



# VACL NEWS

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Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages

## ABORIGINAL FLORA AND FAUNA NAMES

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*Photo: The Hon. Keith Hamilton Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Ms Sue Wesson and Mr John Atkinson*

The Hon. Keith Hamilton Minister for Aboriginal affairs officially launched the Flora and Fauna Names Project. The launch took place on the 10 December 2001 at the Koori Heritage Trust.

The Flora and Fauna Names Project is an initiative of the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages and the Victorian Biodiversity Strategy. The researcher Ms Sue Wesson has examined material from the archives of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE), the State Library of Victoria, the Victorian Public Records Office and the Australian Archives Office.

This first stage of the project focused on the NRE archives, in particular the field notebooks of the earliest Victorian surveyors and their maps although other NRE resources, libraries and public records were accessed. A total of 3028 words were found of which a significant proportion have previously been unknown to linguists. It appears that the place names and word lists in the early surveyors field notebooks, the 1858 surveyors responses to the Surveyor General and an extensive Wiradjuri wordlist by James Baylis have not yet been widely used or published. Fifteen percent of these 3028 words describe flora and fauna and six percent describe habitat. Of particular interest is the evidence provided by these lists of the existence of fauna in the mid nineteenth century in regions where it is now extinct. For example, magpie geese, eastern quolls, bustards and pademelons were assigned names in the Jardwadjali language area of the upper Glenelg and Wimmera Rivers.

The outcomes of this project may help to assist in ascertaining the distribution of flora and fauna assets in Victoria. It is hoped that this pilot project, for which the Biodiversity Strategy (NRE) provided seeding funding, will facilitate the

uncovering of more of Victoria's linguistic assets.

The languages of the Aborigines of Victoria contain information of importance for current cultural endeavours, historical and scientific efforts. DNRE archives (old Crown Survey records etc.) are an important source of information, yet much of the data has not been available to the public, Aboriginal communities, and specialist researchers (linguistics and ecologists).

*Victoria's Biodiversity* strategy recognised the importance of the aboriginal culture and its understandings to biodiversity conservation. As a tangible contribution to implementing this aspect of the strategy, Parks Flora and Fauna commissioned the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages to examine DNRE archives for the names of aboriginal biodiversity assets and related place names.

The resultant report represents a significant contribution to several aspects of the Victorian cultural and scientific environment with over 3000 Aboriginal words being identified into the various language areas in Victoria. The words refer to both biodiversity assets and place names for Victorian localities. The geographic spread makes the new knowledge relevant across rural and regional Victoria.

In the process of developing this report valuable contacts have been developed between agencies of DNRE (eg. Registrar of Geographic Names and VACL).

The Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages sees this project as a significant piece of work that will contribute to their goals regarding promotion and restoration of aboriginal linguistics and culture. It makes a significant contribution to the cultural renaissance currently underway.

The Premier of Victoria, Hon. Steve Bracks has requested the Minister for Environment and Conservation give special consideration and encourage more extensive use of Aboriginal names in the current review of the 'Guidelines for Geographic Names'. This arose from the Government's response to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) strategies. This report should assist in this process.

There is little controversy in the report. Indeed, it will probably be seen as a positive contribution to a variety of Victorian community interests. Land Victoria intends to further utilise this data and have established an on-going involvement with the aboriginal place names and other related issues. This may be of particular relevance in the year of the centenary of Federation.



*Photo: Mr John Harding and Uncle Herb Patten*

## FOCUS ON LANGUAGE AT FATSIL GATHERING

More than 100 delegates representing Indigenous community language programs and related organisations attended the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATSIL) National Indigenous Languages Conference held recently in Cairns, north Queensland.

Over the three days of the conference, representatives from an ever-growing number of community language projects workshoped topics of common interest, such as research procedures, the development of education programs and the involvement of CDEP workers to make most effective use of the funds available.

The focus of the conference was assisting members of the Stolen Generations to gain access to their language. The conference also featured a display of a wide range of materials that have been developed for use as teaching resources and promotional items for individual language groups.

Children's games, puzzles, music CDs and tapes were on show, along with curriculum development kits and library resource guides for people separated from family and country.

FATSIL used the occasion to launch the updated National Indigenous Languages Contacts Directory. The booklet gives details of nearly 40 centres around Australia involved in teaching, research or promotion of languages

Addressing the opening, FATSIL chairman Lester Coyne highlighted the achievements of the peak body in continuing to raise awareness of languages at all levels of government.

"We are reaching the stage where our languages are now an issue to be considered automatically in the creation of any policy that impacts on Indigenous Australians," he said.

ATSIC language portfolio commissioner Preston Thomas pledged support from the commission for FATSIL's push to increase funding the language area, and to raise the profile of languages at all levels of government.

Twenty-one recommendations were drawn from the open forum, and will be incorporated into FATSIL's operational plan for 2002. These include a proposal for a national discussion paper on language and cultural protocols, with particular attention to the performance of songs and dance in other than the traditional country of the performance.

Also in the spotlight was the level of government funding provided for Indigenous languages, and a call for the budget to be increased to at least the level provided for the national LOTE (Languages Other Than English) program.

***The above article was provided to VACL courtesy of the author Faith Baisden Editor Voice of the Land.***

## PLACE NAMES DATABASE PROJECT

The Atlas of Victorian Aboriginal placenames project is drawing to a close and will be launched in the first half of 2002. In its third year, the project has compiled just over 3,000 place names.

The task of gathering the placenames has been undertaken by historical geographers Dr Ian D. Clark and Toby Heydon.

The names have been entered into a Microsoft Access database, according to a standard entry format. Three categories of names are in the database: Existing Aboriginal Placenames - such as Warrnambool, Cobram, Croajingalong; Aboriginal Placenames for Existing Non-Aboriginal Placenames - such as Melbourne, Stawell, Murchison; and Aboriginal names for features currently unnamed.

The process of assembling the database has been innovative. It has involved collaboration between the two researchers and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers and linguists: such as Bruce Pascoe, Lisa Arnold, Professor Barry Blake and Dr Luise Hercus.

The Database will be available for searching on line through the VACL's Internet site. It will also be available in CD ROM format, or in hard copy version. It will be available in one volume, and in four regional volumes: southwest Victoria; northwest Victoria, central Victoria, and southeast and northeast Victoria.

**Ian D. Clark**