

CARBONCARE™ VOICES

Carbon Project Owner Insights: Oral McGuire - Beverley, WA

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CARING FOR COUNTRY IS CRITICAL AT AVONDALE PARK, BEVERLEY

Yaraguia Enterprises Inc (YEI), Oral McGuire and his family group, are traditional Ballardong Noongar landholders.

YEI manages 852ha on Ballardong Noongar Country at Beverley, Western Australia. As a Noongar man and Chairperson of Noongar Landholder Enterprises, as well as Director of the Noongar Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Oral is steeped in the responsibility of Caring for and healing Country.

This process of healing – regenerating land that has been destroyed by 200 years of clearing, overgrazing, and damaging homogeneous growing practices – is the most staggeringly significant piece of the puzzle for Oral. And it's got nothing to do with carbon farming; nothing to do with climate change. It comes from 60 000 years of culture, connection & belonging, understanding, and wisdom.

THE NUTS & BOLTS

- Through a partnership with Greening Australia, YEI has planted about 600,000 plants and trees, each which are native to the area. And about 85-90% of them are production plants for food and medicine and present an economic value add.
- Strategic revegetation, along with removal of livestock and eradication of weeds, has encouraged the return of insects, animals and birds – all of whom are part of the Value Framework – each of whom have a role to play in land management.
- Regenerating the land has allowed Oral to return to cultural burning practices, which means he doesn't rely on herbicides, pest baiting or fertilisers.

THE CULTURAL VALUE FRAMEWORK

There is no way of having a conversation about farming in Australia without also having a conversation about colonisation. The arrival of the First Fleet brought with it an arrogance, the effect of which is still felt keenly by Aboriginal people today. Rejection of the First Peoples'

Cultural Authority (Kaatadjin) – their knowledge, practices, and wisdom – was (and is) a dismissal of the landcare strategies that work on the land in this place.

Oral McGuire is reconnecting to his cultural authority on his property. And that culture is more than Dreaming stories and clap-sticks. It's a recognition of the framework that has sustained Noongar culture for 60,000 years, or 2,000 or more generations. All plants, all creatures (including Noongar people themselves), all water – everything that lives – is represented in Noongar culture through a sophisticated kinship system (Moort). Their connectedness and inter-connectedness is categorised into the totem system (the third layer of a complex kinship structure), where each totem (and therefore each living thing) has its place and role in caring for Country (Boodjar).

The problem, Oral says, is that by placing themselves *above* the framework and above the Traditional Custodians, colonists dismissed the cultural authority that successfully managed the land for generations and in doing so, they lost the opportunity to connect their souls to this land. Consequently, sacred knowledge was also lost when, those practices were very disrespectfully pushed aside.



THE SCIENCE AND THE SACRED

This is not to say that there is no way forward – there is. Oral believes in the value of science and acknowledges the threat of climate change. He sees synergy in the technical capability of western science and the vast wisdom of Noongar sacred knowledge. Sacred knowledge, he says, is not enough now because the land has been mistreated for so long.

While his ancestors would criss-cross Noongar Boodjar over the course of the year, tending, harvesting and burning in culturally specific and appropriate ways, there are huge swathes of land that haven't been burned for years now. Oral knows that an immediate switch back to traditional burning practices would potentially cause a wildfire.

Instead, he sees a future in which Traditional Owners work with Western scientists to restore the land; a system in which Noongar experience and cultural understanding of the land has a valued voice. A system in which regeneration of Country can happen. Noongar wisdom brings spiritual healing capability, while science and technology brings management capability and access to critical resources – as long as the central purpose is Boodjar can be healed over time, but Noongar wisdom must be given its rightful place at the forefront of any strategy.

And that – caring for Country; not economics, not trade, not carbon farming – that’s the most important piece of the puzzle for Oral.

COLLABORATIVE CARE OF BOODJAR

Oral yearns for (and tirelessly works toward) an understanding by leadership of the need to collaborate with Australia’s First Peoples and the world’s oldest living cultures. And he’s angry about it, too. There are times when he throws his hands up and demands to know why the decision-makers in Agriculture don’t put Country first. How can they *not* see that the very land they rely on is quantifiably hurt by current land management strategies and practices?

But he’s also optimistic about what can be done to restore land. The farm at Avondale Park is his testing ground and his hypothesis was proven: strengthening biodiversity with native plants attracts the right bugs, creatures and birds. The soil is softening – making way for traditional practices. “The most powerful thing is that each year we do the work of healing Country and we see continued growth, change and improvement,” Oral says.

When it comes to carbon farming, Oral sees restoration as a developing industry. Clearly, there are some common goals when it comes to carbon planting and regeneration of Country. The best way to bring them to fruition, according to Oral, is to include Noongar people in the biodiversity and restoration conversation.

THE ECONOMICS OF UNDERSTANDING

As far as Oral is concerned, there is nothing more important than regenerating the land. Clearly, he’s on board with caring for the environment. This work is integral for the development of industry and land-based enterprises, as well as potentially improving commercial farming practices – big changes that are good for everyone in the agriculture industry.

But what he’s tired of is care without consultation. Oral is working towards the goal of having Noongar people involved in land regeneration at all levels. He says that when Aboriginal people are empowered to be involved in the process – from decision-making to doing – that’s when real change will happen.

**“ Noongar people know who the right people are to light the right fire. And what our Boodjar needs, is the right fire.”
-Oral McGuire**

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