

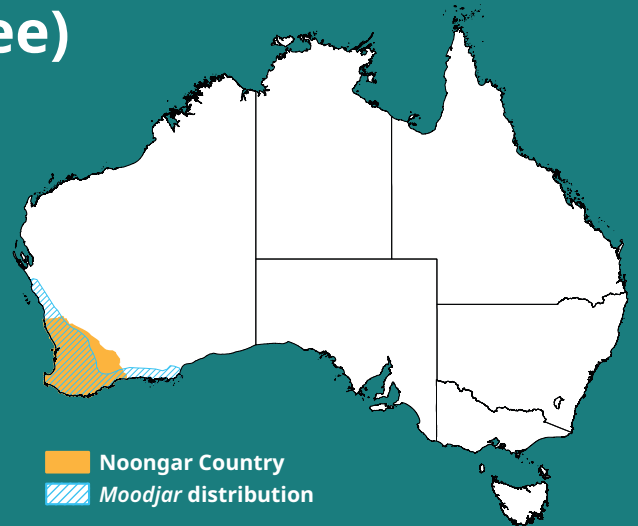
Moodjar (WA Christmas Tree) on Noongar Country

© Zoe Webber, Roni Forrest, Simon Forrest, Julianne Wade

Common names: Western Australian Christmas Tree

Scientific names: *Nuytsia floribunda*

Language names: *Moodjar, Moodja, Mungee*



Status



Description

Moodjar are a tree or shrub up to 10 m tall. The species is the largest member of the mistletoe family. They are hemiparasitic, meaning they can photosynthesise but also attach themselves to the roots of other trees and vegetation around them to obtain nutrients.

Moodjar flowers occur as bright orange clusters across the top of the plants, standing out in the landscape during the summer months.

Studies have shown that *Moodjar* are resistant to Phytophthora Dieback and are therefore an important species used in restoration efforts in affected areas¹.



Moodjar, Breton Bay. Photo: Zoe Webber.

Distribution

Moodjar are endemic to the Southwest Australian Floristic Region from Kalbarri National Park on the north-west coast to Cape Le Grande in the south-east.

Habitat

They occur in *kwongan* (heath) or woodlands, on sandplains, slopes and at the base of rocky outcrops where they often emerge above the dominant shrub canopy layer. They can also be seen in otherwise cleared paddocks in the Wheatbelt.

Threats

Threats to *Moodjar* include:

- **Agricultural development**, urban expansion and mining, leading to land clearance
- **Stock grazing**, leading to damage of roots or habitat degradation such as soil compaction and salinity
- **Climate change**, leading to more extreme temperatures and aseasonal and/or reduced rainfall
- **Invasive plants and animals**, leading to habitat degradation
- **Inappropriate fire**, including too frequent or intense fires occurring at the wrong time of year (spring).

Cultural Connections

Moodjar are sacred, important trees. The spirits of people who have passed on rest upon these trees. For Noongars, all things are sacred. But culturally, **Moodjar** are one of the most sacred and important trees. The **Moodjar** is recognised as the “**Kaanya tree**”, which in Noongar language means “recently departed soul”, reflecting its spiritual significance.

Kurannup is believed to be located across the western sea beyond the horizon, beyond places such as **Wadjemup** (Rottnest Island) and Garden Island. Once a relative passes, their **kaanya** (spirit) rests upon **Moodjar** trees. When it flowers in **birak** season (the Noongar season from December to January), they begin their journey to **Kurannup** across the western sea. The **medi** bird (Pied cormorant) is a spiritual agent that supports these souls on their journey. In Noongar, **medi** or **meedee**, translates to “agent” or “medium”, which reflects its role as a spiritual guide for these souls.

Cultural Values

Country

Moodjar are a significant species in the landscape as an indicator of the health of Country, they are actively monitored and a part of cultural practice. **Moodjar** are also an important seasonal indicator; when **Moodjar** flower, Noongar groups will conduct ceremonies.

Moodjar also need to be considered when planning for cultural fire in an area. Clearing nearby debris around these trees is often important to ensure that the fire does not disturb these trees, as inappropriate fires can alter their flowering patterns.

“And to know that there’s some growing here, I think that’s a healthy sign for this Country.”

Auntie Roni Forrest, Menang and Ngadju



*Cultural burn with Dakota Baker taking care of Moodjar.
Photo: Zoe Webber.*



© Artwork by Sean Kinchella
Design and layout by Nani Creative

This document contains Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP). All rights are reserved by the relevant Indigenous custodians; any unauthorised use or reproduction is prohibited.



Knowledge

Moodjar are Knowledge Holders for Noongar groups, they are usually positioned in prominent locations on Country and very distinctive in the landscape as they watch over Country and kin. The presence of **Moodjar** will often trigger the sharing of stories of family that have passed away. In particular, these trees are recognised as 'women's business' trees, and there are specific differences in how men or women approach them.

"Moodjar trees are knowledge trees, trees of wisdom. They know everything that's going on.

And I, you know, we were taught that the old people, when our old people die, their spirit sits on the leaves of the trees.

And so you don't actually touch the tree at all, the sacredness of the tree."

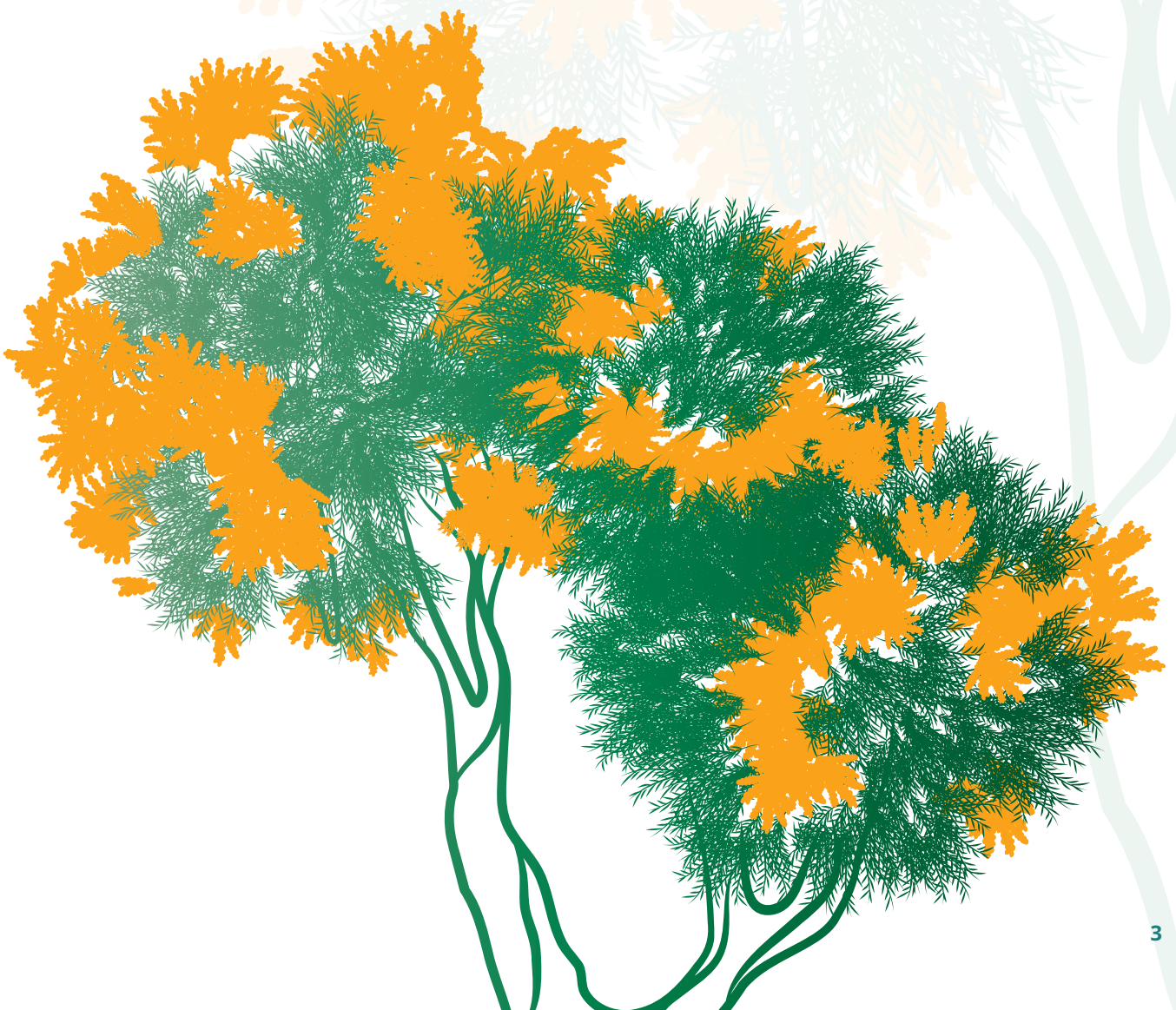
Auntie Roni Forrest, Menang and Ngadju

Kin

There are spiritual and cultural responsibilities when recognising these sacred trees. The flowers represent the spirits of Noongar people who have passed on. **Moodjar** bloom in the season of **birak**, this is when spirits are released back to Country and can return to the **Nyitting** (Dreaming). As such, Noongar Lore forbids breaking branches, picking flowers, or disturbing animals sheltering under the tree.

"Even as kids we were taught about the significance of the tree, we were told by my mother that it was a special tree and never to pick the flowers. It's also a time of the flowering, representing a signal for a ceremony time during that time of the year."

Uncle Simon Forrest, Whadjuk and Ballardong



Results of Poor Management

Loss of Moodjar

Moodjar have been mistreated due to land clearing and urban expansion. Within the metropolitan region of **Boorloo** (Perth), areas are deemed suitable for clearing if they are in a degraded condition and retain little to no biodiversity. However, many of these areas still retain stands of **Moodjar** that are under threat from approved native vegetation clearing permits. These permits currently do not consider the cultural significance of **Moodjar**.

Misuse of plant parts

In the past, multiple distilleries in Western Australia have utilised the **Moodjar** flowers and seeds to make gin. After Noongar Elders raised their concerns, these were respectfully taken off the market.

“I think it was a couple of years back, where some people making gin were using the flowers. It’s just not on. And if people had known more about our culture and things like that, they probably would not have done it.”

Uncle Simon Forrest, Whadjuk and Ballardong



Moodjar flowers. Photo: Zoe Webber.

Noongar Vision

There needs to be systems and policies in place that protect the **Moodjar** on Noongar Country. As the largest mistletoe in the world, this species is not only connected to the interweb of life surrounding it, but also to the Traditional Custodians on the land.

“This interconnectedness is often seen as a metaphor for the web of life in Noongar philosophy.”

Julianne Wade, Whadjuk

A Vision for 300-500 years

Moodjar are sacred across Noongar **Boodja** (Country), protecting these Culturally Significant Entities for many generations demands intergenerational custodianship. Noongars emphasise a vision that spans 500 years, grounded in long-term planning which will protect and conserve knowledge, kin and **Boodja**. Central to this vision is enforcing cultural authority and decision-making with a focus on:

- A nationally recognised cultural and ecological icon, protected under law that evolves with Country and community
- Intergenerational stewardship led by Noongar communities
- Establishing climate-resilient populations of **Moodjar**, thriving across restored habitats
- A global model for integrating Indigenous knowledges into biodiversity conservation, which embeds biocultural indicators into practice
- A research emphasis on Indigenous-led designation and management for Culturally Significant Entities.



National Environmental Science Program

¹ Shearer, B. L., Crane, C. E., & Cochrane, A. (2004). Quantification of the susceptibility of the native flora of the South-West Botanical Province, Western Australia, to *Phytophthora cinnamomi*. *Australian Journal of Botany*, 52(4), 435-443.

