Where do I live?

An Introduction to Local Indigenous People, History and Culture.

Ngunawal People of the Canberra Region
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ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

The ‘Where Do I Live?’ resources are designed to help you learn about the Indigenous custodians, culture, language and history of the local area where you live, highlighting that all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are geographically connected by the land we live on. Understanding the cultural significance of the land you live on and the history that’s occurred there is one of the first steps you can take to end the disconnect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and contribute to a better shared future.

The information presented in the ‘Where Do I Live?’ resources has been collated from publicly available online and published sources. Where available, we’ve sourced this content directly from materials published by members of the relevant Indigenous people group. We’ve provided references where possible, however, we recognise the information contained in the ‘Where Do I Live?’ resources may be contested and it doesn’t claim to be definitive.

For further information about Indigenous language groups, including specific land boundaries or cultural information, we recommend contacting your local Registered Aboriginal Party, visiting a local cultural centre or contacting your local council or state/territory department of Aboriginal affairs.

We warmly invite feedback on our the ‘Where Do I Live?’ resources. If you’d like to contribute additional information, please don’t hesitate to contact our team contact@australianstogether.org.au
NGUNNAWAL

WHO ARE NGUNNAWAL PEOPLE?

Ngunnawal people are the direct descendants of the original custodians of the area in the vicinity of present day Goulburn, Yass, and Canberra. ‘Ngunnawal’ (also spelled Ngunawal) means ‘we’, ‘the people’, or ‘us’.

NGUNNAWAL TODAY

Many Ngunnawal people maintain a close connection to their traditional land and are actively involved in protecting, preserving and sharing their culture.


NGUNNAWAL

DISPUTES OVER TRADITIONAL OWNERS OF THE ACT

In 2002, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government recognised the ACT as Ngunawal territory. This decision caused concern because some historical accounts indicate that other Aboriginal language groups such as Ngarigu and Walgali may also have traditional connections to the Canberra region. In addition, one group formerly identifying as Ngunawal now wish to be recognised as a separate, distinct group known as Ngambri. The ACT Government accepted the general consensus at the time of a gathering of Ngunawal people that the territory should be considered Ngunawal. The 2002 ‘Ngunawal decision’ was made out of respect for Aboriginal self-determination.1
LAND

Traditional Ngunnawal boundaries encompass the area from Goulburn in the north, Gundagai to the west, Cooma to the south and Braidwood to the east, including the entire ACT. This territory is bordered by Wiradjuri, Ngarigo, Gundungurra, Yuin and Tharawal lands.

Ngunnawal country includes limestone plains, mountains, swamps and streams which originally provided a wide range of food sources. Prior to colonisation, Ngunnawal men typically hunted larger game such as kangaroos and emus while women and children gathered smaller game, freshwater fish, bird eggs, yams, seeds and berries.

Ngunnawal clans traditionally travelled across their lands according to these seasonal food sources, trade partnerships with neighbouring nations and to conduct ceremonies to honour their relationship with the land and creator spirits.

According to traditional beliefs, Ngunnawal people belong to the land as caretakers. The notion of caring for country is the basis for much of traditional Ngunnawal life, which involved a strong relationship between people and the land based on respect, obligation and interdependence, and intimate knowledge of the land.
The name 'Canberra' (original spelling Koyanberra) is derived from the Ngunnawal language, and means “meeting place”⁴. The Canberra region is generally understood to have been a traditional meeting place where clans gathered for ceremonies, to arrange marriages, share news and trade goods.⁵ During summer, people gathered together in the high country to feed on the Bogong moth, which migrated there in the millions.⁶

Today there are seven known Ngunnawal clans. These clans have traditional connections to specific areas of Ngunnawal territory. There’s a clear link between clan names and the present day names of these areas:

- **Maloongoola** people lived in the Molongolo area
- **Biyaligee** people occupied the Pialligo area
- **Namitch** or **Namwitch** people lived in the area we know as Namadgi
- **Cumbeyan** people lived in the Queanbeyan area
- **Kanberri** people lived in the Belconnen area
- **Toogoranoongh** people lived in Tuggeranong
- **Yarr** people lived in the Yass area⁷

According to traditional Ngunnawal beliefs, the creator spirit Budjabulya formed the rivers, valleys, hills, mountains, people, animals and plants. Budjabulya is a water spirit living in Lake Ngungara (renamed Lake George) who has nurtured, fed and cared for Ngunnawal people since the beginning of time.⁸
Prior to colonisation, Ngunnawal people probably spoke several of the surrounding languages in addition to the Ngunnawal language. During colonisation, government policies and practices banned and discouraged Indigenous Australians from speaking their languages. Consequently, many Indigenous Australian languages have been partially or completely lost. Today, the rediscovery and reintegration of traditional languages is an important part of cultural renewal for many Indigenous people. The Ngaiyuriija Ngunnawal Language Group is working to revitalise the Ngunnawal language.
NGUNNAWAL

COLONISATION

The first known European exploration into Ngunnawal land was in 1820 and the extensive well-watered grasslands soon attracted squatters and pastoralists. It’s generally maintained that initial relations between the colonisers and Ngunnawal people were good. There are reports that during the early decades of European occupation, Ngunnawal people and their neighbours continued to gather for cultural business around present day Tuggeranong, Ginninderra, Black Mountain, Mt Ainslie, Queanbeyan, Pialligo and Tidbinbilla.9

However, within 20 years of European arrival in the Canberra region, the Ngunnawal population had begun diminishing at an alarming rate. As pastoral properties expanded, traditional hunting lands were cleared or destroyed by cattle, local game was culled and invasive species were introduced, Indigenous people became more dependent on European settlements for survival.10

A famous Ngunnawal woman, Nellie Hamilton, is quoted as saying:

“You come and take our land and kill our game and let us starve, and if we take a sheep or kill a calf you shoot us or put us in gaol. You bring your disease and give it to us — we had nothing like that until you came and stole our land — you give us rotten blanket and bad rum.”

(Schumack 1967: 150)11

Some Ngunnawal people appear to have been absorbed into the colonial economy, working and living on various settlements in the region as stockmen and domestic servants.12 Others were gradually compelled to move to missions and reserves throughout New South Wales. After the ACT was established in 1911, the Aborigines Protection Board forced all Aboriginal people in the ACT (including those who’d been granted land for farming) to move to Edgerton Mission Station at Yass.13

Mt Rogers, ACT
FRONTIER VIOLENCE

Although there's little reference to violence between colonisers and Ngunnawal people on the Limestone Plains, there's evidence of hostility in neighbouring areas, Eden–Monaro and Yass. In 1844, the Chief Protector of Aborigines reported that around Yass, Aboriginal people were considered 'troublesome' and were 'shot on sight'.

MISSIONS AND RESERVES

As Ngunnawal people were pushed off their land by colonisers, many were forced onto Aboriginal missions and reserves. Some Ngunnawal families from Lake George, Yass and Canberra had to move as far away as Maloga Mission on the Darling River and Warengesda at Darlington Point. Another gathering point was Brungle Aboriginal Station in the Tumut District.

A number of Aboriginal reserves were established on Ngunnawal land near Yass, including North Yass camp, Rye Park, Edgerton Mission Station, Hollywood Aboriginal Reserve and Oak Hill Aboriginal Reserve. Following the establishment of the ACT in 1911, the Aborigines Protection Board forced all Aboriginal people in the ACT to move to the Edgerton Mission Station. When that mission closed two years later the residents became fringe-dwellers on the outskirts of Yass until 1934, when authorities forced them to move to Hollywood Aboriginal Reserve.

Some Ngunnawal children were taken from their families on these missions and reserves and sent to institutions and foster homes. From 1909-1969 between 5,000 - 8,000 Indigenous children were removed from their families in New South Wales alone.

You can listen to Ngunnawal Elder, Eric Bell, describe his life growing up on Hollywood Reserve here, or find out more about Oak Hill Aboriginal Reserve here.
NGUNNAWAL

CULTURAL CENTRES

UNITED NGUNNAWAL ELDERS COUNCIL (UNECC)

CONTACT: Level 2, Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre, 180 London Circuit, Canberra ACT 2601
C/- Office for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Affairs, GPO Box 158, Canberra ACT 2601
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BURRINGIRI ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURAL CENTRE

CONTACT: 245 Lady Denman Drive, Yarramundi Reach, Aranda ACT 2614
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REFERENCES


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