

# **Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba: Developing Relationships with Lake Illawarra**

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## **Abstract**

This paper offers an example of how Indigenous knowledges can be integrated into governance within an Australian context. The research is part of an international collaborative project seeking demonstrable examples of the potential for effective integration of Indigenous knowledge into land and marine based planning processes, and environmental decision-making. In the main, the integration of Indigenous knowledge has been tokenistic, or for the purposes of appropriation, making Indigenous peoples reluctant to share their knowledge. Aware of the risks, the authors introduce an Australian based case study of a program with prodigious potential. *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* is a knowledge informed program delivered in place, on the shores of Lake Illawarra, New South Wales. Government employees, planners, scientists, environmentalists, and community members already involved with the Lake engaged in this Aboriginal based knowledge program. The aim was to introduce to participants a relational and generative way of knowing; an ethos that has the potential to inform future decision-making in relation to the Lake. Participants were encouraged to develop a relationship with, and recognise their personal and professional responsibilities to the Lake. This paper explains the *Moolawang* program and the Aboriginal knowledge that underpins it; *Maramal*, a place-based philosophy, articulating an interconnected set of

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frameworks for identifying with an Aboriginal worldview. We acknowledge this generously shared knowledge system is specific to Place, yet we conclude it provides principles, protocols and customs that have transferable potential to decision-making processes outside of the Illawarra, to other parts of Australia, and perhaps internationally.

**Keywords:** *Aboriginal knowledge, environmental decision-making processes, Lake Illawarra, relational ethos, reflexive governance*

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## 1. Introduction

There is widespread international acknowledgement of the importance of embracing alternative and diverse knowledges to address increasingly wicked global environmental problems, particularly effective and inclusive land and marine decision-making. This includes growing recognition of the potential of Indigenous knowledge systems to offer alternative approaches to environmental governance. Across policy and research there is mounting interest in knowledge co-production, creating space for Indigenous voices in environmental governance and new approaches to science, where ancient scientific approaches are woven with more conventional, technological based approaches.<sup>1</sup> Among many recent acknowledgements is the call to respectfully engage with Indigenous knowledges in the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.<sup>2</sup> The imperative to integrate Indigenous knowledges into contemporary governance systems, has led to calls for research projects that address *how* Indigenous knowledges might be authentically integrated into environmental governance. For it is all well and good to espouse normative ideals that Indigenous knowledges should be included into environmental and resource governance frameworks, but the practical question and complexity of *how* to effectively do so has to date proven a difficult and complex process for those academics and Indigenous knowledge holders engaged with inclusive knowledge integration.

As part of a Norwegian Research Council Project, *The Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems into Mapping, Planning and Environmental Decision Making: The Role of Community-Based Impact Assessments as a Strategic Planning Tool* (INDKNOW), Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics and knowledge holders collaborated on several projects that focussed on this complex

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1 Andrea J. Reid et al., “‘Two-Eyed Seeing’: An Indigenous Framework to Transform Fisheries Research and Management,” *Fish and Fisheries* 22, no. 2 (2021): 243–261.

2 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework: An Important Global Agenda for Biodiversity Conservation[J]. *Biodiv Sci*, 31, no. 4 (2023): 23133.

issue of how to integrate Indigenous knowledges. *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* emerged from one such collaboration. It is an Australian case study that sought to explore ways of introducing decision makers and community members to an Aboriginal way of knowing. In short, its focus was clearly on the *how* of integration, an attempt to develop a model whereby participants could be introduced to an Aboriginal way of knowing Lake Illawarra, an urban coastal marine system in New South Wales, Australia. This paper is our attempt to articulate that process and offer one example of how Indigenous knowledges might be integrated into environmental governance and decision making.

This paper has two unambiguous and intricately linked aims. First, it aims to provide a description of the *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* program, a thirteen-week Aboriginal knowledge informed program that was implemented in 2022 on the shores of Lake Illawarra, New South Wales. This was an innovative and courageous attempt to take a group of planners, scientists, decision makers and community members involved with the Lake, and walk them through an Aboriginal based knowledge program so that they might develop a relationship with the Lake, in order that their future decision-making regarding the Lake would henceforth be informed by a *relational ethos*. The second aim of this paper is to articulate in brief the Aboriginal knowledge that underpinned the approach taken in the *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* program. We are conscious of several factors that require acknowledgement before attempting to articulate the Aboriginal knowledge that underpinned *Moolawang* via written form, in a paper such as this.

First, we acknowledge that there is a violence done to Aboriginal knowledge and knowledge holders when this knowledge is captured in the written format – a format that was never used to share knowledge in Aboriginal societies. Similarly, the risk that the knowledge may be abused and appropriated presents another opportunity for violence in this context.<sup>3</sup> We are conscious of these risks and precede in this discussion in full awareness of them, weighing up that the benefits of dissemination of the findings gleaned from this project require these risks be acknowledged and managed.

Second, we acknowledge that whilst some of the academic colleagues involved in this large and diverse project are co-authors of this paper, the work contained within is not the exclusive knowledge of any of us. In fact, the knowledges that are imparted through this work, and the methodologies we devised as part of this program, represent the collective experiences of each of us – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – as well as of our colleagues, our families, the participants of this program and our ancestors. We are grateful for their teachings and guidance.

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3 Chelsea Watego, *Another Day in the Colony* (Univ. of Queensland Press, 2021).

We have structured this discussion in the following manner. First, we provide an introduction and brief discussion of the epistemological character of Australian Aboriginal knowledges in a broad sense, in order that the ensuing discussion of the particular Aboriginal knowledge that underpinned the *Moolawang* project can be contextualised and appreciated. We then move to discuss the history of the collaboration between Norwegian and Australian academics that comprised the INDKNOW project. We then offer a clear overview of the design and approach used in the *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* research project. Finally, we articulate aspects of *Maramal*, the Aboriginal knowledge system of the region where Lake Illawarra is located, and provider of frameworks for both the research and project design. We conclude this paper with some salient insights that we gleaned from our attempts to develop a model which could potentially serve as a template for future integrations of Aboriginal knowledges in land and marine based management and planning. This paper does not seek to provide a detailed analysis of the efficacy and outcomes of the program. That is forthcoming in future papers. This paper seeks to articulate how Aboriginal knowledges can be implemented within decision-making processes, and as such, offers a coherent template to address the key foci of the INDKNOW project – the implementation of Indigenous knowledges in land and marine decision-making processes.

## 2. Indigenous knowledges in this Australian context

Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are often ill defined within the Australian context. All Aboriginal knowledges in Australia are context derived – they are Place based and Place specific, so attempts to homogenise and contextualise it as ‘Indigenous knowledge’ can be inappropriate and disrespectful. Place, which in Aboriginal contexts, can also be known as Land or Country, is given significance, respect and meaning via the enactment of protocols, ritual and ceremony. In Aboriginal philosophy, Place comes to occupy the core interest, conscience and spirit of Aboriginal culture.<sup>4</sup> Aboriginal knowledges develop from respectful relationships, embodied within, and emergent from Place/Country.<sup>5</sup> That embodied relationship engenders knowledge that is considered relational, reflecting a deep, enduring,

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4 Mary Graham, “The Law of Obligation, Aboriginal Ethics: Australia Becoming, Australia Dreaming,” *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy* 37 (2023).

5 Bawaka Country et al., “Co-Becoming Bawaka: Towards a Relational Understanding of Place/Space,” *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 4 (2016): 455–75, <http://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515589437>; G Milroy and J Milroy, “Different Ways of Knowing: Trees Are Our Family Too,” Morgan, S., T. Mia, and B. Kwaymullina (eds), *Heartsick For Country: Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation* (Fremantle Press, 2008): 22–42.

participative connection.<sup>6</sup> Aboriginal knowledges are all about relationships – and are grounded in the holistic conception of the inter-connectedness and inter-substantiation between, and among, all living things and the earth.<sup>7</sup> Aboriginal knowledges are premised on a truth that “all things exist in relatedness” and this principle is sustained and strengthened through practice.<sup>8</sup> It is worth quoting Kombu-merri elder Aunty Mary Graham at length on the importance of relationships in Aboriginal philosophy:

*The two most important kinds of relationship in life are, firstly, those between land and people and, secondly, those amongst people themselves, the second being always contingent upon the first. The land, and how we treat it, is what determines our human-ness. Because land is sacred and must be looked after, the relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations. Therefore all meaning comes from land.*<sup>9</sup>

Aboriginal knowledges are relational knowledge, knowledge that encompasses responsibilities and obligations, and relates emphatically to the Place/Country from which it emerges.<sup>10</sup> Place/Country is not just a geographical identity, an area on a map; it is all beings from that Place, from a blade of grass to the wind and the Ancestors. On Country everything is alive and Country is the principal source of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Country has agency; it can speak clearly to provide rich knowledge by communicating through all the senses, including visual messages, sounds, and feelings.<sup>12</sup> Hence, Aboriginal knowledge is not knowledge solely about a Place; it is knowledge that emanates *from* Place/Country.

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6 Norman W Sheehan, “Indigenous Knowledge and Respectful Design: An Evidence-based Approach,” *Design Issues* 27, no. 4 (2011): 68–80, doi.org/10.1162/DESI\_a\_0010.; Mary Graham, “Some Thoughts About the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews,” *Australian Humanities Review* (45), (2008): 181–194, http://doi.org/10.1163/156853599X00090.; Irene Watson, “Re-centring First Nations Knowledge and Places in a Terra Nullius Space,” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 10, no. 5 (2014): 508–520 http://doi.org/10.1177/117718011401000506; Irene Watson, “De-colonising the Space: Dreaming Back to Country,” *Heartsick for Country*, (Freemantle Press, 2008): 82–100; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm,” *In Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies*, no. 7, (Routledge, 2017): 69–77.

7 Moreton-Robinson, “Relationality”, 72.

8 Lauren Tynan, “What is Relationality? Indigenous Knowledges, Practices and Responsibilities with Kin,” *Cultural Geographies* 28, no. 4 (2021): 597–610, http://doi.org/10.1177/14744740211029287. 21.

9 Graham, “Some Thoughts About the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews,” 181.

10 Tynan, “What is Relationality?”, 1.

11 Bawaka Country et al., “Co-Becoming Bawaka”.

12 Crystal Arnold, Jennifer Atchison and Anthony McKnight, “Reciprocal Relationships with Trees: Rekindling Indigenous Wellbeing and Identity Through the Yuin Ontology of Oneness,” *Australian Geographer* 52, no. 2 (2021): 131–147.

### Indigenous Knowledges Research Collaboration

As mentioned previously, in 2019 a group of scholars, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, were awarded a Norwegian Research Council Grant to undertake the **INDKNOW project**.<sup>13</sup> Via a series of international case studies, the researchers sought to explore various approaches to the inclusion and implementation of Indigenous knowledges in differing land and marine based decision-making processes. The two focus areas of our international collaborative project were Aboriginal knowledge in Australia, and the implementation of local and traditional knowledge in state-led governance and decision-making in Norway and Sweden.

The Australian team reached out to academic colleagues in Australia to locate and identify a potential case study that would illuminate the implementation of Aboriginal knowledge in a potential land or marine based decision-making process. They identified a team of researchers at the University of Wollongong (UOW), who were immersed in the Blue Futures keystone project, which was funded by the UOW Global Challenges project and commenced in late 2019 – just as COVID began to disrupt regular patterns of research and collaboration. Blue Futures was a collaboration between academics from diverse disciplinary backgrounds from the UOW and the Illawarra Local Aboriginal Land Council (ILALC). At that time, the CEO of ILALC, Mr. Paul Knight, had a strong interest in developing and directing research capability within ILALC. He was a key partner in Blue Futures and encouraged the team to explore how values-based models of decision making, inspired by Aboriginal governance approaches, might be explored within ocean and coastal management contexts.

The Blue Futures team also included Yuin knowledge holder and co-author of this paper, [Jade Kennedy] (UOW academic and also then Chair of ILALC), who introduced the entire Blue Futures project team to his articulation of several frameworks that were a part of an Aboriginal knowledge framework known as *Maramal* (see next section). *Maramal* is the Aboriginal philosophy and knowledge system that informed [Kennedy]'s award winning *Jindaola* program, which had been delivered at the University of Wollongong for the previous five years. In the university context, *Jindaola* built knowledge-based relationships between disciplinary knowledges and local Aboriginal knowledge that resulted in Aboriginal stories, experiences, ways of knowing and perspectives becoming embedded within the UOW curriculum.<sup>14</sup> The program was modelled on traditional Aboriginal systems for conducting business and maintaining knowledge integrity, and in this context was predominately focused on teaching and learning outcomes and outputs. Blue Futures, was the first adaptation of the program into a research context.

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13 Grant from the Research Council of Norway, project number 288598

14 Jade Kennedy et al., “An Aboriginal Way Towards Curriculum Reconciliation,” *International Journal for Academic Development* 24, no. 2 (2019): 148–162.



Together, researchers from Blue Futures and INDKNOW sought to explore and make advancements in the ways in which diverse knowledges and values might be better represented in environmental decision-making and governance processes, informed by a local Aboriginal worldview and local relationships to knowledges. As such, the project team began to explore ways in which the learnings from *Maramal* might be translated into real world environmental decision-making contexts. ILALC CEO Paul Knight was actively engaged in a decision-making forum for the culturally significant Lake Illawarra. He suggested the use of Lake Illawarra as a suitable case study on which to base the research. *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* emerged as the collaborative research project, designed and based upon key frameworks of *Maramal*, to examine how Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing might influence decision-making processes in relation to Lake Illawarra.

### **3. *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* – a collaborative Aboriginal knowledge based research program**

*Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* in Dharawal<sup>15</sup> means ‘Come to the mouth of the lake with me’. The *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* program was a designed approach to gather together a suite of environmental and planning decision-makers, conservation actors, scientists, and community members working around, and with, the Lake Illawarra. Specifically, the program was to be conducted with research participants in ‘Place’ for the entirety of the 13-week program, following an Aboriginal knowledge design and facilitated by an Aboriginal knowledge holder, on and around the Lake. The objective being that participants would be introduced to an Aboriginal Way of Knowing – a relational and generative way of knowing – in the belief that it might enable an articulation and reimagining of their values in relationship to the Lake.

As the research design evolved, the team attempted to differentiate the research component of the project from the teachings and the place-based program focused on the Lake (*Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba*). In theory the logic was sound. *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* would be the programmatic component of the project – the tool through which Aboriginal knowledge is shared with non-Indigenous participants in order to explore alternative models of decision-making. The research would be on the impact and effectiveness of this program. In practice, this dichotomy between the research and the program was problematic from the beginning and led to many later challenges, given the boundaries between the two were always opaque. Nevertheless, the following sections will explain the two components separately, as was originally envisaged, before returning to how they interacted in practice.

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15 Dharawal is the language of the original peoples of the Illawarra and surrounding regions.

## Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba: *Developing Relationships with Lake Illawarra*

*Table 1.* The Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba program and associated research activities

<b>Week</b>	<b>Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba program</b>	<b>Research program</b>
1	Full day face to face workshop (9am–4pm)	Preliminary group interview and mapping exercise as part of workshop. This involved two hours of short exercises in focus groups at the commencement of the day. The focus group discussions (2hrs) were recorded and incorporated into the research. The remainder of the day's activities were not recorded.
2	Self guided learning: short online video and reading (Country)	n/a
3	Online group discussion: Zoom (1.5hrs)	The Zoom session was treated as a focus group and included some questions relevant to the research. The Zoom session was recorded for later analysis.
4	Self guided learning: short online video and reading (Kinship)	n/a
5	Online group discussion: Zoom (1.5hrs)	The Zoom session was treated as a focus group and included some questions relevant to the research. The Zoom session was recorded for later analysis.
6	Self guided learning: short online video and reading (Culture)	n/a
7	Online group discussion: Zoom (1.5hrs)	The Zoom session was treated as a focus group and included some questions relevant to the research. The Zoom session was recorded for later analysis.
8	Full day face to face workshop (10am–3pm)	A second small group discussion and mapping exercise took place in the first hour of the workshop. Only these focus group discussions (1hr) were recorded and incorporated into the research. The remainder of the day's activities were not recorded.
9	Self guided learning: short online video and reading (Journey)	n/a
10	Online group discussion: Zoom (1.5hrs)	The Zoom session was treated as a focus group and included some questions relevant to the research. The Zoom session was recorded for later analysis.
11	Self guided learning: short online video and reading (Connectedness)	n/a
12	Full day face to face workshop (10am–3pm)	A third small group discussion and mapping exercise took place in the first hour of the workshop. Only the focus group discussions were recorded (1hr) and incorporated into the research. The remainder of the day's activities were not recorded.
	Half day workshop on application to decision making	Observation and recording of outcomes.

### 3.1 The Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba program

The *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* program intent was to engage participants with place-based Aboriginal knowledges and perspectives. The program aimed to ground their learning and experiences in a series of holistic relationships and connections,



to generate values informed decisions that become collectively understood as in the best interest of the places and spaces being studied and engaged. The program facilitated by Jade Kennedy, a Traditional knowledge custodian of the Illawarra region, sought to connect participants with:

- Localised Aboriginal cultural knowledges;
- Aboriginal and other environmental management approaches; and
- Aboriginal ways of Caring for Country.

The participants of the program were Government employees, community members and researchers, most of whom had a professional connection to Lake Illawarra. They included members of the Lake Illawarra Estuary Management Committee and other governing bodies including Local and State Government departments. They participated in a collaborative and interactive 13-week program which invited each individual to explore their own connections to Country, using *Maramal* frameworks as their guide.

The research design privileged and prioritised the Lake and relationships. Over the course of the program all participants were encouraged to develop relationships with the Lake, with themselves, and with each other. This relational approach is generative and facilitates connections – human to human and human to Lake connections. The research design was thus specifically an Aboriginal epistemological design, scaffolded by Kennedy’s traditional knowledge of his Country. Over the course of the 13-week program, the group met in person for a full day of activities three times. In between the face to face gatherings the group met bi-weekly via Zoom and were also provided with short videos, readings and ‘tasks’ to complete between sessions. These tasks included the creation of an artefact that articulated a different aspect of their relationship with Lake Illawarra, with reference to the different dimensions of Country as prescribed within *Maramal*. When the group met, either online or in-person, they would present and discuss their artefact with the wider group. The critical importance of in-person interactions to the success of the program was acknowledged from the beginning, and hence the commencement of the project was delayed on a number of occasions due to COVID restrictions. The program was finally successfully undertaken in March 2022, with three of the meetings occurring at a locale adjacent to the Lake in Place.

### 3.2 The Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba research

The ultimate aim of the research component of the project was to explore if and how engaging with Aboriginal knowledges and approaches might lead to collaborative and innovative solutions in environmental management. There was an interest in learning whether an Aboriginal philosophical and cultural understanding of the Lake Illawarra might influence environmental decision-makers when presented with values-based decisions in the management of such places. The *Moolawang Ngayagang*

*Yanba* program was the mechanism through which participants were introduced to the place-based Aboriginal philosophies, frameworks and ways of knowing, and as such, it was the process by which participants engaged with these ways that was of interest to the research.

The research design followed a participatory action research framework, which aimed to generate and support co-learning, co-designing and co-creating between all participants, including the researcher-participants. Therefore, members of the research team participated in all aspects of the *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* program. The role of the research, and the research team, was originally articulated as follows:

- As participants in the program – where research components included personal reflections on learnings and reactions to the program
- As participant researchers, undertaking regular research engagements with the other participants through interviews and qualitative mapping exercises.

The research methodologies engaged throughout the program included preliminary interviews with each participant prior to commencing the program. Research workshops were then conducted prior to the commencement of each face to face gathering and incorporated participatory mapping exercises, whereby relationships with the Lake were georeferenced by drawing on a map of the Lake. The final face to face workshop involved an overall ‘assessment’ from the participants on the things they had learnt and would take away from the experience, which contributed to the research data.

### 3.3 Interactions between the program and the research – lessons learnt

As mentioned previously, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the research findings and outcomes of the program and the project. Rather, this section will focus on the reflections of members of the research team on the strengths and challenges of the approach adopted. As discussed earlier, the distinction between the research and the *Moolawang* program was never clear and became increasingly blurred as the program progressed. Eventually the distinction was acknowledged to be largely an administrative construct, aimed at moulding a complex research design into a format that suited established methodologies, procedures and protocols within the academy. In practice, the research and the program were intrinsically interconnected – in relationship – with each informing and influencing the other.

Despite the complexity of the research design and methodology, the project ultimately triggered a number of personal, professional and institutional responses from the various participants. The methodology developed creates space within a participatory action research approach to expand participation to Country, to allow the various ways in which Country is understood and engaged with to be articulated. Participants developed relationships with the Lake, and via construction of

their artifacts, and open forums conducted on the Lake, were able to articulate their emerging relationships with the Lake. The Lake's agency was afforded recognition through this Aboriginal knowledge-based program, which was seen in the following responses from participants:

*I think the thing that's given me hope from this process is this idea of country having agency and country finding its way (Michelle 2022)*

*It was that epiphany happened- now I feel like I can take the lake's perspective. The lake has agency now (Cathy 2022).*

It is a point worth stressing, that from an Aboriginal perspective, the Lake has always had agency, it was not something given to, or afforded the Lake. Rather the program allowed participants to develop a relationship with the Lake and engage with and recognise this inherent and immutable agency. From Jade Kennedy, a traditional knowledge holder whose knowledge underpinned the design, execution and structure of the program:

*What we have done is we've given confidence we've given our participants capacity. We've given them a language on how to describe agency not only for the lake, but also for themselves. We've given the group a sense of group. We've given them a sense of community. It's sort of kind of like they become their own little family... We've given the individuals resilience in a space and place where they feel outsiders and feeling this way because they do feel and they do qualify and quantify their relationships to the lake differently... We've given them opportunity and inspiration to be creative in the decisions that they make to not be limited to the processes that are before them, but as cliché as it might sound to think outside of the box to get outside to be on country to sit to listen to being informed and do what they can do to the best of their abilities to bring the voices of country forward.*

Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba was at all times underpinned by Aboriginal knowledge and Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. The ways in which these knowledges were articulated, translated and integrated was through several frameworks of *Maramal*. The next section will attempt to outline these, whilst acknowledging the limitations and risks associated with doing so in a written form. This paper has been a collaborative effort up till this point between the four authors, however the following section is authored solely by Kennedy, a Traditional Custodian of the knowledge underpinning *Maramal*.

#### 4. Aboriginal Knowledges and Place – Maramal

*Maramal* is an interconnected set of frameworks one can use for identifying with an Aboriginal worldview. It is a Dharawal word meaning 5 fingers or one hand, and refers to the philosophical belief structure that informs the values, customs and ways of the peoples of the Illawarra and South Coast of NSW before invasion, settlement and colonisation. *Maramal*, by virtue of this, is a complex, integrated, non-linear place-based worldview that cannot be easily described in writing with any

real authenticity. *Maramal* requires landscape (including skyscape and seascape), flora and fauna, stories, and other nuanced aspects of these environments to speak for themselves, and thereafter afford one to be with this way of being, knowing and doing in the context of one's interactions with place and space. This is not something one can read about and understand in totality.

This being said, many aspects of this philosophy have been utilised in the Aboriginal education of students within the Illawarra over the last two decades to varying degrees. Depending on the context and level of education required, the appropriate knowledges that stem from these ways of being, knowing and doing have presented significant learning opportunities for students while informing localised culturally safe learning spaces within the region. There have been references to the concepts and ideas of *Maramal* in writing and student exercises, learning activities and assessments, and through numerous incursions and excursions developed for infants, primary, secondary and higher education settings.<sup>16</sup> The motivation and driver of this work has generally been schools and universities responding to national calls to increase the representation of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives within their curricula.<sup>17</sup> The majority of these formalised knowledge-based relationships that have been produced over this time are represented in tertiary education subjects. However, there have also been combinations of these educational resources integrated into community-based programs in the form of excursions, field trips or tours to facilitate this knowledge exchange on Country with knowledge-holders to increase the overall cultural awareness of non-Aboriginal people within the region.

One of the interesting discoveries of this work is that where the placed-based nature of these ideas and approaches are integral to understanding *Maramal* as a place-based philosophy, as the depths of this way have been explored at its intersection with the Australian education system, it has been realised that there are aspects of this worldview that can be shared and utilised intellectually and philosophically in varying contexts and even off-Country. This has become a process of identifying

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16 Karen J. Fildes et al., "The First Steps on the Journey Towards Curriculum Reconciliation in Science, Medicine and Health Education," *Higher Education Research & Development* 40, no. 1 (2021): 194–206; Jade E. Kennedy et al., "A Beginners Guide to Incorporating Aboriginal Perspectives into Engineering Curricula," (2016); Jennifer Atchison and Jade Kennedy, "Being on Country as Protest: Designing a Virtual Geography Fieldtrip Guided by Jindaola," *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* 17, no. 4 (2020): 8; Tom Goldfinch et al., *Embedding Indigenous Perspectives into Engineering Education*, Canberra: Australia, (Dept of Education, 2019); Christine Howe and Jade Kennedy, "Journeying Together Virtually on Country: Building a Relational Poetics and Pedagogy in the Middle of a Pandemic," *TEXT* 25, no. Special 64 (2021): 1–17.

17 Universities Australia, *Indigenous Strategy: 2022–2025*. (8 March 2022) <https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/UA-Indigenous-Strategy-2022-25.pdf> (accessed 31 January, 2024)

same-sames and allowing culturally driven engagement to guide knowledge-based exchange and relations as opposed to pre-determined and pre-defined educational expectations that prescribe to the standardised educational models and designs that rely on non-Aboriginal approaches of knowledge validation.

The *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* program used significant aspects of *Maramal* as the underpinning theoretical framework that enculturated the participants' way of being with the Lake Illawarra. In this context, *Maramal* could be seen as the overarching conceptual basket that holds multiple interconnected frameworks together within it. Continuing this example, when this basket is placed somewhere, metaphorically, the frameworks one takes out and sits with [Yanba] thereafter provide the lens for how to be with that place... that is, in this instance, they inform how one relates and is related to the Lake. Traditionally, one would be introduced to differing frameworks as one progressed through their learning journey toward a more meaningful interrelated and interconnected relationship with *Maramal*, and ultimately the place in which they were from. Participants within the *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* program were introduced to a brief simulated expression of this practice to help them understand the Lake from this relational point of view.

Where all of this work is fluidly informed by *Maramal*, there are two specific frameworks that were relied upon to guide the relational approach used within *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba*. The framework that has become known as the 5 Concepts of Country [Country, Kinship, Culture, Journey and Connectedness], along with the protocols and practices referred to as the 6Rs [Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity, Regularity, Routine and Relevance], formed the programming that participants experienced. Additionally, the intertwining of these two frameworks informed participants' way of being, both individually and collectively, as the Lake raised their awareness of their relatedness and relationships from an Aboriginal perspective.

The relational approach used to help the conceptualisation of these aspects of *Maramal* was a practice known as Artefact Creation. This approach is an interpretation and adaptation of an original methodological pedagogy used within the region to transfer and develop knowledge-based relationships between humans and non-human entities. Artefact Creation, in this adapted form, helped facilitate a space for participants to explore and express their understandings of the 5 Concepts of Country while following the protocols and practises of the 6Rs. Participants would be given time to engage with content and resources pertaining to a concept and then asked to create an artefact that they would then share with the rest of the group. An artefact therefore becomes one's manifestation of their understanding of one of the concepts that they are 'sitting with' and contemplating. The artefacts throughout this program took many forms, including pictures or picture collages with short stories, short video clips, originally composed songs, artworks such as paintings and dioramas, but with each differing program, more creative and expressive artefacts are being shared. The significance of this approach

is multi-layered obviously. One of the points that needs to be made at this stage, however, is that the pedagogy requires the individual to physiologically express their comprehensions of a concept through their own reflections, before sharing their artefacts and stories to contribute to a collectively shared comprehension, moderated and maintained by the group. This ultimately then becomes the group's way of knowing, doing and being.

With the sharing of these ideas and theories, grounded in Place and Space, and in this instance around the Lake Illawarra, the following discussion is an attempt to give a brief insight into some of the understandings of the concepts that participants were introduced to when developing their articulations of their relationships with the Lake through the *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* program. This is done with an understanding that the Lake and the other knowledge-holders that keep that place and space alive are not able to represent themselves in this mode of sharing, and as such we have taken to using definitions and examples directly sourced from the content and resources the participants were engaging with through the Google classroom platform. This we hope affords you, the reader, a closer opportunity to imagine into the place, the Lake Illawarra, the space, the relational network of knowledge and entity and the concepts that reveal these relationships.

#### 4.1 The 5 Concepts of Country

Country is a term that has become synonymous with Indigenous Australian literature, to the point that it is subject to a myriad of definitions that at times contradict themselves. **Country** in this context refers to one's relationship with place. It is intimate and it is sacred. It is personal, and often referred to as one's nature. Country does not just mean the physical land, skyscape or seascape. Country is all living things. It is about people, plants and animals. It embraces the seasons, stories and spirituality. Country is about belongingness and one's way of believing. Country can be regarded as an Aboriginal person's highest order.

Via the established Google classroom, participants were introduced to the concept of Country in relation to the Lake, with the following text developed by Jade Kennedy:

***Country** is a term used in many different ways by Aboriginal peoples, and requires context at times to truly appreciate how it is being used and what it is referring to. For our exercise and reflections we are focusing on the physicality of Country, in particular the physical aspects of the Lake that you are in relationships with. We are trying to consider things like space and place, species or populations and their diversity, positionality, we are even considering things like tides and currents or how the sun and moon move across the Lake at different times... and as I always say... don't be limited by the things I say...*

This written introduction to the initial concept of Country was augmented with a short film, in place, on the Lake, further talking to the concept of Country in relation to the Lake.



**Kinship** as a concept within the framework, confers identity. It tells both one-self and all of those around them, who they are, and importantly, how they belong. It defines how one is related, and in relationship with the significant people within their life. Kinship for Aboriginal people goes one step further again, obligating and binding each individual in a 'give and take' system that is nurtured by Country, story and lived experience. All relationships to Aboriginal people are significant, including those with non-human entities... the trees, birds, animals, waters.

The interactive Google classroom post walked participants through the idea of kinship in relation to the Lake:

*...when considering Kinship, we are reflecting on the network of interpersonal Lake-related relationships you have, and I am encouraging that you identify with something that could be considered as non-Human. For Aboriginal people, when we consider our Kin and our interpersonal relationships we begin by defining our role, responsibility and obligation, and then thereafter the significance of it to our being. How does the Lake and all of its features present interpersonally to you?*

Participants were then encouraged to consider several questions during their reflections to inspire their artefact creation:

*What are the human relationships you have with the Lake (fishing regularly with a mate on weekends, taking a family walk once a week etc.)?*

*What are the non-human relationships you have with the lake (bush-regeneration around the Lake, watching the sunrise from the Lake etc.)?*

*How do these human and non-human relationships intersect and inter-relate?*

This week's lesson was again augmented with a short film taken by the Lake.

The way in which **Culture** is understood by Aboriginal people in this context is through their lived day to day expression of their lives. That is, Culture is one's lived articulation of how they belong. Where culture can be expressed through one's spirituality, one's ceremonies, one's stories, the important fact here is, that for an Aboriginal person their culture is connected to their Country and their Kin. Aboriginal culture is an ongoing story of connection and relationships that become more intimate.

From the Google classroom site, participants were offered the following articulation of the concept of Culture:

*As we come to the concept of Culture we are starting to move into a frame of thinking through what a day in the life of 'YOU' looks like, while asking ourselves the same old questions of who, what, where, when and how. When reflecting on the Lake, some things to think about could be:*

*Are there any protocols you follow?*

*Are there any customs or traditions you have?*

*Are there any regular or routine behaviours you engage in?*

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*What is your way?*

*Is it fast, is it slow, is it adhoc or responsive, is it planned and organised? As we continue to paint the picture and layer our relationship with the Lake and deepen our understanding of our shared landscape let's try not to limit ourselves to how this can be represented, articulated or defined. Artefact creation was a daily practice for Aboriginal Australians pre-contact, and utilised the melding of mind and matter to capture memories, stories, dreams and even aspirations... as we are reflecting and creating try and bring to life your way of being with the Lake and its landscape...*

Another film augmented this narrative on the concept of Culture.

One's **Journey** in this context can be understood as the story of their lived experiences. From before birth an Aboriginal person's story begins, as one's individual story is an intertwining set of stories of one's parents, grandparents and their parents, back to the ancestors, and back to the dreaming. One's **Journey** will be filled with significant moments that have connected them to their Country, to their Kin and to their Culture. One's **Journey** shapes and accentuates their sense of belonging to each aspect of their lives and each aspect of their worldview. One's journey explains why they are, who they are, and where they are from. The following exploration of the concept of journey was presented via the Google classroom:

*However, to begin, let's take a moment to consider and look back over our Lake, and the multilayered and multifaceted landscape that we are starting to understand in terms of our Country, Kinship and Cultural relationships...and then let's consider our lived experience... the significant occurrences we've had on and with the Lake... our regular, routined and relevant experiences...that have a physical, interpersonal and behavioural set of relationships.....and then let's bring these considerations all together and make a chronological story...*

*Journey allows us to be a part of the story of the landscape... and therefore that landscape a part of our story... it's the idea and understanding that we are all a part of the one story and one landscape... that we are not separate from...*

*Some questions we may consider as we are reflecting and approach the concept of Journey in our artefact creations are...*

*When did I start walking this Journey? What is it that brought me here?*

*What did the landscape look like before I got here? How has the landscape changed since I've been here?*

*What are the big significant occurrences/experiences [high-points and low-points] I've had since walking my landscape [walking with the Lake] that have connected me to it?*

This concept of Journey was further elaborated upon with a film on the shores of the Lake.

The final of the 5 Concepts of Country epistemological framework is Connectedness. **Connectedness** is the term used by Aboriginal people to define the way they view the world. It can be expressed as belongingness, in relationship with, at one with, or sometimes as attachment. All these words are attempts by Aboriginal

people to describe an indescribable connection to their Country, Kinship, Culture and Journey. Connectedness within this context is considered the capstone concept; it denotes that each of these concepts are interrelated and interdependent.

Participants were offered a creation story along with the usual video to assist with their deconstruction of the concept of Connectedness. This also aligned with the traditional Aboriginal values that knowledge must be earned; they must earn the story and achieve a deeper understanding of the way the Lake came to be, and how they came to be with the Lake.

Complementary to the above framework utilised within *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba*, the program relied upon the principles and protocols which have become known as the 6Rs. The values of Respect, Responsibility and Reciprocity along with the customs of Regularity, Routine and Relevance are combined to represent a significant model of practice that sits within the 'basket' of frameworks that make up the place-based philosophy of *Maramal*. These 6Rs are contextually defined and become collectively moderated and maintained as relationships between participants and place develop over the course of the program.

As with the 5 Concepts of Country, the 6Rs have been utilised in varying educational contexts, programs and projects, predominantly with the higher education sector.<sup>18</sup> Over the years it was common for the two frameworks to be used together to facilitate an authentic localised Aboriginal teaching and learning exchange. When considering the 6Rs, there are some overarching characteristics of each of the concepts, individually and independent of each other. The context in which one is making decisions, however, derives the precise definition of these concepts for the context and how they relate to each other. In other words, the principles and values, along with the customs and protocols, are all place dependent, and thereafter are context derived, and as such, manifest differently in each situation one finds themselves making decisions in.

#### 4.2 The 6Rs

**Respect** as a guiding principle or value is commonly referred to within many of the recognised Indigenous ways of being, or Indigenous values-based discourses. Specifically, within an Aboriginal Australian context, Respect is understood as an action that can be displayed through one's senses in interactions, differently depending on the context. In the *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* program for example, Respect was expected to be displayed first and foremost toward the Lake, the knowledges shared, oneself and fellow participants, toward the requirements of the program, and generally within each one's ways of being when gathering on Country. Respect became a shared way of being and doing, moderated and maintained by participants with guidance from the facilitating knowledge holders.

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18 Kennedy et al., "An Aboriginal Way Towards Curriculum Reconciliation".

**Responsibility** within Indigenous communities and Indigenous knowledge-exchange settings is informed and governed by kinship relationships and protocols. For Aboriginal people, non-human entities make up part of the kinship system, and therefore Country requires one to be accountable through acts of Responsibility with, and on Country. These notions within *Maramal* are recognised as actions, and Responsibility is understood as being individual, collective, communal, and universal. As part of *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba*, Responsibility was transferred and shared with participants by establishing deeper and deeper degrees of relatedness between each other, and the Lake.

A grounding value of many Indigenous peoples' philosophies is **Reciprocity**. The governance and social system that managed populations on the east coast of Australia before invasion were reliant on models of give and take, circularity and the acceptance of all things having agency and stakeholderhood; that is, the profound understanding that all things are equal. *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* introduced participants to the practice of Reciprocity through the way in which the program engaged cultural ideas and theories that required the Lake to speak and be spoken with. Reciprocity was practiced by participants through their engagement of Artefact Creation, however they were also given opportunities to display it as the program progressed through the knowledge and concepts that deconstructed and reconstructed the Lake's 'humanness'.

The custom of **Regularity** determines the rhythm of knowledge exchange. It establishes a disciplined tempo which in our old times followed the sunlight, the stars and the differing seasons of a place. Regularity within the *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* program set the timing of content and resource delivery, the gathering and sharing of the group, and the interplay between the online and on-Country experiences.

**Routine** as a cultural practice refers to the ways in which information and knowledge is transferred. It describes the patterned approach taken at each exchange, and where the traditional approaches taken in this vein are not things one can write on a page, as they are attached to the Lore of a place, contemporary models are arranged for certain contexts to maintain cultural appropriateness. Within *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* the observance of Routine was displayed through following the same sequence of practices in each exchange, which established a protocolled way of engaging, depending on the session, gathering or exchange. For example, each session, be they online or in person, began with a circle that followed a protocolled approach of moving to the right, with only one person speaking at a time. This circle would require participants to respond to two initial culturally modified questions;

1. What is your name? which translates to both an acknowledgement and announcement for all entities within the place and space; and
2. Where are you from? Which from an Aboriginal perspective is the combination of place and space, that is; where have you travelled from physically to be here today? And where are you coming from mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?

Following this, participants would circle around again and share their artefacts. The custom of Routine was logical and fluid but deliberately designed and embedded within all exchanges as it is of the pedagogical approach of this place.

The continent of Australia prior to invasion operated within a knowledge-based economy, where knowledge in the form of stories, song, dance, art and other intangible modes was exchanged and traded. **Relevance** was the glue that bound this system and this place to one another. Relevance is more than just being on topic and attentive, it is personal and particular and yet shared. It is a complex practice that comes with enculturation, and within *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* it was embedded within the Regularity and the Routine of the program. If Regularity is the rhythm of exchange, and Routine the rhyme, then Relevance could be seen as the melody. Although *Moolawang* shared content through the frameworks being described, the knowledge sharing was driven by the context established in place and time. For instance, the content provided on any given week served as a provocation, and thereafter the gathering sessions would follow the required, and therefore relevant, knowledge journey participants inspired in the ways they reacted and responded in those sessions. Each exchange was unique and relevant in its given time.

## 5. Discussion

This paper sought to explore one means through which the integration of Indigenous knowledges into environmental decision-making might be achieved in a practical and pragmatic way. It did so by introducing Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges and aspects of their systems into relationship with each other, through a place-based approach with the focus in this instance being the Lake Illawarra in the southeast region of NSW, Australia.

By engaging participants and members of the research team in processes that encouraged creative expression, the acknowledgement of vulnerabilities, and a ‘relooking’ at a landscape that was familiar yet also unknown, the program created discomfort and triggered reflexivity.<sup>19</sup> It involved participants operating outside their established norms, often defined by their professional roles and responsibilities, which can constrain decision-making to ‘rational’, objective and transactional processes defined rigidly by regulation and procedure.

*Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* actively engaged with subjectivity, emotion, creativity and reflexivity, which in turn opened up space for intimate relationships to form between participants, between participants and participant-researchers, and between

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19 Gillian Rose, “Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and other Tactics,” *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 3 (1997): 305–320.

participants and the Lake.<sup>20</sup> Through these intimate relationships, participants were encouraged to recognise their responsibilities to the Lake, both within and outside their professionally mandated responsibilities.

We argue that it is this process of coming into relationship with each other and with place that allowed for knowledge integration, rather than the simple exchange of information, facts or truths. As such, the process of participating in *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* became not just about the integration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges, but also the integration of multiple forms of knowledge and multiple ways of knowing – including scientific knowledge, community knowledge, regulatory knowledge, recreational knowledge, family knowledge and research knowledge. These knowledges, as they were brought to our awareness, were nested within the place-based Aboriginal knowledge presented through *Maramal* and its frameworks, but also through the Lake.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the short- and longer-term transformational impact of the *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* program, and whether it has created any lasting changes to decision-making in relationship to the Lake. Certainly, the feedback from participants suggested fundamental and profound impacts on their ways of viewing the Lake and their role in its management. How these impacts influenced their professional and personal practices is something we hope to return to in future research. We suspect that the relational focus of the program would require energy be expended in the ongoing maintenance and care of the relationships that the program established. Yet systemic, circumstantial and situational factors have prevented this occurring in any formal way to date.

Further research is required to explore if and how the philosophies that underpinned this approach, in particular *Maramal* and its interconnected frameworks, can be translated outside of the Illawarra and as separate from the knowledge holders who are custodians of that knowledge. Whilst the Lake was central to the *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* approach, it was the process through which decision makers and stakeholders came to know the Lake – as individuals and as a collective – that created space for integration of knowledges and ways of knowing. In this context, knowledge was co-produced and therefore inherently integrated. In this way we believe the principles, protocols and customs underpinning *Moolawang Ngayagang Yanba* are transferable, if not the specific knowledges or stories that were shared. We envisage future research that uses the approach applied in *Moolawang* in a Norwegian context. We anticipate that the approach is eminently transferrable, and look forward to testing our hypothesis in the near future.

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20 Elisa Oteros-Rozas, Federica Ravera and Maria E. Fernández-Giménez, “Reflexivity, Embodiment and Care Ethic in Rangeland Political Ecology: Reflections of Three Feminist Researchers on the Experience of Transdisciplinary Knowledge Co-production,” *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* 5: 1144668.



## 6. Conclusion

Acknowledging the potential of Indigenous knowledge systems to offer alternative approaches to environmental governance, a collaboration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues developed a research project which we envisaged might enhance future land and marine decision-making processes. Our research design was intimately informed by the Aboriginal knowledge of the place where the project was located, Lake Illawarra, held by a Traditional custodian of that knowledge, Jade Kennedy. This paper is our reflection on that research project.

Via a description of the *Moolawang Ngayang Yanba* program, we illustrated the process whereby we took a group of planners, scientists, decision-makers and community members involved with the Lake, and walked them through an Aboriginal based knowledge program so that they might develop a relationship with the Lake. Kennedy then provided an articulation of the Aboriginal knowledge that underpinned the research design taken in the *Moolawang* program – *Maramal* –and its interconnecting frameworks of the 5 Concepts of Country and the 6Rs. We also shared the relational pedagogical approach adapted for the program known as Artefact Creation, and identified how it inspired the development of participant's relationships with the Lake. Kennedy's concerns that this knowledge might be taken out of context or appropriated, which presents real risks for Aboriginal knowledge holders in contemporary academic spaces, was outweighed by his commitment to the transformative potential of this knowledge for effective land and marine based decision-making, which many of the research participants acknowledged and verified. Future research papers will provide in depth analysis of the project.

This collaborative research project developed a template that we contend offers one approach to *how* Indigenous knowledges might be authentically integrated into environmental governance, the key foci of the INDKNOW project. We now hope to utilise the approach in other geographical places and spaces and in doing so will test the transferability of the approach used in *Moolawang*.

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