

# HOW TO DO AN ABORIGINAL SONGLINES MAP OF YOUR MUNICIPALITY

## What are Songlines?

Songlines are Aboriginal walking trails, pilgrimage routes and trade routes, and they were far more plentiful than people usually imagine. In traditional Aboriginal society Songlines criss-crossed the whole Australian landscape linking important sites and locations. They were maintained by regular traffic use, burning off and clearing. These trails were also signposted by natural and man-made environmental signs, the man-made signs usually being in the form of 'Marker Trees'. These were trees that had either been scarred in the process of canoe or artefact making, or had been tied together when young so as to grow in the form of an arch or ring, or were otherwise trees that naturally grew with a spiral grain. Such 'spiral marker trees' occurred naturally as occasional genetic freaks, but were only allowed to grow if they happened to be doing so on a Songline.

A good example of a scarred tree also being a marker tree is the scar tree at Heidi, the Museum of Modern Art in Bulleen, Melbourne. This tree actually marks the convergence point of five different Songlines, but it simply is not known by the general public to have served this purpose as a Songline marker. There are many such scarred trees in many other municipalities that served this purpose as Songline Marker Trees.

The word 'Songline' is used to describe such travel routes because the natural features and directions of travel along each trail were coded into a song. This then had to be memorised and sung as you travelled in order to remind you of the route you wished to follow. There were literally thousands of lines to be learned and you had to know when to switch to the lines of verses applying to the particular route you wished to follow. Traveling through the bush was therefore a joyous occasion for Aboriginal people. Not only would they always be singing the song that attached to their route and destination, but they would also be singing the coded ecological relationships within each area. 'Singing Country' was therefore an integral part of how they consciously exercised their land and ecological management responsibilities.

Songlines, or 'Yingparring' in Woiwurung, were not restricted to the area of a single tribe and often stretched hundreds of miles. For instance the sacred site of Bunjil's Cave in the Grampians was connected by Songlines stretching to South Australia, New South Wales Queensland and Eastern Victoria. These major Songlines were also coded astronomically and the song was therefore also related to the movement and positions of various constellations. One such known celestially coded Songline connects Alice Springs to Byron Bay. This was so that desert people could visit to see the dolphins help herd the fish and the coast people could visit the majestic Uluru. These major Songlines are also referred to as Dreamtime Pathways because they have specific creation stories attached to them. That is, they were the pathways forged by Creator Spirits during the Dreamtime of Creation.

Therefore not all Songlines are necessarily Dreamtime Pathways, but they may nonetheless have Ancestor Stories associated with them.

When traveling through another tribe's territory the song for that section of the Songline had to be sung in the language of that tribe, as a sign of the legitimacy of your travel. Failing this, the process of 'Singing Country' would be sufficient to prove the legitimacy of your travel. In other words the song you sang was very literally your passport through foreign lands, and it saved you from arrest and deportation, or worse.

## **How do we identify traditional Songline routes?**

If we take Melbourne as an example, the roads that follow a north-south or east-west grid are usually government surveyed roads. The common practice after such surveys was to construct the road by cutting the tops off the hills and dumping them in the valleys so as to reduce the amount of undulation in the road. Aboriginal Songlines on the other tended to follow along valleys and ridges and along connecting contours. There were therefore few steep grades, as the Songline followed natural contours. However this also meant they could also meander a bit in the easier course that they followed

When British settlement first occurred, settlers tended to follow these Aboriginal Songlines because the traveling was along easier contours for horse drawn vehicles and you did not have to find your way through the bush. These travel routes quickly became cart-tracks and ended up being gravelled and then bituminised. Because Aboriginal use of the land was generally invisible to European eyes, the tendency was to see such things as Aboriginal fish traps as just 'natural swimming holes' rather than the product of conscious engineering. In the same way settlers saw Songlines and firestick farmed areas as 'animal tracks' or 'natural clearings' rather than maintained travel routes and grazing areas for prey.

Because the principles behind the establishment of these Songlines were eminently sensible, there are a number of easily followed handy hints to identify the Aboriginal Songlines in your municipality.

## **Handy hints for mapping Songlines in your municipality**

1. Have a look at a road map of your municipality and adjacent municipalities and identify those roads that do not follow a north-south, east-west grid, but instead follow a meandering route.
2. Compare these meandering roads to a contour map or alternatively get in your car, go and drive along these roads and do a visual appraisal. Do these roads meander along a ridge line or a valley line? If so, then odds-on it is a traditional Songline.
3. If there are any cuttings on the route, this is obviously a shortcut engineered later, so check the natural contour to see where the Songline would have originally gone before re-joining the present road. Ink these routes you have identified onto your map of the municipal roads.
4. Now check all available historical documents and oral sources, especially Aboriginal oral sources, to identify the location of any previous or existing scarred, ring, arched,

- or spiral trees in your municipality. Mark these on your map and see if they are in close proximity to the routes you have already marked. If so, the evidence is mounting. If not, it is not necessarily evidence against the route being a Songline.
5. Get hold of a drainage or catchment map of your municipality and see how it relates to a road map of today. Also note any confluences, particularly major creeks and rivers. These were always important traditional sites, often with permanent or seasonal campsites. Note these confluence points on your map and see if there is a present day road linking the sites. Or is there a ridge-line road looping around and connecting the two sites? Again, if there is, it is odds-on that it is a Songline that also represents an effective short-cut between the two sites. If there are scarred or other marker trees on the route it is further supporting evidence.
  6. In looking at all water courses, particularly major creeks and rivers; identify any area of rapids that offer a natural ford. These may well be the point at which a Songline crosses the watercourse. Conversely, if a ford is located near a confluence, then it is a virtual certainty it is part of the route of a Songline.
  7. Next, if you can't readily do it yourself, ask your local historical societies to interrogate the records of early settlers, surveyors, Aboriginal Protectors, and Roads Boards to find any reference to walking trails, marker trees or ceremonial sites. Similarly, interrogate any specific Aboriginal heritage reports your council might have conducted sometime in the past and in consultation with relevant Aboriginal organisations, identify any sites of significance. Mark all these reference points and sites on your map and see if there are any old roads, ridge lines or valley lines connecting these sites.

### **When you have finished mapping**

Finally, when you have completed the exercise, take a step back and look at your map in total. What does common sense tell you about the total picture? Don't take the attitude that it is not a true representation of traditional Songlines unless you can prove that it is true absolutely, because that is a niggardly-minded impossibility. Instead, take the attitude that Aboriginal people belonged to a clever and sophisticated society, and over countless thousands of years learned how to manage their environment and live in harmony with it.

That is what the totemic system in reality is. It is a species conservation and land management system through which every square metre of Australia became part of a vast managed estate. Bill Gammage has so very rightly termed Aboriginal Australia as, 'The Biggest Estate on Earth'. So produce your municipal Songlines map with confidence that it is a true reflection of how Aboriginal people conducted their extensive curatorship of the Australian landscape.

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