

We acknowledge the Noongar people as the traditional owners and custodians of the south-west land region, and respect the elders and community on whose land we live.

Noongar Aborigines occupied the land in the south-west corner of Western Australia for over 40,000 years. Some evidence suggests it may even be over 60,000 years, making it the oldest living culture in the world today.

The Noongar nation consisted of 14 groups (and territories) which were distributed, west of a line from Geraldton in the north, east of Merredin and down to Esperance in the south.



Aborigines have a strong link with *nidga boodja* (this land), which is central to the beliefs of all Aboriginal groups as the traditional landowners and carers of the land. Food, medicine, clothing, shelter and tools were sourced from the land and were essential for life. It was therefore important to maintain a balanced ecosystem through sustainable use of these resources.

Seasonal movement across the land underpinned the Noongar way of life, to live in harmony with the environment. Along the coastal strip, *wardan* (sea), *darbal* (estuary), *beelya* (river) and *pinja* (swamps) were considered as a plentiful food source within the appropriate season.

The Noongar year is divided into six seasons, an annual cycle based on the movement around the sun. These seasons were based on the provision to find food – edible plants and animals.

December	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November
Summer			Autumn			Winter			Spring		
Birak		Bunuru		Djeran		Makuru		Djilba		Kambarang	

Aboriginal Coastal Use continued...

Aborigines didn't only rely on the changes of seasons for the collection of food, but looked for the changing features of the landscape, such as plants. Animal behaviour and appearance was also used as indicators on the best time to collect food and travel through the various ecosystems.

Their diet varied depending on the season, and groups travelled to the most appropriate place in their territory to collect food. Although each territory was protected by the traditional landowners, permission could be granted for other groups to use the land by invitation when food was plentiful, such as in the event of a mamang (whale) stranding, or for cultural ceremonies.

'Fishing and hunting coincided in Bunuru (February and March). Large sections of the country were abandoned for lack of water. Near the sea coast and in estuaries, fish constituted a large proportion of the diet of this season and large assemblies gathered.'*(Bindon et. al. 1992)*

Certain coastal plants were also used for food, medicine and cultural ceremonies.

The Noongar community continue to have a strong connection with the land through the Dreamtime, which is passed on by the Elders of the community. The importance of plants and animals are shared through traditional song, dance (middar), paintings and corroborees.

The Dreaming philosophy reveals that every living thing has a spirit – the land, plants, people and animals, and these spirits were how life evolved and became real. The spirits of all living things come from the land in birth, and through death they are returned to the land by ceremony.

The Dreamtime tells the story of the Waugal, a serpent (giant snake) who moved along the land creating the mountains, lakes, rivers and valleys. This was the beginning of creation.

There are many stories of the Dreamtime passed on through the Elders, which highlight the complex relationships that Aboriginals have with the land, people and animals.

In collaboration with the Swan Catchment Council (now known as the Perth Region NRM), Noel Nannup an Aboriginal elder and Noongar custodian, has produced three audio CDs explaining through the dreaming, how boodjar (country) was formed. These stories highlight the significance of the natural environment to the Aboriginal people, and are available from the Perth Region NRM for \$14.95 each.

- The Carers of Everything (2004)
- When the Sea Level Rose (2006)
- The Coming of the Colours (2008)

'Sunset Dreaming' highlights the importance of the coast in Aboriginal culture through the Dreamtime philosophy. The story was provided by the Aboriginal Heritage Unit, Department of Environment and Conservation.

Reference:

Bindon, P. & Walley, T. (1992, Spring) Hunters & Gatherers. Landscape magazine

Sunset Dreaming

The Perth coast is significant to Noongar Aborigines. Traditionally, when a clan member dies the body is buried in the nearest coastal dunes or Dreaming trail.

Ten thousand years ago the sea level began to rise, flooded the coastal plain and isolated the islands. Beneath the waves now lie the graves of our Noongar ancestors.

On the wind

Seabirds, particularly 'djenark' the silver gull, represent the spirits of the dead. As they fly each day between the coast and the islands, the seabirds maintain the spiritual link between Noongars buried on the mainland and those beneath the sea.

In the water

In the Dreamtime spirit children were placed in special landscape features. The rising sea trapped the spirit children in these places. So now they attach to young whale 'mammang' and dolphin 'kila'. When a whale strands on the beach the spirit child is returned home.

On the beach

A Noongar elder used to sit at the edge of the water and chant to the dolphins. The dolphins would come to him and get so excited that they would chase schools of fish at high speed. At that time the fish were so prolific that they would leap out of the water in great showers with some fish landing on the beach. The old man would thank his dolphin friends, collect the fish he needed and return the remainder to the water.

The story reproduced with permission from the Aboriginal Heritage Unit, Department of Environment and Conservation.



Related Resources

Aboriginal Perspectives Across the Curriculum (APAC). Department of Education & Training

APAC aims to increase students' and teachers' understanding of Aboriginal culture through the school system.

www.det.wa.edu.au/education/abled/apac

Perth Region NRM

Perth Region NRM (formally the Swan Catchment Council) is currently developing a Noongar Coastal Trail to help educate the community on Noongar life and culture along the Perth coastline. Visit www.perthregionnrm.com for further information about their Indigenous Cultural Heritage Program.

Australian Government – Culture Portal

This site provides some background information into Australian indigenous cultural heritage.

www.australia.gov.au/information-and-services/culture-and-arts/heritage

Department of Indigenous Affairs

www.daa.wa.gov.au/

River Guardians

Gives you the opportunity to learn more about Aboriginal History and Culture in Western Australia.

www.riverguardians.com

Nidja Beeljar Boodjar Noonookurt Nyininy

This interactive website provides information about the cultural history of the Noongar people within the vicinity of Murdoch University, Perth.

<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/multimedia/nyungar/menu9.htm> Note: requires flash player.

Western Australian Indigenous Tourism Operators Committee (WAITOC)

Indigenous tourism is a way of educating interested community members about Aboriginal cultural heritage around the state.

www.waitoc.com

Wardarnji Aboriginal Cultural Festival

The Wardarnji Aboriginal Cultural Festival is an annual celebration in Walyalup (Fremantle). Noongar people showcase their Aboriginal culture and heritage where the Derbarl Yerrigan (Swan River) meets the coast.

www.fremantlefestivals.com

Aboriginal Heritage Trails

Aboriginal Heritage Trails are a way of learning more about your local environment. Some trails are self-guided through signage, where as others can only be explored by groups accompanied by a guide from the Noongar community. If you are interested in participating in an Aboriginal Heritage Trail contact Department of Environment and Conservation, the Heritage Council of Western Australia or your local council for further information.

The Heritage Council and the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage, Western Australia

The Heritage Council has produced a series of trails and guide brochures which can be downloaded from their website.

<http://www.stateheritage.wa.gov.au>