

The long connections between people and landscapes

This brochure offers a Ngunawal perspective of the Canberra – Queanbeyan landscape and the importance of understanding the cultural landscape context of sites in which you want to undertake environmental rehabilitation, revegetation or other activities.

Aboriginal people have lived in this region for a very long time. The earliest dated evidence of Aboriginal presence in the Canberra – Queanbeyan region is about 25,000 years old. The woodlands near the junction of the Molonglo and Queanbeyan rivers sheltered extensive camping grounds. Many generations of various family clan groups cared for the local land areas, waterways and landmarks and retain a strong connection to Country.

Cultural signs in the landscape

The tablelands landscape in and around the Canberra-Queanbeyan-Yass region tells us a story - a cultural interpretation of the environment and local people. The Aboriginal landscape story is told by 7 clans of Ngunawal peoples. The landscape provides an integral structure for spiritual beliefs and stories.

There are many sites of significance to Ngunawal people and many artefacts and cultural features in the local landscape. Some examples are scarred trees, ring trees, artefact scatters, grinding groves, stone quarries, rock shelters, stone arrangements, ochre sites, burial sites and ceremonial sites. Such cultural sites and heritage objects are highly important in lore, initiation and ceremony. It is important to avoid disturbing any cultural site or object.



Significant changes to the stories and the landscape occurred when Aboriginal people led the earliest European settlers to the extensive grazing lands of the region. Aboriginal people were removed to missions and reserves. Introduced practices for management of land and water reshaped the landscape and changed the environment.

Cities, townships and suburbs were built on lower parts of the hills and ranges and extended across the floodplains. However, not everywhere was significantly cleared. National Parks and Nature Reserves protect some areas with culturally significant places. However, other significant places occur outside reserves on public or private land.



Working on Country

Inter-connected Landscape Management



Looking after Country

All of the local landscape is significant spiritually and culturally to Ngunawal people but there are also significant landscape features. Cultural tours and talks by Traditional Custodians can help you understand some of their beliefs and cultural practices.

The following are some of the physical sites and objects that you may encounter in the local landscape.

Significant trees

Old-growth woodlands sometimes contain culturally significant trees. In this region, Box-gum trees bearing a hollowed scar on the inside of a branch may have been manipulated to collect rainfall run off. Other trees have had bark removed to make a shield, a Coolamon or canoe. However, not all significant trees are scarred; sometimes they mark a ceremonial site nearby. Ring trees for example have had one or more branches manipulated to form a ring. Old-growth trees also provide habitat for animals and other food resources. If you are working in an old-growth area you may find other cultural features and objects amongst the trees.

Stone and glass artefacts

Common artefacts include flake scrapers or blades made from stone, glass or ceramic material, hammer stones, stone axes and wedges and grind stones. Wooden tools are rarely found.

Artefact scatters tend to be found on sheltered raised flat ridges and gently sloping spurs, particularly in sandy soils and alluvium. They also may be found on walking tracks and vehicle tracks. They become more visible when ground cover is sparse or bare, such as after fire.



Significant cultural sites

Significant cultural sites might be important for spiritual, natural resource usage, historical, social, educational or other values. Traditional pathways link sites. Some pathways follow ridge lines and spurs, others follow river corridors. Some pathways map and guide Ngunawal people to food and water sources, others are for ceremonial purposes. Pathways may form a visual connection between major spiritual and gathering places. The sites and pathways are mapped in Aboriginal stories which are customarily passed on orally.

Stone arrangements – circles, lines, other patterns or piles of stones – may be direction markers or act as a ‘sign post’. They may signal pathways, meeting places, burial sites and other spiritual places, or Men’s and Women’s ceremonial sites. Ceremonial sites are gender specific places where either Men’s Business or Women’s Business is conducted. It is important to respect the exclusiveness of such sites.

It’s important to be culturally aware

All Aboriginal places and objects are protected under legislation. However, by increasing your cultural awareness and ability to recognise culturally significant sites and artefacts, you can help respect, protect and look after them.

To avoid disturbing culturally significant sites

- Organise for a Traditional Custodian to undertake a site inspection before you start any site works
- Look carefully around the area for old gum or box trees with scars or unusual shapes in the branches or stems, and unusual patterns and types of rocks
- Respect that some places were culturally specific and accessed by Men or Women only
- Traditional Custodians can advise on managing sites to protect cultural and environmental values e.g. where and what to plant, where to avoid raking or digging, where and how to burn off
- If you find a site or objects, you should report it

For further information and advice on other relevant resources and organisations, you can contact:

- ACT Government Heritage Unit - ph. 13 22 81 or email heritage@act.gov.au
- NSW Office of Environment and Heritage - ph. 02 9873 8500 or email heritagemailbox@environment.nsw.gov.au

Molonglo Conservation Group



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