



House of spider or no brunettes? - Nyungar scholar sets record straight



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An Indigenous expert from The University of Western Australia is working to unravel generations of confusion over the true meaning of Aboriginal place names throughout Perth and the South-West.

Australian Research Council Research Fellow Professor Len Collard, who was appointed to UWA's School of Indigenous Studies last month, said his ground-breaking project aimed to set the record straight on hundreds of place names derived from the Nyungar language.

"South-West Australia is Nyungar country and more than 50 per cent of town names and countless other geographical features are of Nyungar origins," Professor Collard said. "However, few people know what they mean, and many definitions in official records are factually incorrect."

For example, Landgate records showed the northern suburb of Carramar as "an Aboriginal word meaning shade of trees". However, Professor Collard said his research suggested the meaning was more closely related to "house of the spider" or "ant", or even the red tailed cockatoo karra(k).

"What I'm trying to figure out is what is the actual meaning of all those signs you see when you're driving down in the South-West," he said. "What does the sign really tell us – brunettes can't come into town? Tall people duck their heads under the branch? Or does it mean only silly folks live here?"

Professor Collard's three-year project will use multimedia to tell the story of what Nyungar place names mean and create a collection of 14 maps covering the South-West, showing regional areas defined by linguistic practices.

He has created a database of more than 10,000 Nyungar words based on word lists compiled by colonial administrators and others from about 1831 onwards and uses it to break down and cross-check place names and given meanings.

The results could change the way Government agencies, schools, the tourism industry and others operate, paving the way for dual naming, better-informed naming of new places, new tourism ventures, more meaningful education, and the correction of reams of Government and other documentation containing wrong information about the origins and meanings of Nyungar place names.

Professor Collard said he hoped the project would deepen people's sense of country, history and place, lead to a better understanding and reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and provide strong motivation for protecting the natural and built heritage of an area. It could also provide the basis for giving relevant names to new suburbs. "If new roads or places or suburbs are being made, do we want to call them Paris?" he said. "We have our own culture – let's live our culture and have our ancient place names and meanings embedded in our own landscapes, which is our Australian tradition."

Professor Collard is a Whadjuk/Balardong Nyungar and traditional owner of the Perth region and surrounding districts. His research interests are in the area of Aboriginal studies, including Nyungar interpretive histories and Nyungar theoretical and practical research models, and he has conducted research for the Australian Research Council, the National Trust of WA, WA Catholic Schools and the Swan River Trust.

Media references

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