

‘The right thing to do’: restoring Aboriginal place names key to recognising Indigenous histories

Indigenous communities argue that renaming landscapes should not be limited to removing overtly racist colonial names



In 2020 Western Australia renamed the King Leopold Ranges, named after the brutal colonial Belgium monarch, the Wunaamin Miliwundi Ranges.

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The first recorded name for the finger of land that sticks out at the entrance to Lake Macquarie, 100km north of Sydney, is Keep Clear Point, an instructive if unimaginative label marked on a map drawn in 1841. In the 1900s it became known by another name — Coon Island, apparently for a resident named Herbert Greta “Coon” Heaney.

Now it is being renamed again. In February, Lake Macquarie council began a community consultation process to investigate alternative names. Among the options under consideration is to change the name to Galgabba, a name for the area used by the Awabakal people.

Similar conversations are happening around Australia. In 2017, the Queensland government renamed seven places that included the word “nigger”. In 2020, after global Black Lives Matter protests, Western Australia renamed the King Leopold

Ranges, named after the brutal colonial Belgium monarch, the Wunaamin Miliwundi Ranges, using both the Ngarinyin and Bunuba names for the area.

But many Aboriginal communities argue that renaming landscapes should not be limited to removing overtly racist names.

In Bundaberg in south-eastern Queensland there is a push to rename places where massacres of Aboriginal people took place.

“A lot of those places are named after the ... protectors or inspectors of Aborigines,” says Melinda Holden from First Languages Australia. Holden is a Taribelang woman, one of the traditional owners of Bundaberg.

Protector or inspector of Aborigines was the title given to people responsible for controlling, and often removing, Aboriginal people.

“You have to expose the truth at a lot of the massacre sites – truth-telling and getting appropriate names for them,” she says. “We have a few massacre sites here in Bundaberg that we’re trying to work with the powers that be to get them renamed. There’s still a lot of people that don’t want to change the names.”

Holden says sites of frontier violence, such as Cedar Creek in Bundaberg and The Leap in Mackay, named for an Aboriginal woman who was driven over a cliff holding a child in her arms, should be renamed and have their histories properly contextualised.

Other areas, such as Fraser Island or K’gari, should just be renamed in accordance with the wishes of local people, she says.



In 2012 the Tasmanian government recognised 13 traditional place names, including kunyani for Hobart’s Mount Wellington.

There may be a period of transition, just as there was when Uluru was renamed from Ayers Rock in 1993, “but in the end it’s the right thing to do”.

“That’s all we call [Uluru] now, nobody gets hot under the collar anymore,” she says.

The national park which spans most of Fraser Island was renamed K’gari, the Butchulla name, in 2017.

“We have always known this as K’gari, local people call it K’gari,” says Holden. “It should not be dual named, it should be named K’gari island, not Fraser Island.”

Most Australian jurisdictions now have dual naming policies, which allow geographical features to be identified by both their traditional and colonial name.

Nobody gets hot under the collar anymore [about Uluru]

Dual naming is one way to teach the broader community the Aboriginal history of a place, Holden says. For communities that had language stripped from them through colonisation, it is a way to reclaim and preserve words which may otherwise have been lost.

“We’re confident enough now to make sure we hand it down,” she says. “We know our culture, and we know it through and through. A lot of people down south here, on the eastern coast, we didn’t have that exposure to our culture, like up in the central desert and northern Australia. We were robbed of that. It was taken off us by the protectors. Now we’re able to build on that and are a lot more confident about it.”

The introduction of native title laws in 1993 has aided the process to identify traditional place names in areas with fewer living language speakers. Researching the history of an area and its families, language and boundaries is part of the lengthy process to claim native title. It creates a map of who has authority to name what area.

“All our tribes, we have our boundaries and we know our boundaries,” Holden says. “Thanks to native title we have all had to sit down and work it out.”

Dual-naming debate

But in the areas most devastated by colonisation, native title has provided little assistance. There have been no successful native title applications in Tasmania. There is no formal system to declare who speaks for what country. And in the past five years, the debate over dual naming has become very messy.

In 2016, the Liberal government introduced a “new approach to Aboriginal eligibility” which replaced the nationally used three-part definition of Aboriginality – descent, self-identification and community recognition – with just one step, self-identification.

Before that change, Aboriginal place names were put forward by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, which has been representing the Tasmanian Aboriginal community and conducting research on Tasmanian language and place names for more than 30 years.



In 1992 the Victorian government renamed the Grampians national park the Grampians (Gariwerd) national park, but that was reversed after a change of government in 1992 and Gariwerd not reinstated until after the dual naming act was introduced in 1998.

“The remnants of language that were left were not enough to revive one single language from,” says the director of the TAC’s language program, Annie Reynolds. “So after months of discussions around the state in extensive consultations in 1993 and 1994, the community accepted that there would have to be, or that there could be, one language put together from all the original languages.”

The result of that research is palawa kani, a reconstructed language for lutruwita (Tasmania). It was pieced together from word lists left behind by European settlers following extensive community consultations.

Place names in palawa kani are taken from the best available record of the local name for a place. Many were recorded by George Augustus Robinson, the “protector of Aborigines” who toured Tasmania in the 1830s as part of an effort to round up people who had survived the Black War. He recorded more than 4,500 Aboriginal words in his journals and later made similar recordings in the Port Phillip area in Victoria.

Some of the languages spoken in Port Phillip were later captured in audio recordings of older speakers, which allowed the Tasmanian language researchers to reverse engineer the pronunciation of Tasmanian words and, using the international phonetic alphabet, develop a spelling system.

In 2012, the Tasmanian government recognised 13 traditional place names in palawa kani put forward by the TAC, including kunyani for Hobart’s Mount Wellington.

But the Liberal government changed the dual names policy in 2019, and in March approved 15 new dual names nominated by groups other than the TAC, including

Kennaook for Cape Grim, the site of an 1828 massacre in which 30 Aboriginal people died, and Taneneryouer for Suicide Bay.

The TAC contests the new names and put forward the name pilri for Cape Grim, taynayuwa for the cliff where the people were killed, and luwuka for Suicide Bay.

‘More and more politicised’

Earlier pushes to reintroduce Aboriginal names in the landscape of south-eastern Australia were met with considerable resistance.

In 1992, the Victorian government renamed the Grampians national park as the Grampians (Gariwerd) national park, but the decision was reversed after a change of government in 1992 and official use of Gariwerd was not reinstated until after the dual naming act was introduced in 1998.

Gariwerd, the name in the local Jardwadjali and Djabwurrung languages, was first recorded by George Augustus Robinson.

The area was named the Grampians by the Australian surveyor general Major Sir Thomas Mitchell in 1836.

Mitchell had issued a directive in 1828 to surveyors to “be particular in noting the native names of as many places as you can on your map”, but failed his own directive in south-western Victoria because his travelling party killed seven Aboriginal people at a place he named Mount Dispersion, meaning that local people would not speak to him.

Mitchell’s directive to use Aboriginal place names, where possible, echoed the practices of most European surveyors in Australia from the 1780s onwards, who transcribed – often incorrectly – local Aboriginal place names on maps used by settlers to carve up the land.

Names such as Wollongong, Wagga Wagga, Toowoomba and Coolangatta are derived from the languages of the Indigenous inhabitants.

Ian Clark was the geographer tasked with identifying local Aboriginal place names in Gariwerd in the early 1990s.

“There was significant opposition locally and across the state to the proposal,” Clark says. “I think because the approach [from traditional owners] was not upfront a willingness to accept dual naming. A lot of people were very uncomfortable with the erasure of non-Indigenous names, which they had formed a considerable degree of attachment to. And that process became more and more politicised as the debate went on.”

Had dual naming been put forward as a solution at the start, he says, the debate may not have become so heated. But some responses were “quite ridiculous”, he says.

“One person was saying, well what’s going to be next, are we going to change the name of the Dandenongs?” he says. “But the Dandenongs already have an Indigenous name.”

Some other place names were not adopted because they were seen as a risk to local tourism. The name for McKenzies Falls is Mikunung wira, the place where the blackfish (wirap) can go no higher. Mount Stapleton, named for Mitchell’s second in command, was known as Gunigalk, or excrement stick.

“That was actually a wonderful insight into traditional practices, because in traditional times Indigenous people were very concerned that their enemies never got access to any part of their human body, including their waste. So they deliberately carefully buried their excreta,” Clark says.

“But the local tourism authorities just could not accept a place name that meant excrement stick.”