



**Executive Summary Report**  
Swan and Canning Rivers Iconic Trails Project

**Living Culture - Living Land**  
and its people

# Disclaimer

Disclaimer: The term Noongar (alternative spellings include Nyungar, Nyoongar, Nyoongah, Nyungah, Nyugah, Yunga) is inclusive of all Aboriginal people in the South West region of Western Australia. Throughout this report the term Noongar has been used in accordance with the way in which the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council refer to the Aboriginal people of the South West region.

Similarly, the term 'Waugul' has many different spellings, including Wagyl, Wagal and Wagul. In this report the term Waugul has been used for the sake of consistency.

Intellectual Property: Noongar knowledge belongs to the Noongar community, some knowledge being individually owned by families. All Noongar information provided through this project will remain the property of the Noongar community and should not be used without the express consent of the appropriate Noongar community, family or individual.

## Message from the Noongar community:

This report is an expression of our heart felt feelings as Noongars. We have been extensively consulted over many years for our views and opinions, which are rarely considered because they don't fit the mainstream perspective. Once consultation has finished we are once again left on the sidelines.

**This must stop. We are proud Noongar people with credible knowledge and expertise.**

**Our voice must be heard, acknowledged and respected.**

As Noongars we demand full and effective participation in all facets of life and this means meaningful engagement in all matters concerning the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelieer.

# Executive Summary

The Swan and Canning Rivers Iconic Trails Project was initiated and is coordinated by the Swan River Trust. As part of the project the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council was asked to facilitate the inclusion of Noongar values in the development of a network of interpretive trails along the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelie. The Trail aims to highlight Noongar, European and natural heritage sites as well as identify any missing links in the existing trail network.

This is the first time that a project of this nature has seriously engaged the Noongar community to hear their voices and opinions and for the community to express their values in caring for country on the river system.

Throughout this consultation process it became clear to the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council that the Noongar community was very dissatisfied with the current management processes along the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelie by the relevant statutory authorities. These processes do not include meaningful Noongar representation or allow for any Noongar expertise to be included in planning, environmental management, monitoring or decision making.

The project revealed there have been many years of frustration within the Noongar community about what they see as their lack of involvement in the management of one of their most significant heritage sites, which they hold in extremely high

regard and have a cultural responsibility to care for.

The report on this project therefore goes much further than simply providing an outline of the values that Noongar people associate with the river systems that should appear on the trails' signage. Rather, the report provides a fundamental starting point for improving Noongar participation in all matters relating to the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelie to ensure that Noongar expertise is afforded the authority to positively influence policy and decision making.

The following principles should guide future Noongar engagement in all matters relating to the river systems:

- To be acknowledged as Noongar (not Aboriginal or Indigenous);
- Meaningful participation (not tokenistic consultation);
- Inclusion of Noongar expertise in environmental management and related activities; and
- Respect for Noongar cultural values of the river systems.

Ultimately, the Noongar community demands meaningful involvement in caring for the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelie as well as their active participation in decision making, strategic planning, environmental management, monitoring and related activities.



The South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council received funding from Lotterywest to undertake the Noongar values project, which aims to emphasise the Noongar cultural heritage surrounding the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelie. The Project also aims to significantly raise community awareness of the various Noongar heritage values along the rivers and contribute to an increased understanding for residents and tourists of how and why it is important to care for Perth's water ways.

During stage one of the project, consultation has been undertaken to enable the Noongar community to identify places of significance along the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelie and document the values and importance these places have for Noongar people. The project facilitated a respectful engagement with Noongar families, and helped to build relationships between Noongar families and the broad range of stakeholders in river management, including local and state government bodies and community-based natural resource management groups.

The project has also enabled a positive and collaborative partnership to be developed between the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council and a number of agencies and statutory authorities. In particular, valuable relationships have been developed with the Swan River Trust, the C21 (the 21 Local Governments along the Swan and Canning Rivers), the Committee for Perth, the WA Planning

Commission, the Department of Indigenous Affairs, the Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council, Perth Region NRM and the National Trust. The project has generated a surprising amount of interest from these main stakeholders and the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council is keen for this collaborative partnership to continue.

At the commencement of the project, a project Advisory Group was established that included representatives from the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, Perth Region NRM, the Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council, Swan River Trust, the WA Planning Commission, Department of Indigenous Affairs, Committee for Perth, the C21 Councils and the National Trust. The Advisory Group has overseen the project from its commencement.

The South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council invited the Noongar community to be part of the process through a number of consultations that included workshops, tours and one-on-one interviews during 2009 and 2010. Through the consultations Noongar Elders imparted knowledge, told stories and gave information about significant sites along the river system. The consultation has also provided the first step in layering the appropriate information and site identification to guide the development of the comprehensive Rivers Trail for Perth.

As well as this Executive Summary, a Full Report and Cultural Protocol Guidelines to guide further consultation for the project have also been produced. All documentation will contribute to building more appropriate frameworks for engagement in natural and cultural resource management across the Perth region as well as Noongar country more broadly.

The purpose of the values project has been to acknowledge and celebrate Noongar people and their history of spiritual and physical connection to the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelie. The project ensured that the Noongar community also had the opportunity to input their values into major projects in the future that will leave a legacy for future generations to respect. The ultimate aim of any project such as this is to secure the place of the Noongar community in contemporary society as a unique, credible, and knowledgeable group with culturally specific expertise and to be a key player in all processes and decision making at the local, regional and national levels.

Importantly, the first stage of the Project has facilitated a respectful engagement with Noongar Elders and communities who can speak for country along the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelie. It acknowledged Noongar places and people, and critically, it enabled Noongar people to define how significant places associated with the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelie should be recognised.

The Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelieer have a strong Noongar spiritual connection and epitomise the sense of place for the Noongar people. The significance of the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelieer to the Noongar community cannot be underestimated, nor should it be understated – the spirit of the river system is the running soul of the Noongar people living in its midst. The Noongar values project captured some of the stories of the community, their lived as well as living experiences and how significant events have altered the flow and life of the rivers and Noongar people.

Waterways such as the Swan River literally and spiritually lie at the heart of Noongar culture.

To ask the elders what they would like to see signposted along the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelieer evokes a lifetime of experiences; memories about life along the river, memories of family, camping, yarning, fishing, passing on culture, and the laughter of kids. But it also raises memories

of oppression, dispossession, and racism. For them to see the river now brings sadness – the river has deteriorated significantly due to pollutants, chemicals and lack of proper care.

Since 1829, Noongars have been denied their cultural responsibility to care for the river system. Bureaucratic processes have ensured that they remain at the very margins of decision making, with their involvement in river management kept to mere tokenism. Added to this, there is a sense of frustration that Noongars do not have access to particular areas along the rivers for cultural reasons to enable them to protect significant sites.

The full report not only provides recommendations on the signage for the Iconic River Trails Project, it also makes a case for the greater involvement of the Noongar community in the decision making and management of the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelieer. The rivers are the icons – the very subject of the Swan and Canning Rivers Iconic Trails project.

## The Consultation

Throughout the consultation process, Noongars raised many concerns in relation to the river system. These concerns included but are not limited to:

- the right to access the river for cultural purposes;
- the importance of water to Noongar women;
- the strong community wide sentiment for the preservation of cultural heritage along the river systems;
- the poor environmental state of the river;
- the constant development along the rivers being detrimental to the health and well-being of the rivers;
- the need for more regulation of recreational boats on the river, including jet skis and speed boats;
- the critical need for protocols to cover different developments;
- the lack of acknowledgement and respect for Noongar heritage sites by Government.



## Noongar Values

Through the consultation, Noongars shared some of the values they associate with the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelieer. Noongar values tended to focus on the environmental health of the river system as well as Noongar history and culture. The river system in its entirety is a significant heritage site for the Noongar community and their cultural history insists they have a responsibility to care for it. One of their main concerns is that since the days of colonisation Noongars have been locked out of key decision making in relation to the rivers and this has prevented them from fulfilling their cultural obligations. It has only been over the last 20 years or so that Noongar people have even been afforded the opportunity for even basic representation.

The consultation highlighted the vast range of cultural values attributed to the Swan and Canning Rivers that should be highlighted on the signage of the Iconic Trail. These values can be separated into broad categories that include:

### Sense of Place

#### *Noongar Culture:*

- Swan and Canning Rivers as significant heritage sites;
- Mythological significance of the river (Waugul);
- Dreaming trails that lie within the river;
- Valuing the different areas of the river (men's places, women's places, ceremonial grounds, etc);
- Relationship to country.

#### *Acknowledgement:*

- Recognition of Noongar people as Traditional Owners of the south-west region;
- Recognition of Noongar culture;
- Recognition of significant sites along the Swan and Canning rivers;
- Recognition of traditional practices along the Swan and Canning rivers pre-settlement;
- Recognition of a unique Noongar history – dispossession from the land, destruction of sites.

### Ecosystem Health - Environment:

- Importance of the health of the river system to Noongar people;
- Importance of protecting native flora and fauna.

### Community Benefit

#### *Education:*

- Importance of providing educational information about culture, traditions and history;
- Importance of educating the wider community about the significance of the river system to the Noongar community.

#### *Meaningful Participation and Engagement (empowerment):*

- Noongar involvement in the development of river management strategies;
- Noongar involvement that ensures the cultural interests, obligations and sites are protected and acknowledged;

### Economic Benefit - Employment:

- Training and employment for Noongar people in policy and management positions dealing with the river system, i.e. Swan River Trust, Department of Environment and Conservation and Local Government;
- Employment for Noongar people in environmental roles caring for the river system, i.e. rangers, land management etc;
- Employment for Noongar people in education roles that educate the public about Noongar culture and values, including the mentoring of Noongar youth to maintain culture and knowledge.

## Implementation and Installation of Signage

The full report recommends that the signs along the Iconic Trails should reflect Noongar values about the river systems. Signs should include stories about Noongar culture, traditions and history as well as cultural responsibilities. Signs should also reflect the concerns that were raised through the consultation in relation to the environmental degradation of the two rivers.

The community indicated a number of possible signage locations as significant areas that hold strong cultural value for Noongar people. However, this is a preliminary indication of where signage should go and the report recommends that further consultation must be undertaken to ensure other sites have not been missed and that all community members are comfortable with those sites already highlighted.

Key elements for the signage could include, but not be limited to:

### **Sense of Place:**

- Noongar artwork – a theme could be adopted for all signs along the trail;
- Noongar place names;
- Noongar Stories;

- Historical photos of people and places (signage at Success Hill as an example);

### **Ecosystem Health:**

- Environmental significance of the area to the Noongar community including bush tucker (if acceptable);
- Environmental protection responsibilities (loss of habitat for Carnaby Cockatoos, death of river dolphins, pollution etc);

### **Community Benefit:**

- Cultural and social significance for the Noongar community;
- Historical significance for the Noongar community;

### **Economic Benefit:**

- Initiatives undertaken in that specific area that has included involvement of the Noongar community, i.e. employment of Noongar river rangers;

It is recommended that signage could include particular stories, however where the information is culturally sensitive, such as women's stories, a cultural custodian should be listed on the sign. A final list of signage criteria should be developed through the Advisory Group.

## The Full Report

The Noongar Values Report is the result of a comprehensive consultation process about the Iconic Trails Project. What sits behind the report however is the positive result of a process that can not be articulated through any amount of signage along the shores of the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelieer. This project has not only brought people together it has provided the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council with the opportunity to facilitate talks with members of the community that have been distanced and alienated through the arduous processes dictated by the native title system. This signifies the depth of feeling that Noongar people have for their river system and waterways and the cultural responsibilities that Noongar people have to care for them.

The process of consultation has highlighted the different values that Noongars place on the rivers compared to the non-Noongar community. By way of example, but in no way a definitive comparison, Noongar cultural heritage values relate to family, family relationships, spiritual beliefs and the harmonious relationship between people and environment. Whilst non-Noongar heritage values relate to history, settlement of the Swan River colony and a moulding of the environment to better suit the values and needs of society. These different value systems however, are not completely incompatible with both Noongar and non-Noongar

values converging on areas of recreational activity and environmental protection. The Iconic Trails Project can highlight these differences and similarities in a positive manner.

Through the project the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council has also succeeded in raising awareness about Noongar culture in various forums throughout the metropolitan area. Members of staff were invited to participate in C21 meetings, they met with the Minister for Indigenous Affairs as well as senior staff from other Government departments and have been involved in a series of publicity articles on the Swan and Canning Rivers in Community Newspapers.

The project has had surprisingly positive results in that it has facilitated the engagement of key stakeholders and raised awareness of Noongar interest in the river system and their desire to be fully engaged in processes and decision making. The collaborative relationships that have been developed through this project should be harnessed and cultivated.

The consultation has also revealed that Noongars believe it is time to move beyond mere 'representation' in processes throughout the south-west to more meaningful and active participation. Noongar involvement should be based on principles of respect, acknowledgement and recognition, in particular it should be remembered that Noongar values are cultural and spiritual and form the basis

of life in harmony with the land. Such values can inform, educate and positively influence how developments occur in and around the river.

To this end, the Iconic Trails Project is providing an opportunity to influence and change the way business is done in Western Australia, not only by the Swan River Trust, but also other government agencies, statutory authorities and even the private sector. Meaningful participation means listening to the Noongar community, respecting their values and opinions, and weaving Noongar cultural knowledge through the actions and activities of government.

Noongar participation needs to occur on a multi-layered basis. International principles should be brought to bear on national, regional and local processes, Noongar participation should occur in national, regional and local decision-making and the employment of Noongar people should occur at the grass roots level through State Government departments as well as local initiatives through Local Government.

As well as the Report, this project has facilitated the development of Consultation Protocol Guidelines that, whilst specifically for the Swan River Trust and the next phases of the Iconic Trails Project, will form a draft document for further consultation that will ultimately be adapted to cover the whole of Noongar country. The Consultation Protocol Guidelines will be used to form positive and lasting

partnerships with key stakeholders across the south west of Western Australia and galvanise the political empowerment of Noongar people and their place in Australian society.

The South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council wishes to thank all stakeholders that have contributed to this project, most importantly the Noongar community, but also the Perth Region NRM, the Swan River Trust, C21, Committee for Perth, the East Metropolitan Regional Council, the WA Planning Commission, the Department of Environment and Conservation and the Department of Indigenous Affairs.



## Sense of Place - Today

1. That this consultation on the Noongar Nation, Noongar history, Noongar culture and Noongar values associated with the Swan and Canning Rivers be used as the best practice template for future consultations with the Noongar community to ensure Noongar input into caring for country.
2. That the Noongar Nation, Noongar history, Noongar culture and Noongar values associated with the Swan and Canning Rivers must be acknowledged and respected.
3. That Noongar history, Noongar culture and Noongar values associated with the Swan and Canning Rivers must be enshrined in policies, strategies and documentation developed on the river systems.
4. That the Noongar community, through consultation with the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council in partnership with the Swan River Trust, must be fully involved in the development of a joint management strategy for the protection of the river system.

## Concerns of the Community

5. That a Noongar consultation group be formed to advise on design, use of language, interpretation and placement of signage for stage two of the project.

6. That all community works along the river systems be done in consultation with Noongar Elders.
7. That Welcome to Country ceremonies be done by recognised Noongar Elders.
8. That Government be advised that Noongar Elders through this consultation process are concerned with the waterfront development and its impact on the Swan River as a significant registered heritage site.
9. That a cultural Elders group be formed to ensure all heritage sites along the Swan and Canning Rivers are registered and protected as more sites are identified.
10. That the Aboriginal flag be flown at Local Government buildings along the Swan and Canning Rivers and other sites including, but not limited to, Parliament House, Kings Park and the City of Perth.
11. That the Beelie and all other wetlands throughout Noongar country are associated with Women's Business and should be acknowledged and respected as women's sites.
12. That the Department for Environment and Conservation and the Swan River Trust establish Noongar units within their operations.
13. That the Department for Environment and Conservation and the Swan River Trust review

their policies and procedures and instigate amendments to legislation to ensure meaningful Noongar participation and consultation.

14. That the Department for Environment and Conservation and the Swan River Trust allow sufficient time for culturally appropriate Noongar governance processes.
15. That the C21 Local Governments develop a Memorandum of Understanding with Noongar people, through SWALSC, to include Noongar knowledge, Noongar history and Noongar culture in activities and developments along the Swan and Canning Rivers.
16. That a comprehensive consultation process with the Noongar community be undertaken by the Government in relation to the development of the Perth City foreshore and that a Noongar cultural centre remain as part of the development.
17. That Noongar Elders be consulted on the development of a cultural education package and for Noongar people to be trained to deliver cultural education to young Noongar people, schools, governments and appropriate industries.
18. That the Swan River Trust employ Noongar men and women for substantive positions throughout the organisation, including, but not limited to policy, monitoring and ranger positions.

## Policy Context

19. That the principles contained in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples be enshrined in policies, processes and initiatives developed and implemented in and around the Swan and Canning Rivers as well as for broader Noongar country.
20. That water planning throughout the south-west of Western Australia include Noongar representation in a meaningful and effective way to ensure the incorporation of Noongar language, social, spiritual and customary objectives.
21. That the Noongar community is afforded full and effective participation in the development of the Swan-Avon regional water plan with the Department of Water.
22. That the Department of Indigenous Affairs ensure full and effective participation in development and works in and around the Swan and Canning Rivers including free, prior and informed consent for the Section 18 approvals process.
23. That a working partnership be developed with the Department of Environment and Conservation for the employment of Noongar men and women, in particular young people, in environmental management in and around the Perth and south-west region.
24. That SWALSC, in partnership with the Department of Environment and Conservation, the C21 Local Governments and the Swan River Trust, access funding to employ Noongar rangers and river managers along the Swan and Canning River system.
25. That the Swan and Canning Rivers Management Act 2006 be amended to include specific reference to Noongar people, in particular the requirement for consultation with Noongar people about access to country.
26. That the Swan River Trust include a Noongar Traditional Owner for the Swan-Canning area on the Swan River Trust Board.
27. That the Swan River Trust develop a Memorandum of Understanding with Noongar people, through SWALSC, to include cultural awareness training and the introduction of policies for meaningful participation of the Noongar community in policy and decision making.
28. That the Swan River Trust establish a Noongar Advisory Board to assist in the development of a holistic policy for the protection of the river system. The panel should include Elders, women, men and young people with a functioning secretariat.





South West Aboriginal  
Land & Sea Council

Supported by:



Partners:



**Produced by**  
**South West Aboriginal Land & Sea Council**

1490 Albany Highway  
Cannington WA 6107  
Ph: 08 9358 7400  
Fax: 08 9358 7499