

GROUNDWATER STORIES FROM THE DREAMTIME, GURANGATCH AND MIRRAGAN (NSW)

The content for this case study is taken directly from the Masters Thesis entitled "ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND GROUNDWATER" by Bradley J. Moggridge (University of Technology, Sydney, 2005). For full details, refer to the original thesis document, including a comprehensive set of references.

WARNING – THE AUTHOR OF THIS MATERIAL APOLOGISES TO ANY ABORIGINAL PERSON WHO MAY BE DISTRESSED BY THE MENTION OF THE NAMES OF PERSONS WHO MAY NOW BE DECEASED.

To Aboriginal people, the stories of the dreamtime represent the past, present and future.

Storytelling is an integral part of life for Australian Aboriginals. These stories are passed from one generation to another, usually by elders in Aboriginal communities both traditional and contemporary. The Dreaming or Dreamtime is an English translation of an Aboriginal concept that has many terms to describe. Dreamtime stories depict the very basic part of a long and complex event. Stories covered include: the creation of the land and life, protocols and tribal lore, life and death, warfare, hunting, linking every creature and every feature of the landscape, male and female roles, as well as sacred and public affairs.

These are stories of the history and culture of Aboriginal people, handed down in this way since the beginning of time and refer to all that is known and all that is understood. The stories indicate the linkages between surface water, groundwater, lakes and rivers, cave systems, natural springs, thermal springs, rain events recharging the aquifers and, in drought, excess discharge allowing culture heroes to move with watertable fluctuations. Many groundwater related sites would be dreaming sites because water that originates from below the ground, with Aboriginal people not knowing the full extent of hydrogeological processes, would deem it to be spiritually significant. The dreaming significance of these sites, for instance, would link surface and sub-surface waters through their culture heroes.

The stories are told in detail and re-enacted in ceremonies which capture the imagination of the young, primarily for educating. The teaching styles have proven to be inspiring and powerful tools in presenting the Dreamtime beliefs and cultural practices.



Gundungurra people lands, South East Australia
Horton D R (1996)

Gurangatch and Mirragan

A dreaming story of the Gundungurra people, who are to be found south-west of Sydney NSW, is given in both Meredith (1989) and Stockton (1993). The Gurangatch and Mirragan story was recorded by anthropologist R.H. Matthews in 1908 from a small community on Aboriginal Reserve No. 26 Byrnes' Creek in the Burragarang Valley on the Wollondilly River.

This dreaming story is significant as its journey comes as close as 70 kilometres of Parramatta, thus close to Sydney. Dreamtime stories from around Sydney are long lost following colonisation. The story includes two culture heroes who were responsible for the formation of groundwater related features in the landscape south of Sydney.

In the far past times, in the gun-yung-ga-lung, all the present animals were men, or at any rate had human attributes. These legendary personages are spoken of as the Burringilling, in contradistinction to the present race of people. It would appear however, that the Burringilling folk were much cleverer than the people of the present time. They could make rivers and other geographical features, cleave rocks and perform many similar Herculean labours.



Australian Government
National Water Commission



Teacher Earth Science Education Program

GROUNDWATER STORIES FROM THE DREAMTIME, GURANGATCH AND MIRRAGAN (NSW)

Gu-rang-atch was one of the Burringilling, his form being partly fish and partly reptile. One of his camping places was in a large, deep waterhole or lagoon at what is now the junction of the Wollondilly and Wingecaribee Rivers; the waterhole and the country around it being called Mur-rau-ral in the Gundungurra tongue. Gurungatch used to lie in the shallow water near the bank in the middle of the day to sun himself. One day Mir-ra-gan the tiger cat, a renowned fisherman, who searched only for the largest kinds of fish, happened to catch a glimpse of Gurangatch's eye which shone like a star through the water. Mirragan tried to spear him but he escaped into the centre of the waterhole, which was of great depth. Mirragan then went into the bush a little way off, and cut a lot of hickory bark, called Millewa in the native language, and stacked it in heaps under the water at different places around the lagoon, in the hope of make Gurangatch sick, so that he would come to the surface. (There are some long, thin slabs of stone still lying in layers on the banks of Murraural waterhole, which are the sheets of hickory bark put there by Mirragan to poison the water.) The poisoned water made Gurangatch very uncomfortable, but the solution was not strong enough to overcome such a large fish as he.

Seething with disappointment, Mirragan went into the bush again to cut more hickory bark to increase the nauseating power of the water, but as soon as Gurangatch saw him going away he suspected what he was after and commenced tearing up the ground along the present valley of the Wollondilly, causing the water in the lagoon to flow after him and gear him along. He went on forming several miles of the river channel, and then he burrowed or tunnelled under the ground for some distance at right angles, coming out again on a high rocky ridge on one side of the valley, where there is now a spring of water catchment, known to the white people as 'Rocky Waterhole', but is called by the natives Bir-rim-bun-nung-a-lai, because it contains birrimbunnings or sprats. The natives say that there is a subterranean passage from Rocky Waterhole to the Wollondilly because sprats are found there as well as in the river. Gurangatch raised his head above this waterhole and shoved out his tongue which flashed like lightning. From the elevated point of observation he saw Mirragan starting from Murraural along his trail.

Gurangatch then returned along his burrow or tunnel to the Wollondilly where he had previously left off, and continued making a canal for himself. When he reached what is now the junction of Guineacor River he turned to the left and made a few miles of the channel of that stream. Coming to a very rocky place which was hard to excavate, he changed his mind and turned back to the junction and resumed his former course. He had some difficulty in getting away from this spot and made a long, deep bend or loop in the Wollondilly which almost doubles back upon itself at that place. When Gurangatch got down to where Jock's Creek now embouchures with the Wollondilly, he turned up Jock's Creek excavating a watercourse for himself.

Being a great magician he could make water flow uphill as easily as downhill. On reaching the source of Jock's Creek, he burrowed under the range, coming up in the inside of Wam-bee-ang caves, which are now called Whambeyan by the white people, being a corruption of the Aboriginal name.

We must now return to Mirragan. When he came back to Murraural waterhole and saw how Gurangatch had escaped, he followed on down the river after him, going on and on till he overtook him at Wambeeang. Mirragan did not care to hoe into any of the subterranean passages, therefore he went up on top of the rocks and dug a hole as deep as he could go and then prodded a long pole down as far as it would reach, for the purpose of frightening Gurangatch out of his retreat, much in the way we poke a kangaroo-rat or other creatures out of a hollow log. Not succeeding in his purpose with the first hole, he dug another and still another and shoved the long pole down each one as before. There are still several weather-worn 'pot holes' on top of the Whambeyan caves, which are said to be those made by Mirragan on that occasion.

When Gurangatch perceived that his enemy was continuing his relentless pursuit, he started off one morning at daylight through his tunnel or burrow and returned down Jock's Creek till he came out into the Wollondilly again. Some miles farther down was where Mirragan's family resided. When they heard Gurangatch coming and the water roaring after him like a flood, they ran away up the side of the hill in great terror.



Australian Government
National Water Commission



Teacher Earth Science Education Program

GROUNDWATER STORIES FROM THE DREAMTIME, GURANGATCH AND MIRRAGAN (NSW)

By that time Mirragan himself appeared upon the scene and his wife began scolding him for having meddled with Gurangatch and besought him to give up the pursuit, but he would not be dissuaded. He went on after Gurangatch and overtook him at what the white people call the 'Slippery Rock', but the native name is Woong-ga-ree. There they fought for a long time, which made the rock smooth and slippery ever since.

Gurangatch at last got away and went on downwards, making the water flow after him. Every time that Mirragan overtook him, he hit him with his big club or boondee, and Gurangatch struck Mirragan heavily with his tail. This continued down to what is now the junction of Cox's River, where Gurangatch turned off to the left, digging out the present channel. He went on till he came to Billa-goo-la Creek, corrupted to 'Black Hollow' on our maps, up which he travelled some distance, but turned back and resumed his course up the Cox to the junction of Ked-oom-bar Creek, now called Katoomba by the Europeans. He excavated Kedombar Creek as far up as where Reedy Creek comes into it and turned up the latter a little way, where he formed a deep waterhole in which he rested for a while.

Gurangatch then journeyed back to the Cox, up which he worked his way for some distance and formed the waterhole Karrangatta. In order to dodge his enemy he burrowed underground, coming out on Mee-oo-wun mountain, now written Mou-in, where he made a deep hole or spring, which is even now a menace to the white man's cattle on account of its narrowness and great depth. Returning to Karrangatta waterhole, he made his way up to the junction of Koo-nang-goor-wa, corrupted to Konangaroo, where he and Mirragan had another fierce encounter. Gurangatch journeyed on up the Cox to the present junction therewith of Harry's Creek. He then excavated the valley of Harry's Creek till he came to Bin-noo-mur, the present Jenolan caves, where he had the good fortune to meet with some of his relations.

Gurangatch was weary from his hard work and sore from all the blows he had received during his journey. He suspected that his enemy would still be in pursuit of him and therefore besought his friends to escort him out of his reach. They accordingly took him out of the caves and conducted him over the main range into a deep waterhole, called by the natives Joo-lun-doo.

While this was going on, Mirragan had arrived close to Binnoomur, but was very tired and lay down on a little hill to rest himself. When he revived he searched about the caves and found tracks of where Gurangatch had been staying, and also the tracks of how he had been taken away to Joolundoo by his friends. Mirragan was quite worn out by his prolonged encounter, and when he saw that his quarry had got among his relations, he thought that he also would go and obtain assistance.

He then considered that it would be prudent, before he left the spot, to adopt some means of preventing Gurangatch from escaping back to his old haunts during his absence. He consequently set to work and built a precipitous wall of rock, Wan-dak-ma-lai, corrupted by Europeans to Duckmulloy, along the side of the range between the caves and Joolundoo. A precipitous sandstone escarpment, consisting of huge blocks of rock, layer upon layer, is still pointed out as the wall built by Mirragan.

Mirragan then hurried away to his friends somewhere out westward. On reaching their camp they were eating roasted eels and offered him one. Although he was weary and hungry he answered, 'No, no, that is too small a thing for me to eat. I am chasing a great big fish and want you to come and help me.' He stated that this great fish was in an extremely deep waterhole and requested them to send the very best divers in the camp. They selected Billagoola the shag, Gool-a-gwan-gwan the diver, Gundhareen the black duck and Goonarring the wood duck.

When Mirragan returned to Joolundoo with this contingent, Gundhareen dived into the pool but returned after a while saying he was unable to get down to the bottom. Goonarring then made the attempt but without success. Goolagwangwan was the next to go down and after a considerable time brought a young or small Gurangatch to the surface, saying to Mirragan, 'Is this what you have been after?' 'No! That is too small; try again.' Goolagwangwan dived down the second time and brought up a larger fish, but Mirragan would not look at it. Billagoola then took his turn at diving and when he got down a long way, he observed several fish like those brought up by Goolagwangwan. They were trying to hide a very large fish by covering it with mud on the bottom of the pool. Billagoola



Australian Government
National Water Commission



Teacher Earth Science Education Program

GROUNDWATER STORIES FROM THE DREAMTIME, GURANGATCH AND MIRRAGAN (NSW)

it with mud on the bottom of the pool. Billagoola tried to get hold of this monster, but its head was jammed into a crevice of the rock and its tail was fast in another crevice on the opposite side, so that he could not shift it. Being a very expert diver and a strong fellow withal, he pulled a huge piece of flesh off the back of Gurangatch and started up again. On reaching the surface, Mirragan exclaimed with delight, 'That is a piece of the fish I was chasing.' When the meat was cooked Mirragan and his friends had a great feast and returned to their respective homes.

Along the course of the Wollondilly, as well as along the Cox River, there are big waterholes here and there, which are said by the natives to be Gurangatch's resting places. The following are some of the holes in the Wollondilly: Doogalool, Gungga-look, Woonnaree, Goo-rit, Mullindee, Boonbaal and Gurrabulla. In the Cox River there are Gaung-gaung, Junba, Billagoola, Karrangatta, and several others. Many of the waterholes referred to are believed by the old natives to be inhabited to the present day by descendants of Gurangatch.

Reference:
Meredith J (1989) **The Last Kooradgie Moyengully, Chief Man of the Gundungurra People**. Kangaroo Press Pty Ltd Australia.
Stockton E (1993) **Blue Mountains Dreaming**. Three Sisters Production Pty Ltd Australia.

Going further

Using a number of sources, identify where you believe this Dreaming story occurred. Locate the features on a map of NSW. Knowing what we know today, how would you describe how the Bin-noo-mur or Wam-bee-ang caves were formed?



Australian Government
National Water Commission



Teacher Earth Science Education Program