Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre
Aboriginal Corporation

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Submission

Inquiry in to language learning in Indigenous Communities

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Prepared by Steven Ross

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Chairperson's Statement

Thank you to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs for providing this opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous Communities.

Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre Aboriginal Corporation is proud to be an organisation for the Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa Traditional Owners of Deniliquin and surrounding areas.

Our organisation utilises our traditional language in our cultural and education programs and are keen to see support for language programs expand in this area and across Australia. Not having language does not lesson our cultural identity but having it can deepen our understanding of family and Country.

For us the Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa Language underpins our culture, offers knowledge about food and medicinal plants, installs pride in our Elders and young peoples and offers an exchange of learning and understanding between Wamba Wamba Perrepa Perrepa peoples and the general community.

The loss of traditional language was devastating for my people, not just because of the language itself but the processes designed to stop Aboriginal people speaking our native tongue was genocidal, draconian and left inter-generational pain and suffering, which can still be felt today.

Revitalising Wamba Wamba Perrepa Perrepa language can assist to heal those wounds and provide for a profound and rewarding future for our young people.

My father and many of his contemporaries often secretly spoke our language and thanks to work of people such as Luise Hercus the Wamba Wamba Perrepa Perrepa language is tantalisingly within reach. All we need is the support and resources to instil our language in our lives and in the rightful and unique place it belongs in Australian society.

Jeanette Crew

Yarkuwa Background

Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre Aboriginal Corporation covers the Northern part of the Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa Country that includes the district around Deniliquin and Moonacullah.

Yarkuwa was formed in 2003 as to house historical and cultural material as part of a local research project and exhibition. Since that time the organisation has grown to include cultural, genealogical and environmental services such as cultural heritage assessments, service provision of arts, sports, carers and educational programs.

Organisational Objectives

1. To collate and maintain cultural, heritage and environmental information as it relates to Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa country.
2. To provide an educational service to the wider community including schools and community groups.
3. To engage in negotiations with Local, State and Federal and other agencies on matters relating to culture, heritage and the environment.
4. To provide the means for members to develop skills that will allow them to be involved in the provision of educational and research services.
5. To provide a centre to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next.
6. To acquire and hold title to land and water for the purposes of economic and cultural economy, cultural heritage, education and conservation

Membership

Active Members – Direct descendants of the Wamba Wamba or Perrepa Perrepa Nations who have research skills. Active members hold preferred employment status and must form the majority of the Governing Committee.

Non-Active Members - All other direct descendants of the Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa Nations.

Associate Members – Other members of both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community who wish to support Yarkuwa.

Language Principles

Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre Aboriginal Corporation has endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples including Article 11 Part 1 and 2 of the Declaration:

> 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.
> 2. States shall provide redress through effective mechanisms, which may include restitution, developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples, with respect to their cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free, prior and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs.

Furthermore Yarkuwa supports the Universal Declaration on Human Rights including

Article 2:

> Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.
>
> Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre asserts our right to practice our local language in all aspects of our lives including at schools and in our homes.

The Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa Language

Background

Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa peoples are the traditional owners of Country around the townships of Deniliquin, Moulamein, Kyalite, Barham, Kerang and Swan Hill. Our Country extends across the NSW and Victorian border and we have large populations of people who still live on Country.

Furthermore, of those peoples who live on Country still access, exploit and utilise Country. To illustrate this, in 2010 the local traditional owners of Werai Forest were involved in a Use and Occupancy Mapping project conducted by the Murray Darling Basin Authority in conjunction with the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN), Yarkuwa and the Deniliquin Local Aboriginal Land Council.

This mapping technique has been developed and utilised by First Nations peoples in Canada for almost 30 years. The methodology is a social geographic interview process with GIS mapping of sites that directly correspond to the respondents' direct connection to country, use of resources and occupation of land.

The almost 80 Wamba Wamba and Pereppa Pereppa traditional owners who were interviewed mapped on average approximately 120 sites each and had a total of over 12,000 sites.

The traditional language of Wamba Wamba peoples is an important aspect of the exploitation and use of Country and its continued use in terms of the use of traditional flora and fauna has become increasingly used in activities on Country (see Language Projects below).

According to Luise Hercus the Wamba Wamba language is part of the Kulin Group of languages spoken throughout the whole of western Victoria and parts of southern NSW. This group includes Wamba Wamba, Perrepa Perrepa , Mutthi Mutthi and Wadi Wadi.

The similarity in Kulin Languages is illustrated in the table below:

English	Mutthi Mutthi	Wamba Wamba	Werkaya
Camp	*lengi*	*lar*	*lar*
Sun	*nyawingi*	*nyawi*	*nyawi*
Spearthrower	*kariki*	*karek*	*karik*
Sand	*kurraki*	*kurrek*	*kurrak*

Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa are practically identical.[i]

Speakers

There has been considerable work done on the Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa Language particularly by AC Stone and Luise Hercus in the late 1800s and throughout the mid-20th century respectively.

Hercus identifies a number of speakers of the Wamba Wamba language around Moonacullah, a mission near Deniliquin, particularly Aggie Sampson, Maria Day, Esther Charles, Nancy Egan, Hubert Day, Stan Day, Uncle John Taylor and Walter Sampson. Of Walter Sampson Hercus writes:

> "…shortly before his death he began to organise a Wemba Wemba reunion, where no English was to be spoken. Had he lived longer he would have certainly have started a language revival program, long before these became recognised".[ii]

Indeed many contemporary traditional owners in Deniliquin remember their parents speaking fluent Wamba Wamba such as Neil Ross, Harry Briggs and others, meaning the loss of speakers occurred one generation from today's Elders.

Hercus describes the prospects for language revival as very strong:

> "Aggie Sampson, Maria Day and Esther Charles would apparently sit on the verandah of the Deniliquin hospital, speaking in Wemba Wemba, which they preferred to English. By the time the current work began in April 1962 Mrs Day and Mrs Sampson had died and Mrs Charles was too ill to speak. Wemba Wemba however was not dead, the next generation could still remember the Moonacullah days and recalled

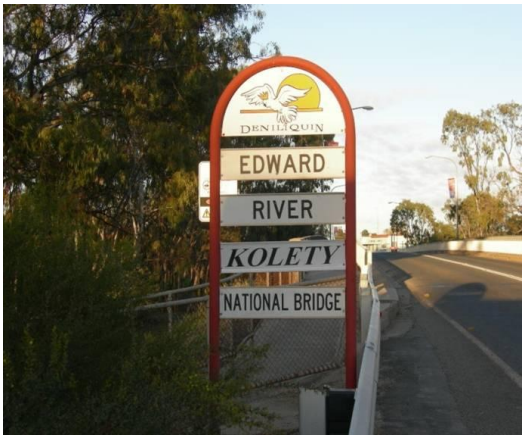
more and more of the language. Thanks to them it was possible to make a study of Wemba Wemba".[iii]

Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa Local Language Projects

Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre has an integrated and holistic approach to the use of traditional language.

Dual Naming

Yarkuwa was instrumental in a dual naming project of the Edward River which runs through the township of Deniliquin. A consultation process involving local Traditional Owners, Deniliquin Council, Department of Water and the Geographic Names Board was carried out throughout 2005

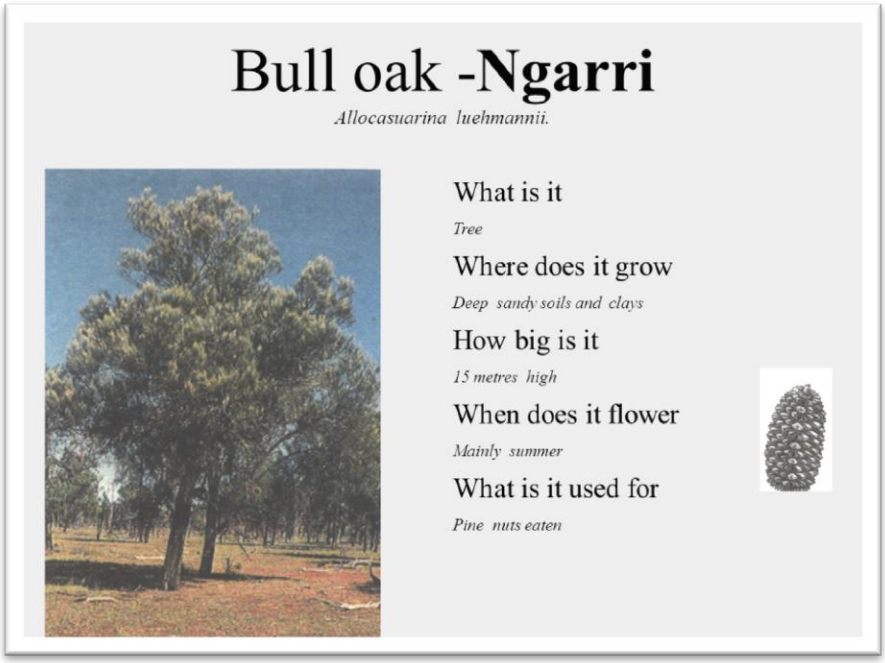


(Dual Naming sign of the Edward River, pronounced "Koletch")

Town Signage

In 2003 Yarkuwa began discussions with the Deniliquin Local Council for town signage that acknowledged the traditional owners of the land at all the main road entrances into Deniliquin. The signage includes the totems of Wamba Wamba men and women, as well as correct pronunciation of each group as determined on recordings of Elders from the 1930's and through community consultation.

Language Posters



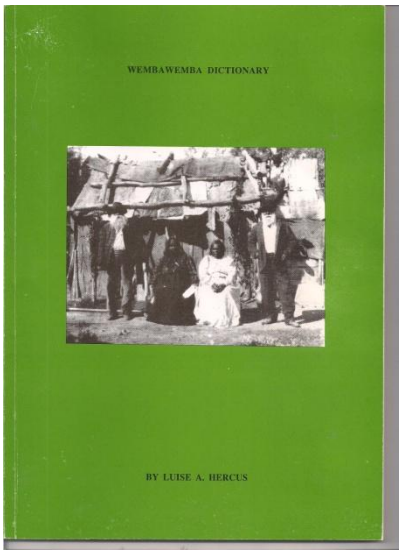
(Poster of Bull Oak with Wamba Wamba word and traditional usage)

In partnership with a number of agencies such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs and utilising the Wemba Wemba Dictionary, Yarkuwa has developed a series of language posters. There are posters of the human body with Wamba Wamba words for each body part, plants and animals, nature and the cosmos, family relationships and activities.

The posters are particularly popular with local students and are used as educational tools during our Cultural Week and throughout the year on exhibition.

Dictionaries

Yarkuwa houses copies of the “Wemba Wemba Dictionary”* written by Luise Hercus in 1992. When funds are available we also buy copies and distribute them to local Traditional Owners, new members of Yarkuwa and to interested people free of charge.



(Wemba Wemba Dictionary by Luise Hercus)

Cultural Events

(Deniliquin South School on a forest tour 2011)

Each year in October Yarkuwa organises Wamba Wamba Perrepa Perrepa Cultural Week. During these celebrations the language is used in welcomes to Country and in displays of our language posters and in the tours of the forests. In 2011 some 650 students participated in tours of the forest and some 400 locals attended various other events.

In past we have also used the language during traditional dances and in other traditional and contemporary songs for example the “Hands, knees, ears and toes” song and in storytelling.

Potential for Future Language Projects

Environmental management and On Country Learning

Yarkuwa increasingly is involved in environmental management of Country, including enhancing natural and cultural character of local forests. Language is a vital component of land management. Traditional language provides for a cultural context and deeper meanings for the environment and the different aspects of the environment and its behaviour.

One example is *Walpukana,* which is a Wamba Wamba/Perrepa Perrepa word meaning to "look around". The *Walpulkana Project* will develop a resource identifying local Traditional plants, medicines, foods, sites with Wamba Wamba/Perrepa Perrepa language translations and traditional uses and practices. The book will be developed using the Wamba Wamba dictionary, recordings and writings of past Elders and speakers of the language and through local workshops with current Elders and young people.

The knowledge within the project would be delivered through local workshops including *On Country Learning* workshops for local Traditional Owners. These workshops will include immersion in the Wamba Wamba Language and workshops with local ecologists, botanists, language technical support and Elders in the field and on country to describe and illustrate practical traditional uses of flora and fauna and their Wamba Wamba names. We will utilise Werai Forest which will soon become an Indigenous Protected Area and is a significant cultural and ecological asset.

Prisoner information exchange

There are a number of prisoners in Victoria who are learning the Wamba Wamba Language while incarcerated. There is one prisoner who is fluent in Wamba Wamba and has undertaken to teach other people in custody. Yarkuwa could assist in providing language and cultural material to inmates.

We believe this would provide positive outcomes through instilling pride in people in custody and provide a positive role in the community. These could assist in reintegration into community life and reduce recidivism.

School curriculum

A number of years ago there was a project to train locals in teaching languages in schools over a 3 year period. Wamba Wamba was being considered for this program however due to funding restrictions the program ceased. However there is still great interest in local schools in Deniliquin and surrounding areas for language programs.

Challenges/Opportunities

- *Lack of funding:*

  There is historically a lack of funding around cultural activities in the southern region of NSW, including resources for language. We acknowledge the recent support of the Federal Government in language and cultural activities but we feel more can provide either through funding or technical support.

- *Language Centre dominance:*

  There is a perception in the general community that funding for language is generally awarded to language centres. Local organisations who have holistic approaches that utilise language in environmental or cultural activities feel disadvantaged in the funding rounds. There needs to be more coordination with language groups and local traditional owners and the funding base needs to include local organisations.

- *Technical support and resources:*

  Support to transfer language dictionaries and other resources into teachable resources such as school curriculum is a major challenge for our community. Furthermore, access to language dictionaries can be difficult and often requires an impost on local traditional owners. There is also a lack of awareness of the time and cost of capacity building in local communities and the cost of delivery.

- *Cross border issues:*

  The Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa peoples and our traditional Country are in both southern NSW and northern Victoria. This often means that language programs are uncoordinated and funding is also fragmented. This provides a particular challenge of coordination, and possible duplication of programs.

Recommendations

Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre acknowledges and supports submissions to this Inquiry by the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples and the Human Rights Commission. Yarkuwa is a member organisation of the National Congress of Australia's First People.

Yarkuwa recommends that:

1. Funding for Indigenous Language Development be increased;
2. The Federal Government adopt a National Approach/Localism – the loss of traditional languages is a national issue and should be addressed as a matter of urgency. The Federal Government should also look at different models of funding from regional approaches or to even funding certain large language groups such as the Kulin Nations which covers most of western Victoria;
3. There needs to be themed rounds of funding for example On Country Learning Resources. This would allow for targeted projects and projects that are focused and innovative;
4. There should be a funding pool for local traditional owners to be able to purchase and/or access their local language resources such as dictionaries;
5. Curriculum development needs to be coordinated and supported as matter of urgency as part of the reform of our education system and the development of national curriculum; and

6. Development of skills and resources to teach language at a local level needs to occur through local organisations.

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[i] Hercus, Luise, *Wemba Wemba Dictionary*, AIATSIS, 1992, page3.
[ii] Ibid, page 16.
[iii] Ibid, page 15.
*Please note that the spelling of "Wamba Wamba" and "Wemba Wemba" is a regional difference and based on linguistic and pronunciation differences. It is not a major issue of contention.