

Yan-nhaŋu Atlas.

Illustrated Dictionary of the Crocodile Islands.

1. Appeal for funds

97 year old Australian Indigenous woman Laurie Baymarrwangga and the Yan-nhaŋu dictionary team are looking for funds to complete the publication of a 350 page *Yan-nhaŋu Atlas: Illustrated Dictionary of the Crocodile Islands.*

As one of the last of 12 speakers of this language she has struggled for twenty years to complete this publication in order to give to the children of her community some opportunity to learn their heritage. In 2012 she was recognised as the Senior Australian of the year for her efforts (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laurie_Baymarrwangga), but no funding was forthcoming. The Atlas is in its final stages but is short of funds to complete the project in time. As Baymarrwangga is 97 years old we are working constantly to distribute the Atlas while she is still alive.

The trilingual Atlas is in Yan-nhaŋu, and the local lingua franca of Yolŋu Matha with some 7000 speakers in North East Arnhem Land, and in English to support bilingual education.

I want to give this book free to the school children of North East Arnhem Land, to pass on the rich inheritance of their languages and diverse cultural knowledge. This knowledge is a vital resource for sustainable livelihoods, and the linguistic, cultural and biological diversity of our country. But my time is running out.

Laurie Baymarrwangga

2. Content, structure and mode of publication

Baymarrwangga's trilingual Yan-nhaŋu dictionary project is aimed to support language education on the Crocodile Islands, in two Yolŋu languages, Yan-nhaŋu and Dhuwal/a (7000 speakers) and English. It will be distributed to homelands across North East Arnhem Land where Yolŋu Matha is spoken.

In 1993 there were only 300 of her words documented; now we have some 4000 words recorded, containing the local knowledge of countless generations. This learning resource is designed to fill the vacuum left by the removal of bilingual education. It includes a sketch grammar, beautiful historical picture series mapping the hundred year life of Baymarrwangga and including the photos of the most renowned anthropologists to have worked in the area since the early 1920's. These pictures include never before seen images by Donald Thomson, Sir Hubert Wilkins, W. Lloyd Warner and AP Elkin. This aspect of the Atlas gives it an outstanding historical and aesthetic quality beyond any other contemporary work.

Furthermore, it maps 577 sites in the seas and islands, as well as the song lines and dreaming complexes of six discrete Yan-nhaŋu clans across ten thousand square kilometres of the Arafura Sea. Added to this are seasonal calendars, diagrams of the traditional round of inter-island travels, ecosystems and knowledge of the ways and words of the ancestors coalesce, all of which as yet has never before been recorded.

This remarkable Atlas and learning resource has taken over twenty years to produce and has relied on the loving dedication and belief of volunteers and donors to come to this point. 350 pages of exquisite photography illustrate the utterly unique local knowledge and biological diversity of the Crocodile Islands in three languages.

This work highlights the need to support and sustain the biological, linguistic and cultural diversity of our diminishing indigenous worlds.

3. Degree of endangerment

Yan-nhaŋu is regarded as a severely endangered language according to the UNESCO report on language vitality and endangerment. The contexts of its intergenerational transmission are very particular, emerging from a very distinctive Australian Indigenous site based ontology its songs, ritual, traditional activities are all linked to the remotest islands of the Crocodile group.

It is now spoken by only twelve people, although the total number of some 250 Yan-nhaŋu live within a wider indigenous community speaking the lingua franca Yolŋu Matha (Dhuwal/Dhuwala). This makes Yan-nhaŋu an extremely endangered minority language. The wider community, numbering some 7000 Yolŋu people speakers of another (less endangered) minority language of North east Arnhem Land, live in remote coastal and inland areas of Northern Australia covering approximately 45,000 km².

There are a small number of (approx. 20) children's books in Yan-nhaŋu for primary learners. There also exist a small number of learner's guides for non-first language speakers. There is an 1800 word dictionary produced by myself and the Yan-nhaŋu between 1993 and 2003.

This Atlas is the culmination of twenty years of painstaking ethnographic and linguistic investigation by people of their own culture. Its publication will be the most substantial documentation of the language, culture and history of the Crocodile Islands ever.

Bilingual education, abolished by successive settler governments, supports a predominantly monolingual majority culture. This settler culture is understandably ambivalent towards indigenous languages, given its powerful signification of the colonial process of assimilation. This attitude contrasts strongly with that of the indigenous Yolŋu communities who continue to struggle valiantly to save their language, and are highly supportive of Bilingualism, despite being the poorest socio economic group in Australia.

Majority political discourse emphasises assimilation and consequently state education does not support minority language learning, discourages its use in all contexts, and promotes English only education. Further, Yan-nhaŋu is surrounded by speakers of the wider lingua franca Yolŋu matha (Dhuwal/Dhuwala). This language has become the indigenous first language lingua franca which is exerting pressure on the domains in which Yan-nhaŋu was traditionally used.

In consequence, there are few recent responses by Yan-nhaṅu speakers to new domains and media and little in the way of new vocabulary. Language transmission across generations is hampered by the decapitalisation of the Yan-nhaṅu Homelands. Homelands are the traditional centres of Yan-nhaṅu life, where children generally learn their language, linked to country. Today there are between ten to twenty homelands school students who are exposed to occasional Yan-nhaṅu lessons provided by elders in the more customary practices, song, dance, material culture creation, and hunting. Today all children speak the Yolṅu Matha lingua franca (Dhuwal/Dhuwala) in the home as a first language, with pressure to conform to majority norms of behaviour and speech.

4. Work with community

For the last twenty years I have worked as a volunteer on The Yan-nhaṅu Atlas and Illustrated dictionary and a number of other projects, motivated by Baymarrwangga and the Yan-nhaṅu community. The Atlas project is one of a family of programs designed and implemented by the Yan-nhaṅu and directed by Baymarrwangga, in order to support appropriate life education and employment opportunities for her kin under the shadow of powerful assimilationist policies.

For fifteen years I lived and researched on the remote island of Murrungga, largest of the outer Crocodile Islands with Baymarrwangga. In this time I documented, with her consent, the daily socio economic, linguistic, political and ritual domains of Yan-nhaṅu life. The fruits of which can be seen in my ethnographic doctoral thesis *Time and Tide in the Crocodile Islands: Change and Continuity in Yan-nhaṅu Marine Identity* (2009) ANU.

As the most respected elder and senior custodian she directed the efforts of all members of the community to actively commit to the intergenerational transmission of local indigenous ecological knowledge. For example in 2010 we refurbished a fish trap not used since 1937. This project became a short film that has won awards.

These projects have aimed at strengthening linkages between community, kin, biological and linguistic diversity as a basis for sustainable culture based livelihoods. The Atlas is at the heart of practical projects like the Junior Rangers Program, Crocodile Islands Rangers, Yan-nhaṅu language nests, and Yan-nhaṅu Ecological Data-Base, run and supported by volunteers, and aimed at passing on the deep knowledge, stories, and cosmologies of the Crocodile Islands, spanning countless aeons. This is a history captured in language, language that is rich with links to ceremonial sites, to ancient patterns of maritime travel and to a reservoir of knowledge about natural resources tested thousands of generations of intimate coexistence with this environment (50,000 years).

5. Target group, benefits of publication

This resource will be handed out to schools and learning centres on approximately fifty homelands and among the elders and teachers in large communities of North East Arnhem Land. Baymarrwangga has insisted that it be provided free to these children who are the rightful inheritors of this knowledge of the ancestors. This amazing woman will provide this Atlas and dictionary to the children whose endowment this knowledge is, but

it MUST be provided without cost to this most disadvantaged group of children. This is their endowment.

Learning local language, aside from the positive health outcomes and psychological resilience attending bilingualism, promotes the intergenerational transmission of local knowledge to a new generation. These indigenous languages are among the oldest languages in the world and their sustainability depends upon complex cultural knowledge linked to country. Their intergenerational transmission is assured on the remote homelands where country life promotes their use but the homelands are under threat.

That is why the Atlas will be given to homelands children, to promote continuity in homelands residence and in support of this unique culture (<http://crocodileislandsrangers.wordpress.com/>).