


Pang-ngooteekeya weeng malangeepa ngeeye (remembering our future: bringing old ideas to the new)

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we highlight the poor health of the Australian environment and propose a new framing for how we care for Maar Country. We identify the basis for our Law/Lore of the Land and describe six guiding principles for our proposed biocultural landscape restoration approach. We also explore the way that our ancestors used cultural stories to guide the management of Country and we reflect on how we are adopting these same approaches today by giving culturally significant entities primacy in our approach to caring for Country. Finally, we extend an invitation to non-Aboriginal scientists, conservationists, and government agencies to work with us to care for Country, in a respectful and holistic manner.

Position statement. *We, the authors of this paper, are all either Aboriginal Australians or employed by the Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation. We are all actively participating in the Pang-ngooteekeya weeng malangeepa ngeeye project.*

Keywords: biocultural landscapes, caring for Country, cultural burning, culturally significant entities, ecological restoration, ethical research, ethnozoology, indigenous cultural intellectual property, indigenous knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge.

Introduction

The 2021 State of Environment Report outlined that the Australian environment is in increasingly poor condition (Cresswell *et al.* 2021), most of the continent's ecosystems are in decline and many are at a tipping point, on the verge of collapse. This is a direct consequence of colonisation and the cessation of traditional land-management practices, along with the introduction of threatening processes that include anthropogenic climate change, pollution, invasive plants and animals and habitat destruction (Legge *et al.* 2023). The changes have led to the countries woeful record of threatened species protection, more than 2000 species are currently threatened with extinction (Woinarski *et al.* 2019). But we have also failed, and continue to fail, in maintaining strong populations of species; for instance, threatened and near threatened bird populations are now less than half their year 2000 population sizes (Threatened Species Index 2022).

The impacts of colonisation have been keenly felt in Victoria, Australia's most densely populated state, and this is reflected in the state of Victoria's environment (see the (Victoria State Government 2023)). The Eastern Maar Nation, in Victoria's south-west, is made up of language groups whose Country is diverse and includes the cliffs and forests of Gariwerd, the tall wet forests of the Otways, volcanic plains, dry hinterland forests, heaths and Sea Country. Each has been adversely affected and continues to be affected by poor land-management practices (Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation 2015). The Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation (EMAC) is a Registered Aboriginal Party and Native Title holder for portions of their traditional territory. EMAC represents their community, referred from here as Eastern Maar, and pursues the collective obligation to care for Eastern Maar Country.

Aboriginal Australians were actively managing landscapes (Pascoe 2014; Steffensen 2020; Gammage and Pascoe 2021). The present-day Eastern Maar community desires to

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reinstate land-management practices that tackle the many issues that challenge our ancestral territory. Our relationship with Country is one of kinship and our cultural traditions, spiritual beliefs, livelihoods, and social structures are shaped by and interwoven with the natural features, ecosystems, and resources of our surroundings. It is through this worldview that we approach caring for Country, a philosophy which is missing from the current dominant approaches to land management.

Approaches to conservation, such as those focusing on single-species conservation (e.g. DCCEEW 2022) and those that increase the size of the National Reserve System (e.g. Commonwealth of Australia) are struggling to arrest the decline of biodiversity.

Country, Meereeng, is not heathy; we see this as part of colonisation. Species that are important to use are becoming rare. For instance, the eastern ground parrot (*Pezoporus wallicus*) has disappeared from the Carlisle Heath after the consecutive impacts of agriculture and then the region's management regime after designation as National Park and State Forest.

We wish to bring back a biocultural values-centred approach to caring for Eastern Maar Country, and here we outline our vision for how this can be implemented through the vision/legacy of our ancestors, led by our knowledge holders and in partnership with land managers, governments, and scientists.

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Our assertion is that approaching ecological restoration with an intent to restore cultural values recognises the inherent kinship of Country and Eastern Maar. In this kinship relationship, Eastern Maar inhabit a place of belonging as stewards and custodians and inherit a body of ancestral knowledge or traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). TEK comes with responsibility to continue to maintain and improve the health of Country. Our template integrates TEK, respects cultural diversity, engages communities, and prioritises ethical considerations, leading to more inclusive, holistic, and sustainable restoration outcomes.

Founded in Customary Lore, Knowledge and Practice, a biocultural values-approach to landscape restoration involves recognising and embracing the interconnections between ecosystems and human culture. It acknowledges the symbiotic nature of human relationships with and reliance on nature and how the health of Country is inextricably tied to human behaviour and the impacts of human development. It allows for the reintegration of cultural knowledges and practices for the mitigation of damage and the restoration of healthy adaptive ecosystems.

Our health is linked to that of our Country.

Our approach is founded in our Law/Lore of the Land that underpins our co-existence, place and belonging in Country (see Box 1).

Informed by our Law/Lore, we have developed six guiding principles for a biocultural landscape-restoration approach to caring for Eastern Maar Country.

1. *Holistic understanding*: by adopting biocultural methods and values, we develop a holistic understanding of ecosystems that goes beyond purely biological aspects. We recognise the cultural dimensions and diverse ways in which humans depend on and shape ecosystems. It means that we seek the skills, knowledge and experience of collaborators across disciplines and cultural backgrounds. This comprehensive perspective helps us to address challenges to the health of Country more effectively.
2. *Traditional knowledge and practices*: biocultural approaches value and incorporate TEK held by Aboriginal communities. These communities have deep-rooted knowledge systems that have evolved over generations, offering insights into sustainable resource management, biodiversity conservation, and ecosystem restoration and continue to be effective (e.g. McKemey et al. 2021; Goolmeer and van Leeuwen 2023). There are no analogues or substitutes for TEK to be found in modern land management because they are not founded on ancestral responsibility and the place of TEK can be defined only by the relevant and appropriate knowledge holders (Pascoe et al. 2023). The integration of TEK with modern approaches to land management will ensure that restoration efforts are informed by local wisdom, knowledge, experience, and research.
3. *Cultural resilience*: biocultural approaches recognise the importance of cultural resilience alongside ecological resilience. By preserving and revitalising cultural practices, languages, and traditions, we promote the resilience of communities in the face of environmental changes. Cultural resilience enables our society to adapt, maintain its identity, and sustain its relationship with and as Country.
4. *Community engagement and ownership*: biocultural methods emphasise the active involvement and empowerment of local communities in ecological restoration. Engaging communities in decision-making, planning, and implementation processes ensures that restoration initiatives align with their cultural values, needs, and obligations. It fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, leading to more sustainable outcomes.
5. *Ethical considerations*: biocultural approaches prioritise ethical considerations, particularly in relation to Aboriginal peoples and local communities. Respecting their rights, knowledge systems, and cultural practices is essential. Ethical considerations guide the restoration process by ensuring that it is inclusive, respectful, and mindful of social justice, human rights, and self-determination.
6. *Benefits for nature and society (Country)*: restoring ecology through our biocultural approach generates co-benefits for

Box 1. Law/Lore of the Land from EMAC Native Title Recognition Statement 2022

Tyamateeyt poondee-yee pang ngootee weeng-wanoong

Lores for living we remember

kaneepoorreewooka-wanoong

we honour

Wangangootyoong:wooka ba mana Wangangootyoong, poondeeya Tyamateeytee

Respect: give and hold/receive respect live in Lore

Kooroondie: poondeeya wanga-kandeeyt-ee,
behave properly Live in listen understand/proper relationship,

Yoongama: responsibility/obligation, give and
receive/reciprocal; responsibility/obligation, share resources,

Matoowee-matoowee-keel: Matooweematoowee-kee Keeyn Meerreeng-ee
have kindness/compassion be kind care/love for Country

Keeyn Kayamp-eyt-ee, Leerpeen Meerreeng-ee, Karweeyn Meerreeng-ee
care/love for all Kin sing for Country dance for Country-

Pang-ngootapana weeng rhoonampee; mana ngarrakeetoong
hold family/community, leaving noone behind anyone/people

nganto pay ngarrakeetoong kaneepoorreewooka ngarrakeetoong
keep family/community honour family/community

both ecosystems and humans. By integrating cultural values, livelihood systems, and social equity, restoration efforts can enhance the resilience and sustainability of both nature and society. This leads to improved ecosystem health, increased community resilience, and enhanced quality of life for all people.

A cultural template for Country

Re-orientating to a biocultural approach will achieve better outcomes for Country and culture and ensure a more comprehensive, holistic, and sustainable path toward ecological restoration that will support Country's capacity for adaptation in the face of change in an uncertain future.

The foundation of our approach is that cultural stories and songlines identify for us the purpose for which Country was managed. We use the term culturally significant entities (CSE) to identify these significant features of Country, adopted from

Goolmeer *et al.* (2022). CSEs are associated with regions of our landscape through language, dreaming stories and ceremonies and can refer to culturally significant species, seascapes and landscapes (see Box 2).

A great illustration of our approach occurs north of Colac. From Red Rock in Alvie on Gulidjan Country, it is possible to survey extensive parts of Gulidjan, Djagurd Woorroong and Keeray Woorroong Country. From that vantage, several dreaming stories are visible in Country. To the south, Corang or snake Country, to the north-east Cheralum or sea tern Country, and directly north is Warrion, bandicoot Country. This is the biocultural land management template for the region. Each of these landscapes was managed for the purpose of protecting the significant species that the feature represents (see Box 3).

We see that many scientific disciplines, including anthropology, biogeography, hydrology, ecology and biology all have a role to play in helping us to re-imagine our future in caring for Country and our CSEs.

Box 2. Culturally significant entity

Koontapool, the southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*), travel north every year to birth and raise their calves in the shallow, warm and protected waters of the bays along the coast of southern Australia. These sites are related to Koontapool midwives, and this Lore/Law prescribes the matrilineal nature of the Gunditjmara nation. This Lore/Law demonstrates the relatedness of Country and people with Koontapool. It also highlights the areas where Koontapool congregate to give birth and nurse, and their migratory pathways or ancient songlines, as areas of protection under a biocultural values-centred approach (Pascoe *et al.* 2024). In this example, the migratory pathways and birthing places of Koontapool could all individually be considered as culturally significant entities.

Box 3. Dreeite Nature Conservation Reserve (Gulidan Country, Eastern Maar Nation)

Mount Warrion is an old volcanic col in Gulidjan Country, and its lava flow is associated with bandicoot. Bandicoot ancestors changed the flow of water through the landscape, demonstrating ancient hydrological knowledge of the Gulidjan, which has been encoded in Law/Lore. Ancestors worked with Warrion Country for the purpose of ensuring that bandicoots were prevalent. Eastern Maar are responsible for reinstating this principle.

To the north-west of Mount Warrion, on the lava flow, is the Dreeite Nature Conservation Reserve, ~0.55 km² that was gazetted primarily for the protection of an endangered species, the Corangamite water skink (*Eulamprus tympanum marnieae*), but also for protection of the Stony Knoll Shrubland vegetation community and wetlands.

Through partnership with the current land manager, Parks Victoria, the Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation (EMAC) has taken the lead role in directing management actions on the property. The main cultural objective is to restore habitat of Warrion, the bandicoot.

Because the Gulidjan people have been unable to act as custodians of the landscape, Eastern Maar people must relearn much and have sought the partnership of scientists, conservation non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government agencies in fulfilling their obligations to Country. The landscape is in a drastically changed condition; many processes that contribute to this are a direct result of colonisation, including pest plants and animals and altered fire regimes.

Country was managed for bandicoots because the dreaming story is still strong, it tells of how the landscape was shaped and influenced the flow of water. However, it is unknown how the landscape looked and how it was managed, so we looked to Western Science for insight. EMAC commissioned paleobotanist and Wiradjuri man Micheal-Shawn Fletcher to sample the sediment from one of the reserve's water bodies. From the deposition of charcoal and pollen in the sample, we have learnt that the reserve has seen a reduction of fire since colonisation. Additionally, grass cover has reduced, whereas shrub species have increased.

As a direct result of this knowledge, EMAC has worked with the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action and Parks Victoria to restore weeyn (fire) to the landscape. In 2023, the first jointly planned burn was conducted with the objective of resetting the balance between grasses and shrubs across the landscape. We will observe Country as it responds to the fire; we have already gained insight into how the Old People worked with the landscape, as the fire has uncovered cultural heritage we were not aware of.

We have also engaged with the Conservation Ecology Centre and Zoos Victoria who have conducted flora and fauna surveys across the reserve prior to our burns. The results of these surveys will now act as a biodiversity baseline to compare back to, as we continue to implement our biocultural practices. EMAC is also training staff in flora and fauna survey methods and providing opportunities for Eastern Maar community members to visit and learn from Dreeite. This is increasing knowledge and providing opportunities for people to connect with Country.

This biocultural project has strengthened the spirit of our community and encouraged our partners to walk with us to fulfill our obligation of restoring Country to health.

We invite experts in these fields to work within our framework and:

1. Engage with Eastern Maar knowledge holders to conceptualise new research that helps inform our biocultural approach to caring for Country in line with the principles of right-way science (e.g. [Ens et al. 2012](#); [Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2020](#); [McKemey et al. 2022](#)). This research, guided by Eastern Maar, will contribute to the revitalisation of Eastern Maar traditional knowledge as well as a body of work that combines western and Aboriginal science and ways of knowing.
2. Describe the potential, likely and historical distribution of our CSEs and the changing conditions of their Country and co-develop a spatial database that holds this knowledge. Colonisation has devastated our Country and the species that thrived there. Code-signed research can help us understand the condition of Country prior to colonisation and how that contributed to the distribution of our CSEs (see [Box 3](#)). This will help Eastern Maar and other land

- managers to understand the processes that have in many cases led to the decline of species and will also lead to conceiving the solutions. For instance, the eastern ground parrot was once a resident species in the Carlisle Heath, Gadabanut Country. However, several years ago, author Clarke pointed out to local land managers and researchers that the species (a) was of cultural significance and (b) was no longer observed in the region. This statement has led to a collaborative research program over 6 years, which has not only confirmed that ground parrots no longer persists in the region, but has also begun to describe the historical land management practices that allowed the species to thrive and the contemporary practices and events that are likely to have driven them out. Significantly, we also have a far more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the Carlisle Heath region than we have had previously, which includes knowledge of the water table, fire response, pollen record and biodiversity.
3. Help understand the associated biodiversity, cultural and community values that are held by each of our CSEs in

their Country. Our CSEs hold story that teaches our community valuable lessons that need to be retained to maintain inter-relationships with Country and ancestors. CSEs, like us, also inter-related with other aspects of Country, and are therefore associated with other species. Research that can illuminate these associations and that is co-designed with Eastern Maar will lead to the protection of our knowledge of culturally significant entities, the associated traditional ecological knowledge and its relationship with the landscape and culture.

In working with Eastern Maar, it is important that our science partners are aware of the importance of protecting our Aboriginal cultural intellectual property (ICIP) from exploitation (Janke 2005). Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation is developing a biocultural-values database that will include a mapping system, and will be equipped to hold data. The database will have various levels of access, set by Eastern Maar, as appropriate to protect ICIP, and we expect our partners to act in accordance with our guidelines. In this paper, we have used several examples of our knowledge (see Boxes 1, 2); these case studies alone describe examples of relationality with Country, understanding of geological events and the distribution of species. We have used these case studies because they have been previously made public and they are good examples of ongoing connections. Our community, and our Country, hold many such stories. Researchers working with Eastern Maar may or may not be entrusted with knowledge as per the wisdom of Elders, and this must be respected. But in working with our knowledge holders in conceptualising and co-designing research, scientists will be helping shape the future of Country and the strengthening of Aboriginal knowledge and ways of knowing.

We see that the role of land managers and government agencies will be equally important, as we seek to learn by doing and observing. Land managers can further our obligations to Country, as follows:

1. Enabling our biocultural practice through the removal of policies and regulatory barriers. The Eastern Maar community does not have access to much of their traditional lands. This has imposed many barriers to the community participating in caring for Country. It is important to acknowledge these barriers and work with Eastern Maar in a relationship of reciprocity and trust to achieve our obligation for caring for Country (Rawluk *et al.* 2022). For instance, Box 3 provides an example of an excellent Eastern Maar-led collaboration, but it required the removal of a significant barrier to proceed. For instance, Parks Victoria, the land manager of Dreeite Nature Conservation Reserve, have supported EMAC to have a directive role in how the reserve is managed. Parks Victoria did this by adopting a supportive and flexible approach in applying their policies to ensure that EMAC was in a position to have a directive role about the management of one of their reserves.
2. Providing resources, capacity, systems and expertise that align with our desired approach to Biocultural landscape management. Many of the projects that Eastern Maar would like to lead involve the use of fire. This has historically posed many barriers to the progress of Aboriginal-led fire in south-eastern Australia (Smith *et al.* 2021). These barriers include a lack of trained personnel and access to appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action provided training and PPE for Eastern Maar. This has allowed Eastern Maar

Box 4. Reflection by Ebony Hickey, Gulidjan Custodian, observing Weeyn on Country

The still but subtle winds carrying the barrels of light smoke as it rolled up over the rocky ridge on the landscape and the crackle of a fire we were yet to see triggered movement from the ground, birdlife circling and a lone roo traversing along the ridgeline to beat the blaze. Soon after, visions of our community members alongside Forest Fire Management dressed in green, in white helmets and flame throwers in hand, were visible. The landscape now visibly being transformed in a targeted and respectful way before our eyes and ears.

Those not involved directly in the fire lighting sitting atop the western ridge, viewing on as the sun rose up over the horizon and into the landscape of Dreeite – part of a landscape that is made up of waterways with broader story for the region that is linked to listening and reflecting. It was impossible to remove the thoughts of what was in comparison to what will be, a moderately silent cohort of Maar peoples watched on, deep in thought and reflection as the colour of Country changed before our eyes. From the outside, this could be viewed simplistically as land management; however, it was actively participating in part of our birth rights, actively managing Country to the elements and for the benefit of the bio-cultural landscape that has seen extensive change and in more recent years, neglect, since this place grew its lumps and bumps. This was just one small action, a few years of conversations and planning, one day of fire – fairly insignificant in the timeline of place, however incredibly significant in reinstating our knowledge and presence within the active management of our places. It was a source of pride to be witness to the landscape change and I encourage community to attend these days where the invite goes out and it's safe to do so, I'd also like to acknowledge the work of the bio-cultural landscapes team and the relationships they maintain within the environmental management space; it's the nature of such relationships that provide us with such substantial opportunities to put to practice our knowledges.

employees and community members to attend and participate in burning on Country.

Conclusions

As the knowledge of our biocultural template for Country is restored, Eastern Maar will be reasserting our obligations to care for Eastern Maar Country. When seeking to work on our Country, this is the frame through which we invite scientists and land managers to assess the utility of their skills and resources, in offering to care for Eastern Maar Country.

When white people first came to Eastern Maar Country, our ancestors immediately tried to initiate them into the Lore of the Land so that they understood their obligation to Kin and Country. That offer, to be a part of Country, is still being extended.

We invite all partners to work with us to enliven our cultural practices and restoration of healthy, adaptive and connected ecosystems, by approaching their work through biocultural centric practices and working with the people, lands and waters of our nation. By working together on Country, we will all heal (see Box 4).

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