

# Galk-galk Dhelkunya Update

December 2025

DJAARA, the representative body for Dja Dja Wurrung People, launched our Galk-galk Dhelkunya (Forest Gardening) Strategy three years ago. This is a brief update on what's being done, what we've learned, and what's to come.

## The Strategy

### Galk-galk Dhelkunya 'to care for/to heal, many trees' Strategy | What is it again?

The Galk-galk Dhelkunya Strategy is a 12-year plan with an intergenerational outlook, which outlines Dja Dja Wurrung People's holistic philosophy and practices for managing and restoring **Djandak** (Dja Dja Wurrung Country).

Galk-galk Dhelkunya is a landscape-scale interaction with Country, using a toolkit of cultural practices. It seeks to restore Country as recognisable cultural landscapes – from the canopy to the soil.

The Galk-galk Dhelkunya Strategy describes a holistic suite of tools that are planned, implemented and monitored by Dja Dja Wurrung.

### What's in the Galk-galk Dhelkunya toolkit?

The following activities form the foundational tools for Galk-galk Dhelkunya. More tools and techniques may be added over time.

- **Djandak Wi** (Country fire) follows the principle of 'right fire, right time, right place'. It is often applied as a low, cool fire, in a carefully considered mosaic pattern.
- **Cultural thinning** is a restorative method, carried out where disturbance has caused dense regrowth. See [What is Cultural thinning](#), on page 3.
- **Revegetation and rehabilitation** includes returning habitat, culturally important plants and vegetation. This will vary depending on the cultural landscape.
- **Regenerative practice and partnerships** is taking collective action to care for **Djandak** (Country), including working with private landholders to restore ecosystem function, connectivity and spirit to degraded Country.
- **Gatjin (water) management** to see it flowing with health through **Djandak**. Activities include water monitoring, and restoring vegetation in and around waterways and water bodies across Country.



*Djandak Wi (Country fire) – low, cool fire, in a mosaic pattern – at Babbingtons Hill, a Forest Gardening trial site in the Wombat Forest*

### What are the aims of the strategy?

Our vision is for our lands and waters to be in good condition and actively managed to protect our values and to promote the laws, Culture and rights of Djaara (Dja Dja Wurrung People). Healthy Country is essential to the health and wellbeing of our People.

### How was the strategy developed?

DJAARA staff developed the strategy in consultation with a Dja Dja Wurrung cultural knowledge group, which included Elders from multiple clan groups.

A contemporary expression of an age-old knowledge system, the strategy was developed over two years.

It expands on the goals of Dhelkunya Dja, the **Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Country Plan (2014–34)**, which is the key guiding document for all work across DJAARA and its enterprises (the Dja Dja Wurrung Group).



Monitoring fauna in the Wombat Forest (top: wallaby and joeys; bottom: greater glider\*) \*photo: John Walter

- On-Country workshops, field days, working bees and events have been run for Djaara, our partners and the broader community.
- Collaboration with researchers and Western science has resulted in holistic monitoring projects being implemented across multiple sites.

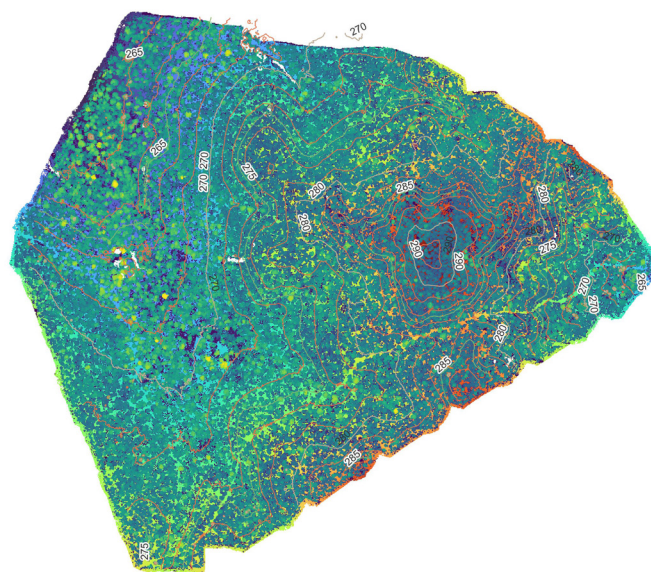
### What's happening at the trial sites?

We established two trial sites in the Wombat Forest and one at Paddys Ranges State Park (one of six Aboriginal-title parks on **Djandak**). Cultural and ecological monitoring has been carried out in partnership with the University of Melbourne and the Arthur Rylah Institute.

The small trial sites are in different forest types and serve as on-Country living labs.

They allow DJAARA to:

- demonstrate land management tools
- build skills and capability in our Ranger crew and Djaara community
- engage with friends, partners and the broader community.



LiDAR canopy modelling at Paddys Ranges in partnership with Firetail Environments, used to monitor forest health, carbon sequestration, erosion and runoff

### Why is it important?

Djaara are intimately connected to **Djandak** through our **Ngurar Balak** (Ancestors), our Culture and **murrup** (spirit). Gatjin (water) and **wi** (fire) flow through cultural landscapes, where Djaara and **Djandak** exist through interdependent relationships.

The healthy landscapes that colonisers 'discovered' in the 1830s had been managed by our **Ngurar Balak** for thousands of generations.

The delicate, dynamic ecological functions of **Djandak** began to deteriorate without Djaara presence in the environment. Traditional land management practices, such as regular cool burns and the tilling of soils ceased. Meanwhile, mining, timber harvesting and sheep grazing dramatically changed the landscape.

The Galk-galk Dhelkunya strategy provides clear guidance to land managers about the practices and expectations of Djaara, consistent with our rights and responsibilities to care for Country.

### Implementing the strategy

#### What's been happening on the ground since 2022?

- Three Galk-galk Dhelkunya restoration trial sites have been established.
- DJAARA Timbers – a speciality timber workshop – has been set up.
- We have built partnerships with Councils, Landcare Networks and environmental organisations.

Actions include:

- Biocultural monitoring of vegetation, canopy, fauna and understorey conditions.
- On-Country workshops engaging Djaara Elders, youth and community members.
- Building climate resilience through cultural thinning, mosaic cool burning and revegetation of culturally important plants.
- Creating habitat by carving hollows and installing nest boxes.
- Weed and pest management to restore ecological balance.





*Djaara returning habitat hollows to the landscape at Paddys Ranges*



*Nest boxes high up in the canopy at Wombat Forest – installed in partnership with local First Nations business Deadly Tree Care*

## What is 'Cultural thinning'?

One of the tools in the Galk-galk Dhelkunya toolbox is cultural thinning. Like ecological thinning, it's carried out in areas of dense regrowth – where closely packed young trees have grown after disturbance such as logging or severe bushfire.

These young trees compete for light, water and nutrients and can compromise the health of older trees, understorey plants and a forest's structure – creating a monoculture which is vulnerable to further impacts and threats.

Thinning involves crews on foot using hand tools to ringbark or selectively remove thin trees. It allows other, older trees to thrive and restore a more open forest structure, including a more biodiverse forest floor.

Felled trees may be left on the ground to help build soil profile on forest floors where the soil is depleted. Some are used for projects such as park signage (see images next page). They may also be used for cultural crafts such as clap sticks and boomerangs, for tools, artwork, or for firewood for Djaara Elders and community members.

Comprehensive cultural and scientific ecological assessments and monitoring are part of the process, carried out by Dja Dja Wurrung practitioners and ecologists from different research institutions (currently the University of Melbourne and Arthur Rylah Institute).



*At Paddys Ranges, thinnings have been laid horizontally along the contours to slow water runoff across the landscape*



*Monitoring at a Wombat Forest trial site – with dense regrowth evident in the background*





High value forest materials (for example, from windthrown trees) have been used for furniture, shelters and art installations.



## What is DJAARA Timbers?

DJAARA Timbers is a Dja Dja Wurrung specialty and cultural timbers project.

Its vision is to create an ethical not-for-profit timber business that heals **Djandak** (Country) while healing Djaara (Dja Dja Wurrung People).

DJAARA Timbers honours trees by producing high-value timber products for cultural use, furniture, park signage, shelters, artistic installations and

musical instruments. It also generates meaningful cultural, economic, and professional development opportunities for Dja Dja Wurrung People, enabled through the restoration of Country.

DJAARA Timbers supports the implementation of the Galk-galk Dhelkunya (Forest Gardening) Strategy.

See the [DJAARA Timbers](#) website for more information.



Thinned timber from DJAARA's Forest Gardening trial sites at Paddys Ranges and the Wombat Forest has been used to support projects on Country, such as the Nyerna Djayi Wurreka (listening to Country speak) cultural trail in Hepburn Regional Park.

## More information:

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## Further reading:

[Galk-galk Dhelkunya Forest Gardening Strategy](#)

[Dhelkunya Dja, Dja Dja Wurrung Country Plan](#)

[Dhelkunyangu Gatjin, Working together to heal water strategy](#)

[Djandak Wi \(Country Fire\) Strategy](#)

[Turning 'wrong way, right way' Climate Change Strategy](#)

[Nyauwi Mutjeka – to keep the sun, Renewable Energy Strategy](#)