

# D'harawal

## DREAMING STORIES

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*Illustrated by Lorraine Robertson*

### How the Wombat Lost his Tail



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# Foreword

Throughout the past two hundred years, society has come to regard the Koori Dreaming stories as something akin to the fairy stories they were told as children.

However, for thousands upon thousands of years, the stories in this book were used as a teaching tool to impart to the youngest members of the clans the laws which governed the cultural behaviour of clan members. The successive attempts to destroy the Koori culture and assimilate The People into the Euro-centric population were unsuccessful, and the Dreaming Stories were able to continue in their disguise as charming legends where animals became the heroes and the heroines.

Historians and anthropologists have studied the Koori culture since they first arrived on this continent, and have come to the conclusion that the D'harawal culture is dead. Of, course, this has been done without reference to the descendants of that culture, and without even asking the proper questions. The D'harawal culture is not dead, it is a strong, living, vital culture of the Sydney and South Coast regions that just had to go underground for a while to be able to survive. Now that the right questions have been asked, we have the key to unlock a vast wealth of knowledge of this part of the country in which we live.

It is difficult to explain to a society based on commerce fuelled by the profit motive, that D'harawal culture is not based on the ownership of tangible things like land and dwellings and possessions, but it does have a very strong sense of ownership of information. That information, particularly in story form, was not traded, but could be given, and given freely, but its ownership was respected, those stories were not told or passed on by those to whom they had been given, but the knowledge in them was used by the receiver whilst ever they walked in the Land of the D'harawals, This Land.

It is hoped that our present society is now mature enough to be able to accept the Koori Dreaming stories as they were, as they are, and as they were always destined to be; tools to teach the Children of The People about living with Earth, the Mother, in peace and harmony.

Each story contains several layers of knowledge, the first of which are the secrets. Which can only be passed on or discussed with persons of the same level of knowledge or higher than the story teller. These secrets are never told within a legend, but are remembered separately from the legend itself. These are very important components of any legend, and it is the knowledge of the secrets which determines the level of the person's worthiness to ownership of that story.

The next layer of knowledge within the stories was the law, or laws, to be obeyed. The laws of the stories were told and often repeated after the telling of each story, after which the laws were discussed and their application in life demonstrated in a variety of ways.

The third layer of knowledge contained in each story was the lessons which could be learned from the story and the lessons were taught to all members of the group as well as visitors. These lessons introduced Peoples to the means to live in harmony with each other, and the land and its resources.

In this series of D'harawal Law Legends, there are many lessons to be learned. The D'harawals believed that children learned better and more quickly when they were encouraged to work through a problem, rather than be told the answer. By sharing the stories of our ancestors with you, it is hoped that not only will you recognise and learn the lessons and laws of the Peoples of This Land, but you will also come to understand and respect the culture of The People and our feelings and relationship with the land.

The stories do not in themselves act as an instruction manual - rather they point the way and encourage The People to think, to learn and to live. It is hoped that by sharing our stories, you too may be able to think, to learn and to live in This Land.

With understanding and respect for each other we can learn to more easily share This Land and live together in peace and harmony.

*Frances Bodkin*

# How the Wombat Lost his Tail

Once, a long time ago, the wombat had a very long tail. Wombat used his tail for many things, he used it to carry things when he did not have enough hands. He used it to hold food that burned his fingers because it was too hot. He used it to help him climb trees, and he even used it when fishing.

Now Wombat was a very handsome man, but he had one very bad habit. His skin was itchy all the time, and he was always scratching himself. Some thoughtless People would ask him if he had malagadang, and would not go near him in case they got them, too. Some others said that he must have done something wrong, and someone had a curse put on him. But Wombat was a kindly fellow and would not have deliberately hurt anyone.

His mother in law told his wife that his affliction could be cured if he soaked himself in running water. So Wombat went down to the river and stayed in the river all day, but to no avail. All he got was wrinkled skin which was still itchy.

One of his aunts told his mother that perhaps he would feel better if he smeared oil from the fish all over himself. So Wombat went down to the beach and trapped himself some fish.

No one came near him for many days. Not even his wife. The only thing that seemed to like him was the flies, millions of them, covering him, biting him, making him even itchier.

So Wombat decided that he would go to see the Yuri woman who lived in the valley of the Sweet Water. He packed up his woomera, boomerangs and spears, and farewelled his wife, then started on his way. His wife was very worried about him, but, as he got older the itch had got worse until he could hardly sleep at night.

It took him many days to walk to the little valley that was the home of the Yuri woman, and he scratched and scratched all the way. He scratched his arms and his legs with his fingernails, he rubbed his back on the rough bark of the trees, he scraped his feet on the rocks, trying to ease the terrible itching, but with no success.

Finally he reached the cave of the Yuri woman, and sat down, waiting until the old woman had finished what she was doing, and was ready to see him.

“What did you bring me?” She asked.

Wombat looked down at the ground. He did not want the Yuri woman to know that he was so eager to be cured of his itchiness that he had not thought of bringing her anything. “I did not bring you anything, I thought first that I would find out what you want.

”The Yuri woman stared hard at him. She knew that he had not even thought of bringing anything in payment. “I like your tail.” She said. “It is a fine tail. I would like a tail like that.”

Wombat stared down at his tail which was curved peacefully around his bleeding legs. He, too, liked his tail. It was very useful. “I do not think that such a tail would suit you.” He said. “It would get in the way when you are walking, and trip you over.” He said. “It is very heavy, too. You do not look strong enough to carry such a weight around.”

The Yuri woman stared at the tail, smiling thoughtfully. “It is most attractive. If I had such a tail, I would be happy.”

“Is there not something else you would like?” Wombat asked. “I would give you whatever you requested. If I do not have it, I will travel far and wide to get what you want.

”The old woman circled him. “There is nothing else you have that I would like.” She replied. “If I get rid of your itch, will you give me your tail?”

Wombat looked at the ground. He did not want to lose his tail, but he did want to be rid of the itch.

The Yuri woman smiled. “If I show you something that will ease your itch, will that help you decide?”

Wombat’s face brightened. “Yes.”The Yuri woman took him to a small plant that was growing near the entrance to her cave. “This will help you. But remember, you must use it sparingly. Not more than once a day.” She said. “If you enjoy being without your itch, then come back here and give me your tail and I will cure your itch forever.” She gave him a handful of the leaves and showed him how to use them. “Come back in ten days and give me your answer.”

Wombat felt his skin cool almost immediately, then the itch went away. He stared at his skin, still red raw and weeping from the scratching, but it was no longer itchy. When he looked up the Yuri woman was gone.

On his way back to his camp he noticed the plant growing in many shady places, and wondered why he had never seen it before.

Wombat enjoyed being without the itch so much that he disregarded the Yuri woman's instructions. Instead of picking a few leaves and rubbing them on his skin, he would roll on the bush, enjoying the cool feeling of the leaves, and most importantly, he forgot that the Yuri woman had insisted that he use the plant only once every day.

Wombat cared little for the woman's instructions, the plant eased his itching, and every night he gathered fresh armfuls of the plant and placed them in his shelter to sleep on. Every morning he awoke refreshed and ready to go out hunting. But, unless he took some of the plant with him, he would return to his shelter cranky and itching, with his tail lashing about. And woe betide anyone who came within the reach of his tail.

People, even his own wife, learned not to come near him, and to particularly avoid his tail which seemed to have a life of its own.

What Wombat did not know was that Ban'burrans of the Lizard clan had always been jealous of Wombat's tail, and wanted it for himself. Although he pretended to be Wombat's friend, and greeted him every day with sympathy, Ban'burrans used each occasion they met to sprinkle a powder that he had obtained from a sorcerer all over Wombat. It was this powder that caused the terrible itching.

And poor Wombat was grateful to Ban'burrans for continuing to be his friend even when others refused to come near him. Pretty soon, Wombat had used all the plants growing around his camp, so he moved to where some more plants were growing. But it was not long before he had used all those plants, too.

The People were deeply concerned. Too many of them had suffered broken bones because they had wandered too close to the tail of their former friend. The plants he used to treat his itch were so scarce that they could not be found within a day's travel of even the fastest runner, so that Wombat spent more time in a bad temper than he spent in a good temper.

So they called a meeting to decide what to do.

Now this was exactly what Ban'burrans wanted. He spoke quietly to many of The People attending the meeting, suggesting that a solution to the problem would be to remove Wombat's tail.

And, at the meeting, almost everyone said the same thing. Cut off Wombat's tail. Everybody liked that solution, and were trying to decide how it was to be done and who was to do it, when a wizened little old woman stepped into the ring. She held up her fighting stick, and the meeting fell silent.

"You know who I am." She said. "At one time or another, you have all used my services."

Almost everyone stared at the ground, not wanting to catch the pale eyes of this Yuri woman. "As has Wombat. But unlike you, he did not obey my instructions." She walked around the ring, peering at each person, noting that the Lizard man was not to be seen, anywhere. "I told him to use the plant only once a day. The plant is dangerous, and will capture the spirit of those who use it too often. When I, or any other like me, tell you not to do something, or to do something, you must obey, exactly as you are told."

Wombat's wife stepped forward. "I did not know what you had told him to do." She said, "otherwise I would have ensured that he obeyed."

"It was your husband's responsibility to do as I said, not yours." The Yuri woman replied. "Let this be a lesson to every one of you. When you seek advice, use that advice as it is given. Your husband sought my advice, and when it was given did not heed it, instead he used it improperly. For that he is being punished."

Wombat's wife approached the old woman and handed her a small bag of coloured stones that she had gathered from the river. "Please take this gift for trying to help my husband." She said.

The old woman smiled. "I thank you for your gift," she said, "but it is a gift from you, not from your husband. However, I will tell you that it is that of which he is most proud which causes his itch.

"Then she gathered up her possum skin cloak and her fighting stick. Just as it was when she came, none saw her go.

Ban'burrán came out from behind the tree where he had been hiding, and spoke. "It is Wombat's tail which is causing all this trouble. Let us remove it, then he will be well again." The warriors at the meeting gathered up their spears and axes and sought out Wombat. After much a great deal of searching, they found Wombat asleep on a bed of the wilting plant and before he could awaken they crept upon him and cut off his tail.

As he jumped up screaming, his tail lashed around felling warriors and trees alike, then, suddenly it disappeared, leaving only a few spots of blood.

Wombat was distraught, his beautiful tail was gone, and he searched and searched for it, wherever he could find red stained ground, he dug great holes looking for his tail, but to no avail.

You see, Ban'burrán, as soon as Wombat's tail was removed, grabbed it and dragged it into his cave where he promptly attached it to his ban'gading.

That is why, when many wombats today are afflicted with a terrible itch, the only way they can get relief from that itch is to roll in the leaves of the plant that had been shown to Wombat by the Yuri woman.

But they only roll in the plant once a day.

And wombats have no tail, to remind us that when we seek advice from those who know more than we do, it is wise to heed that advice.

And because the Lizard man was a false friend to Wombat, whenever he feels threatened, or gets a fright, his tail will drop off, and he has to grow a new one.

This reminds us that when we pretend to be something we are not, that which we gain through this deception, will not bring happiness, only pain.

# Information about Wombats:

**Common Wombat**    Scientific name: *Vombatidae*

Wombats are amongst the world's largest burrowing animals. It is a short, stocky, barrel-shaped animal with physical characteristics that reflect its burrowing nature, they are equipped with powerful limbs, short broad feet and flattened claws. It has a broad head with small eyes, a short strong neck, powerful shoulders and a very small tail (~25 mm) hidden by fur. Colour of the wombat's coarse coat varies from glossy black, dark grey, silver-grey, chocolate brown, grey-brown, sandy and cream. In southern Victoria, there is a small colony of ash-white wombats and albino animals have been reported, as well. Often the coat can also be coloured by the soil (e.g. clay can stain the fur red), and/or have patches that are lighter in colour.

Wombats are primarily grazers and their continuously growing incisors work as efficient cutters of grass and forbs. Wombats differ from other marsupials by having only two incisor teeth in the upper jaw. The incisor and molar teeth of this animal are also unique because they have open roots and continue to grow throughout the animal's life.

Common Wombat's distinguishing features are: large and naked nose; coarse thick coat; short, slightly rounded ears. The size of the Common Wombat varies with their distribution. Tasmanian and island species are generally smaller. Females tend to be slightly larger than males of the same age, but the geographical variation makes it difficult to generalise. Average head and body length of mainland wombat is 985 mm (840-1150 mm). Weight is 26 kg (22-39 kg).

Common Wombat is the only living member of its genus *Vombatus*, and is similar in appearance to two remaining wombat species (Southern and Northern Hairy-nosed Wombats) belonging to the genus *Lasiorhinus*. The main differences are the absence of hair on the nose in the Common Wombat, its coarser hair and narrower nasal bones than in *Lasiorhinus*. In the early descriptions of the species by the Europeans, wombats have been linked to badgers, beavers, pigs and bears (it is because of its bear-like appearance that it has been named *ursinus* (Latin *ursus*, bear)). However, other than being a mammal, the wombat is not related to these animals: wombats are marsupials (the young develop in mother's pouch) and not placentals, like the other aforementioned mammals.

The main habitat for the Common Wombat is the temperate forest-covered areas of southeastern Australia. The species tends to avoid rainforests and is often found in the mountainous areas. Wombats prefer to dig their main shelters on slopes above creeks and gullies, and feed in grassy clearings. Common Wombat is one of the few marsupials that are active above the snowline in winter, however they appear to be less active than during warmer months. In summer, the animal is mainly nocturnal, emerging from its burrow when the air cools down, to avoid high temperatures. In general, wombats spend most of their lives (about two thirds) in their burrows only usually leaving the burrow after sunset and to graze for several hours. During this time, it may return to its burrow to rest, or seek refuge, and it will return to sleep generally before sunrise. However, in cool or overcast days the animals are known to forage longer and during the day.

The main food for wombats is fibrous native grasses, sedges and rushes, and the choice of food depends on what is available at the time. Wombats seem to prefer Tussock Grass in the forest areas, and Kangaroo Grass and Wallaby Grass are favoured in open, more pastoral areas. At times when it is eating grass, a wombat will also eat dry leaves and stalks, and occasionally tear a strip of bark from a tree trunk and chew small quantities of it. In some habitats, wombats also feed on mosses, possibly as a source of water, given their low nutritional value. Anecdotal observations of wombats feeding on fungi have been reported as well.

Wombats are generally classed as solitary animals despite the overlapping ranges and occasional sharing of the burrows. Therefore, communication between two individuals is often threatening or aggressive. A warning call is usually a low guttural growl, but when a wombat is alarmed or angered, rasping hiss can also be heard. The animal repeats this high, loud call as it expels air. Sometimes the call can be a more aggressive 'chikker chikker' sound and/or a more guttural sound similar to that of an angry brushtail possum. Common Wombats are mainly nocturnal animals and as such are not often encountered by people in the wild. However, they are strong animals and can move fast at speeds over 40 km/h over short distance.

Communication is also apparent between younger animals and their mothers. Young make repeated, softer 'huh huh' calls when they lose sight of their mother, and she usually responds in the same manner.

Breeding may occur at any time of the year, however, in the highlands of New South Wales, most wombats give birth during December-March. Usually, one very small, underdeveloped wombat is born following a short gestation period (probably 30 days). It makes its way to the pouch, where it grows and develops for 6-10 months. The young then leaves the pouch and remains with its mother for further 8-10 months before becoming independent. Common Wombats become sexually mature after two years and live up to 11 years in the wild. In captivity, individuals can live well into their twenties.

The Common Wombat does not have many natural predators, except the introduced ones: wild dogs and foxes. When threatened it will escape to the nearest burrow, where it can defend itself by crushing a predator's head with its rump against the roof or wall of the burrow. In the open, an adult wombat can usually hold its own against a single dog, but it is overcome by a pair or a pack of dogs. Young, immature wombats, or old/weakened adults are, therefore, more likely to be the potential prey for the predators.

Wombats are susceptible to bacterial infections that can be difficult to treat in captivity. However, in the wild, an injured wombat will roll in earth and the soil will stick to the wounded area, allowing the area to heal with time. Similar behaviour is observed when the animal suffers from mange mite, and the soil is believed to help the animal alleviate some of the intense itchiness caused by the disease. In severe cases mange can affect the wombat's vision and ability to eat, making the animal weaker until it eventually dies. Other external parasites commonly found on wombats include: ear mites, skin mites and ticks. Internal parasites include worms of various kinds, but these appear to do little or no harm to the animal.

- See more at: <http://australianmuseum.net.au/Common-Wombat/#sthash.Z2G65X2O.dpuf>