A POSSUM SKIN CLOAK
BY THE LAKE

AN ABORIGINAL CULTURAL REVIVAL PROJECT
Project Partners
Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery
LMCAG’s Aboriginal Reference Group
Lake Macquarie City Library

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Publication prepared by Teagan Goolmeer and Cherie Johnson
in consultation with the project team, partners and community participants
Published by Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery 2011.
Revision in consultation with Education Consultants and Aboriginal Reference Group 2012.
Editor: Debbie Abraham
Proof reader: Jenny Scepanovic

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Design: Raelene Narraway, Lakemac Print
Design Watermark: Douglas Archibald Mangroves (detail) 2010
Images courtesy the participants and project team

The education component of this project was partly funded through the Creative Education Partnerships ConnectEd Program supported by Communities NSW in partnership with the NSW Department of Education and Training; and partly funded through the State Library of New South Wales Library Development Grant Program.

Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery and Lake Macquarie City Library
are supported by Lake Macquarie City Council
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 4
THE HISTORY OF CLOAK-MAKING IN EASTERN AUSTRALIA 7
THE ETHICS OF USING POSSUM SKINS 10
THE CLOAK DIARY 11
  Community 11
  Schools 20
  Making Possum Skin Armbands 21
CROSS-CURRICULUM LESSON SUGGESTIONS 22
  HSIE: Aboriginal Studies 22
  HSIE: Geography 23
  TAS: Textiles 24
  TAS: Cooking 25
  TAS: Industrial Arts 25
  TAS: Marine Studies 26
  TAS: Agriculture 26
  Maths 28
  English 28
  CAPA: Visual Arts 29
  CAPA: Drama 30
  Life Skills 30
  Information and Communication Technology (ICT) 30
SYMBOLS CHART 31
THE TRAVELLING SUITCASES 32
THE CLOAK STORIES 33
SCHOOL PELT STORIES 42
APPENDICES 44
  Activity Sheet 44
  Find a word 45
  Crossword 46
  Glossary 47
  Comprehension Sheet: The Ethics of Using Possums Skins 48
  Comprehension Sheet: Making a Possum Skin Cloak 50
  Images of Pelts Referenced in Cross-Curriculum Lesson Suggestions 52
INTRODUCTION

Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery’s Aboriginal Reference Group (ARG), in collaboration with the Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery and Lake Macquarie City Library, hosted a series of workshops between October 2010 and January 2011 to facilitate the design and creation of a possum skin cloak by members of the Aboriginal community, and develop valuable educational resources for the region.

The seed of *A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake* was planted when Victorian-based Aboriginal artists Lee Darroch and Vicki Couzens with curator Amanda Reynolds approached the gallery in mid 2009 to conduct a workshop imparting the skills they have been developing and researching over the past twelve years. The main aim of their workshop was to teach the local community skills by having them contribute to the Pacific Festival Cloak they had been working on with other communities. The day and a half workshop in November 2009 with Lee and Maree Clarke was highly successful, and added to the established skills and knowledge within the local community. As the workshop was intended to be a part of a cultural revival movement, participants were left feeling confident enough to extend the tradition through their own major project.

The resulting project, *A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake*, had far-reaching effects and contributed greatly to the revival of this cultural practice which is significant for people from many nations across south-eastern Australia. The key to the project was to pay tribute to tradition in a contemporary context. It brought together over 40 participants who, together, taught and learnt techniques of designing, painting with ochres and using a burning tool to decorate each pelt to reflect ‘country’ and ‘identity’ through personal water stories. The workshops were multi-generational with an emphasis on family, school groups and local knowledge.

Ten schools were involved in the initial stages of the project, during which they learnt about the tradition of cloak-making and practised skills while making possum skin armbands. In addition, each school was allocated a pelt to design for exhibition, which was returned to each school not only as a reminder of the significance of possum skin cloaks and Aboriginal culture in the region, but also as an acknowledgment of the achievements of the Aboriginal students involved.

The community and school workshops were managed by the ARG, with direction from artist Doug Archibald, project coordinator Donna Fernando, and educators Teagan Goolmeer and Cherie Johnson. The success of the project was due to the knowledge and enthusiasm of this dedicated group of people who have worked together since 2000 to promote, support and celebrate Aboriginal art and culture in the region. It also touched many participants.
in a personal, cultural and profound way, allowing them to discover, or rediscover, their heritage. In fact, artist Doug Archibald rediscovered his own family’s links to possum stories in Gumbangarri country.

The ARG’s aim was for the cloak to be made by the community for the community: the finished cloak was displayed at the gallery from 21 January – 6 March 2011 along with working drawings, process information and a DVD made as a part of the ABC Open program. The cloak exhibition was also displayed at the Australian Museum from 18 March – 31 July 2011 and was seen by a record number of visitors. After exhibition, the cloak is now housed at the gallery in the custodianship of the ARG, but may be formally borrowed by community members for appropriate Aboriginal ceremonies, funerals and occasions.

Long-lasting outcomes for the project are this education resource kit; ABC Open DVD; two travelling ‘suitcases’ to be used by schools, community groups and libraries; and online resources for the libraries. These resources will not only benefit the community and school students by contributing to literacy levels and artistic practice, but will also build pride within the Aboriginal community and extend cultural knowledge. Lake Macquarie City Library will continue to support this process by establishing its own reference group to improve access to library collections and programs. The reference group will promote local Aboriginal literature and language and develop online resources for use by residents and non-residents.

The gallery has achieved much success with its Indigenous programs over the past twelve years, and the long-term plan for the library is to build on that strength and capacity and make Aboriginal programming and resources a fundamental part of library services in Lake Macquarie. A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake provides an opportunity for the library to make more connections with the community, to collaboratively record Aboriginal history and culture through family stories, and support the recovery of Aboriginal language, literature and those stories.

The gallery and library are proud to be involved in such a significant project in partnership with the ARG. We feel confident, through this work, that this tradition and associated learning will strengthen cultural practice in the region.

Debbie Abraham
Gallery Director
Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery

Del Abbot
Customer Services Coordinator
Lake Macquarie City Library
Possum Skin Cloak (known as Hunter River Cloak) acc. 1858
147 x 145cm
 donated by United States Exploration Expedition
collection Smithsonian Institute, Washington, United States
The tradition of using possum skins for the making of cloaks, waistbands, belts, armbands and headbands was practised by Aboriginal people across eastern Australia.

Historical accounts of the customary methods of trapping, preparation, decoration and use of possum skin cloaks within Aboriginal nations in Queensland and throughout New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania are numerous and extensively documented. Nations in NSW include those of the Dharug, Kamilaroi, Gumbangarri, Wiradjuri, Worimi, Wonnaruah, Darkinjung, Awabakal and Narrinyeri people.

One of the earliest documented accounts of a possum skin cloak is from Governor Macquarie. In his journal on 10 May 1815 (Bathurst), he recounts that three Wiradjuri warriors, led by Windradyne, visited him and gifts were exchanged. Macquarie gave Windradyne a tomahawk and a piece of yellow cloth; in return he received a possum skin cloak.¹

An account closer to home is of Robert Miller during his explorations in the mid-nineteenth century around the (now) Hunter Valley area. He said of the Wonnaruah [sic] people, ‘...they wear opossum skin cloaks, and a girdle of spun opossum hair next to the skin, and their principle ornament is a nautilus shell cut into an oval’.²

One example of cloak-making from this region is held in the Smithsonian Institute (Washington, DC, USA). Known as the Hunter River Cloak, it was collected during an expedition in the mid 1800s by American explorer Charles Wilkes. It features four rows of six rectangular pelts sewn on the back, edge to edge, with very fine overhand stitching of corded sinew. The fur has been left on and the skin side is completely covered with large diamond-shaped designs made by scraping up a thin layer of the skin so that it stands up in a little curl.³

Traditionally, cloaks were used for ceremonial purposes: in dance, drumming, initiation rites and also in daily life. They were primarily worn as a means of protection from winter conditions, but also used as a shelter from heat and wet weather and to carry babies and small children.

A local example of how valuable the cloaks were in trade is suggested by stories of the Darkinjung nation trading them with inland tribes in exchange for spears and woomeras. In the Dandenong region of Victoria, the trade value of a cloak was said to be worth a greenstone axe. They were also given as peace and marriage offerings.

Possum skin cloaks were created for individuals when they were born and were added to throughout their lives. The intricate designs and ochre decorations were either made by the individual or by others, depending on the design and the purpose for which they were being added.
A POSSUM SKIN CLOAK BY THE LAKE
The cloak recorded clan moiety and a person’s journey through initiation. It symbolised the individual’s status and was unique to each owner so was easily recognised by other members of the tribe and surrounding clans. An historical example of this comes from James Fraser (1882): ‘...a friend tells me that on one occasion he had a opossum cloak made for him by a man of the Kamilaroi tribe, who marked it with his own mombarai; when this cloak was shown to another black man sometime after, he at once exclaimed, “I know who made this; here is his mombarai.”’ (Mombarai is roughly translated as ‘his mark’; a design-based signature unique to an individual, tied to moiety and kinship lore.) There are only six nineteenth-century possum skin cloaks known to have survived. A number of factors have contributed to this scarceness: the cloaks were used in funerary rites and used as a burial object; the nature of the possum skins as they were often infested with insects and/or developed mould; and the use of natural sinews (possum and kangaroo) led to seam fractures and fraying on some of the more fragile skins.

After white settlement, in addition to the natural causes of decay, came manmade interventions which led to the removal of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands and segregation of nations and tribes. The introduction of pastoral leases, disease, massacres and warfare changed the way Aboriginal people existed – life became about survival. The mandatory actions of all Aboriginal Protection Boards in each state and territory, controlled every aspect of Aboriginal life. As a result, many cultural practices were lost or almost lost, including the ancient craft of possum skin cloaks.

The revival movement of creating cloaks – working with skins in a modern, mostly urban Aboriginal context – has been greatly supported by the work of Victorian-based artists Vicki Couzins, Lee Darroch and Maree Clarke among others. To the architects of the Tooloyn Koortakay Collection, the artists, the Aboriginal elders and the communities who shared their knowledge and vision – we give thanks. With pride we move towards reclaiming our mutual birthrights, to again make, to wear, to dance with, and to see possum skin cloaks in our country for our people.

**Donna Fernando**
Project Coordinator

*A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake*

ETHICS OF USING POSSUM SKINS

Traditionally possums were used by Aboriginal people as both a food source and as resource material for clothing, ceremonies and possibly even games. However, today in most areas of Australia, possum species are protected under the provision of the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974. The NSW Office of the Environment and Heritage has identified several species as having suffered a significant decline in abundance and distribution, while many species have been identified as endangered or threatened. In Australia a permit is required in most states to trap and relocate possums under strict regulations. Only in extreme conditions is an additional destruction permit able to be obtained from The NSW Office of the Environment and Heritage.

All the possum skins used in A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake were imported from New Zealand, where the possum is classified as a pest. They were first introduced from Australia in 1837 to start the fur industry, but now there are an estimated 63 million possums there. This is most likely due to the fact that there are no natural predators to control the increasing populations, which are causing severe environmental degradation and endangering native animals and plants. In addition, they are contributing to an estimated $15 million per annum in loss in primary production as they have been recognised as major carriers of disease.

The New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals and many other organisations regulate the culling of possums and overall treatment of the animal. Basically Bush Ltd, the New Zealand supplier of the pelts for this project, use trapping as the most humane method of culling the species. The use of commercial harvesting to control the size and distribution of the possum population in New Zealand is economically, environmentally and socially sound, placing a commercial value on the introduced species.

In addition, the import of possum skins from New Zealand enables the Aboriginal community to revive a significant cultural tradition without endangering local possum species any further.
THE CLOAK DIARY:

CONSULTATION AND FUNDING
The process of designing and making the Lake Cloak was developed by the Aboriginal Reference Group (ARG) and the project team, in consultation with the community, following protocols developed by the ARG over 11 years of working with the gallery. Of course, the ARG recognises that each Aboriginal community will differ in protocols and perspectives.

The first step in this project, as with any Aboriginal community project, was consultation. As this was an Aboriginal cultural revival project, the community had to be completely supportive and willing to participate. It was also mandatory for the ARG that an Aboriginal artist be employed to direct the project and that Aboriginal people carried it out.

The ARG nominated a project team and negotiated a schedule for the project, including securing funding. Possible sources were Arts NSW, Australia Council (Community Partnerships) and Indigenous Culture Support (Federal Government). In this case funding was secured through Arts NSW’s ConnectEd Program, so the emphasis was on education, as are many of the ARG programs and projects.

The possum skins had to be sourced, and through some gallery contacts visiting New Zealand, an exporter called Basically Bush Ltd was discovered. This company supplies tanned pelts to order for a reasonable price and delivery time and is very helpful. The possum species is slightly different to those in Australia in size and colour.

THE WORKSHOPS
The community workshops were predominantly carried out on Saturday afternoons from 2pm–4pm, with occasional weekend sessions towards the end to finalise the cloak. These were relatively informal, with ideas and knowledge swapped between those participating. As it was important that the cloak reflect community interests, the main cloak-making process was developed by the project team with input from all participants, particularly ‘yarning’ over a cup of tea and scones. A process diary was established at the beginning, in which all ideas, stories, technical and aesthetic decisions were documented. Workshops during school term were also held for Aboriginal school students between October–December 2010.
WEEK 1  (30 OCTOBER)

The main objective of the first week was to establish the parameters of the project including a general thematic approach for the cloak’s design. Many issues and ideas were discussed and evaluated by the project team, and it was decided to base the imagery of the cloak on water stories from the Hunter region and/or each participant’s ‘home country’. Subjects such as fish traps, aquatic animals, landscapes, middens, river systems, lakes and the oceanic environment were examples of what could be included, but the focus on fish was to be limited.

It was also important to the group that the cloak’s designs were of a general nature; they were to be images rather than text, not realistic renditions of stories and not be about men and or women-specific business. Once the overall design factors of the cloak were established, the group brainstormed to produce general ideas for stories and individual pelt designs. Most people commenced their initial rough design with assistance from the project artist Doug Archibald.

WEEK 2  (6 NOVEMBER)

To commence this session a visual presentation was delivered that outlined the history and contemporary possibilities of cloak-making. The design brief was reiterated for the benefit of new participants. This process was repeated over the coming weeks to ensure all participants were working in the same direction.

The use of traditional and/or contemporary symbols or designs as a vehicle through which to tell a personal story was discussed at length. It was also noted that the public would view the works and thus no secret/sacred images/symbols should be used. The public would be able to read each story with the aid of text panels in the exhibition.

There was much discussion about how the final cloak should look and how that best could be achieved. Many questions were raised including ‘When should we sew the pelts together?’; ‘How will each design fit in with the overall scheme of the cloak?”; and ‘How will the ochre process work; is there any pre-treatment required?’
It was decided after much discussion that the cloak-making would continually evolve, with ideas and methods adapted throughout the process. A general layout for how the pelt would be sewn together was drawn up, to establish the number of pelts (50–55) needed and the estimated size of the finished cloak for installation purposes (approximately 147cm x 145cm). The layout highlighted the fact that all designs, except for those on the collar, must be vertical in orientation.

Rough designs were drawn on A3-sized paper. The suitability of the design was discussed with the artist and/or group. Issues such as intricacy of the line work for replication by burning tool, appropriateness of symbols and imagery, orientation on the pelt and design modification (if necessary).

While most participants were finishing off their rough designs, Doug tested the capacity and effect of the burning tool on the skin. It was important to practise and refine these skills as too much pressure could easily result in a hole in the skin, making the pelt useless for use in the cloak. It was also discovered that using the prong at different angles produced different types and shades of line.

The group chose a standard burning tool, Iron Core, for quality assurance. Extreme care was taken while burning to ensure there were no injuries caused to participants. Clear instruction was given and a ‘tool box talk’ sheet was developed that all participants signed before they used the tool during each workshop. Burning was done outside due to the odour.

**WEEK 3 (13 NOVEMBER)**

By this week, most of the participants were ready to transfer their rough drawing onto a piece of parchment-coloured Canson paper within a pre-painted template in the shape of a possum skin. So the designs could be transferred to the pelts, participants were asked to ensure their designs sat within 2cm of the narrowest section of the pelt (or template of the pelt). This would minimise the possibility of the drawings having to be adjusted or cropped when the pelt was trimmed for sewing.

The design was firstly drawn lightly in pencil and then outlined with black ink (to emulate the colour of the burning tool on skin). Sections were then painted in either red or yellow ochre-coloured acrylic paint.

At this point Doug talked about how the ochre paints were made and the role of resin binding. This elicited a ‘yarning’ session and many participants swapped their knowledge of the process.

The ochres used on *The Lake Cloak* were collected from the local area in Lake Macquarie and Watagan Mountains. The volume of ochre required varies depending on the origin of ochre and the final colour desired. Deeper/stronger colour required more ochre powder to be added. The ochre was made into powder form by grinding it in a mortar and pestle or hitting it gently with a hammer.
A tree resin is used as a medium to bind the ochre and allow it to adhere to the pigment of the skin side of the pelt. A local native tree resin was used in this case, which was extracted directly from the trunk of the tree (500gm of the resin was needed for this cloak). Doug found it best to extract the resin while the temperature was warm as it was more viscous and thus easier to collect.

After much discussion within the group, Doug decided to experiment and use his own knowledge. He added a small volume of cold water to some tree resin slowly to make a paste with the consistency of jam. The resin mixture was left overnight, after which the ochre powder was stirred in according to the colour desired. He found that the resulting gritty texture was typical and once the ochres were applied to the cloak and dry, the grit brushed away.

WEEK 4 (20 NOVEMBER)

The success of the weekday school sessions led to several more local participants, including family groups, starting this week. New designs and new connections were made throughout the session. The guidelines for the design of the cloak were reiterated alongside new guidelines for the use of ochres on the finished design as focal points to ensure the pigment and colour didn’t overpower the intricate burned lines.

Final designs were lightly drawn onto trimmed pelts with pencil as a guide for the burning tool. Some participants, with Doug’s help, began burning their design on the skins, while others either finished their design or documented the design stories in the process diary with Teagan Goolmeer.

The schedule for finishing the cloak was discussed along with the idea of taking the workshop into the community. In addition, the process of sewing the cloak was discussed and it was decided that all of the designs would be laid out and arranged and then sewn together according to related stories and aesthetics.

Each pelt was created as a separate piece as participants came to the workshops. To create a ‘whole’ cloak stylistically and thematically, the project team agreed on the project artist creating a motif (six pelts) sited centrally on the cloak, dedicated to local Awabakal stories; firmly placing the cloak by the ‘lake’ as well as acknowledging the traditional owners of the area.
**WEEK 5 (27 NOVEMBER)**

It was decided by the group that the pelts be cut to size by Selena Archibald before burning. They were cut into a fairly regular rectangular shape to maintain uniformity. After burning so many pelts, project team members determined that in order to keep the line even and smooth, the prong of the tool needed to be replaced periodically.

**WEEK 6 (3 & 4 DECEMBER)**

This workshop spread over a full weekend and was very productive. There were many new participants and many previous participants returned to either finish off their pelt or design a second. The group was really motivated by the cloak taking form – the planning stage was moving into the realisation stage. As more and more participants attended the workshops, the word spread throughout the community about the cloak and its importance. The ongoing discussion between participants highlighted the community’s passion and respect for the project as an avenue for keeping local culture alive for future generations.

**WEEK 7 (12 DECEMBER)**

The last school workshop was on 10 December, and many of the schools had either brought in their design for burning, or were working on them at school. Many of the cloak pelts were completed and there was much discussion about the placement of each design within the total layout of the cloak to ensure it made sense.
WEEK 8 (18 & 19 DECEMBER)

This was the final session in 2010 for the group to gather, and even though it was the weekend before Christmas, it was the biggest turnout to date. As it was a two-day workshop, many participants finished their pelt/s. The new participants were assisted by regular ones to design and complete pelts. The cloak was laid out and many pelts moved around to suit story lines or design elements. Teagan lay down on the cloak to test the size compared to a person – the cloak was reconfigured to suit.

WEEK 9 (12–16 JANUARY)

This week the core members of the group arranged the pelts for the final layout for sewing. The designs were laid out in story lines ranging from the traditional Awabakal stories to community/personal stories. The collar design was finalised – an image of Biame, one of the great ancestral beings, embracing the cloak. There was a massive working bee over several days to sew the cloak together, finalise the collar design and finish all the templates. The cloak was sewn in sections using waxed saddle twine. Only selected participants who had a sure knowledge of sewing carried out this process to ensure consistency and quality in the finished cloak. These were Selena Archibald and Louise Charles.

There was a lot of interest from local media, both print and TV, as well as ABC Open: a community story-telling initiative. During this collaboration, producer Anthony Scully mentored community members, particularly Teagan Goolmeer, in the process of making and editing a video about the possum skin cloak-making project. The finished product was in the exhibition both at the gallery and Australian Museum, as well as on ABC platforms and in the travelling suitcases. The project team attended the opening at the Australian Museum on 18 March 2011.
AN ABORIGINAL CULTURAL REVIVAL PROJECT
Cloak layout: please see page 33 for the story of each pelt design.
AN ABORIGINAL CULTURAL REWAL PROJECT
WORKSHOP DIARY:

SCHOOL WORKSHOPS

Sessions were held over six consecutive Fridays, with 150 Aboriginal students (from 10 schools) attending from the region. The sessions comprised:

- a basic history of cloak-making in Australia and the Hunter
- the process of making a cloak
- ethical issues of culling New Zealand possums
- practical demonstrations of using ochres and the burning tool
- discussion of appropriate themes and symbols
- skills practice with each students making a possum skin armband
- discussing and drawing designs for a possum skin

Each school group was allocated a pelt and selected a design, either as a collaborative or competitive approach; most opted for the collaborative approach in the spirit of the project. The design was finished at school and brought back to the gallery for either parents/teachers or a member of the ARG to complete on the pelt.

The pelts were framed for exhibition with the finished cloak produced in the community sessions. They are on permanent display at each of the participant schools.

The teachers and students enjoyed the workshops and the process of working together, and embraced the opportunity to learn about their culture and cultural practice.

_I just wanted to say thanks for today! It was a great workshop for the kids to be involved in. They came back so excited and positive about their morning. The other kids were very, very impressed with the armbands!_  

Helen Smart, Wallsend South Public School

_An outstanding program – all students and parents were highly motivated. They are proud to wear their skins (armbands) back to school._  

Maria Lantz, Rathmines Public School

_The students learnt a great amount of information including symbolism in art and traditional Aboriginal design. Students thought it was brilliant. Instructors were great, especially Uncle Doug, who taught the students a variety of skills and techniques about art and the role of Aboriginal people in the community. It was excellent and thoroughly enjoyable._  

Tammy Gordon, Hunter School of Performing Arts
MAKING POSSUM SKIN ARMBANDS

Armbands have been traditionally used in Aboriginal dance and for personal decoration across eastern Australia.
This activity was developed to engage and educate school students through the development of *A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake* and delivered by the artist and project coordinator. Aboriginal students from 10 infants, primary and secondary schools participated with enthusiasm and pride.

It is a good introductory activity to a community possum-skin cloak project and a great way to teach Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students about Aboriginal culture and use of symbols. As with the cloak itself, it was important for participants as a group to establish the design rules and uses for the armbands. Participants used symbols and the cloak theme to guide their designs (see symbols chart on page 35).

Armbands were cut from damaged sections or off-cuts from the cloak pelts. Each participant was given an armband template to begin their design process. These sections were about 4 x 12cm each.

Once the design was on the template, black or dark brown ink was used to represent the burning process and acrylic paint was used to represent the ochre.

The finished designs were transferred to the skins lightly in pencil, with space left at each end for the holes to be punched (for the straps) and to allow for shrinkage during the burning process.

Doug helped with the burning process to ensure student safety. The application of ochre was optional, as the smaller surface provides enough design detail. Ochres should only be used on small sections as focal points.

Although the band can be worn on any part of the arm, most participants in our workshops chose their wrist, and to wear the band fur side in. All students wore them with pride.
CROSS-CURRICULUM LESSON SUGGESTIONS

The lesson suggestions below will guide you through ways of encompassing new, local and relevant Aboriginal teaching in your classroom. They link to the exhibition A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake, but can also be taught in conjunction with the A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake Travelling Suitcase or in tandem with the online resources. Using these suggestions, the teacher will be able to provide engaging Aboriginal education content (as required by the Department of Education and Training) within established programs. They are non-stage specific suggestions and can be modified to suit programming. More in-depth stage-specific lessons have been prepared for the Travelling Suitcases.

HSIE – ABORIGINAL STUDIES

1. Students use visual literacy and the symbols chart (page 31) to complete the narrative of a selected design from the Possum Skin Cloak (page 32). Also provide an annotated drawing of the design. Continue the story to the next scene or geographic area.

2. Students research the Hunter River Cloak in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington USA (page 6) and note the information recorded by the curators of the museum. Students write a report on their findings and focus on issues such as why is it important that archaeologists/curators recorded the information about the cloak; why are there only a small number of cloaks recorded.

3. Students could extend this activity by writing an essay based on the question of ‘tradition’ – is it still considered a traditional activity if the Aboriginal community has learnt to recreate a traditional object, now only located in museums?

📚 Each possum skin cloak was privately owned. At birth an individual was given a small number of pelts sewn together to be used as a baby blanket, much like the sheepskin blankets used today. The initial number of pelts would be added to by the owner or others (depending on the situation and occasion) until it was made into a cloak. It was adorned with designs and decorations expressing the individual and his/her place in society. The owner always kept their cloak, using it for bedding, clothing in cooler seasons and finally as burial attire.

4. Dawn Townsend’s design (pages 36 & 52) is about groundwater. Students research and write a short essay about why locations of natural springs would be important to Aboriginal people and how urbanisation affected groundwater and associated springs.

5. Scott Luschwitz’s Firestick Farming (pages 38 & 52) depicts the local traditional Aboriginal practice of firestick farming. Students use the design as a starting point for a discussion about the use of firestick farming, brainstorming the possible reasons for using this method of farming (focus questions around the ideas of growth, germination and forced movement of animals).
Fire is a management tool widely used by Aboriginal people; the term ‘firestick farming’ is used to describe deliberate burning of areas of vegetation for specific purposes. The concept of ‘firestick farming’ has been recognised by non-Aboriginals since 1969. ‘Fire was used seasonally to burn areas to encourage growth of food plants, and young shoots. Many Australian plants require fire to stimulate flowering or for seed germination. Some areas of land were burned with low intensity fire in alternating blocks over a number of years, creating a mosaic of vegetation in various stages of growth. Controlled blazes produced grassy landscapes which encouraged herbivores such as kangaroos which were then hunted by Aboriginals.’

Online text, Preliminary Agriculture: It’s a big field (TaLe – teaching and learning exchange) Part 3 (Firestick farming)

6. Students complete the activity Sheets (pages 44-46).
7. Students complete the comprehension sheet on the possum skin cloak-making process (page 50).
8. Students complete the comprehension sheet on the ethics of culling, hunting and protecting possums (page 48).

RESOURCES

| Smithsonian institute | www.collections.si.edu/search/
| ‘Australian Possum Skin Cloak’ | www.collections.si.edu/search/results.jsp?q=record_ID:nmnhanthweb_8470030
| Preliminary Agriculture: It’s a big field Part 3 (Firestick farming) | Online text – (TaLe – teaching and learning exchange) www.tale.edu.au
| The Impact of Fire: A Historical Perspective; Australian plants online | www.anpsa.org.au/APOL3/sep96-1.html
| Video – Our History, section on Firestick farming, produced for the ABC network | www.abc.net.au/schoolstv/series/OURHISTORY.htm
| DET video – On the case – farm case studies, Agriculture 2 unit preliminary | This should be a resource that most Department schools have; if not, contact the department in regards to obtaining a copy.

HSIE – GEOGRAPHY

1. Students identify and read about Selena Archibald’s Five Islands (pages 34 & 52). Students then create their own topographic map of the Five Islands (use a street directory or Yellow Pages as support documents) and complete the following:
   - add appropriate contour lines
   - create a cross section using the contour lines as a guide
   - indicate true north
   - grid up the topographic map and identify the longitude and latitude
   - find a spot to hide treasure and record the location
   - pass to another student to see if they can locate the treasure using the coordinates

AN ABORIGINAL CULTURAL REVIVAL PROJECT
2. On the map of Five Islands, students draw several Aboriginal symbols indicating possible indigenous animal habitats. They then create a legend of these animals using the symbols chart (page 31), or Google Aboriginal symbols.

3. Students create their own map (to scale) identifying their journey from home to school using the symbols chart (page 31). Students will then create a legend, ensure the map is to scale, indicate true north and identify any natural landmarks. Students are then encouraged to indicate on their map where they believe the animals would have lived before development.

4. Students create a population pyramid using the statistical data found on possums in Australia and New Zealand. These pyramids could be male/female (Australia/New Zealand), culled/sited (New Zealand), known/captivity (Australia), population (Australia/New Zealand).

5. Students complete the activity sheet (pages 44-46).

6. Students complete the comprehension sheet on the possum skin cloak process (page 50).

7. Students complete the comprehension sheet on the ethics of culling, hunting and protecting (page 48).

**RESOURCES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistics on Humans and Lifestyle</th>
<th><a href="http://www.abs.gov.au">www.abs.gov.au</a></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kiwi Conservation Club</td>
<td><a href="http://www.kcc.org.nz">www.kcc.org.nz</a></td>
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**TAS – TEXTILES**

1. For decades the catwalks have been lined with models parading items inspired by nature and animals – for instance feathers, animal prints, furs, etc. Using Australian native animals as inspiration students create their own item of clothing or fashion accessory.

2. Students will investigate the possum skin cloak-making techniques and compare with how other fur coats are made.

3. Students will investigate Aboriginal jewellery making techniques and create their own using an array of native materials, nuts, quills, feathers, etc. Students may also like to look at other artists who use natural materials to make accessories.

4. Teachers provide a possum skin pelt and the students each make a modern accessory with a small piece.
5. Using the possum skin cloak as inspiration, students are given a rectangular section of fabric each, to apply a water-themed design to using any decoration methods such as printing, appliqué, sewing, etc. Each student can use a different method or combination of methods within a set colour range. The sections of fabric are arranged by the class and then sewn together.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESOURCES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria Fernanda Cardosa (Chilli/Australia)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mariafernandacardoso.com">www.mariafernandacardoso.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper bark women: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fashion design</td>
<td><a href="http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/hsc/paperbark/">www.powerhousemuseum.com/hsc/paperbark/</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TAS – COOKING**

1. Participants in *A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake* have come from all over the country, as well as from the Hunter region. The cloak stories (page 33) reflect this. Students imagine all of these people have travelled to Lake Macquarie for an important ceremony – one in which the cloak will be used. Students create a traditional Aboriginal menu complete with traditional ingredients to serve at this one-day ceremony. Students are also encouraged to include food that requires traditional cooking methods.

*It is recorded that large numbers of people did travel to Wollombi (near Cessnock) to take part in ceremonies. The exact number of people who attended, how often they occurred and the length of each occasion are unknown, but evidence suggests many attended, travelling weeks or longer to get there. Each ceremony was not a one-off but one that was repeated and it has been suggested that the Awabakal people, as the closest to the coast, would transport whole whales as food for the celebration.*

2. Students study the possum skin cloak and identify traditional ingredients either depicted or actually used to use to make a dish.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESOURCES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recipes</td>
<td><a href="http://www.benjaminchristie.com/blog/bush-tucker-meals-on-wheels/page7">www.benjaminchristie.com/blog/bush-tucker-meals-on-wheels/page7</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TAS – INDUSTRIAL ARTS**

1. Students, using the burning tool (page 13), create a design to be burned either into a tanned skin or timber object. This can be used as a decorative element in an existing project or written into the program to include Aboriginal objects such as digging sticks or a coolamon. Students can either investigate their own designs or use the symbols on page 31 to tell a story of themselves or their place. (Note this activity may be most suitable for Stages 4 and 5 Woodwork.)

2. Students could investigate local plants for resins suitable as a substitute for modern varnishes or lacquers. The section of this kit about resins and ochres may assist (page 14).
TAS – MARINE STUDIES

Several *A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake* pelt designs and stories describe the uniqueness of the local marine environment and the relationship between Aboriginal people and ‘water’ country.

1. Students read about each design (page 33) and discuss, as a class, what they think about the local Aboriginal people’s relationship to ‘water’ country and the marine life. Teachers may assign questions to particular pelts to encourage deeper understanding and higher order thinking.

2. Students can then research examples of ownership and stewardship of marine waterways, focusing on management practices of the past and present. (Note this activity may best be suited to Stages 5 and 6.)

TAS – AGRICULTURE

1. Students identify those designs on the possum skin cloak that depict different forms of fish traps used by traditional Aboriginal people (see Doug Archibald’s *Fishtraps* page 34 & 52). The designs are used as a starting point for a class discussion on historical and modern farming techniques; in particular, aquaculture projects, including intensive and extensive.

2. Students should research and analyse second hand data, on fish traps from the local and wider region. (Note this activity may best be suited to Stages 4 and 5.)

There is evidence that Aboriginal people dammed watercourses to promote survival of plants and preserve fish populations during dry periods. Young fish were sometimes carried to these dams and released.
3. Scott Luschwitz's *Firestick* design (pages 38 & 52) depicts the local traditional Aboriginal practice of firestick farming. Students use the design as a starting point for a discussion about the use of fire stick farming, brainstorming the possible reasons for using this method of farming (focus questions around the ideas of growth, germination and forced movement of animals).

 hü Fire is a management tool widely used by Aboriginal people; the term ‘firestick farming’ is used to describe deliberate burning of areas of vegetation for specific purposes. The concept of ‘firestick farming’ has been recognised by non–Aboriginals since 1969.

‘Fire was used seasonally to burn areas to encourage growth of food plants, and young shoots. Many Australian plants require fire to stimulate flowering or for seed germination. Some areas of land were burned with low intensity fire in alternating blocks over a number of years, creating a mosaic of vegetation in various stages of growth. Controlled blazes produced grassy landscapes which encouraged herbivores such as kangaroos which were then hunted by Aboriginals.’

Online text, Preliminary Agriculture: It's a big field (TaLe – teaching and learning exchange) Part 3 (Firestick farming)
**MATHS**

1. Students will look at culling statistics for possums in New Zealand and determine the ratio of culled to recorded population. Students could also look at population numbers of kangaroos in Australia and their culling statistics to determine the ratios.

2. Students to complete a line and bar graph of the possum population in both Australia and New Zealand.

**RESOURCES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Kiwi Conservation Club</td>
<td><a href="http://www.kcc.org.nz/possums">www.kcc.org.nz/possums</a></td>
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</table>

**ENGLISH**

1. Students compose a poem or sonnet as if you are either a particular place, native animal or plant that has been on that land for decades. The poem should describe the changes that have occurred and what feelings they evoke.

2. Students imagine they are either a possum in Australia or New Zealand and write a short letter to cousin possums in the other country describing what is happening within the possum clan.

3. Students use visual literacy and the symbols chart (page 31) to complete the narrative of a selected design from the possum skin cloak designs (page 33). Also provide an annotated drawing of the design.

4. Students form two teams to debate the proposition ‘Possums – Cull or Protect’. Students will also need to choose whether to argue from the point of view of New Zealand or Australia.

5. Students imagine they are either a resident of rural New Zealand with possums causing issues on the land or a suburban resident of Australian with many possums in the roof – write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper.

6. Students complete the activity sheets (pages 44-46) containing a find-a-word, crossword puzzle, cloze passage, multiple choice questions, glossary, word list – match the meanings.

7. Students complete the comprehension sheet on the possum skin cloak-making process (see page 50).

8. Students complete the comprehension sheet on the ethics of culling, hunting and protecting (see page 48).

**RESOURCES**

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Kiwi Conservation Club</td>
<td><a href="http://www.kcc.org.nz/possums">www.kcc.org.nz/possums</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie ‘Australia Wild – Hello Possums’ 30mins</td>
<td><a href="http://www.abc.net.au/abcontentsales/s1177703.htm">www.abc.net.au/abcontentsales/s1177703.htm</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Students create their own lined topographic-style map using the symbols chart (page 33) as a guide to plot their journey from home to school. On the map students are to identify animals they either see along the way or those they think may have been there before development. This activity could be linked to a printmaking unit through converting it into a collagraph.

2. All of the designs in the possum skin cloak are based on water stories, both personal and Dreamtime. Students create their own contemporary water-themed design using some local symbols. The design should be annotated with the meaning of the borrowed and personal symbols used, along with a short narrative. Once all of the designs are completed, the class can discuss how they could be assembled as one artwork. Consider both the aesthetics and the context of the installation, and if the smaller works can be arranged to tell a bigger ‘water’ story.

3. Using the possum skin cloak as inspiration, students are given a rectangular section of canvas or calico on which to apply a water-themed design using painting or printmaking methods such as linocut or silkscreen printing. Each student can use a different method or combination of methods within a set colour range. The sections of fabric are arranged by the class and then sewn (or just pinned up) together.

**RESOURCES**

| ProppaNOW collective artists | www.lindenarts.org/show/2010/0807/
| Maria Fernanda Cardosa’s (Chilli/Australia) | www.mariafernandacardoso.com/
| Peter Read, ‘Returning to nothing: The meaning of lost places’ | Cambridge University Press, Melbourne. 1996
CAPA – DRAMA

1. Students read the possum skin cloak stories (page 37) and choose one to create into a performance.  
2. Using as inspiration the fact that each possum skin cloak was essentially the story of an individual’s life (page 7), students write a monologue of their own life and deliver it to the class using a cloak or jacket as a prop.

RESOURCES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Smithsonian institute</th>
<th>collections.si.edu/search/</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Australian Possum Skin Cloak’</td>
<td><a href="http://www.collections.si.edu/search/results.jsp?q=record">www.collections.si.edu/search/results.jsp?q=record</a>_</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ID:nmnhanthweb_8470030</td>
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LIFE SKILLS

Students:

1. Identify animals and plants on the pelts.  
2. Identify the way traditional Aboriginal people used hunting and gathering techniques.  
3. By using the Travelling Suitcases, can have the chance to feel the pelts and gain tactile information and identify different techniques used in the cloak-making process i.e. burning, sewing pelts together, etc.  
4. Identify areas which have had ochres applied and areas of the pelts that have been burnt.  
5. Identify the different coloured ochres used and link them to male and female colours.  
6. Briefly describe the general processes involved in making a possum skin cloak.  
7. Outline the purpose of making a possum skin cloak.

ICT

1. Create a Powerpoint presentation on the process, history and ethics of the possum skin cloak.  
### SYMBOLS CHART

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
<th>MEANING</th>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
<th>MEANING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>water</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>possum tracks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>women sitting</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>water holes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>men sitting</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>rainbow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>rain</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>swirling water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>coolamons</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>camp ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>stars or moon</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>frog tracks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>emu tracks</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>spinifex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>kangaroo tracks</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>sand</td>
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</table>

*This chart represents selected symbols used on the cloak made for 'A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake’*
THE TRAVELLING SUITCASES

A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake Travelling Suitcases were designed for use by schools and community groups. One is available through Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery and the other through Toronto Library. They both comprise the following:

- Two pelts clearly demonstrating the process of designing, burning, painting and sewing the cloak
- Examples of a finished armband
- Examples of ochre in its natural form and then mixed as a paintable liquid, and native tree resin in its natural state
- An introduction and history of possum skin cloaks
- Class activities for different curriculum areas and stages along with worksheets and a related board game
- A DVD made in collaboration with ABC Open by the community
- A copy of this Education Kit

For bookings contact either:

Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery          Toronto Library
Visitor Services                        Kath McNaughton
T: (02) 4965 8260                       T: (02) 4959 2077
E: artgallery@lakemac.nsw.gov.au        E: kmcnaughton@lakeamc.nsw.gov.au

NOTE: Loan times are limited to one week for each booking
THE CLOAK STORIES

The cloak was made by many members of the community, and many of them attended in family groups. The stories below have been set out in family groups and each is numbered to indicate its place in the finished cloak (page 20 & 21).

DOUGLAS ARCHIBALD

**Biame:** Biame is one of the great Goori ancestral beings of the Creation period. He features in many eastern Australian Aboriginal dances, song, art, oral histories and Dreaming sites.

During creation, he moved across the land helping develop the landscape and giving life and law to the people. When his journey was complete he returned to the sky but appears from time-to-time to remind people of the law. Mt Yengo, south west of Wollombi, is one of the sites from which he ascended back to the sky. On the cloak he appears on the collar, with his arms and hands outstretched embracing the design and stories of the cloak with Big Yengo and Little Yengo in the background.

**Mullong-bula:** This design represents the Awabakal story of the two Petrified Women at Swansea Heads. The original story is not fully known but it is said that they were petrified in recognition of an injustice against them. Traditionally their role was as guardians of the local people.

**Toe KurraKurrarn:** This design depicts the Awabakal story of the Petrified Forest (‘KurraKurrarn’) under the high tide mark at Blackalls Park. According to local stories, a giant, angry iguana dropped a huge rock from the sky and killed a number of local people assembled there. It is said this act was a punishment to the people for killing and roasting lice on their fires.

**Kkaual-lag Moanee Koba Whibay-gamba (Kangaroo of Nobbys Island):** This design tells an Awabakal story about social control, ethics and the environment. The story is about a kangaroo couldn’t control his desires and attacked a female wallaby. As retribution, he was chased by an angry wallaby clan into the sea and onto the (then) island. He was presumed drowned, but it is said that he was entombed inside Nobbys and sometimes jumps around in his prison with frustration causing earthquakes.

**The Monster of Pulbah Island:** This design depicts the monster that lives in a deep lair near Pulbah Island also known as ‘Boroyirong’. Local people believed if they went too close to the island their canoes would be attacked and overturned and the occupants would be eaten by the monster ‘Wau-Wai’.

**The Monster in Bottomless Freeman’s Waterhole:** This design depicts the monster fish that resides at the bottomless freshwater hole know as Freeman’s Waterhole. The story tells of this monster that roamed swamps in the area and sporadically killed local Aboriginal people.
**The Platypus:** This design represents an Awabakal story about the importance of moral discipline. It tells of a black duck that always went to the lagoon alone, even though she was told not to by elders. One day a rat saw her by herself and attacked her but the duck didn’t tell anyone about the attack. Eventually she laid an egg but when it hatched all the ducks were surprised as it had a duck’s bill and webbed feet, but also furry body of a rat. It is said that this is the reason the platypus lays an egg (like a duck) and then suckles its young (like a rat).

**Mangroves:** This design represents all the mangroves which once surrounded the lake. Mangroves are a vital breeding ground and nursery habitat for many marine and terrestrial species. However, they are one of the first things to be removed to make way for the reclaimed land and views demanded of waterfront urbanisation.

**Fish traps:** This design depicts the fish and eel traps which were used as traditional methods for harvesting food by both men and women, whereas the multi-pronged spear was used only by men and hook and line only by women.

**Birds:** This pelt depicts the birds that live on and around the shoreline of Lake Macquarie. They are often seen feeding on the flats at low tide.

**Dilly Bags:** This design depicts dilly bags that were essential in traditional life for the collection of food and other materials by women. They were generally woven from plant fibres.

**Middens:** This design depicts one of the many middens that can be found along river, lake or ocean shores. They indicate that a campsite is nearby as they were used for the refuse of shells and other food scraps. As seasonal hunters, groups would travel far but always come back to the same middens over many years.

**SELENA ARCHIBALD**

**Tittalik:** This design focuses on the local story of Tittalik and the creation of the Hunter River. The story starts in Wollombi when there was no rain and water had to be sourced from springs and groundwater. Tittalik, a selfish frog, drank all the water so there was none left for the other animals. They decided to make him laugh so he would let go of all the water. They tried one at a time and failed. Then the platypus tried to climb the hill to Tittalik but kept falling down. The kookaburra burst out laughing at this sight and then all the animals, including Tittalik, started laughing … and the water began to flow from Tittalik’s mouth, symbolising the beginning of the Hunter River. All the animals came down to the shores of the river to quench their thirst.

**Five Islands:** The ‘Five Island Clan’ was a clan that lived on the northern end of Lake Macquarie, stretching to Mount Sugarloaf. The Five Islands were the clan’s main hunting and fishing grounds, from which they gathered shellfish, fish and other aquatic species.
TREVOR ARCHIBALD

**Namoi River:** This design reflects on the artist’s youth around the Namoi River in the Gwydir Valley, where many a Christmas was spent fishing and swimming. There are fish in the river the family used to catch and the swirls represent whirlpools and the dots members of the family swimming. 9

SUE ARCHIBALD

**Mud Crab:** This design tells the story of a young girl who went fishing with her family on the southern point of the second island of the Five Islands (Teralba). Using a handline she landed a beautiful big mud crab. Her family asked her to unhook the crab, but she was so scared she dragged the crab across a busy road to the family home. When her father finally unhooked the crab, the poor thing had missing limbs. 29

AMY BUESNEL

**Jerry-Ray:** This design depicts a childhood memory about a family fishing day on the lake. As they were sitting in their boat, one of them got a bite and it was a stingray. While the father was really excited and stared to reel it in, the uncle was really ‘freaked’ and kept saying, ‘Watch his barb! Watch his barb, Johnny!’ The serious manner in which the uncle relayed this message was very funny and everyone broke out into laughter. After that the ray was called ‘Jerry-ray’, and was let go to swim off as an unforgettable memory. 42

GARY BILES

**Ceremonial Circle:** This design depicts a ceremonial circle in the artist’s home country surrounded by dry weather ground. There are animals and animal tracks leading to the water where they are then trapped and hunted. 16

DONNA FERNANDO

**Coolamons:** This design focuses around the idea that water provides life, especially through the process of giving birth and the breaking of ‘waters’ – reinforcing the idea that the mother is the bringer of life through birth. The large central coolamon symbolises the mother, while the two smaller coolamons are representative of two daughters and the shield-shaped coolamon, the son. The design is symbolic of life and family; the water motif surrounding the coolamons representing the water within the womb. 27

**Water Womb:** This design conveys the idea of the link between water and the womb – new beginnings and connections between life and the spirit pool. 20
Laura Fernando

The Storm: This design describes a nice sunny day which turns into a stormy and rainy day. The sun is represented in the top right corner. All the animals got wet, so the platypus and the snake went into the river to get out of the rain, and all the other animals found places to find shelter. After the rain stopped, the sun came back out, and two rainbows appeared in the sky.

Brittany and Indianna Biles

Shells: This design depicts a collection of shells that may be found by the lake’s edge. It also conveys the movement of the water and waves, which move the shells to the shore.

Bud Gibson

Creation Story of the Brewarrina Fisheries: This design depicts a Dreaming story of when Biame and his four dogs created the four smaller rivers and the fisheries in Brewarrina. His footprints represent where he left his mark on the land. Also represented in the design is swirling water and the community that benefited from this creation. The man and woman represent the people who were a part of this Dreaming and were entrusted with the raking care of the fisheries land. The two suns represent the coming and going of god from the sky.

Dawn Townsend

Groundwater: This design pays respect to the significance of ground water in the lives of Aboriginal people, particularly those living on a salt water lake. Groundwater seeps through the earth via sandstone ‘filters’. The water collected can be millions of year old, but it still finds its way back to the surface as fresh water springs which are vital for life as drinking water and for ceremony. It is said that many of the groundwater systems are linked to one another across the land and across Aboriginal nations, thus linking the people. They are looked after as traditional sites, however, mining activity is disturbing the systems, and as a result the springs are drying up.
CHERIE JOHNSON

Reeds: This design depicts the wetland reeds that are vital to the purity of the water and are integral in traditional Aboriginal society for weaving. 35

Places I Lived: This design features the lake as the central motif, with Swansea Heads on the right. Each campsite depicted represents a location in which the artist lived throughout her life. The campsites form epicentres, linking the pelt and stages in the artist’s life together. 21

Who I am: This design is about identity inspired by the magnification of an onion layer. It shows a section of hundreds of cells bunched together to create one organism; much like the Aboriginal community when they are together, as the artist says “Singularly we don’t have much impact whereas together we are powerful, complex and bold”. 15

FRED GOOLMEER

Mooloo's Learning: This design depicts the story of whale migration. The story tells of the moon lighting a path on the ocean as Poohau leads Deena and little Mooloo south to the cold water to feed and grow. Poohau and Deena are singing songs of love and old times. Poohau has a scar on his side, and he sings of how he was slashed by a thrasher shark’s tail, and how he escaped by diving deep. He also sings to Mooloo about how far they have to go to get to the nice cold waters. There is great joy in their hearts as they swim on through the night, towards the full moon and stars. 10

NEIL GOOLMEER

Yabbie: This design conveys fond memories of harvesting and eating yabbies from the creeks surrounding Lake Macquarie as a youth. 45

TEAGAN GOOLMEER

Turtle: This design depicts the green turtle, which lives in Lake Macquarie. Marine turtles provide a vital food source for traditional Aboriginal people; both their eggs and flesh are eaten. Traditionally Aboriginal people used the stars to determine the breeding seasons of marine turtles, which helped sustain the populations of the now endangered species. 7
LOUISE CHARLES

**Prawning:** This design tells the story of vivid and fond memories of a father collecting prawns from the lake and bringing them home to eat, reinforcing the fact that prawns have been a good source of food for many years. 11

**Stoney Creek:** This design depicts one of many creeks and waterways that lead into Lake Macquarie. The artist remembers spending many years of her childhood playing in and around Stoney Creek. 31

SCOTT LUSCHWITZ

**Southern Cross:** This design depicts the Southern Cross constellation as an important tool for navigating as well as for spiritual inspiration. It is a significant symbol for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. The constellation is intertwined with branches searching for water (or knowledge and wisdom) symbolising the artist’s journey through life. 22

**Firestick Farming:** This pelt depicts the traditional use of firestick farming, by men as a means of renewing the environment and encouraging growth and germination. It was also a hunting technique – spot burning was used to smoke animals out and it also encouraged regrowth and feeding grounds. The seasonal use of firestick farming was effective and a great example of cultivation before European settlement. 30

DIANNE LUSCHWITZ

**Yunug or Koe-too-marnghgiratee-mulleekoebamaro:** In this design the turtle is looking to feed on the bush onions surrounding it. 46

**Maiyangiratee-mulleekoetatankoekung a koli:** In this design, the snakes are feeding on the frogs which are moving between waterholes. 1
SONYA ERSKINE

The Dancing Ceremony: This design depicts a seasonal dance ceremony. The stars dictate the formation and timing for the ceremony – the best time for full release from the shackles that bind the people. The light of the sun allows all to shine to their fullest potential, while the elders overlook and support the ceremony. The direction of the dance is represented by the tracks leading into the circle to the fire – the symbol for all to return to the mother earth. The windbreak represents a change of direction while the tracks out of the circle represent the dancers emerging into a revitalised life – flying like birds on their new journey.

The Rain Story: This design depicts frogs coming out through the rainy season – a resounding orchestra that washes away the old and nurtures the earth.

SUE STEWART

When the Moon Cried: This design tells the Awabakal story of the formation of Belmont Lagoon. The story begins with the idea that whenever the moon was present in the sky, the local people were sad and inactive. Only when the sun passed through the sky, were the people happy and active. This made the moon very depressed, so he decided to go away for a long time. While he was away he cried and cried, forming Belmont Lagoon. Belmont Lagoon became an important meeting place for both Awabakal people and animals. Ceremonies were held during times of the full moon, making the moon and the people happy.

ELIZABETH DAVE

Sand: This design depicts the movement of water around the lake and the impressions it leaves on the surrounding sands.

Rocky Bottom Crossing, Cooranbong: This design tells the story of Cooranbong and its rich history as a meeting place, symbolised by the central symbol of the campsite with the many paths leading from other communities to the ‘meeting place’. This area was not only used for corroborees and as hunting grounds, but also as a battleground, therefore weapons, tools and shields are scattered throughout the design. At the bottom of the design is a shield recognised by European settlers as having significant similarities with the Union Jack, and at the top of the design mountains and trees represent the Watagan Mountain Range.
INDIA LATIMORE

**Water:** This design depicts a story from the Worimi region and conveys the idea that water brings all living organisms together. The river is the focus of this pelt, with animals and people interacting with the river and its surrounds – women are around a campfire near the river, symbolising a ‘meeting place’. Animal tracks represent all the different species that come together around the river, while the fish play a significant role in this design as they represent the artist’s family ties with the river, acting as a medium through which the family is held together. The elements of the weather dominate life and the earth and are depicted as wind and rain at the top of the design. 18

KASH LATIMORE

**Water Animals and Fish:** The artist’s family are traditional owners from Myall Lake and his second name is ‘mungo’, which means ‘Myall Lake camp’. This design depicts the fish and water animals found in the lake that have significant meaning to the artist. 2

SIMONE PLACE

**The Water Hole:** One side of this design depicts the artist’s Worimi tribe collecting water from the waterhole and having a dance party, listening to the music of the frogs. On the other it is raining heavily and the kangaroos are at the waterhole drinking. 5

ADAM RIDGEWAY

**Goo-jeikkoo:** This design illustrates the importance and influence of water upon the individual and community. Regardless of how removed from ‘home’ it’s the power of water and family that draws the individual and community back together. This pull is depicted by specific shorelines of Lake Macquarie. The headlands are burnt; to highlight the pull towards the water, forming directional arrows. The tracks symbolise the paths made to and from the lake’ memories of the influence of the water pulling the people together. 26
SHARON CARRETTE

*Life Journey:* This design symbolises the artist’s significant connections with both the goanna and water through a journey. The story starts by the water and winds its way back to the water with a central motif of ‘home’ demarcating the two water environments. The second part of the journey is depicted by the goanna tracks leading to the mountain range and river. Many animals are gathering in this design including a wombat that stopped to be patted by the artist’s two-year-old son. 41

ALEX, LACHLAN, SOPHIE BRENnan

*Shells:* This design depicts the lake and the shells surrounding the water’s edge. The family often collect shells and take them home, sometimes labelling them. The water animals surrounding the water represent the extended family – parents, brothers and sisters. 47

CHRISTINE EVERRIT

*Turtle:* This design depicts the sea turtle as a central motif, symbolising how the artist feels about traditional Aboriginal culture because it is classified as endangered – the artist has witnessed aspects of Aboriginal cultural slipping away. The hope lays in the longevity of the turtle’s life span; in the same way, the artist hopes that traditional culture will be carried on for many future generations. 40

TAMARA DRYLIE

*Coming Together:* This design depicts animals and people walking into the corroboree - dancing up the spirits. There are men’s and women’s meeting places, and a place for Elders to oversee the camping grounds on one side of the design and waterholes on the other. It is a story of people coming together for celebration. 43
BOORAGUL PUBLIC SCHOOL
The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and parents of Booragul Public School were thrilled to have the opportunity to collaboratively design and decorate a possum skin using traditional methods. Lake Macquarie is a significant part of their location and culture, and to the Awabakal people, and as such, is centrally positioned in the design. The reeds, bushland, men’s corroboree, women’s campsites and tracks (both human and animal) indicate the richness of culture and diversity of wildlife in the surrounding area.

DUNGOG HIGH SCHOOL
This design represents the local Wonnaruah and Worimi areas. Dungog High School is a central meeting place where students and families from a wide area travel each day. They are from Seaham, Glen William, Stroud, Clarence Town, Martins Creek, Paterson, Booral, Vacy, Glen Martin, Stroud, Gresford and surrounding areas. The snake in the design forms the surrounding mountains from which the river flows. Many of the local animals and fish are depicted as the river is rich with fish, platypus and long-necked turtles, while there are still many kangaroos, wallabies and goannas inhabiting the mountain and forest areas.

HINTON PUBLIC SCHOOL
This design is entitled Crane Dreaming and depicts a good place with good spirits, rich with bush food and plenty of water. The crane always returns each season and its free spirit is captured in this women’s dreaming.

HUNTER SCHOOL OF PERFORMING ARTS
This design represents what the school means to the students. In the centre of the design is the school’s Aboriginal dance group’s symbol. The group is called Millabah which is an Awabakal work for ‘Place of Fun’. They believe their school is a place where they can enjoy themselves, have fun and express themselves. The stars on the design represent the most important aspect – all students are accepted by peers and teachers for who they are and are therefore able to shine. Each of the smaller symbols represent each of the students that attended the workshop.
RATHMINES PUBLIC SCHOOL
This design depicts a series of waterholes and the abundance of wildlife that exists around them.

ST BENEDICT’S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL
This design represents the creek at the back of the school. The playground is shown with the children’s footprints and the animal tracks symbolising the many different animals seen around the area of the school.

TOMAREE HIGH SCHOOL
This design depicts the story of Port Stephens. The two Mountains that form the heads to the Bay – Yacaaba and Tomaree – symbolise a meeting pace – a place where the river meets the ocean. The meeting place is surrounded by bush and kangaroos are found everywhere from the golf course to suburban streets. The sun is an important element as the region is a popular travel destination for many tourists.

WALLSEND SOUTH PUBLIC SCHOOL
Aboriginal students at Wallsend South Public School have come from many different nations. Their story proudly celebrates where they come from and where they now live – it is a travelling story. They have used water as the theme of their design. A large body of water centrally placed represents Lake Macquarie or the ocean – where they now live. The water is surrounded by personal stories from each student – telling of their ‘country’. The stories are linked to the water by many footprints, symbolising travel to a new place and the need for water by all communities. The possum tracks, boomerangs, snakes and bush fruits indicate the foods able to be collected in some of the student’s home countries.

WHITEBRIDGE HIGH SCHOOL
This design is a combination of all of the motifs on the students’ armbands made during the workshop. Thematically they all link to the water and reflect each student’s interpretation of his/her relationship to the water and the school’s proximity to the ocean, lake and also Belmont Lagoon, a significant Awabakal site.
ACTIVITY SHEET

A POSSUM SKIN CLOAK BY THE LAKE

1. Match the following words with a line to the correct sentences by drawing a line between them.

- Possums eat fur
- Possums live in claws
- A possum has fruit
- Possums have trees

2. Let’s practise our writing by tracing over the letters below.
3. Find the words listed below in the matrix. The words may be found either forwards, backwards or diagonally.

abundance  harvesting  poisoned  possum skin cloak
Australia  heritage  possums  predators
Culling  humane  preventing  protecting
Distribution  imported  introduced  Smithsonian
Endangered  introduced  New Zealand  utilitarian
Environment  New Zealand  utilitarian
Extinct  ochre  utilitarian
4. By using the glossary, complete the following crossword

ACROSS
2. It could kill you if you were smaller or weaker.
3. A native animal in Australia.
5. A rock found in the ground that Aboriginal people used as paint.
6. Means it can be used, mostly is everyday tasks.
7. When there are no species of animal or plant left.
8. When there is a of something.
10. To move something around among people or places.
12. What Aboriginal people wore in this region when it was cold.

DOWN
1. The term used when you do something to lower the number of animals in an area.
2. What you do when gathering food from the field.
3. Because Australian possums are .......... they are protected.
4. When you bring something in from one country to another.
## GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abundance</td>
<td>A great amount.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquaculture</td>
<td>The farming of aquatic organisms in controlled environments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culling</td>
<td>To select, choose or kill an animal from a group in an area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution</td>
<td>The delivery or giving out of an item or items to the intended recipients, as mail or newspapers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endangered</td>
<td>In danger; used especially of animals in danger of extinction, e.g. the giant panda is an endangered species.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extinct</td>
<td>Having died out; quenched.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firestick farming</td>
<td>The use of fire in a controlled manner to promote growth and movement of organisms in terrestrial environments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvesting</td>
<td>Gathering in grain, gathering crops.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humane</td>
<td>Characterised by tenderness, compassion and sympathy for people and animals, esp. for the suffering or distressed, e.g. humane treatment of horses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imported</td>
<td>To bring in, e.g. Australia imports goods from other countries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ochre</td>
<td>A coloured rock from the earth that Aborigines would grind down and add to water to create a paint. (Ochre: Various natural earths used as yellows, brown or red pigments.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pigment</td>
<td>Colouring matter in paint.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poisoned</td>
<td>A substance harmful or fatal to a living organism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possums</td>
<td>A protected native animal in Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predators</td>
<td>(Zoology) Any organism that exists by preying upon other organisms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resin</td>
<td>General term for brittle glassy, thickened juices exuded by certain plants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilitarian</td>
<td>Designed for use rather than beauty, often for everyday use.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Definitions from Collins English Dictionary and http://dictionary.reference.com
ETHICS OF USING POSSUM SKINS

Traditionally possums were used by Aboriginal people as both a food source and as resource material for clothing, ceremonies and possibly even games. However, today in most areas of Australia, possum species are protected under the provision of the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974. The NSW Office for the Environment and Heritage has identified several species as having suffered a significant decline in abundance and distribution, while many species have been identified as endangered or threatened. In Australia a permit is required in most states to trap and relocate possums under strict regulations. Only in extreme conditions is an additional destruction permit able to be obtained from The NSW Office of the Environment and Heritage.

All the possum skins used in A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake were imported from New Zealand, where the possum is classified as a pest. They were first introduced from Australia in 1837 to start the fur industry, but now there are an estimated 63 million possums there. This is most likely due to the fact that there are no natural predators to control the increasing populations, which are causing severe environmental degradation and endangering native animals and plants. In addition, they are contributing to an estimated $15 million per annum in loss in primary production as they have been recognised as major carriers of disease.

The New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals and many other organisations regulate the culling of possums and overall treatment of the animal. Basically Bush Ltd, the New Zealand supplier of the pelts for this project, use trapping as the most humane method of culling the species. The use of commercial harvesting to control the size and distribution of the possum population in New Zealand is economically, environmentally and socially sound, placing a commercial value on the introduced species.

In addition, the import of possum skins from New Zealand enables the Aboriginal community to revive a significant cultural tradition without endangering local possum species any further.
1. Why are possums protected here in Australia? 

2. When and why were possums introduced in New Zealand? 

3. Why are they seen to be such pests in New Zealand? 

4. Why doesn’t Australia have the same problem? 

5. Where did the gallery get their possum skins from? 

6. Do you think the control methods used for populations of possums in New Zealand are humane?
A Possum Cloak by the Lake is an Aboriginal cultural revival project. For various reasons, some aspects of Aboriginal cultural has almost been lost to the people. It is important for Aboriginal people to know and learn about their culture through story telling, education and projects such as making a possum skin cloak.  

The first thing that needs to be considered when creating a possum skin cloak is the overall theme as well as the style of design. Traditional symbols can be used as a way of interpreting stories within the cloak. This way the cloak doesn’t look just like a patchwork quilt, but tells one big story through many smaller ones.  

Once the general theme for the cloak is established, the artist needs to work out and refine a design on paper. The possum skin pelts also need to be cut to size (i.e. trim off the tail, head, leg sections, etc). Possum skin pelts can be bought through suppliers in New Zealand, where they are culled as a pest.  

The artist can then use a light pencil to transfer the drawn design onto the pelt as a guide. The pelt is now ready for burning with a standard burning tool. The tool is used to burn the outline of the design onto the skin, but also cross-hatching and patterns can be used for increased effect.  

Extreme care must be taken while burning to ensure there are no injuries caused to the artist or those close by. It is recommended that the artist practise the techniques on scraps of pelt before burning on the final pelt. At this stage, it is important to realise that the more burning incorporated into the design, the more shrinkage will occur on the pelt.  

After the burning process is completed, ochres can now be applied to a few areas to make them stand out. Finally use some waxed saddle twine to sew each pelt together using a blanket stitch.
1. List the steps you would need to take to make the a possum skin cloak

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   ________________________________
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2. List the things you would need to make a possum skin cloak

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3. What is one safety consideration when making the cloak? (There are three)

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4. Why is the design process critical in creating a possum skin cloak?

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5. What is the cultural value of making a possum skin cloak?

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   ________________________________

AN ABORIGINAL CULTURAL REVIVAL PROJECT
A Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake
AND THE JOURNEY CONTINUES...

AN ABORIGINAL CULTURAL REVIVAL PROJECT
a Possum skin Cloak by the lake