



Cultural Learning On Country

Reflections Report

September 2025



Acknowledgement to Country

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 Hands Up Mallee

Hands Up Mallee (HUM) is a place-based initiative located in Mildura LGA in north-west Victoria on Latji Latji Country. Established in 2015, we began as a collective impact initiative to address complex social challenges by bringing together community, services, and government. Our vision for a connected, thriving community was shaped through more than 1,600 conversations to understand what matters most.

We have since strengthened our commitment to local leadership and governance, moving towards a community-led and governed place-based model. Guided by the ARACY Nest framework, we work across six key wellbeing domains: healthy, learning, participating, material basics, valued, loved & safe, and identity & culture. By combining lived experience, local knowledge, evidence, and data, we focus on local priorities and drive systemic change for better outcomes and lasting impact.

Hands Up Mallee is proud to be one of ten Stronger Places, Stronger People sites funded by the Department of Social Services.

Contributor Acknowledgement

Hands Up Mallee recognises the generosity of all partners and community members who share their time, words, insights, and support to work collaboratively and create change. Their contribution is essential to our work. The stories and information shared, and outcomes achieved in our journey together to create a connected community where families matter and children thrive, belong to them and the Northern Mallee.

Hands Up Mallee

P (03) 5021 7671 | **E** hello@handsupmallee.com

A 93 Pine Avenue, Mildura, VIC 3500 | **M** PO Box 10184 VIC 3500

W handsupmallee.com



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Background

Yarning Group and its Role

The Yarning Group plays a vital role in guiding Hands Up Mallee's (HUM's) work alongside Aboriginal communities, ensuring that culture, lived experience and community voice are embedded in every decision. It is made up of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, including Elders and young people. The group works alongside the Collaborative Governance Group and the Backbone team to support long-term social change.

The Yarning Group's key roles are:

- Culturally guide and oversee work that aims to change outcomes for the community
- Lead and support cultural learning and connection across the HUM collaboration
- Lead decision making in key areas such as ethics, data sovereignty, communication, and engagement with Aboriginal community
- Advocate and champion to influence systems change at all levels
- Actively seek input and views from a broad representation of the local Aboriginal community
- Make sure that community needs and wants are central to decision making
- Support and ensure culturally safe and appropriate practices across Hand Up Mallee's work and partnerships

The Introduction of Cultural Learning on Country

The Cultural Learning on Country event, introduced by HUM in 2023, is an annual gathering designed to deepen cultural understanding and connection to community and Country through immersive experiences. Designed by the Yarning Group and facilitated by the Aboriginal Social Impact Lead, this event provides an important opportunity to increase understanding of community, culture, history and its influence on the present, while acknowledging the ongoing impacts of colonialism and recognising the strength and wisdom of the local Aboriginal community

The 2025 gathering brought together a diverse group of participants from:

- HUM Yarning Group, Collaborative Governance Group and Backbone Team

- Local Service Partners
- Department of Social Services
- PLACE.

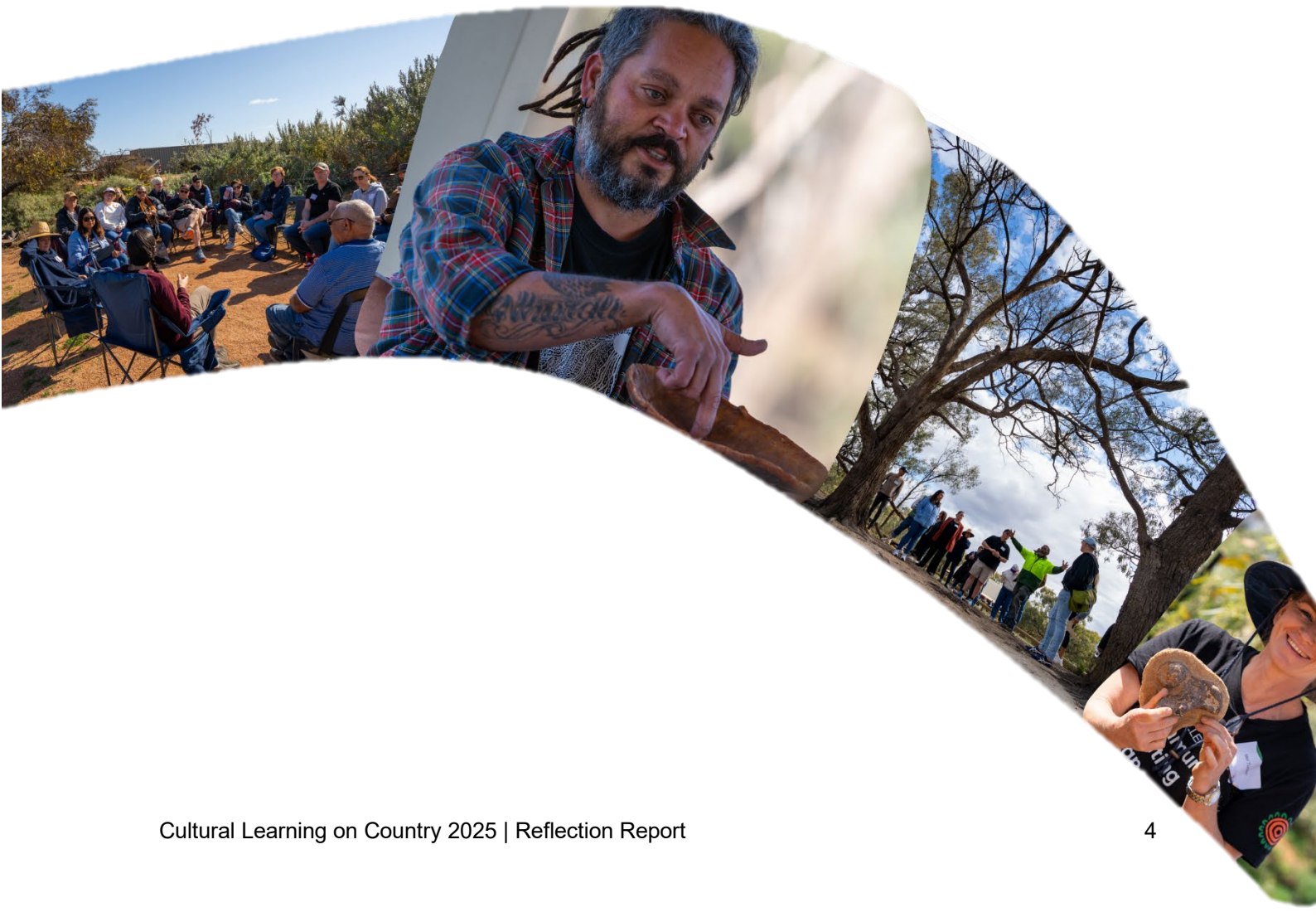
Purpose of this Reflection Report

The purpose of this report is to:

- Document and reflect on the 2025 Cultural Learning on Country program design, experiences and learnings
- Inform future event design and delivery
- Enable ongoing measurement, evaluation, and learning over an extended period

Reflections shared in this report were captured from participants and organisers of the Cultural Learning on Country event and were collected through:

- Surveys
- Feedback forms
- Reflection sessions
- Interviews



Program Design

Purpose

The purpose of the 2025 Cultural Learning on Country event was to deepen participant's cultural understanding and strengthen connections across the initiative. The event was guided and supported by the Aboriginal Social Impact Lead, together with Elders and Respected Persons from the Yarning Group.

Cultural Learning seeks to deepen cultural understanding and embed culturally safe practices across Hands Up Mallee and promote a shared responsibility for cultural safety.

Program Design

An intentional design process is undertaken to support the delivery of the Cultural Learning on Country event and ensure that the objectives of the program are met. The Aboriginal Social Impact Lead works in partnership with the Yarning Group to design a program that:

- Connects people with each other and with Country
- Deepens cultural understanding
- Increases awareness of history, both locally and nationally, and the impacts on the community
- Broadens people's awareness of local places of significance
- Facilitates personal reflection
- Encourages curiosity about community, culture, partnership, and people's individual and collective role in creating cultural safety and respect

The event design process involved making decisions to enable the above, such as

- Inviting key service partners in addition to the HUM Backbone, Collaborative Governance Group and Yarning Group, both at an executive level and on the ground level, ensuring the event strengthens ongoing engagement and shared understanding and responsibility for action
- Making the event a full day, creating time and space for learning and connection, encouraging people to switch off from work and be fully present
- Facilitating transport, creating additional space and time for connection and reflection. When people travel and sit together, this creates an opportunity for sharing and connecting, potentially with someone new

- Diversifying the cultural learning activities and facilitators, ensuring new experiences and broader connections in community
- Sharing meals together throughout the day, creating quiet space for conversation and reflection together
- Clear roles for Yarning Group members to play, which supports the cultural learning experience of participants



STORYTELLING

SHARED EXPERIENCES

IMMERSIVE CULTURAL ACTIVITIES



**Community
Creating
Change**

On Country Cultural Learning Agenda

Friday 12 September 2025 | 8:30 AM to 7 PM

Gol Gol School Immersion Centre, Kings Billabong and Psyche Pumps

Day Session	8:30 AM	Arrive at Hands Up Mallee Office
	8:45 AM	Depart from Hands Up Mallee
	9:00 AM	Gol Gol School Immersion Centre
	12:30 PM	Travel to Psyche Pumps
	1:00 PM	First Peoples of Millewa Mallee
Night Session	3:00 PM	Kings Billabong
	5:00 PM	Dinner and Yarn
	7:00 PM	Return to Hands Up Mallee



Activities, Insights and Reflections for Participants

Gol-Gol School Immersion Centre – Morning Session

Welcome to Country

The day began with a Welcome to Country and Smoking Ceremony led by Uncle Warren Clark at the Gol Gol School Immersion Centre, near the iconic sculptures of the two giant Rainbow Serpents, representing Ngati Ngati, a symbol of deep cultural significance to the Barkindji people.

Archaeological Dig: Thumpaka – Dig with Knowledge

Participants engaged in “Thumpaka” (meaning “dig with knowledge”), an archaeological ‘mock’ dig experience that emphasised the importance of seeking permission from Traditional Owners and the responsibility of preserving and caring for Country. Through hands-on-learning, participants carefully excavated and studied historical Aboriginal artefacts and Megafauna remains.

Insights and Learnings from Participants

- The deep connection between what the land represents, and what is in the land to the living First Nation’s people today. The significance of the land to the personal and cultural stories from ancestors past experiences.
- Created time and space to reflect on the space, close to the river.
- It’s so much more than just the ground I walk on; everything has a purpose I feel more connected at peace and spiritual. Proud of our culture and learnings
- How those artefacts found can tell a story about who lived in the place and how they lived. The consideration of Dreamtime stories and possible references to megafauna



in a new idea for me.

- The idea that megafauna and people lived at the same, and how this connects with culture and country stories.
- The connection between Dreamtime stories and the megafauna and other ways/aspects the environment was experienced by Aboriginal ancestors.
- It was interesting to learn about the process of asking permission, acknowledging Barkindji ownership of land, findings and knowledge. So interesting to consider the co-existence of megafauna and Aboriginal people.

“I was really impressed to learn about the evidence of co-existing between the Megafauna and Aboriginal Peoples.”
- Participant

Miiki Puuri Mandi – Aboriginal Art and Culture

Corey Payne introduced participants to a range of traditional Aboriginal artefacts, including the coolamon, didgeridoo, and boomerang, crafted from various types of wood, bone, and stone. Many of these pieces had been passed down from his great-great-grandfather. Corey also spoke about the bush medicine and the use of native herbs, and demonstrated a scar tree, explaining traditional methods of tree preservation after carving.

Elisha Mangal guided participation through a session on Aboriginal symbols in painting. She explained the meaning behind common symbols and invited participants to tell their personal stories through art. This activity was described as an enriching and emotional experience, with many sharing heartfelt reflections through their artwork.

Insights and Learnings from Participants

- Understanding how art is used for storytelling and passing down reflections about land, people to communicate



connection to people and place.

- Connections that are made with each other, and each other's stories through the creation of art.
- Aboriginal art begins with a story. A story may direct the use of symbols.
- When you can't find the words, draw it.
- The use of symbols and what they mean.
- Everyone's story is different. Art is our individual interpretation that should be celebrated.
- Appreciated looking at the tree from which the coolamon was cut, and seeing the dried coolamon, the growth back over the scar.
- Different properties of different wood. Stone found locally from other parts shows evidence of trade.
- The different types of materials and, in particular, the trade that enabled access to the different materials.
- That I know very little of the deep wisdom and practice of healing with plants. I would love to learn about this specifically, in some depth.
- Significantly grounded in practice and wisdom around 60 to 70 thousand years

“Simple stories that connect on a deeper level. Connection to people and the land is very healing.” - Participant

Psyche Bend – Afternoon Session

Learning About ‘Multi-tools’ with Uncle Willie Hannah

Uncle Willie Hannah provided a rich presentation of a diversity of traditional Aboriginal artefacts, including the coolamon, didgeridoo, and boomerang, spears and other traditional throwing tools, crafted from various types of wood, bones, and stone. He demonstrated how to light a fire the traditional way and coached a number of participants in throwing boomerangs of various designs and sizes. He also talked about scar trees and the challenges and responsibilities that come when people find traditional artefacts and want to give them to him.

Insights and Learnings from Participants

- A reminder of the need for different management of our precious resource – water. Where country is alive but not well/healthy due to a loss of regular flooding cycles.
- Scar trees, in addition to being a resource for making coolamons, also designate the surrounding areas as Aboriginal land.
- What the scars represent in terms of practices making canoes and other implements or tools

Nature Walk

Part of the program could not be delivered at the last minute, so Peter Kelly, Mildura Offroad Adventures, led a nature walk through the area, identifying local plant and tree species and explaining their significance.

On return to the bus area, the participants observed an environmental company and sponsors releasing giant Murray Cod into Kings Billabong, which provided some additional interest and learning.

Insights and Learnings from Participants

- The connection between the river system, water and land.
- Native Title recognised that the First People have had continuous contact with their land and therefore that the land is theirs to be managed and used as the judge to be appropriate. They advise on its use and care for all.

“It is a privilege to share this beautiful country with people living today who are descendants and owners of the land.”- Participant



Further reflections from participants...

"It is a privilege to share this beautiful country with people living today who are descendants and owners of the land."

"... a deeper sense of gratitude, and reminder that I have been a little naive about what this land provides. It made me realise that we have so much around us that we take it for granted."

"It has been amazing to hear such a richer experience of the Aboriginal people in this region talking about their culture... their relationship with the history, their customs and being able to share that with us is just a real privilege."

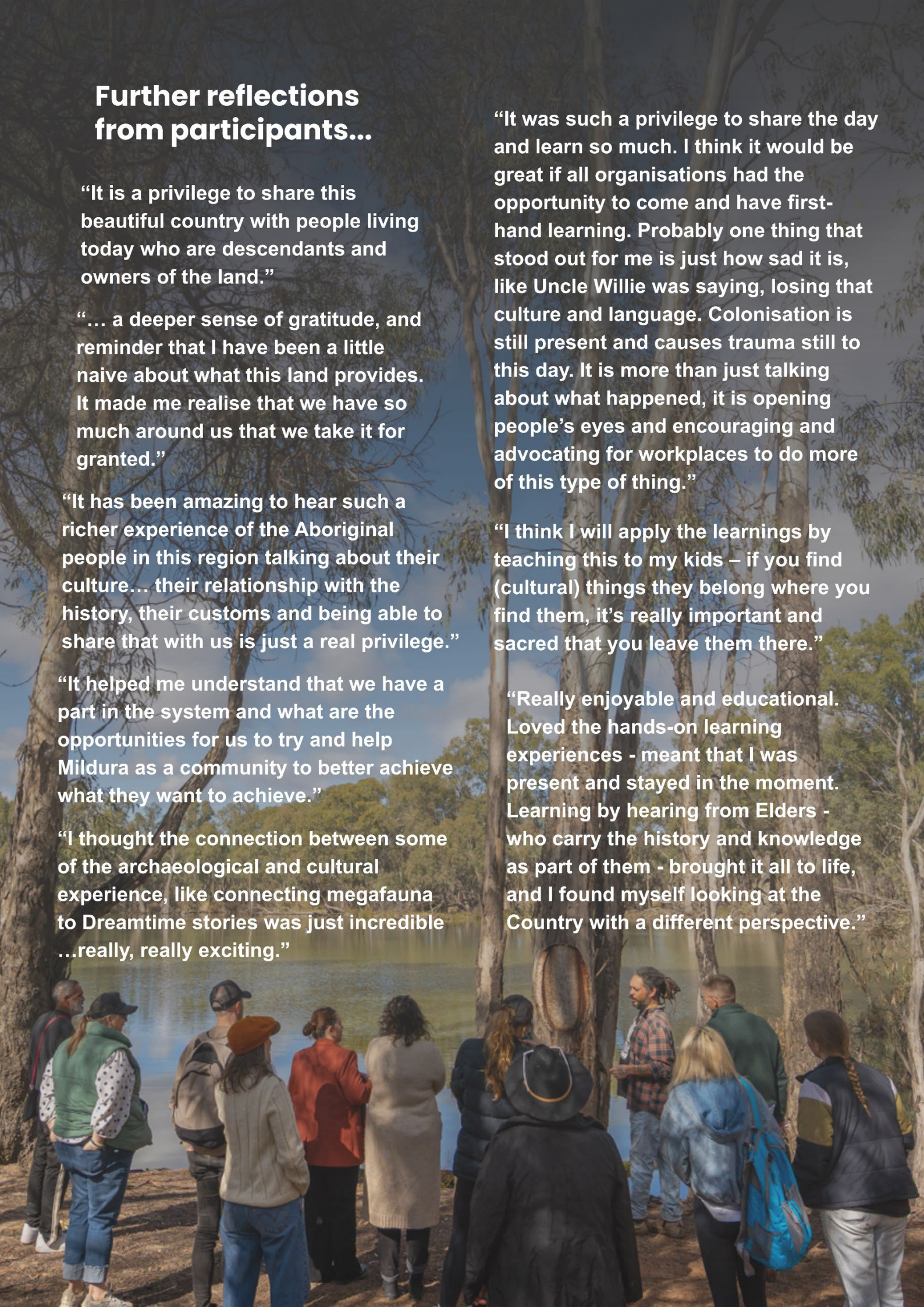
"It helped me understand that we have a part in the system and what are the opportunities for us to try and help Mildura as a community to better achieve what they want to achieve."

"I thought the connection between some of the archaeological and cultural experience, like connecting megafauna to Dreamtime stories was just incredible ...really, really exciting."

"It was such a privilege to share the day and learn so much. I think it would be great if all organisations had the opportunity to come and have first-hand learning. Probably one thing that stood out for me is just how sad it is, like Uncle Willie was saying, losing that culture and language. Colonisation is still present and causes trauma still to this day. It is more than just talking about what happened, it is opening people's eyes and encouraging and advocating for workplaces to do more of this type of thing."

"I think I will apply the learnings by teaching this to my kids – if you find (cultural) things they belong where you find them, it's really important and sacred that you leave them there."

"Really enjoyable and educational. Loved the hands-on learning experiences - meant that I was present and stayed in the moment. Learning by hearing from Elders - who carry the history and knowledge as part of them - brought it all to life, and I found myself looking at the Country with a different perspective."



Yarning Group Reflections

The Yarning Group members reflected on the event and identified some of the things that helped the planning and design process, this included:

- Everyone participated in suggesting locations and activities
- Uncle Warren was available to support a pre-visit of sites to determine suitability for the program
- The Yarning Group members expressed satisfaction with the overall design of the program for the event

Highlights and Achievements

The Yarning Group thought the participants loved the program.

- It gave the participants a greater understanding of how important it is to understand Aboriginal history, how long it is and how they survived.
- Through the archeological dig activity, the participants gained a lot of rich insights about Aboriginal people's long history and deep connection to country.
- The art and tools parts of the program were very well delivered.
- People really liked Uncle Willie's story.
- Connections and relationships were strengthened during travel and shared mealtimes.
- The catering was excellent, particularly the camp oven dinner.

Recommendations

The Cultural Learning on Country event is an annual event and commitment of HUM. A shift in the timing of the event to the first part of the year in 2026 will enable the second half of the year to focus on reflections and the annual joint meeting of the Yarning Group, Collaborative Governance group and Backbone Team.