

10 April 2024

## The Ugly Truth About Who's Speaking for Our Tall Forests

Whilst many love our forests and many believe they know what's best for our forests, not very many have the experience and knowledge to properly manage them. At the heart of the tension between western science and Traditional Owners is who has this knowledge.

There's knowledge of Traditional Owners, developed over tens of thousands of years of caring for Country (and still developing as we collaborate with western experts). And there's knowledge developed by academics who have studied forests for decades. Both contribute to caring for forests.

But when one kind of knowledge holder fails to listen – indeed, dismisses – the other, forests lose.

Long term monitoring, research and analysis is essential to understand the effects of a changing climate and broader environmental impacts. Many subtle ecological shifts may go undetected in smaller surveys and shorter timeframes. In many regards both the scientific community and Traditional Owners agree on this point.

The concept of long-term, broad scale, field research is not new. As the General Manager of DJAARA and a proud Dja Dja Wurrung and Wamba Wamba woman, Cassandra Lewis says:

“From a modern science, empirical ecological perspective it is, but to Traditional Owners it has just been the way Country has been managed for 65,000 years. Surely the longest running field data survey in the world.”

She continues:

“Ours are the oldest living cultures on the planet. Critical to that statement is that they are living and evolving. We are blessed to have inherited 65,000 years of knowledge and connection to Country. In evolving, we include new understandings and respond to changing environments. Like western science, we incorporate new theories and understandings to strengthen our practice and achieve better outcomes for Country.”

But still, at every turn, Dja Dja Wurrung People must fight to reinstate our rights to care for Culture.

Whether it be the right to speak language after it was banned on many missions where we were driven like livestock, the right to practice Culture when we needed permits to walk our own Country, or make decisions about the management of our stolen Country.

The support of those who advocate for us to work on Country is invaluable, but we are ready now to make decisions about our Country. Limiting our relationship to mere stakeholders instead of decision-makers who can actively heal and grow and tend to the health of Country, is continuing to colonise.

Whilst some may say that is important for Traditional Owners to have access to scientific research to make appropriately informed decisions on Country, we would say that all land managers need access to Traditional Owner knowledge to make all decisions on Country.

“When we share our plans for Country and invite people to walk with us and understand our Culture, we expect respect. We do not ask for Confidentiality or Ethics Agreements to be signed because in respecting you we assume that you respect us. And whilst many do, that mindset of our knowledge not being as important or as rigorous as western science prejudices responses,” Ms Lewis also said.

This is about more than two perspectives; this is about the structure of power attributed to one perspective that lessens the consideration of the other perspective. It is also about the active and prejudiced questioning of our knowledge, its genesis and validity.

Let's turn our backs on divisive discourse and accept that all knowledge is valuable. In doing so we can decolonise Country and respect 65,000 years of ancient research as we do 400-year-old Western Science.

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## About DJAARA

The Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, trading as DJAARA, is a representative body for Dja Dja Wurrung People.

Djaara (Dja Dja Wurrung People) have lived on our traditional lands and cared for Djandak (Country) over many thousands of years. For us, Djandak is more than just a landscape, it is more than what is visible to the eye; it is a living entity which holds the stories of creation and histories that cannot be erased.

Dja Dja Wurrung land extends from Mount Franklin and the towns of Creswick and Daylesford in the southeast to Castlemaine, Maldon and Bendigo in the east, Boort in the north, Donald in the northwest, to Navarre Hill and Mount Avoca marking the southwest boundary. Our territory encompasses the Bendigo and Clunes goldfields and the Loddon and Avoca River watersheds. Hundreds of years ago, our Country was mostly covered in open forests and woodlands, providing us with the plants and animals that we used for food, medicine, shelter and customary practices. Today, though our Country is vastly changed, it still holds many important values.

<https://djadjawurrung.com.au>

## About Galk-galk Dhelkunya

For two centuries the forests have lost Traditional Owner specialist knowledge and hands-on tending. Today is the start of nurturing Country. Galk-galk Dhelkunya, our strategy, empowers DJAARA and others to heal Country, heal Dja Dja Wurrung People, and improve the economic health of local communities.

It is essential that Dja Dja Wurrung People are supported to manage Country and apply their principles of Galk-galk Dhelkunya. The statutory, policy and regulatory environments that impact on the management of Djandak must be reformed so that genuine self-determination can be realised.

<https://djadjawurrung.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Forest-Gardening.pdf>

## About Cassandra Lewis

Cassandra Lewis is the General Manager of DJAARA and a proud Dja Dja Wurrung and Wamba Wamba woman. With a background in business and people management, she is responsible for the day-to-day operations of a rapidly growing organisation.

Cassandra is part of a talented and strong Executive Management Team facilitating organisational improvements in strategy, policy, business systems, and organisational culture. She supports the Dja Dja Wurrung Group CEO and the Board in fulfilling DJAARA's mission.

Her leadership has promoted organisational stability and high employee satisfaction through a period of rapid expansion. Increasing numbers of Djaara staff are employed in culturally safe, secure, and satisfying roles.

Cassandra is recognised as a considered and collaborative leader, with a track record of fostering partnerships that advance the interests of Djaara and benefit the wider community. Her focus is ensuring that Djaara rights are recognised, and opportunities for Djaara are maximised.

She has driven organisational transformation and capacity building to support Djaara self-determination through her governance responsibilities across Joint Management, DJAARA's 2013 Recognition and Settlement Agreement and DJAARA's Registered Aboriginal Party Status.

Cassandra was raised on the beautiful Murray River Country of Swan Hill. She is a mother of five children born and raised on Djandak (Dja Dja Wurrung Country).

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