

## Nyoongar Seadragon Tales

On 10<sup>th</sup> March 2011, Kerry Fletcher and I met with Nyoongar elder, Noel Nannup. Noel told us the wonderful, very long story of the rainbow serpent and how the many members of the *Syngnathid* family (weedy seadragon, leafy seadragon, seahorses, pipefish and their relatives) came into being.



Nyoongar elder, Noel Nannup with Kerry Fletcher

In Nyoongar language the *Syngnathid* family members are all known as wardarn (sea) noort (horse).

The story begins long ago in the south west of Western Australia when the earth was flat and in total darkness. The sky sat on the ground and it was bitterly cold. All the spirits gathered as they realised that they were soon going to become 'real'. They sorted themselves into groups – tree spirits, plant spirits, bird spirits, animal spirits and human spirits. The tree spirits dominated but they pledged to help those who would care for them. Soon the plants, birds and animal spirits all followed suit. Finally only the yonga (kangaroo), weitch (emu), nyingarn (echidna), karda (goanna) and the spirit man and spirit woman were left to decide who would care for the land.

There was a large sleepy serpent who suddenly became real but said he could not care for anything as he had no hands or feet. The heavy sky crushed him to the ground but with all his strength he lifted the sky then he set off across and under the land, creating hills, trails and waterways. The serpent is wogarl.

Meanwhile the spirit woman collected thousands of tiny spirit children in her long white hair and this is how the 'Milky Way' came into being.

But the spirit woman was actually a magical 'shape shifter' and soon she became a rainbow serpent. In the sea she collected a rainbow and with the help of two blue whales she added wonderful rainbow colours to the ocean and gave oil to the whales and fish. She entered the Swan River and changed again, this time to a seahorse. Near Blackwall Reach she was recognised by two males who chased her out of the river and on to the land. Now as wogarl she was chased across Australia, all the way to Carnarvon Gorge in Queensland. Finally she entered the Darling then the Murray rivers and travelled all the way to the Coorong and out the Murray mouth. The two males caught up with her, they killed her and cut her up; her many parts created two islands and many different fishes - including salmon, herring and wardarn noort (sea dragons and seahorses).

When the spirit woman turned herself into a seadragon she knew that she would finally live under the Yonga Mia (Stirling Ranges in WA) and that she would only reveal herself to women.

This is a very brief version of the fantastic long story that Noel shared with us. Noel supports our call to the WA government asking for full protection for wardarn noort.

Thanks very much 'Uncle Noel'.

Robyn Benken 10<sup>th</sup> March 2011