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Are our Indigenous Sciences at risk of Assimilation?

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From homeopathic remedies to ecology, Indigenous Sciences need more protection.

The 'Hylandia dockrillii', commonly named 'Blushwood' is getting more and more press for it's anti-cancer properties (NITV)

By Luke Briscoe

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Every year we are seeing more and more Indigenous inclusion in National Science Week, but are we actually educating Australia or are our Indigenous Sciences becoming assimilated into Western Science?

Are our Sciences on a dangerous path to assimilation?

Yes I said it! We are on a path to assimilating our Indigenous Sciences - and if we don't act fast, Indigenous Science will just be a token symbolic view point offered when undergoing research into Indigenous sciences.

Already we are seeing [more and more non-Indigenous people using Indigenous Science as a way to gain either innovation funding \[http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lawreport/bio-piracy/2982084 \]](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lawreport/bio-piracy/2982084), with little to no real connection to communities the science might originate from. However, Indigenous Science without Indigenous Culture behind it is not Indigenous Science at all.

Our people are the first scientists in the world and this is backed up by the fact that we having been [using the sky to navigate for thousands of years \[http://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/feature/life-code-sky-full-secrets?cx_navSource=related-side-cx#cxrecs_s \]](http://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/feature/life-code-sky-full-secrets?cx_navSource=related-side-cx#cxrecs_s) and the Australian boomerang was the only engineered object in the world that returns. Our understanding of how the world works is so valuable that it has to be protected from greedy people.

Related Reading

[\[/nitv/feature/life-code-sky-full-secrets?cid=inbody:are-our-indigenous-sciences-at-risk-of-assimilation \]](#)



The Life Code: A Sky Full of Secrets

The way our ancestors passed on knowledge was through a very sophisticated code and the Yalanji word for this is Ngujakura; our Lore and it's The Life Code of the world that we live in.

Why do I say we are on a path to assimilation? Just really think about this for a minute. Really think about it. Indigenous and Western Sciences are vastly different and people who say that there very much alike are very misguided. It's called Indigenous Science for a reason; Indigenous Australians have been practicing this science for thousands of years in a way that it has become a part of our identity. Indigenous Science within Western Science are just mere remnants of our overall practice, with a pat on the back for "inclusion". Some of these key differences in Indigenous science are defined;

- Indigenous culture and science are one in the same; Indigenous science is embedded into our cultures we as Western Sciences distances itself from culture.
- Indigenous science is guided by our traditional lore.

- Indigenous science is collective.
- Indigenous science puts nature at the centre of its practices, whereas Western Sciences places man at the centre.
- Indigenous Science practices involve spirituals ceremonies and rituals, whereas Western Science doesn't.

Even the United Nations recognises that Indigenous people have their own sciences; [article 31 of the United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples-1) [<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples-1>] states that Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.

[[/nitv/article/2017/04/21/where-are-indigenous-voices-march-science?cid=inbody:are-our-indigenous-sciences-at-risk-of-assimilation](https://www.nitv.com.au/article/2017/04/21/where-are-indigenous-voices-march-science?cid=inbody:are-our-indigenous-sciences-at-risk-of-assimilation)]



Where are the Indigenous voices in the March for Science?

This weekend Indigenous scientists across the globe will not March for Science - but for Sciences.

An Indigenous scientist in Western Science, doesn't make it 'Indigenous Science'.

A PhD isn't required to be an Indigenous Scientist, neither is a flash floppy graduation cap. What you do need, is to be connected to your culture and country and practice the ceremonies and rituals that have sciences embedded within them.



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Calling a science program "Indigenous" by having Indigenous academics that have studied Western Sciences doesn't make it Indigenous. Having someone from the community who knows their Songlines and how the sciences are communicated within the stories - that's Indigenous Science.

Having someone from the community who knows their Songlines and how the sciences are communicated within the stories - that's Indigenous Science.

Our culture is what defines us as Indigenous people, so if there is no culture involved or very little when why call it Indigenous? I am a proud Yalanji man and it's the word 'Ngujakura' in my language that defined our culture, lore and science. Just this fact that Indigenous Sciences are enshrined by tribal lore should be evidence enough to give light to how Indigenous people are active in protecting of their sciences.

While there is a place in Western Science for Indigenous people, we need to be careful that we are not demoralising culture that is some 80,000 years old for a few crumbs from corporate and government.

I get it - Western Science and innovation is interesting and attractive and provides many business opportunities. While there is a place in Western Science for Indigenous people, we need to be careful that we are not demoralising culture that is some 80,000 years old for a few crumbs from corporate and government. Are you just in the Indigenous STEM space to fix an employment deficit that is not anyone's fault but the government and society that rejected Indigenous people in the first place?

Science in cultural tourism: Is it exploiting our Sciences and diminishing our culture?

I think it's important to make a link between cultural tourism and Indigenous STEM programs. At this point, both provide non-Indigenous people insight into our Sciences - like bush tucker walks or star-gazing events - and yet, they are not really connecting on a true spiritual

and culture level. So what is it then? It's just a taste of Indigenous Australia and I don't people to just mildly grasp who I am. I want people to respect and understand that our culture and our Sciences is so sophisticated that it takes years to be allowed to understand our culture. You can't simply understand Indigenous Australia by going to a festival or trekking through to the Northern Territory.



I believe cultural tourism is blinding us, and even though it provides economic opportunity, it's more entertaining for the visiting tourists, who get to take off their blackfella masks when they return home.

0 We need to be independent from mainstream tourism and free to practice our cultures and I think we as Indigenous people need to come together to look holistically about where our paths are going with Indigenous STEM and how we can make it benefit us first and foremost. The government and Western Science take our knowledge to cure cancer [<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-07/queensland-scientists-discover-cancer-fighting-berry/5796106>], but we don't even have adequate health care ourselves.

Is the balance it too far skewed to give our scientific knowledge to non-Indigenous people?

When I hear the words "inclusion" I am reminded that this word was born from an exclusionary society. In fact, when you delve into 'inclusion' in Australian policy this actually was adopted from inclusion policies from the UK in which the government used to assimilate ethnic minorities into an English way of life. This social inclusion model was used in Australia and applied to Indigenous peoples in an attempt to include us into Australian society.

So I ask myself, if whitefellas are teaching our cultures and Sciences - what is left for us and how does this impact on my community spiritually, culturally and economically? Our culture and lands are what gives us our identities and no person should be stripped of this. Our culture is ours and unless Australian's want to truly understand our Sciences, they have to also swallow the history of this country.

Related Reading

[</nitv/content/kangaroo-bone-nose-piercing-oldest-bone-jewellery-ever-found?cid=inbody:are-our-indigenous-sciences-at-risk-of-assimilation>]



Kangaroo-bone nose piercing is oldest bone jewellery ever found

Ancient jewellery tells stories of the complicated behaviours of our ancestors, and recently discovered septum accessory in The Kimberley is oldest bone jewellery in the world.

This evening, I will join a panel [<https://whatson.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/events/culture-and-science-indigenous-perspectives>] as a part of National Science Week [<https://www.scienceweek.net.au/>], exploring the role of the world's oldest living cultures in the development of new technology. I believe our future is at stake and I call on the Indigenous STEM sector to do more to protect and maintain our sciences.

I'm confident one way we can do this is by developing ethical guidelines in Indigenous STEM for anyone working in our sector and that way we as a collective voice can ensure that we are doing our best to protect our sciences. We need to ensure that what we are putting out as Indigenous people is benefiting our communities and not our own pockets. We need to not undersell our projects and programs and say yes to free workshops because the science that you are providing will most probably have a legacy that dates back to over 80,000 years and that is priceless.

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As part of [National Science Week \[https://www.scienceweek.net.au/ \]](https://www.scienceweek.net.au/) the city of Sydney will hold a panel discussion [<https://whatson.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/events/culture-and-science-indigenous-perspectives>] Tonight, Thursday 17 August to explore the role of the world's oldest living cultures in the development of new technology. Join Indigenous STEM educators; Vanessa Lee, Luke Briscoe, Michael Rome, Warren Roberts and Monica Stephens as discuss how knowledge held by Aboriginal peoples help shape innovation and sustainability? What will be the impact on future generations? For information on the event, [go here \[https://whatson.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/events/culture-and-science-indigenous-perspectives \]](https://whatson.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/events/culture-and-science-indigenous-perspectives)

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