



HANDS UP MALLEE

**ON COUNTRY CULTURAL
LEARNING EVENT 2023**

PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

We acknowledge the Latji Latji as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Country on which we are. We also acknowledge their near neighbours the Barkindji.

We pay our respects to the Elders past, present, and emerging and to the ancient connection they hold with their Country.

We acknowledge there are also other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live, work in and contribute to the cultural heritage of the Mildura region.



About the Cultural Learning Event

Background

In October 2023, the Hands Up Mallee (HUM) Yarning Group planned and guided a cultural learning experience on country for the HUM Collaborative Governance Group and the Backbone. The purpose of the Cultural Learning event was to deepen cultural understanding as well as strengthen connections across the HUM initiative. The Yarning Group was supported HUM's Aboriginal Social Impact Lead to plan and run the event.

What the Cultural Learning Event Involved

- Exploring over 40,000 years of history at Lake Mungo, home to Mungo Man and Mungo Woman – the oldest human remains ever found in Australia – and delve into the deep spiritual connections the Barkindji, Muthi Muthi, and Ngiyampaa (Nyampar) people have to the Willandra Lakes region.
- Reflecting on the European settlement of Australia through the eyes and stories of Traditional Owners; Uncle Warren Clarke, Uncle Peter Peterson, Auntie Jemmes Handy, Beltana Thomas and Auntie Ada Peterson who facilitated the Cultural Learning on Country.
- Seeing and learning about the traditional ways of the Aboriginal people from the boundary tree to the shell middens and how they use plants for medicine and healing.

The days out on Country included:

- A smoking cleansing ceremony with Uncle Peter and Welcome to Country with Uncle Warren and introduction by Auntie Ada Peterson and Auntie Jemmes Handy.
- Learning about the ancient history at the Wentworth Junction, the junction of Australia's two longest rivers, the Murray and Baaka (Darling) Rivers, which, combined, is the fourth largest river system in the world.
- Sighting of a Boundary tree, ancient trees & shell middens.
- Deep listening - time to hear and share stories and history with the Elders.
- Connecting with over 40,000 years of history through the archaeological work at Lake Mungo, guided by the Elders.
- Seeing the fossil record come to life, from 20,000-year-old footprints to bones and tools dating back even further.
- Understanding the history of journey to claim Native Title.
- Yarning around the fire pit area to reflect on the learnings and journey.
- Beautiful sunrises and sunsets over the picturesque sand dunes.
- Complete immersion in a rich, beautiful and deeply moving landscape to better understand the connection between Aboriginal history, culture, spirituality, and Country.

About the Reflections

To understand the impact and experience for people attending the On Country Learning event, a series of questions were developed and provided to participants. Participants recorded and shared their reflections with the HUM team and collated for the Yarning Group as feedback. .

Participant Reflections

The following is a collation of individual participant reflections in response to a series of prompt questions.

In what ways do you have a better understanding of Aboriginal peoples from your visit to Wentworth?

Visiting the boundary tree and the stories that were shared at the site helped me to visualise and imagine what it would have been like for Aboriginal people. It helped me understand how they used the tree to signal for food and how they wrapped the limbs inside the tree to create the markings. It also helped me learn about other trees that were special and used similarly like the birthing tree.

I learned how the Aboriginal people lived on the river and followed the river as they went on their journey through life.

What it also helped me understand from listening to the lived experience, is the impact, pain, ongoing suffering, and the intergenerational trauma that the stolen generation endured and still suffering to this day. When the Elders spoke of their lived experience it helped me put myself in their shoes and it was heartbreaking, as they said its why so many people drink or are on drugs etc which is understandable.

It also highlighted how families have lost language, culture, connection, their belonging and so much more because of what happened to the stolen generation.

I have more awareness of sacred sites in and around Wentworth. While I have a basic understanding of the Stolen Generation concept, hearing personal stories deepens that awareness. I had not thought about how birth order/family responsibility was impacted upon by the removal of children.



In what ways do you have a better understanding of Aboriginal peoples from your visit to Mungo?

Much deeper understanding of the expectation on Elders to look after country in traditional ways that also focus on protecting the sacred sites for future generations. I am still learning/challenging my own experiences about the importance of protecting, rather than opening the places up for all the world to see. I also learnt about the difference between Paakantyi and Barkindji.

I did not know anything about the Willandra Lakes system and how vast it is, and that Mungo has additional complications as a National Park, but also associated with a World Heritage listing. How amazing to hear from Uncle Warren about all of this.

This is not linear work. We move forward, then circle back to revisit and gain more understanding, more knowledge, and more practice, enabling us to engage at ever-deepening levels.

At its essence, cultural competence is about relationships, trust and dialogue: dialogue with yourself and with others. As we get to know and understand ourselves better, we are better able to know and understand others.

What did you learn that will help you connect with and strengthen your relationships with Aboriginal people in your community?

It has helped me to learn to reflect more and continually put myself in Aboriginal people's shoes to understand the impact of the stolen generation and all the intergenerational trauma and loss of culture, identity and belonging which is what so many families are suffering still to this day. However, I also acknowledge the great wisdom and knowledge the Aboriginal people have with the use of the land and all the history on country that could be shared, it would be a shame to lose that.

I am more comfortable with challenging my understanding and learnings. In the past I got upset as I felt that I was being blamed for the decisions of first settlers. Now I am wanting to work out how my European history can become joined with the first people and we can celebrate and be sorrowful for our history.

Having the opportunity to build relationships and ask questions of local Elders.

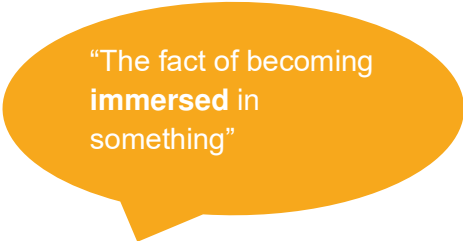
How will this help you in your future work with Aboriginal people in local communities?

By listening to the lived experience and stories, will help me to always put myself in Aboriginal people's shoes whenever I am with Aboriginal people. To be yourself with Aboriginal people, to ask questions.

In what ways do you have a deeper knowledge and understanding of the Aboriginal Elders and members that took us out On Country?

By listening to their stories that they shared showed how much wisdom and knowledge they have on the land and in general, and how much they want to get the younger generation to learn the culture and spend time on country to restore their language and to help them to get a sense of belonging and connection. It was shared by an Elder how the Elders are involved in Local Magistrates/County Koori Court sentencing conversation: time to sit with the troubled youth to understand the why, the what and then talking with them to link them into services or having them spend time on Country etc so that they may get a sense of belonging and connection to their culture and to their Elder. Changes for them, hearing their narrative of the changes they have made into the right direction moving forward.

I have never met Uncle Warren before and loved his honesty, humour, and wisdom that he so willingly shared. I would love to be able to purchase art from Uncle Peter the drawing of us at Mungo was really special. I have known Ada for a long time, but more in a transactional work way rather than knowing her personal journey which I feel privileged to have heard. Auntie Jemmes is such a passionate advocate who I would love to get to know more, and I was so appreciative of all the personal stories and wisdom that Beltana shared- what an amazing woman who is going to be a leader of the future. So, thank you all.



"The fact of becoming immersed in something"

How will this help the service or organisation you work in to have a better understanding of Aboriginal culture in your community and to help it to better serve Aboriginal people in the community?

I think it's vital all organisations can do cultural training like this which is something I will be telling my workplace to do. I can only share what I have learnt from the valuable time I spent at Mungo and Wentworth, but I think hearing the stories firsthand is the best way, so I strongly suggest all organisations do this type of cultural training, so they truly gain a deeper understanding of all that the Aboriginal people have experienced.

Am keen to explore how we can do more visits to Mungo with youth we work with at SCHS and also how to broaden the SCHS staff training and orientation.

Final Reflections

Cultural journey on Country with our work family and friends was great connection in strengthening our relationship into extended family. Elders' connection with the group to share their personal stories, wisdom, knowledge, and cultural history with everyone.

'The cuppa and a yarn with the women on the veranda was very respectful'

"I'm so grateful for the generosity of knowledge, spirit and stories of the Elders and Beltana"

"Privilege and honoured to hear all the stories on country – seeing how to live on land, plants used for medicine."

"More time"

"Privilege to share time and space, permission to ask questions"

"My view on Aboriginal culture has vastly expanded, and I now know so much more after being physically present. Having the privilege to visit and interact with sacred sites was breathtaking."

"I have come back being more thankful for what I have and the facilities I have access to. It was a fabulous opportunity for me to get immersed in the Aboriginal culture to learn about them and the challenges they face in their day-to-day lives. Everyone needs to experience this."



What Next

HUM has an ongoing commitment to cultural learning and deepening relationships with Aboriginal people and community. HUM also has a strong commitment to Measurement Evaluation and Learning (MEL).

The Yarning Group will continue to play a lead role in guiding cultural learning for the initiative and in future this will be supported with a simple MEL plan which outlines the longer term vision for cultural learning, some key goals and a selection of tools to effectively measure, evaluate and learn from the experience. The MEL plan will also outline who such learning and reflections could be shared with and for what purpose.

