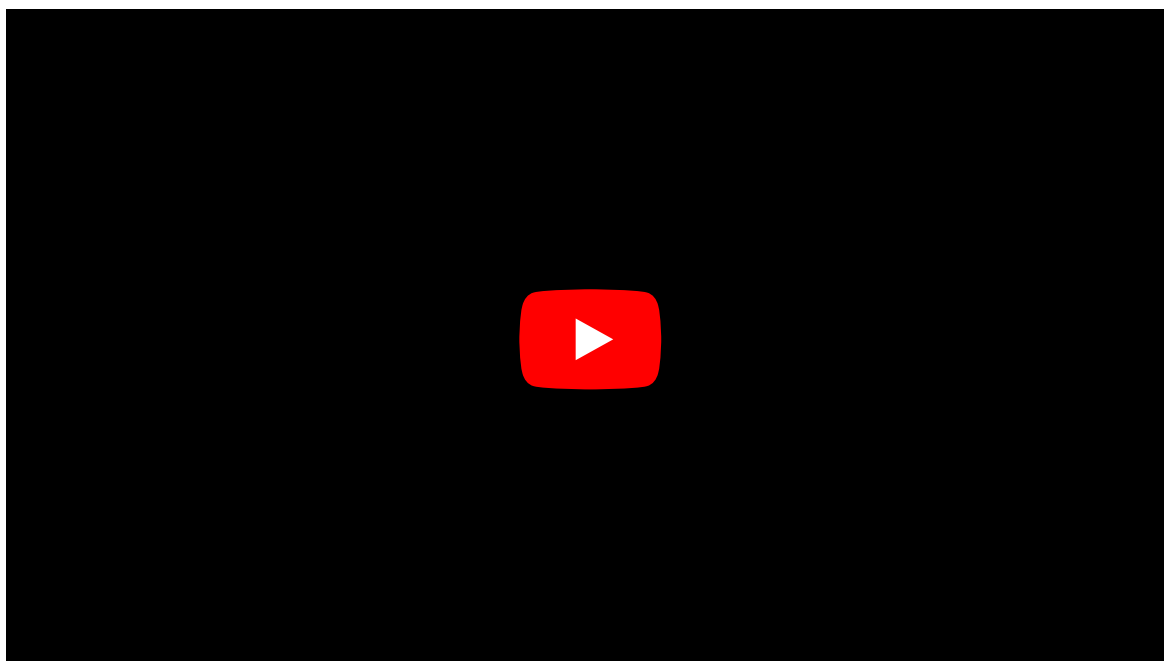


# To learn your country, start by learning its Aboriginal names

[ABC South East NSW](#) / By [Vanessa Milton](#) and [Sarah Abbott](#)

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YOUTUBE: [Historian Bruce Pascoe on Australia's Aboriginal place names](#)

Learning the Aboriginal meaning of place names will deepen our connection to the land we all live on, say Indigenous historians, at the launch of the ABC's This Place project.

Bunurong, Punniler panner and Yuin author and historian Bruce Pascoe lives on the junction of three rivers near Mallacoota, on the southern end of Yuin country.

All three rivers have Aboriginal names which point to the richness and cultural significance of the area.

"Something like 60-70 per cent of place names in Australia are Aboriginal names," Mr Pascoe said.

"They show how deeply and intimately our old people knew the land, how much they loved and respected the country. It's something we should all

be proud of."

Mr Pascoe is a committee member of First Languages Australia, which has launched This Place in partnership with the ABC.

The project invites Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share the story behind their place names.

"One of my ambitions has always been that we do a thorough analysis of Australian place names as a way of bringing the country together," he said.

According to Mr Pascoe, the correct spelling of the Genoa River near his home is Jinoor, which means foot or pathway — a word common to many Aboriginal languages.

The name refers to one of the songlines that converge at Mount Kosciuszko, where people would gather together to harvest moths and conduct important ceremonies in the summer months.

"Both names Jinoor and Mallacoota are ceremonial names, they're spiritual names," Mr Pascoe said.

"Mallacoota means 'sacred white pipe clay'. All the different clans know it as that because all the clans would receive white pipe clay from this country here.

"There's a bank downstream from here where we get that pipe clay, and every time I'm underneath that big, white bank I'm so conscious of the old people.

## This Place



Do you know the meaning of the Indigenous place names where you live? It's time to find out. You can also share the story behind your community's place names. [Watch some on our YouTube channel](#) or visit our latest stories:

- [To learn your country, start by learning its Aboriginal names](#)
- [ABC Indigenous on YouTube](#)

Vanessa Milton speaks with Bruce Pascoe for This Place (ABC South East NSW: Vanessa Milton)

"There's a feeling in that country that's not about the clay, it's about the ceremony, about the specialness of it."



the Jinoor, or Genoa River, is the path of a songline that leads from the coast to Mount Kosciuszko. (*Supplied: Peter Ritter*)

For Patsy Cameron, a Pairrebeenne-Trawlwoolway woman born and raised on Flinders Island in the Bass Strait, learning the original names of Australian places is a vital act of decolonisation.

"The first thing the colonisers did when they arrived in Tasmania, or anywhere for that matter, was that they gave their names to different landmarks, rivers and mountains," Ms Cameron said.

**"The way of decolonising those places is to research and find the names of those places and give back their original names.**

"My research shows the Tamar River has two names. It has the name Kunermurlukeker, which is from the headwaters of the Tamar River down to where the salt water meets the fresh, and then following the salt water down to the estuary its name is Ponrabbel."

Ms Cameron is an advocate of dual naming to recognise the Aboriginal names recorded by those who actually heard the old people speaking, while also acknowledging that some names can be difficult to pronounce.

"I think we should honour the ancestors and acknowledge the beautiful languages, that significant part of language that tells the story of country," she said.

"We need to do it together so that we can all feel confident and feel like we are part of it."

Many place names refer to particular plants, animals or features of the landscape.

Others refer to history itself, the arrival of Europeans, and [the sites of massacres](#).

"To learn the names we'll have to go through a period of discomfort because it's an uncomfortable history. But it's better than going through a period of ignorance," Mr Pascoe said.



Pairrebeenne-Trawlwoolway woman Patsy Cameron was born and raised on Flinders Island. (ABC Northern Tasmania: Fred Hooper)



nurong, Punniler panner and Yuin author and historian Bruce Pascoe on the Wallagaraugh River in Victoria. (ABC *uth East NSW: Vanessa Milton*)

While the meaning of some place names have been lost since colonisation, Mr Pascoe said he preferred to think of them as being regained.

"I live on the Wallagaraugh River, and we're not really sure what Wallagaraugh means," he said.

"But before I die I will find out what she's called. I have to find out because I'm living right beside her.

**"You learn the name, you learn your country."**