

Noongar explained

Noongar people's country covers the entire south-western portion of Western Australia. Archaeological evidence establishes that the Noongar people – alternative spellings: Nyungar/Nyoongar/Nyoongah/Nyungah/Nyugah and Yunga – have lived in the area and had possession of tracts of land on their *country* for at least 45,000 years. The boundary commences on the west coast at a point north of Jurien Bay, proceeds roughly easterly to a point approximately north of Moora and then roughly south-east to a point on the southern coast between Bremer Bay and Esperance.

Noongar are made up of fourteen different language groups (which may be spelt in different ways): Amangu, Yued/Yuat, Whadjuk/Wajuk, Binjareb/Pinjarup, Wardandi, Balardong/Ballardong, Nyakinyaki, Wilman, Ganeang, Bibulmun/Piblemen, Mineng, Goreng and Wudjari and Njunga. Each of these language groups correlates with different geographic areas with ecological distinctions.

The 'Tindale Map': Perspectives on the South-West and Noongar Country

When we look at maps of the Aboriginal groups of the south-west we often do not see the word Noongar (or the variants), but the language group names. This mapping of the different Noongar language groups is most associated with the work of anthropologist, Norman Tindale, who was influenced by the earlier work of Daisy Bates.

Norman Tindale is well known for his map of 'Tribal Boundaries' based on the work he did in the late 1930s when he established that there are at least 400 – and possibly up to 700 – different Aboriginal language groups in Australia. (See Below) Published in 1974, Tindale's map still has great currency and influence. It was used by the Western Australian Government in the Single Noongar Claim to challenge the notion of a single Noongar society.

The term 'tribal groups' however, is not currently used. Much of Tindale's work was based on earlier writers who also used the term. Like all social scientists, he was a product of his time. Thus, Australia, including the south-west, is divided into the 'tribes' seen on the map. Today, we identify these 14 groups as sub- groups, or dialectal units of the larger Noongar society.

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Norman Tindale's work was, however, groundbreaking in that it showed Indigenous groups as having territory, geographical interests and *country* (rather than being 'wandering' nomadic people), with boundaries, language and identity. Today, anthropologists see the boundaries (including dialects of language, Identity, custom) as far more fluid and malleable with enormous overlap and interchange, as is the case in Noongar society. Many people today still think of Aboriginal people as nomadic or wandering people, when this is not the case

In 1938, Tindale began his research as part of the 'Harvard-Adelaide Expedition'. He and other members of his team did an enormous amount of travel in their quest to map tribal boundaries across Australia. Because of the sheer size of the project, with very slow transport at the time, Tindale's study was hurried. The research for the entire mapping project was done in 18 months.

Tindale visited missions (and government settlements) in the south-west to do his research on Noongar groups. We know he went to Moore River, Gnowangerup and a number of other places. He recorded as much information as he could from the Noongar people who turned up on the day, and others that he was in turn told about.

The other members of the expedition were interested in things like physical anthropology, so people were measured (skull size, bone length) and photographed. There was little research relating to social customs and no participant-observation field work, where the anthropologists try to get inside the culture and see how people really tick.

One point to make about Tindale's observations is that, like many of his time, he had a strong patrilineal bias, in that he saw land being transferred through the male line. This naturally influenced his mapping and ignored the fact that Noongar women's lines were equally important as men's.

The most current map we have is called Aboriginal Australia and is generally referred to as 'The Horton Map'. It is based on Tindale's work but is more up to date, as it includes the smaller Indigenous groups as sub-sets of larger societies.

