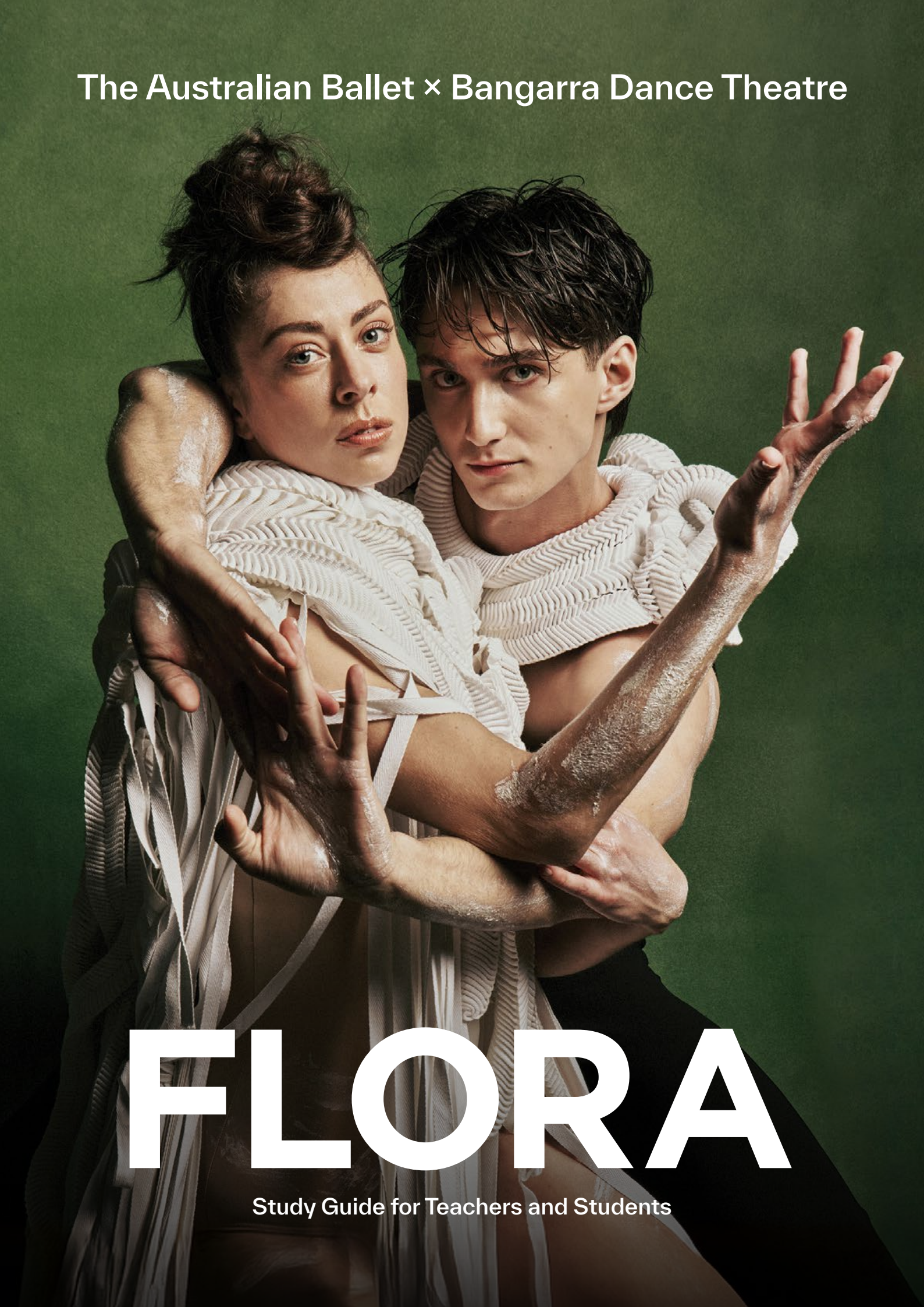
The Australian Ballet × Bangarra Dance Theatre



FLORA

Study Guide for Teachers and Students

Acknowledgement

The Australian Ballet and Bangarra Dance Theatre pays respect and acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands on which we meet, create, and perform. We wish also to acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples whose customs and cultures inspire our work.

Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)

Bangarra Dance Theatre carries Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) at the heart of our practice. It shapes how we listen, how we move, how we design, and how we tell Story – grounded always in cultural authority and respect.

Our ICIP policy, developed alongside Terri Janke and Company, guides every stage of our work. These same Principles have been embraced by The Australian Ballet in the creation of *Flora*, reflecting a shared commitment to cultural integrity.

Using this resource

This study guide provides contextual background to some of the stories that have inspired the creation of Frances Rings' *Flora*. It is important to note, the study guide is not an analysis of the work, nor a literal explanation of the work's 12 sections. Instead, it aims to illustrate some of the research themes and creative pathways that the team explored in the early development stages, which in turn fuelled the collective creative journey towards bringing the work to the stage.

We hope this information will support and encourage teachers and students to think critically about their experience of *Flora* and be inspired to consider the multiple approaches and perspectives involved in learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, while reflecting on their own social and cultural background and its relevance to the stories of the place we call Australia.

Cover photo:
Courtney Radford and Hugo Dumapit
Photo Pierre Toussaint

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FLORA

A co-production between The Australian Ballet and Bangarra Dance Theatre, commissioned by The Australian Ballet.

Contents

Introduction

Courtney Radford
Photo Pierre Toussaint

Australian flora is a living part of our continent's history – culturally, economically, environmentally and politically. Its history, its presence and its fate are inseparable from the Stories of the First Nations people who shaped and were shaped by the natural world over millennia. European colonisation brought rapid and destructive change to our native species. Today, a renewed appreciation for Indigenous knowledges and practices is helping to restore, protect and respect Australia's unique plant life.

Flora invites audiences to journey through a timeline of major geological, historical, and environmental events across Deep time, Creation time, Interrupted time, to a time of Renewal. *Flora* is an immersion into the evolution of life on Earth, told from the perspectives and spiritual lens of First Nations Storytellers.

Plants are Country. Through songlines and story, our native plants have a critical role in keeping our Lands and Seas healthy. These stories have endured for over 65,000 years.

Plants are Kinship. Through totemic systems, people connect and are one with the plants, trees and grasses of their Country.

Plants hold Cultural Knowledge. Through creation stories that tell of ancestors scattering seeds from the sky and creating the many unique plant species as they walked the earth forming landscapes, Culture is preserved in perpetuity.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Across the curriculum priority:
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures.

General capabilities:
Intercultural understanding
Ethical understanding
Critical and creative thinking
Personal and social capability

Learning areas:
Humanities and Social Sciences: History, Geography, Civics and Citizenship, Philosophy.
Arts: Drama, Dance, Music, Visual Arts, Media Arts
Science: Biology, Earth science, Geology
Technologies: Design and technology, Digital technology
Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages
Health and Physical Education

Themes:
Indigenous knowledge systems
Environment protection
Cultural resilience
Historical inquiry practices
Sustainability practices
Ownership and Custodianship
Evolution and adaptation
Innovation and Understanding
Regenerative farming practices
Cultural & Intellectual Property

Ecological and Historical

Major events that shaped the world as we know it.

Mya = Million years ago
BCE = Before Common Era

500 Mya
Late Cambrian period
The first land plants appear. Bryophytes (liverworts, hornworts, and mosses) evolve from green algae.

390 Mya
Devonian Period
Plant life evolves to have roots and leaves in Pteridophytes (ferns).

91 Mya
The 'Dinosaur Tree'
Part of a 200-million-year-old plant dynasty, the Wollemi pine is one of the world's oldest and rarest trees. Believed to have been extinct for 91 million years, a small grove of the critically endangered species was discovered in the central west of NSW in 1994.

65 Mya
The asteroid Chicxulub makes impact with Earth, causing the mass extinction of an estimated 70% of all living species. The plants that do survive must adapt and diversify.

100,000 BCE
Early Homo sapiens begin to create and express their need for symbolism, systems and Story. Drawings using pigments, making of adornments and engravings on rock faces indicate ceremonial practices.

65,000 BCE
People living on the continent now known as Australia, evidenced by the discovery of ground ochre in the Madjedbebe rock shelter on Yolngu land in the Northern Territory.

20,000 BCE
Holocene Epoch The Ice Ages end and the current geological epoch begins. Plants flourish in response to the warmer climate.

1680-1820
Age of Enlightenment
The 17th-century Scientific Revolution leads to the Age of Enlightenment. Characterised by an emphasis on reason and the separation of church and state, European colonisation is at its peak, leading to unprecedented cultural, social, political and economic impact on First Nations populations that is both destructive and permanent.

1770
The HMS Endeavour, under the command of Captain James Cook, makes landfall on the east coast of Australia in the area now known as Botany Bay.The crew includes prominent scientific leader Joseph Banks who, along with several other researchers, removes thousands of native plant specimens, taking them back to Europe where they remain in various collections to this day.

1779
Report of the Select Committee on Convicts. Joseph Banks recommends NSW as a suitable location for the establishment of a prison colony.

1788
The First Fleet arrives on the shores of Warrane (Sydney Harbour). The new inhabitants introduce horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, poultry, goats, rabbits and cats, as well as wheat, barley, maize, bananas, cocoa, coffee, cotton, legumes, guava, citrus fruit and prickly pear to the native environment.

1846
The Pastoral Act
Under the Imperial Waste Lands Act of 1846, the British government creates a legal framework to provide permanent use of designated land for the grazing of animals and growing of crops. Provisions to protect Aboriginal People were included but largely ignored. Settlers changed the landscape, unaware of First Nations Peoples' knowledge about the care of and sustainability of ecosystems.

1901
Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900
The British Parliament and Queen Victoria pass legislation for the six colonies to be united and known as the Commonwealth of Australia. The Federation of Australia officially comes into effect on 1 January 1901.

1912
Golden Wattle
The Australian Coat of Arms featuring the Golden Wattle (Acacia pycnantha) is authorised by King George V. Golden Wattle is worn at citizenship ceremonies, the 'green and gold' colours synonymous with Australia's sporting identity.

1974
Environment Protection Act
The first Environment Protection Act comes into Federal law.

1975
National Parks and Wildlife
Conservation Act 1975 is passed. The law reforms how national parks are managed and strengthens the protection and conservation of wildlife in Australia.

1984
The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 is established to protect culturally significant Places and Objects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

1992
Mabo v Queensland
The High Court of Australia establishes the principle of native rights under common law, overturning the legal concept of 'terra nullius' (nobody's land).

2009
Australia supports Indigenous Cultural & Intellectual Property (ICIP) through the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007.

2024
Australia signs the World Intellectual Property Organisation's (WIPO) Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge, requiring consultation with local communities and acknowledgement when using native plants and ingredients.

TIME

Infinite and Ever-present

Past, present and future co-existing, held in Country.

Ancestor Spirits: The Creators of All Living Things
Landscapes, waterways, animals, people, plants. Creation stories impart Knowledge, promote Lore, and guide Kinship structures. As people moved across Country, they shared and traded seeds and plants, altering 'natural' distributions through deliberate propagation, creating ecological diversification.

Architects of Nature
Plants lead the design of Earth's numerous and complex ecosystems. They use highly adaptive strategies while building interactive relationships with each other and other species, including animals and humans. Plants are the lungs of our Earth; without them there is no life.

Story tellers, Knowledge keepers
Plants hold the story of our planet. Their knowledge is central to how life on Earth exists. Science in the Age of Enlightenment focused on collecting plant species from territories being colonised, naming them to conform with constructed taxonomies, displaying them in museums and institutions as evidence and promotion of the success of colonisation, galvanising white superiority and western interpretations of sovereignty.

Competing Agricultural Practices
The delicate ecosystems cultivated and respected by First Nations People for thousands of years are damaged by the introduction of European weeds and invasive pest species. Prickly pear and lantana spread extensively as the settlers debate commercial gain versus sustainability.

British Settlement
The impact of hard-hooved animals (ungulates) destroys existing and functioning ecosystems through soil compaction, erosion, water pollution and loss of ground cover.

Ancient Knowledge
When the wattle flowers bloom, the whales are on the move and the mullet are ready to be caught. There are over 1,000 species of wattle (acacia), each an important source of food, medicine, tools and weapons.

Renewal
Cultural burning practices employed over thousands of years protect the environment by limiting fuel availability and preventing potential destruction. The revival of First Nations practices helps restore and maintain the health of Country. Fire is renewal.

The Natural World
Australia's past is gradually being acknowledged in natural history collections. The truth behind the vital role of plants in the natural world leads to the repatriation of First Nations knowledge.

Architects of Nature

Hugo Dumapit, Elijah Trevitt, Benjamin Garrett, Brett Chynoweth, Jye Uren and Joseph Romancewicz
Photo Daniel Boud

Plants are the silent architects of our world.

> *With an estimated 250,000 species, plants stand as a testament to nature's boundless creativity, each species a masterpiece of evolution, finely tuned to its ecological niche. Yet, their significance transcends mere biodiversity; plants are the true stewards of life on Earth, serving as the primary producers of biomass and the foundation upon which entire ecosystems thrive.*
> **European Plant Science Organisation.**

The first plant species are estimated to have appeared on Earth around 3500 million years ago (Mya). They came into existence as aquatic blue green algae, existing close to the sea's surface so as to absorb light for photosynthesis to occur. Land plants did not appear until another few thousand million years, with the earliest fossil evidence indicating around 480 Mya, evolving and adapting to provide the sustenance for terrestrial life to begin.

However, plants needed to overcome some extreme challenges in order to exist on land – finding access to water, coping with harsh and extreme differences in temperature, managing access to sunlight, and inventing biological systems that could transport sugars, minerals and reproduction cells to ensure not only survival but the capacity to flourish across every possible environment.

Plants have taken the leadership role in designing our many complex ecosystems using memory, highly adaptive strategies, interactive relationships with each other and with other species domains such as animals and humans.

Plants have evolved to not only provide us with food, but with pharmacological resources for medicine. Plant fibres provide us with textiles for clothing, matting and woven objects. They are used to make vessels, paper, and musical instruments. They clean our air and provide our lungs with oxygen. They enable us to construct shelters to protect us from harsh climates, and they nourish and protect our soils.

Plants are our planet's greatest archive, a formidable library of success stories pertaining to evolution. It is our responsibility to acknowledge this, understanding the absolutely critical role that plants play in our existence, and act as allies to ensure the future of our incredible flora.

Over a period of more than 65,000 years, the First Peoples of the continent we now call Australia developed a deep understanding of the natural world. It is an understanding that is relational and holistic. It's about being one with the natural world. Aligned to this knowledge is the collective obligation to care for Country and all living things, to sustain the future of our planet.

Courtney Radford and Hugo Dumapit
Photo Pierre Toussaint

Discussion: read these two quotes

...plants are arguably the most indispensable inhabitants of the planet. They absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen that supports life. They provide basic human necessities, including food, clothing, and shelter. And in communion with people, they have functioned as medicine, inspired art, and sparked scientific exploration. Empires have risen on their fruits, and fortunes have been made from their fibers (sic). In these intersections with human culture, plants tell stories about people—about ingenuity and power, poetry and oppression.

John H. Shaw, Professor of Environmental Science and Engineering, Harvard University Magazine, 2025

Plants are not only part of Country – in our worldview they are Country. As such, plants are part of the Dreaming, given to us by the ancestors to ensure their survival. Plants have their own repertoire of song cycles practised by custodians in a variety of ways as part of this cycle of survival.

Margo Ngawa Neale, Plants: past, present and future, First Knowledges series, Thames & Hudson, p.9

Discussion starter

Both of these quotes speak about plants as being absolutely critical to human existence and survival.

- What are some ways in which these perspectives can be interpreted?
- Is there any commonality, intersection or difference in the two perspectives?

Interrogating the Age of Enlightenment

The Age of Enlightenment (late 17th to early 19th C) is commonly regarded as the age of reason, where science overruled divine right, where capitalism flourished, and individual thought was championed and celebrated. A definition of 'enlightened' thinking means being 'factually well-informed, tolerant of alternative opinions and guided by rational thought'.[1]

The Enlightenment coincided with the height of European Imperial expansion, with Britain and other European nations in a race to colonise territories and lay claim to the valuable resources of the so-called New World, amassing great power and wealth along the way. Enlightened ideologies supported the thinking that colonisation would build civilisations to mirror 'preferred' European values and ways of life.

Colonisation was promoted as a vision that would create mutually beneficial advancement for all parties, albeit through the lens of the colonising nation's national interest, which was driven primarily by nationalist and capitalist aims. It is now widely acknowledged that there was not a great deal of 'enlightened' thinking behind the often ill-informed miscalculations and decisions of colonising nations, decisions that would have devastating impact to the First Peoples of the lands and environments being colonised. It is also widely acknowledged today that the exploitation of, and impact on the original inhabitants of lands being colonised was cataclysmic and permanent.

The explorers who claimed 'discovery' of new lands, were frequently accompanied by scientists who claimed 'discovery' of new species, disregarding the fact that First Nations people who had lived there for many thousands of years, held vast knowledge of the scientific information and practical application of native species, both flora and fauna. Also ignored was the spiritual significance of Country, and the native plants and animals who keep Country healthy.

The European focus on collecting specimens and artifacts, naming them after themselves or whoever they chose, labelling them to conform with constructed taxonomies, and displaying them in museums and various institutions played into some of the key goals of Colonisation, galvanising white superiority and upholding convenient interpretations of Sovereignty.

The Enlightenment gave science a high platform, elevating the role of scientists while changing the nature of learning. When museums became institutionalised, their mission was to preserve cultural heritage and be a place where European people could learn by engaging with actual artifacts related to people, societies, and practices of Cultures other than their own. One of the first of these was the British Museum founded in 1753, today recognised as the world's oldest national public museum.

From the Enlightenment into the mid 20th century, museums' classification practices and the language used in such practices followed a script that was essentially racist. Many anthropologists continued to perpetrate the idea of inferiority of non-white races, describing Indigenous people as uncivilised and unintelligent.

> *"Museums were integral to entrenching these scientifically racist ideas, functioning as repositories for the objects and specimens collected on scientific expeditions carried out around the globe, and, simultaneously, legitimising this collecting in the context of scientific thought".* [2]

Objects and artifacts (including human remains), stolen and brought back to Europe to be displayed to the public, supported the claim that non-white races were inferior and headed for extinction, adding weight to the assumed power and might of Empires' proclaiming their role in a world order that stood for progress and wealth.

Thankfully, things have changed. Many European museums have made efforts to reevaluate and rehabilitate their role beyond preservers of cultural heritage and educators of the public, through the repatriation of select artifacts, and the inclusion of First Nations perspectives in museum's written content – perspectives that have been absent from collections for many hundreds of years. Over recent decades there has been a slow trickle of artifacts being sent back to First Peoples' clans and tribes from whom they were stolen. But it's not just about repatriating artifacts (many of which are sacred) back to Country or noting facts in didactics. It's also about acknowledging the Spirit, Story, Culture, Knowledge and Kinship held in those objects/ specimens.

> *"The knowledge from indigenous people from around the world, captured through colonial encounters, needs to be more widely acknowledged for their impact on society, with their narratives sitting proudly alongside those specimens and artefacts within natural history museums".*[3]

The international community is gradually coming to terms with these truths and recognising that a coalition of understanding regarding the impact of Colonisation from the perspective of colonised people is required, in order to restore and heal. As well, the establishment of actionable legal frameworks to protect Cultural rights (tangible and non-tangible) into the future is slowly being understood and incorporated into legislation.

Article 31, of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), recognises that Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions. This is referred to as Indigenous Cultural & Intellectual Property rights. (ICIP). While Australia has endorsed this Article, it has yet to ratify or bring forward legislation to support it as a binding instrument of law.

Isabella Smith and Maddison Paluch
Photo Daniel Boud

In 2024, Australia signed on to the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge. The Treaty requires patent applicants to identify the origin of genetic resources and traditional knowledge used in the development of their invention. The treaty has been signed by 44 countries to date and will enter into force three months after being ratified by 15 member states. Australia has yet to ratify the Treaty but has made a commitment to the implementation of its principles.

These recent developments display the growing realisation that the rights of the world's First Nations Peoples are central to government, organisations and individuals' commitment to the upholding of universal human rights.

Discussion starters

- How are Museums addressing the story of how they acquired their collections?
- How did the ideologies of the Enlightenment contradict the actions of European colonisation?

1. Collins Dictionary UK / online edition.
2. Das, S. and Lowe, M., 2018. 'Nature Read in Black and White: decolonial approaches to interpreting natural history collections'. *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, 6, pp.4-14.
3. Das, s. and Lowe, M. 2018, *ibid*

Sir Joseph Banks (1743 – 1820)

Bank's Endeavour Journal, 1768-1771, State Library of NSW / Bruce York

Joseph Banks was a prominent naturalist and patron of science at the height of the Enlightenment (late 1700s to early 1800s) when intellectualism emphasised discovery and learning through observation and experience as opposed to religious or traditional belief systems. However, many of these 'enlightened' thinkers, especially scientists and anthropologists promoted extremely racist claims, such as classifying white people (Europeans) as civilised and superior, and non-white people as savages, uncivilised and unintelligent. Joseph Banks was one such scientist.

In 1768, Banks joined the expedition led by Captain James Cook aboard the HMS Endeavour to observe the transit of Venus and explore the southern hemisphere to find the Great Southern Land and claim it for Britain. As a scientific researcher, Banks' role was to collect specimens of flora and fauna to advance scientists' knowledge of the world beyond Europe. Being a man of substantial personal wealth, Banks provided the financial resources for two other scientists, two botanical illustrators and four servants to accompany him.

On 19 April 1770, the crew and passengers of the Endeavour sighted the east coast of Australia, and on 29 April several members of the expedition, including Banks and his assistants, stepped ashore at Kamay (D'harawal) / Botany Bay. Over several days, he and his colleague, Swedish botanist Daniel Solander (1733-1782), collected thousands of plant specimens, laid them out on sails to dry before labelling and placing them into books to be taken back to England. Most of these specimens remain in various institutions and private collections around the world to this day.

Banks' so-called 'discoveries' failed to recognise the First Peoples' vast knowledge of these native species. Knowledge that had been transferred over many generations for 65,000 years. Knowledge that was scientific and practical in its approach to environmental sustainability, and just as importantly, knowledge that was intrinsic to the continuum of Culture, Kinship, and life on this planet.

Over the duration of the expedition, Joseph Banks maintained a comprehensive journal. Evident in his writings are all the expressions of racism that Enlightenment science promoted — it's loaded bias against non-white people, and its misjudgements of a natural world different to that of Britain. In his journal, Banks referred to the people they encountered on the shores of Kamay/Botany Bay as *'the most uncivilizd savages perhaps in the world' and the landscape as having 'a sameness to be observd in the face of the country very uncommon; Barren it my justly be calld and in a very high degree'.*

When the Endeavour arrived back in London in 1771, Banks' bounty of specimens was heralded as the greatest collection of its time. He became a central figure in scientific communities, was made a Trustee of the British Museum and in 1778 was appointed president of the Royal Society, a position he held for 41 years.

In 1779, Banks' testimony to the British Parliament's Select Committee on Convicts advocated for the establishment of a British settlement in NSW as a suitable destination for some of Britain's over population of convicted criminals, while enabling Britain to claim an entire continent as part of their Empire.

More information on the Joseph Banks' Papers

Hard Hooves, Wrong Plants

Artists of Bangarra Dance Theatre and artists of The Australian Ballet
Photo Daniel Boud

Before colonisation there were no ungulates (mammals with hooves, or foot coverings made of keratin) in Australia. In fact, Australia was the only continent devoid of ungulates. When the first British fleet arrived in 1788, they brought with them animals (ungulates) they believed would be beneficial to establishing agricultural industry in the colony. However, they had little or no understanding of this environment or the ecosystems that enabled it to thrive and provide sustenance of all living things – plant, animal and human.

European settlers imposed not only their farming practices into the land they were occupying but did this under colonial ideologies that were based on racist principles of superiority and inferiority of white and non-white races respectively. Basically, the settlers assumed they knew better than the Indigenous people of the land, whom they regarded as savages and inferior to the white man. But they were blind to what was there before them – a fully sustainable agricultural system.

The animals they brought included horses, cattle, pigs, goats, buffalo and sheep – all hard hooved animals.

The impact of the introduction of these species into Australia's ecosystems was and continues to be destructive. The hooves of these animals cause the compacting of soils, disrupting natural drainage and forcing water to collect and create channels that encourage saltwater intrusion. Grazing, especially over-grazing causes erosion. Root systems are weakened impacting plant species that exist to support each other, as well as the native animal populations. Nutrients are lost, waters are contaminated, ecosystems are dismantled.

The first settlers also brought a number of European plants species with them for the purpose of establishing crop growing. These included wheat, barley, maize, and corn so that they could enjoy the foods that were considered a desirable diet. From the early years of the colony, settlers embarked on extensive land clearing, seed sowing, and crop growing in line with European farming practices – practices that were not suited to the Australian natural environment and climate.

Since Colonisation, Australia has developed a very significant agricultural sector, consisting mainly of livestock (beef, sheep, and dairy) and broadacre crop farming (wheat, canola and barley). Today, agriculture accounts for 55% of Australian land use (426 M hectares) excluding timber forests. But it's also worth noting, agriculture uses 74% of the nation's water consumption (9,981 gigalitres in 2021-22) and contributes 13% of greenhouse gas emission.

The impact of agriculture on the health of Country has been significant. Loss of habitat, soil depletion of organic carbon, species loss, and the overall disruption of vital ecosystems is clearly unsustainable for life on our planet. It is encouraging that many farmers in Australia (and indeed around the world) are now recognising the impact of past miscalculations, and implementing farming practices focused on regeneration. Policy makers are also recognising that regenerative agriculture offers both economic and environmental co-benefits. Regenerative farming has the possibility to transform and renew landscapes, by rebuilding the health of soils, increasing water retention, rejuvenating biodiversity and generally improving resilience to climate events. Regenerative farming includes techniques such as cover cropping (growing non-harvest crops between cash crops), managed grazing, and less use of chemicals (pesticides).

Our future on this planet, is under threat and only a collective whole-of-world effort will save our ecosystems. We have so much to learn from First Peoples' knowledge of Country and the deep history of Mother Earth. Their knowledge is undeniably scientific, but it is also balanced, respectful, equitable and based in truth.

Story tellers & Knowledge keepers

Waradah

Dharug language 'beautiful from afar'.
English name: Waratah.
Scientific name: *Telopea speciosissima*

Story: Two native wonga pigeons fall in love. While the male flies back and forth, collecting and bringing materials to the female to prepare the nest, a hawk spots the pigeons. The hawk swoops down and picks up the female pigeon, and flies through dense bushland while eating and scratching her as she fights to escape from the hawk's claws. The hawk loses its grip, and the pigeon, bleeding from her wounds lands on a white Waradah, her blood causing the Waradah to turn red.

Waradahs thrive in semi shade and full sun, producing little pockets of nectar for birds, animals and insects to drink. Once the flower has been pollinated, fruits/seeds are formed in a pod which opens up over time, with the help of heat and/or smoke from fires. The seeds have a small wing to support their flight as they travel to places where they can germinate away from the mother plant. Tilting the flower to one side and tapping the full flower when in bloom will extract the sweet nectar.

Marrai'uo

D'harawal language – a name connected to seasonal change.
English name: Golden wattle
Scientific name: *Acacia pycnantha*

The flowering time for Marrai'uo is at the end of the cold season when temperatures start to rise, and days get longer (late winter into early spring). It's time to start fishing, as it's breeding time for mullet and flathead. The bright yellow flowers of the wattle attract pollinators, including bees, butterflies and small birds. Ants are enticed to feed on the sweet nectar of the flowers, and also seek out the wattle seeds, transporting them across rough ground to their warm nests, helping the seeds to germinate. Sap from the wattle tree is used for healing tooth aches, while branches are used to make tapping sticks, woomeras and digging sticks.

On 19 September 1912, on the recommendation of Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, the new design for the Australian Coat of Arms was officially approved by King George V. The design incorporated a stylised version of the wattle as a framing for the kangaroo and emu and the central shield depicting the six states that make up the Commonwealth. The illustration of the wattle is not botanically accurate, nor does it recognise the species for its cultural significance or its practical usage by First Nations people.

In 1988, Australia's bicentennial year, the Golden Wattle was proclaimed as Australia's official floral emblem. Once again, a decision that was taken without Cultural consultation and acknowledgement of the Cultural significance of the species. There are legal restrictions around the use of both the Coat of Arms and the Emblem.

Kai-mia

D'harawal language – the name of a great warrior.
English name: Gymea lily
Scientific name: *Doryanthes excelsa*

Story: The spirit of the warrior Kai-mia is everywhere the Gymea lily exists, his story represented by the magnificent red flower that sits atop the long spear-like rod that rises from the thick flax. Kai-mia's story is about the time a group of knowledge holders decided to travel to the lands of the Creator Spirit, but the younger members of the community refused to make the journey with them. The warrior Kai-mia offered to stay with the young people, but when a large storm surged onto land the young ones started to run. Kai-mia went with them, but the storm pursued them and chased them further inland. They stopped to rest in a valley, but the storm erupted over them again. Kai-mia told them they should have gone with the knowledge holders in the first place. Eventually they found a cave to shelter in, but there was seemingly no way out if the waters reached into the cave. Kai-mia found a small crevice in the roof of the cave, and he managed to climb into the daylight. He was wounded and weak. Then the earth shook and the crevice closed up. Kai-mia was unable to rescue the young people. The knowledge holders found Kai-mia's body on their return journey and followed his blood drops to look for the young people. But the young people were never found. What the knowledge holders did find was small plants growing at the sites of Kai-mia's blood drops. The Gymea lilies we see represent the young people who were never found.

Endemic to the Northern to the Southern coastal lines of New South Wales, Gymea/Kai-mia flowers are a valuable food source for Aboriginal people. The youngest flowers are the sweetest to eat. The thick and fibrous stalk can grow up to six metres. Pieces of the stem were cut into sections and placed onto hot coals to cook the inner flesh, while the outer skin kept the inner layers intact. The stalk pieces were then peeled back and when cool eaten or placed in a dilly bag to eat later.

Gymea lily fronds, some as long as two to four meters, are stripped lengthwise and hung to dry. They are then soaked in water, to become evenly pliable, and ready to weave into large mats, dilly bags, fishing lines and fishing nets. The Gymea lily root systems can grow to the size of a large, sweet potato and are cooked the same way as the stem.

Images supplied courtesy of Sate Library of NSW.

Creating *Flora*

Cultural consultation

Fundamental and central to *Flora*'s creative journey was the Cultural consultation undertaken with Uncle Matthew Doyle, a descendent of the Muruwari People of North West NSW. As a former Bangarra dancer, and previous consultant for Bangarra's productions Patyegarang (2013) and Bennelong (2017), Uncle Matthew's guidance and knowledge sharing was critical to *Flora*'s creative development and decision-making processes.

Cultural consultation is not only about the sharing of knowledge and ensuring of the authenticity of Cultural content, it is also about care. As creative ideas were explored, Uncle Matthew alerted the artists of any specific Cultural and/or Community protocols that had to be observed and implemented – from the broadest concepts to the finest details. In every Bangarra production, Cultural consultation is sought and engaged with from the earliest stages of research and throughout the creative development until the final performance.

Research

Alongside Cultural consultation, highly focused research was conducted over a period of two years, drawing on an extensive range of publications, peer reviewed articles, reports (many produced in the 18th and 19th centuries), illustrations and documentaries. Conversations with First Nations historians, botanists, and other experts in native flora were conducted in order to fuel the creative team with relevant information.

The creative team visited the State Library of NSW to view specific collection items, including Sir Joseph Banks' Endeavour journal, written over the expedition's duration from 1768 to 1771. Viewing and turning the pages of Banks' journal was a significant and very emotional experience for everyone present.

The production, marketing and creative teams, including the dancers, also visited the Royal Botanic Gardens and the Barangaroo Reserve in Sydney to learn about particular species in their natural environment, and the practical applications and Cultural significance of various plants. It was critical that everyone involved in the production experience these activities firsthand and together, to reinforce the importance of this being a collective creative journey, where everyone is part of the learning as well as the creation and presentation.

Story telling

The scope for Indigenous Story telling is vast, its importance is critical, and its impact is palpable. Story carries insight, establishes connection and is one of the most transferable human communication platforms possible. In dreaming about how the production will unfold, ideas enter and inhabit the artists' imagination. It is an organic and intuitive creative process, but it is also a highly organised and disciplined process, so that ideas can be fully explored, distilled and refined. There is, of course, always room to change, to adapt, to discard, to dive deeper. Focuses are tightened. A structure emerges. The dancers' roles in the story become more articulated. The environment of movement, sound, visual poetry comes together and the Story starts to burn with its own unique energy.

Collaboration

Choreographer, composer, designers, researchers, and those responsible for the technical requirements that will bring the production to realisation, met constantly over a period of months to develop and share ideas before the choreographer started working with the dancers.

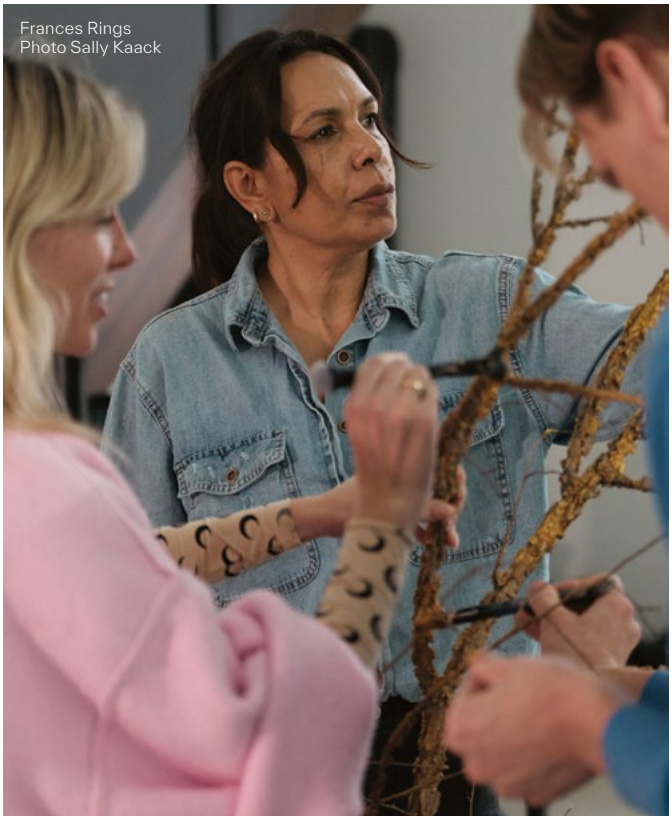
In collaboration, they developed a lexicon of terms to refer to specific sections, design elements, sounds, textures, props and movement motifs to ensure common understandings and clear communication among the artists. This helped build a dramaturgical landscape for the Stories being told.

Having a studio environment where artists could be constantly immersed in the ideas and stories that were fed into the work was critical to maintaining focus. The walls of the rehearsal studios were covered with information, images and other visual references so that the dancers were aware of the research and development process leading up to the point where they could make their own creative contributions. We called this the Knowledge wall.

Production

Production teams are central to the work from the time the first ideas are ignited, to the final day of the final performance season. Production teams are the technical enablers. Their role is to turn what has been imagined into reality. This involves not only knowing what is technically possible within specific theatre venues, but finding ways to, in many cases, do what has never been done before. The production team had to source materials, commission construction, and test prototypes. With the current technical advancements of theatre production, textiles, and technology, including digital, the scope for the creative team was vast, but it was the production team who make it all possible. The pre-production stage for *Flora* also involved important considerations such as safety, surfaces, materials, weight and of course, cost.

Frances Rings and David Hallberg
Photo Daniel Boud



Frances Rings
Photo Sally Kaack

Set

The set design for *Flora* was designed by Elizabeth Gadsby. *Flora* is a technically complex production. The design emerged after many months of research, discussion and dreaming.

The stage itself provides a large open space, while the areas behind and above the stage hold customised structures (rigging) that enable the movement of set pieces, lighting and other visual effects to occur. The first act of *Flora* is danced on a black floor, the second danced on a white floor.

A scrim, sometime called ghost mesh or transparent gauze, hangs horizontally from the top of the stage to the floor and cover the whole width of the stage at about the midway point. Scrims are generally used for projection or to create a soft hazy effect. They are lowered and raised – silently – as required. The scrim in *Flora* is called a pepper scrim. It has threads of reflective material incorporated into the weave to give a dappled and more dimensional effect.

One of the main set design elements is a set of three canopies attached to the rigging above the stage. Canopies made of jute and hessian rope-like thread, woven in a random way to resemble the natural entanglement of tree roots. One is positioned towards the front, and one is midway. The third is across the back wall and is the widest. The canopies descend and ascend (silently) at various times during the performance, sometimes only the tendrils of the lower edge are visible.

In the Act 2 section titled 10 Days, a large metal truss, about 8 meters in diameter, is used to lower 12 very large specimen bags onto the stage. The sides of the bags are made of thick translucent material, fixed to a firm base about 50 cm x 30 cm and lit from the inside with a small LED light. Inside the bag are customised props that represent different Australian native species – Wattle, Waratah, Gymea lily, Flowering gum, Bottle brush, Grevillia, Kangaroo paw, Warrigal greens, Lemon myrtle, Banksia, Native orchid, Native mistletoe. The bags have a slit in the back for dancers to enter the bag, be seen moving inside, and exit.

Props

There are a number of props used in the work. Spinifex clumps, coolamons, firesticks (with actual fire) and various tetherings. For example, in the Sleeping Yams section five dancers are hanging in the air, secured by harnesses that are hidden by the dark lighting state, so it looks like the dancers are floating. Other props used in the production include coolamons made of metal, wire and thick fireproof material. The coolamons are affixed to a thick plaiting of rope so they can be carried on the head. Some of the coolamons have smoke machines inside them. It should be noted that in the Fire Song section, the dancers costumes are treated with fire retardant.

Costume

The costumes for *Flora* are all designed by Grace Lillian Lee, a descendent of the Doolah family from Erub (Darnley Island) in Zenedth Kes / Torres Strait. The costumes are quite sculptural and highly textured – from the lightest palest gauzes to broken down denim, from fluffy fabrics to super slick and reflective material. In several sections, traditional weavings are shaped into very dramatic and quite large adornments that are fixed to undergarments. Colour palettes range from neutral creams and off-white to very bright tones of floral celebration. In some sections, body paint and exaggerated makeup is used. The dancers are in bare feet for the whole performance.

Lighting

Karen Norris was the lighting designer for *Flora*. Most of Act 1 is in a dark environment, colours are cool, except for when certain objects need to hold the viewers focus. In Act 2, colours are warmer to very bright, especially when they reflect off the white floor. Lighting is sourced from both the top of the stage and the sides.

Body paint and make up

Various colours of body paint – gold, blue, white – are used in some of the sections of the work. The body paint is smeared on to arms, legs, chests, and sometimes forehead and hair. In specific sections exaggerated make up is applied – dark circles around the eyes, extended corners of the eyes, darkened lips.

Digital design elements

The pepper scrim, positioned vertically across the entire width of the stage, serves to create an atmosphere of being underground. Video projection on the canopies during Lungs of Country and Grass keepers sections enriches the lighting states by adding dimension and gentle movement to the 'glow' effects. In the Fire Song section, fire is projected on to the back wall and at various other points in the production, video projection is used to enrich the atmosphere.

Activities

- Discuss why Cultural Consultation is central to the creation of *Flora* and how it reflects responsibility, respect and artistic integrity.
- Discuss how production elements (floor colour, scrims, lighting, video projection) and costume (texture, colour, shape) affect audiences' responses and interpretation.
- Reflect on how the various elements of the creative process contribute to communicate meaning in *Flora*. Consider the intention of the work, Cultural considerations, and research pathways that informed the work, production and design, and how these elements work together. What would change if you took one element away?
- Create a short movement phrase inspired by research into an Australian native plant species, referencing elements such as the species' physical features, evolution, symbolic meaning or ecological role into choreography. (Students should generate their own gestures and movements from their research and not aim to replicate existing dance movements.)

Structure

***Flora* is presented as a work of twelve sections:**

Mother Seed

Deep time – the ancestral journey of the Mother Seed begins below the surface of the Earth. Creation stories unfold. The biological patterns of life evolve.

Sleeping Yams

Beneath the cracked clay lie the sleeping yams, interconnected in their subterranean world. They listen to the footsteps of people following trade routes and learning the Songlines of ancestors.

Lungs of Country

Through the process of photosynthesis, plants and trees provide animals and humans with oxygen, nourishment and shelter. Balancing ecosystems, holding knowledge, controlling the atmosphere.

Grass keepers / Spinifex

Grasses caring for the soil, provide a home for animals, resin for trade, and fibres for weaving. Spinifex grasses cover vast areas of the continent. Connecting people to Country and Community.

Grass keepers / Weaving women

Weaving and fibre craft combining practical craftsmanship with deep cultural, spiritual, and social meaning.

Hooves are coming

Colonisation served the Empires' political, economic and socio-cultural goals. Hard hooved animals and introduced plants would destroy the balance of delicate ecosystems in the same way European mindsets destroyed First Nations societies.

10 Days

Joseph Banks (1743-1820) removes hundreds of species from their natural environment, their native Story and their Cultural home in the name of 'discovery'. He creates the largest collection of species for its time. Banks is elevated to a position of significant prestige and is influential in Britain's colonisation exploits. The collecting of species and objects to display in museums reduces First Nations people and cultures to artifact status

Golden Wattle

Highly valued for its practical use, the wattle's natural cycles announce seasonal change – when the fish are breeding, the pollinators arrive, and when ants feed from the nectar. 1912, the Federal Government appropriates the wattle for inclusion in the Coat of Arms; 1988, the Green and Gold becomes an official emblem – a tool for nation building, a symbol of unification; contradicting the wattle's critical significance in the lives of First Nations people and the natural world that they cared for.

Repatriation

Repatriating plant species from botanical institutions restores living heritage to Country, reconnecting seeds, restoring Knowledge, and strengthening Culture.

Grass tree warriors

The grass tree holds deep cultural and spiritual significance for First Nations peoples, symbolising both protection and resilience—qualities that closely mirror those of First Nations warriors.

Fire Song

Fire – a vital tool for survival, a sacred force of renewal and connection to Land. Fire-stick farming altered plant distributions, encouraging fire-adapted species like eucalypts and banksias to germinate.

Bush flowers

Australian flora underpins the personal, social, and spiritual foundations of First Nations peoples through resilience and identity in perpetuity. This living relationship with native plants supports not just survival, but the commitment to hope, healing, and the building of a healthy and sustainable future.

Reference sources & further reading

Links 

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