

Graham Atkinson, Chair of the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation

Friday 15 November, Rosalind Park, Bendigo

Your Excellency, Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Guests

I acknowledge that we are on the traditional lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung People and pay my respects to elders past and those present today.

I have been honoured to perform countless Welcome to Country ceremonies and acknowledgments in my role as Chairman of the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, but this is the first time I have been able to do it knowing that the Dja Dja Wurrung People *finally* have the full legal recognition of being the Traditional Owners of our country.

To some people it may seem unimportant – just words on a piece of paper and not worth the years of struggle it has taken. It's true that as Dja Dja Wurrung People, we have always known that we are the Traditional Owners of this land and it has sometimes been a painful process having to prove this to others. To prove that we belong to the land and that this land belongs to us.

I believe the struggle has been worth it.

This historic agreement will bring Dja Dja Wurrung People back into the landscape. We will no longer be invisible.

We will have the right to access our traditional lands for hunting and ceremonial purposes enabling us to keep our culture alive and strengthen our connection to our traditional lands and waters.

We can reclaim, revive and rejuvenate our language – the language that calls our ancestors to ceremony and strengthens our identity.

We can promote understanding of our spiritual beliefs.

We now have a formal protocol for welcomes to country and everyone will know where to come for information about Dja Dja Wurrung; whether it be cultural awareness training or heritage management that benefits from the profound knowledge of the traditional custodians of this country.

No more will our resources be plundered preventing the Dja Dja Wurrung People from maintaining our well-being and from generating and passing down wealth from our country across generations.

We now have the right to sit at the negotiation table alongside mining companies, exploration companies and government and have our say in any developments that take place on our land.

We have the right to jointly manage the national parks on our traditional lands and have Dja Dja Wurrung people not just working on the lands as rangers, but taking up positions on management boards, setting the direction and effecting change.

We can direct how country is used and managed to ensure that our country and waters stay healthy and in turn, Dja Dja Wurrung People will stay healthy and our culture will thrive.

The passing down of traditional knowledge is a seminal way in which we transmit Dja Dja Wurrung cultural heritage to the younger generations, and it is how we have maintained our cultural identity over the passage of time.

This practice is a primary responsibility of Dja Dja Wurrung men and women. We teach stories of pre-contact origin, the correct way to engage with country, the importance of revisiting places as a way of connecting with our spirituality and culture, and informing the decisions about the management of Aboriginal sites.

This Agreement will enshrine Dja Dja Wurrung's position in mainstream Australia by recognising our 'unique and exceptional contribution to the identity and wellbeing of this State'.

I think our ancestors would be proud of us at this moment. I would like to pay tribute to their resilience, which has carried us through this struggle and pay my respects to the people who died before seeing their country recognised.

I believe we have honoured their memory, particularly those who started this native title journey with us, but didn't live to celebrate with us today and the warriors who fought so bravely to prevent the total dispossession of our peoples.

And also the younger generation, who have put their trust in the negotiating team and this decision which will bind them into the future.

Of course, the Dja Dja Wurrung People did not do this alone. The negotiating team were helped by the lawyers, anthropologists, researchers and historians of Native Title Services Victoria, the organisation that assisted us with this claim.

If the Government honours its obligations in the Regional Settlement Agreement we will ensure the next 2,000 generations do not suffer and can pass on their knowledge proudly, share our ceremonies and learn from our stories of survival.

It also means that the Dja Dja Wurrung can start to forge a new partnership built on trust and an acceptance of the historical truth.

By reaching out to people and sharing our history. We deserve to be respected. Our history is part of everyone's history; we can all take pride in it.

This Agreement will make sure that we walk the next part of this journey together so that our history proudly takes its rightful place as part of the story of modern Australia.