

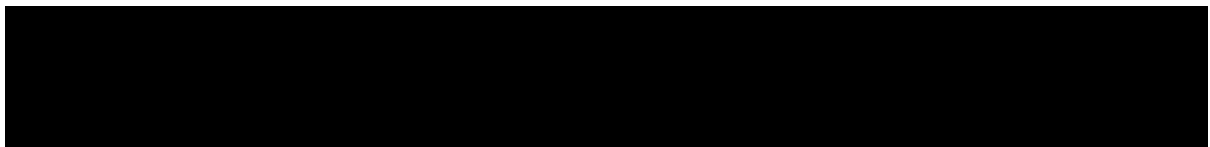
# Visitors flock to Budj Bim Indigenous site after World Heritage listing

By [Miki Perkins](#)

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In the slate-coloured sky above Tae Rak, three predators – a sea eagle, a hawk and a wedge-tailed eagle – warily circle each other.

They appear put out at the prospect of sharing a territory. The hawk sweeps the wedgie, banks at the last moment, and shrieks. “You don’t often see them together - what a treat,” says Gunditjmara ranger Leigh Boyer peering upwards, a hand shading his eyes.



Gunditjmarra Aboriginal site was recently added to the UNESCO World Heritage list and has been an immensely satisfying outcome for the Gunditjmarra people after more than a decade of lobbying to have one of the oldest aquaculture systems in the world

From a bird's eye view, the extent of the ancient stone aquaculture system built on the edges of Tae Rak (Lake Condah), in far-western Victoria, becomes clear.

Created at least 6600 years ago by the Gunditjmarra Aboriginal people, and in continuous use ever since, the Budj Bim landscape was added to the World Heritage Site list in early June.

It's the first Australian site to be nominated exclusively for its Aboriginal cultural and heritage values, and there has been a strong increase in visitors since the listing.

At the edge of the lake, the basalt channel walls are cloaked in iridescent green moss and lichen. The eel traps were sited to make best use of the lake's ebb and flow.



Gunditjmarra Aboriginal site Budj Bim is considered one of the oldest aquaculture systems in the world. JUSTIN MCMANUS



Nearby, on the edge of a rocky rise, stands a gnarled eel-smoking tree. Hollow and blackened inside, the fish were hung on sticks inside the tree and smoked with fragrant Cherry Ballart leaves.



For the Gunditjmara, this landscape is where the creation figure Budj Bim emerged in the form of a volcano (now also called Mt Eccles). Through eruptions, Budj Bim “shared his teeth and blood” over the landscape, creating the volcanic rock and sinkholes.



The Gunditjmara established a system of weirs, constructed channels, and built holding and growing ponds.

These supplied them with enough food to sustain them year-round in villages of stone huts, and to undertake trade.

Since the listing, Leigh Boyer has received about 10 inquiries from the public each day about Gunditjmara-led tours, compared with 10 a week previously. Interest is evenly split between school groups and the public.

The Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation has been advocating for the heritage listing for more than a decade, and plans to increase sustainable tourism, and develop the site for cultural and community purposes.

But traditional owners will also be cautious. Areas of Budj Bim will remain off limits to protect the sites from damage. While they welcome the economic benefits of tourism, Boyer says they cannot risk their cultural heritage.

“The visitors we’ve had actually want to learn. They’re not doing it to tick it off their bucket list or for taking selfies,” says Boyer.

Senior ranger Aaron Morgan travelled from Melbourne to Azerbaijan with a dozen other Gunditjmara people for the 43rd session of the World Heritage Committee.



Budj Bim rangers Aaron Morgan and Leigh Boyer stand by replica stone houses. JUSTIN MCMANUS

On the day it was a tense wait, he says: “Until the last moment we didn’t know for sure if the bid would get up.” When the conference voted to approve Budj Bim’s addition, one of the ecstatic Gunditjmara contingent jumped to their feet and waved the Aboriginal flag.

Meanwhile, in the Windamara Aboriginal Corporation in Heywood, about 30 kilometres north of Portland, a nervous gathering of 50 people watched the process through a live feed. When the vote was announced the room erupted.

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“It validates the significance of this aquaculture and it does it on the world stage,” says Boyer. “There was so much excitement, it was quite emotional.”

Currently, visitors to the Great Ocean Road usually head north to the Grampians from Warrnambool. The Gunditjmara rangers would like to see them travel a little further west and take in Budj Bim on the way.

The Budj Bim master plan encourages education, special interest and cultural awareness visitors in the short term, with a later expansion into the self-drive and bus tour market from the Great Ocean Road region.

A tourist drive will begin at Lake Surprise, where a new cantilevered lookout and walkway will provide a view of the crater of the long-dormant volcano.

An elevated deck system will be built at the Tyrendarra Indigenous protected area to prevent visitors eroding the stone walls and eel traps. And signage at the “Convincing Ground” massacre site will establish it as a place that represents military and social conflict.

Victoria’s share of international visitors to Aboriginal sites is estimated to be about 9 per cent.

In May, the Andrews government committed \$5.7 million for preserving and promoting Aboriginal heritage, in large part to complete the master plan for Budj Bim, in anticipation of an increase in global attention the World Heritage listing will bring.