

Yabbies, innovation and aquaculture on Country

Case Study

garinga djimbayang

The Dja Dja Wurrung journey of community vision, planning, perseverance, aquaculture and success.

Dja Dja Wurrung People have lived on and sustainably managed Djandak (Dja Dja Wurrung Country) for thousands of years and are now leading the way in applying First Nations connection to Country in a modern context. Dja Dja Wurrung commercial aquaculture and agricultural enterprise, DJAKITJ, which means 'to eat' or 'food', aims to bring culturally significant foods to the marketplace.

The grand vision for DJAKITJ

DJAKITJ is a bush foods business by DJAARA (Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation), the representative body for Dja Dja Wurrung people in Central Victoria. DJAKITJ researches, cultivates and promotes traditional foods, combining Traditional Ecological Knowledge with contemporary technology.

Food and fibre have been a significant part of DJAARA's vision since 2014, when the 'Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Country Plan' was developed. In 2023, after forming some key partnerships, DJAARA purchased a 200-acre farm in Lockington on Djandak, with the purpose of developing the for-profit enterprise.

DJAARA wanted to produce food at scale, and specifically a protein, and a yabby (freshwater crayfish) farming aquaculture venture fit the bill.

DJAKITJ is a significant step towards community empowerment, and an innovative project that has been embraced by Dja Dja Wurrung people. DJAKITJ's vision is to create pathways for Traditional Owner agriculture and food and fibre businesses to thrive. "For Dja Dja Wurrung people to be modern farmers, I think it's a really exciting thing", says former Dja Dja Wurrung Group CEO, Rodney Carter.

From pond to plate

At DJAKITJ farm, sixty terraced yabby ponds are under construction, each the size of two Olympic swimming pools, of which ten have already been filled. The ground ponds are fed from the Waranga Western Channel, which is the main regional distribution point.

Once completed, the venture aims to farm 15 tonnes of yabbies per year, becoming one of the largest aquaculture ventures in the country.

Longer term plans for end-to-end processing are also in the works – delivering farm production on site, through to packaging for domestic consumption, or wholesale distribution. Research and development areas for both aquaculture, native plants and bush foods are also part of the vision.





Scaling up Kangaroo grass

Alongside the yabby venture, a four-year project is underway to demonstrate the viability of Kangaroo grass as an agricultural crop. Dja Dja Wurrung People selected this particular grain for DJAKITJ because of its cultural importance, significant biodiversity benefits and ecosystem function.

Dan Duggan, DJAKITJ Business Manager, hopes the agriculture industry sees the benefit of these kinds of projects to both Dja Dja Wurrung People and the wider community for economic and industry resilience. "Taking on board the leadership of people who have been sustainably managing Country for many thousands of years, can help reframe the way we look at agriculture in a modern context."

Creating career pathways for Djaara

Kolby Kerr, Djaara and Yorta Yorta man and DJAKITJ Assistant Farm Manager, is excited about his future and the support he has received to grow into the role.

Previously, Kolby worked casually at an abattoir before joining the crew at Dja Dja Wurrung Natural Resource Management enterprise, DJANDAK. Over 5–6 years, he worked his way up to Team Leader, which led to his current role as Assistant Farm Manager. From here, he sees potential opportunities to move into senior management in the future.

Already focused on the big picture for DJAARA members, Kolby says, "We're planning aquaculture training for members, and it's something we call the 'Pathway to Aquaculture'. So, yeah, that'll be a pretty interesting thing in the future, to get enrolled in".

Primary production and opportunity

DJAARA's aspirations are already being realised and include training, capacity building, and creating career pathways for the Dja Dja Wurrung community. With DJAKITJ supporting people's growth in primary production, Rodney sees a bright future for Dja Dja Wurrung people.

"This is an example of a venture to provide support in economic development. Dja Dja Wurrung People are the decision makers. We're the owners. We have to accept the faults in things that might go wrong, and we get to celebrate the successes."

Rodney is confident that through this project, Dja Dja Wurrung people will be exposed to different management, administrative and technical roles, and also work in collaboration with others. "It's really good for the development of Dja Dja Wurrung people", says Rodney.

Connection to Country and the inherent responsibility to Country are at the front of Rodney's mind. He emphasises how important it is for First Nations peoples to lead and drive these activities, while bringing an innovative range of culturally significant food products to market for the public to enjoy.

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For more about DJAKITJ enterprise, visit djakitj.com.au

For more about First Nations peoples' connection to agriculture, visit agriculture.vic.gov.au/garinga-djimbayang

