

Hundreds walk in Perth in support of protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage

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Photo: Walkers crossing Perth's Matagarup Bridge during the 23 October Protect Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Walk (image: Carolyn Betts)

Hundreds of people gathered at Perth's Victoria Gardens on Saturday 23 October for the 'Protect Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Walk', in a show of solidarity to oppose the State Government's draft *Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Bill, 2021 (ACHB)*.

Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC) was proud to partner with South-West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council (SWALC), Native Title Services Goldfields (NTSG) and National Native Title Council (NNTC) to stage the Walk, at which walkers demonstrate their support for the highest possible protections of Australia's unique and globally-recognised cultural heritage in the laws that will replace the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (AHA)*.

People from across the State travelled to Perth to take part. It began with a Welcome to Country conducted by Noongar Elder Mr John McGuire which was followed by response by Martu Elder Mr Bruce Thomas, and a minute silence. Walkers then proceeded to the Swan River (*Derbal Yerrigan*) foreshore and across the Matagarup Bridge, shouting, "No Veto, No Bill," accompanied by traditional singing from Mr Thomas.

After gathering outside Optus Stadium – a stones throw from the symbolic Nick Winmar sculpture - SWALC Chair Mr Brendan Moore introduced several speakers. Each spoke passionately about why Aboriginal cultural heritage matters, their grave concerns about recent government processes in finalising the ACHB, and issues with the current draft.

Speakers delivered a clear message to government – the ongoing desecration of Aboriginal cultural heritage has created great sorrow. The current Bill isn't good enough. Government needs to work with Traditional Owners to co-design legislation that will protect culture and heritage. Consultation is not consent.

Njamal and Pitjajarli Traditional Owner from the Pilbara **Mrs Doris Eaton** said, “We all come here from different nations – but we all have to stick together for one cause We all have the same law. All we want to say is no. We are not supporting this Bill until government comes back and rewrites this with us.”

Mr Dwayne Mallard, a Yamatji man, from Wajarri Nanda peoples Yamatji Traditional Owner, also delivered an impassioned speech about the continuing desecration of lands (*barna*), people and culture. He noted there isn't much land left to protect, questioned what the bill is protecting and noted that the even when the Bill is introduced, Section 18s from the current AHA will remain in place for at least 10 years that will allow continued destruction of sites. Mr Mallard reminded the (absent) Minister for Aboriginal Affairs that it is his job to stand up for Aboriginal people.

Following the walk, Mr Mallard said, “There's a couple of fundamental issues with (the Bill). Obviously, a really great sticking point at the front end is the voice - or lack of. That there's no right to veto.

“For human beings that descend from the oldest continuous culture in the world; yet to be told in Law that we have actually have no right to say no to the desecration and destruction of the very culture we are born into.... not just the tangible landscape and *barna* and hills and rivers but then also the mythology and songlines - once gone are irreplaceable...

“For a culture that's 65,000 plus years old it's just no longer acceptable, it was never acceptable. It's got to stop.”

Other speakers were Mrs Geri Hayden (Noongar), Mr Clayton Lewis (Nhanda Widi – Yamatji), Mr Richard Evans (Kuwarra) and Sandra Evans (Spinifex), and Mrs Pat Mason (Kariyarra – Pilbara).

People can continue show their support for protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage by visiting <http://protectaboriginalheritagewa.org.au> and sending a letter to Premier Mark McGowan or by lobbying their local Member.

ADDITIONAL QUOTES – gathered following the walk:

Jamie Lowe, Djabwurrung (Victoria) CEO National Native Title Council

“The big thing especially from the messages you have heard today and over the last few years from the mob is that this [bill] doesn’t reach the standard of prior and informed consent. You heard that strong today.”

“The days of doing things about Aboriginal people without Aboriginal people are over. Aboriginal people want to be designers of this Bill and also in the operations of it, they need to be in charge of that.”

Clayton Lewis - Nhanda Widi – Yamatji (lives in Morowa)

“There’s a number of issues. If I had to pick one, that main one would be that the Minister has sole right in the end to say yea or nay on destruction. After all of the various reports - and he’s a person with no cultural authority.”

“The Act is written by public servants here in Perth. They have no cultural authority and know nothing about heritage sites in the regions.”

Sandra Evans – Spinifex (Great Victoria Desert)

“The voices in the desert are crying. They’ve said, “leave it alone, don’t touch it” because the people in the desert are weeping, and mourning for their land.

“They are tired, because the Government never, ever listens. They have never listened to the people.”

About Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation

Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC) is the Native Title Representative Body (NTRB) for what are described as the Pilbara (Marlpa) and Geraldton (Yamatji) regions of Western Australia. YMAC is run by an Aboriginal Board of Directors, representing several native title groups, each of whom has their own language, culture, traditions and protocols. YMAC provides a range of services, including native title claim and future act representation, heritage services, executive office, community, economic development assistance, and natural resource management support.

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ADDITIONAL IMAGES (further images available on request)



Photo: Mrs Doris Eaton, (lower left corner), Mrs Pat Mason (right), leading walkers across Perth's Matagarup Bridge during the 23 October Protect Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Walk (image credit: Carolyn Betts)



Photo: Mrs Bruce Thomas, (centre), singing in language as walkers cross Perth's Matagarup Bridge during the 23 October Protect Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Walk (image credit: Carolyn Betts)