

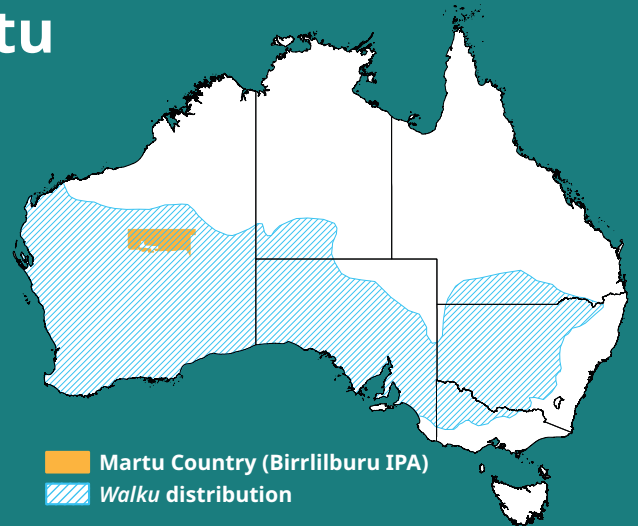
Walku (Quandong) on Martu Country (Birriliburu IPA)

© Birriliburu *Wanti* (Ladies) Team

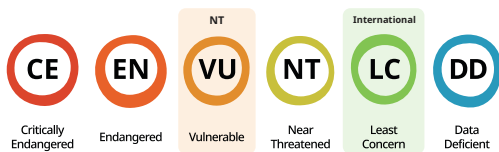
Common name: Quandong

Scientific name: *Santalum acuminatum*

Language names: *Walku*, *Tjawirli*



Status



Description

Walku are a small tree, 6-8 m high with drooping grey-green leaves, small green flowers (September to January) and bright red fruit.

Walku are hemi-parasitic plants, they get water and nutrients from the roots of a host plant (usually a wattle). As a result, they have relatively high-nutrient leaves which lots of animals like to eat. Emus eat *Walku* fruits and play an important role in seed dispersal because the seeds are undigested in their droppings.



Walku. Photo: mastersky/stock.adobe.com

Distribution

Walku are found in the semi-arid and Mediterranean climatic zone across southern Australia.

Habitat

Walku prefer nutrient-poor, free draining soils and can occur in a wide variety of habitats. Within the Birriliburu Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) they are often restricted to gullies and gorges where they are more protected from fire and feral herbivores (like camels).

Threats

Threats to *Walku* include:

- **Feral animals (herbivores)**, including camels, donkeys, goats and rabbits
- **Climate change**, including reduced winter rainfall and more droughts leading to reduced survival rates, seedlings also require cooler temperatures to germinate
- **Weeds like Buffel grass**, increasing the amount of fuel making fires more frequent and out-competing seedlings or host plants
- **Inappropriate fire regimes**, including fires that are too hot, occur too often or burn special places
- **Mining**, reducing groundwater availability and fragmenting habitats
- **Loss of many medium-sized digging mammals**, which used to collect and bury seeds helping them to germinate.





Cultural Connections

When ripe *Walku* fruits were collected from a tree they were often carried a long way, usually in a *wira* (big wooden dish). This would mean seeds were moved around on Country as Martu travelled along *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming) songlines, between special water places. Some songlines stretch across Birriburu Country and connect Martu to other surrounding lands and people.

Spreading seeds would mean new plants could grow and produce fruits in special places for generations to come. Emus, like Martu, also moved seeds around.

“Emu love them too, you know. Emu, they go to the tree. You got to be first to get this Walku otherwise nothing.”

Lena Long, Martu¹

Cultural Values

Country

The fruits are ready to eat in *talmarta* (early summer, spring), about September, after good rain.

Seeing *Walku* trees full of nice red fruits, of different ages and in different parts of Country – these are all indicators that Country is healthy.

It is an important and enjoyable part of ranger work on Country – to visit these places, pull up and check if there are any fruits to collect.



Walku. Photo: Vanessa Westcott.

Knowledge

Martu hold knowledge about how to harvest the fruits and how to prepare the seeds as medicine. They hold knowledge about the location of *Walku*, they know where individual *Walku* trees occur across vast areas of Martu Country.

It is very important to pass this knowledge on to the young ones. It is best to do this when out on Country, to tell stories when you see a tree.

For Martu, *Walku* trees also keep contemporary knowledge alive, with story of Warri and Yattungka, the old Mantjiljtarra couple, who were still living in the bush until 1977. When they met up with family and others it was a really dry time in the desert, Yattungka's *wira* was full of red *Walku*.

Kin

Walku fruits were often relied upon as a food source when meat was scarce. The fruits can be eaten straight from the tree (when yellow or red) or made into cakes for later use. They are a rich source of antioxidants and contain vitamin E, folate, zinc, magnesium, calcium and iron.

When *Walku* fruits are found to be ripe on a tree, it is important that they are shared amongst family members appropriately.

Looking after Country both spiritually and through active land management is critical to keeping Martu Law and Culture strong.

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Results of Poor Management

Martu are worried about *Walku*.

"We see less Walku plants out on Country these days."

Gladys Ashwin, Martu

Climate change

Rainfall is critical to the health of *Walku* and a key determinant in whether plants produce any fruit. Climate change is affecting a variety of different important bush tucker plants.

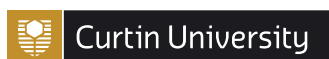
Land management issues

The Birriliburu IPA is 6.6 million ha, a vast area to look after. Most Birriliburu Martu live in Wiluna or other neighbouring towns making it harder and more expensive for the existing ranger team to manage.

Wrong-way fire, especially frequent, big, hot wildfires threaten the health of Country. Buffel grass is also making fires more frequent. Camel grazing has also had a heavy impact on *Walku* populations. Cats and foxes threaten remaining *muntalgnaku* (Greater bilby) populations which are in low numbers and are important for soil health and increasing the chance of *Walku* seed germination.

Loss of cultural practice

Martu are not able to travel along the *Tjukurrpa* songlines as often anymore, therefore *Walku* seeds are not being moved around as much. This is an important cultural practice that helps to keep Martu healthy and *Walku* healthy too.



Martu Vision

Martu-led ranger work

Martu know what our Country needs, we know what needs to be done. We have done much work already to identify key areas and plan and prioritise this work. The existing ranger program has led to meaningful employment opportunities and improved health and wellbeing outcomes for many Martu since it began.

The Birriliburu IPA ranger program undertakes right-way burning each field season, including aerial burning operations. They also conduct an aerial camel shoot each October. These aerial operations are expensive and require in-kind and funding contributions from multiple partners each year.

We now need to be funded appropriately, for the scale of the work required, and be able to decide how the work is undertaken. This includes looking after Culturally Significant Entities, regardless of whether or not they are listed as threatened.

Walku projects

Martu want to undertake special trips on Country to spread seeds, to continue cultural practice and ensure *Walku* are not lost from Country.

We also want to investigate the feasibility of creating a *Walku* orchard to grow up *Walku* plants. We could sell the fruit and spread more seed on Country. Employment opportunities could also result from such a project.

Kids on Country

Kids are the future, the next generation. Intergenerational knowledge transfer is very important to Martu women. We want more chances to take the kids out on Country, to show them Country, to tell the stories, to connect them with special places.

"When you go out on Country you feel good, kids running around and you sit back and tell the stories."

Annette Williams, Martu

How will we know if *Walku* are going ok?

- If there are plenty of plants producing fruit
- Young people know how to collect and use them.

¹ Long L, Ashwin G, Cutter R, Bingham K, Williams G, Long C, Williams R, Birriliburu Rangers, Westcott V, Shipway S (2023) *Birriliburu Bushtucker Book*. Birriliburu Pty Ltd, Wiluna.

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