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Sacred Indigenous site handed back to traditional owners

By Caleb Cluff

A significant site of cultural practise for the Dja Dja Wurrung people has been handed back to them to manage.

One of the most culturally significant Aboriginal sites in Victoria was granted to the Dja Dja Wurrung people at a special ceremony on Friday.

The Mt Barker site in Mt Alexander shire was bought by the Indigenous Land Corporation on behalf of Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation to protect the property's significant cultural and environmental values.

Graham Atkinson is director of the DDWCAC.

He says that the purchase of land is especially significant, as the Dja Dja Wurrung had no traditional country to access for cultural practice prior to now.

"It comes two years after we signed our recognition and settlement agreement with the state government of Victoria, back in March 2013, and it has always been on the books that eventually the Mount Barker property and site would be divested back to the Dja Dja Wurrung traditional owners," says Mr Atkinson.

"It's one of the only remaining stone arrangement precincts in Victoria. It's on the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register. It has significance in the culture and history of the Dja Dja Wurrung people."

The stone arrangement on and surrounding Mt Barker is thought to be connected to ceremonial activity relating to a sacred ancestral being called the Mindi.

It is believed that the Mindi - a large serpent - was responsible for smallpox epidemics during the 1800s.

"This is an ancestral spirit; he's a bit like our other ancestral spirit, Bunjil the eagle. His alter-ego, you could probably say," says Mr Atkinson.

"Whilst Bunjil symbolises power, wisdom and knowledge, Mindi represents the enforcement of cultural law of the Dja Dja Wurrung people - that is if anyone was seen to be breaking the law, then Mindi's powers would come into play to get people back on track.

"As legend and history says, he was associated with the smallpox spread; however the group recovered and overcame that. It was, of course, really introduced through European settlement."

The intricate stone arrangement and scar tree on the site will be the source of cultural education for the new traditional owners, as well as training in environmental management.
"It's very important for the Dja Dja Wurrung owners now to be able to preserve, manage and look after that stone arrangement and to include it as part of a wider history of the area, as part of European settlement and Indigenous occupation," says Mr Atkinson.

The Mt Barker property comprises about 46 hectares, about 30 kilometres south of Bendigo.

"We've identified several land management areas that need to be addressed: the promotion of natural revegetation, the planting of native trees and shrubs; pest eradication and weed control; maintenance of existing tracks and erosion control.

"Starting from next week there'll be about 9,000 trees planted on the Mt Barker property; that's an amazing partnership between Dja Dja Wurrung and the Mt Alexander Landcare groups.

"Overall, in the wider area, they'll be planting up to 40,000 trees.

"It will play a significant role in cultural education for traditional owners; in the future it will also provide a very important educational tool for the wider community."