

The Carers of Everything

This story begins here, in the south west of Western Australia, it begins at a time when the Earth was flat and featureless, there was nothing on it at all, there was almost total darkness. The sky was a thick dark mass that sat on the ground, there was no wind, and it was freezing cold, this time is known to local Aboriginal people as nyetting, the time when it was "freezing cold".

In the dim darkness the spirits wandered, they wandered around some of them drifting into and out of reality. Today, we know this area as Bibbulmun country. All the land south and west of a boundary line that runs approximately from Geraldton to Merredin and almost to Esperance.

As the spirits wandered they suddenly realised that they were all going to become real, while they did not know where, or when, or how, or why they began to communicate with each other. They sorted themselves into different groups, there were tree spirits, plant spirits, bird spirits, animal spirits and people spirits.



A great gathering of spirits moved across the land, while more and more joined as they moved along. By this time the tree spirits completely dominated, as there were countless billions of them. From their point of dominance the trees stated that they believed that there should be a carer of everything. And so a process of elimination began, the tree spirits said when we become real we will only grow in one place, that means we won't be able to look after anything else. However, that doesn't stop us from making this pledge, we will provide whatever we can to help who ever wins the right to look after us, and everything else, all we ask is that we are not used until there is none of us left. Once the tree spirits made this pledge they all moved to one side.

The plant spirits quickly saw their chance and followed the trees, stating that they would not be able to care for everything and just like the trees they made their pledge, we will provide whatever we can to help who ever wins the right to look after us, and everything else, all we ask is that we are not used until there is none of us left.

The birds went through the same process, making their pledge, and so did the animals. By this time there was only a handful of spirits left, all the others had moved to one side. In this last group was yonga the kangaroo, weitch the emu, nyingarn the echidna, karda the goanna, and of course humans, one male and one female.

Also there was this huge spirit serpent, it had been lying there half-asleep and at the same time very much aware of what was going on. The serpent said, when I become real I'll have no hands and no feet, how can I possibly look after anything, then as all the other spirits watched this great serpent materialised in front of them, the heavy sky was crushing the great serpent onto the ground, and as they watched they saw the great serpent use all its muscles together and with all its strength, and energy it lifted the sky, and in total defiance move across the land creating a smooth trail beckoning all the others to follow.

With the exception of the handful, all the spirits started to follow this great serpent as it moved along forming the valleys and pushing up the hills. This serpent is known as Wogarl. Yes, Wogarl was the first to become real, the first to perform heroic deeds by creating the trails and the hills it was the first leader. At times this great serpent went under the ground and came up again forming the area where there would be lakes.

The small group continued to discuss the role of the one who would win the right to care for everything. Soon karda the goanna, nyingarn the echidna said to the others, the task for caring for everything is too big for us, we could never do it justice, we are going to join the others. However, before we go, we pledge to provide whatever we can to help who ever wins the right to care for us and everything else.

Before nyingarn, and karda left, it was agreed that these two should be given a special role, they both accepted this special role and left to catch up with the large group that was following Wogarl, by now all of these spirits were singing, and dancing in rhythm and some were also performing heroic deeds as they moved across the landscape.

Only three remained and all the others could be heard in the distance. Yonga the kangaroo, weitch the emu and the spirit people continued to discuss the task that lay ahead for one of them, when suddenly weitch leapt into the air, and started running in circles all the while yelling, pick me, pick me, I can care for all of you, I can look after everything.

Yonga turned to the two spirit people saying look at that fool, weitch is kaart warra (sick in the head). I don't want no stupid emu looking after me, I would look after everything myself if only I had bigger hands, I know that I can move quickly across the ground, however I also know that I could never do the job as good as you people.

I think you people should be the carers of everything, I want you to look after me, I don't want no stupid emu looking after me. With that yonga made a pledge to the people and left following wogarl's trail to the south. On reaching these great hills yonga chose to live in them, today Aboriginal people call these hills yonga mia which means home of the spirit kangaroo. You might know them better as the Stirling Ranges, they are a very important place for Aboriginal people.

This left the two spirit people on there own, all the while they had been sitting listening to all the discussion, they both decided to stand up and when they did they towered above the landscape, in the distance all the other spirits were singing and dancing as they continued to follow wogarl the great creation serpent. Weitch the emu was still running around shouting pick me I can care for everything.

As they stood in the dimness their attention shifted to these little eyes that could be seen shining on the ground all around them, it was at this time that as humans they revealed three qualities that you and I will show every single day of our lives. First of all they became impatient, they could not wait for weitch to come back. They also became inquisitive, as they just had to find out what all these little shining eyes were.

So over they walked and the spirit woman bent down and picked up a pair, and when she realised that they belonged to this beautiful little spirit child, she became so emotional that she could not bring herself to put the child back on the ground so she put it in her hair. This huge spirit woman had beautiful long white hair that flowed right down her back. She saw another little child so she collected that one to putting it into her hair, and then another, and another.

The spirit man was also collecting the little children and he was eating them, no one paid any attention to this and together they walked around the country collecting the little spirit children, eventually parting company at a point well to the east of where the City of Perth now stands.

The spirit woman wandered right down through the south around up past where Perth is today, all the while she was collecting the spirit children. By this time there were many thousands of the children in her hair, which was by now tied up like a net. Her journey continued to the north to about where Geraldton is, once again she turned.

Suddenly she stopped it was then that her worst fears were realised, the little spirit children had been placed in the country for a reason. They were to become future generations of people because it would be the people that would win the right to be the carers of everything. As she stood there trembling her long white hair full of little children, she said to herself, I'll put them back I know where I collected them from.

Then she remembered the spirit the spirit man was eating them, I have to stop him from eating any more and at that moment one of the children became loose and fell, the instant it hit the ground it turned into stone and the stone was strong enough to hold up the sky. Another fell and the stone grew bigger, and yet another with the stone growing even bigger. She started to run heading in the direction where she had last seen the spirit man, and as she ran across the country with the children falling from her hair she left a trail of stones all along the way.

She was running through an area where she had not collected any of the spirit children, the one's trapped in her hair were screaming for help, those in the landscape thought what can we do, they tried to turn themselves into birds and fly up and help, however, the sky was too heavy and they were flattened onto the ground. They had all seen the great wogarl lift up the sky, so they knew it could be done.

It was then that they made a very important decision, they agreed to work together just like all the rippling muscles on the great wogarl, so with their tiny little hands all working together they began to lift the sky. When they had lifted as high as they could, and with the help of some tree branches they found laying on the ground, they lifted the sky higher and higher, once it was high enough some of the spirit children turned themselves into coolbardie the totem spirit bird for children, and they flew up and pecked the children from the spirit woman's hair and dropped them onto the ground.

By this time the spirit woman had reached the place where she had last seen the spirit man and he wasn't any to be found he had hidden in the darkness. As she stood confused the spirit children rained down from her hair turning into stone as they hit the ground.

In one last effort she ran out in a large circle and the spirit man was no where to be seen as she returned to the place where most of the children had turned into stone, she thought this is the safest place for me and stepped onto the rock and it fell flat onto the ground and then sprang back up again lifting her into the sky. The instant she left the stone the spirit woman knew that as punishment for what she had done, she could never walk on the earth again.

As she lifted higher up into the sky, she kept thinking what have I done, a voice bellowed at her across the sky, and when the spirit woman turned she could see it was weitch the emu yelling and shouting, you have tricked me. Weitch had been running near by when she lifted into the air from the stone, and weitch thought I can do that, and of course the instant on leaving the rock it knew it could return to earth and be in the format it was supposed to be.

It was then that yonga the kangaroo's words came flooding back, "I think weitch is kaart warra (sick in the head). I don't want no stupid emu looking after me", with that the spirit woman said to weitch you are such a fool you have tricked yourself, how could you look after anything.

Weitch became very angry and aggressive and pecked one of the stars that represent the children saying I am going to watch you and make sure that everything that you do is wrong, with that the spirit woman said no I have done all the wrong I am ever going to do and now I am going to make up for it, weitch she said, this is what I am going to do.

She made this beautiful orange glowing fire, and she called it Munda and then she started to gather the children around her fire, once she had gathered the right amount she said to weitch, now I am going to send them back to earth. They have won the right to be the carers of everything.

I know that we have all been outside on the dark night and seen a shooting star streak across the sky, I have heard some people say make a wish, when we see this we always say by-ee coolunger nyina, which means little spirit children returning to earth. When they reach earth they are nothing more than a little stone, some are a bit bigger than others, and some don't make it at all.

The spirit children return to earth all the time, with a known pattern of large showers about every thirty three years, that is when we believe that our spiritual energy is at it's strongest.

When the spirit children reached earth they all transformed into spirit adults, and there were seven clans of people all the same age, as instructed they all followed the great trails out to kutta keitch which is the name of the rock where the spirit woman was lifted up into the sky. On arriving there they captured and killed the spirit man, because if he became real all the people from this area would have been cannibals.

They dismembered the body and placed all the parts away from where there would be fresh water, as fresh water is the giver of life. Once this task had been done they all gathered along side of the head of the spirit man, it was then that the men received more knowledge, in particular the right to marriage.

However, before marriage could take place each of the seven clans had to divide evenly in half, taking the number of clans to fourteen. Each clan was then divided again into two sections, however this time they remained as one, one half being represented by a spirit totem bird called Wardong (the crow) the other half being represented by a spirit totem bird called Monarch (the white cockatoo).

The marriage law is a person from wardong clan can never marry another person from wardong, and a person from monarch clan can never marry other person from Monarch. Marriage can only take place

across, that means a wardong person can only marry a Monarch person, and of course the other way around.

As all the clan groups gathered at katanyiny this is the Bibulmun name fro the place where the spirit man's head was cut of as I mentioned earlier. And as they all stood there the spirit children were still lifting up the sky, by this time they had lifted the sky so high that it burst open, and there sitting on the horizon was the sun. The bright stabbing light caused the Coolbardies to break out in song, and spread out their wings to absorb the vivid bright light as they attempted to protect the eyes of the little children.

At this point the first hint of wind came and took away all the sprits and everything became real. All of the people were the same age, and each clan followed the trail made by Wogarl back to the area where they had been collected from. On their arrival they were so tired they lay down and slept, it was a while before they were asleep that they dreamed the dreams.

They dreamed their language, the language is in the land the people are taught the language which is always returned to the land through ceremony when they die. They also dreamed that there would be six seasons, and that during each season there would be six basic diets. The people were now ready to perform sole purpose of being, to care for everything.

© Noel Nannup, 2003



Noel Nannup

In collaboration with Noel Nannup, the Swan Catchment Council has produced an audio CD, narrated by Noel that tells this Nyoongar story of country.

These stories have never been documented and will endeavour to be a major contributor to a better understanding of Nyoongar people of the past and their intimate relationship with the land.

If you would like to order a copy of the “*Carers of Everything*” CD, please contact the Swan Catchment Council.