



Aboriginal Spirituality & Culture

A Conversation with Revd Dr Garry Worete Deverell

VIDEO & DISCUSSION SERIES

VIDEOS

#1

LIVING ON COUNTRY

7 mins 31 secs

#2

THE DREAMING

7 mins 41 secs

#3

COUNTRY & COLONISATION

7 mins 57 secs

WEB LINK

[vimeo.com/showcase/
aboriginal-culture](https://vimeo.com/showcase/aboriginal-culture)

INTRODUCTION

This series of videos is the first part of a series of six interviews filmed with Revd Dr Garry Worete Deverell in mid-2023 in Melbourne, Australia. Garry is a Trawlolway man from lutruwita, northern Tasmania. He is an Anglican priest, theologian, writer and speaker. Garry's thinking is incisive, clear, original and provocative.

The interviews are an initiative of Port Phillip East Presbytery to help church members listen to First Peoples. Port Phillip East Presbytery is a region in eastern and south-eastern Melbourne down to Mornington Peninsula.

Filming took place in the lead up to the Australian referendum on a Voice to parliament for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Many, many Aboriginal people were hopeful of a positive result from the vote. We now know that this was not the outcome. At the time of filming, Garry was a faculty member of the University of Divinity within the School of Indigenous Studies, the first of its kind in Australia. Since that time, the School of Indigenous Studies has been closed by the University of Divinity due to lack of funding from its member institutions.

While the political landscape may have changed, the issues have not.

The first of these is the need for Australia's Second Peoples to listen and learn seriously from the First Peoples, and from country itself. We hope that the videos will provide a springboard for local learning and engagement between Second Peoples and First Peoples regarding First Peoples' history, culture, lore and hopes. If people simply watch these videos and discuss them, we will not have succeeded. Please take the action suggestions seriously as you address the challenges raised by Garry.

My own family story includes having an Aboriginal foster sister whom the state took from her parents and to whom my parents offered a home. This was life-changing for all of us, and complex. When my sister was reconnected with her Aboriginal kin, it brought her to life in a remarkable way. I am constantly reminded that the stories of First Peoples in this land are narratives of particular people in particular places. As Garry says repeatedly, it is all about relationships.

May these videos prompt you not only to question and learn, but to begin or deepen or widen relationships with First Peoples.

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RESOURCES

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
aiatsis.gov.au/

Garry Worete Deverell,
Gondwana Theology.
atfpress.com

Garry Worete Deverell,
Contemplating Country,
wipfandstock.com

Garry Deverell's blog:
uncommonprayers.blogspot.com

John Harris, *One Blood*. Kindle
edition available on Amazon.

Marcia Langton, *Welcome to
Country*, Hardie Grant.

Sally Morgan, *My Place*,
Fremantle Press.

Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu*,
Magabala Books.

Uluru Statement from the Heart -
ulurustatement.org

VIDEO SERIES

The video series has been produced by Craig Mitchell for Port Phillip East Presbytery, Uniting Church in Australia, with the support of The School of Indigenous Studies, University of Divinity. Filmed by Craig Mitchell and James Douglas at the Box Hill Campus, University of Divinity. Edited by Craig Mitchell.

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Video music by David MacGregor from the album *Mostly Ambient*. Photographs by Ian Ferguson, Craig Mitchell, Dean Whittaker, JJ Harrison, Pexels and Unsplash.

The Discussion Guide was written by Craig Mitchell and may be copied for non-commercial education purposes.



Session One: Living on Country

Background Reading: Gondwana Theology pages 9-11.

As you begin this series, we ask you to create a space where people are willing to listen respectfully to one another, and to speak respectfully of other people. This series invites people to hear, respect and honour the First Peoples of this land. This will no doubt involve paying attention to our own tendencies towards misunderstanding, labelling and racism. We recognise that many of us were taught in school that colonialism was a good thing, and we have since come to question this. Some churches have made statements and apologies to acknowledge this.

We are all at different points on our journeys towards reconciliation. Some conversations may not be 'safe' for everyone involved. Indeed, confronting injustice may take us beyond 'safe' conversations into disturbing ones. We invite you to be honest, caring and courageous together. We also request that, if First Peoples are present in your group, you prioritise listening to their wisdom before other people share their views.

You will need

A whiteboard or newsprint/chart paper and felt markers.

If possible, you will need to play the song *River* by Archie Roach from the album *Looking for Butterboy* - available on all major music services. [NOTE: We encourage you to purchase music from artists rather to stream it as then they receive a fair income.]

INTRODUCTION

Take some time to introduce yourselves to one another.

Take time to acknowledge the lands on which you meet and the First Peoples who have dwelled here and cared for them for thousands of years.

Share a prayer for your time together.

us as people, but there was also a huge change in the way that the landscape worked. Millions of sheep and cattle meant that the soil was compressed, and we could no longer do that loose soil sort of yam-based farming that we've done before. People taking over the landscape, felling lots of trees reclaiming land as they saw it, had massive impacts upon our ecology.

There's a big difference in the way that I think Aboriginal people look at landscape and the life in it compared to the way that, you know, Westerners do. I guess what I'm saying is Westerners I think tend to look at landscape as something you can use and profit from, whereas we look at landscape as kind of our family, and it's a family that we need to care for and respect and look after, so that it will care for and respect and look after us. So there's a kind of relationship of mutual reciprocity there - mutual respect - but I feel like Westerners have tended to use the landscape as if it was a commodity which can just be used for profit.

You may have heard of the notion of lore - L-O-R-E instead of law -which is a big part of Aboriginal culture, at least traditionally. Lore is really that which maps out our relationships with each other in the kind of way in which that is best done. So ethics is related to lore. Our dreaming stories suggest a lot of ways in which we might relate to each other in ethical ways. And if you get the collection of all of that and the way that it's been encoded in ceremony and oral tradition, then you end up with a body of knowledge that you could call "lore, "L-O-R-E. The difference between L-O-R-E lore in Aboriginal society and L-A-W law in Western societies is it's never written down anywhere and therefore it's a little bit softer in the way that it gets interpreted from generation to generation.

So there's principles, if you like, in lore, which tell us how to relate to the landscape and the plants and animals, but also to each other. But that lore can be interpreted by elders in different ways as circumstances change down through time. And obviously a big change in our circumstances is colonisation, and in fact a lot of law has been lost during colonisation. But our

elders try to deal with that situation by modifying the law to the new circumstances.

Certainly for Aboriginal community in its traditional sense there's a very strong sense in which the complexity of the landscape and the relationship between plants and animals is mirrored in human community. So it's very complex, but it maps out ways in which we respect each other. You could say that aboriginal communities are more collectivist than individual, and that would be a big contrast with, you know, colonial societies, colonial settler societies. So there's a lot of stuff you can't choose. There's a lot of stuff which is simply your job by virtue of the family that you belong to and the place that you belong to. So you have less choice about how you behave and what you do, and really, of the a lot of the things are identified as problems in Aboriginal society are actually about the intrusion into the traditional culture of a more individualist sort of mindset, and the arrival of that with missionaries and colonists who all said to us "You must make up your own mind" - meaning you as an individual - "You must make up your own mind about your own path in life." And from a Western point of view, that's liberative, you know, it's freeing. But from a collective a society point of view it actually isn't because it introduces into a system that works very, very well at a collective level something which is a foreign agent and changes everything

We're talking here about alternative stories, alternative narratives about the land that we're on. Settler colonists have their story about what the land is for. The land is for opportunity for economic prosperity. That's a very, very different story than the one we tell about landscape, which is about living in the same place for a very, very long time, and living with the land rather than exploiting the land.

Garry Deverell

Photos in this Discussion Guide are from Pexels, Unsplash and Craig Mitchell.



Video Script 3: Country & Colonisation

I remember going for a drive in the country. It was actually my country with someone I know a few years ago and they knew that country very, very well - also in the sense that they were landowners in that country, and from a 4th or 5th generation they were farmers. And as I was going, as we were driving along my friend was telling me about, you know, the cattle that we could see, the sheep we could see, the different breeds that they are, what they're good for, how they're useful, what they're worth in the market. Looked at the soil and said "Well, that's more productive." You can get more out of that soil if you're growing wheat or barley or whatever. And so it was a discourse about the value, the "use" value, the utility, if you like, of the soil and the country and the sheep and cattle that were that were now there

While he was talking. I was looking at the same country and thinking "It's a shame the swans aren't nesting there anymore", because they would have provided us with swan's eggs which would have kept us going for a long, long time, particularly during the winter period you know. And I was thinking, oh, our ancestor lay down in that rock, and if you listen carefully you can hear them talk to us,

A lot of Australians work out of a narrative which is what I would call a "pioneer" narrative. And the way that story goes is that people came to this country by whatever means. They were sent here as convicts or they came here as free settlers. And the country was empty and ripe for exploitation. And we knew how to exploit the land. We knew what to do with it is how the story goes. And so we worked very, very, hard to make this very unproductive land productive in a way that gave the nation wealth, and we need to celebrate those pioneers and those heroes for all of the hardship they went through when they first came to this country.

I guess what I'm saying is Westerners I think tend to look at landscape as something you can use and profit from, whereas we look at landscape as kind of our family, and it's a family that we need to care for and respect and look after, so that it will care for and respect and look after us. So there's a kind of relationship of mutual reciprocity there - mutual respect - but I feel like Westerners have tended to use the landscape as if it was a commodity which can just be used for profit.

Our story about that colonial period is rather different, of course, because we've been living here for a lot longer. We had all our farming methods worked out - worked for us, sustained us, for many thousands of years. But our experience of the newcomers was that they came and they committed ecocide as well as genocide. So not only was there a big effect on

THEME

Play the song *River* by Archie Roach from the album *Looking for Butterboy*.

The theme of this video and session is about country.

What is your "home country"? Is it the place where you were born? The place in which you grew up? The place where you live now? The place where your ancestors lived?

What makes this place important for you - not just your feelings about it, but also the place itself - its features and its story?

Briefly describe an outdoor place in Australia where you have experienced a strong connection to country - bush, beach, wherever.

VIDEO

Watch Video #1 - *Living on Country*.

REFLECTION

A transcript of the video follows this section.

Spend some time individually reading over the transcript. Highlight or underline some statements that seem significant or important to you. Place a question mark "?" against some that you would like to discuss.

DISCUSSION

Begin by inviting people to share two of Garry's insights that were helpful for them. Don't discuss the topics at this point. If you wish, list these on newsprint or whiteboard to keep track of them.

After each person has shared, discuss the following:

What do you hear about 'country' as being more than or different from 'land'?

Which insights particularly challenge or change your appreciation of First Peoples' relationship with country?

What is Garry saying about the connection between knowing country well and being in relationship with country?

Talk about seeing country as "sacred" or "family" or "kin." *How does this compare with other ways that people see and use the land and the life*

within and around it? How does it compare with seeing land as something that we "own"?

Discuss other insights that group members found helpful.

Which statements did you put question marks against and what issues did they raise for you?

[NOTE: It is important to list these so that people can see them before you discuss them.]

Choose the most common questions or issues to discuss.

[NOTE: In this initial session, the purpose is to identify issues for further investigation. You may not have the resources yet to resolve them within the group. The purpose of these sessions is to start you on a journey of learning more from First Peoples. We invite you to see this as an opportunity to name issues for further work.]

What do you know about the history of First Peoples in your region?

What do you know about their local stories of country?

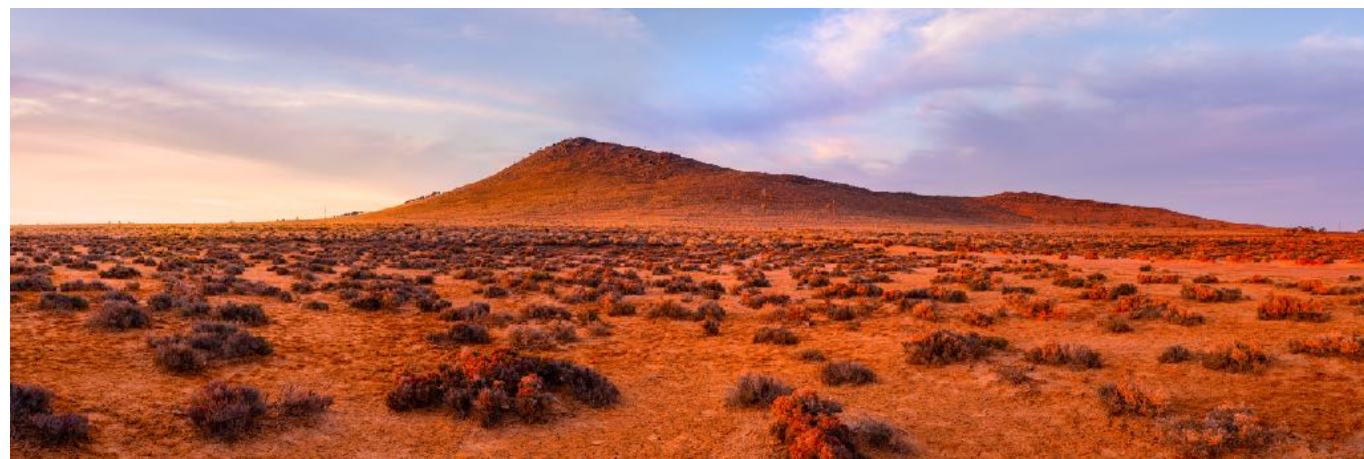
NEXT STEPS

This series is an invitation to learn more from and about First Peoples. Before you close the session, make a list of people and places you might connect with. The emphasis here is on making direct connections and on finding first-hand or reliable information.

- ▶ Local First Peoples' groups, centre or organisations
- ▶ Local Library and State Library
- ▶ Municipal Council
- ▶ Regional or state First Peoples' council
- ▶ Church-related groups or staff

Before the next session, see what new things you can learn about First Peoples' history and stories of country where you live.

We also invite you to spend a couple of hours in the coming week being 'on country' where you live - no agenda other than to be present to the place and to allow country to be present to you.



Video Script 1: Living on Country

So, we're here today on Wurundjeri Country, Kulin Nation. To begin. I just want to pay my respects to the ancestors who created this country and the orders who care for it. For us as Aboriginal people, country is about family. So we have our human family, but for us that family extends into the whole of creation. So country is not just inanimate objects or utilities that we mine or cut down for our own use - it's actually family - and so we have an obligation to care for country, because if we care for country then country will care for us, for Aboriginal people.

Country is also sacred, and what we mean by that is that for us the sacred is anything that tells us who we are and what our responsibility is in the world. And so we believe that the ancestors who created this country continue to talk to us and to guide us through country. And so if we attend very carefully to what they are saying to us. For example, in the in the movement of kangaroo or possum in the river scape in the landscape, then we will know how to live ourselves.

And so we will learn to imitate the way that country looks after itself and embed ourselves in it and therefore find our sacred vocation. So sacredness is not really some kind of spiritual notion that sort of hovers above ordinary life. Sacredness is about living life well in the

materiality of country. So it's all about how to live well that's what sacredness means for us.

We believe that the ancestors who created this country are still speaking to us from it. So in that sense country is alive. So even if country is not moving around like a kangaroo or a possum would, even if it's just rock, we believe that that rock vibrates with the presence of this sort of ancestral spirit or voice.

And so particularly my mob back in *Iurawita* or Tasmania, we have a thing about rocks, you know, and our senses that the rocks vibrate with energy. And you can kind of feel it in certain places more than others. And we believe that if you can, if you can tune in, then you can hear what the ancestors are continuing to say to us.

This is not unique to Aboriginal culture. This is actually part of traditional culture in many parts of the world. So there's potential there for conversations between many traditional peoples about the aliveness of country and the way that it actually relates to it.

We can have a relationship with country. So in the Hebrew tradition there's a lot of talk about the Spirit of God, the *ruach*, the wind. We've got that flowing around us at the moment, Craig! For us, that is like the breath of the ancestors, you know. They're breathing in and out. It tells us that country is alive, and it means that if we tune in, we can hear that voice. Land as "mother" is a metaphor, you know, amongst a whole other range of metaphors.

THEME

Play the song *Solid Rock* by Goanna from the album *Spirit of Place* or the song *The Dead Heart* by Midnight Oil from the album *Diesel and Dust*.

The theme of this video is about colonisation and some of what it has meant for Aboriginal people and for country. It is also about different views of history and different worldviews of how we live within Creation. This will probably be the most challenging of the three sessions as it calls into question much of what many Second Peoples have learned about the goodness of colonialism and its ongoing effects. There is a strong societal pressure to deny the past and to act as if the injustices of colonialism are somehow behind us. Perhaps the first step towards truth-telling is the willingness to question what we have learned as Second Peoples about colonisation, and to begin to hear a different narrative about what it means to live on country.

VIDEO

Watch Video #3 - **Country & Colonisation**.

REFLECTION

A transcript of the video follows this section.

Spend some time individually reading over the transcript. Highlight or underline some statements that seem significant or important to you. Place a question mark "?" against some that you would like to discuss.

DISCUSSION

What are some things that you learned from the video?

What are some questions that were raised for you?

Make a list of the questions on whiteboard or newsprint before you begin to discuss them.

Make a list of some of the tenets of the "pioneer narrative" of colonisation.

For example

- ▶ the land was uninhabited
- ▶ the inhabitants were a violent people



- ▶ the land and its features (mountains, rivers) were "discovered" by Europeans

What other tenets are mentioned by Garry?

In your own experience, when and how has this narrative been questioned by yourself or others?

Talk about the differences between the ways that Aboriginal people pass on culture and meaning through LORE and the ways in which western societies use LAW to structure themselves.

What are some tensions between Aboriginal worldviews and western worldviews?

What are some particular Aboriginal perspectives, cultural ways or worldviews that provide a positive alternative to western ways?

What would it mean for your community (household, group, church, local community) to learn more intentionally from First Peoples and their ways of seeing the world?

NEXT STEPS

You may wish to explore some of the resources recommended at the start of this guide to engage in further learning and reflection.

Particular dreaming stories are of course related to particular landscapes so there are many different nations around this continent that's now called Australia, and each of them have their own dreamings - their own set of stories which, if you like, are their "landscape wisdom" that relate to their part of the world and how to live in that part of the world. But of course there are incredible similarities between those stories right across the country. The ancestor creators will change the names will change the animals that are used to represent them will change.

We've got a few of them talking to us just now from the trees! But the stories will also be particular and unique to the places that people live in because primarily they relate to how you live in that place rather than some other place. So dreaming stories are very related to country, and at one level they actually explain why country is the way it is and why things are the way they are and they're an answer to that sort of question of curiosity. But at another level they're related to country because they tell us how to live in it how to live in a sustainable way with the plants and animals and the life forms that are there. So actually they're about relationship. They're about the relationship that we have with other living things, but also with the landscape which we also believe is living in our sort of cosmologies.

So actually dreaming stories sort of map out how healthy relationships will work. But it's much bigger' than' just me or my friends or my family. It's a sense of kinship with all living things in a particular place, and how do I live in a sustainable and helpful and respectful manner with everything that is alive,

One other way this plays itself out is with this notion of totems. So people talk about totems and the word in English actually comes from North America, so we've borrowed it. But a totem is actually an animal or a plant which is particularly important in the place where you live, and is really seen as a bit of a lynchpin to the way that the ecosystem works. And so a particular tribe in a particular place may have a special relationship with one animal to particularly look after that animal, because they know that if that animal can survive and be

looked after well then the rest of the ecosystem is more likely to survive.

So for example, if you've got a dreaming stories where the key figure is a wombat ancestor, chances are in that place the wombat is a key player in the way the ecosystem works. For example, here on Wurundjeri Country in Melbourne, a key ancestor is the eagle and so chances are at some point in the past the eagle was seen as a kind of a lynch pin in the way that ecosystem worked.

So these totems are very important and they are kind of like access points for us to understand how to live sustainably in a particular place. And of course different places, different ecosystems, there'll be other lynchpin sort of animals or life forms. And so the dreaming stories from that place we'll talk about them and give them prominence.

Garry Deverell

Session Three: Country and Colonisation

Background Reading: *Gondwana Theology*, pages 12-14, 21-24, 40-44.

You will need

A whiteboard or newsprint/chart paper and felt markers to list issues raised.

The Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia is a helpful resource - ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/128

INTRODUCTION

Take time to acknowledge the lands on which you meet and their First Peoples.

What have you learned about the story of your local area and its First Peoples since you last met?

What have you been learning about attentiveness to country, in particular the place in which you live?

Read the prayer on page 80 of *Gondwana Theology*.

So, I was saying before that country is kin or family. So, one member of our family, a very important member of any of our human families is our mother, and we come from her mother. We come from her womb and we receive into ourselves, by virtue of that person being our mother, our DNA imprinted upon us. We receive so much of who we are through that DNA process from our parents. So we receive who we are from our mother the Earth.

We have other metaphors. We can talk about land as uncle or father or sister, or cousin or brother or sister. Lots and lots of metaphors, and also non-relational metaphors work as well. So in the Christian tradition, we have lots of names for God. Some of them are personal names or family names. Others of them aren't.

It's exactly the same in the way that we think about country. Just as in our human families, we look to our mother and father and the adults in our lives as we're growing up to learn how to be responsible members of the family, and of the tribe and the community if you like, so we look to country. And the thing is that if you don't spend a lot of time in country and you don't actually watch and see what's going on and listen and hear, then you don't learn a lot, you know.

But for us, we have a strong sense that unless we listen and learn from our mother country, then we'll get all the wrong messages. We'll forget how to live in a responsible and sustainable way in country.

So it's really, really important that we spend time there if we can and learn what's going on -tune into the ecosystems, if you like. Find out how every bit supports every other bit and try and embed ourselves in that, so that we're not doing damage on the one hand, but we're also supporting country on the other. And of course, when we grow into adulthood in our human families, we sort of take on more and more responsibility and eventually we care for our parents as they become quite old and fragile.

And so it's exactly the same process for us with country. We depend upon it. We need what it

gives to us. It sustains us and nurtures us. But as we grow into our responsibility and we learn how to care for country, then we have to give back. You know we take full responsibility to care for country and learn its ways and make sure that the right things happen, so that it's sustainable and we can continue to have this good relationship.

Garry Deverell



Session Two: The Dreaming

Background Reading: Pages 15-18 of *Gondwana Theology* by Garry Worete Deverell.

You will need

A whiteboard or newsprint/chart paper and felt markers to list issues raised.

If possible, you will need to play the song *Baywara* by Geoffery Gurrumul Yunupingu from the album *Gurrumul* (available on major online music services). An English translation of the lyrics is available here - lyricstranslate.com/en/baywara-baywara.html

[NOTE: We encourage you to purchase music from artists rather to stream it as then they receive a fair income.]

INTRODUCTION

Take time to acknowledge the lands on which you meet and the First Peoples who have cared for them for tens of thousands of years.

Talk about spending time 'on country' in the last week.

Where did you go?

How easy or difficult was it to make time and space to do this?

What did you experience of country?

What did your experience in yourself?

What discoveries have you made since the last session about helpful resources for learning about local First Peoples and the history of your region?

If you have the book *Gondwana Theology*, we invite you to read the prayer at the bottom of page 76 and following.

THEME

Play the song *Baywara* by Geoffery Gurrumul Yunupingu from the album *Gurrumul*.

The theme of this video and session is about The Dreaming.

"... the dreaming is not primarily about the past... [It] is everywhere and always present, in the living things all around and like the breath in our own nostrils; it is a past rendered meaningful, a future full of promise, and a present aflame with life in all its fulness."

Gondwana Theology, p15.

VIDEO

Watch Video #2 - ***The Dreaming***.

REFLECTION

A transcript of the video follows this section.



Spend some time individually reading over the transcript. Highlight or underline some statements that seem significant or important to you. Place a question mark "?" against some that you would like to discuss.

DISCUSSION

What are some things that you learned from the video?

What are some questions that were raised for you?

Make a list of the questions on whiteboard or newsprint before you begin to discuss them.

Take some time to discuss these and talk about how you might investigate them.

Talk about the connection between Dreaming stories and how we live on country.

What do you know of the native fauna from your region and how they are related to the local ecology?

What do you know of any Dreaming stories and the particular peoples who carry them?

NEXT STEPS

How might you learn more about The Dreaming and about stories that are particular to your region?

Your local library and state library are good places to start. If you have not yet made a connection with local First Nations people, now would be a good time to begin to explore this.

You can also search on the National Library website - trove.nla.gov.au.



Video Script 2: The Dreaming

When Europeans first arrived in the country there wasn't a lot to eat at least that they could recognise. And so they actually killed a lot of kangaroos. Now the eastern grey kangaroo, the forester kangaroo - they're a big totem in the dreaming stories of my people. And we called this... we called particularly the forester kangaroo *palova*. When they started killing kangaroos, they removed a lynchpin in the ecosystem, and suddenly all sorts of things started to go wrong. So a lot of the trees down through the Midlands started to die.

And the reason they started to die was because the kangaroo's stomach system actually helped tree seeds germinate. And if you remove a lot of the kangaroos from the ecosystem, then suddenly there's a lot of seeds that don't germinate anymore, and the landscape starts to die. So here's an example from my own people in *lutruwita* or Tasmania of how a totem in a dreaming story and its prominence tells you "Don't mess with that species!" because it will actually have ongoing effects in destroying the rest of the ecosystem.

When Aboriginal people talk about "The Dreaming" or "Dreaming" they're referring to a whole heap of cultural knowledge which has

been passed down orally over generations and also through ceremony. So it's kind of like a combination of our law or ethics, but also stories about the creation of the world and our place in it, and so lots of individual groups will have their own stories that are associated with their country.

But in my tradition with my people we have stories about a wombat spirit named *moinee* who walked his way down the Milky Way and came to the place called *lurawita* or Tasmania and joined up with a whole bunch of other creator ancestors. There was *turner* the kangaroo there was *lala* the ant and they formed the landscape and they told us how to live in it sustainably.



So you'll find examples of these dreaming stories all over the country. And of course colonisation has disrupted a lot of those stories and so much has been lost and so many of us are engaged in programs to try and recover as much of that knowledge as we can because it's very important to telling us who we are and what our responsibility in the world is.

They come from the creation and for us creation is something that has always been happening from the very beginning all the way through. So they're just given in land, they're given in landscape and we've received these stories and we pass them on. We're not particularly curious like many Westerners are about how these things emerged in a kind of historiography sort of way. That's not an interesting question to us. A more interesting question is "How do these stories show us how to live sustainably in the country that we belong to?".