Margaret Kovach, for example, has heralded decolonizing research practices where epistemological planning and design research, mapping methodologies and project implementation initiatives are designed as ongoing Indigenous-led conciliatory ceremonies in their own right, determined by strict inter-cultural protocols, ethics and customs of knowledge inquiry, development and keeping. Involving ‘two-way’ relationship building and the dialogical spaces in which they develop, performance and celebration are essential ‘ceremonies’ in the project design process and remain at the forefront of improving any planned landscape. Senses of community need and site specificity are bound up with different ways of knowing, decolonizing theory itself, story as method, cultural protocol and ethical responsibility (Kovach 2009).

Walker et al (2013) has collated much of the North American discourse on this topic, echoing Kovach (2009), and Porter (2004, 2006, 2010, 2013) and Smith (1999, 2012), in Australia and New Zealand respectively, are key proponents of this Reclaiming Indigenous Planning (Walker et al 2013) argument.

An exemplar Australian model of bi-cultural collaboration can be found in the south-western Western Australian (WA) planning work of Collard and Palmer (2008). Nyungar senior Len Collard directed the development of a set of nine (9) meta-narratives – see Table 1 -- that would become operational principles to undertake planning and design studies on Nyungar lands in WA. They offer planners a way of working with ‘Nyungar Ways’ and are intentionally broad ranging and holistic in their understanding of Nyungar peoples, their ‘country’ and their ways of working. Non-replicable per ‘country’, these principles are specific to the Aboriginal country to which they belong.

Table 1: Nyungar Meta-Narratives of Planning. Source: Collard and Palmer (2008).

Meta Narrative #	Meta Narrative Principle
1/ <i>Windja Noonook Koorliny</i> or Where are you going (Interrogating the planners own motivation and desire)	The first step in any process of recognising the importance of <i>Nyungar</i> systems of land use ought to involve planner and design workers interrogating their own desire – asking the question: where am I going and what motivates my work;

2/ <i>Nidja Nyungar Boodjar</i> or this is Aboriginal land (Land & Place)	Planning and design work ought to begin with a recognition that the south west of Western Australia is <i>Nyungar Boodjar</i> or <i>Nyungar Country</i> . This means that a principal theme which needs to run through planning work ought to be recognition of <i>Nyungar's</i> knowledge of legal, cultural, linguistic, and custodial obligations and rights to country. Designers must be mindful of their legal and moral obligations to recognise and respect the prior ownership of <i>Nyungar</i> cultural custodians. In practice this includes planners and designers understanding their obligations under federal and state Aboriginal heritage legislation, researching native title claims and perhaps negotiated native title agreements, and establishing sensitive plans which incorporate <i>Nyungar</i> protocols for <u>Nyungar</u> involvement;
3/ <i>Moorditch Boordier</i> or strong path-makers (Strength and Leadership)	It is a mistake to assume that Nyungars have, as yet, had little influences on the way that other Australians use and engage with land. Design work should regularly draw out the point that Nyungars have often acted in leadership roles, influencing, directing and shaping economic, cultural and social life for other Australians growing up in the south-west. Designers need to shift their thinking to emphasise the strength and resilience of Nyungars and Nyungar culture. Far from being dupes who have always lost any capacity to shape landuse and design, Nyungars have, in different historical moments, been instrumental in influencing the way other Australians use and interpret country;
4/ <i>Kura, Yeye Boorda</i> or the past, today and in the future (Continuity)	It is a mistake to assume that <i>Nyungar</i> culture and land-use, while once being important, is no longer powerful. Planners and designers ought to be mindful of the need to include a balance in the design between 'old stories' and contemporary stories and that <i>Nyungar</i> land use has always been dynamic and is ever present. In other words designers should try and find ways to show continuity in <i>Nyungar</i> influence on land use and landscape design, culture and access to the south-west by seeking out examples of continuity between past land use with present land use;
5/ <i>Wangkiny</i> or speaking (Language)	It is also a mistake to think that <i>Nyungar</i> language is dead. It is very much alive, particularly so in the names that are often still used to describe places. <i>Nyungar Wangkin</i> or language has been critical, particularly in relation to nomenclature. Planners and designers who begin to learn and appreciate language will have keys to understanding <i>Nyungar</i> land use in particular sites;
6/ <i>Boola Wam</i> or lots of strangeness (Shared Difference and Diversity)	It is a mistake to assume that Aboriginal culture represents one unified set of values, ideas and experiences. In any design process there ought to include a balance between an emphasis on how <i>Nyungar</i> and history is distinct and how aspects of <i>Nyungar</i> life are shared with other Australians. In other words, planners and designers should look at different as well as shared cultural experience. At the same time design projects ought to show the diversity of <i>Nyungar</i> life and experiences.
7/ <i>Nyungar Karnya</i> or shame and respect (Culturally Sensitive):	Planners and designers must be sensitive to <i>Nyungar</i> protocols, learning modes and ways of doing things. Many of these values include: respect for elders, the importance of maintaining <i>Nyungar</i> family connections, the central nexus between country and family, taking pride in community, care for the environment, encouraging creativity, regard for the views of others, emphasising active and personal learning, placing great store on learning through listening and observing;

8/ <i>Ngulluckiny Koorliny Nyungar Wedjela</i> or we travel together Black and White (Interaction and Collaboratively):	Planners and designers should find ways to make and maintain contact and dialogue with <i>Nyungar's</i> in the communities they are working in. People need to make opportunities to meet, interact and consult with a variety of <i>Nyungar's</i> . Designers, particularly non-Aboriginal people, must begin to understand the value of shared exchanges and reciprocal learning. The knowledge, practices and information of <i>Nyungar's</i> are gaining in value in the market place. Planners and designers must plan to have contributions of <i>Nyungar's</i> recognised in practical ways; and
9/ <i>Boola Katitjin Koorliny Nitjar Boodjar</i> or with much informed thinking and moving in the land (Thinking and Using Land in Many Ways):	Within many <i>Nyungar</i> accounts we find the idea that country is relational and land use is multiple and contextual. For <i>Nyungar's</i> particular places are related to other places and it is meaningless to talk about one place in isolation from other places related to it. This is in contrast to many western ideas about land use being specific to one activity (often one person) and fixed over time. Planners and designers must begin to understand <i>Nyungar</i> ideas about spatiality and how <i>Nyungar</i> use of space is much more contextual and inter-relational than standard western ideas about land use and mapping space.

### Australian decolonising discourses

Australian planning is predicated on Eurocentric definitions of planning and land settlement that run counter to many Indigenous systems of planning. Subject to little discipline-specific introspection, scholars, including the Australian planning profession and its own Institute (PIA 2002, 2010), have started re-thinking this pre-condition. Anthropologist Stanner (1968) first challenged the 'great Australian silence' on Indigenous issues in the 1960s and subsequent authors and political and legal activities heightened debates about Indigenous marginalization in Australian society and the absence of Indigenous knowledge and people in citizenship and enfranchisement.

These differences of perceptions are increasingly embodied in several actions by Indigenous peoples and communities aimed at redressing the denial, dispossession and discrimination against their traditional rights and interests. Included are, the Gurindji Strike (or Wave Hill Walk-Off) in 1966; the successful Constitution Alteration (Aboriginal People) 1967 Commonwealth referendum in 1967; the *Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty Ltd*, (1971) 17 FLR 141 or Gove land rights Australian High Court determination that legally legitimized terra nullius and that no concept of native title existed in Australian law; the *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* 1992 (commonly known as 'Mabo decision') decision by the High Court of Australia that declared terra nullius to be invalid and legitimized Indigenous 'ownership' of land and water based upon traditional custodianship practices and 'laws'; the *Wik Peoples v The State of Queensland* (commonly known as the 'Wik decision') of 1996; the Motion of Reconciliation by Prime Minister Howard in 1999; and, more recently the apology to the Stolen Generations by Prime Minister Rudd in 2008. Another key example is the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth) that was the lynchpin of the *Mabo (No. 1)* determination because the Court found that the Queensland government's attempt to effectively wipe out native title rights while the *Mabo* case was before the Courts, was invalid on the basis of race and was in clear breach of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975. The Racial Discrimination Act 1975 also provides the right for compensation for the loss of native title rights subsequent to the Racial Discrimination Act 1975.

The Mabo (No. 2) decision is highly significant to Australian planning histories as it clearly demonstrates that traditional custodianship practices and 'laws' constitute a system of conscious land management curatorship and thus an act of planning of lands and resources. 'Laws' embrace Indigenous myth, moral codes and their narratives linked to place, or a series of places (Gammage 2011; Rose 1996, 2000; Sandercock 1998).

Anthropology, geography and history academics have been perceptive and relevant in participating in much of this debate (Reynolds 1997). But the planning discipline has been lax in its introspectively and ethical responsiveness, still deferring its appraisals to dates of colonization despite Native Title legislative and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage legislative responsibilities. Thus historic and contemporary planning interrogations continue to exclude and marginalize despite pleas 'from the edges' of the discipline by authors and planning practitioners including Johnson (2010, 2014), Wensing (2007, 2011), Jackson (1997), Cosgrove & Klinger (1997), Lane (2005, 2008), Jones (2005, 2010a), Porter 2004, 2006, 2010, 2013), Porter & Barry (2012), and Barry (2012). These authors have questioned this ethical accountability and offered case studies that demonstrate alternate planning approaches and outcomes that robustly express and fulfil Indigenous interests, aspirations and 'planning' strategies.

Wensing summarizes it as:

This cultural blindness means that conventional land and property planning as well as management regimes have been, and continue to be, instruments in sanctioning and reinforcing ABTSI [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] people's dispossession of their land and culture, causing loss of physical, spiritual and cultural traditions and customs (Wensing 2007).

The Mabo (No. 2) (1992) and Wik (1998) determinations, unfortunately, relied upon the demonstration of physical or tangible 'evidence'. But, as a consequence they have proven that rich and continuing narratives and legacies have legitimacy in the Native Title discourse. Where 'evidence' is muddled or obliterated by years of dispossession such evidence is much harder to document and prove within the Western legal system (for example: [http://www.nntt.gov.au/news-and-communications/newsletters/native-title-hot-spots-archive/pages/yorta\\_yorta\\_v\\_victoria.aspx](http://www.nntt.gov.au/news-and-communications/newsletters/native-title-hot-spots-archive/pages/yorta_yorta_v_victoria.aspx)). Notwithstanding this barrier, cultural re-empowerment and re-definitions of 'ownership' have been forthcoming through various measures; including the creation of statutory land rights grants regimes, direct transfers, purchases on the open market, declaration of cultural heritage sites or zones, and re-naming or dual naming of places through Indigenous-informed or associative toponyms, consultation and direct involvement in national park joint planning and management arrangements. They have also been deceptively and tacitly woven into larger reconciliation strategies.

Therefore, while land 'ownership' and traditional country, as a terra nullius reversal, is known and increasingly becoming respected in both general and planning debates, the legislation of planning process and perspectives in land management and landscape planning has been limited and superficial, hampered by planning practitioner and academic naïf and lack of depth of interrogation and appreciation. Such a knowledge gap can be met, in part, by detailed and localised studies of

Indigenous and non-Indigenous planning histories and joint practices. One such case is offered by the Gunditjmarra of western Victoria.

### **A journey into the planning of *Budj Bim***

The Gunditjmarra are historically and continue to be landscape planners possessing technical expertise in freshwater aquaculture and hydraulic engineering, and have more recently engaged consultant engineers, natural resource management scientists and other technical expertise to corroborate and inform their own management strategies for land now under their ownership. This knowledge and expertise arises from some 60,000 years of occupancy of a landscape tract in south-western Victoria, and includes unique specializations in architecture, natural resource management, and sustainability curatorship.

All these terminologies are deeply embedded in the planning discipline literature and language systems today, but do not accord with Indigenous language interpretations as they contain alternate notions of science and land management practices (Gunditjmarra with Wettenhall 2010; Reynolds 2005).

The Gunditjmarra represent one of approximately 250 countries or nations that resided on the Australian continent prior to European colonization and dispossession. Their 'country' stretched across most of the lower south-west of the Western District of Victoria, embracing the localities of Portland, Hexham, Hamilton, and Lake Condah today.

Their landscape beginning and its environment rotates around ancestral beings – part human, part animal – who brought life to this barren expansive continent (Gunditjmarra with Wettenhall 2010). As part of this narrative, Dreaming stories record the journeys of these ancestral beings whom left aspects or physical representations in the landscape, as part of this transformative role. Such stories are temporally deep in the origins of the landscape but also embedded in intermittent reappearances that have cast new transformations and responsibilities into the landscape. As Eileen Albert, a Gunditjmarra women, recounts:

In the Dreamtime, the ancestral creators gave the Gunditjmarra people the resources to live a settled lifestyle. They diverted the waterways, and gave us the stones and rocks to help us to build the aquaculture systems. They gave us the wetlands where the reeds grew so that we could make the eel baskets, and gave us the food-enriched landscape for us to survive (Albert in Gunditjmarra with Wettenhall 2010, p.7).

Every aspect of the Budj Bim environment and landscape holds some meaning, sense of purpose and contains a library of oral narratives about Indigenous science and history.

The ancestral being Budj Bim is integral to this environmental creation to the Gunditjmarra. His apparition resides in Mt Eccles, an erroneously colonial appellation that celebrates English aristocrat Eeles, where the doomed form of the mount is Budj Bim's forehead. With the eruption of his head, lava spat out and flowed through his teeth in endless streams of red lava, creating the Tyrendarra lava flow. To the Gunditjmarra, Budj Bim means "high head" and tung att means "teeth belong to it" in the Dhauwurd wurrung language. Budj Bim's journey and transformative acts link the axial castellated Serra Range at Gariwerd (The Grampians) to the desolate isle of Lady Julia Percy Island

(Deen Maar) in Portland Bay to Cape Bridgewater to the west, with Lake Condah in the centre. Included in this somewhat linear tract is the volcanic cone of Tappoc (Mt Napier), and the foreboding granite escarpment of Mutt Te Tehoke (Mt Abrupt) that watches southwards over much of this landscape. The Island, at the far end of the lava flow, is Deen Mar being the final resting place of the spirits of the Gunditjmarra people when they die. The head of Budj Bim itself is analogous to a Eurocentric sacred place because, to the Gunditjmarra, it is a place that only law men or Elders may venture and stand upon, and in their absence it is guarded by the silent sentries of gnearing or weeping she-oaks (*Allocasuarina verticillata*) (Bell pers. comm., 2010; Saunders pers. comm., 2010; Gunditjmarra in Wettenhall 2010, pp.6-7; McNiven & Bell 2010).

Within this 'country', formerly a 7,000-1,000,000 old volcanic plain, is an extensive dendritic watercourse system that flows north-south, often resulting in low-lying and seasonally perennial swamps, lakes and depressions. The undulating volcanic plain is composed of weathered basalt rock and soils, of 1.5 to 4 million years old, affords rich acidic native grassland and introduced perennial pastures to support extensive communities of herbaceous mammals and sheep and cattle respectively (Carr et al 2007). The most recent of these volcanic upheavals occurred some 20,000-30,000 years ago at Mt Eccles, causing the Tyrendarra lava flow that advanced 50 kilometres west and south of this volcano reaching under Portland Bay today. This lava flow progressively became distorted into hummocks and depressions, resulting in extensive fields of loose or interconnected small and large scoria, either heavily air-pocked or dense hard rock. Central in this flow route was the formation of Lake Condah.

The Gunditjmarra witnessed these volcanic eruptions; a major transformation of their 'country'. Their response, in terms of survival necessitated a shift from a semi-sedentary hunter-gather society to a semi-permanent society based upon intensive aquaculture production arising from their mastery of hydraulic engineering principles and their manipulation of this post-lava flow landscape. The end result, after some 25,000 years of landscape planning activity, and some 5,000-7,000 years of lava flow manipulation, was a semi-permanent community, dependent upon and culturally responsible for the intensive production and harvesting of fish and Short-finned Eel (*Anguilla australis*) through the conscious acts of engineering an intricate hydraulic system to support aquaculture production. Semi-permanency was aided by the formulation of unique micro-climatic responses, including architecture from stone and vegetation, a new-found role as a core food supplier and sharer/trader to adjacent countries and the wider region, and by their spatial and physical neutrality of land custodianship (Builth 2002, 2003; Clark 1990a, 1990b; Coutts et al 1978; Jones 1993; Lourandos 1980; Sutton 2004; Williams 1988).

All this knowledge and expertise was suddenly cast aside in the 1840s-60s, and again in the 1930s-50s, when colonial pastoralism, intensive settlement, guns, small-pox, uncontrolled fire, and the European protectorate and religious missions 'invaded' the landscape. Such ongoing incursions resulted in death, dispossession, cultural knowledge disintegration, 'natural' landscape transformation including extensive drainage measures, and the transposition of conventional European science onto the environment. During these periods, and over the wider 160 years, sheep invaded the pastures, the Gunditjmarra were herded, split, died of disease, and their knowledge and 'religion' were discredited despite attempts to fight against this onslaught (Gunditjmarra with Wettenhall 2010; Context 2000; Dawson 1881; McNiven & Bell 2010). These periods witnessed the

disintegration of these traditional aquaculture systems, the imposition of Western knowledge, science and land systems, and the cultural dispossessions of land, spirit and purpose.

The last 25 years have witnessed a major shift in these acts of intellectual and physical planning. The former Lake Condah Mission Station has been returned to the Kerrup Jmara Elders Aboriginal Corporation (KJEAC) (now Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation, GMTOAC), additional properties progressively acquired and transferred to the Corporation, and Crown land, whether reserved (at Mt Eccles National Park) or unreserved, transferred to the Corporation openly or under deed embodying management and access conditions (Context 2012).

After an extended period of mediation, research and court hearings, Justice North of the Australian Federal Court ruled in March 2007, on *Gunditjmarra People v State of Victoria* (North FCA 474) in favour of recognising “non-exclusive native title rights” over 13,300 ha involving 2,000 parcels and 170 respondents. Such rights allowed the Gunditjmarra to access, enter, remain, camp, use and enjoy these lands and waters, to take the resources of these lands and waters and to protect places and areas of importance. Crucially the determination did not grant ownership or exclusive rights to these lands – it is a right to enter and use as hunters, gatherers and custodians of these sites – though it does acknowledge their symbolic and cultural value. The reasons for such a judgement are instructive as they acknowledge the long and particular history of the Gunditjmarra on these lands and the means by which they were displaced from them. The ruling therefore notes:

Dating back thousands of years, the area shows evidence of a large, settled Aboriginal community systematically farming eels for food and trade in what is considered to be one [of] Australia’s earliest and largest aquaculture ventures.

This complex enterprise took place in a landscape carved by natural forces and full of meaning for the Aboriginals who lived there.

More than 30 000 years ago the ground in this area rumbled and rolled as Aboriginal people nearby witnessed Budj Bim, an important creation being from the Dreamtime reveal himself in the landscape. That volcano that today we call Mount Eccles, is his forehead and the scoria are his teeth.

Budj Bim is the source of the Tyrendarra lava flow, which extends over 50km to the west and south and which is central to the history of [the] Gunditjmarra.

As the lava flowed from Mount Eccles to the sea it changed the drainage pattern in this part of Western Victoria, creating some large wetlands. Beginning thousands of years ago, the Gunditjmarra People started to develop this landscape by digging channels to bring water and eels from Darlots Creek to low lying areas.

They built dams to hold the water in these areas, creating ponds and wetlands in which they grew short-fin eels and other fish. They also created channels linking these wetlands. These channels contained weirs with large woven baskets made by women to harvest mature eels.

The modified and engineered wetlands and eel traps provided an economic basis for the development of a settled society with villages. Gunditjmarra used stones from the lava flow to

create the walls of their circular stone huts. Groups of between (2 and 16) huts are common along the Tyrendarra lava flow and early European accounts ... describe how they were ruled by hereditary chiefs (North, 2007).

The ruling further describes the history of the many attempts by the Gunditjmara to have this area recognised as their own, including a successful attempt to have part of it included in the National Heritage List in July 2004. This determination recognition that:

The remains of the system of eel aquaculture in the Mt Eccles/Lake Condah areas demonstrates a transition from a forager society to a society that practised husbandry of fresh water fish. This resulted in high population densities represented by the remains of stone huts ... The landscape of the Tyrendarra lava flow ... [is also] of outstanding heritage value because it provides a particularly clear example of the way that Aboriginal people used their environment as a base for launching attacks on European settlers and escaping reprisal raids during frontier conflict ... (North, 2007).

The recognition by the Australian Federal Court of prior occupancy and use was in the face of a spirited division of opinion by experts, anthropologists and archaeologists, as to the existence, use and meaning of the landscapes around the Tyrendarra lava flow. Thus anthropologists such as Lane have argued that there is limited material evidence of long term semi-sedentary occupancy, with the many stone circles adjacent to Lake Condah more likely created by natural processes – such as lava flows and tree roots - than by pre-contact Aborigines (Lane, 2008).

However, others, such as the Victorian Archaeological Service's (VAS) Lourandos (1997) and Builth (2002, 2004) argue a very different case, citing the existence of engineered canals and numerous clusters of stone circles as evidence of a sophisticated fish farming enterprise which, in conjunction with bountiful water and land based food supplies, allowed virtually permanent villages to be sustained. This conclusion is also supported by historical accounts of the region by the Chief Protector of Aborigines – George Augustus Robinson (1841) – and by others, including squatters, observers and travellers such as Smyth (1878), Dawson (1881) and Westgarth (1888) together with the Gunditjmara themselves who deride any alternative interpretation of their inheritance (Saunders pers. com. 2003; Gunditjmara & Wettenhall 2010; Johnson 2014).

In the Aboriginal Land (Lake Condah and Framlingham Forest) Act (1987) (Cth), the Victorian State government acknowledged that the land “was originally Aboriginal land” with “... that part of Condah land ... traditionally owned, occupied, used and enjoyed by Aborigines in accordance with Aboriginal laws, customs, traditions and practices.”

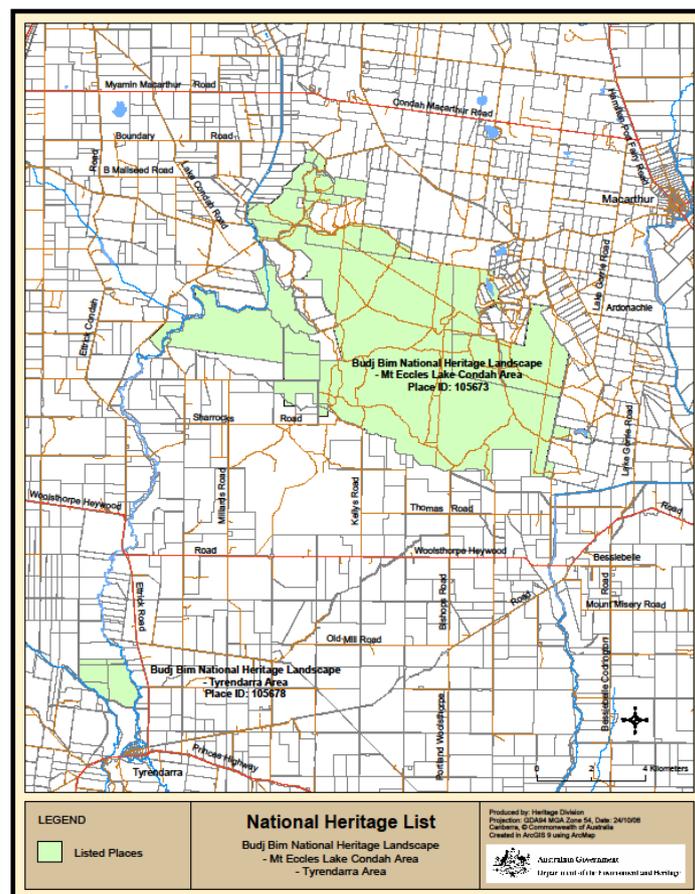
Further:

- iii. The traditional Aboriginal rights of ownership, occupation, use and enjoyment concerning that part of Condah land are deemed never to have been extinguished;
- iv That part of Condah land has been taken by force ... without consideration as to compensation under common law or without regard to Kerrup-Jmara Law;

- v. Aborigines residing on that part of Condah land and other Aborigines are considered to be the inheritors of title from Aboriginals who owned, occupied, used and enjoyed the land since time immemorial;
- vi. That part of Condah land is of spiritual, social, historical, cultural and economic importance to the Kerrup-Jmara Community and to local and other Aboriginals;
- vii. It is expedient to acknowledge, recognise and assert the traditional rights of Aboriginals to that part of Condah land and the continuous association they have with the land (quoted in Weir, 2004: 16).

This ruling is of national significance as it does not admit that Crown land acquisition involved the extinguishment of native title (something the Mabo decision and Native Title Act of 1993 (Cth) rules), recognises that taking land by force was illegal and necessitated compensation and acknowledges the economic rights of the traditional owners while allocating funds to assist in their management. Unlike the later Native Title ruling then, this ruling and related actions provided the foundation and economic basis for post-colonial planning by the Gunditjmarra.

Map 1: Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape (2004). Source:  
<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/national/budj-bim/index.html>



A key change has been the gazettal of the Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape in July 2004 by the Commonwealth in recognition of their extensive aquaculture harvesting system embodying Indigenous technology and its continuity of husbandry practice; the role of the place as a venue to retaliate against colonial invasion and dispossession; the legal precedent of land ownership repatriation; the technical creativity of system construction and maintenance; and, the clear demonstration of ancestral being revelation in the physical form of Budj Bim and landscape transformation.

With repatriation of segments of their original 'country', the Gunditjmarra have consciously sought to renovate, heal and re-establish their traditional systems of landscape planning drawing upon generations of knowledge. To assist this process the Gunditjmarra have directly engaged contemporary technology and science to record past natural resource management practices and to enable future landscape planning and healing actions and processes.

This strategy consists of:

- harnessing generations of technical and cultural knowledge about the environment and landscape of Lake Condah;
- seeking to nurture and enable the environmental and cultural healing of ties to the landscape through cultural and ecological restoration initiatives; and,
- celebrating and respecting the spirit and narrative of Budj Bim, and thereby re-nourishing the life and creation of this ancestral being;

This is a major landscape planning initiative in which "we continue our heritage" embracing the philosophy and objectives of the Gunditjmarra community.

### **Reflections upon the *Gunditjmarra* experience as post-colonial planning**

The Gunditjmarra story offers an additional way to that offered by the Nyungar to think and act in a post-colonial way. For their re-engagement with their cultural landscape has involved mobilizing a range of the colonial tools – of freehold land tenure, of scientific investigation and of ongoing presence – as well as the utilization of some critical post-colonial systems which recognize native title, cultural heritage and Indigenous knowledge and practices. The result is a mix of freehold titles, native title rulings, joint management arrangements and cultural heritage acknowledgements which affirm their past, present and future custodianship over the land of Budj Bim.

While reconciliation and repatriation around Lake Condah have gone some way to re-establishing respect and trust to the Gunditjmarra and Budj Bim, the next phase lies in the acceptance of Indigenous science and planning as legitimate forms of process and knowledge.

In terms of Indigenous planning, acceptance of generations of land management regimes, practices, and spiritual 'laws' – from fire practices, to wildlife culling and harvesting, to seasonal calendars and 'passive' management practices – have and continue to be substantially overlooked by professional planners as offering and possessing scientifically valid information, relevant and temporally-informed sustainability strategies, and legitimate landscape planning methods and practices.

The Gunditjmara are offering a contemporary insight. This insight is informed by their ancestral responsibilities. It is validated by contemporary scientifically-based reviews and investigations to better appreciate physical environment formation and relevant vegetation, wildlife, water, aquaculture, and seasonal regimes to restructure thought and to comprehensively guide and heal recent European land re-patterning and transformative acts.

Thus, in the words of the Gunditjmara, “we continue our heritage” through our acts of landscape planning.

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