Nalderun Education Aboriginal Corporation
Curriculum Resource

Resource Title	Classification – an Aboriginal Perspective
Aboriginal Protocols	
Person	Aunty Julie McHale
Mob Group/Country	Aunty Julie is a Pallawa woman
Content Country	This resource was created on Djarra country
Curriculum Area	
Year Levels	• Primary, Secondary, Tertiary / Adult
Pedagogies	• Community Links
Ways of Assessing	
First Nations Education Academics that back your reasons	
Any other info / comments	

CLASSIFICATION-An Aboriginal Perspective

Prepared by Julie McHale.

**Within this document I have written about ways Indigenous Australians classify living things. Facts are written in black. A suggested activity to accompany the facts is written in red. If a word is written in blue it is in the DjaDjaWurrung language.*

Although "Western Society" has often regarded Aboriginal taxonomy (classification of organisms) as either non-existent or very primitive, in fact very complex systems for classification apply. Aboriginal ways of organising knowledge is very complex, not restricted to plants and animals but incorporating societal structures and kinship. These systems include the landscape, the people, the physical and the spiritual aspects.

Different mobs of "tribes" of Aboriginal peoples are often regional and relate to cultural components, but in all cases the classification of plants and animals is complex and highly structured and is expected to be known by all the people in the mob of family group.

Of course we can start simply by sorting the edible and non-edible plants and animals.

Put the children into three groups (if a large class put them into a multiple of 3) Using the thumbprints (attached-should be cut into smaller individual pieces whole sets given to a group of pairs) of indigenous animals sort into the binary classification of edible and non-edible. All these animals are or were indigenous to Central Victoria.

Often animals which aren't eaten are not considered of any use and many aren't even named. They would simply be put in the category of eg: insect (toombak) and not given individual names.

The Aboriginal classification of edible plants and animals has similarities to western taxonomy in that it is hierarchical with things being grouped in levels and each higher level containing the ones below it.

Now sort the edible thumbprints into groups as in western taxonomy. Eg: birds-flight/flightless-ducks-finches-waterbirds-; reptiles-snakes-brown-black etc.

These groups would have the complication of the language names of them added to the mix. For example, in the Yolgnu community, the word warrakan is used by children up to 10 years old to refer to large birds. From 11 to 18 years of age, warrakan is used to refer to both large and small birds. From 19 to the early 30s, warrakan refers to all birds and mainly to large edible birds (which are classified by their habitat from the sea to the bush). Older people use warrakan to refer to large land animals, reptiles, bats, echidnas and birds.

While the example above demonstrates that levels of knowledge can be delineated by age, they can also be determined by gender, kinship and other social structures. From the Aboriginal point of view, the ways of classifying plants and animals are many and complex. Significantly, these ways of understanding the natural order are not limited to the identification of plants and animals as objects. They are also used to interpret and construct social positions within communities.

Aboriginal people also have totemic (or symbolic) classification. This refers to the recognition of plants, animals and natural phenomena as belonging to particular social groups or moieties. Aboriginal communities are divided in complex ways, with all individuals belonging to one or more social groups as determined by descent from either their mother or father. These moieties also include animals and plants, and they guide people in all aspects of their social life, especially their roles, responsibilities and obligations. Maintaining knowledge about the plants and animals, and the ceremonies associated with them, is the responsibility of the people of the social group to which the plants or animals belong.

Let's look at a ficticious scenario, based on reality. People have very complex classifications in Aboriginal Ssociety. All indigenous people of Australia are called Aborigines (which actually means "first peoples"). They are then divided into where they live ie: Koorie-Victoria and Southern NSW, Koori-NSW and Southern Queensland, Murri-Queensland etc etc. They are then divided into Mobs or Language Groups (tribes) ie: Koorie-DjaDjaWurrung, Wurundgeri, Gunai, DaungWurrung etc. These Mobs are then divided into family groups or "skins" (moieties). As all these hierarchical groups have Language names it, the Aboriginal People were aware of the classifications and had knowledge of what each classisfication meant.

Let's call our Mob, Kinnie. This Mob's Creator is Bunjil. Bunjil turns himself into a wedgetailed eagle to watch over Country. Therefore, the wedgetailed eagle is sacred and is never killed. All Kinnie people perform Ceremony if a wedge-tailed eagle is found dead. Of course, not all wedgetailed eagles are Bunjil but all are respected just in case.

Each group would remove the wedgetailed eagle and create a new pile.

The Kinnie has sixteen "clans" or "family groups". Each of these groups have one of three "totems" or ancestor groups. Which group you were a member of depended on one of three components, your father's lineage, your mother's lineage or a complex combination of both..

Give each group one of the following "ancestors"-Waa the crow, Barramul the emu and Gure the kangaroo. (Remember ALL groups saw Bujil as the supreme head of the group.) Depending on which group they are appointed to, remove the animal which is now their special group. Once again this animal may not be harmed in any way. However, the Waa and Gure mob could kill an emu and the Barramul and Gure mob could kill a crow and the Waa and Barramul mob could kill a kangaroo. Put the removed card onto the "new" pile.

Traditional ecological knowledge is information built up over generations by groups of Aboriginal people living in close contact with their environment. For each group it is a set of interpretations about the local ecology and a system of self-management that governs the uses of both the non-living and the living parts of their environment, such as collecting, hunting, trapping and fishing. This knowledge is passed by word of mouth within traditional laws and practices and often as part of Dreaming stories.

Yarranmillawit, the bat is also considered to be an important animal as it welcomed weary travellors to Country and showed them where the rest of the people were. (See the attached Teaching-Eagle, Bat and Crow). They were respected by ALL Kinnie people.

So now put the bat picture into the pile of special animals.

Wirrimul the owl was considered to bring news of a forthcoming death. Owl were considered to be birds you didn't want to see. So of course you did not want to eat them.

So remove all owls from the food pile.

The landscape or environmental features of the areas also impacted on each "skin". For example-the Kinnie Waa lived and hunted on the hills and in the tops of trees, the Kinnie Gure lived and hunted in the thinly treed areas and the rivers and the Kinnie Barramul lived and hunted on the open grasslands and the swamps. Of course if the hunting and gathering in each of these groups was restricted only to that area then the food sources would be limited. You could get food from another group's area if you gained their permission. This may involve trade or bartering.

So the Kinnie Waa group need to place all the things that could be eaten and are found in the treetops into another pile which will become their food pile. The Kinnie Gure and the Kinnie Barramul groups remove these things to another pile-this will become the pile of things they may kill and eat if they have the permission of the Kinnie Waa group (of course the Kinnie War group would never give permission for crows to be hunted). This process should be done for the Kinnie Barramul (open grass and swamp) group and the Kinnie Gure group.

Now let's consider the information mentioned earlier in terms of gender. In the Kinnie mob men cannot only eat birds which are smaller than their hands. In the Kinnie Mob women are not allowed to eat reptiles and birds which are black in colour. In the Kinnie Mob children are not allowed to eat animals which walk on two legs.

Now put the food into groups which are not permitted by gender and age.

By this stage you will understand that how complicated these things get. If you also add plants, types of rocks which can and can't be used or walked upon, sky symbols, seasons, areas of land, customs and ceremony into this mix the mind boggles. Yet children as young as ten are expected to know all these rules.

Give a copy of this excerp from a Science lecturer who worked in Arnhemland and went to observe a classroom activity being taught by a trainee teacher.

Mark Linkson's story

As a person of Western culture, my expectations were often different from the realities of Indigenous cultures and this has had many impacts on my work as an educator. As a teacher education lecturer in Arnhemland, I watched a science lesson being taught in a junior primary classroom at Galiwinku. Students had the task of sorting a pile of shells. Now, how could this be done? Colour, shape, size? I watched bemused as students made two piles that I could not identify. Their Yolngu teacher was quite pleased. Her explanation to me afterwards was that the shells were sorted by moieties, *Dhuwa* and *Yirritja*, the two halves into which Yolngu people place just about everything: people, plants, animals, landforms and physical phenomena. The Indigeous science in this lesson was excellent – but where did it fit into a Western

curriculum?

Linkson, Mark. (1999). Some issues in providing culturally appropriate science curriculum support for Indigenous students. *Australian Science Teachers' Journal, 45*(1), 41-48.]

The religious knowledge and ceremonies attached to these plants and animals are the responsibility of the people of the same clan as the plant or animal in question. Clans then combine in song cycles, where each clan sings their portion of the cycle. This can involve plants, animals, tracts of land or events which they own. Some information in religious categories is open to all people, but much is considered restricted and sacred by Indigenous people and will not be further mentioned here.

In pre-contact Aboriginal communities, religious beliefs governed every aspect of people's lives, including their movements, what they ate and how they managed the land. Principles for the conservation of the environment for future generations were embedded in these religious beliefs. The principles were based on the knowledge of hundreds of generations of people about using the environment.