

Collaborative mapping and digital storytelling as tools of Walbunja resurgence

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Abstract: *For several decades, members of the Walbunja community around Mogo and Batemans Bay (New South Wales) have aspired to exercise their sovereignty and strengthen their capacity to influence the development and environmental management decisions across their land, freshwater and sea territories. This paper reflects on the experience and findings emerging from the Environmental Stewardship Resurgence in Walbunja Land and Sea Country project funded through the AIATSIS Indigenous Exchange scheme. It explores some of the opportunities and challenges associated with using collaborative mapping applications and digital storytelling to document Walbunja contemporary connections to Country and support the resurgence of Walbunja stewardship responsibilities across their territory. We explore whether these platforms can be used creatively by local communities to exercise their sovereignty, on a day-to-day basis, by taking control over the cartographic expression and knowledge produced about their territories. We also examine whether this process can help transform the ties between the Walbunja and non-Indigenous people living on their territories by stimulating dialogues and fostering better understandings by the latter of the contemporary reciprocal commitments that the Walbunja people maintain with Country.*

Introduction

For several decades, members of the Walbunja community have aspired to exercise their sovereignty and strengthen their capacity to influence

the development and environmental management decisions across their land, freshwater and sea territories. Walbunja Country is located along what is now known as the South Coast region of



Map 1: Walbunja territory (Country).

New South Wales, Australia, famous for its picturesque beaches and crystalline waters. These lands and seas, for which Walbunja people are the Traditional Custodians and caretakers, have been deeply transformed by settler colonial processes from the 1820s onwards. Development pressures from population growth, urban expansion, gentrification, and tourism are constantly increasing. Commercial fisheries and conservation practices have also transformed and disrupted access to Country beyond the beaches and impacted on Walbunja people's livelihood and capacity to engage with their marine territories.

Despite being a significant portion of the local population of Mogo and Batemans Bay, the Walbunja community have had little influence over the region's development directions. The community has faced numerous obstacles to voice their needs, aspirations, concerns and objections to settler land and sea Country uses. In the early 2000s, their contributions to New South Wales Government consultations underpinning the determination of Batemans Marine Park's conservation zones, highlighted the deep connections and responsibilities that they, as a saltwater people, hold towards their coastal and marine environments. The

knowledge and insights they provided to the government consultation process, however, did not prevent the extensive loss of fishing and seafood harvesting areas, most of which were declared no-take sanctuary zones. This is in addition to tourism activities that further limit their capacity to cast their fishing nets and harvest seafood from the beach. While not often perceived by the broader public as a form of colonial dispossession, such marine conservation strategies continue to deny Walbunja people's access to their environment and resources, criminalise aspects of their lifeways and infringe on their rights and responsibilities to practice their culture and maintain their economic and spiritual engagements with Country. Fishing practices and the deep relationships with the sea are an integral part of Walbunja people's identity. This imposed and relatively recent break with their maritime way of life through settler colonial land and sea environmental management is having considerable repercussions on the community's physical, mental, and spiritual health, economy, and overall wellbeing.

Walbunja people's historical and contemporary connections to Country and their aspirations to resume their environmental custodianship

practices across their coastal urban and peri-urban territories have remained largely invisible to the local non-Indigenous inhabitants and transient tourist population coming to the region. Although many Walbunja people still reside on their ancestral territory and have maintained close ties with it, the extensive urbanisation of their lands tends to support the misperception that this is no longer a Walbunja place. Their territories have become what Dene scholar Glen Coulthard called an *urbs nullius*, that is, an urban space imagined as 'devoid of sovereign presence and indigenous land rights' (2014:176). The British colonial conceptualisations of the rural landscape with its vast green pastures have had the same obliterating effect. British legal conception of the sea as a space empty of human connections also contributes to settlers overlooking the extensive relationships and responsibilities held by the Walbunja community towards their saltwater world past the highwater mark. One way the Walbunja people, with the wider Yuin Nation to which they belong, have challenged their invisibility is by lodging a large claim for the legal recognition of South Coast peoples' land and sea native title. This claim is covering nearly 17,000 square kilometres and reaches out for three nautical miles into the sea (National Native Title Tribunal 2018).

As in so many other settler colonial contexts, the extent of Walbunja people's presence, aside from some place names, historical and archaeological sites, is not captured by settlers' cartographic imagination (Louis 2007; Peluso 1994; Perkins 2017; Potter 2020). Yet, Walbunja ways of being in the world, sovereignty, connections, philosophies, knowledge, spirituality, and ancestors continue to co-exist in dynamic and entangled engagements with the settlers and visitors to their world. Given the continuous encroachments on their lives and Country, it is crucial to represent Walbunja people's contemporary presence, perspectives and interests across their semi-urban land and seascape to ensure that their culture, aspirations, and values can thrive into the future.

This paper reflects on the experience and findings emerging from the Environmental Stewardship Resurgence in Walbunja Land and Sea Country project funded through the AIATSIS Indigenous Exchange scheme and Environmental

Stewardship Resurgence in Walbunja Country funded by AIATSIS and the foundational guidance for the project Reviving Dhurga to better talk with Country: Environmental Custodianship & Disasters funded by the Australian Government Indigenous Languages and the Arts program and the Australian National University (ANU) Watervale Award. The paper explores some of the opportunities and challenges associated with the process of documenting Walbunja people's contemporary connections to Country, by using collaborative mapping applications and digital storytelling tools and techniques (for example Cybertracker, ArcGIS Storymaps) to support the resurgence of Walbunja stewardship responsibilities across their territory. We explore whether these platforms, applications and technologies can be used creatively by local Indigenous communities to exercise their sovereignty, on a day-to-day basis, and progressively in their own language (Dhurga), by taking control of the cartographic expression and knowledge produced about their territories. We also examine whether this process can help transform the ties between the Walbunja and non-Indigenous peoples living on their territories by stimulating dialogues and fostering better understandings by the latter of the contemporary reciprocal commitments that the Walbunja maintain with Country. As such, this project investigates the role that collective mapping tools, techniques and digital narratives can play in destabilising the uneven power relationships between settlers and Indigenous institutions as well as fostering renewed relationships between non-Indigenous people, Indigenous peoples, Country, and the colonising state in Australia.

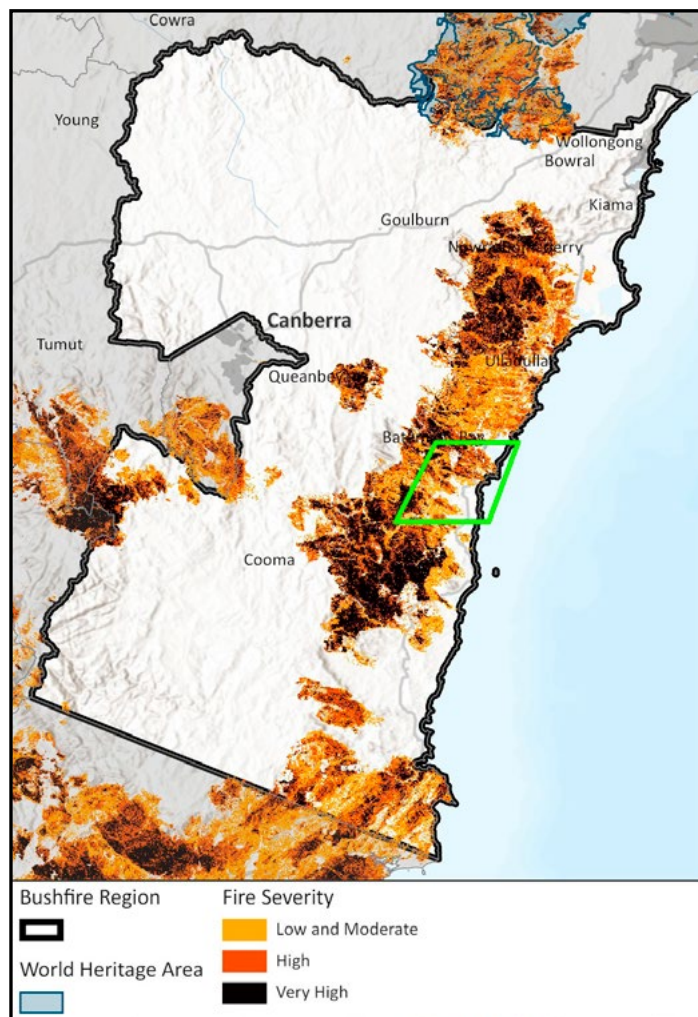
This project was developed and conducted in considerably difficult circumstances, especially given the impact of the 2019–2020 bushfires and COVID-19 on local Indigenous communities, which required that we think carefully about what a methodology centred on caretaking looks like in practice. Drawing on this experience, this paper provides an opportunity to discuss how such collaborative research and community engagement using digital mapping and surveying tools can be undertaken ethically and in a way that supports healing and intergenerational knowledge transfer and learning about the meaning and practice of caretaking for Country.

Cartography and digital storytelling in Walbunja territories

This project is based on an ongoing research relationship that has flourished over a decade between the Mogo Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC), Batemans Bay LALC, the Australian National University (ANU) and, more recently, Western Sydney University.¹ The earlier Seachange pilot project (2015–2018), led by Thomassin, Carlson and Hunt, aimed to devise a data collection system that brings together the information required to fulfil the rangers' contracts with different organisations (for example, data on water

quality and invasive or protected species) and a database where the users of ecological data would be exposed to Walbunja perspectives, culture, relationship with and understanding of Country and the genealogical ties that connect them with the whole territory and the non-humans who inhabit it.

Since 2020, as part of the Environmental Stewardship Resurgence in Walbunja Land and Sea Country project, our team has continued to work towards amplifying the visibility of Walbunja people's contemporary presence in this region of the New South Wales South Coast by



Map 2: Extent and severity of the 2019–20 bushfires in the South Coast New South Wales region (Base Map Source: Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water).



Figure 1: The 2019–20 bushfire devastated a large portion of Walbunja Country (Photo: Annick Thomassin 2020).



Figure 2: Uncle Keith Nye near a midden that was recently exposed by coastal erosion (Photo: Annick Thomassin 2021).

further developing collaborative mapping tools and digital narratives. The goal of this ongoing work is to support the Walbunja community's aspirations to increase their influence over the decisions concerning their territories while asserting the importance of going beyond celebrating the lives of their ancestors by acknowledging the living contributions of Walbunja peoples today. The project does so by creating dynamic, accessible, and appropriate virtual tools to facilitate the intergenerational transmission of their knowledge, their relationships and responsibilities towards people and Country.

This mapping work and these digital narratives are deeply intertwined with the increasingly evident climate crisis in Australia. The bushfires (Figure 1) that devastated the South Coast in the last hours of 2019, followed by two flooding episodes in 2020–21, demonstrated the urgency of developing better approaches to risk and disaster management to define and minimise future threats, particularly those associated with climate change. The superimposition on the map of the areas affected by the 2019–20 fires and the Walbunja territory (Map 2) illustrates the risks to which their territory is increasingly exposed. Along the coastline, the rising sea level and ever-increasing coastal erosion are gradually exposing ancient middens and burial sites among other places of importance for the Walbunja People (Figure 2). Some river fish traps have also been revealed after the fires. Documenting these sites can help illustrate the impact and risks associated with climate change on Walbunja cultural heritage, as well as the density of past and contemporary links they maintain with this territory.

Indigenous mapping practices are of course not a new phenomenon. Various forms of mapping and marking the land and seascapes have existed for thousands of years (Hirt 2009; Poirier 2025). Over the millennia, these practices have been developed and used as navigational tools, but also as a means of expressing the intimate relationships and understandings of the land, sea and celestial entities of the peoples who developed them. Some of these cartographic representations were engraved on physical supports, sometimes permanent, inscribed on stone, on animal skins, or on bark. Some were more ephemeral such as inscriptions in the sand (Woodward and

Lewis 1998; Sutton 1998a, 1998b). Others were carried over the ages through oral narratives, place names, songs and dances (Hirt 2009; Poirier 2025; Thomassin 2019). Across Walbunja and Yuin territory, marks were left on trees to facilitate navigation, but also to warn of the sacred or gendered nature of certain places. Violent and continuous colonial encroachment on Indigenous territories gave rise to a variety of cartographic needs and strategies, both by the settlers as well as by members of the Walbunja community.

Over the past two decades, many Indigenous groups, whether they inhabit metropolitan spaces or regions that city dwellers imagine to be remote, have adopted and adapted digital mapping and communication technologies for a variety of purposes, from reviving their traditional practices to re-establishing their nomenclature systems and processes of intergenerational knowledge transfer. Increasingly, easy access to computers, especially smartphones, geo-positioning systems, tablets and social media, has also enabled community members to document and record their narratives, knowledge, and relationships with their territory (Peterson 2017). These tools have enabled them to expand and share their knowledge, cultures and lifeworlds through films, podcasts, blogs and other social media (Carlson and Frazer 2018, 2021; Kral 2010, 2014).

More recently, open-source software and applications such as Cybertracker have emerged as useful tools enabling some Indigenous groups to (re)take control of their cartographic narratives and anchor geographic and environmental data collection in their own terms and perspectives and focus on aspects important to them (Ens 2012). During an earlier pilot project, Cybertracker sequences were created to document the work of the rangers as well as placenames, cultural heritage sites, family connections to specific sites, and local knowledge on places, plants, animals, and more. Complementary platforms, such as ArcGIS Storymaps, which allow for the dynamic arrangement of maps, text, audio and video recordings, as well as visual or musical artworks, also offer interesting opportunities for Indigenous groups to assert their contemporary presence over their territories using a variety of modes of expression.

ArcGIS StoryMaps, which we are using as part of this project, as well as free platforms such as



Figure 3: Adam McCarron using Cybertracker to mark a local midden (Photo: Annick Thomassin).

Google Earth, are particularly attractive tools for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge including supporting learning about cultural practices of caretaking (Clapperton-Richard et al. 2021). Whether through films or cartography, the young Indigenous people who take part in these projects are encouraged to have meaningful conversations with their Elders and their culture through everyday digital practices (Steffensen 2019). Euahleyai and Gamillaroi professor of law Larissa Behrendt aptly notes that storytelling, whether digital or traditional, is a 'transformative practice' and an 'act of sovereignty that reinforces indigenous identity, values and world-views' (Behrendt 2019:175). Digital multimedia storytelling (including narratives carried through mapping), offers Indigenous people a unique avenue to affirm and implement projects of environmental resurgence and responsibility, thanks to contemporary equipment and tools, which are adaptable to intergenerational knowledge-sharing practices.

Places, landscapes and seascapes, seasons and practices, are powerful sites of meaning, memories and wisdom (Basso 1996). Being in place, on Country, supports the process of knowledge transfer, collective storytelling and learning from the past for the future. Intergenerational learning and knowledge transfer is critical to the process of caretaking that links the past with the future within the present moment of enacting care of Country. Country creates a space to recollect, reflect, make sense, feel and share knowledge, stories and experiences. The act of collectively producing the knowledge of Country as a research method fosters and enriches the conversational and individual storytelling and knowledge-sharing process while enabling the knowledge holders' control over what is revealed, how it is shared and how this should be governed for the future. As Professor Margaret Kovach (member of the Pasqua First Nation, Saskatchewan, Canada) explains, '[s]tory is a relational process that is accompanied by particular protocols consistent

with tribal knowledge identified as guiding the research' (2010:42).

Cartography is a political act (Peluso 1995), never neutral (Perkins 2017), and inseparable from the power relations framing the societies that imagine the maps (Chartier 2020; Halder and Michel 2018). It is also a social act, productive of relationships and representation of different worlds and different geographies by what it includes and excludes, consciously or unconsciously (Halder and Michel 2018; Poirier 2021; Yates 2021). As Canadian anthropologist Benoit Éthier (2020) points out, Indigenous cartography deployed to support Indigenous projects of self-determination and resurgence, is a form of counter-cartography, in that it aims to disrupt forms of colonial territorialisation (Peluso 1995), as well as (re)present and re-complexify territory from an Indigenous peoples' point of view (Chartier 2020; Hunt & Stevenson 2017).

The production of digital geographies and virtual narratives associated with this project is therefore fuelled by the collective aspirations, shared among our team and members of the Walbunja community, to transform and challenge colonial property regimes and colonial extractivist and utilitarian relationships with the environment. The project also provides members of the Walbunja community with additional avenues to represent themselves and the significance of their relationship to Country to counter settler colonial environmental management laws and regulations that result in furthering dispossession. In other words, the counter-mapping exercise carried out by this project hopes to support the renegotiation of conditions of coexistence between the Walbunja people, non-Indigenous peoples and regional, state and federal colonial authorities across their territory. In the process, we paid particular attention to the power relations and knowledge systems privileged by cartographic structures and geographic information systems (Chartier 2020; Louis 2007) that could undermine these resurgence efforts.

To ensure that this research reflected the priorities, knowledges and stories of the Walbunja community and only revealed what they wished to share, we held collective mapping workshops and a series of interviews conducted primarily in Walbunja territory with a number of Elders and

other key members of their community, including the Indigenous rangers with caretaking responsibilities. These collective mapping activities were intended to highlight Walbunja people's ways of relating to the territory, informed by the principles of relational responsibility, respectful representation, and reciprocal learning (Louis 2007).

The potential cultural sensitivities attached to some of the places, knowledge and stories that might be documented during the research process were always a key preoccupation for our team. The presence of Traditional Custodians who are knowledge holders on the team and our ongoing engagement with local Walbunja Elders and community members ensures that culturally sensitive or restricted information and knowledge is being dealt with according to Walbunja cultural protocol both at the information collection and publication stages. This includes special consideration for having gendered men and women sites, managing and documenting gender-specific knowledge, and restricted access to stored data. Fuzzy boundary maps are being used to illustrate the density of Walbunja people's connections to certain areas without revealing specifics (Potter et al. 2016). Specific sites will also be identified in a community review process before maps or stories are made public. This ensures community control over what is or is not revealed to the non-Indigenous community. Using a fuzzy boundaries method also helps demonstrate that Walbunja connections and responsibilities to Country are holistic and not associated with discrete sites and points on the map. Country is a sentient kin. These boundaries do not delimit Country, they are an illustration of the area over which the Walbunja people have responsibilities.

Most of the interviews with Elders and community members were conducted by four of the Walbunja members of our team (three in their twenties and one in his forties). In this way, the project freed up time and space for the rangers to interact with their Elders, listen to their stories, share their knowledge and help document these stories for generations to come. By leading most of the interviews, our Walbunja colleagues (mainly Adam, Tayla, Jake and Jordan) were able to adapt the conversation topics to their Elders' priorities. They were able to ask their own questions about Country. They also developed a



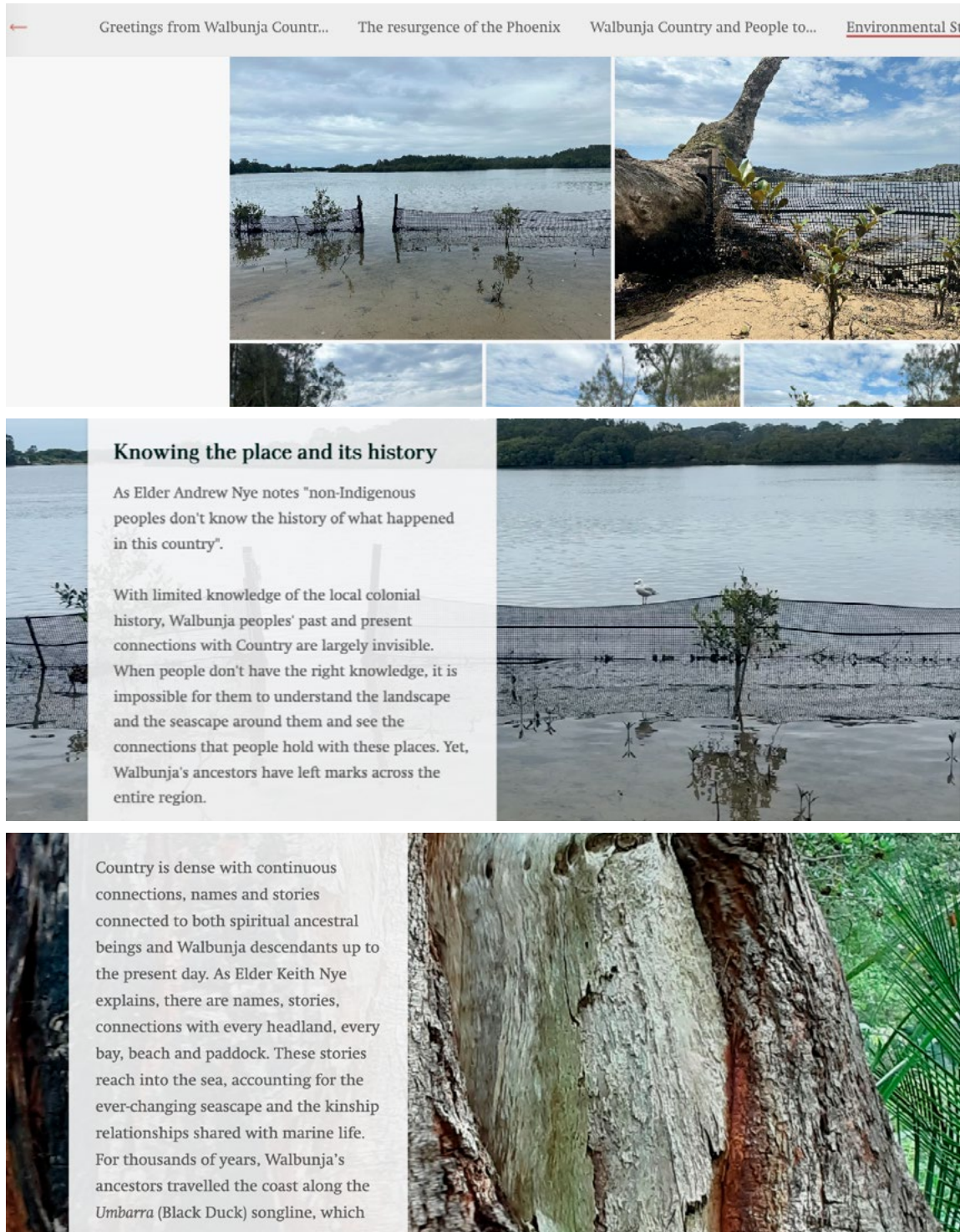
Figure 4: Sketch mapping exercise by the Mogo Local Aboriginal Land Council ranger team (Photo: Annick Thomassin 2021).

mastery of the material and controlled the access, dissemination, interpretation, and reinterpretation of shared knowledge. This process leading to the creation of digital maps and narratives, in its capacity to foster engagements with Elders but also with Country, was itself a bearer of resurgence and contributor to intergenerational relations.

These small workshops and individual interviews generated enthusiastic and lively discussions about the location of certain sites, place names and the activities associated with them. They provided opportunities for the Elders to talk about their intimate connections with sites important to them and their families. These workshops and interviews drew on the sketch-mapping technique, which consists of geographic storytelling and involves working with base-maps containing very few markers to allow for stories to emerge. Different types of base-maps were explored by the team so that we could select the ones that people would relate to best. These workshops and interviews documented the sites, stories and practices dear to Walbunja community members both geographically and through narrative.

A total of 20 members of the Walbunja community in and around Mogo, aged between their twenties and seventies, participated in the project, either in groups or through individual interviews. Collective mapping workshops, first with the Walbunja members of our team (Figure 4), and then with members of the community, enabled us to create sketch maps based on the experience and knowledge of community members in relation to their territory.

These sites included ancient campsites, middens, ochre quarries, and scarred trees whose bark was removed long ago to mark sites or for the construction of canoes, shields and other objects. There are initiation sites, gender-specific sites, and traps for catching fish and shellfish. There are more recent sites where local families used to camp, swim and fish. They include places where traditional foods, medicinal plants and the lomandra, used to weave the baskets sold in their art gallery, are concentrated. There are also important sites located beyond their territory, testifying to the links and porosity of their borders (for example, Gulaga to the south of their territory). Many sites are inaccessible due to urban development, their



Figures 5, 6 & 7: Extracts of the project's ArcGIS Storymaps created by the team.



Figure 8: Barlings Beach near the Burrawang Coastal Club (Photo: Sherrie Nye McCarron 2022).



Figure 9: Cultural burning on private land, Burrawang Coastal Club, Walbanga Country (Photo: Janet Hunt 2021).

accompanied by a considerable transformation of their own engagement with the land, the waters, the seas, non-humans and so-called 'natural resources'. As John Borrows (2018), Anishinaabe professor of law at the University of Victoria (British Columbia), aptly stresses, it is not enough to encourage the renewal of Indigenous responsibilities and laws to address environmental crises. As non-Indigenous ways of life have significantly impeded Indigenous peoples' capacities to uphold their practices and responsibilities across their lands and seas, Indigenous peoples must reconcile and renew their relationships with their territories and their obligations toward non-human entities. This reconciliation also depends on the willingness of non-Indigenous people to significantly rethink their relationships with the environment and recognise their responsibilities towards the territory.

This emphasises the necessity to create spaces (in person or online) where the Walbunja people and non-Indigenous residents and visitors can interact respectfully. Reflecting on the complex intersection of Walbunja and non-Aboriginal lives, many community members, including members of our team, see the importance of sharing some of their knowledge and perspectives with the non-Indigenous population with a view to transforming the latter's relationship with the territory. To do this meaningfully and avoid relying on their own assumptions, the rangers sought to explore how non-Indigenous peoples (residents and visitors) understand the territory, Walbunja Country, and how familiar they are with Walbunja people's culture. To this end, our team's Walbunja members developed an interview grid for the non-Indigenous population living in Walbunja territory. This interview grid explores the ways in which non-Indigenous people perceive Country and Walbunja culture. This aspect of the project is in its infancy. The interview grid was tested on the non-Walbunja members of our team as well as a few acquaintances in the community.

Building positive connections with non-Indigenous members of, and visitors to, the community has also meant a growing capacity to access part of Country normally inaccessible (as it is now considered private property). Because of an existing relationship between a member of our team and the Burrawang Coastal Club, we were

able to gain access to their property (a wildlife reserve with some cabins). This allowed us to document parts of the sites and some of the stories associated with it. The club's land is located near important areas in Walbunja Country, including Barlings Beach and Little Paddock (Frank's Beach), as well as Barlings Island (a men-only site). A number of Walbunja families have camped on this part of the territory until recently, including the family of Adam McCarron, one of our team members. Some sites of importance to the Walbunja members of our team can now be found on the club's private land. This mapping and storytelling initiative has opened the door to a desire on the part of the club's owners to learn more about the history of Walbunja families associated with their 'property', and they have expressed their desire to know the outcome of this investigation.

The connections that are emerging from these relationships will also provide an avenue for the StoryMaps produced as part of the project to reach this section of the community.

Methodology of caretaking – ethical research in challenging times

Preparation for this project began in February 2020, after the bushfire and just before Australia started to experience its first COVID-19 lockdown. It was developed with several interrelated aims in mind. Our team had been working together for several years and we were hoping to expand the research, tools and training we started in 2015. Following the bushfires that severely impacted Walbunja Country, the project wished to respond to Walbunja people's concerns about how Country had been mismanaged by settlers' institutions for over more than a century, and to make the links between this mismanagement and the disrupted local fire regimes, coastal erosion, and disruption of waterways. Most importantly, the team was preoccupied by the need for the community (including the rangers) and Country to heal from these recent traumatic events. Acknowledging the importance of Country for people's wellbeing, it was thought that creating a space on Country for the rangers and community members to map their connections to meaningful places – to tell stories and discuss environmental stewardship needs – would support the wellbeing of people and place.

We did not foresee at the time that other significant challenges were waiting around the corner. After the bushfires, and adding to the serious and lasting constraints and stress linked to COVID-19 the community was hit by several cases of Sorry Business,² as well as flooding which caused the loss of Mogo LALC's temporary office (a space that was already replacing the office lost in the fire in 2019). The cumulative impact of these events resulted in several members of our team being unwell for an extended period. While the delays caused by these events and stressors were not linked to the project itself and were outside of our control, it was important for us to create the space for the community, our Walbunja ranger colleagues, and non-Walbunja team members to look after their health, grieve and heal.

Our collaboration and projects have always been framed around principles of reciprocity and care at their heart. Our methodology and methods have been collectively crafted to acknowledge and prioritise the strength, skills and knowledge of local Indigenous rangers from community – as well as other Walbunja community members – to co-produce knowledge about Country that is relevant to their needs, perspectives and aspirations. Respect for community members' and rangers' everchanging circumstances and aspirations have been fundamental factors around which our activities are planned. The current project being in response to the traumatic bushfire of 2019-2020, we discussed from the outset the strong need for a flexible design of the research schedule and activities. Given the long-term and trusting nature of the relationships within our team, communicating these needs among us was relatively easy. And when the enduring scars from the fire made being on Country too difficult, we turned to art to tell the story. As a result of these difficult circumstances, the project schedule had to be pushed forward on several occasions, extending the initial deadline over several months. This reflects the fact that community life and priorities do not always align with academic and funding bodies' schedules and that increasingly, broader socio-environmental factors such as bushfires and pandemics are shaping our lifeworlds. Without the openness, flexibility and understanding of our funding partners, it would not have been possible to complete this project.

Discussion

The dominant cartographic representation of the region presents a minimal portrait of the region's First Nations history and is generally silent on both the extent of Walbunja people's dispossession and their contemporary presence. We mentioned in the introduction to this article that one of the main concerns shared by the Walbunja community members involved in this project is the recognition of their contemporary presence and relationship with Country, and the inclusion of their interests in decision-making processes concerning their territory.

By making Walbunja people's presence and interests visible, we hope to support a growing awareness of the close links between them and Country and the value of their environmental responsibilities for the wellbeing of the land, non-humans, and the South Coast population more generally. We also hope that this exercise can influence a change in perception regarding the nature of this coastal landscape among the non-Indigenous people who inhabit or frequent it.

In Walbunja territory, counter-mapping and digital storytelling offer opportunities to document and demonstrate the density of Walbunja people's relationships with the South Coast region of NSW, Australia. As Walbunja Elder Keith Nye explains, 'every headland, bay, beach and lagoon have a name, a history and links with families and ancestors' (Interview 2021). The enduring processes of settler colonialism, notably manifested through ongoing urban expansion, limit Walbunja people's access to much of their territory and significantly disrupt their cultural practices and caretaking responsibilities toward Country. Despite this, Walbunja people's knowledge, ways of being in the world, and their environmental responsibilities (enacted when circumstances permit), continue to coexist with non-Indigenous ways of life across Walbunja territory. Sharing and making visible Walbunja people's contemporary presence over the territory can play an important role in supporting their aspirations to increase their influence on decisions concerning development and environmental management on the South Coast. It makes their interests harder to ignore.

By entwining Walbunja people's personal, family and tribal knowledge, memories and narratives with these maps and databases, renaming

places, reclaiming and renewing inherited responsibilities to the land and seascape, we hope that this exercise can provide alternative and transformative narratives to disrupt the processes of dispossession, exclusion and destruction that continue to affect the Walbunja community and Country. By producing and controlling the data generated on their territory, the Walbunja people increase their chances of controlling the way Country is understood, related to, and represented. By supporting the development of a rich database of knowledge (geographical, cultural, and environmental) about sites that are important to their community, it may become possible to rapidly use this information, in addition to legislation relating to Aboriginal cultural heritage, if important sites come under threat. Much work remains to identify the avenues available to ensure this knowledge and data carries political weight.

The process of counter-mapping and digital storytelling is also intended to bring generations of Walbunja people closer together, as well as the Walbunja and the non-Indigenous population living on or regularly visiting the South Coast. The mapping activities have revealed a significant density of sites and places of significance to the Walbunja community. The landscape is filled with memories, names, and relationships past, present and future. This project underlines the importance of the Walbunja people's contemporary engagement with their land and sea territory for their physical, spiritual, cultural, and economic wellbeing. However, the use of counter-mapping and digital storytelling is not without its challenges. To echo Socrates, as we engage with these options, we need to continuously ask ourselves 'what does this technology add to our lives and what does it take away from them' (King 2023:50; Nakata et al. 2014). Hence, we need to remind ourselves regularly to question the benefits and risks of using these technologies.

Our project focuses on the potential benefits that digital technologies and virtual applications offer for realising the resurgence of Walbunja environmental responsibilities and renewing relationships with non-Indigenous communities on the South Coast. Mapping is always a political endeavour, expressed simultaneously by what it includes and by what is, purportedly or not, excludes. As we have briefly alluded to

earlier in this paper, there are a number of ethical and other challenges associated with the use of these technologies. There have been instances, as Christie highlights, of government agencies showing interest in Indigenous mapping initiatives and databases in order to develop and expand their own databases (for purposes that are often contrary to Indigenous aspirations) (2005; Poirier 2021). The online-accessible digital data produced on Indigenous cultural sites can potentially be appropriated by colonial authorities to support their own projects (Hunt and Stevenson 2017). There is also a risk of data misinterpretation. As mentioned above, the consultations that led to the identification of areas important to the Walbunja people as part of the zoning planning for Batemans Marine Park led to the establishment of sanctuary zones near Aboriginal archaeological sites (shell middens). These rich marine spaces have been important to Walbunja fishermen since ancient times, as evidenced by the presence of these middens. These middens are historically important and listed as part of the Aboriginal cultural heritage of the region. As Adam McCarron explains, middens are living sites of knowledge. Examining the composition of a midden reveals the types of seafood to be found nearby. Yet, now, the middens are dying as people are prevented from contributing to them by state regulations and the establishment of sanctuary zones. The middens are not only exposed to erosion, the rising of sea levels, and climate change, but also threatened with disintegration because nothing is added to them. They are treated like relics.

While the conservation of the species living in these areas is desired by both the Walbunja people and the marine park authorities, the importance of Walbunja fishing practices in these zones does not seem to have been understood or seriously considered by park managers. As noted above, this situation has led to the loss of important fishing territories,³ the criminalisation of fishing activities, particularly the collection of abalone, a key species for the Walbunja people. Thousands of dollars in fines and even prison sentences have been issued to Walbunja fishermen over the years (Thorpe and Proust 2022). Overall, the establishment of these sanctuary zones by the marine park, combined with the regulations associated



Figure 10: Tourist interpretation panel. Cape Melville lookout, an important site for the Walbunja community, overlooking a series of sacred sites (e.g. Broulee Island and Barlings Island). There are only minimal references to ancient Walbunja sites. Walbunja people's contemporary presence is invisible on the maps.

with fishing in the state of New South Wales, have significant impacts on food sovereignty, general wellbeing and Walbunja people's ability to pass on knowledge and culture to their younger generations (Smyth et al. 2018).

As one of the community Elders pointed out, there are, therefore, considerable dilemmas around whether certain knowledge about important sites should be mapped and revealed or mapped and kept secret. Echoing this, Cristina Rojas' work in Columbia (in production) indeed emphasises that some Indigenous practices and sites have endured because they continued to exist in the shadows, while others needed to be made visible to survive. It is, therefore, imperative to reflect carefully on what and how practices and places are exposed through digital mapping and storytelling. Both

options can help them protect their sites but also risk exposing them to vandalism and unwanted interventions by settler institutions. In both cases, there is also a risk of opening the door to appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and loss of control over important sites. Even when this data is kept secret, there remains a risk of it falling into the hands of government bodies (Éthier et al. 2019; Peterson 2017). Hence, data collection on the territory remains fraught with a certain level of mistrust. Co-author Sherrie Nye acknowledges that, for many Elders, sharing their knowledge is associated with a fear of potential loss of access to their territory. As we highlighted in our introduction, the memory of this happening is still fresh.

Mapping practices – even those labeled as participatory or referred to as counter-mapping

– along with the gathering of Indigenous ecological knowledge, are often associated with processes of distillation and abstraction that frequently filter out knowledge and information that does not align with Western epistemologies (Nadasdy 2003). These practices carry with them the potential to perpetuate an imbalance between Indigenous and Western ontologies, between human and non-human interests (Yates 2021), and between genders (McGurk & Caquard 2020). How can the rights belonging to the producers of this knowledge continue to be protected once this data is made accessible online? Can the use of digital mapping and internet platforms support the extension of colonial practices of exploitation, extraction and control, particularly those that displace a people's self-understanding with a worldview that favours colonial interests?

This appears to confirm Audre Lorde's (2018) warning that the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house. Yet, this claim somehow denies the ingenuity and capacity of Indigenous peoples to appropriate, reorient and reinvent these tools for their own purposes as underpinned by the principles of counter-mapping (Peluso 1995), and to perceive, avoid or mitigate these potential political pitfalls (Nakata et al. 2014). Yet, in a context of increasing urbanisation such as that of the South Coast, counter-mapping appears to be a necessary tool offering an alternative to colonial representations of the territory supporting future urban expansion projects. Indeed, counter-mapping can provide a different view of the territory, outside the realm of possession (Chartier 2020).

The extent of sites and Walbunja cultural heritage that have been damaged is extreme. The cartographic identification of these sites can help to protect them. By maintaining control over their data, rangers and community members can decide to reveal the location of certain sites when they deem it necessary.

Despite the potential carried by digital narratives for the preservation and transmission of knowledge, these platforms offer less control over the conditions for sharing and accessing knowledge once it is published online (Éthier et al. 2019). Consequently, it is necessary to tread lightly and interrogate from the outset the extent to which digital mapping and storytelling enhance or

hinder the continuation of oral narratives and traditions based on this practice. Éthier et al. (2019) question, among other things, the impact of written media on the ability of narratives to remain flexible and adapt to new contexts. Does this form of representation of the territory constitute an additional obstacle generating greater distance between Elders and generations whose lives are now deeply entangled with the virtual world? What codes and arrangements need to be put in place to ensure the maintenance of the 'customary authority' (Éthier et al. 2019) and 'relational responsibility' (Louis 2007) associated with the transfer of knowledge?

An important point made by Hunt and Stevenson (2017) is that digital technologies are not used or adopted homogeneously. These technologies are adapted, integrated, provided with new purposes, and infused with new meanings. Digital mapping and storytelling are thus iterative, living processes. They take the form of fluid performances, always in conversation with offline realities. In many ways, it's a decolonial, non-linear journey, rather than a finished product.

As many Elders pointed out, understanding and relating to Country requires us to be present on the land. So how do we reconcile the fully embodied experience of being present with Country with the generally disembodied experience of virtual spaces? Do these 'technologies of absence' (King 2023) contribute to lessening direct ties with Country and our relationships with non-humans? Do virtual (re)presentations of the Walbunja people's world and memory convey Walbunja ontological perspectives, or are they new realities entangled and encoded through the possibilities and norms of the virtual world?

Notwithstanding the importance of maintaining close ties with the land, digital space is increasingly present in everyday life and an integral part of the lives of younger people. These young people are both transformed by their relationship with the virtual world while also being involved in transforming this reality. As Yiman and Bidjara researcher Marcia Langton (2013) points out, the opportunities offered by information and communication technologies for young Aboriginal people are immense. These technologies add to young Aboriginal peoples' ability to take part in the transmission of their culture

and can provide a certain pride associated with this opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing of their communities. In the context of our project as well as their wider rangers' work, the process of gathering information and stories has, in itself, created a time and space for quality discussions between the Walbunja rangers part of this team, and the Elders. This kind of work enables them 'to learn more about culture [...] to reconnect with the Elders, reconnect with the land [...] connect more with family. It just all goes hand in hand' (Sherrie Nye 2023).

Conclusion

One of the purposes of this project was to produce a platform that the Walbunja rangers and wider community can keep using, adapting and updating. At the end of this particular project, we also hope to continue interrogating the (trans)formative potential carried by digital mapping and storytelling by engaging, both online and offline, with non-Indigenous residents and government representatives within the Walbunja territory. In fact, the process of gathering the data on which these digital tools are based was itself a catalyst for encounters and rapprochements among both young Walbunja people and their Elders as well as Walbunja people and non-Indigenous people (such as members of the Burrawang Coastal Club who supported this project). As community members often say, to understand Country, you need to spend time with it. In some ways, digital multimedia platforms allow only an incomplete and disembodied experience of this relationship, these narratives, and this knowledge. This digital storytelling must, therefore, be accompanied by invitations to extend these relationships outside of the virtual realm, with people, on Country.

The resurgence of the Walbunja people's way of life and the renewal of their relationship and responsibilities towards Country are largely dependent on radical changes in the non-Indigenous population's relationship with the land. To this end, but not without some reluctance, many community members are willing to share their knowledge and philosophical perspectives.

This digital mapping project also presents an iterative means of preserving, renewing and amplifying territorial knowledge, and generating

useful tools for the intergenerational transmission of this knowledge within the Walbunja community. For young people who do not have easy access to ancestral territory, either because they live elsewhere or because of the region's rapid urban expansion, this is especially valuable. While the maps and narratives created as part of this project can serve as a means to share the Elders' memory, knowledge, practices, and relationship with Country with future generations, the personal involvement of our young Walbunja team members (co-authors of this article) in directly gathering their Elders' stories was itself a vessel for transmitting and integrating this knowledge. In so doing, they participated in the creation of cartographic representation tools and digital narratives adapted to their context and needs, while at the same time laying the foundations for the narratives and knowledge they will one day pass on to future generations as Elders.

The project helped build the confidence of the rangers (especially the young rangers) in relation to conducting research activities. The Elders were also thrilled that the young Walbunja rangers were interested in their knowledge and their perspectives and were happy to pass on their knowledge and share stories. The young rangers felt privileged to be paid to work on their Country, to learn about the history and the knowledge from their Elders. This project enabled this intergenerational learning.

It remains to be seen to what extent it is possible to map several ways of being in the world by mobilising collaborative cartography and digital storytelling. Can we map other worlds in a way that allows them to interact and coexist fully? Can the articulation and interaction of these complementary digital platforms transform the understanding of the territory and the environment held by non-Indigenous members of the community and the region's visitors? And finally, while it is still too early in the context of this project to answer these questions, can this counter-mapping and digital storytelling provide a space and a tool through which non-Indigenous people may begin to understand and experience Walbunja people's perspectives and territory differently, including what having Country as agent and as kin could mean on the ground for everyone, every day?

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