



Reintroducing Indigenous practice in our landscapes, and mapping cultural resources ⁺

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Abstract: Geoffrey Simpson has been involved in many initiatives to encourage Aboriginal people to restore and reconnect with their culture, to learn new skills and create employment opportunities. He has also been an advocate for Aboriginal people to share their understanding of traditional land management practices to facilitate their incorporation in land and conservation management. He initiated the Friends of Grasslands' and Kosciuszko to Coast (K2C) Traditional Land Management Practices (TLMP) projects which demonstrated the use of old practices to Canberra region landowners and managers. More recently he has been involved in mapping natural and cultural values in the landscape – adding information to maps to assist 'informed decision making'. Geoffrey will talk about his experiences and the opportunities that mapping cultural heritage will provide.

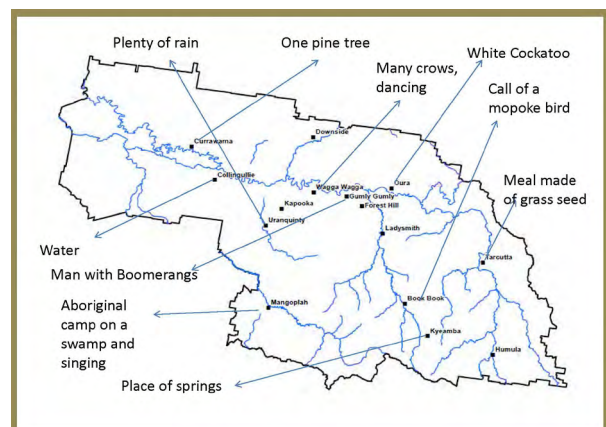
I acknowledge that we are on Ngunnawal Country and I pay my respects to Elders past and present. Actually those Elders have paved the way for our sustainability and existence. We managed this country sustainably for at least 40,000 years. We did the testing, we did the research, we have done all the work, and yet within 225 years we have reached tipping point. What does that tell us?

For people in our twilight years, probably including myself, what do we do as we get older? We want to know our history, where we come from and what we have done. Maybe we need to do that for Country. What have we done before can inform us now to make better decisions, because to me it seems we are still trying to put a square peg in a round hole. The country requires diversity, not monoculture.

My name is Geoff Simpson. I am with the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, and I am going to reiterate that message throughout my talk today: that we managed this country sustainably for at least 40,000 years. We can do it again. The knowledge is out there. Go and connect with local people and restore the knowledge and restore the practice. You talked about fire. Black fellas know all there is to know about fire, and if we do not, we know someone that does. So information on how to manage it is already there.

I am not here to talk about Aboriginal culture and I am not here to talk about white culture. I am not here to divide it up. I am here to talk about our inherent responsibilities and obligations to Country, which means that we have the obligation to do it, whether you want to or not, if you are working in this field. Just think about those old people that we love and respect. What would they be saying about our efforts?: 'Is it good enough? Can you do more?'. I am here to talk about the shared responsibilities and obligations to Country that we all have.

My message has three themes and they all relate to language: using language, the uses of vegetation, and its extent. This map for example (right) is part of a first attempt to prove that we can show connection to Country through vegetation, and it is focused on the Wagga Local Government Area. The most important part of Country, water, provides life for us. My first theme is language. In the Wagga Local Government Area we have the Wiradjuri language. That language is an indicator of how





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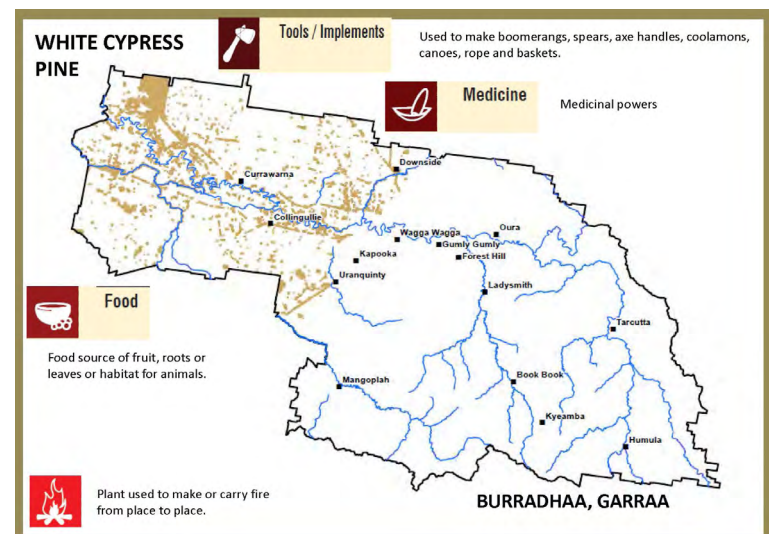
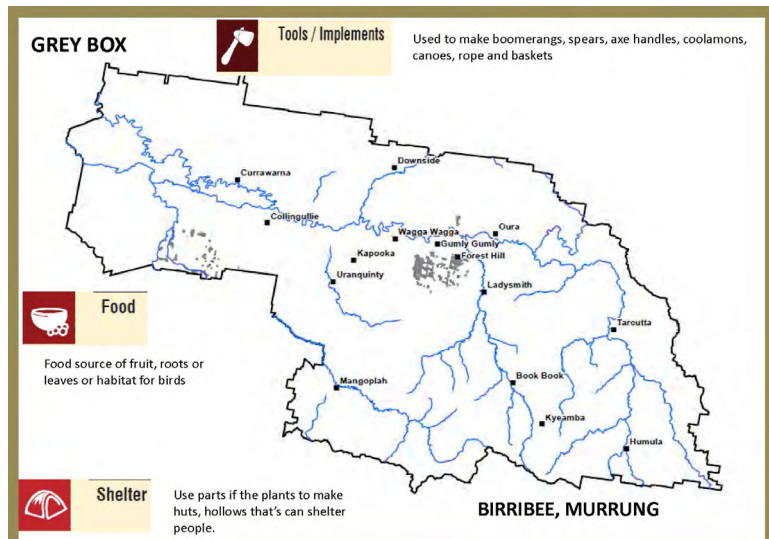
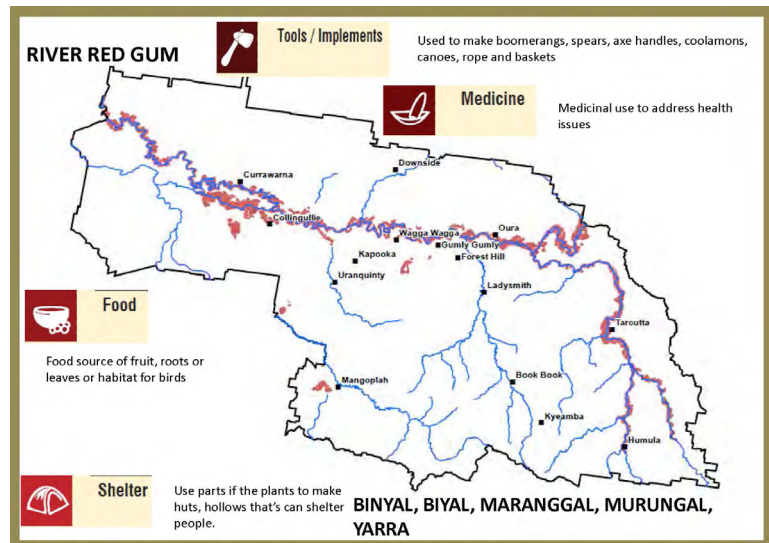
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we managed Country. In this map of the Wagga Wagga district you can see there is habitat for Pine Trees out at Currawarna; at Many Crows Dancing you get a feed of crows; at Book Book you hear the Mopoke bird. The solutions are already in Country about why it was used, and I am sure if we did similar assessments across all geographical areas the local people would still have that knowledge. It might be a little bit disconnected here and there, but in essence it is still there. So language is an indicator about where you find things, and the common things are plants, animals and water.

My second theme is uses of vegetation. The map (above right) shows uses of River Red Gum. There are plenty of Wiradjuri names for it. From the recent book about Ngunnawal plant use (ACT Government 2014) I see they have similar uses and names. Tools and implements, medicine, food, fibre, shelter were the common uses for plants – were and are. I expect that right across the nation the uses are pretty similar. Red Gum is found all over and the map shows only relatively large communities. The same kind of thing goes for Grey Box within the catchment (next map, right). With White Cypress Pine (right), language again gives us the names and the generic uses for the tree, and what type of pine it is. I am sure there are similar names in the different languages, and similar uses, for Yellow Box and Iron Bark.

As you see, language is still providing place names and plant names.

My third theme is vegetation extent. Extent of the various tree species is shown on the next map (next page). There is more Iron Bark in the upper part of the catchment (shown in green), although not all of it is





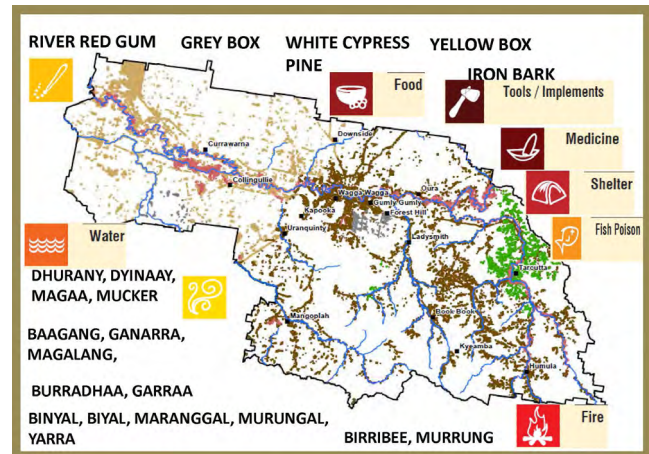
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mapped, so there are huge opportunities there for us to do some more work with Indigenous people to map those vegetation communities. What better way to connect people with managing Country – adding to their sense of pride, sense of identity, sense of self.

These maps represent Country spatially, not to give culture a voice but to give Country a voice in a way the government understands it. In government, thinking about Country tends to be an afterthought, and specifically the Aboriginal voice in managing Country, because the spiritual connection is not understood.



How can it be understood? I wanted to do it first with these slides. Adrian Brown tells me the Ngunnawal book describes uses for 50 plant species, though they recorded the uses for over 250 species. To have included all of them the book would have been too heavy. However, with over 250 plants for use in the Ngunnawal area you have only to walk outside and there is your supermarket. There is your food, fibre, medicine, shelter and resources, everything we need to know. In this Wagga version, the maps that I have shown you, I have represented spatially five of the species that are in the Ngunnawal book. Every ounce of this country was used by our forebears. It was used sustainably, and we can do it again. I am not saying we have to go back and live on dirt-floor humpies. Our culture adapts and changes and we are in the present. Mostly when we talk about culture, we think of around 40,000 years ago, but in fact it is right here, right now. It is right in front our eyes.

My three key themes were language, vegetation extent and vegetation use. We use Country for what we need to use it for. With regard to fire, I am sure we could map not only the old values but also the new and adaptive values: what this species responds to best; what this other species needs; and so on. We need to reconnect with the old to know where we need to go in the future. That means that cultural data and information are necessary for managing Country better.

What is the call to action? It is connecting with local people and working with them on their knowledge on how to manage Country better.

In trying to integrate the old knowledge with new ways it was apparent to me that we can learn from each other. A couple of years ago I was up in the Northern Territory at Galiwin'ku in east Arnhem Land, and I met an old uncle up there, and he was already onto this concept of integrating old knowledge and new ways.

He was telling me the story of how he rang the Bureau of Meteorology and said, 'Is it going to be a cold winter this winter?', and they said, 'Absolutely, absolutely', so he got all his mob together and out they went to get some firewood. A week or two later, he said, 'I'll ring the Bureau of Meteorology again'. He went down to the phone box at Galiwin'ku and he said, 'Are you sure it's going to be a cold winter?', and they said, 'Absolutely, it's going to be freezing, so do whatever you've got to do'. So out he and his family went again, grabbing some more firewood. Just before winter set in he decided to give another call to the Bureau of Meteorology. He said, 'Are you absolutely sure that it's going to be a cold winter? I need to know if I need to go and get some firewood.' And they said, 'It's going to be the worst in Northern Territory history'. My uncle said, 'How do you know?', and the Bureau man said, 'Oh, our satellite imagery told us Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land are collecting firewood like it's going out of fashion, and they know Country, so we take our indicator from that.'

This is trying to merge the old with the new. The solutions are out there: connect with local people, build a relationship, have a cup of tea, tell a story and have a yarn with people and



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find out what knowledge is out there. I am sure with your knowledge and their knowledge we can make progress in managing our country in the way it should be done – and that is with diversity, not monoculture.

We have to restore the practices, and the solutions are there. We use grazing, fire and grazing. You can fix the country up with a box of matches and grazing. You do not need rocket science.

Reference

ACT Government (2014) *Ngunnawal Plant Use: A Traditional Aboriginal Plant Use Guide for the ACT Region*. ACT Government, Canberra.

Geoffrey Simpson is a former Catchment Officer with the Murrumbidgee Catchment Authority, and a teacher, and is currently employed by the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage as Senior Scientist, Community / Aboriginal Engagement Officer.

+ This record of the talk given at the forum has been checked by the presenter, but not peer-reviewed. To find out more, contact the presenter, via their institution or by email to: info@fog.org.au.



OPPORTUNITIES

- Cultural data information missing across the state (restore and reconnect our culture).
- Values and knowledge of fauna connected to flora.
- Culture is a practice not an ideology.
- Bush food propagation.
- Our culture needs champions.
- Two way learning.
- Our culture comes from Country.

• RESTORE THE PRACTICES.