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## THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSERVING ROCK ART: A CONVERSATION AT THE JIBBON PETROGLYPH SITE, ROYAL NATIONAL PARK, AUSTRALIA

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**Abstract.** In this paper we represent the Aboriginal voice about the importance of rock art and its conservation as strongly as possible, through a conversation at a highly significant rock art site known as Jibbon, on Sydney's southern fringes. The Sydney region saw the full brunt of European colonisation with an enormous impact on the area's Aboriginal communities, their well-being and their heritage. It continues to do so today. The conversation is particularly insightful in terms of articulating the links between heritage (especially rock art), traditional culture and contemporary well-being. It not only summarises why rock art sites remain so important for Indigenous Australians today but also highlights many aspects about the threats to heritage, and in turn well-being.

### Introduction

Aboriginal people have been in Australia since at least 65 000 years ago as indicated by archaeological excavations at Madjebebe in the Top End of the Northern Territory (Clarkson et al. 2017). As soon as people arrived from what is now Indonesia to the north they used ochre for some form of 'art' making (Clarkson et al. 2017; Taçon 2011). Some of the oldest dated rock art in the world is from Indonesia, specifically in southern Sulawesi and Kalimantan, where some hand stencils and a painting of an animal have been dated to at least 40 000 years ago (Aubert et al. 2014; 2018), but the earliest from Australia could be even older. There are at least 100 000 surviving rock art sites spread across Australia today and each year many more are discovered through archaeological survey (Taçon 2016: 245). Indigenous Australians do not consider them to be archaeological relics as larger Australian society has classified them but rather they are an integral part of contemporary living Indigenous cultures. However, all rock art sites are under threat from both human impacts and natural processes (Marshall and Taçon 2014; Taçon and Marshall 2014; Agnew et al. 2015).

The greater Sydney region, although Australia's largest urban centre, still has thousands of rock art sites, including some spread across the Royal National Park to Sydney city's south. Royal National Park, Australia's and the world's first 'National Park', and the world's second oldest declared park behind Yellowstone (U.S.A.), was established on 26 April 1879 (Mosley 2012: 23). Situated immediately south of Sydney and

north of Wollongong, the park's boundary has shifted several times since April 1879 so that it now is about 151 square kilometres in size. It was placed on the Australian National Heritage List in December 2006 but it always has been and still is Dharawal Aboriginal land.

Dharawal-speaking people are associated with an area that extends from southern Sydney south to Jervis Bay in New South Wales (Mathews 1901: 127). Archaeological excavations suggest Aboriginal people were living in what is now Royal National Park since about 8000–9000 years ago (Attenbrow 2012: B42), southern Sydney by 10 000–11 000 years ago (Attenbrow 2012: B49), and the greater Sydney area since at least 15 000 years ago (Attenbrow 2002: 3). For the Dharawal, 'In 1816 these thousands of years of sustainable living were brought to an abrupt end when Governor Macquarie's Government engaged in a brutal clearance of the Aboriginal people from their land' (Mosley 2012: 20; and see Organ 1990). In the late 19th century Dharawal people were moved to a reserve at La Perouse that was established in 1895 (Mosley 2012: 20).

Today, the Dharawal culture is kept alive by Aboriginal people who descend from the ancient Dharawal people. The Elders are advocates and cultural historians for this rich and inspiring culture that has thrived for over 8500 years in this area. Research and study of many hours of spoken language has helped it to be revived. This is now our shared heritage for which we all have a responsibility to know and understand. This inheritance must then be used to enrich the lives of future generations (Ryan 2001: 45).

There are over 650 known Aboriginal archaeo-



**Figure 1.** Jibbon Beach with the Jibbon rock art site on the headland in the exact middle of the photograph (all photographs by PT).

logical sites in Royal National Park (Attenbrow 2012: B40). According to the New South Wales government Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System (AHIMS) 531 of these are rock art sites, 218 of which have petroglyphs (for some petroglyph sites see McCarthy 1943: 122; McDonald 2008 analyses 182 shelter sites and 52 platform petroglyph sites from the northern half of Dharawal country).

Unfortunately, the petroglyphs, usually of food sources such as eels and of totems, are gradually becoming less distinct as a result of natural rock-weathering. Depictions of whales, a major totem of the Dharawal, are a distinctive feature of the area, examples occurring in petroglyphs around Port Hacking (at Maianbar and Jibbon) and in pigment rock art. Other totems included the kangaroo, stingray and turtle (Mosley 2012: 22).



**Figure 2.** The Jibbon rock art viewing platform opened in December 2014. It was built not only to allow the visiting public a good view of the engraved figures but also to stop people walking over them.

### Jibbon petroglyphs

The Jibbon (Djeeban in Dharawal, meaning 'sand bars at low tide'; Ryan 2001: 31) petroglyph site is located at Jibbon Head (Fig. 1), about 30 km from downtown Sydney, a kilometre from the town of Bundeena and about 300 m up from Jibbon Beach. It 'is the most extensive engraving site in Royal National Park' (Attenbrow 2002: 183) and consists of a large sandstone rock platform surrounded by natural vegetation only 30 metres from Port Hacking Bay. There are 13 surviving petroglyphs including four large depictions of whales (a pilot whale, two overlapping whales and an enormous depiction of an orca), a kangaroo

and an important Ancestral Being for the Dharawal known as Daramulan. The petroglyphs have not been scientifically dated but based on studies across the greater Sydney region and the friable nature of the Hawksbury sandstone they were pecked and abraded into they are likely between 1000 to 2000 years old. Fortunately, there is no graffiti carved or painted at the site but Jibbon was vandalised in the 1970s with a pecked petroglyph of a macropod by a non-Aboriginal person in a non-Aboriginal style (Attenbrow 2002: 183).

The earliest published report on the site dates to 7 November 1903 in a Sydney-based publication, *The World's News*, written by someone known as 'A.K.' (A.K. 1903). Jibbon has been a popular place to visit since but people walking over the platform were contributing to increased erosion, abrasion and flaking. The Dharawal community was concerned about this so they worked closely with New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife staff to remedy the situation, resulting in a \$500000 viewing platform and walkway opened to the public in December 2014 (Fig. 2).

In the context of a five-year project that focuses on rock art history, conservation and Indigenous well-being that began mid-2016 we visited Jibbon together on 5 July 2017 (e.g. see Taçon 2019) to discuss why rock art is important to the Dharawal and other Aboriginal people across Australia today, in the 21st century. This is part of a series of events bringing Aboriginal Australian expertise (in this case Shayne Williams and Tanya Koeneman) together with non-Indigenous rock art experience (Paul Taçon) to share ideas about how to better care for Australia's rock art heritage for contemporary people and future generations and why it is important to do so.

Shayne Williams is a senior Dharawal community elder with family connections to several other New South Wales Aboriginal communities. He is the author of a PhD thesis called 'Indigenous values informing curriculum and pedagogical praxis' (2007). Shayne is passionate about traditional Aboriginal culture, heritage and lore as well as its importance for contemporary Aboriginal well-being. Tanya Koeneman is from the La Perouse Aboriginal community with family links also to the Wonnarua people of the Hunter Valley and has worked in the heritage sector for many years at a local and state level, for government and community. Her passion is to place Aboriginal people and their cultural perspective back into the narrative of heritage conservation and protection; to assert their voice and aspirations. Tanya is keenly interested in the way in which rock art is able to provide people with a relatable piece of heritage and how that has led to 'the expert' opinion often leading the way in this field.

### The whale story

SHAYNE WILLIAMS (SW): The best way to start about teaching the [Dharawal] culture is to teach about the starfish and the whale Dreaming story. The whale is a very significant spirit ancestor for us. And the whale, when it first had its canoe, the koala and the starfish wanted to steal it. They both schemed, and the starfish said to the koala, 'Well, I'll climb up on top of the whale and pick the sea lice off him and put him to sleep while you steal the canoe.' So, the starfish did that and, while he was picking the lice off the whale's skin, the whale fell asleep. While he was sleeping, the koala jumped in the canoe and started rowing as fast as he could and as far away as he could from the whale. But then the whale woke up and he discovered that he was tricked, so he got the starfish and he splattered him on the rocks. That's why the starfish looks like that today.

And then he took off after the koala, who stole the canoe, but the koala, as he was rowing, he was getting stronger and stronger, so his arms were getting bigger and stronger, so it was very hard for the whale to catch up. But, when the whale finally did catch up to him, the canoe was already on the land. And that canoe today can still be seen; it's an island called Windang Island, just south of here at the mouth of the Illawarra Lake.

Well, that's how the ontology started, yeah, with this whale Dreaming. Land, for us, was a featureless environment from the very beginning. The Dreaming, as some people put it, is actually our ontology; that's the science of existence. And all this land was a featureless environment. And then our spirit ancestors moved across these featureless environments, they created our rivers, our lakes, our mountains and hills, and they even give us our languages and our Aboriginal laws, as well, to follow. So, everything that we know today actually comes from this Dreaming. People whose Dreaming is the whale Dreaming are whale people; people whose spirit ancestors are snakes are snake people. People whose spirit ancestors may be an emu or



Figure 3. Shayne Williams at the Jibbon rock art site with an engraved whale below and to the right.

a kangaroo are either kangaroo or emu people. Except us; we're actually whale people.

PAUL TAÇON (PT): And are you a whale person?

SW: Yeah, I'm a whale person (Fig. 3). We call a whale a *burriburri*, and we call starfish the *joonargoon*, and we call the koala a *kurrilwa*. So, even though the spirit ancestor is the whale, the starfish and the koala are still part of the spirit story, so they're spirit ancestors as well.

PT: This is a wonderful spot, and because of the story, it must be a really important place for you?

SW: Yeah, it's a very spiritual place for us because this is where our foundational stories actually emanate from. You see, not only is the Dreaming our ontology, it's where a lot of our spiritual knowledge comes from as well. Our knowledge systems are fundamentally spiritual knowledge systems, and spiritualism was taught all the time by our people for thousands of years. And knowledge was passed on through ceremony, so we're basically a ceremonial people. And spiritual storying was the main teaching method for us. Storying, for us, embodies knowledge. As I say, our knowledge was passed on from one generation to the next.

PT: And the nearby rock engravings, they must bring the stories to life?

SW: Definitely, they capture the stories I just told a moment ago. And those engravings always remind us of where we come from and who we are and what



Figure 4. *Burriburri* the whale is engraved four times at Jibbon, emphasising the special significance of this, the most important and impressive Dharawal petroglyph site.



*Figure 5. Jibbon viewing platform interpretation sign reinforcing the key role the whale ancestor plays in the story of the first Dharawal people.*

the spirit ancestors have given us (Figs 4 and 5). They give us particular knowledge.

And it's knowledge that enables us to live in harmony with the land, but also utilise the land as well, but in a respectful way. So, for example, we've got this little fern here, and the knowledge we were given teaches us that we can use that for bites. If we get a bite from a tick, for example, we can use that to alleviate the pain, so it's like a medicine. These are skills that come from the Dreaming. See, the Dreaming gives us everything; there's nothing in our culture that we don't know or do that doesn't come from there.

PT: And because the rock art illustrates different aspects of this knowledge it must be very important to protect these places for the future?

SW: Yeah. It's important to protect them because that's where our literacy is. Our literacy mightn't be in the form of books, but it's physically manifested into the land, like the rock engravings, for example, and paintings. This platform ... is like a big book to us. And, when we look at it, it reminds us about all the other stories associated with it and all the things, like the arts and crafts, that we learn where that actually comes from. So, these arts and crafts actually come from that Dreaming, and all of our laws — so our ways of living and our philosophies for living in the world in a respectful way — actually come from that story I told a moment ago.

PT: Wow. And in that story, the whale and the other Ancestral Beings, the starfish and the koala, were responsible for creating this landscape around us?

SW: Yeah. Even though they were a bit devious in that story, they were still a part of it, and that's why the starfish and the koalas also are revered spirit ancestors for us: because they were a part of that story.

That's why we're whale people. But it's important to know that our spirit ancestors actually have human characteristics for us. They're not just another mammal, a whale; when we look at them we see them as part of our family, and we see them as having human characteristics. I know in other people's cultures, they might have a pet dog or cat or bird, and they might feel like

they're family to people, but for us our spirit ancestors are different to us because they do have human features for us. When we see whales coming back, travelling up and down the coast this time of the year, we see them as our spirit ancestors visiting us. And we also have ways where land can talk to us — land can talk to us through the trees, it can also talk to us through animals as well. So when we see the whale moving up and down the coastline, that's the land telling us, through the whale, that we can go and get snapper right now off the reef just here. So that's how the land talks to us.

PT: The changing seasons, the movements of whales, other animals, the change in the colour of the vegetation — that all signals when different foods are ready?

SW: Yeah. And particular things you can catch. We've got what we call an eastern wattle here, and when that particular tree hangs really heavy with its golden blooms, that's the land speaking to us and telling us we can go and get bream and whiting at that time of the year. You see?

PT: Oh, wow. If you know how to read the land you can survive?

SW: Yeah, well, the land talks to us. So it's not about reading the land, it's being able to speak back to the land; communicating with it. And it's all spiritual communication between us and the land, and that spiritual knowledge comes from that ontology I spoke about a moment ago.

PT: It's all interconnected: the Aboriginal Creation, the more recent past, and then the land today, your survival, the future; it's all interconnected, from the sounds of it.

SW: We don't see ourselves as separate from the land and other life forms. Our cultures have been so harmonised with the land for such a long time that our cultures are actually part of the land itself, part of the ecology. You cannot separate the ecology from our culture and our spiritual systems of knowledge. It's all the one entity.

PT: And besides talking to, and listening to, the land, are there particular spirits in this landscape that people interact with, or particular ancestors?

SW: Some of us can see things, but I'm more audial, so I can hear things but not necessarily see anything. So sometimes our knowledge systems are metaphysical knowledge systems, so we do experience spiritual happenings, it's just that you can't prove that that's happened time and time again. It happens when it happens, you know.

PT: And in different parts of Australia people say that often there are ancestors associated with particular rock art sites, and sometimes they call out to them when they go to sites. Is there that sort of belief here?

SW: Well, with some of the really deeply sacred sites, where there's a lot of restricted knowledge associated with them, yeah, you would need to conduct some kind of a ceremony before entering there. Some people might sing or sing out, some people might have

a smoking before they go there; it all depends. All our cultures are different. You're talking about 260 different cultures across the country, so our practices are different. But we do have open sites, like the one we're going to today, so that's more of a general one, and the more secret-sacred ones are much more hidden, a bit more inland where they're not accessible.

PT: So open sites like this, men, women and children would come here. Would there be stories for the children and different stories for adults?

SW: Yes. Children will be told the stories, such as the one I told a moment ago. And a lot of the storytelling will be done at night, sitting around the fire, relaxed, like we're doing now. And that's the way knowledge would pass on as well, through stories. But as the kids get older and older, we would then go into a deeper level of that story, so when the kids progress and they're more mature then we can go and give them deeper levels of spirit knowledge. It's like a spiralling process where the kids were taught something young, and as they got older, they were told a little bit more, or we might have come from a different perspective to tell that story. So it was all age-appropriate.

PT: It sounds like rock art sites were teaching places, among other things?

SW: Definitely teaching places, but also places that taught the younger generations the importance of maintaining these places. There would have been regular re-grooving of these sites. Unfortunately, in places like where we are now, where the culture has been heavily impacted on, a lot of that knowledge is not readily available. And when it comes to re-grooving we still need to determine who has the rightful status to be able to re-groove these sites, or even the skill, as well, to be able to do it. Because if it isn't done properly, they'll never be the same again. And we have to take into consideration what tools would be used. I would say that the traditional tools should be used to re-groove, not modern equipment. Because modern equipment could easily damage them.

And also in our culture we feel there are spiritual consequences if we do the wrong thing, you know what I mean? We're worried about spiritual repercussions if we make a mistake or if we do the wrong thing in re-grooving these sites.

PT: Yes. But also, if people came and they left graffiti behind or they vandalised the site, would that cause spiritual or physical harm?

SW: Well, whether they're Aboriginal or not, we feel that there would be repercussions for them, even though they mightn't realise what they're doing at the time. But it really is spiritually demoralising for us because people show a deep disrespect for our cultural heritage, which, as you know, is the country's foundational cultural heritage, and the cultural heritage that everybody should actually be respecting if they want to call themselves Australian.

PT: Yes. I think that's one of the really sad and unfortunate things, there's this large disconnect be-

tween much of the general Australian population and the Aboriginal population in terms of that respect for the traditional foundational knowledge, in terms of respect for the land.

SW: I think a lot of non-Aboriginal people probably perceive our culture, and our engravings in particular, and our paintings, as something ancient and primitive that has no relevance today. But it has absolute relevance for us, because the Dreaming resonates into the present for us with real meaning, so it isn't something from an ancient past; it has real currency for us in the present and it has an equally strong presence for us into the future. Everything that comes into an Aboriginal culture's Dreaming becomes a part of it. It's a very big and all-embracing concept.

PT: And these engraving sites, these painting sites, would you call them living heritage, because they are old, but they are still alive in the culture today?

SW: Well, they are alive: there's vibrancy in these sites. With the naked eye you might think they're just an engraving; for us, they're a living, breathing part of our culture, just like the land is. And they're like our libraries: we go there and that's where we learn about our culture and heritage so, to destroy them, is like pulling down the British Library or the State Library of New South Wales or the Australian National Library, for example. Can you imagine how devastated people would feel if that happened?

PT: Yes. And I think that's something that, unfortunately, a lot of people don't realise — just how much knowledge is bound up in these places; how important they are, how alive they are for Aboriginal people today.

SW: Yes. There's a lot of spiritual knowledge bound up in them. Because [of that] we need to look at a way where Aboriginal knowledge and wisdom and scientific knowledge can work together. So, our focus, Paul: Western knowledge — scientific knowledge — and our knowledge working together.

TANYA KOENEMAN (TK): Yes. And I think it would be worth saying something about the significance of the rock engravings to other people — it's a bold statement. To other people it is a statement that Aboriginal people are still here, they still occupy this landscape, they are intrinsic in the landscape, and that there needs to be a proper reconciliation of that, or a proper management of that, and a respectful relationship based on that.

SW: Proper acknowledgement of it. They wanted to acknowledge us in the Constitution, do you know what I mean? But that's political.

TK: No, that's right. You need the people to really have a proper level of respect.

PT: Okay. This is quite a remarkable place here, Tanya.

TK: Yeah ... it's great, and it's a really good place to be able to teach new generations of Aboriginal people, but also new generations of those people that have come to this land and are, by default almost, custodians

themselves of these places and these sites. At 2% of the population, Aboriginal people can't possibly hope to cover everything; there's really a need for wider society to adopt our values, in terms of how much we respect these places and how important they are to us. Why it is important to look after the Jibbon petroglyphs.

SW: There's a lovely walkway now, Tanya.

TK: This is the loveliest walkway.

SW: It's a physical sign of respect for the culture.

TK: That's right, exactly.

SW: So National Parks need to be commended.

PT: And it looks like it won't burn, either.

SW: Yeah. I think they would have thought about all of that. Before, access to the site was up there, so people just walked across. We tried to argue for something like this for a long, long time, and it was all about the protection of these sites, it wasn't about having something here that was aesthetically nice, you know, for the area. It was all about protection of the site.

PT: And the colour works well, too.

SW: There's our spirit ancestor [carved on the rock platform]. He's a separate ancestor to the spirit whale, okay, because what comes from him are different laws to do with social behaviour as well, where the whale gives us laws to do with how we behave towards the environment, you see.

One of our major laws is the marriage law, it comes from him, and that's one of those laws that couldn't be broken at all. When a boy and girl were born, they were straightaway promised to each other and, throughout their growing up they always knew who their rightful wife and husband was going to be, and there wasn't anything they could do to change that.

That's an example of one law that comes from him. That's our spirit ancestor here, called Daramulan (Fig. 6). And a lot of our social laws come from him. But a



**Figure 6.** Ancestral spirit Daramulan is engraved next to one of the whale images at Jibbon. Together they gave the Dhawaral the key laws of conduct; environmental laws from the whale ancestor and social laws from Daramulan.

lot of our environmental laws come from the whale.

PT: Yeah. So that's really interesting that the environmental laws come from the whale, because the whale is such an important creature of the ocean, but also here, obviously, of the land. And that's a wonderful engraving of a whale, and it's quite well preserved; eroded a bit at the front, but the grooves are quite deep for most of the body outline.

SW: Yeah. I think these particular engravings have stood up fairly well, considering they haven't been touched for a long, long time. But as you've just noted a moment ago they are starting to fade around the edge here and we really do need to work with people with scientific knowledge as well, so Aboriginal cultural knowledge and scientific knowledge can work together to find solutions to these sorts of problems. Because, at the end of the day, we need a third knowledge system that can help us do whatever we possibly can to preserve these sites.

PT: Yeah. And often that working together approach is the way forward. Because if you just charge in using a Western science approach and with heavy machinery, then you'll do damage, there won't be the respect.

SW: Well, there'll be two forms of damage: there'll be physical damage then there'll be spiritual damage to the sites, and the physical damage will probably be irreparable and so will the spiritual damage that may be caused as well. So, we're stuck in a bit of a sticky situation at present, and we really do need to work with people with scientific knowledge as well to try and find solutions to these sorts of problems.

TK: I think too we need to work with the legislators, the people that make the laws that protect these sites in Australian Law and New South Wales Law. Because, unless those laws are created with a very good understanding of the things that Shayne's talking about, the laws are inadequate.

SW: I absolutely agree with you: the protection and preservation of these sites needs to be absolutely enshrined in legislation, at state and national level.

PT: I think that's the most important thing that we can do working together, is to enshrine the protection for future generations.

SW: Yeah.

PT: Back to this amazing whale, what species of whale do you think this one is?

SW: Well, that would be a smaller whale, could be a pilot whale, because you usually get a lot of pilot whales in here. The last time a pilot whale actually came there was a few years ago,

so we haven't seen them since that time, which makes us wonder what's happened to them. But the main whale we see here now travelling up and down the coast, particularly this time of the year, is the humpback whale. But the big engraving (Fig. 7) we're about to see in a minute is actually — well, you tell me what it is, okay, based on your experience of seeing whale engravings elsewhere.

PT: And you were saying this is Daramulan?

SW: Yeah, he's a spirit ancestor of ours as well, and that's where we get our social laws, from him, whereas the whale gives us our environmental laws.

PT: So, the two together give you everything you need, in terms of the law.

SW: Yeah. And philosophies as well; philosophies in how to live a better life, how to be a better person, how to live in harmony with your country, your land and other life forms. And, more importantly, as well, how to live in harmony with one another.

PT: I think it's wonderful in that regard that we have depictions of both of them, side by side. I've not seen that anywhere else.

SW: Yeah. It's like a big story book, isn't it, you know? But, see, that engraving, people are not aware of our culture, they just see it as an engraving, but like I just explained to you, there are lots of laws embedded in that one engraving.

TK: And also different aspects of the same image. Different stories can be brought out at different times, like you were saying before about age-appropriate learning and a time for knowing certain things.

SW: That's right. Children would be brought in and taught about a particular social law that's relevant to their age and then, as they get older, they'd be brought back here again and told another social law that's at a higher level than they would learn when they're younger. And then adults will come back here and learn the more deep, fundamental social laws.

TK: And with that new knowledge comes new responsibility and new obligations. That's why it's very important that it is age-appropriate. And I think that also touches on why it's really important that the interpretation of these sites, as undertaken by park managers and tourism companies, there's a social and an ethical and a cultural responsibility there to make sure that what they're saying is accurate and agreed to by the Dharawal people.

SW: And what else would come with that as well is a higher level of spirit knowing. There's one engraving



Figure 7. Shayne Williams stands to the right of the head of the largest engraved whale at Gibbon, an almost life-size depiction of an Orca.

there and lots of different levels of spirit knowledge embedded in it. It's not just an engraving, that's a book in its own right, for us.

PT: Yeah. And that's one of the things that I think is so important, and so many people don't realise, is there isn't just one meaning or one small story associated with these engravings, there's a whole book of knowledge. Because often people say, 'Oh, what does it mean?' 'It's a whale.' 'What kind of whale is it?' 'It's a pilot whale.' 'Oh, that's good.' And then they move on. They don't realise that there's all of this knowledge behind all these different stories, and especially in terms of passing on environmental laws, and that's something I think that we need to educate the larger Australian population about. It's not just these particular engravings, but it's other engraving sites and painting sites across the country as well.

TK: I think too it's about recognising the relevance of these engraving sites and these stories with what is happening now. If you are telling the story about the whale, or a story about this engraving at the time of migration of the whales, then for school children they can see the link and it becomes a lot more real to them and it's something that's more able for them to understand and to appreciate. It's important, I think, that Aboriginal culture is communicated in a way that isn't something past and ancient and was; it's dynamic and now and evolving; it's in the future.

SW: It's evolving, dynamic and it has currency for us. It resonates into the present for us with real meaning.

PT: And these aren't artefacts from the past, they aren't archaeology, they are a part of living culture.

TK: Yeah, absolutely.

SW: Yeah, a living, vibrant culture.

TK: People today still have a cultural obligation to

make sure that this is well looked after, well understood, well protected.

PT: And in terms of looking after, are you happy with this boardwalk that's been put in and do you think it's working the right way?

SW: Yeah. The boardwalk is spectacular, so National Parks Wildlife Service need to be commended for what they did for us. See, previously, lots of people would come here and visit this site, which meant that people would actually walk across the platform, and sometimes you can't see the sites when you're that low down. People would be walking across them accidentally most of the time, and that was a bit of a problem for us, because we feel it's unethical to do that, but it would also lead to a quick erosion of the sites as well.

PT: Yeah, of course.

SW: This platform is the perfect thing to put here for us.

TK: Yeah, it's a good remedy for that.

SW: You can see it better.

TK: You also get people who come down and they think, 'I'll put sand in' or they try to scratch it out, or they outline it in chalk. There's the accidental walking across it, but there's also the deliberate remarking so that people get a better sense.

SW: Of chalk. And get photos of it as well.

TK: And what they'll often do is they'll remark it in a way that they think it should look, not in what is actually there.

PT: There's a real distortion.

SW: Yeah. They look at things through a European eye, you know what I mean? But these sites here are very precious to this city and to teaching people about these cultures, our national heritage.

TK: And it's such a source of pride and identity to young Aboriginal people from our country. It's really important that it is respected.

PT: Yeah. So that's interesting to hear that the young Aboriginal people are still engaging with these places and find them really important.

SW: Yeah. Well, they feel it's very important to their personal identities as well. These sites have the potential to really ignite a deeper sense of cultural pride in the young 'fellas' and a deeper sense of identity in them as well.

TK: And belonging: that this is proof.

SW: And connection.

TK: Yeah, connection. This is proof positive you belong here. If you're a Dharawal person, this is your place, this is your space. This is your country.

SW: Yeah. These places are the conduit between us and our spirit ancestors and all the laws that they give us.

PT: And if some young people are going through a difficult period in their life and they come and spend some time at a place like this, does that help? Does it help ground them?

TK: I remember being told by older Aboriginal women that, if I ever had troubles, to go to the bay

and put my feet in the sand, on the edge of the water, and just to let be. And that would bring you peace and a grounding.

SW: Yeah. These sites have the same impact on us as well. It's just like walking into a cathedral; see, this is our cathedral here. Our cathedral isn't a building. Like I said before, our culture is physically manifested into this land so, for us, everything is a part of country. We don't see ourselves as separate from the land, either. In fact, our cultural kinship systems are ecological kinship systems, so they're absolutely embedded into the ecology.

TK: Yeah, we're not above the environment, we don't separate ourselves from it. It's not at our service, which is what a lot of cultures do.

SW: No, we're not above. We're engrained. Land manages us, we don't manage land, you see. So, we're here to serve country and look after it.

PT: What I've noticed about many rock art sites that I've had the privilege to visit across the country — and this is very reminiscent of that — it's a spectacular part of the local landscape. You've got a wonderful view, it's an outstanding piece of geology and then these wonderful designs. And all of that together creates that cathedral-like atmosphere that you were talking about.

SW: You can feel the tranquillity here, can't you, straightaway, as soon as you enter this place.

TK: And I don't think it's any coincidence that that's the case. I think these places, where these engravings are, were chosen for that purpose because they connect a place and people and purpose.

SW: Yeah. A spiritual reason for them being here in particular.

PT: It goes back to what you were saying before about the land speaking to you.

SW: Well, feel the silence that's in this place. That's country talking to us, telling us that this is a special place. If these engravings did fade away completely — I hope that it never happens in my lifetime or anybody else's — but if they did, for example, this [rock] platform would still be a special place for us.

TK: That's right. Just because the evidence of the site is gone doesn't mean that the place is less significant. It's still that place where that ceremony was held, where those teachings took place, where those ancestors dwell, where people come together to meet.

SW: And these sites, too, Tanya, really enable us to synergise with country, don't they?

TK: Yeah. You get energised when you come to a place like this. You walk away feeling so much better.

SW: Like, I come here today and the engravings of Daramulan reminded me of particular laws that need to be abided by. You can forget about all that stuff when you get caught up in the non-Aboriginal world.

TK: Yeah, you do.

SW: You've got non-Aboriginal values around you all the time, putting pressure on, and it's very easy to forget about your own, you know? Coming back here, like Tanya said, re-energises us and really helps



us synchronise with country again. And those laws come to us through that Dreaming story I told you about previously.

TK: The biggest challenge, I think, for us as Aboriginal people, is how do you create a sense of custodianship and responsibility towards something that you don't feel a connection with; talking about mainstream Australia? Most people would come up here and just see a rock platform. Unless they were really keen to stop and be still and to look and to feel, it would all just pass by. And we live in such a quick world, it's not easily digestible and you don't get that instant gratification. It's not bang, there, move on. You've got to spend time. The challenge, I think, is how do you get people to connect to something that they don't feel is theirs?

PT: And I wonder how much time people actually spend on this platform when they come here.

TK: The people that have gone through; a couple of minutes.

SW: It would be interesting to do a study just of the time people ...

TK: How long do people spend. And even, in the interpretation, have something at the beginning saying, 'For you to really get a sense of what is here you need to be still and you need to let country talk to you. You need to be open to listening.'

PT: I've seen that at rock art sites in many parts of the world: people travel all the way to get there and then they just zip through like they're in an art gallery, quickly going from room to room, 'Oh, saw that.'

TK: Yeah. And they take photos and go, 'I'll look at it later' and they never do. It's like, 'Oh, no, I've seen that. I've got to move on to the next one now.' Yeah. Half the value is the actual place you're in.

PT: Yeah. And spending some time so that you can interconnect with it. Everyone is in such a rush these days, trying to cram as much in to the little time they have as possible.

TK: Yes. And I don't know that we're any richer for it, to be honest. I don't know because we consume more and we acquire more and we have more at our fingertips, that our lives are enriched or better for it. They're busier; can't argue with that.

Life is so quick and things happen so fast, and you get so caught up in things, and you curse the fact that, 'Oh, this isn't happening quickly enough' or, 'That was supposed to happen on this day' and then you realise that, in fact, it was better that things didn't happen



*Figure 8. Shayne Williams and Tanya Koeneman carefully clear leaf litter from over the Jibbon petroglyphs and inspect areas of erosion. Looking after rock art sites is an important aspect of managing 'country' for them. If people manage country properly and with respect it manages you; 'it's a reciprocal relationship'.*

when they did, because they happened at the right time, they happened in their own time. They happened when they were meant to happen, not just because you wanted it to happen, because it was caught up in your will or your ego just to make that happen.

SW: Yeah. Well, that's how metaphysics works for us with our cultures. We have a metaphysical culture and it works through a spiralling process and things happen when they're meant to happen.

TK: But the National Parks have this concept of wilderness that doesn't exist in Aboriginal culture. There's no such thing as a wilderness area because human beings are intrinsic in all country. People manage country (Fig. 8); it's a reciprocal relationship, so to have an idea that people don't go in that area because it's a wilderness area, it's a foreign concept to Indigenous people, I think.

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