



What it means to be Tasmanian Aboriginal: Four people share their stories

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The State Government has proposed changes to the way Tasmanian people can identify themselves as Aboriginal.

The move has been met with mixed response, with some concerned it could lead to many non-Aboriginal people self-identifying for personal gain. In a community conversation with Louise Saunders on 936 ABC Hobart, four Aboriginal people from Tasmania shared their stories of what identifying as Aboriginal meant to them.

"Identity is such a personal thing," artist and Trawlwulwuy woman Fiona Hamilton said.

Ms Hamilton said there were layers to identity, from organisational groups to family groups, even sporting groups, that all help shape a person's identity.

"What we're seeing more and more is people looking up their family connections," she said.

"It's great to have a central identity as Tasmanian Aboriginal people, but there has to be some flexibility to be able to express on a personal level what it means to be a Tasmanian Aboriginal person."

Emma Lee, an Indigenous research fellow at the University of Tasmania and also a Trawlwulwuy woman, said discovering the country of her ancestors had played a big part in helping her form an identity.

Although she had always identified as Tasmanian Aboriginal, Ms Lee said as she learnt more about her heritage, she was able to identify to her country as well.

"As I sat down at the knees of my elders and aunties to learn about our history, I've been able to adopt more and more in terms of my language," she said.

"I like to use where I come from, so I like to use the name of country.

"I'm a Trawlwulwuy woman from Tebrakunna country."

While Ms Lee and Ms Hamilton have information about their ancestral country, not all Aboriginal people in Tasmania are so lucky.

Caleb Nichols Mansell, an Aboriginal and LGBTIQ activist, said although he was proud to identify as a Palawa or Tasmanian Aboriginal man, he did not know enough about his family's history.

"I actually don't know that much about my background. I'm constantly learning," he said.

Mr Mansell is one of many Tasmanians whose Aboriginal ancestral connections were kept hidden for many years.

In some families, Aboriginal ancestors were written out of family trees altogether.

Teacher Kate Williams said her family suppressed their Aboriginal heritage for generations.

"Some of the family acknowledge Aboriginality ... I believe there is some sense of pride, but because it's sort of been kept inside for so long [some family are] not letting it out," she said.

Ms Williams discovered her great-grandfather was an Aboriginal man from Victoria, but she has not been able to find out much more.

"I think to a certain extent I might be fighting a losing battle, but I hope not. I pray not," she said of her family research.

"I really want to go back to the roots of it all ... that's the biggest burning desire for me."

Mr Nichols Mansell said there was a fear cultural knowledge could be lost forever unless families recognised their roots.

"One of my biggest fears around my heritage and my culture, or our culture, is that I feel it is slowly slipping away," he said.

"Unlike the white culture, we don't have things recorded in books that we can pick up down the track; a lot of our culture is passed down through word of mouth."

Ms Hamilton agreed cultural practice in some families had been lost.

"There's a lot of Tasmanian Aboriginal families who've gone through this tremendously difficult time of having to suppress identity," she said.

"That has been an effect of colonisation, that people have had to hide their identity, particularly in the regional areas of Tasmania.

"It's been very difficult for people to be open and proud and sharing of their culture when non-Aboriginal Tasmania has quite often not been so ready to deal with their historical connection to Tasmanian Aboriginal people."

Coming to terms with a bloody history

The history between Aboriginal people and European settlers on the island state is a bloody one and a subject many Tasmanians still struggle with.

Ms Lee said this history helped shape the identity of many Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

"There's two parts to that; one is the pride," she said.

"Two, it's also been the fact that we've been a cautionary tale of colonisation and the absolute extremes of inhumanity and cruelty.

"So to be Tasmanian Aboriginal is to stand up and be the ultimate survivor of genocide."

Ms Lee said Tasmanians must come to terms with the history in order to move on.

"When we can come to terms with what's happened and we can share that, I think our communities become stronger," she said.

Ms Hamilton said real change would come once families were open to talking about their history, but that some questions needed to be answered.

"What is our relationship to each other, and how do we have the conversations we need to have about the experiences we've had together in this place over time to be able to move forward together?"

"I don't think those are solely political conversations that we need to have, or organisational conversations.

"I deeply suspects that those are cultural conversations - and that they happen at the family level when families connect."