



Right People for Country Program

Photograph: Mick Harding

Walking Country to reach a boundary agreement

Story

Overlapping claims to Country

In 2012, neighbouring Traditional Owner groups in central Victoria, Dja Dja Wurrung, Wadawurrung and Taungurung, identified overlapping claims to Country that were affecting both Traditional Owner settlements and cultural heritage management responsibilities. The Traditional Owner groups submitted Expressions of Interest to the Right People for Country program for support to negotiate boundary agreements.

'Walking Country'

The Right People for Country program provided support for Traditional Owners to review maps and research and then 'walk Country' to reach boundary agreements. Tammy Gilson, Wadawurrung negotiation representative says: 'We sat down with Dja Dja Wurrung and decided the best way to negotiate boundaries was to walk them and so we did!'

Rodney Carter, Dja Dja Wurrung negotiation representative explains: 'Just as our ancestors had done, we met, we talked, we stepped back in time to walk the boundary. We followed the old ridgelines, we walked across the landscape, we looked through our ancestors eyes and agreed on our Countries. We followed the old ways and used modern tools to record our boundary.'

'Reviewing the historical research was useful', says Mick Harding, Taungurung negotiation representative, 'because we could see that the research is not definitive and that it's up to us as Traditional Owners to work collectively to come up with an agreement!'

'We talked about the landscape, names of places, language names of those places, different vegetation changes and the most important thing for Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung was that we actually stood on the boundary and agreed where the border was', reflects Tammy Gilson. 'We used GPS co-ordinates all the way along to map the boundary and once completed it was then presented to the Elders from both mobs and was approved and accepted!'

Documenting agreements

The boundary agreements recorded a line on a map for Traditional Owner settlement and cultural heritage management purposes. But equally importantly, agreements also documented stories for Traditional Owners, recording important information about Country and the journey of agreement making. Reaching agreement is seen as an enduring decision for future generations: 'My children will use it, their children will use it.'

Relationships

Strengthened relationships provide the foundation for Traditional Owners to work together into the future. 'This is not a boundary in the usual sense, it is not a dividing line - this is a place that brings us together, connects us and makes us stronger' says Rodney Carter.

Mick Harding adds 'I think the most important part is what we do after the agreement, how we continue the cultural connection, continue our relationship. Reaching agreement is not about going separate ways, it's about continuing to work together. It's up to us to facilitate this but it requires resources.'

Outcomes

The boundary agreements reached in 2012 supported Dja Dja Wurrung to sign a Traditional Owner settlement agreement with the Victorian Government in March 2013.

It also supported Dja Dja Wurrung, Wadawurrung and Taungurung to gain Registered Aboriginal Party appointments for undetermined areas of overlapping claims in accordance with the boundary agreement reached. In 2016, the boundary agreement is supporting Taungurung to negotiate a settlement agreement with the Victorian Government.

'I was so proud to be part of this journey and I hope we have made our old people proud. And to have the opportunity to work closely with our neighbours was really satisfying knowing that we both share the same compassion for caring for Country,' says Tammy Gilson.

For more information about the Right People for Country program visit:
www.aboriginalvictoria.vic.gov.au/right-people-country-program