

# Showcase indigenous culture

Paul Beeson



The recent focus on tourism, the Premier's adoption of the portfolio, and completion of Elizabeth Quay, among other infrastructure, have created a palatable excitement for the future of this important sector.

However, a fundamental element of great potential remains yearning for its place.

In 1885 Swan River colonist George Fletcher Moore published the first attempted translation of the Noongar language to English.

Selections from it were published by this paper.

Although his motivations were not purely altruistic, and his behaviour as an early citizen far from model, his work stands as a substantive record of Noongar indigenous spoken and behavioural culture in the mid 19th century.

Many more successful and respectful efforts have been made over ensuing years by concerned citizens, academics and Noongars to permanently enshrine and enliven the many, rich facets of their, and their fellow indigenous group's culture, for the education and appreciation of all.

This record is represented through many media and in our redeveloping Perth Museum, cultural centres and libraries throughout our great State.

All the while, Perth city and its surrounds have benefited enormously through expanded infrastructure and improved amenity; heritage buildings juxtapose with modern office towers, St Georges Terrace

underfoot now has granite as opposed to the ubiquitous cement slab, once redundant lanes now alive with the joy of cafes and small bars, the Swan River now drawn into, and warmly embraced by the city in the form of Elizabeth Quay.

Quite rightly, the politicians and bureaucrats responsible for this renaissance, proudly declare Perth a "reborn city", offering its residents and visitors world-class amenity and experience.

But buildings, bars and granite a city does not fully make; there is something missing that would allow Perth to truly complete. A significant member of our broad and diverse family deserves a seat at our newly, expensively and beautifully set table.

Our reborn city rests gently on the Derbarl Yiragan (Swan

River), a significant cultural feature of the Whadjuk people of the Noongar group. It sits in the protective lap of the Karra Katta (Kings Park), formed by the dreamtime Waugal, as it made its serpentine journey to the ocean.

The Elizabeth Quay master plan, wisely and timely included an indigenous cultural centre placed appropriately on its western bank, foremost to the river.

But on its western bank, the ghost of what could be, sits quietly in the long, afternoon shadows of Karra Katta.

International conference delegates that the Perth Convention Bureau attracts to WA spend five times more than leisure tourists, the knowledge and commerce they bring, along with the Perth and West Australian visitor experience they take home are invaluable socially and economically to

our State.

The sophistication and education of these delegates reflects their spend: high. As such, the experience they seek

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when they visit is generally natural, cultural and heritage based, and ideally all three simultaneously.

West Australian indigenous culture, one of the longest living in the world, offers West Australians and our visitors a unique view of the land and ecology through a layered and rich Dreamtime.

What better way to appreciate the diversity our glorious West Australian natural beauty than through the experience, culture and knowledge of its inhabitants of 40,000 years.

In Wellington, visitors can enjoy and learn of Maori culture at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, and in Washington DC, of American Indian culture at the National Museum of the American Indian.

As a tourism marketer of our State I'm acutely aware of the need for Perth to have an iconic experience and attraction.

Through a dedicated national indigenous cultural centre our West Australian indigenous

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culture could be experiential, educational, celebrated and paid due reverence, all on the banks of Derbarl Yiragan.

The NSW Opposition has mooted \$100 million for a national indigenous culture centre on Sydney Harbour at Barangaroo.

Both our State's major parties have recognised the importance of indigenous culture, what is critical now is to what degree? I sincerely hope the wisdom of both sides

of our Parliament allows Perth the advantage of being home to Australia's first and pre-eminent national indigenous cultural centre.

Supported and encouraged by successive State Governments through Tourism WA, the WA Indigenous Tourism Operators Council works tirelessly to develop businesses that showcase and educate visitors of our indigenous culture.

The demand for indigenous tourism product is high, and the potential is great.

What better centre of gravity for this tourism business momentum than a national cultural centre.

We have the privilege of living in a country and State that is home to one of the richest and most complex continuing cultures on Earth, let us facilitate a greater representation of it in our

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education and cultural experience, for the betterment of all West Australians and our visitors, for the enrichment of our community and economy.

If culture is the invisible web that binds a community, then our shared cultural heritage is the "sticky stuff" of which that web is formed.

In 1830, George Fletcher Moore arrived in Fremantle as one of our State's first settlers.

His journey and early years in Perth's colony formed the later published Diary of Ten Years.

While his naivety of the period allowed him little appreciation of the local indigenous culture, his imperfect translation of the indigenous languages of the region stands as an important, and rare, record for its time.

Almost 200 years, a developed economy and millions of citizens later, surely, we, as West Australians could give greater reverence to our indigenous culture than merely putting it in the pages of print.

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■ Paul Beeson is chief executive of the Perth Convention Bureau, a State Government (through Tourism WA), City of Perth and industry supported body charged with attracting high yielding national and international conferences to WA.



There is something missing.

**Paul Beeson**



**Unrealised potential:** Elizabeth Quay's master plan included an indigenous cultural centre placed on its western bank. Picture: Michael Wilson