

Fleurieu Peninsula Swamps Aboriginal Values Spirits and mythological creatures



Aboriginal spirits are just as much part of the swamp ecosystem as plants and animals that live there © Nicole Motteux, 2021

Contemporary Aboriginal people believe that spirits are part of a world where they communicate cryptically with humans through their use of supernatural powers. There are a number of stories that Aboriginal peoples use to explain how the landscape was formed and how it should be managed. Lessons learned from project research emphasise the importance of overlapping environmental, cultural and spiritual values for Aboriginal people. Water spirits and mythical creatures are just as much part of swamp biodiversity as plants and animals living there.



Aboriginal people use their ngartji, a totem such as Wirilda, to connect to Country © Nicole Motteux, 2021

To integrate these different values Aboriginal people use their *ngartji*, a totem. Each family group has their own *ngartji* including species such as the swamp wattle (*Wirilda*, *Acacia retinodes*), long-neck turtle, black swan, eagle and wild dog. Mark Koolmatrie said that "our values are enhanced through the term *ngartji*, which is a word that describes our totems that are given to us to connect our family, clans, Tribes and the

world around us. Our *ngartji* is a friend, our protector and our server. It is to show connection to Country, our identity of belonging and the responsibilities we have to each other and our *ngartji*." The term *ngartji* refers to individual totems which include; animals, plants, fish and other marine life, mammals, birds, and how those *ngartjis* connect to protect and serve the land, waters and cosmology and the connecting of a complete system to look after our world. Mark Koolmatrie shared that his family *ngartjis* are the wild dog or *keli* and the fish called mulloway. His Mother's *ngartji* was the seagull or *throkeri* with his Father's was the wattle tree or *wirilda*. A simplified way of looking at the concept of *ngartji* is if we all look after and serve the needs of our *ngartji* ensuring they have fresh clean waters, plant life and other microorganisms to survive, food and protection and their needs for survival are met then the whole system is taken care of and the whole environment, cosmology and other *ngartji* survive.



Beliefs in the ngartji encourage people to look after the environment and to show an awareness of what threatens it. As Ngarrindjeri people, it is seen as a cultural obligation to protect the ngartji spirits that are part of their culture.

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Spirits in human form are sometimes said to interact with birds. Oral accounts record stories of the "little men" or *kintji*. These anthropomorphic spirits apparently lived in family groups with their camps on hills and high cliffs. The "little men" appeared in several colours, most commonly red or grey, although never black or white. They were said to be hunters with a particular desire for duck meat. This brought them into occasional contact with Aboriginal hunters in swamps and wetlands. There are recent accounts of spirit men encounters when Ngarrindjeri people were foraging for swan eggs. In 1984, one man claimed to have recently seen two grey *kintji* men standing in water among reeds at Waltawa Swamp, on the edge of Lake Albert, when he was "swan egging".

Warki/ Ramindjeri Elders Nita McAdam and Collin Koolmatrie, who grew up in the Coorong, shared a story of a water spirit known as *Mulyawonk* explained that the *Lakalinyeri* (language groups or clans) that are grouped together as the Ngarrindjeri people share a story of a water spirit known as the *Mulyawonk*. Australians may also know this mythical being as a "bunyip". The story varies between clans but the essence

of the story is about a Ngarrindjeri *Ko:ni* (man) who was greedy catching more fish than he needed. The Elders were not happy with this man who did not respect the Ngarrindjeri fishing laws. The Elders were so angry with this man that as a punishment they turned him into the *Mulyawonk* - a half fish, half man creature and banished him to the deep water forever. However, at a later time a child swimming in the water disappeared and the terrified Father frantically searched for his child. Diving deep under the water he found the *Mulyawonk* lair and the child, who was rescued and brought safely back to the shore. Ngarrindjeri children are told never to swim alone or to take more fish than they can eat from the rivers and swamps. This story teaches children water safety and respect for the fishes of the rivers, lakes and swamps.



Warki Elder Nita McAdam sharing knowledge of Water spirits and mythical creatures linked to Fleurieu Swamps

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Tjilbruke is pivotal to the creation stories of the Kurna people, and is shared with neighbouring language groups including the Ngarrindjeri clans. *Tjilbruke's* nephew, *Kulutuwu* was killed as punishment for breaking the law by killing a female emu. *Tjilbruke* then carried his nephews' body down the Fleurieu Peninsula coast into Ngarrindjeri country near Goolwa. Where *Tjilbruke* rested on his journey, his *luki* (tears) of overwhelming grief formed the freshwater springs at places such as Hallett Cove, Port Noarlunga, Port Willunga and Sellicks Beach. Eventually *Tjilbruke* placed the body of his nephew into a cave at Rapid Bay and transformed himself into a bird (identified as either a White-faced Heron (*Egretta novaehollandiae*) or a glossy ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*). When these birds are seen on Fleurieu swamps, it reminds people of Aboriginal laws, the links between coastal and inland water, and the importance of not breaking the law.

In another myth concerning the creation of fire, *Tal Kanna* the Robin Redbreast Ancestor stole the power to make fire by secretly thrusting a dry flower stick from a grasstree (*Xanthorrhoea semiplana*) into a fire made by *Mar* the White Cockatoo. A fight broke out between the Ancestors when a fire spread through the long grass and underwood. The burning of the country ceased when *Croom* the Musk Duck Ancestor clapped and shook his wings, bringing in water that settled as swamps and lakes. Many Fleurieu swamps have adjoining woodland containing grasstrees and providing habitat for scarlet robins (*Petroica boodang*) while larger water bodies around swamps often have musk duck (*Biziura lobata*) in spring – reminding us of this story.



Ngarrindjeri people have a cultural obligation to protect the ngartji spirits that are part of their culture. © Nicole Motteux, 2021
Our ancient ways demonstrate that by looking after our individual *ngartji* we inadvertently look after the environment because by looking after these *ngartjis* we collectively look after the whole ecosystem. This is shown by Elders who said:

I remember looking after everything. We fished, hunted, collected and understood our needs.

I grew up at the One Mile and in Raukkan and we were told stories by the old people. These stories are still true today.

I value the spiritual connection to who we are in the world now and in the spirit world.

Text: John Fargher Images: @nicolemotteuxphotography
This post especially informed by many papers and advice from [Philip Clarke](#), Ethnobotanist and Anthropologist.
A full list of references for this Post are available at [\[link to references\]](#)