

MAGIC AT RICK FARLEY RESERVE



Listening to Country

Rick Farley Reserve
Image: Courtesy of Chels
Marshall, Flying Fish Blue.

Quick facts

Project type:
Caring for Country,
connecting to culture

Location:
Willandra Lakes region,
south-west NSW



**Aboriginal language
landscape group:**
Ngyampaa, Mutthi Mutthi
Barkindji/Paakantyi peoples
Acknowledgement and
respect also to Mallee
Country of south-west NSW

Project time frame:
Since 2010 and ongoing

Project scale:
Landscape scale

Project cost:
Funded by the NSW
Environmental Trust's
Protecting our Places
Program

Project team:
MAGIC and the NSW
Department of Planning
and Environment

At Rick Farley Reserve, Mothers Ancestral Guardians Indigenous Corporation (MAGIC) has demonstrated how a cultural approach to caring for land, by ‘listening to the voice of Country’, can revitalise deep connections and create positive change for people and for Country.

Key outcomes

Healthy Country

Scientific and cultural knowledge systems have been combined to monitor the health of Country by observing the behaviour of key plant and animal species – in this case the malleefowl (an endangered species).

Cultural competency

The park evokes deep listening to Country. People are invited by Traditional Custodians to listen deeply through experiencing living cultural practices; for example, cultural burning, walking Country, dreaming ceremonies, visiting lookouts and areas of reflection, and to understand core cultural values: lore, kinship, Country and Dreaming.

Healthy community

In partnership with the NSW Government, the project empowers Traditional Custodians and the local Aboriginal community to return to their homelands and fulfill their responsibility to care for Country.

Patches of burnt spinifex after a cultural burn at Rick Farley Reserve

Image: NSW Department of Planning and Environment.



Spatial implications / tips for designers

Elevate environmental systems and landscape to the primary level of design decision-making rather than lower-level functional requirements to benefit site users.

Always look for connections with Country beyond site boundaries to inform and shape whatever is built within those boundaries.

Draw upon First Nations’ knowledge of Country to supplement what is understood within western science and technology to find design and planning solutions for built environment projects.

Understand ecosystem responses to seasonal changes, and how built and natural environments can be designed and maintained with this in mind.



Rick Farley Reserve

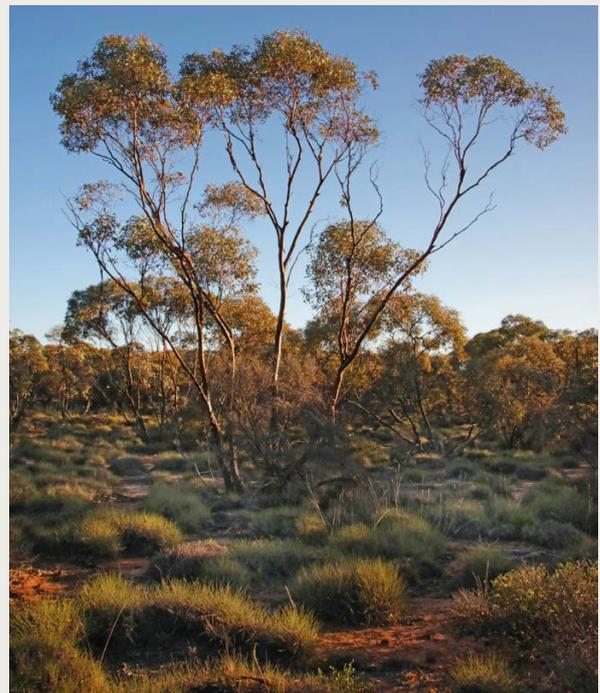
Image: NSW Department of Planning and Environment.

Rick Farley Reserve consists of 12,300 hectares of land adjacent to Mungo National Park in south-west NSW. It sits on Yungadhu Country and is home to the threatened malleefowl. The reserve was named after the founder of Landcare in NSW – an advocate for soil conservation, environmental management and reconciliation.

‘Restoring Cultural Practice for Country in Rick Farley Reserve’ began as a 3-year project designed to promote connection to Country and to care for the land through cultural practices. Through an ongoing process of participatory management, the project explores the role of traditional kinship, Country, culture and lore to bring about protection and recovery of threatened species and sustain long-term engagement and partnerships in environmental management for cultural keystone species.

MAGIC was established to care for the reserve. It is a not-for-profit organisation made up of people representing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities across NSW. Its aim is to improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal people and to manage the land according to traditional Aboriginal practices and philosophies. Land management processes were initiated by MAGIC and the (then) Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, funded by the NSW Environmental Trust’s Protecting our Places Program.

Rick Farley Reserve has seen measurable outcomes in terms of its revitalised landscape; for example, the occurrence of plant species that hadn’t been sighted in the area for 40 years. It has also introduced people to the cultural practice and wisdom behind this kind of slow, scientific, cultural land management.



Spinifex grass at Rick Farley Reserve

Image: NSW Department of Planning and Environment.

Understanding core cultural values

The project started from a point of invitation, where people were asked to join in understanding core cultural values – lore, kinship, Country and Dreaming – applied through cultural practice.

- **Lore** – rules, roles and responsibilities – lore distributes roles and responsibilities according to people’s gifts.
- **Kinship** – relationships – kinship enables all people to find value in their connection with nature.
- **Country** – place – Country is the binder that links everyone and everything together.
- **Dreaming** – stories and remembering that connect old knowledge to the current day – Dreaming connects us to the Old People and the stories of creation. It guides the present and allows us to imagine the new.

Engaging through cultural practice

A framework for engagement was developed. The framework embraces a set of cultural practices, including a series of stepping-stone activities for people to connect with core cultural values. Participation was left to individuals – they were invited to engage according to how comfortable they felt in the space.

Cultural practices included:

- **the Malleefowl Ceremony** which tells the story of the Yungadhu and helps participants make sense of their roles and responsibilities to others and to the land
- **cultural burning** to manage the spinifex grass, create fresh habitat, and support species that need fire to reproduce; a slow, cool burn of low heat applied at the right time of year enhances plant and animal biodiversity
- **toolmaking** to make transparent the resources and cultural values of a given landscape; this allows participants to form a relationship with the land through stone, links the old ways to the present, and speaks to managing resources responsibly
- **a visit to the Amphitheatre** – a natural formation once filled with fresh water, a place from which to listen to Country and a place that helps to physically connect people to Dreaming
- **a visit to the Lookout** – a high place from which to look and listen to Country and to connect to Dreaming
- **a 13-kilometre walk** around Rick Farley Reserve through the mallee and belah trees; an opportunity to experience the bush in order to create a connection to Country and to stop, look and notice the landscape
- **ongoing species monitoring** of birds and other animals, to learn to look and listen to Country and to understand the health of the landscape over time.

The Malleefowl Ceremony

Image: NSW Department of Planning and Environment.

Yarn around the fire

Image: NSW Department of Planning and Environment.

Recognising living culture

Image: Toby Scott.



Kinship, lore and Dreaming. We asked people to engage as little or as much as they felt comfortable during their time with us.





Cooking with fire

Image: NSW Department of Planning and Environment.

Listening to Country

These practices are founded in the old practice of listening to Country. It's about removing barriers and providing access for Aboriginal people to re-engage with Country and have access and ability to be back on Country. By getting back to ceremony, song, dance, cultural science and the values of respect, trust, humility and patience, people are invited by the Traditional Custodians to enter into Country and listen.

This approach is embedded in systems where Country leads conversation and actions, how to care for the landscape, build cultural wisdom and to form deeper authentic connections. It's designed to encourage people to participate in land management practices that will revitalise the landscape and help develop connection to culture and the land far beyond their time on the reserve.

By 'listening to the voice of Country', the project explores the application of a cultural approach and applies this through cultural management planning and objectives. The process has been successful in demonstrating and fostering deep connections and change, embedding culture in science and land management. This brings 2 world ideologies together – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, western science and Aboriginal cultural knowledge (cultural science) – by applying traditional cultural approaches in modern-day environmental management of the reserve.

The open invitation of this project allowed people to choose to understand why deep listening is required on Country, and how an understanding of the spiritual connection of all things is an essential realisation in participating in the cultural ceremony of looking after Country, and how this gesture of equity and guardianship is reciprocated back from Country.

Framing connection with Country through culture

One important aspect of connecting with Country is learning and sharing knowledge using cultural keystone species and biocultural systems as a framework.

These concepts have been developed and used by geographers and ecologists to describe a human-centred relationship with the landscape. A new understanding of these concepts grew politically through the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (known as the World Heritage Convention) (UNESCO 1972) and the impetus that emerged from that international agreement. The World Heritage Convention has helped to change and broaden our understanding of the human component of landscape – Aboriginal people and culture have always been embedded in the landscape. Twenty years on from its establishment, revisions to the World Heritage Convention again helped to focus our attention by linking the previously separate designations of natural and cultural sites through framing landscapes in a biocultural context. The convention achieved this by embracing the concept of 'cultural landscape' as part of its operational guidelines, which it describes in the following way:

There exist a great variety of Landscapes that are representative of the different regions of the world. Combined works of nature and humankind, they express a long and intimate relationship between peoples and their natural environment. Certain sites reflect specific techniques of land use that guarantee and sustain biological diversity. Others, associated in the minds of the communities with powerful beliefs and artistic and traditional customs, embody an exceptional spiritual relationship of people with nature.

— Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention

Cultural burn at Rick Farley Reserve

Image: NSW Department of Planning and Environment.



The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) uses 'biocultural' as a key word. Biocultural knowledge is grounded in understanding species within an ecosystem of relationships. The ecosystem includes cultural practices informed by cultural indicators describing a shared understanding of how species relate to other species, ecologies and seasons. As outlined by Hoffman (2013, p.190), Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies – the fundamental basis of a society's way of thinking, behaviour, customs and values – are rooted in worldviews that are an inclusive and inseparable weave of both the sacred and the secular. Biocultural diversity on Country is biodiversity, cultural diversity and the intricate links between them, embedded in design. Applying landscape biocultural variables to take account of interrelations – both tangible and intangible – and Aboriginal cultural values, when evaluating design application, provide a framework set in Aboriginal ways of knowing and thinking.

Sustainable, culturally derived landscapes aim to provide healthy, functioning ecological systems. Understanding the integrity of these systems raises cultural understanding of Country and the relationships of environment to people. This relies on acknowledging the concept of equity to 'kin' (the flora and fauna of an area) and making areas and management available and specific to kin – especially those identified as primary or secondary cultural keystone species (having cultural value to place and people). This is in addition to those species protected or managed under recovery planning instruments and legislation.

Further resources

Hoffman R (2013) 'Respecting Aboriginal Knowing in the Academy', *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 9(3), 189–203, <https://doi.org/10.1177/117718011300900301>.

Finding identity and purpose through connection with Country

Rick Farley Reserve is Yungadhu Country, home to the malleefowl. The MAGIC project states that 'to be on Country here is to be part of Yungadhu's story'.

Knowing our place in that story is key to restoring the landscape and returning it to a state of balance that brings life and spirit to all the species that share this Country. Every animal, every plant, every species here has a purpose to ensure Yungadhu survives. Together they create and maintain the perfect conditions for Yungadhu to thrive. People play an important role in that system.

— MAGIC Project Report

Each of the cultural practices at Rick Farley Reserve reinforces core cultural values, and inspires connection with Country, wisdom, practice and role. Through the cultural practices and the core values they embody, people are finding their identity and purpose. These core cultural values underpin the work of MAGIC and have been the key to the project's success in enabling people to connect to Country.

Credits

Research and writing:
Chels Marshall, Flying Fish Blue