
Creative Spirits: 2021 NAIDOC Week | Heal Country, heal our Nation

<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/naidoc-week>

NAIDOC Week 2021

NAIDOC Week is predominantly held in the first full week of July and is a time to celebrate Aboriginal history, culture and achievements.

The 2021 National NAIDOC Theme is "Heal Country!"

The 2021 theme calls for greater protections for Aboriginal lands, waters, sacred sites and cultural heritage from exploitation, desecration, and destruction. [Country is more than a place](#) and inherent to Aboriginal identity. It sustains lives in every aspect – spiritually, physically, emotionally, socially, and culturally.

Meaning of land to Aboriginal people

<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/land/meaning-of-land-to-aboriginal-people>

Land means different things to non-Indigenous and Aboriginal people. The latter have a spiritual, physical, social and cultural connection. Land management and care are vital for Aboriginal health and provide jobs. Many Aboriginal artworks tell about the connection between people and their land.

What does land mean to Aboriginal people?

Non-Indigenous people and land owners might consider land as something they own, a commodity to be bought and sold, an asset to make profit from, but also a means to make a living off it or simply 'home' [1]. They 'develop' land, as if it was unfinished or raw.

For Aboriginal people the relationship is much deeper. Palyku woman Ambelin Kwaymullina explains:

"For Aboriginal peoples, country is much more than a place. Rock, tree, river, hill, animal, human – all were formed of the same substance by the Ancestors who continue to live in land, water, sky. Country is filled with relations speaking language and following Law, no matter whether the shape of that relation is human, rock, crow, wattle. Country is loved, needed, and cared for, and country loves, needs, and cares for her peoples in turn. Country is family, culture, identity. Country is self." [2]

They have a profound [spiritual connection](#) to land. Aboriginal law and spirituality are intertwined with the land, the people and creation, and this forms their culture and sovereignty.

The health of land and water is central to their culture. Land is their mother, is steeped in their culture, but also gives them the responsibility to care for it. They "feel the pain of the shapes of life in country as pain to the self". [2]

Aboriginal languages described intimately the land and the culture of the people who spoke them. That is why the [removal of Aboriginal people from their ancestral lands](#) has been so disastrous because the loss of country leads to loss of that language and culture.

Living in a city has its own challenges. "I often wonder how to connect with my country when I'm in the city," wonders Aboriginal dancer and choreographer Francis Rings [3]. "For many Indigenous people it's a visceral connection; you look beyond the buildings and concrete and feel a sense of belonging," she says.

Key take-away: The land owns Aboriginal people and every aspect of their lives is connected to it.

We cultivated our land, but in a way different from the white man. We endeavour to live with the land; they seemed to live off it.

— Tom Dystra, Aboriginal elder [4]

Story: The Lost Girl

The girl had lost her way. She had wandered far from the Mothers, the Aunties and the Grandmothers, from the Fathers and the Uncles and the Grandfathers. She had hidden in the shadow of a rock, and fallen asleep while she waited for her brothers and sisters to find her. Now it was night, and no one answered when she called, and she could not find her way back to camp.

The girl wandered, alone. She grew thirsty, so she stopped by a waterhole to drink, and then hungry, so she picked some berries from a bush. Then the night grew colder, so she huddled beneath an overhanging rock, pressing herself into a hollow that had trapped the warm air of the day. Finally she saw a crow flying in the moonlight, flapping from tree to tree and calling 'Kaw! Kaw! Kaw!'. The girl followed the crow. She followed him through the trees and over the rocks and up the hills, until at last she saw the glow of her people's campfires in the distance.

The people laughed and cried at once to see that the girl was safe. They growled at her for her foolishness, and cuddled her, and gave her a place by the fire. Her little brother asked her if she had been afraid; but the girl said – 'How could I be frightened? I was with my Mother. When I was thirsty, she gave me water; when I was hungry, she fed me; when I was cold, she warmed me. And when I was lost, she showed me the way home.' [2]

This story is available as a children's book of the same name.

"The land owns us"

Most text use 'custodians' or 'owners' when referring to Aboriginal peoples' relationship to their lands.

It is tricky to find [appropriate words](#) to express their intimate relationship, as John Christophersen, deputy chair of the Northern Land Council, knows all too well.

"We're not custodians, we're not caretakers," he says. "We weren't looking after [the land] for somebody else to come and take [it] away. We were the owners. And occupiers. And custodians. And caretakers." [5]

An Elder explains

Bob Randall, a Yankunytjatjara elder and traditional owner of Uluru (Ayer's Rock), explains his connectedness to the land and how every living thing is connected to every other living thing.

Bob Randall Video 6:14 mins [\[Click Here\]](#)

Land sustains Aboriginal lives in every aspect, spiritually, physically, socially and culturally. The notion of landscape as a second skin is central to every Aboriginal art form, whether it be theatre, dance, music or painting [3].

Without their connection to land Aboriginal artists cannot create. "Living and working or creating in the land of their birth is vital for an artist's connection to country," says Edwina Circuit, manager of the Warakurna Art Centre in Western Australia [7]. Maintaining this connection is vital to pass on important stories to younger generations.

When walking on country, Aboriginal woman Melissa Lucashenko sees another dimension beyond the obvious. "We see the world that white people see but we are also seeing a mythic landscape at the same time, and an historic landscape," she says. "White people see Rotary parks and headlands; we see sacred sites. And we are looking at bush food." [8] Aboriginal law and life originates in and is governed by the land. The connection to land gives Aboriginal people their identity and a sense of belonging. Ambelin Kwaymullina explains how law is the basis to everything we see today:

"The Ancestors taught the peoples the ways of living in country, and these ways were called Law. It was Law that sustained the web of relationships established by the Ancestors, and the web of relationships established by the Ancestors formed the pattern that was life itself. This pattern – being life – is everywhere; it exists in a single grain of sand, and is formed again by millions of grains coming together to make desert; it is in spinifex and crow and rock and human and every other shape of life; and is created anew when these shapes come together to form country; and when all country comes together to form a continent." [2] Country was, and still is to many, a place of learning. "We know everything there; the trees, animals, plants," explains Djawa Timmy Burarrwanga, an Aboriginal Elder from Arnhem Land. "It's like a bush library for us, and often a bush university too. It's there that we study and understand, and have learnt about the land and the care of that land over thousands of years. We can read it like a GPS. It's been handed down by our ancestors." [9]

But if we don't sustain the land, when we only take and not give back, we are destroying this library: *"It's just like a big book to us. This whole land. Now, over the years, people been taking – like tearing pages out of our book so there's bits and pieces getting lost... You know, if we take out the centre part of our country, you know we've taken out a whole guts of our book, we're tearing it right out... It would be hard for teaching to carry on after that point."* [10]

Spiritual connections

Their spiritual and cultural connection to the land obliges Aboriginal people to look after cultural sites which are 'living museums' of their ancestors and include: [15]

- Dreaming sites
- water holes
- archaeological sites
- burial grounds

Ceremonial activities help them renew or rebuild their [spiritual connection](#) to the land and the sacred sites they look after.

Today access to traditional lands can be gained when [native title](#) is recognised, but gaining this title is a lengthy, costly and complex process.

Non-Indigenous people have problems understanding the close relationship with land. When Aboriginal people try to educate about what the land means to them they often are "hit with this hurtful phrase 'the land doesn't belong to you Aboriginal people, it belongs to all of us.'" It is one of the "most hurtful comments" that they have to endure. [16]

"Aboriginal cultural heritage places are an essential part of our library," explains Tasmanian Aboriginal activist Jim Everett. "[They hold] not only material evidence of our ancestors' lifestyles, influenced by ice ages, isolation, climate changes and eventually colonisation, but also a spiritual connection to country and the identity of place and spiritual belonging." [17]

"Destruction is like ripping pages from our library books, it is like cutting the hearts of our people, cutting our identity and our cultural philosophy that sustains our spiritual connectedness to country."

Many Aboriginal people's connection to the land has been severed during the time of the [Stolen Generations](#). They have lost their traditional connection. Aboriginal author and academic Stephen Hagan estimates that about 70% of the people he has spoken to do not have "the faintest idea" of their connection to country [18].

It's like the love for your mum and dad.

— Natasha Neidje, grand-daughter of Bill Neidje, about the love for the land, Kakadu National Park

If you belong there your country will find a way to call you back. Country needs to be remembered, needs to be listened to, needs to know that we can still speak its language.

— Aboriginal elder in TV series Double Trouble