Layers of Meanings in our Landscapes: Aliwa! Ni!

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Aliwa! Ni!

By Sandra Wooltorton, Len Collard and Pierre Horwitz

Noongar meaning in landscape

Aliwa is a Noongar (South West Australian) word which translates as 'look out, be observant or be aware. Ni means 'listen, pay attention'. In our Australian landscapes, Aboriginal stories and meanings are hiding in full view, wherever we walk, wherever we travel, wherever we are. The point in this short article is that as educators we need to be able to see, hear and understand the essence of landscape-embedded stories so that we can teach, show and explain these meanings to our children, students, peers and families. To do this, we need to learn the Aboriginal languages of our own places.

Aboriginal languages, which helped to form the Australian landscapes and are a product of those landscapes, have been spoken in Australia for over 60,000 years. Our places hold and have integrated their local languages and language-embedded wisdom, ‘Learning language’ and ‘learning place’ go together.

The research team

We, the three writers, are university-based transdisciplinary researchers and educators who have been working from different perspectives on the ecological wisdom in Noongar science – as described in Noongar language – each for over thirty years.

For the last fifteen years or so, we have been collaborating to synthesise and build upon our separate knowledge bases to address complex socio-ecological problems. We are: a fluent Noongar language speaker/cultural custodian (Len), an ecologist (Pierre) and cultural geographer (Sandra), who have been on a katitjin bidi (knowledge path), a Noongar learning journey (examples of our joint publications are listed below).

Our intent is quite blatantly ‘reciprocal colonisation’, aiming to actively influence the everyday lifestyles and habits of settlers and their descendants. This is a third way, a cultural reciprocity – enabling people to live and share an Earth-based rationality: one that acknowledges Noongar cultural custodians, recognises Noongar meanings and stories in landscape, and celebrates Noongar ways of knowing, being and doing.

Whilst our research and examples pertain to Noongar boodjar, or southwestern Australia, the ideas we develop apply to many Australian place-based and ecological language contexts.

Noongar language-embedded science for cultural-environmental learning

Because of the depth of ecological knowledge developed in Noongar language, some concepts do not translate easily into English. This points to the significant reasons why Australians should be given an opportunity to learn their local Aboriginal language.

Here we offer three examples of Noongar language-embedded science: the kundaam (specifically, the long now), boodjar and karlaboodjar.

The kundaam is the basis of...
Noongar knowing: it comprises all of the stories, songlines, creation narratives, science and explanations for everyday life. To understand this, we need to understand that in Noongar language, time is not historically linear.

For example, that which English speakers refer to as the past and the future is understood in Noongar language as a ‘long now’. Using documents originally produced over 100 years ago, here is how we have described it in our 2015 article:

[The long now is...] a cyclical, rhythmical sense of time in which elements and characters of the past (kura), the present (yey) and the future (burdawan) are all enfolded here in the now (yey), yielding an expanded, continuing present with an interconnected past and future; a concept fundamental to the kundooam.

Similarly, boodjar is often translated as ‘country’, however Noongar language seems to describe an inclusive concept of a ‘nature-culture’, a pregnant, fertile, nurturing landscape inclusive of people, spirits, water and food sources and narratives – all of whom are all socially and ecologically related. Altogether boodjar is living, where interdependencies play out.

Similarly, karl translates to English as both ‘home’ and ‘fire’ – because home is the boodjar that a bidija – the senior custodian of a family group – has cultural authority to burn, to care for it. So karlaboodjar is home-place – to which we are related in the same way as we are related to our family members. An extension of this is kurduboodjar: ‘love of place’.

Noongar language speakers have always influenced settlers and their descendants. For example, many of our local plant and animal species such as jarrah, karr, tuart and gidgei, and many place names for instance Gnaangara, Mandurah and Katanning, are Noongar words.

Cultural-environmental learning centres

Over the last decade, educators and activists have produced an encouraging increase in cultural-environmental learning centres (albeit often with different local objectives), both actual and web-based.

For Noongar boodjar at least, these places are here now, and ready for visits:
- NoongarPedia website;
- Kodja Place gallery, in Kojonup, WA;
- Bilya Koort Boodjar in Northam, WA;
- Museum of the Great Southern Education in Albany, WA;
- the forthcoming WA Museum (we believe an outstanding display is being developed); and
- Ngalang Wongi in Bunbury WA, where you can take cultural tours at with custodians such as Troy Bennell and many others.

Other parts of this continent will have a similar array of opportunities.

Conclusion

Aliw! Ni! The 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages presents an outstanding opportunity to practice cultural environmental learning in our teaching and daily lives. Learning our local Aboriginal language enables us to learn to see, hear and recognise our places anew.

Australia is an Aboriginal place – we are all participants in landscape time, now recognising the urgency of listening to its languages and acknowledging its wisdoms. Place is family too – and it needs the same respect and care.

Waking up landscape-embedded meanings is also the process of waking up ourselves: of coming back to our real selves through reciprocal interaction with our places. In the southwest, Noongar meanings are here in our landscape, hiding in full view.

What are your local language-embedded place-based stories?

Bibliography

All references available free of charge at panjournal.net.