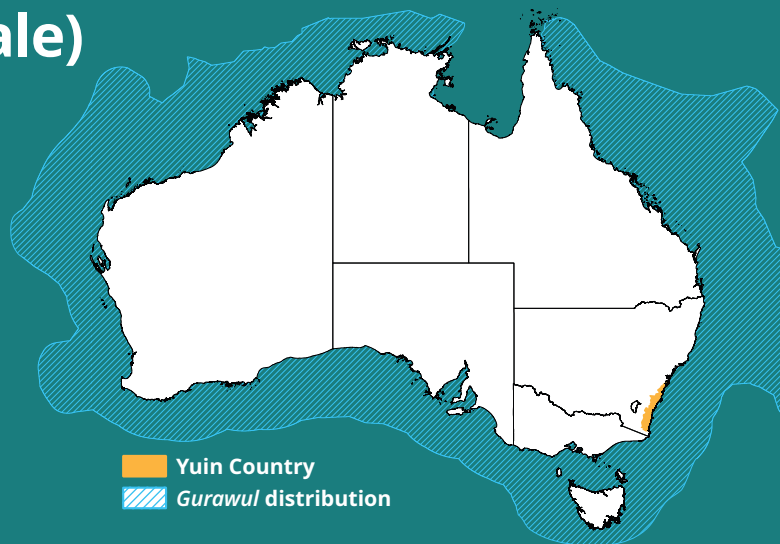


# Gurawul (Humpback whale) on Yuin Country

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Common name: Humpback whale  
Scientific name: *Megaptera novaeangliae*  
Language name: *Gurawul*\*



## Status



As a result of recovery from past whaling, *Gurawul* was delisted as a threatened species at the national level in 2022, however they remain listed as a 'Cetacean' and 'Migratory' species under the EPBC Act.

## Description

*Gurawul* grow to between 11 and 14 m long and can weigh up to 40 metric tons. The upper parts of the body are black, the underside is white. The species is a gape feeder and forces water out through its baleen.



*Gurawul*. Photo: Thomas/stock.adobe.com

## Distribution

*Gurawul* have a worldwide distribution, present in all oceans except regions of the high arctic and some inland seas. In Australia *Gurawul* occur in all oceanic water, except for the Gulf of Carpentaria, from northern Queensland and the Top End, south along the east and west coasts, and across the Great Australian Bight to the Southern Ocean south of Tasmania.

\* Acknowledging there are other variations and spelling for the Humpback whale in the Yuin Nation.

## Habitat

*Gurawul* frequent a wide range of marine habitats across their distribution. The species undertakes an annual migration, spending summer in Antarctic feeding grounds, returning each winter to the east and west coasts of Australia to breed and give birth. In their southern feeding grounds, they feed mostly on Antarctic krill but will also feed on small fish and other small crustaceans. They dive regularly on seamounts to approximately 80 m but are known to dive to a depth of 600 m.

## Threats

Persistent and significant threats to *Gurawul* include:

- **Climate change** could see the collapse of submerged ice shelves in Antarctica that are vital for the Antarctic krill food source of *Gurawul* in their summer feeding range
- **Ship strikes and ghost net injuries**, leading to mortality
- **Increasing fishing for krill** in Antarctic waters is in direct competition with *Gurawul* as they hunt for food and incidental netting of the species during this process has also been recorded
- **Oceanic pollution is increasing**, with autopsies finding *Gurawul* can mistakenly swallow enormous amounts of plastic
- **Seismic blasting** can kill massive amounts of their food and can force *Gurawul* to alter their movement and migratory pathways.

## Cultural Connections

**Gurawul** travel through connected Sea Country around the mainland into the Torres Strait and beyond. Many Indigenous Australians have significant cultural connections and stories of **Gurawul**.

According to Yuin cultural Lore, **Gurawul** were once land-based animals who beseeched the Elders to let them live in **gadu** (the ocean).

The Elders agreed on the condition that **Gurawul** would hold the Lore of **gadu**, just as people would do for **wruk** (the land), and that from time-to-time **Gurawul** must return that Lore to the people, by beaching, so that the Lore would never be lost. This embodies the relationship between freshwater and saltwater.

*“In the time when gadu rose up and submerged significant parts of Country (at the same time as severing Lutruwita (Tasmania), from the mainland of Australia) the people were confused and fearful. But, as gadu engulfed the plains and swept up toward the mountains, Gurawul came to their aid, showing a clear path for the people to follow by blowing bubbles. In this way, Gurawul led the people to safety on the higher grounds of Country, keeping the promise that had been made to the Elders. We are related to Gurawul through kinship and mutual responsibility. In our time of need, Gurawul held Lore and protected us.”*

Anthony McKnight, Yuin

Every year when the wattle flowers are golden, Yuin know that **Gurawul** have followed their ancient songline from Antarctica in the south and are now returning to the warm and sheltered breeding and birthing grounds in the north. Every year Yuin perform ceremony to ensure **Gurawul** can safely navigate their ancient songline. At the start of the migration season, a ceremony is performed to protect pregnant mothers on their northern journey through coastal water. Later in the year, a ceremony ensures a safe journey for **Gurawul boori** (calves) to the feeding grounds in the south as they travel wider in deeper water. A version of these ceremonies is performed by most south, east and west coast Traditional Custodians. Not only are we connected to **Gurawul**, but **Gurawul** connect us saltwater people together along its ancient songline.

This significance is why we must ensure the health of Sea Country. Not only the health of Yuin Sea Country but of all Sea Country across **Gurawul's** songline. For the east coast population this means we must, in relatedness and through our protocols, protect the Sea Country of the Palawa and Gunditjmara in the south to the Butchulla and Gabi Gabi in the North. It also means that we must be strong advocates for protecting oceanic health as **Gurawul** are not confined to the territorial waters of Australia, this includes Antarctic waters.



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## Cultural Values

### Country

**Gurawul** are the Elders of **gadu** and the loss of an Elder of the sea reduces the collective memory of **Gurawul** and their ability to hold the Lore of **gadu**. In the same way that our Elders collectively hold our Lore on **wruk**, they hold knowledge of the ancient places of our ancestors before **gadu** rose. **Gurawul** is responsible for performing ceremony in **gadu** and occasionally returning ancient knowledge to the people.

### Knowledge

Annual gatherings for ceremonial purposes ensure the continuity of our connections with the Ancients and connection with the ancient **Gurawul** songline. This will ensure knowledge transfer for next generations. The story of **Gurawul** teaches respect for Lore, for our Elders, for our neighbours, and for our understanding of change and adaptability.

The story of **Gurawul**, and **Gurawul** ancient knowledge, has given Yuin many insights into changes of climate and even the movements of energy within our oceans. Western science has explained many things to our Elders which were already known.

### Kin

It is our cultural responsibility to uphold our ceremonial connection with **Gurawul**. Without doing so we cannot hold our Lore. **Gurawul** have protected us in a time of great change, and so, it is our responsibility as custodians to ensure that we care for them. That means that we must raise our voice to ensure their care in all forums, and that voice must be heard, or it is a constraint to our self-determination, not as native title holders, but as Lore holders.



## Results of Poor Management

### Lack of care for beached whales

Current policy and legislation settings are not inhibiting our ability to perform sacred ceremony to protect *Gurawul* on their annual movement. However, an important element of our connection is to perform ceremony for *Gurawul* when they beach. This is part of our respect of Lore and our interrelationships with and responsibilities to *Gurawul*. Currently, *Gurawul* that have beached are treated disrespectfully and Traditional Custodians should play a greater role in how strandings are managed.

### Modern threats

One of the major issues to address with the care of *Gurawul*, is that all the threats to populations and individuals are modern. There is no Traditional management of boat strikes, ocean pollution, climate change and seismic blasting. So, we must adapt our cultural care of *Gurawul* because it is our cultural responsibility to adapt to these new threats. This means that our voices, as custodians, must be heard and raised in forums that relate to each of these threats. Seismic blasting is an example of a threat to *Gurawul* that is less tangible from a conservation perspective, whilst Traditional Custodians see it as an unacceptable interference to an ancient songline.

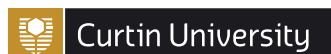
Enshrining our right to be heard and considered as rights holders and decision makers as it relates to the care of our ocean habitats is critical. Our Traditional 'management' must always be valued. In this instance, it is our connection, responsibilities and priorities that must be respected, in a society that is extractive by nature and cannot be trusted to make decision that impact these ancient sacred beings.

### Threatened status downgraded

The predominant mechanism for providing special protection for a species is listing it as a threatened species. The case study of the *Gurawul* demonstrates that the species is not consistent with such a listing. However, our cultural obligation demands we give the species care beyond what is currently demonstrated.



National Environmental Science Program



## Yuin Vision

### Environmental law reform

We have an opportunity through environmental law reform to create a listing mechanism to offer Culturally Significant Entities (CSEs) protection under legislation. This would allow for Traditional Custodians to identify species and places of significance which require great care and co-management. This could also provide better linkages between cultural heritage and environmental legislation so that there could be more holistic protection of the 'intangible' elements of the cultural values of CSEs.

### Improved government policies

Whilst legislation is very important, much can be done now. For instance, policy shifts at both state and national government levels could easily make possible a greater voice for the care of *Gurawul* by Traditional Custodians. This could allow for the inclusion of knowledge holders in decision making, with veto powers for projects with the potential to cause too much damage.

### Improved engagement processes

The industrialisation and colonisation of oceans is only increasing. It leads to enormous burdens on Traditional Custodians to engage. We must co-create engagement processes for fisheries, renewable and extractive projects that empower Traditional Custodians as decision makers for our oceans to protect our *Gurawul* and their songline.

### Greater support for cultural projects

Over the last decade, several whale custodian Elders have been re-strengthening the whale songlines across the different language groups. The story and knowledge embedded in these songlines on the east and west coasts of Australia are very similar, many Traditional Custodians have the same cultural responsibility. There are also shared whale songlines internationally in the Pacific, New Zealand, and North America. Supporting cultural projects that link songlines and knowledge holders together will strengthen cultural ties, enhance the collective Indigenous knowledge of the whale and their Sea Country. Support of these projects would demonstrate support for the self-determination of cultural Lore holders.

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