



Enjoy the glow, love the symbolism

July 2020

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The recently announced Nation Brand, featuring an Aboriginal-inspired golden wattle blossom, is the latest recognition of our national floral emblem. Wattle has long been an undeniable presence in our land. It has a utility and simple beauty that tells us much about this place and us. But despite this its formal recognition and acceptance have been a slow and winding journey. The Nation Brand initiative is an opportunity for our emblem, with its ancient past, to lead us into a confident future. Are we up to the challenge?

Behind the new branding is a narrative that celebrates what is unique about Australia's people, place, and product. It is not a case of commercial interests leading. Rather it is about identifying what distinguishes our people and place and presenting to the world what the nation offers that expresses those characteristics. It seeks to touch the authentic real Australia and wattle is the logical and unequalled symbol for doing so.

In recent years archaeology and history have been helping us understand the true significance of statements such as 'ancient land' and 'home of the world's oldest surviving human culture'. Slowly Australia's 'deep time' is being decoded and laid bare. This process challenges radically the accepted starting points of our national narrative. It unpacks our past and illuminates our future, drawing us gradually to an irresistible reconciling, made possible by scientific data opening our minds and ultimately our hearts.

The Australian story began long, long ago and the story of Aboriginal people extends back at least 65,000+ years of that time. But we have a witness to this story - the wattle – that has journeyed in this land for more than 30 million years. As archaeological historian Billy Griffiths says: "It is only through a long view of Australian history that we can come to understand the Australian landscape, which is as much cultural as it is natural". Today's study of ancient Australia is taking us to new depths of geological time and new boundaries of human engagement with the land.

For many years, the Wattle Day Association has referred to wattle as the great witness to the whole of the Australian story. It has welcomed us all and for thousands of years has been an integral on-going feature of the world's longest surviving culture. It carries the wisdom of that long presence in our land and helps tell the story of its uniqueness.

We can distil much wisdom from our wattle – not least the importance of resilience and adaption in living meaningfully in this great southern land. Now finally the Nation Brand is



tapping this symbolism as its “literal and abstract interpretation of a wattle flower” presents “a cultural richness and graphic voice that speaks distinctively of Australia”.

Wattle has always drawn us to such perspectives, but we have been hesitant, unsure of the embrace. We have taken only incremental steps that began in 1910 with the first co-ordinated celebrations of Wattle Day across the country on 1 September. It was not until 1976 that the wattle blossom was made the centrepiece of the Order of Australia medal. Then in 1988 the golden wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*) was proclaimed our national floral emblem and in 1992 National Wattle Day was gazetted, to be celebrated on 1 September each year. And yet throughout all of this we have known deep down that wattle is the balm to which we are drawn in times of tragedy and national sorrow. As a community we have recognised wattle’s beauty and symbolism but not really explored the true depths and richness that it offers.

In the often-contested field of national symbols, wattle has no historical or cultural baggage. Its more than 1000 varieties give expression to a single genus, a statement of our diversity as a people and our unity as a nation, echoing in its own way: “we are one and we are many”. Such attributes are beautifully expressed in the evocative multi-dot focus of the abstract but real imagery used in the branding. It speaks of energy, optimism and expanding ideas in wide and unbounded horizons. This is an Australia we all know and one we would want to project to the world.

At last there is a glimpse of the future we can create. It is built upon a foundation of land and people inspired by those who have lived here longest and know it best –the first custodians - and the wattle. There are other nation building challenges still ahead. We keep circling issues of national identity and the search for a unifying national day. What the branding process is showing us is that wattle holds the key to reaching sustaining and unifying solutions to these important tasks. It has been the great and patient witness. It is time to let the witness speak.

All of this is entwined with business that we have been invited by Aboriginal people to address in the Uluru Statement of the Heart. Their generous invitation to share a rich history born of 65,000+ years asks essentially for only one thing – respectful recognition. It is a request to walk together into a future inspired by a rich past. Let us do that and the wattle can be our shared companion.

The new Nation Brand is an opportunity to own our ancient past and leverage it to create our future. No other nation is so blessed.

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