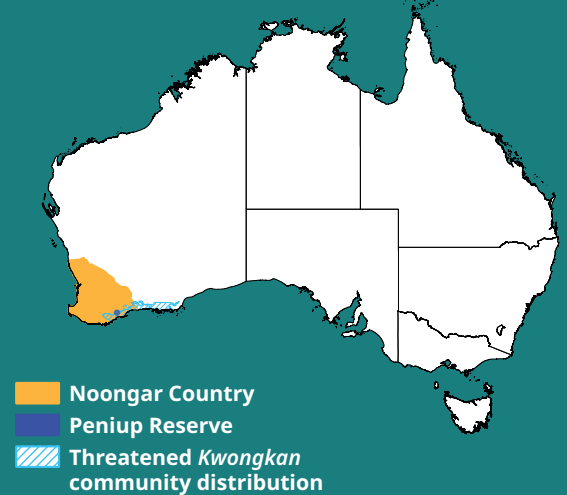


Kwongkan (shrublands) of Peniup Reserve and the Nowanup Rangers

© The Nowanup Rangers, supported by Michael Just and Ngaire Bonnington

Common name: Kwongan shrublands
Scientific name: Proteaceae dominated kwongkan shrublands of the southeast coastal floristic province of Western Australia
Language name: *Kwongkan*



Status



Description

Kwongkan is a species-rich heathland/shrubland community in which Proteaceae form a major component. Dominant genera include *Banksia*, *Hakea*, *Grevillea*, *Isopogon*, *Adenanthos* and *Lambertia*.

The community also supports a high concentration of endemic and threatened fauna, including numerous threatened species such as the Dibbler, *dayang* (Heath mouse), *gnow* (Malleefowl), *ngolyenok* (Carnaby's black cockatoo), *kyloring* (Western ground parrot), *booderitj* (Western bristlebird) and *dading* (Western whipbird).



Kwongkan on Peniup Reserve. Photo: Ngaire Bonnington.

Distribution

The nationally-listed ecological community titled 'Proteaceae dominated kwongkan shrublands of the southeast coastal floristic province of Western Australia' is predominantly situated within the Esperance Sandplains and Mallee Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia (IBRA), with several smaller occurrences in neighbouring bioregions.

Peniup Reserve is located east of the Stirling Range National Park and west of the Fitzgerald River National Park, in south-west Western Australia.

Habitat

Kwongkan occurs on sandplains, slopes and ridges on duplex sands, deep to shallow sands, gravelly loams and loams, under a Mediterranean-type climate with approximately 400–800 mm of annual rainfall.

Threats

Key threats to the community are:

- **Inappropriate fire regimes** lacking cultural consultation, either the complete absence of fire or the application of frequent, intense fire
- **Land clearing for agriculture**, leading to fragmentation
- **Climate change**, including increasing temperatures, declining rainfall, and changes in seasonality
- **Overgrazing and trampling by herbivores**, including both introduced and native species
- **Invasive plants and animals**, outcompeting native species and changing species composition.

Cultural Connections

Biophysically and culturally significant, these shrublands form part of Noongar and Ngadju Country, providing bush foods, medicines, materials and important spiritual and ceremonial sites.

Above and below-ground waterways run through **Kwongkan**, shaped by the **Waargal** during the Dreaming. Here, vegetation is mostly low-lying and water can be found by digging into the sand. Animals form trails across **Boodja** (Country) throughout the six Noongar seasons, linking meeting places, hunting grounds, water sources, camps, and more. Burning banksia cones carried fire and lit the way for people to move along these trails, following the food chains, listening to, and caring for Country.

Ochre pits are scattered throughout Peniup and on surrounding Country but the Nowanup Rangers are concerned that smoke run-off from mis-managed fire regimes will continue to leach into these pits, discolouring the sacred mineral.

“Story lines, cultural lines and waterways are common in the area and are of high cultural significance. When we first came out here the land would call to us saying heal me, heal me and I will teach you the old ways.”

Uncle Eugene Eades, Noongar Elder





Cultural Values

Country

Talking about “following the food chains”, Uncle Eugene Eades shared what taking cues from indicator species looks like on Country. Knowledge that food is on its way when certain plants begin to flower; that **gnow** and **kaarda** (goanna) are laying eggs; and to look out for **dobitj** (Dugite) once the **moodja** (Western Australian Christmas tree) begins to flower.

Many roots, fruiting shrubs, and orchids are eaten “same as the animals” to maintain balance, not excess. Some fruits provide both food and dye, while kernels and leaves are prepared as bush teas and medicines for cleansing and healing.

Within this landscape, **mangitj** (*Banksia media*) is a significant cultural species. Its long history of use extends beyond that of many plants elsewhere in the world. The large golden inflorescences attract bees and native pollinators, providing rich nectar that is tapped for sweet drinks, and shared with children and visitors. As a totem plant for some families, it also holds responsibilities of respect, protection and teaching, reinforcing kinship ties between people, plants and animals.



Chiddick (*Lambertia inermis*), Peniup Reserve.
Photo: Michael Just.

Knowledge

Many **Kwongkan** plants, animals and places are totems for families, binding people to specific obligations of care. Access to intact patches of **Kwongkan** enables Elders to teach on Country in a culturally secure way, supporting the transfer of cultural and ecological knowledge that might otherwise be lost.

“We need to go back to the practices of the old people. Practices to follow for caring for Country are right there.”

Uncle Eugene Eades, Noongar Elder

Kin

As Country is cleared, fragmented and fenced off, animals such as kangaroos become difficult to access. Remaining **Kwongkan** remnants are therefore places where cultural authority, autonomy and healing can be re-asserted. Initiatives such as Indigenous-owned properties and ranger programs exemplify Indigenous-led governance and “two-way” management, where Traditional Ecological Knowledge guides decision-making alongside contemporary conservation practice. In this context, caring for **Kwongkan** is not only about protecting biodiversity; it is about honouring unbroken responsibilities to Country, strengthening cultural and spiritual wellbeing, and walking together towards genuine reconciliation grounded in practice, not words.

“Our job as Noongars and wadjelas together is to get the runs on the board that we need – in the spirit of reconciliation.”

Uncle Eugene Eades, Noongar Elder



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Results of Poor Management

Wrong-way fire

“The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) wanted to come in here [Peniup] and put a match to it quick as lightning.”

Uncle Eugene Eades, Noongar Elder

Poor, Western management of *Kwongkan* has direct ecological and cultural consequences. Ecologically, decades without appropriate patchy cultural burning have resulted in senescent shrublands, heavy fuel loads and reduced recruitment of key Proteaceae and associated species. Long-unburnt patches (often 50–70+ years) are more vulnerable to high-intensity wildfire, *Phytophthora* dieback impacts, weed invasion and structural collapse, undermining the very biodiversity values for which the ecological community is listed as Endangered. Failure to maintain cultural burning (fine-scale, cool, mosaic burning) that protects refuges, seed banks and habitats for *gnow*, reptiles and small mammals erodes both species persistence and ecosystem resilience.

Lack of inclusion in the management of Country

Culturally, poor management represents an ongoing interruption of Lore, responsibility and practice. As Uncle Eugene Eades notes, the “gaps that have been left over the last 200 years” are not abstract; they are visible in locked-up Country, absence of young plants, loss of accessible hunting grounds, damaged sites, and limited opportunities for young Noongar people to learn on Country as rangers and knowledge holders. Excluding or marginalising Noongar decision-making in *Kwongkan* undermines intergenerational knowledge transfer, weakens health and wellbeing, and conflicts with the principle that *Kwongkan*, as threatened Country, demands heightened cultural as well as environmental care.

Current policies and legislation

Under current policy and legislative settings, several barriers limit full implementation of Traditional management practices, despite formal recognition of Indigenous values:

- **No dedicated recovery plan**
- **Regulatory and tenure complexity:** cultural access must navigate multiple overlapping approvals
- **Limited decision-making powers**
- **Insecure resourcing and roles** for ranger programs and Aboriginal organisations.

Collectively, these barriers mean *Kwongkan* is treated as a set of compliance sites rather than living *Boodja*. If unchanged, this risks further biodiversity decline, continued erosion of cultural authority, and the loss of opportunities for Indigenous-led, evidence-based management that can restore both ecological integrity and cultural strength.

Nowanup Rangers' Vision

“I would like to see a collaboration coming together of farmers, Noongars, and DBCA.”

Uncle Eugene Eades, Noongar Elder

Indigenous-led management of *Kwongkan* should be built on shared authority between Noongar Traditional Owners, government agencies, and farmers, with decision-making grounded in cultural Lore and place-based ecological knowledge rather than ad hoc consultation.

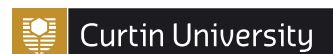
“The road we’re traveling down to prepare our rangers to care for Country is filling in the gaps that have been left over the last 200 years. CALM in the old days, and DBCA today, have neglected their obligation to involve Indigenous people, and the work we’re doing today is identifying the gaps that have been left by them, which are being incorporated into our work plan for our boys and girls, to create ongoing cultural protocols for caring for Country and our young people.”

Uncle Eugene Eades, Noongar Elder

Kwongkan must be managed as living Noongar *Boodja*: Country that provides food, medicine, story, ceremony and water, and that in turn requires care, reciprocity and responsibility.



National Environmental Science Program



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