

# Darrwal [Dingo] in Australia's First Nations Peoples Cultures: Indigenous Archaeological Perspectives

KELLY ANN BLAKE AND DAVID S. JONES

Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation

Monash University

[kelly@wadawurrung.org.au](mailto:kelly@wadawurrung.org.au)

## Abstract

I, as a Wadawurrung woman, a First Nations person, in what is now called Victoria, Australia, have always known about the connection and value of the Dingo in Wadawurrung culture. Darrwal [the Dingo] (*Canis lupus dingo*), as known in Wadawurrung Language is today my kin, companion and spirit animal. We know that their role was more than just an apex predator species but rather we knew how essential they were for keeping Country and People healthy and balanced. Extensive cultural heritage offers associations with Darrwal but there is insufficient extant archaeological evidence as to our relationships with Darrwal. The latter is in part due to the negative and dramatic impacts of colonialism but is also evidence of deterioration from the passage of time and environmental influences. This article discusses Darrwal from one Wadawurrung woman's lens, drawing upon historical, ethnographic and archaeological evidence, with ontologies to appreciate the cultural importance of the Darrwal to Wadawurrung People and their Country, and other First Nations Peoples of southeastern Australia.

## Acknowledgement to Country

*Kim-Barne, Wadawurrung Tabyal.*<sup>1</sup>

As a proud Wadawurrung woman, I wish to acknowledge and honour Wad-

---

<sup>1</sup> Language used in this article is Wadawurrung Language. Each First Nation's mob or group across the Australian continent have different languages and dialects, and the use of Language in this article—e.g. Darrwal, Dja, Murrup, Kaal, Bellawyn—is Wadawurrung specific.

awurrung Dja [Country],<sup>2</sup> the traditional lands on which my Murrup [spirit] connects to. The place of my Ancestors, the origin of my bloodline. Together, we pay our deepest respects to Elders, past, present and emerging who will be our future leaders. We honour all of which belongs to Dja, lands, mountains, waters, seas and skies. We pay our respects to Darrwal [dingo]<sup>3</sup> and all living creatures great and small who share Wadawurrung Dja with us. We acknowledge and give thanks to cousins and extended family, the Wadawurrung People, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we respectfully care for and protect. As a proud Wadawurrung woman, I also acknowledge and pay my respects to my heart, Dja, Djaara Dja<sup>4</sup> and to the other First Nations<sup>5</sup> communities<sup>6</sup> of Australia. *Nyatne* [Thank you].

*Koling wada ngitj* [Let's walk together].

---

2 Wadawurrung is the Country of the Wadawurrung People: First Nations People who are the traditional owners of lands including the water catchment areas of the Ballarat [Ballaarat] to Geelong [Djilang] and Bellarine Peninsula [Bellawyn] region west of Melbourne [Naarm], Victoria, Australia.

3 In this article the Wadawurrung Language word for Dingo, Darrwal, will be used throughout. 'Darrwal' means wild dingo, while 'Kaal' means tame or camp dingo (WTOAC 2020)

4 Djarra is the Country of the Dja Dja Wurrung, also known as the Djaara or Jajowrong People and 'Loddon River tribe': the First Nations People who are the traditional owners of lands including the water catchment areas of the Loddon and Avoca rivers in the Bendigo region of central Victoria, Australia.

5 In this article we use the term 'First Nations Peoples' that is more commonly used by Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities across Australia in deference to the generic and colonial term 'Aboriginal'.

6 An important point to recognise is that there are over 250 different groups of 'First Nations Peoples' and that the colonial generic singular term 'Aboriginal' has deceptively hidden the plurality that exists within their languages, cultures, traditions, histories, and social systems.

## Preamble

I acknowledge and respect other First Nations Peoples across Australia who use their own Language word for dingo. However, as a Wadawurrung woman, respecting my Language, I choose to refer to dingo throughout this paper as Darrwal.

## Introduction

It is time to reawaken—*Barrat-car-loon ngarrwabil-nhuk burdu'auan Darrwal baap Kaal*—the sleeping cultural knowledge and significance of Darrwal in southeastern Australia (Blake 2022). Wadawurrung People have always known and recognised Darrwal as a cherished and respected companion as non-human kin and spiritual totem animal. Wadawurrung People have always known and recognised Darrwal's ongoing role in maintaining the health and balance of Dja. Much of this Wadawurrung strength of affinity and kinship connections also resides with other First Nations Peoples across Australia but with different values, stories, obligations and Country relationships. This narrative should not be interpreted as a consistent argument for First Nations Peoples, but as one perspective from Wadawurrung Dja.

Colonial and contemporary ethnohistorical narratives and First Nations People's oral traditions evidence that these Peoples across the Australian continent maintained and often continue to maintain complex social relations with wild-caught dingo pups (Balme and O'Connor 2016; Barker and Macintosh 1979; Breckwoldt 1988; Cahir and Clark 2013; Corbett 1995; Fijn 2018; Gollan 1982; Gollan 1984; Hayden 1975; Jones 1970; Kolig 1973; Koungoulos 2017; Koungoulos and Fillios 2020; Meehan et al. 1999; Meggitt 1965; Rose 1992; Shipman 2021; Smith 2015; Smith and Litchfield 2009; White 1972). I myself, as an example, directly continue this cultural relationship and kinship connection in my care and adoption of a dingo pup (kaal) 'Jack'.

The term 'companion', used in contemporary anthropological literature, being a feeling of fellowship or friendship, is important in this discussion as it best explains the relational synergy of First Nations Peoples and Darrwal in Australia. It is also a noun used in anthropological literature to explain this relationship, as used by Brumm (2021), Cahir and Clark (2013), Koungoulos and Fillios (2020),

Koungoulos et al. (2023), Meggitt (1965), Rose (1992) and White (1972).

Rose (1992: 176) states “While never domesticated as a species, individual dingoes have become companions, hunting assistants, warm bedfellows on cold nights, and watchdogs.” Colonial squatter Beveridge (1889: 116) wrote that “It is not by any means an uncommon thing for [a female elder] to have as many as two dozen ... and it is certainly a variety to find one possessing fewer in number than half a dozen.” Meggitt (1965) observed that young dingoes raised in Aboriginal society, that became camp dingoes, served various roles and were highly prized including serving as sentries, as bed warmers or ‘living blankets’ in cold areas, as hunting aides and were useful for capturing small game especially for women. But anthropological and zoological questions persist as to whether this relationship fully constitutes ‘domestication’ (Smith and Litchfield 2009: 114). The latter is a proposition that Brumm (2021: 20) has recently challenged arguing that (i) domestication is grounded in the outmoded dichotomy, (ii) dingoes reared in First Nations society as pups did not behave like solely wild, free-living dingoes and (iii) pups acquired by humans each whelping season may often or even mostly have derived from a distinct population of human-associated ‘wild’ dingoes.

Through a critical review of existing research on Darrwal in southeastern Australia, this article considers Darrwal’s deeper cultural significance and importance within Australia’s First Nations cultures, with a specific focus on Wadawurrung People. Drawing upon archaeological and ethnographic evidence, as well as exploring sources related to Indigenous worldviews and cultural themes (such as First Nations creation stories and ceremonial dance) this paper highlights the deep kinship and cultural connections that Darrwal had/has with Wadawurrung People and Dja in Victoria, and beyond.

### **The arrival of the Darrwal in Australia**

Before European colonisation, the Australian landscape thrived with diverse mammalian species, such as the Eastern Grey Kangaroo (*Macropus giganteus*), Bennett’s wallabies or red-necked wallaby (*Macropus rufogriseus*) and quolls (*Dasyurus sp.*), maintaining balance as trophic regulators. It also hosted the legacy of a much wetter and humid landscape in the Holocene period (11,700 years ago to the present), that over the preceding Pleistocene period (2.6 million to 11,700 years ago) experienced a major drying thereby influencing and nurturing

a fire-dependent landscape vegetation system and low water reliant vegetation and animal systems. These regulators are today essential for ecosystem harmony, preventing species dominance and ensuring biodiversity, akin to keystone species in ecology (Levin et al. 2013; Philip 2021: 594). The timing of Darrwal's arrival onto the Australian continent, discussed below, has been extensively debated by archaeologists, zoologists, ecologists and anthropologists (Smith 2015), with archaeological evidence suggesting a timeframe between 5000–4000 years ago, while recent research suggests an arrival approximately 3300 years ago (Balme et al. 2018; de Kruijff 2024; Koungoulos et al. 2023; Souilmi et al. 2024).

Recent discourse surrounding Darrwal, and incidents about their intrusion upon recreating families in national parks, particularly heightened by the Lindy Chamberlain incident at Uluru in 1990, have sparked significant debate regarding their ecological status and societal role (Brown 2012; Sawyer 1997). Quietly hidden within this is the contemporary formal regulation of approved, licenced culling of dingoes, being a far cry from their excessive indiscriminate slaughter as 'wild dogs' during colonisation. These contemporary incidents have often prompted media calls for population caps, culls or sterilisation in the absence of understanding their long-term cultural relationships. Recent examples include discussions about the role of the dingo on K'gari [Fraser Island, Queensland], revisions to Victoria's *Wildlife Act 1975* (Victoria 1975, 2019–2023; WTOAC 2021), and the inaugural *First Nations Dingo Declaration 2023* (Girringun 2023).

Western scientific perspectives highlight Darrwal as Australia's oldest surviving placental mammal carnivorous species, following the extinction of the Thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*), Darrwal emerged as the mainland's primary terrestrial apex predator approximately 3200 years ago, integrating into local ecosystems (Fillios et al. 2012; Koungoulos and Fillios 2020: 263). There are over 140 terrestrial placental mammals in Australia, with almost all of these being bats or rodents, but Darrwal is the only extant canid. While the scientific community can offer approximate dates for the Thylacine and Darrwal, the Wadawurrung People position the latter as existing "since time immemorial" (Blake 2022, 2023; Powell et al. 2019). But this temporal positioning is certainly not a true statement for all First Nations People across Australia as many mobs recognise that Darrwal is a recent addition to Australia's fauna that is an important

species and part of kinship.

Darrwal is distinct from domestic dogs despite confusion between the two species. Ecologists classify Darrwal as a medium-sized, free-ranging canid native to Australia, although their freedom is often restricted (Smith 2015: 1). The physical traits of Darrwal include a lean body for speed, a bushy brush tail, hooded ears for acute hearing, high intelligence, keen senses, a shy demeanor and a need for social structure and hierarchy; traits that have ensured their ongoing survival (HSI 2023).

### **Contemporary archaeological evidence of Darrwal in Australia**

Mein and Manne (2021: 133, 137) have observed that there is a “lack of robust protocols for discriminating marsupial taxa” in archaeological excavations in Australia. This observation is validated by morphometric evidence that demonstrates “that the body size and cranial shape of some Australian mammalian species such as ... dingo ... can vary spatially and temporally in response to environmental influences such as temperature, precipitation, latitude and habitat structure as well as individual life history.” Koungoulos (2020: 263) validates this conclusion in his research, stating that the dingo’s physical appearance, weight stature and skeletal measurements differs depending on the local environment. This diversity of environment residencies is more recently discussed by Koungoulos et al. (2023), including large islands like K’gari, that further evidences the dingoes ecological adaptability to various climates and habitats and variations in their physical characteristics across different regions. The situation is also hampered by the absence of numerically viable dingo assemblages identified from archaeological excavations and inquiries, as distinct from DNA investigations (Balme et al. 2018; Koungoulos 2020).

Koungoulos et al. (2023: 8–11) have recently compiled a table of “archaeological dingo and dog burials reported in published archaeological literature and news media”. Their inventory and interpretation of results comes with considerable caveats of data veracity and situational contexts. Further, they draw a conclusion that only “a small number of complete dingo skeletons [were] found within archaeological sites that also include human burials” (Koungoulos et al. 2023: 7). This does not necessarily point to the absence of such human and dingo burials, but rather the identification of this partnership where it occurred.

Recent cultural conclusions from archaeological excavations point to the fact that dingoes were commonly buried in the same manner as First Nations Peoples and often in areas used for human burial, sometimes alongside People, as demonstrated in the dingo burials from Curracurrang Rockshelter in southern coastal New South Wales (NSW) (Koungoulos et al. 2023). The latter cites colonial ethnographic recordings, including several specifically in Victoria (Cahir and Clark 2013: 193). Archaeologist and anthropologist Meehan (1971) concludes that a single-stage interment in the ground was the predominant basic form of burial practiced throughout much of southeastern Australia, thus companion dingoes were mourned and given human-comparable burials. Koungoulos et al. (2013: 6-7) conclude that where a human burial is uncovered there is likely to be a high propensity that one or more dingos may have been buried in partnership and thus archaeologists should be vigilant of this pattern when dealing with human burial sites.

There are numerous references to these practices in early ethnographic and squatter diaries and papers written within Wadawurrung Dja, but little in Wadawurrung stories attest to this cultural pattern. For example, squatter Samuel Rawson in 1839 wrote that “they buried the dead bodies of their four legged companions with great ceremony, wrapping them in blankets and sheets of bark and lighting fires by their graves after which they decamped and moved up the river” (Stephens 2014).

Meehan’s conclusions have been confirmed in several archaeological excavations and investigations. For example, Wilson et al. (2022: 210–211), in investigating the ‘zooarchaeological’ record of the Lower Murray River Gorge region in South Australia (SA) have observed that “ethnographic evidence reveals dynamism in *ngatji* [meaning ‘mate’ or ‘friend’ in Ngarrindjeri tongue] (and other cultural) considerations, given that the dingo (...often known as *keli* to Ngarrindjeri) was incorporated over time in the region into Aboriginal mythology, songs/ceremonies, cultural practices and also as a *ngatji*.” This research cross-references Berndt and Berndt’s (1993: 123, 199, 307–308, 580) significant account of the Yaraldi group of the Ngarrindjeri People of SA, corroborating their writings.

On the Nullarbor Plain of SA, Balme et al. (2018: 1) have recorded the oldest direct date for dingo bones demonstrating “that dingoes were in southern

Australia by between 3348 and 3081 years ago ... [and that they] may have spread extremely rapidly throughout mainland Australia” from their excavations at Madura Cave. This conclusion extends our knowledge from previous excavations involving radiocarbon dates in presumed good stratigraphic association with dingo of between 3000 and 4000 years ago at excavations at Capertee 3 in the Blue Mountains in NSW, Fromm’s Landing (Tungawa) on the River Murray in SA, Wombah midden on the Northern Coast of NSW and past work at Madura Cave (Balme et al. 2018: 1–2).

### **Darrwal as a species**

Watkin Tench (1789: 11) first records the ‘dingo’, a noun derived from the Dharug Language, in 1789. Despite this, dingos were earlier observed by Dutch navigators in the 1600s on northern and western Australia shorelines (Shipman 2020: 293–294).

Several scientific debates rotate around the dingo. These include taxonomic nomenclature, their purity and their historical origins. On the latter, it is commonly accepted in the scientific community that dingoes are ecologically and culturally an important canid whose ancestors arrived in Australia over 3000 BP, likely transported by seafaring people or First Nations Peoples or over remnant land bridges, in parallel with the early human settlement of Sahul (Bird et al. 2019; Rose 1992: 101). However, the ecological history of dingoes in Australia—including their formative populations and routes of introduction—remains unclear due to the complicated and unclear relationship between modern dingoes and New Guinea singing dogs (*Canis dingo hallstromi*), and ethnozoological and ecological suspicions that post-colonial hybridisation has introduced recent domestic dog ancestry into the genomes of many wild dingo populations. Thus a scientific debate has been occurring across Australia for several decades as to the dingo lineage, purity and origins (Cairns et al. 2021, 2023b), even implicating the taxonomic nomenclature reclassification of dingoes being formally classified as *Canis familiaris dingo* or *Canis lupus dingo* to distinguish them from domestic dogs (Balme and O’Connor 2016: 775; Koungoulos and Fillios 2020: 263).

Recent scientific evidence indicates that upon reaching mainland Australia, dingoes dispersed across the continent, adapting to various habitats (Shipman 2021: 22). However, to many First Nations People, Darrwal has always been

here walking alongside People, ‘from time immemorial’. Western ecological and zoological research on canine ancestry suggests a close relationship between Darrwal and the New Guinea singing dog; a dingo subspecies native to New Guinea (Elledge et al., 2006; HSI 2023; Quartermain 2020).

In searching for species nomenclature, Wayne and Ostrander (1999) investigated maternal lineage using mitochondrial DNA (mDNA) as a genetic marker concluding that the dingo and New Guinea singing dog developed at a time when human populations were more isolated from each other. More recently mammalogist Wozencraft (2005) has included the dingo under the wolf *Canis lupus* (its wild subspecies) and proposed two additional subspecies – “*familiaris* Linnaeus, 1758 [domestic dog]” and “*dingo* Meyer, 1793 [domestic dog]” – with *Canis dingo hallstromi* as a taxonomic synonym for the dingo.

Ongoing debates in Australia revolve around the existence of ‘pure’ dingoes in the wild (Cairns et al. 2021, 2023a). Unfortunately, this debate has led governmental bodies, hunting groups and individual hunters to justify the shooting and culling of what they perceive as ‘wild dogs,’ which are, in reality, illegally targeting dingoes. Recent genetic studies have debunked the myth of the disappearance of ‘pure’ dingoes, revealing that 87 percent of Victorian dingoes are indeed purebred (Cairns et al. 2023b). Consequently, the term ‘wild dogs’ should be reconsidered and not used in Victoria.

Recently, Souilmi et al. (2024) published findings arising from an investigation of Australia's oldest dingo DNA, from fossils up to 2746 years in age compared with modern populations. They concluded that there are two distinct dingo population groups east and west of the Great Dividing Range that continue today, which is interesting given the supposed success of the 5614km-long Dingo Proof Fence: a pest-exclusion fence erected to keep dingoes out of the relatively fertile south-east part of the continent and protect the sheep flocks of southern Queensland (Philip 2016, 2021). Souilmi et al. (2024) argue that Australia's dingo populations are more closely related to ancient lineages that pre-date European colonisation than with modern dog breeds (de Kruijff 2014). Their research concludes that,

The ancestry of dingoes ... results from at least two waves of migration from source populations with varying affinities to New Guinea singing dogs ... and that modern dingoes derive little genomic ancestry from post-Colonial hybridization with other domestic dog lineages, instead descending primarily from ancient canids introduced to Sahul thousands of years ago (Souilmi et al. 2024: 1).

This is despite their detection of excess allele sharing between New Guinea singing dogs and ancient dingoes from coastal NSW compared to ancient dingoes from southern Australia, irrespective of any post-colonial hybrid ancestry in the genomes of modern individuals.

### **Darrwal on Country: Relationalness**

From the Wadawurrung perspective, Darrwal is not just a dingo, nor is Darrwal a dog. Darrwal is not only an animal for me, as a Wadawurrung woman, but represents Dja [Country], spirit, song and life. This can be a confusing concept for non-First Nations People due to the different cultural concepts of relational functioning or embodied knowledge that we utilise as a way of maintaining our cultural lore and continuing our deep connection to Country (Coff 2021). While considerable contemporary anthropological literature suggests that a better term for this ontological relationship is 'Relatedness' and not 'Relationalness' (Brady and Bradley 2014; Brady et al. 2024; Pickering and Jewell 2008; Thomas et al. 2023), from my Wadawurrung perspective the concept is manifest in the adjective 'relational' as concerning the way in which two or more people or things are connected. It is through the passing of intergenerational knowledge, and teachings of Elders, community and our experience of existing on Country that forges our connection to Country, and all that is in it and of it, including People and Animals as well as Darrwal (David and Thomas 2016).

These Traditional Ecological Knowledge Ripples, summarised in Table 1 and Figure 1, speak to Wadawurrung worldviews and ontologies, that are present in varying degrees in First Nations Peoples worldview across Australia.

First Nations worldviews are beliefs, values, knowledge systems, cultural

practices and cultural protocols often referred to as LORE. It is how we view ourselves and others within our communities and the wider world. It is our way of knowing, doing and being which guides our journey through life whilst maintaining or upholding our cultural lore and practices, which is the very essence of what we do and how we operate within our communities and the wider world.

While cultural beliefs and lore vary among different First Nations communities, certain core beliefs emphasise that Dreamings<sup>7</sup> are not merely stories but serve as educational teachings that highlight the interconnectedness of animals and land. In *Dingo Makes Us Human*, Rose (1992) based her research with the First Nations community of Yarralin<sup>8</sup> in the Victoria Rivers area of the Northern Territory (NT). Rose also made a narrative distinction between “camp” Darrwal (“*waluku*” in Yarralin tongue) and wild or “bush” Darrwal (“*ngurakin*” in Yarralin tongue), each possessing unique roles and narratives, in part by her learnings from the Yarralin People (Rose 1992: 176). Insights from the Yarralin community shed light on the interconnectedness of species, land, spirit and people, emphasising the significance of Dreamings in fostering connections to Dja. Teachings are regarded as knowledge passed down purposefully, relying on trust and relationships. Darrwal are intricately woven into both Wadawurrung Peoples and First Nations Peoples Dreaming stories and lore, underscoring their importance in cultural traditions.

Similar to Rose, Bradley et al. (2021: 92) endeavoured to decipher embodied knowledge by unveiling deeper meanings of rock art and rock shelters. Collaborating with the Yanyuwa People of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria in NT,<sup>9</sup> they

---

7 ‘The Dreaming’ or ‘Dreamings’ are a colonial-derived phrase/word or term also referred to as ‘Dreamtime’, devised by early colonial anthropologists to refer to a religio-cultural worldview attributed to Australian First Nations Peoples beliefs. It is not a word/phrase specific within Wadawurrung Language so there is no Wadawurrung Language word used here.

8 The Yarralin People, also known as Walangeri, are a First Nations People resident in the Victoria Rivers area of the Northern Territory.

9 The Yanyuwa People, also spelt Yanuwa, Yanyula and other variations, are a First Nations People of Northern Territory who live in the coastal region inclusive of and opposite to the Sir Edward Pellew Group of Islands in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria.

advocate for an open-minded and open-hearted consideration of the Yanyuwa perspective on rock art. In their case study, rock art holds significance beyond mere depictions—it is perceived as living spiritual entities with functional roles within Yanyuwa culture (Bradley et al. 2021: 92).

Therefore, viewing Darrwal through our cultural lens unveils a broader significance to the existence of Darrwal, encompassing Ancestral beings, places, events, descendants and responsibilities in Wadawurrung Dja; an interpretation that is common with most First Nations Peoples in Australia.

### **In my words**

As a Wadawurrung Woman and Traditional Owner I seek to live by Bundjil's lore to care for Dja (Country) and all things living as our Ancestors have always done. Our Dja is more than a place. Our coastal cliffs, wetlands, grassy and volcanic plains and people were all formed by Bundjil and our Ancestor spirits who continue to live in the land, water and sky. Kareet Bareet (Black Hill near Gordon) is where Bundjil created Wadawurrung People. Lal Lal Falls near Ballarat (Ballarat) is where Bundjil created the waterways and where he returned to before heading to his resting place in the stars continuing to watch over us.

Our Dja is interwoven with relationships no matter whether the shape of that relation is human, granite hills, Waa (crow) or Larrap (Manna gum). Dja is filled with relations speaking Language, sharing stories and following lore. These spirits link us back through time in a continuing connection with our past, our cultural practices and our stories. These spirits connect us to our Dja and each other which gives us ongoing respect for our obligation to care for our Dja.

Darrwal, like my Jack, is as clever, loyal and extraordinary today as he was before the beginning of time. Through prior studies and extensive research, we see from the mid to late Holocene to present time, Darrwal has contributed significantly not only to Wadawurrung culture but also as a messenger to balance this continent's ecology (WTOAC 2021). Darrwal has performed an invaluable role throughout time providing rich archaeological, anthropological and ethnographic data which gives us a better appreciation and understanding of many questions relating to human/dingo relationships and interactions. We note the extraordinary ability of Darrwal to evolve and adapt to the harsh, unpredictable

Australian climate, “founder effect and genetic drift,” making it one of the most iconic and resilient spirit animals to have walked our Dja beside us (Shipman 2020: 20).

Most importantly, yet sadly, we see the use of the Darrwal to move First Nations Peoples off their traditional Dja. Noting the long-standing kinship connection and bond that First Nations Peoples across Australia continue to have and historically had with Darrwal, this was used against them. Darrwal was and is our ‘living cultural heritage artefact’. Their conscious colonial slaughter and ecological colonisation was the ultimate goal in displacing First Nations Peoples from their traditional lands and waters, and ceasing Darrwal’s kinship connection as human companions to the First Nations Peoples of Australia.

Darrwal, today, and since the beginning of time, always has and always will be part of our Dja, culture and story, confirming that “Aboriginal people and dingoes have the oldest surviving canine-human relationship in the world” (Bethke and Burt 2020: 1).

### **Conclusion: Darrwal as a living cultural heritage ‘artefact’**

Through this review, through the lens of a Wadawurrung woman, a significant gap in contemporary anthropological, archaeological and zoological literature and research concerning Darrwal culture and their relationships with Australia’s First Nations communities is very evident (Blake 2022). Australian First Nations Peoples and their connections with Darrwal face ongoing challenges of deliberate and forced separation—cultural dispossession—depriving Darrwal of their rightful place on their ancestral lands and their vital connection to both People and Dja, including their role as the apex predator of this landscape.

This is because Darrwal is indeed living cultural heritage. More significantly Darrwal is a living cultural heritage artefact yet to be comprehended that way by the Australian archaeological discipline. Darrwal is not comprehended this way in contemporary Western-authored anthropological and archaeological practice and writings.

Since colonisation to the present day, ethnographers, archaeologists and anthropologists have consistently evidenced an antiquarian passion in documenting

First Nations culture and commenting with a culturally insensitive bias towards “skulls, stones and bones” (Griffiths 1996)—or objectified antiquarianism—and cultural knowledge appropriation control (Jones 2023; Smith 2000). Such a blinkered bias has extended to their observations about our relationships with Darrwal.

Despite the tangible and intangible impacts of colonialisation and dispossession, a large portion of our Wadawurrung and First Nations culture has maintained its strength and presence hidden from mainstream view. Our culture, our Language and the omnipresence of many of its sentient relationships and Ancestors are now returning back to their rightful and respectful positions in our Dja. Darrwal is one active character in this Dja revivalism, who has a key synergistic predator and companionship role in our culture, and warrants a re-thinking (WTOAC 2021).

While Darrwal has been acknowledged as an important ecological species, its cultural significance has been largely overlooked. Darrwal must be acknowledged for its cultural role within Australian First Nations communities and Dja, in addition to its ecological significance (DDWCAC et al. 2020).

The continuing persecution of Darrwal continues to be an assault on Australian First Nations living culture and if true reconciliation is to mean anything, then it must stop. Together we need to find a way in which we can all *koling wada ngitj*—walk together with Darrwal and this begins with *Barrat-car-loon ngarrwabil-nhuk burdu’auan darrwal baap kaal* or ‘reawakening the sleeping traditional knowledge of dingo culture’.

## REFERENCES

- Balme, J. and O'Connor, S. 2016. Dingoes and Aboriginal social organization in Holocene Australia. *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 7: 775–781.
- Balme, J., O'Connor, S. and Fallon, S. 2018. New dates in dingo bones from Madura Cave provide oldest firm evidence for arrival of the species in Australia. *Scientific Reports* 8(1): 1–7.
- Barker, B.C.W. and Macintosh, A. 1979. The dingo – A review. *Archaeology and Physical Anthropology in Oceania* 14 (1): 27–53.
- Berndt, R.M. and Berndt, C.H. (with Stanton, J.) 1993. *A World That Was: The Yarlaldi of the Murray Lakes, South Australia*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Bethke, B. and Burt, A. 2020. *Dogs: Archaeology Beyond Domestication*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Beveridge, P. 1889. *The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina, as seen by Peter Beveridge*. Melbourne: M.L. Hutchinson.
- Bird, M.I., Condie, S.A., O'Connor, S., O'Grady, D., Reepmeyer, C., Ulm, S., Zega, M., Saltr , F. and Bradshaw, C.J.A. 2019. Early human settlement of Sahul was not an accident. *Scientific Reports* 9: 8220.
- Blake, K.A. 2022. Reflections on Western Archaeology Training from a First Nation's Perspective: Whose Knowledge and Whose Methods? In Kutay, C., Leigh, E., Prpic, J.K. and Ormond-Parker, L. (eds). *Indigenous Engineering for an Enduring Culture*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 259–271.
- Blake, K.A. 2023. Darrwal/Kaal: 'Barrat-car-loon ngarrwabil-nhuk burdu 'auan dawaal baap kaal'. *Reawakening the traditional knowledge of dingo culture in south-eastern Australia*. Unpublished MProf Archaeology thesis submitted to Latrobe University, Bundoora.
- Brady, L.M. and Bradley, J.J. 2014. Images of relatedness: patterning and cultural contexts in Yanyuwa rock art, Sir Edward Pellew Islands, SW Gulf of Carpentaria, northern Australia. *Rock Art Research* 31(2): 157–176.
- Brady, L.M., Bradley, J. and Kearney, A. 2024. Always a Trace: Archaeological Absence, Indigenous Presence, and Depictions of "Contact" Experiences in North Australian Rock Art. *Current Anthropology* 65(2): 292–319.
- Bradley, J., Kearney, A. and Brady, L.M. 2021. Embodied knowledge and deep presence: Ethnography and rock art places in Yanyuwa country. *Rock Art Research: The Journal of the Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA)* 38(1): 84–94.

- Breckwoldt, R. 1998. *A Very Elegant Animal: The Dingo*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson.
- Brown, M. 2012. Dingo baby ruling ends 32 years of torment for Lindy Chamberlain: Azaria Chamberlain was killed by wild dingo at Uluru, coroner finally rules, after decades of legal and police obstruction, *The Guardian*, June 13. Website: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/12/dingo-baby-azaria-lindy-chamberlain>, accessed on 1 June 2023.
- Brumm, A. 2021. Dingos and domestication. *Archaeology in Oceania* 56: 17–31.
- Cahir F.D. and Clark, I.D. 2013. The historic importance of the dingo in Aboriginal society in Victoria (Australia): a reconsideration of the archival record. *Anthrozoös* 26(2): 185–98.
- Cairns, K.M., Crowther, C.M., Nesbitt, B. and Letnic, M. 2021. The myth of wild dogs in Australia: Are there any out there? *Australian Mammalogy* 44(1): 67–75.
- Cairns, K.M., Crowther, M.S. and Letnic, M. 2023a. New DNA testing shatters ‘wild dog’ myth: most dingoes are pure, *The Conversation*, May 30. Website: <https://theconversation.com/new-dna-testing-shatters-wild-dog-myth-most-dingoes-are-pure-206397>, accessed on 1 June 2023.
- Cairns, K.M., Crowther, M.S., Parker, H.G., Ostrander, E.A. and Letnic, M. 2023b. Genome-wide variant analyses reveal new patterns of admixture and population structure in Australian dingoes. *Molecular Ecology* 32(15): i-ii, 4093–4460.
- Coff, K. 2021. Learning on and from Country: Teaching by incorporating Indigenous Relational worldviews. In Shay, M. and Oliver, R. (eds). *Indigenous Education in Australia: Learning and Teaching for Deadly Futures*. London: Taylor and Francis, 190–201.
- Corbett, L.K. 1995. *The Dingo in Australia and Asia*. Ithaca: Comstock/Cornell.
- David, B. and Thomas, J. 2016. When a Stone Tool is a Dingo: Country and Relatedness in Australian Aboriginal Notions of Landscape. In Bruno, D. and Thomas, J. (eds). *Handbook of Landscape Archaeology*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 633–637.
- de Kruijff, P. 2014. Dingo populations more closely related to ancient ancestors than modern dogs, DNA study suggested. ABC Science News, July 9, 2024. Website: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2024-07-09/ancient-dna-study-suggests-dingoes-preserve-genetic-heritage/104065490>, accessed on 1 June 2023.
- Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, Gunditjmarra Aboriginal Corporation, Tati Tati, Wadi Wadi, Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, Department of Environment, Land, Water, and Planning [DDWCAC, GAC, TT, WW, BGLCAB and DELWP]. 2020. *Restoring Spirit on Country: A living document which explores principles and outcomes of restoring Spirit - culturally significant species and their function on Country*. East Melbourne: DELWP.

- Elledge, A.E., Leung, L.K.P., Allen, L.R., Firestone, K. and Wilton, A.N. 2006. Assessing the taxonomic status of Dingoes *Canis familiaris dingo* for conservation. *Mammal Reviews* 36: 142–156.
- Fijn, N. 2018. Dog ears and tails: Differential ways of being with canines in Aboriginal Australia and Mongolia. In Swanson, H.A., Lien, M.E. and Ween, G.B. (eds). *Domestication Gone Wild: Politics and Practices of Multispecies Relations*. Durham: Duke University Press, 72–93.
- Fillios, M., Crowther, M.S. and Letnic, M. 2012. The impact of the dingo on the thylacine. *World Archaeology* 44(1): 118–134.
- Girringun. 2023. First Nations' Dingo Declaration. Cardwell: Girringun Aboriginal Corporation. Website: <https://www.girringun.com/dingoforum2023>, accessed on 1 October 2023.
- Gollan, K. 1982. *Prehistoric Dingo*. Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the Australian National University, Canberra.
- Gollan, K. 1984. The Australian dingo: In the shadow of man. In Archer, M. and Clayton, G. (eds). *Vertebrate Zoogeography and Evolution in Australasia (Animals in Space and Time)*. Marrickville: Hesperian Press, 921–927.
- Griffiths, T. 1996. *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hayden, B. 1975. Dingoes: Pets or producers? *Mankind* 10: 11–15.
- HSI [Human Society International]. 2023. Disappointing: VIC Government renews Order to kill threatened dingoes. Website: <https://hsi.org.au/blog/disappointing-vic-government-renews-order-to-kill-threatened-dingoes/>, accessed on 23 May 2024.
- Jones, D.S. 2023. *Planning for Urban Country: Taking First Nations Values into Future Urban Designs*. London: Palgrave/Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.
- Jones, R. 1970. Tasmanian Aborigines and dogs. *Mankind* 7: 256–271.
- Kolig, E. 1973. Aboriginal man's best foe? *Mankind* 9: 122–124.
- Koungoulos, L.G. 2017. *Canis dingo* and the Australian smaller-fauna trend: A new explanatory model integrating ecological data. *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 14: 38–45.
- Koungoulos, L.G. 2020. Old dogs, new tricks: 3D geometric analysis of cranial morphology supports ancient population substructure in the Australian dingo. *Zoomorphology* 139: 263–275.

- Koungoulos, L.G. and Fillios, M. 2020. Hunting dogs down under? On the Aboriginal use of tame dingoes in dietary game acquisition and its relevance to Australian prehistory. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 58: 101146.
- Koungoulos, L.G., Balme, J. and O'Connor, S. 2023. Dingoes, companions in life and death: The significance of archaeological canid burial practices in Australia. *PLoS ONE* 18(10): e0286576.
- Levin, S., Xepapadeas, T., Crépin, A.S., Norberg, J., de Zeeuw, A., Folke, C., Hughes, T., Arrow, K., Barrett, S., Daily, G., Ehrlich, P., Kautsky, N., Mäler, K.G., Polasky, S., Troell, M., Vincent, J.R., and Walker, B. 2013. Social-ecological systems as complex adaptive systems: modeling and policy implications. *Environment and Development Economics* 18: 111–132.
- Meehan B. 1971. *The form, distribution and antiquity of Australian Aboriginal mortuary practices*. Unpublished MA thesis submitted to The University of Sydney.
- Meehan, B., Jones, R. and Vincent, A. 1999. Gulu-kula: Dogs in Anbarra society, Arnhem Land. *Aboriginal History* 23: 83–106.
- Meggitt, M.J. 1965. The association between Australian Aborigines and dingoes. In Leeds, A. and Vayda, A. (eds). *Man, Culture, and Animals: The Role of Animals in Human Ecological Adjustments*. Washington DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 7–26.
- Mein, E. and Manne, T. 2021. Identifying marsupials from Australian archaeological sites: Current methodological challenges and opportunities in zooarchaeological practice. *Archaeology in Oceania* 56(2): 133–141.
- Philip, J. 2016. *Representing the Dingo: An Examination of Dingo–Human Encounters in Australian Cultural and Environmental Heritage*. Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the University of New England, Armidale.
- Philip, J. 2021. The Waterfinders: A cultural history of the Australian dingo. *Australian Zoologist* 41(3): 593–607.
- Pickering, K. and Jewell, B. 2008. Nature is Relative: Religious Affiliation, Environmental Attitudes, and Political Constraints on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 2(1): 135–158.
- Powell, B., Tournier, D., Jones, D.S. and Roös, P.B. 2019. Welcome to Wadawurrung Country. In Jones, D.S. and Roös, P.B. (eds). *Geelong's Changing Landscape: Ecology, Development and Conservation*. Melbourne: CSIRO Publishing, 44–84.
- Quartermain, E. 2020. Australia's dingoes: Vital yet villainised. Human Society International. Website: <https://hsi.org.au/blog/australias-dingoes-vital-yet-villainised/>, accessed on 23 May 2024.

- Rose, D.B. 1992. *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sawyer, P. 1997. 'Naming Whiteness': an inquiry into Lindy Chamberlain's through my eyes and Australian nationalist discourses. *Law Text Culture* 3: 107–123.
- Shipman, P.L. 2020. The elusive dingo: Neither quite domesticated nor entirely wild, these canids defy easy zoological categorization. *American Scientist* 108(5): 292–297.
- Shipman, P.L. 2021. What the dingo says about dog domestication. *The Anatomical Record* 304(1): 19–30.
- Smith, B.P. 2015. The role of dingoes in indigenous Australian lifestyle, culture and spirituality. In Smith, B.P. (ed.) *The Dingo Debate: Origins, Behaviour and Conservation*. Clayton South: CSIRO Publishing, 81–101.
- Smith, B.P. and Litchfield, C.A. 2009. A review of the relationship between indigenous Australians, dingoes (*Canis dingo*) and domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*). *Anthrozoös* 22 (2): 111–128.
- Smith, L. 2000. A history of Aboriginal heritage legislation in south-eastern Australia. *Australian Archaeology* 50: 109–118.
- Souilmi, Y., Wasef, S., Williams, M.P., Conroy, G., Bar, I., Bover, P., Dann, J., Heiniger, H., Llamas, B., Ogbourne, S., Archer, M., Ballard, J.W.O., Reed, E., Tobler, R., Koungoulos, L.G., Walshe, K., Wright, J.L., Balme, J., O'Connor, S., Cooper, A. and Mitchell, K.J. 2014. Ancient genomes reveal over two thousand years of dingo population structure. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, July 8, 2024, 121 (30): e2407584121.
- Stephens, M. 2014. *The Journal of William Thomas: Assistant Protector of the Aborigines of Port Phillip and Guardian of the Aborigines of Victoria 1839 to 1843*. Melbourne: Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages.
- Tench, W. 1789. A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay. Project Gutenberg. Website: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3535/pg3535-images.html> , accessed on 21 July 2024. [Note that page numbers are not used in this journal].
- Thomas, E.J., Ross, A., Bauwens, S. and Bauwens, C. 2023. Resurrecting the power in the stones, developing a modern narrative of the agency and sentience of powerful stones, and recreating shared knowledge encounters at Gummingurru and its associated site architecture. *Archaeology in Oceania* 58(1): 5–19.
- Victoria. 1975. Wildlife Act 1975. Website: <https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/wild-life-act-1975> , accessed on 2 May 2023.

- Victoria. 2019. Dingoes. Melbourne: Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. Website: <https://www.wildlife.vic.gov.au/our-wildlife/dingoes> , accessed on 2 May 2023.
- Victoria. 2020. Wild dog, dingo-dog hybrids (feral or wild). Melbourne: Agriculture Victoria. Website: <https://agriculture.vic.gov.au/biosecurity/pest-animals/priority-pest-animals/wild-dog-dingo-dog-hybrids-feral-or-wild> , accessed on 2 May 2023.
- Victoria. 2021. The Independent Review of Victoria's Wildlife Act 1975. Have your say to help shape a modern Wildlife Act. Website: <https://engage.vic.gov.au/independent-review-victorias-wildlife-act-1975>, accessed on 2 May 2023.
- Victoria. 2022. The Independent Review of Victoria's Wildlife Act 1975. Website: <https://engage.vic.gov.au/independent-review-victorias-wildlife-act-1975> , accessed on 2 May 2023.
- Victoria. 2023. Dingoes. Melbourne: Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. Website: <https://www.wildlife.vic.gov.au/our-wildlife/dingoes> , accessed on 2 May 2023.
- Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation (WTOAC). 2020. *Paleert Tjaara Dja – Let's make Country good together 2020-2030: Wadawurrung Country Plan*. Ballarat: Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation.
- Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation (WTOAC). 2021. *Review of Wildlife Act 1975 –Submission on behalf of Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation*. Ballarat: Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation.
- Wayne, R. and Ostrander, E.A. 1999. Origin, genetic diversity, and genome structure of the domestic dog. *BioEssays* 21(3): 247–57.
- White, I.M. 1972. Hunting dogs at Yalata. *Mankind* 8: 201–205.
- Wilson, C., Roberts, A., Fusco, D. and Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Corporation. 2022. New data and syntheses for the zooarchaeological record from the Lower Murray River Gorge, South Australia: Applying a ngatji lens. *Australian Archaeology* 88(2): 200–214.
- Wozencraft, W.C. 2005. Order Carnivora. In Wilson, D.E. and Redder, D.M. (eds). *Mammal Species of the World: A Taxonomic and Geographic Reference (3rd ed.)*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 575–577.

|                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Our Connection to Dja and relatedness.                           | The holistic concept that everything both tangible and intangible is related, its very existence is interconnected with part of an intricate web of life. This also speaks to the belief about spiritual beings which guide and warn us throughout our life journey. Wadawurrung People believe that we synergistically exist in the presence of our Ancestors and other terrestrial and Lakorra Dja [Sky Country] animals, beings and landscape features possess tangible and intangible characteristics; an interpretation that is common with most First Nations Peoples in Australia.                                                                                                                                                         |
| Cyclical time not linear.                                        | Wadawurrung People believe that we exist within a cyclical understanding of time which is prompted by seasons, which in turn prompts events and ceremonies. Our understanding of time is what informs our cultural practices. Oral traditions, songs and lores are historical tapestries. This is the passing on of knowledge and our ways of knowing, doing and being through story, song, dance/ceremony; an interpretation that is common with most First Nations Peoples in Australia.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Community and reciprocity is our foundation for survival.        | The Wadawurrung People believe that the generosity of sharing resources and knowledge is a demonstration of mutual and cultural respect of the natural world—Dja, animals and plants and knowing to only take what we need and to give back to Dja in reciprocity. Through taking care of Dja, not taking too much of a resource but making sure everything sits in balance; an interpretation that is common with most First Nations Peoples in Australia.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Respect for Ancestors, Elders and traditional knowledge holders. | The Wadawurrung People believe that our physical and intellectual location in our mob is dependent upon our cultural passage (or journey) and learning, but it also establishes our ‘circle of knowledge’, standing and respect by my People and my Dja. It is through cultural protocols and practices, such as ceremony, rites of passage, and sitting in circles with our mentors—those being people who have come before us and who have been a part of our teachings and life learnings on Dja, who have showed us and walked with us on our journey in order for us to share and ripple out this knowledge and teachings—do we partake our cultural journey; an interpretation that is common with most First Nations Peoples in Australia. |

Table 1. Relational Worldviews (reproduced by Kelly Ann Blake from Blake 2022).

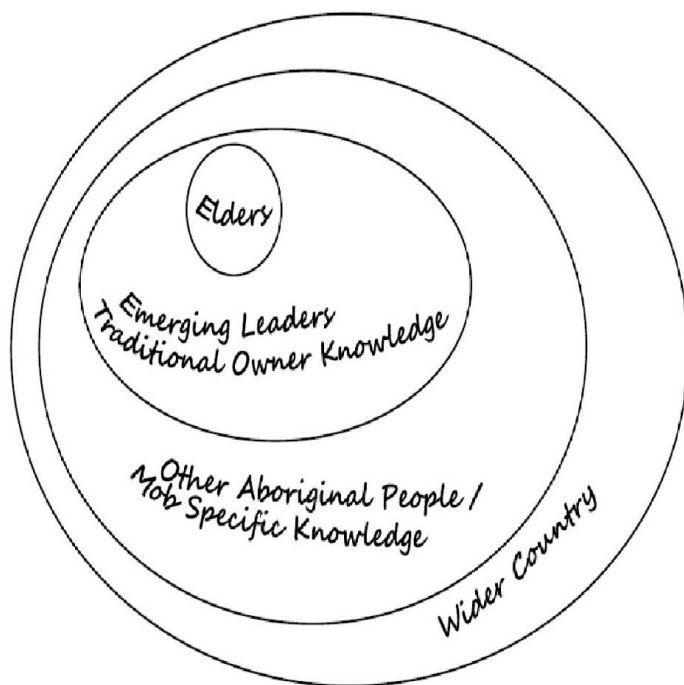


Fig. 1. Traditional Ecological Knowledge Ripples (reproduced by Kelly Ann Blake from Blake 2022).