

The past is in the present is in the future

My name is Siena Stubbs. My full identity as a Yolŋu woman is Siena Mayutu Wurmarri Mitjparal Yumalil Barakara Baḡatjuna Stubbs. At eighteen, I have just finished school and am working at The Mulka Project at the Buku-Larrŋgay (ŋ as in ng) Mulka Centre here in my beautiful community, Yirrkala. In Yolŋu Matha, (the language of the Yolŋu people), 'Mulka' means 'a sacred ceremony' and to hold or protect. This means at Mulka, our mission is to protect Yolŋu knowledge under the guidance of our Yolŋu elders, be that through film, audio recordings or documents in our archive.

As an eighteen-year-old, I get scared about the effects global warming is having on the earth and as a Yolŋu eighteen-year-old, I already see these effects everywhere. I see it in the dead, rooted djomula (casuarina trees) that used to line our beaches. I see it in the irregular rain of the dulundur' (wet period between December and March) and I see it in the late fruiting of the mundjutj (green plum), which has shifted from late January to March.

For 60,000 years, we as Yolŋu have lived in harmony with the land through our system of gurrutu, the system that relates everything in the world to each other.

Through gurrutu, everything is connected. I relate to you, you relate to me, we relate to everything in the world, From the wäkuṅ (mullet) in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and the current they follow, to the pockets of rainforests that surround us and the guyita (witchetty grubs) within them. Through gurrutu, Yolŋu have stayed in equilibrium with our earth since the beginning of time. This has shaped the way we live our lives and the sustainable practices that have been followed to make sure it stays that way.

When Yolŋu sing, we sing in a tense that doesn't exist in English. To explore this tense, let's take an activity, say a young boy walking along the beach. Within the song lines, this boy was walking along the beach, is walking along the beach and will walk along the beach, simultaneously. As a non-Yolŋu person, it might be hard to understand this, but it might make sense when you hear the songlines.

It's scary to think that the increasing pressure of global warming is challenging the songlines of Yolŋu people. Whether we like it or not, the sustainable way of Yolŋu life is being disturbed and, if we are not careful, the knowledge trapped within our Yambirra could be lost forever.