

Lesson 2: Teacher Resource Sheet 1

The Ngarrindjeri people of South Australia

The Ngarrindjeri Nation is the traditional Aboriginal people of the lower Murray River, western Fleurieu Peninsula, and the Coorong of southern Australia. The Ngarrindjeri Nation consists of 18 separate tribal groups which formed a unified cultural block after remnants of each separate community congregated at Point McLeay, now Raukkan – an Australian Aboriginal community located on the south-eastern shore of Lake Alexandrina, 80 kilometres to the southeast of South Australia's capital, Adelaide. Raukkan is the heartland of Ngarrindjeri country.

Both men and women hold special cultural and environmental knowledge, and both are involved in passing down knowledge between generations and in decision-making about Ngarrindjeri affairs, land waters and resources.

The Ngarrindjeri people hold cultural and spiritual connections to particular places, to particular species of animals and plants, and all elements of the environment are part of their kinship system. Particular animal and plant species are the Ngartji (totem or special friend) of Ngarrindjeri people, who have a special responsibility to care for their Ngartji. To care for Ngartji is to care for Country.

The Country of the Ngarrindjeri was rich in fish and birdlife. Food has always been plentiful.

David Unaipon, a famous Australian inventor and author, and a member of the Ngarrindjeri Nation is featured on Australia's \$50 banknote.

Ngarrindjeri timeline

Years ago

- 40 000 The ancestors of the Ngarrindjeri settle on the shores of Lake Mungo where they gather perch, shellfish, lizards and emu eggs
- 30 000 Giant kangaroos and giant wombats roam the plains
- 20 000 Last Ice Age — Snow on the nearby mountains
- 14 000 The climate becomes warmer — Some lakes dry out
- 10 000 People living at Kow Swamp who look different from the neighbouring tribes
- 6 000 Lake Alexandrina formed as sea reaches today's level
- 4 000 People living on the lower Murray at Devon Downs
- 750 Many settlements now line the river
- 200 The Murray supports more first peoples than most other places in Australia
- 170 The white invasion begins — Squatters take over the riverbanks and plains — Many Aboriginal people die from influenza and smallpox
- 120 Many of the surviving Aboriginal people are forced to live on missions
- Today Ngarrindjeri form their own communities and farms — Live in the river towns

Dreaming Story of Ngarrinderi

Ngarrinderi is one of the great ancestral Dreaming 'heroes' of the Ngarrindjeri people. The story of Ngarrinderi, passed down from generation to generation, is an account of how the mighty River Murray was formed.

According to the story passed down from generation to generation over thousands of years, Ngurunderi chased an enormous Murray cod named Pondi from a stream in central New South Wales. In the process of fleeing, Pondi created the River Murray, with its flailing tail. Kauwira (Mannum) is the point at which Ngurunderi forced Pondi to turn sharply south. The straight section of river near Tailem Bend was formed when Pondi fled in fear after being speared in the tail. The twin peaks, large permanent sandhills of Mount Misery on the eastern shore of Lake Alexandrina are known as Lalangenggul or Lalangangel (two watercraft) and is said to be the place where Ngurunderi brought his rafts ashore to make camp. Ngurunderi cut up Pondi at Raukkan, throwing the pieces into the water, where each piece became a species of fish.

What follows is another version of the Dreaming Story of Ngurunderi.

The Story of Ngurunderi

In the Dreaming, Ngurunderi and his two sons, in search of his two wives who had run away from him, followed a massive Murray cod down the Murray from where the Murray and the Darling rivers meet. As the huge fish swam, its tail swept the water aside, creating billabongs and swamps. Long Island, near Murray Bridge, is said to be a spear thrown by Ngurunderi. Ngurunderi eventually speared the giant cod and proceeded to cut it into small portions. As he threw the small pieces into the river, they became the many different species of fish now found in the lakes and streams of the Murray–Darling.

When Ngurunderi discovered his two wives cooking a silver bream, a fish forbidden to women, he was very angry. The women sought to escape on a raft they had built. Ngurunderi pursued them down through the Coorong, creating the natural features of the landscape. When he caught up with the women, who were crossing to Kangaroo Island, he caused the sea to rise. The women drowned and became the rocky islands known as the Pages. Ngurunderi crossed to Kangaroo Island, removed his old skin of life and went to heaven. The Dreaming Story is depicted in Figure X.

The fate of Ngurunderi was re-enacted in the traditional funeral ceremonies of the Ngarrindjeri people. The skin of the dead was removed before the remains were cremated on a raised platform.

Figure 1: Approximate historical extent of Ngarrindjeri territory



Figure 2: Satellite photograph showing the River Murray, Lake Alexandrina, the Coorong and the mouth of the Murray.



Figure 3: The landscape of the Coorong



Figure 4: The mouth of the River Murray



Figure 5: The Coorong

