

Chapter 8

Indigenous Governance Structures in the Southwest of Western Australia

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On 19 September 2006, Justice Murray Wilcox ruled that the Noongar people continue to hold native title over more than 6000 square kilometres, covering Perth and its surrounds.¹ This first native title win in any Australian capital city came about through the efforts of the South-West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council (SWALSC). In 2003, SWALSC managed to unite the majority of competing, overlapping claimant groups to the area in question in southwestern Australia, some of whom had individually been seeking native title since the mid-1990s.

Noongar lands stretch from Jurien in the north through to Dalwallinu in the northeast and Hopetoun in the southeast, and all areas in between. Numbering in excess of 27,000 individuals, Noongar represent one of the largest single Indigenous groupings in Australia. Noongar families are generally spread over a discrete set of towns (a run) which are recognised by other Noongar families as belonging to that family. Within these families, Noongar individuals generally claim one town as their primary town. These links to Country and to other members of the family are maintained by ongoing movement around these family runs. This form of organisation has 'enabled the Nyungar people to maintain themselves as a discrete socio-political group within the wider Australian society' (Birdsall 1988: 137). The families are the key marker of Noongar identity both in the non-Noongar world and in relation to other Noongar families.

In the wake of the history of enforced transportation and institutionalisation of Noongar over the last century, many Noongar families often ended up residing great distances from their traditional

1 I use the term 'Noongar' here, although it is variously spelt in other publications as Nyoongar and Nyungar.

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