**CLASSIFICATION-An Aboriginal Perspective**

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*\*Within this document I have written about ways Indigenous Australians classify living things. If a word is written in blue it is in the DjaDjaWurrung language.*

Although “Western Society” has often regarded Aboriginal taxonomy (classification of organisms) as either non-existent or very primitive, in fact very complex systems for classification apply. Aboriginal ways of organising knowledge is very complex, not restricted to plants and animals but incorporating societal structures and kinship. These systems include the landscape, the people, the physical and the spiritual aspects.

Different mobs of “tribes” of Aboriginal peoples are often regional and relate to cultural components, but in all cases the classification of plants and animals is complex and highly structured and is expected to be known by all the people in the mob of family group.

Of course we can start simply by sorting the edible and non-edible plants and animals.

Often animals which aren't eaten are not considered of any use and many aren't even named. They would simply be put in the category of eg: insect (toombak) and not given individual names.

The Aboriginal classification of edible plants and animals has similarities to western taxonomy in that it is hierarchical with things being grouped in levels and each higher level containing the ones below it.

These groups would have the complication of the language names of them added to the mix. For example, in the Yolgnu community, the word warrakan is used by children up to 10 years old to refer to large birds. From 11 to 18 years of age, warrakan is used to refer to both large and small birds. From 19 to the early 30s, warrakan refers to all birds and mainly to large edible birds (which are classified by their habitat from the sea to the bush). Older people use warrakan to refer to large land animals, reptiles, bats, echidnas and birds.

While the example above demonstrates that levels of knowledge can be delineated by age, they can also be determined by gender, kinship and other social structures. From the Aboriginal point of view, the ways of classifying plants and animals are many and complex. Significantly, these ways of understanding the natural order are not limited to the identification of plants and animals as objects. They are also used to interpret and construct social positions within communities.

Aboriginal people also have totemic (or symbolic) classification. This refers to the recognition of plants, animals and natural phenomena as belonging to particular social groups or moieties. Aboriginal communities are divided in complex ways, with all individuals belonging to one or more social groups as determined by descent from either their mother or father. These moieties also include animals and plants, and they guide people in all aspects of their social life, especially their roles, responsibilities and obligations. Maintaining knowledge about the plants and animals, and the ceremonies associated with them, is the responsibility of the people of the social group to which the plants or animals belong.

Traditional ecological knowledge is information built up over generations by groups of Aboriginal people living in close contact with their environment. For each group it is a set of interpretations about the local ecology and a system of self-management that governs the uses of both the non-living and the living parts of their environment, such as collecting, hunting, trapping and fishing. This knowledge is passed by word of mouth within traditional laws and practices and often as part of Dreaming stories.

By this stage you will understand that how complicated these things get. If you also add plants, types of rocks which can and can't be used or walked upon, sky symbols, seasons, areas of land, customs and ceremony into this mix the mind boggles. Yet children as young as ten are expected to know all these rules.

# Mark Linkson's story

As a person of Western culture, my expectations were often different from the realities of Indigenous cultures and this has had many impacts on my work as an educator. As a teacher education lecturer in Arnhemland, I watched a science lesson being taught in a junior primary classroom at Galiwinku. Students had the task of sorting a pile of shells. Now, how could this be done? Colour, shape, size? I watched bemused as students made two piles that I could not identify. Their Yolngu teacher was quite pleased. Her explanation to me afterwards was that the shells were sorted by moieties, *Dhuwa* and *Yirritja*, the two halves into which Yolngu people place just about everything: people, plants, animals, landforms and physical phenomena. The Indigeous science in this lesson was excellent – but where did it fit into a Western curriculum?

Linkson, Mark. (1999). Some issues in providing culturally appropriate science curriculum support for Indigenous students. *Australian Science Teachers’ Journal, 45*(1), 41-48.]

 **Questions**

1. In paragraph 2, the aboriginal systems of classification are described as…
2. What is mentioned as the first, and simplest difference used to separate plants and animals (see paragraph 3)?
3. What is one similarity between aboriginal classification methods and “western taxonomy”, or scientify classification?
4. List three features of aboriginal classification systems which make them more complicated than a western, scientific method of classification (paragraphs 6 – 9)?
5. List one advantage and one disadvantage of people having to remember all the complex variation in the aboriginal classification system.

Advantage:

Disadvantage: