

CONNECTING WITH COUNTRY

“For my People, our Djandak (Country) is our being. It is a landscape in which the tangible is interwoven with our dreaming stories, our Lore and our Martinga guli murrup (Ancestral spirits). It is the land that gave birth to our Martinga guli (Ancestors) and nourished and sheltered them. In return, they were the guardians of Djandak, in the care of the waterways and woodlands, ensuring the health and future of both Djandak and Djaara (Dja Dja Wurrung People)”.

Trent Nelson, Chairperson, Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation

Seeing people and nature as part of one interconnected ecological, cultural and livelihood system is a fundamental tenet of Djaara and other First Nation cultures. It forms the basis for their connection to Djandak, a relationship that has stood strong for tens of thousands of years and that is crucial to both Djaara and Djandak (see Figure 1). It is a relationship which Djaara continue to honour and strengthen by being present on Djandak, looking after it and using its natural resources.



DJANDAK
IS THRIVING

DJAARA
ARE THRIVING

Fig 1: The critical connection between Djaara and Djandak

It is difficult to appropriately explain or quantify Djaara’s connection to Djandak in words. It underpins their whole physical, cultural, emotional and spiritual wellbeing, providing feelings of recognition, belonging and identity, as well as inner peace and enjoyment when they are on Djandak. Conversely, if Djaara are disconnected from Djandak, it can be a significant cause of separation and suffering.

Their intimate relationship with Djandak provides Djaara with deep knowledge of Djandak and how to manage and care for it. It also brings an inherent custodial duty and obligation to do so. This has provided the basis for the ecologically sustainable use and management of Djandak by Djaara over millennia.

Djaara’s unique relationship with their Country and their right to maintain it is legally recognised in their *Recognition and Settlement Agreement* with the State of Victoria. All First Nations people’s connections to their lands and waters are also acknowledged in the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

The holistic way of being by Djaara and other First Nations people stands in marked contrast to Western rationalism, where people and the environment are typically seen and treated as separate entities.

Many people believe that this separation is at the root of the current ecological crisis, as well as the mental health crisis, as contact with nature is now increasingly also being seen as an important factor underpinning the western concept of health and wellbeing.

Much recent scientific evidence shows that people tend to be happier and healthier, as well as more productive, creative, active and engaged in community and civic life, when nature is a meaningful part of their lives.



'Nature Connectedness', the degree to which individuals include nature as part of their identity through a sense of oneness between themselves and the natural world, is also a strong predictor of positive environmental behaviour. Recent research suggests that it may explain 69% of such behaviour, while environmental knowledge may explain only 2%.

While information and awareness campaigns have a role, in order to get to real action, people's hearts need to be engaged and an emotional affinity or love of nature built as well.

Not surprisingly, the need to increase people's connection with nature is gaining significant support, including at the local level, through the *Healthy Greater Bendigo 2021-2025* plan, and the state level, through *Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037*. The latter is the Victorian Government's plan to stop the decline of native plants and animals and improve the natural environment, and identifies connecting people with nature as fundamental to achieving one of its two main goals (i.e. Victorians value nature).

Djaara and other First Nations cultures have lead the way, and now the science is in – by establishing a connection with Country, we have the opportunity to improve the condition of our lives and that of the earth itself.

Balak Kalik Manya (Walking Together) is a collaborative program lead by Dja Dja Wurrung Enterprises (DJANDAK) which combines traditional Djaara knowledge and practices with modern science to provide accessible, engaging and healthy natural spaces for people to connect with Country.

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