

City of
Cockburn



wetlands to waves

Beeljar Boodjar

An introduction to
the Aboriginal History of the
City of Cockburn based on
existing literature

This brochure is intended as an introduction to the deep and continuing history of Aboriginal people and culture in the area known as the City of Cockburn. The authors wish to acknowledge the many Aboriginal families who have long association with the Cockburn area and will have more stories to tell in the future.

We advise that this document contains names of deceased Aboriginal people. Their relatives have been notified about this project. We do not wish to cause any distress to Aboriginal people who follow a specific cultural protocol regarding such names.

Introduction


Aboriginal Australians have histories spanning well over 40,000 years. In that time, *Nyungar* have occupied, controlled and managed the south-west of Western Australia.¹

Nyungar is the generic name that describes people whose ancestors originally occupied and continue to occupy the whole South West.² The word *Nyungar* is commonly accepted as meaning 'person' or 'people'.³

Other spellings in common use today include *Noongar* and *Nyoongar*. Words in the *Nyungar* language can be written in many different ways.

The South West is traditionally occupied by at least twelve *Nyungar* groups including *Balardong*, *Juat*, *Kaneang*, *Koreng*, *Minang*, *Njakinjaki*, *Pibelman*, *Pindjarup*, *Wardandi*, *Whadjuk*, *Wilmman*, and *Wudjari*.⁴





Beeliar are one of the clans of the *Whadjuk* group of *Nyungar*.⁵ *Beeliar Nyungar* literally means 'river people'.⁶ What we know today as the City of Cockburn is *Beeliar Boodjar*.

Traditional owner and long-time Cockburn resident Reverend Sealin Garlett said:

Boodjar means land to Aboriginal people. It really is the sense of identity and sense of belonging.

...this is my country where I belong. This is *demangarmarn*, my grandmother and grandfather's land, this is their land where their spirits move now. *Boorda* or later on, this is going to be the responsibility of my children and my children's children, their home and this place will always be linked to their spirit.⁷

The Dreaming

'The Dreaming' is a term used to describe Aboriginal creation stories about events within and beyond the living memories of Aboriginal people. The Dreaming shaped the physical, moral and spiritual world and continues to renew and sustain itself today.⁸

Nyungar responsibilities, beliefs and values have been based on the same principles since *kura*, a long time ago.⁹ The content of Dreaming stories may change depending on the narrator, audience and location.

The Rainbow Serpent, the *Waakal* is always depicted as fundamental to *Nyungar* Dreaming, creating the shape of the *boodjar* and giving foundation to the meaning of life.¹⁰

Traditional owner and long-term Cockburn resident Len Collard wrote:

...the *Waakal* came out of the earth. Sometimes it went *kardup boodjar* (under the earth) and sometimes it went *yira boodjar* (over the earth) and it made *bilya* [*beeliar*] (river/s), the *kaart* (hill/s) and *ngamar* (the waterhole/s).¹¹

It is easy to look at the *Beeliar Nyungar* wetland system and visualise this huge *Waakal* twisting up and down, making its way north to Fremantle and south to Mandurah.

Traditional owner, the late Tom Bennell Yelakitj said:

...the real water snake oh, he is pretty, that carpet snake. ... the *Nyungar* call him *Waakal kierp wirrinitj* (water spirit). That means that carpet snake, he belongs to the water. You mustn't touch that snake; that's no good. If you kill that carpet snake *noonook barminyiny* that *Waakal ngulla kierp uart*, that means our water dries up - none. That is their history stories and very true too.¹²

The Dreaming

Nyungar have rules to follow when they are around the *Waakal's* sacred waterholes.

The stories that many *Nyungar* tell is that when the water is clear it is all right to take the water, but when it is 'dark or murky' the *Waakal* is swimming around and you must not take any water while he is there.¹³

The late Judy Jackson spent a long time in the 1940s and 50s visiting relatives camping in the wetlands around *Walliabup* (Bibra Lake).¹⁴ She said:

The *Waugal* (sic) keeps everything clean and tidy and supplies the clean waterways for the food to grow in those areas, the wildlife to live in those areas, for us to have our clean, fresh water.¹⁵

Traditional owner Dorothy Winmar said:

They believe in the *Waakal* very dearly. They reckon without the *Waakal* around they would have no water.¹⁶

Boodjar: Land

Nyungar in the Cockburn area continue to enjoy much of their boodjar (country), visiting areas around estuary waters and wetlands with their moort (family), wangkiny (talking) and maintaining Nyungar katatjiny (knowledge and understanding).

Traditional owner and long-term Cockburn resident Patrick Hume said:

There are special places around here... It will just stay in my family, and be handed down from generation to generation.¹⁷

The late Thomas Henry Ford was a traditional owner and long-term resident. He spoke about important places in Cockburn:

Yeah well one place they used to go is Bibra Lake but they got Adventure World there, but see they are all built over now... The Aboriginals used to go and camp there years ago. There's a another place out here at Thompson's Lake – its only just a waterhole, its water but that's another place of significance for Aboriginal people in the area.¹⁸

Boodjar: Land

Dr Joan Winch has lived in the Cockburn and Fremantle areas since 1942. She said:

...Bibra Lake was the one that we used to go to. And there was so much water in those days, because the kids used to swim there... And of course there was a lot of brumbies, you know, wild horses you'd come across – Lots of kangaroos... Another place we used to go out to, was ride our bikes out with Dad down to Robb's Jetty and go fishing. Because people always used to go fishing out there. And I think there were quandong trees out along that way...¹⁹

The wetland system in the Cockburn area has always been an important region for Nyungar. While having great spiritual significance, the wetlands have long provided a variety of food, medicinal and manufacturing resources.²⁰ These well-populated wetland areas were the most biologically productive areas of the plain.²¹

Reverend Sealin Garlett tells us:

One of the things that I remember Uncle Cliff Humphries and Uncle Sully Hume talk about is the richness of Aboriginal people here. You see, one thing is, I am very sensitive of my surroundings and I found that going through the lakes here, there are a lot of trees that are associated with our bush medicine. I think that there is a wealth of medicine in our area... through Bibra Lake... when I used to walk in these places or take my kids for a walk, I always approached this place with my Aboriginal spirit, just thinking how we are surrounded by people who knew how to walk this land, you know?²²

Boodjar: Land

Coolbellup (North Lake) and *Waliabup* (Bibra Lake)²³ have always been main campsites, with large numbers of *Nyungar* frequently travelling to the area.²⁴ *Nyungar* continued camping in the Cockburn area through the 1980s²⁵ and regularly visit the area today.

Long-established trails linking the fresh water wetlands were frequently utilised by *Beeliar Nyungar* and other *Nyungar* coming to the area to fulfil their social and cultural obligations. A series of well-worn paths leading to and away from Bibra and North Lakes formed the main transport route between the Swan River and Murray River *Nyungar* groups.²⁶

The late Joe Walley was a traditional owner of the *Pindjarup* region. His family has a long association with the Cockburn area. He spoke of travel:

The *Pindjarup Nyungar* used to follow the lakes or water chain from Pinjarra, right through where Murdoch University now stands, to *Walyalup* or Fremantle. It was a seasonal run for the *Nyungar*, from Pinjarra to Ravenswood, past Lake *Gorgerup*, Black Lake, Pagononi's Swamp, Hansley Swamp and *Warriup* Swamp and past Thompson's Lake.²⁷

Places in Cockburn such as *Coogee* have special significance to *Nyungar* and additionally, to Aboriginal people from other parts of Australia.

Nyungar Names for places in Cockburn



Nyungar Nomenclature

Nyungar language has been incorporated into Australia-English terms for places, trees, animals and various objects. Over eighty sign-posted suburbs, streets and landmarks in Cockburn have names in *Nyungar* language.

In the coastal *Nyungar* dialects, the ‘-up’ suffix at the end of a geographical name means ‘place of’.²⁸

Examples of *Nyungar* names for places in the City of Cockburn and their meanings include:

Yangebup (Yangebup Lake):
Place of the bullrushes²⁹

Kogolup (Kogolup Lake):
Place of the quokka³⁰

Jilbup (Thompson Lake)³¹:
Place of grass³²

Toodjabubup (Banganup Lake)³³:
Place of mist³⁴

Derbal Nara (Cockburn Sound)³⁵:
Estuary³⁶ of salmon³⁷

Walliabup (Bibra Lake)

Trade & Exchange

The Cockburn area was a well-established place of trade activity amongst *Nyungar* groups.³⁸

Dr Richard Walley is a traditional owner of the *Pindjarup* region. His family has a long association with the Cockburn area. He spoke of trade:

Nyungar have always been engaged in trade, right back well before settlement... Our people, the *Nyungar*, went as far as Uluru and the centre of Australia and those people, the Aboriginal people from there, came back here to *Nyungar* country as well... The different groups would bring stones and ochres and all sorts of different things from their country that didn't exist in *Nyungar* country and that is a form of “paying their way” when they visited *Nyungar* country. So trade in *Nyungar* country is very, very old. Thousands of years old.³⁹

Non-Aboriginal author J.E. Hammond observed that many items produced by *Nyungar* in areas around Cockburn were traded to areas far north of Perth.

While in the Gascoyne, in 1873-74, I found evidence of exchange with the Southwest... (They) had blackboy gum and red tail feathers and white tail feathers of the cockatoo, which I had never seen or heard of north of Perth... We also saw several

koilies of the South-West on the Gascoyne, and this left us with no doubt that some sort of exchange was carried on... I much inclined to think that the blackboy gum we saw in the Gascoyne was also taken north from the South West with the spears, *koilies* and feathers.⁴⁰

Koilie is a *Nyungar* term for 'boomerang' and the gum that Hammond refers to is an adhesive produced using the resin of the *Balga* or Grass Tree (*Xanthorrhoea preisii*).⁴¹

Glossary of Nyungar Language

Nyungar (Noongar, Nyoongar) – person, people

Beeliar (*bilya*) – river

Boodjar – land, earth, country

Demangarmarn – grandmother and grandfather

Boorda – later on

Kura (*koora*) – a long time ago

Waakal (*waugul*) – Nyungar rainbow serpent

Kardup boodjar – under the earth

Yira boodjar – over the earth

Kaart – hill, head

Ngamar – water hole

Moort – family

Wangkiny – talking

Katatiiny – knowledge, understanding

Koilie (*kerl*) – boomerang

Balga – grass tree, *xanthorrhoea preisii*

Additional Information

Please consult the following resources for additional information:

Nidja Beeliar Boodjar Noonookurt Nyininy: a Nyungar interpretive history of the use of Boodjar (country) in the vicinity of Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/multimedia/nyungar/menu9.htm>

Kaartdjin Noongar: Sharing Noongar Culture: South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council <http://www.noongarculture.org.au>

Publication Details

This is a brief introduction to the rich Aboriginal History of the City of Cockburn. The City will publish more information in the future as part of an ongoing process.

Most people quoted in this document have taken part in previously completed oral history projects. Aboriginal people in Cockburn are encouraged to register their interest in future oral history projects with the City of Cockburn Aboriginal Community Development Officer on 08 9411 3487.

The City of Cockburn Aboriginal History Steering Committee provided project objectives and approval for content. Committee members included Reverend Sealín Garlett, Maisie Stokes, Gail Barrow and Hayati Jaffrey. The City of Cockburn Aboriginal Reference Group provided additional feedback.

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Endnotes

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Featured photographs used in this publication were taken in the surrounds of the Beeliar area, April 2011. (Yangebup Lake, Lake Coogee, Spearwood Wetlands, Coolbellup & Bibra Lake.)

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