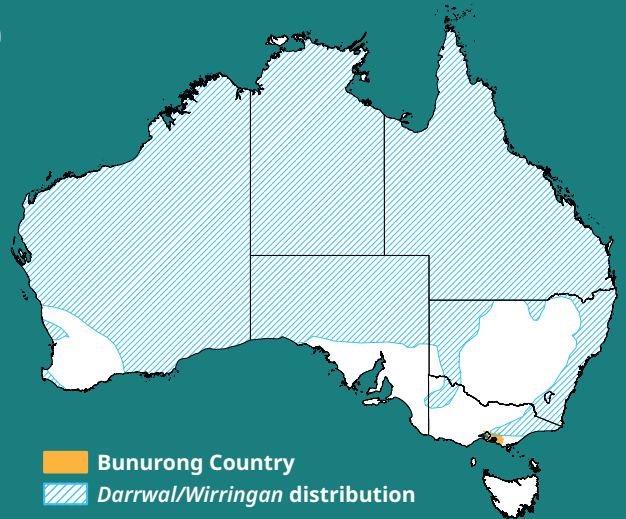


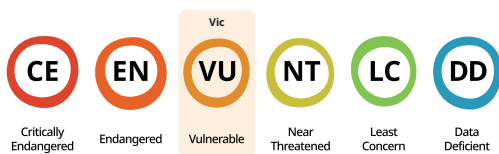
# Darrwal/Wirringan (Dingo) on Bunurong Country

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Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation

Common name: Dingo  
Scientific name: *Canis familiaris*  
Language name: *Darrwal, Wirringan\**



## Status



*Darrwal/Wirringan* were assessed as Vulnerable under the IUCN Red List in 2004 but are no longer listed due to taxonomic changes.

In September 2024, *Darrwal/Wirringan* were [declared unprotected](#) under section 7A of the Wildlife Act 1975 (Vic) over an area covering much of central and eastern Victoria. This allows for *Darrwal/Wirringan* to be culled freely in these areas until 1 January 2028, when the decision will be reviewed.

## Description

*Darrwal/Wirringan* are an iconic native Australian species, being Australia's largest terrestrial, mammalian carnivore. *Darrwal/Wirringan* can be seen in colour varieties ranging from sandy cream to tan and even dark brown, brindle, black and red, often with light coloured feet.

*Darrwal/Wirringan* are an apex species and 'ecological engineer', playing a significant role sustaining ecosystem health. For example, the presence of *Darrwal/Wirringan* has been shown to reduce the abundance of foxes and feral cats, which can result in more diversity in small mammal populations and increased vegetation cover and complexity.



*Darrwal/Wirringan*. Photo: Cynthia/stock.adobe.com

## Distribution

*Darrwal/Wirringan* can be found throughout mainland Australia as well as some islands such as *K'gari* (Fraser Island) in Queensland<sup>1</sup>. Today, they are no longer found in large parts of New South Wales and Victoria. This is largely due to the construction of infrastructure to limit their presence near farmland such as the Dingo Barrier Fence, which extends from South Australia through Queensland to northern New South Wales.

In Victoria, there are currently two main populations. The north-west population in the Mallee near the Big Desert is small and isolated. The population in the east, which ranges across Bunurong Country, is larger with a wider distribution.

## Habitat

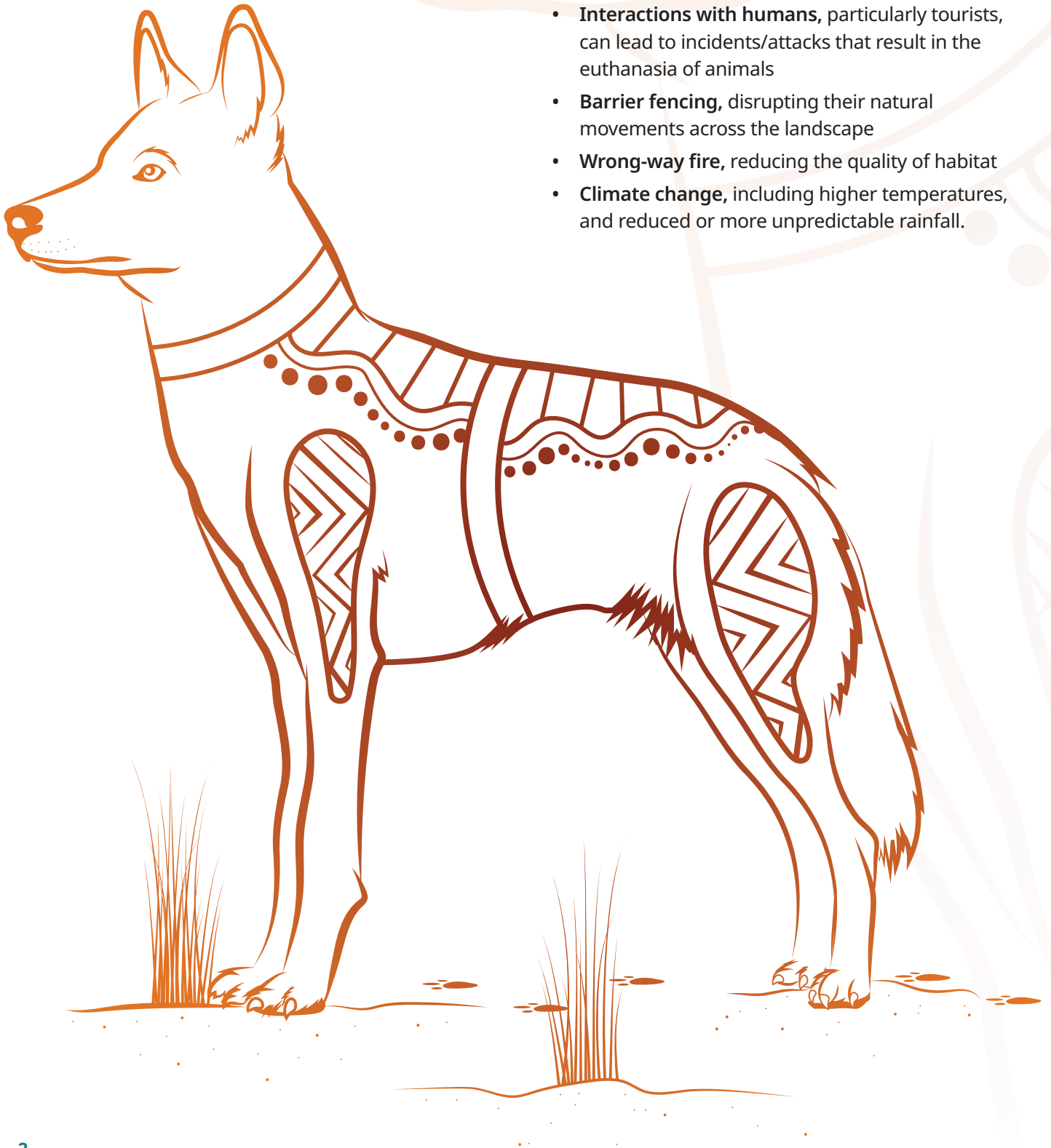
*Darrwal/Wirringan* have adapted to live in many habitats, from cool wet forests and alpine snowfields in southern Australia to the more arid grasslands, semi-desert and tropical areas of central, western and northern Australia.

In Victoria today, *Darrwal/Wirringan* are restricted to landscapes with large areas of public land. On Bunurong Country, this includes dry and wet forests, sub-alpine woodland and coastal heath environments.

## Threats

Threats to *Darrwal/Wirrigan* include:

- **Habitat loss**, leading to population fragmentation, low genetic diversity and inbreeding
- **Misidentification** as wild dogs, leading to lethal control by farmers (including shooting, trapping and baiting)
- **Interactions with humans**, particularly tourists, can lead to incidents/attacks that result in the euthanasia of animals
- **Barrier fencing**, disrupting their natural movements across the landscape
- **Wrong-way fire**, reducing the quality of habitat
- **Climate change**, including higher temperatures, and reduced or more unpredictable rainfall.





## Cultural Connections

*Darrwal/Wirrigan* are significant to First Nations peoples across the continent and this can be seen in the [National First Nations' Dingo Declaration](#).

In Victoria, the first steps towards the development of a collective statement on the cultural significance of *Darrwal/Wirringan* were made at the Restoring Spirit on Country workshop in December 2023. The purpose of this workshop, which was hosted by Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (BLCAC) with support from the Victorian Government's Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA), was to bring First Nations peoples from across Victoria together to create a shared understanding of the outcomes sought for Dingo and healthy Country. Workshop attendees comprised approximately 70 First Nations people and Traditional Owner Corporation staff from 19 different groups. A statement, known as *Dingo Story*, was developed by workshop attendees. While *Dingo Story* has not yet been published, it has been distributed to First Nations communities and organisations across Victoria.

## Cultural Values

### Country

*Darrwal/Wirrigan* once freely roamed across Bunurong Country. They moved in significant numbers, with their howls a constant noise from dusk until the early morning hours. *Darrwal/Wirrigan* bring balance to Country. Healthy Country needs healthy *Darrwal/Wirrigan*. Many Bunurong peoples believe they have a responsibility to help restore Country by advocating for and protecting them.

### Knowledge

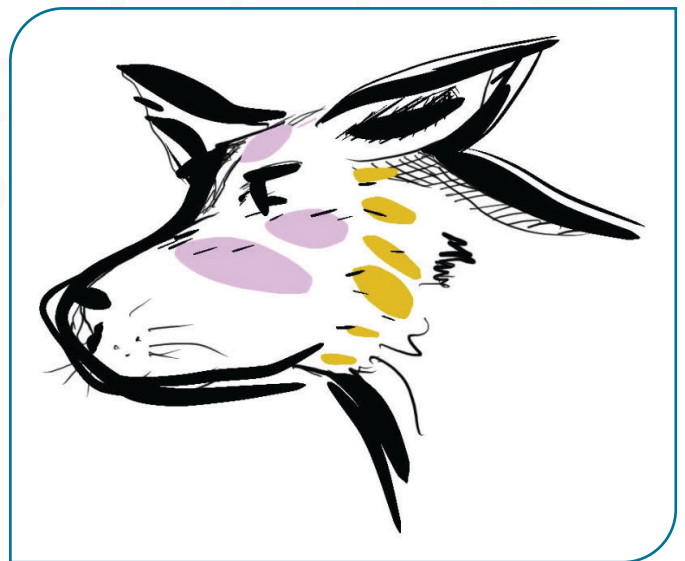
Bunurong peoples have maintained a mutually beneficial, or symbiotic, social and culturally complex relationship with this species. This connection persists today despite the impacts of colonisation on *Darrwal/Wirrigan* numbers and Bunurong cultural knowledge.

*Darrwal/Wirrigan* were tamed through socialisation practices that have now become impossible for community members to freely practice.

### Kin

Many Bunurong peoples consider *Darrwal/Wirrigan* to be kin – members of their family.

*Darrwal/Wirrigan* were a part of everyday life on Bunurong Country and were part of important ceremonial activities.



*Darrwal/Wirrigan*. Artist: Adam Magennis.

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Design and layout by Nani Creative



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## Results of Poor Management

### Misunderstood

Recent DNA analyses of *Darrwal/Wirrigan* in Victoria have demonstrated that many canines labelled as wild dogs (e.g., feral/wild domestic dogs and hybrids) are actually pure *Darrwal/Wirrigan*<sup>2</sup>.

### Forced separation

The removal of *Darrwal/Wirrigan* from Bunurong Country has contributed to a loss of cultural knowledge at a local level – with many Bunurong peoples voicing that they have been forcibly separated from their kin.

### Declines in the health of Country

There is no doubt that the removal of this apex predator from sections of Bunurong Country has made it easier for invasive pest species such as feral cats to become established in these areas.

### Poorly protected

The Unprotection Order currently in force in Victoria is deeply concerning to Bunurong peoples. It is the latest in a series of successive colonial and state laws that have been used to legitimise the killing populations of *Darrwal/Wirrigan* on Bunurong Country.

### Not included

Currently, Bunurong peoples have no way to contribute to the sustainable management of populations on private land and are not empowered to make decisions regarding *Darrwal/Wirrigan* protections at the Victorian government level. Bunurong peoples cannot currently contribute to the holistic, long-term management of *Darrwal/Wirrigan* according to their ways of caring for Country.

## Bunurong Vision

As a body that represents the interests of Bunurong peoples, BLCAC is committed to the protection of *Darrwal/Wirrigan*. Bunurong peoples want to return *Darrwal/Wirrigan* back to Country by protecting them, allowing them space to roam and instituting management strategies to help them thrive.

Ultimately, BLCAC aims to pursue the following outcomes for *Darrwal/Wirrigan*:

- Removal of the Unprotection Order issued under section 7A of the Wildlife Act 1975 (Vic)
- Reintroduction of *Darrwal/Wirrigan* to more areas within Bunurong Country
- Drive research about *Darrwal/Wirrigan* on Bunurong Country such as scat analysis programs
- Help to develop programs to rehabilitate the reputation of *Darrwal/Wirrigan* with the wider public, so that there is a more accurate understanding of the role they play in ecological and trophic balance
- Help to develop programs to rehabilitate the reputation of *Darrwal/Wirrigan* with farmers and land managers - specifically regarding DNA evidence of their status as a distinct species and not wild dogs or hybrids
- Support for scientific research that will assist the pursuit of recognition of *Darrwal/Wirrigan* as a distinct species.

BLCAC is advocating for a balanced approach to the management of *Darrwal/Wirrigan* which will allow Bunurong peoples to see, feel and hear them back on Country.

\* Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation is currently working with Bunurong Elders, knowledge holders and community members to reclaim [Bunurong language](#). For 'dingo', two words are in use by the Bunurong community: *Wirrigan* is shared with *Woiwurrung* to the north of Bunurong Country and *Darrwal* is shared with *Wadawurrung* to the west of Bunurong Country.

<sup>1</sup> Cairns, K. M., Shannon, L. M., Koler-Matznick, J., Ballard, J. W. O., & Boyko, A. R. (2018). Elucidating biogeographical patterns in Australian native canids using genome wide SNPs. *PLoS One*, 13(6), e0198754.

<sup>2</sup> Cairns, K. M., Crowther, M. S., Parker, H. G., Ostrander, E. A., & Letnic, M. (2023). Genome-wide variant analyses reveal new patterns of admixture and population structure in Australian dingoes. *Molecular Ecology*, 32(15), 4133-4150.

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