The Disappearing Goanna
Twenty years’ of accelerated callus growth obscuring the design of a carved tree, Mungabareena Reserve, Albury (NSW)

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**Introduction**

This report has been written in response to comments on an earlier study that compiled information on nineteenth century Indigenous land use of Albury (NSW) (Spennemann, 2015). That study contained a brief photo sequence that documented the gradual disappearance of a goanna which had been carved into a river red gum in Albury.

The present study will expand on this and focus on the carved tree. The report will detail the context of the Mungabareena Recreational Reserve, as well as the history and development of the scar.

**Mungabareena Recreational Reserve**

It is widely assumed today that the current Mungabareena Reserve area was a traditional Indigenous ceremonial and meeting space. The current draft management plan for Mungabareena Reserve (NSW Crown Lands, 2011), refers to this, but makes very little reference to any solid historic information.

That said, there is no evidence in nineteenth century papers, however, that identifies the current Mungabareena Reserve as a ceremonial place. On the contrary, the nineteenth century Aboriginal camp site and the presumed ceremonial ground appears to have been on higher ground that was not prone to flooding, adjacent to Mungabareena Ford. The site of that camp is outside of and some distance to the north of the current Reserve, approximately where the current Albury water works are located (Spennemann, 2015). At this point it needs to be unequivocally stressed, that, in the author’s opinion, the question of actual nineteenth and pre-nineteenth century use of the Mungabareena Reserve area has very little bearing on the indisputably high level of cultural significance that is ascribed to the current Mungabareena Reserve by the modern-day Indigenous community of the wider Albury Region (Spennemann, 2015).

The area that is today called Mungabareena Reserve (lots 174–183 on DP753326) was originally gazetted as a reserve for the purposes of public recreation and so notified on 13 February 1904 (R37208 and 37209) (Department of Lands, 1916; Rochford, 1905). It appears that R37209 was revised on 6 December 1957 and gazetted as R80196 for public recreation (Department of Lands, 1977).

Mungabareena Reserve is mapped as open space on the 2000 and 2010 Albury Local Environmental Plans, but has (as yet) not been ascribed any heritage significance (Minister for Planning, 2000, 2010). The same applies to any components of the reserve.

At the core of the reserve is Mungabareena peninsula (portion 182, Fig. 2; Fig. 3) which had been used as a popular picnic spot by the Albury community since the nineteenth century. The carved tree under discussion (see below) is located at the neck

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1. The location of the Indigenous camp was at the location of the modern water works (Spennemann, 2015).
2. The water works are some 900m north of the northern boundary of Mungabareena Reserve and some 1500m north on Mungabareena Peninsula, which is where the carved tree, the reconciliation site and the venue of the Ngal Girra Festival are located.
3. There is also a conflation of terms with the Ngal Girra Festival (see below, p. 2), when Mungabareena Reserve has been termed ‘Ngal Girra (Mungabareena)’ and ‘Ngal-Girra reserve’ (e.g. Clegg, 2000).
4. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the reserve functioned as a popular recreational space: “The Mungabareena reserve... is a favourite rendezvous for picnic parties, for which its pretty river frontage and its abundance of umbrageous trees render it particularly suitable” (Anonymous, 1907) with
of the peninsula, directly at the sole road access to the area. The approach focusses the view on the reconciliation area, a central boulder with a plaque, surrounded by (at present) ten smaller stones each bearing the painting of a traditional totem (Fig. 4; see also sub-image on Fig. 5). This reconciliation area had been established in about 1993 by Wiradjuri elder Wungamaa (†)\(^5\) and Darren Wighton.

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picnics on record from pre 1907 onwards (Anonymous, 1907, 1910, 1911, 1912b). Albury’s favourite picnic spot was the peninsula, then known as “The Point” (Anonymous, 1912b).

After World War I it was argued that a tree lined road leading to the picnic area should be planted as memorial for the fallen soldiers (Henderson, 1918a, 1918b), to be named ‘A.I.F. Boulevard’ or ‘Anzac Boulevard.’ While the idea was supported by the editor of the *Border Morning Mail* (BMM, 1918) it did not eventuate until the 1930s (and the Albury War Memorial on Western Hill, overlooking Dean Street, was erected instead).

\(^5\) A.k.a ‘Wongamar’; Pastor Cecil Grant.
Fig. 3. Aerial image of the Mungabureena Peninsula. The carved tree under discussion is located at the root of the peninsula where the road forks (for more detail see Fig. 6) (Land and Property Information, 2014).

Fig. 4. The Reconciliation Circle at the Mungabureena Reserve (Photo Dirk HR Spennemann 2012).
Fig. 5. Article in the Border Mail (Albury) of 21 November 1994, reporting on the first Ngan Girra event at Mungabareena (then called the Bogong Moth Festival) (Galinovic, 1994).

Ngan Girra Festival

Mungabareena Reserve has a long-standing connection with Indigenous issues and reconciliation and is the location of the Ngan Girra Festival (commonly held in November). The late 1980s and early 1990s were a period of public reaffirmation of Indigenous culture, that emerged from a national debate on identity in the wake of Australia’s Bicentenary in 1988, and spurred on by the 1992 Mabo decision ("Mabo and Others vs. Queensland," 1992) as well as the subsequent Commonwealth Legislation ("Native Title Act," 1993). This public reaffirmation occurred via the creation of cultural centres, the staging of Indigenous festivals, as well as outreach and education programs targeted at both the Indigenous youth and the wider community. These flourished in particular in the mid to late 1990s (e.g. Basinski & Parkinson, 2001). Today, they provide a sense of place (Derrett, 2003) and are deemed to form an integral contribution to community wellbeing, resilience and capacity and have to be regarded as powerful spaces for cross-cultural negotiations (Phipps & Slater, 2010).

The first (modern) Indigenous festival at Mungabareena Reserve was held in November 1994 (Galinovic, 1994). Prior to 1994, Indigenous community members residing in the Southern Riverina and North-eastern Victoria travelled to the Bogong
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Moth Festival held at Mt Beauty in Victoria. There it was formally acknowledged that some Indigenous members from the Riverina would have traditionally met at Mungabareena prior to crossing the Murray and travelling to the Alps (Murphy, 1993). From 1994 onwards, a Bogong Moth Festival event at Mungabareena preceded that at Mt Beauty (e.g., Murphy, 1995). In 1997 the event was renamed Mungabareena Ngan Girra (Zeppel, 1999). By the early 2000s it had gained enough nation-wide significance to be included in a national educational text on Indigenous Festivals (see Hilvert, 2006, pp. 6–9).

It can be posited that the exposure brought about by the early Ngan Girra festivals paved the way for a number of Cultural Reaffirmation Projects in the Albury-Wodonga region (e.g., Basinski & Parkinson, 2001). Today, there are cultural walks along the Murray as well as at the Wonga Wetlands, and active cultural programs run by various Indigenous community organisations.

Indigenous Carved and Scarred Trees

Traditionally, Australian Indigenous communities utilised a wide range of trees to source food; to provide raw materials for shelter and tools; and for ceremonial purposes. Tree bark was removed to shape utility objects such as shields, coolamons and canoes (Long, 2005). Once the bark has been removed and taken away, a ‘negative’ of that bark remains on the tree. The exposed sapwood will dry out and leave a ‘scar’ or dead wood. As the tree was never wholly stripped of its bark, it continued to thrive. Gradually new bark will encroach and grow over the scar (‘overgrowth,’ ‘callus’), eventually obliterating the scar from view. As the callus does not bond with the dried sap wood, scar itself will continue be present underneath the callus (Long, 2005).

A specific kind of scarred tree are carved trees, where the bark was removed in order to expose the heart wood. The exposed area was then used as the ‘canvas’ for carving a motif or a design. This is, for example, the common practice for European surveyor’s blazes. In Indigenous Australian culture of western New South Wales, carved trees were used to demarcate significant burial as well as ceremonial sites (Briggs & Jackson, 2011). Traditionally, a scar of a carved tree faced (‘looked towards’) the direction of the significant place.
In the early 1990s number of cultural centres offered programs that featured not only bush tucker, but also the manufacture of traditional items of material culture. Among these activities were those that aimed to teach young Indigenous community members how to cut the bark for coolamons and canoes. Such activities continue today (e.g. ABC Regional News, 2009; Barker & Barker, 2011; Monaroo Bobberrer Gudu Aboriginal Cultural Centre, 2011), thereby gradually creating a twentieth and twenty-first century Indigenous cultural landscape.

![Aerial image of the Mungabareena Peninsula. The carved tree under discussion is located in the centre of the image.](Land and Property Information, 2014)

**The Goanna Carving**

The River Red Gum is located close to the entrance to the Mungabareena Peninsula (coordinates -36.091356 146.955227), with the scar facing north-east. In consequence, it cannot be seen by people driving onto the peninsula. Given that the scar is largely occluded, it is unlikely that many, if any, visitors today will recognise it as an artefact upon driving past it when leaving the reserve. This was not the case when the scar was initially created (Fig. 9).

A number of cultural activities took place on occasion of the first Ngan Girra Festival held at Mungabareena Reserve in October 1994 (Galinovic, 1994). One of these, undocumented by the media of the day, was the carving of the goanna by Darren Wighton. The bark of the river red gum was removed, exposing an oval shaped area of sapwood. Into this a goanna was carved. To the knowledge of the author, the original scar has never been formally measured. Using Fig. 7 and extrapolating a measurement of the goanna’s tail, as taken on 9 June 2015, the original scar would have measured

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13 The reconciliation area can be made out in the shadowed area between the two large Eucalypts. Note that it is not the grassed circle surrounded by a concentric dirt circle.

14 Occasionally the area is referred to as ‘Mungabareena Island’ (see Google Maps for example).

15 In addition, the road on the peninsula forms a loop, although half of that is an unsealed track. Hence many visitors will not retrace their steps and thus will not face the scar upon departing.
approximately 0.760 x 1.680 m, with the goanna carving approximately 0.5 by 1.5m. The goanna was carved at a varied depth, about 10 to 15mm into the heartwood. The completed work was an imposing sight even from afar (Fig. 9).16

Darren Wighton17 opened the scar in such a way that it faced the centre of the peninsula, the modern meeting space. The motivation for carving was that the goanna is regarded as one of the primary totems of the Wiradjuri people and that it embraces, and therefore claims, Mungabareena reserve (Whighton, 2015).

The gradual occlusion of the scar on the Mungabareena River Red Gum

The tree is a River Red Gum (Eucalyptus camaldulensis var. camaldulensis) with a girth of 5.4m (at 1.8m) and an approximate height of 31 m.18 Based on the 2014 aerial image, the canopy of the tree measures about 25m in diameter (using the distance tool in Land and Property Information, 2014).

Being at the root of the peninsula, the tree has good and reliable access to water: the edge of the Murray River is only 80m to the north and 90m to the south (Fig. 3).19 In addition, prior to the construction of the Hume Reservoir, the Murray River was prone to flood in the winter months, regularly inundating the low-lying area of the Mungabareena Reserve.20 Since the construction of the Hume Reservoir the Murray has become a highly regulated river system. During the twenty years of the scar’s existence, Mungabareena was repeatedly flooded: such as in early October 1996,21 in February and December 2012, and April 2014 (Anonymous, 2012; Office of Water, 2015a, 2015b).

Fig. 8 shows images the various stages of callus growth on the red gum bearing the scar. The scar is being overgrown from the sides, with the southern (left) side of the scar growing faster than the northern side. The least amount of growth occurs on the bottom (Fig. 10). By 2008 part of the goanna was still visible (Fig. 8a), even though it would have been unrecognisable to the uninitiated viewer. By 2015 only part of the tail is still discernible (Fig. 8d). The carved surface and exposed dead sapwood will be fully obliterated in the near future. Given the observed rate of occlusion, this is likely to occur in the next 7 to 10 years.

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16 The occluded scar, as measured on the 9 June 2015, was 780mm high and 190mm wide at its widest point. The callus, as evident on the day, measured about 0.6 by 1.6 m.
17 Currently Pastor of the Koori Church. Also Wiradjuri elder and artist.
18 Measured on 9 June 2015.
19 Using the distance tool in Land and Property Information (2014).
20 For example, Mungabareena Reserve is on record as being fully flooded in 1895 (Anonymous, 1895), 1909 (Anonymous, 1909a, 1909b), 1912 (Anonymous, 1912a) and 1917 (Anonymous, 1917).
21 A sudden 5mm movement of the wall of the Hume Weir required an emergency release of water on 13 October 1996. (Murray Darling Basin Commission, 1996). This inundated low-lying areas in South and East Albury, including Mungabareena. See also flood data in (Office of Water, 2015a, 2015b).
Fig. 7. Appearance of the scar on 17 August 1995. (Photo Dirk HR Spennemann).
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Fig. 8. Image of a goanna carved into a River Red Gum as part of cultural activities at the Mungabureena Reserve in 1994. Appearance of the scar in 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2015 (Photos Dirk HR Spennemann).

a) 5 May 2008       b) 29 August 2010

a) 5 May 2008       b) 29 August 2010

c) 11 August 2012       d) 24 May 2015

Fig. 8. Image of a goanna carved into a River Red Gum as part of cultural activities at the Mungabureena Reserve in 1994. Appearance of the scar in 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2015 (Photos Dirk HR Spennemann).
Fig. 9. Appearance of the goanna carving from afar 1995 and 2015 (Photos Dirk HR Spennemann).

Fig. 10. Gradual occlusion of the Goanna scar 1995–2015 (see Fig. 7 and Fig. 8 for individual images).
Management Options
Given the ongoing occlusion of the scar, it will be inevitable that the carved surface will be fully obliterated in the near future. As mentioned above, given the observed rate of occlusion, it can be predicted that this will occur in 7 to 10 years’ time.

The question can be posed, how this carved tree can be managed, assuming that the health of the tree itself is not impaired by environmental or anthropogenic influences. Ultimately, any management decision regarding the future of the carving is, in the first instance, the prerogative of the Indigenous artist who created the scar and in the second instance, the prerogative of the local Indigenous communities to whom the site and the carving is significant. The following comments are made with this in mind.

One of the questions the decision maker(s) may wish to ask themselves is where the cultural significance of the carved goanna lies. Is the significance embedded in the product, i.e. the carved goanna as a visible piece of art? Or was the process of creating the goanna carving the significant element, the public and symbolic act of reclaiming Mungabareena as a significant place for contemporary Wiradjuri people and other Indigenous community members residing in the Albury-Wodonga area? The answer to these questions might inform the approach to its management.

In principle, two management options exist: i) allowing the scar to fully occlude; and ii) removing the callus tissue in order to re-expose the scar.

Option 1: allowing the scar to fully occlude
If the callus growth is allowed to go unchecked, then the carved surface will be fully obliterated in 7 to 10 years time. The level of growth that has occurred today has already obscured the goanna beyond recognition. It can be argued that this has entailed the loss of the goanna as a piece of artwork.

At the same time, however, the occlusion can be construed as nature reclaiming the space, a living organism enveloping the goanna carving. It can thus be seen as a highly symbolic process whereby the area embraces the modern Koorie heritage that developed at that place since the recommencement of Ngan Girra. Symbolically, the tree both reclaims Indigenous connections, and by virtue of covering the scar, heals the wounds of the past. Moreover, the goanna will not be ‘lost’ forever. It can be anticipated that goanna will eventually reappear once the tree has died and the bark has fallen off. That, however, will be in the more distant future. While there is no way to accurately project the life expectancy of the river red gum carrying the scar, there is no reason to assume that the tree will not live another 200 to 300 years.

Option 2: removing the callus tissue in order to re-expose the scar
The other option is to ‘restore’ the goanna to its 1994 appearance. This is possible by removing the accumulated callus tissue with knives or adzes and to fully re-expose the scar with the goanna carving. This can be done comparatively easily, as long as care is taken not to cut too deep. At the same time, the re-exposed goanna may be recut, if the artist so desires. Once exposed, the callus will regrow unless its growth is retarded by means of a tree-wound occluding paint.

Whichever approach is eventually taken, it may be advantageous to interpret the scar (whether visible or invisible), its meaning and its setting, by means of a interpretive panel. If the presence of a signboard is deemed to be too intrusive, it is possible to host the interpretive text on a website and make it accessible via a QR code.
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