



MEDIA RELEASE

Traditional owners try tech to keep ancient language alive

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Malak Malak traditional owners, who are from the Northern Territory's Daly River region, have funded the development of a language app containing over 300 words and phrases. The Malak Malak Vocab Builder is now available on the Google Play and App store.

Only five fluent Malak Malak speakers are left. Prior to 2012, little work was done on preserving and revitalising the language besides some grammar work undertaken by a researcher in the 1970s.

In 2012, Dr Dorothea Hoffmann, a linguist with nonprofit organisation The Language Conservancy, began working on documenting and recording the language. Malak Malak traditional owners then began working with NLC's Community Planning and Development Program (CP&D) in 2016, allocating a portion of their income to community development. A Malak Malak working group was formed, and preserving language with the help of an app was identified as a priority.

Using existing technology from The Language Conservancy, Dr. Hoffmann developed a vocabulary builder app and NLC's CP&D team assisted with project management.

"I'm delighted to see the app come to life. I hope it will help this beautiful language to thrive and gain new interest," Dr Hoffmann said.

Malak Malak traditional owner Joy Cardona said it's important to preserve the language and hand it on to the next generation.

"We needed to capture the language while the Aunties are still alive, to keep the language and Malak Malak clan strong, and to pass it on to our children," said Ms Cardona.

Matthew Shields, a Malak Malak traditional owner, was one of the first to download the app.

"This is the first time I've seen our language on websites. I feel really happy, I can listen to it over and over," said Mr Shields.

NLC CEO Marion Scrymgour said the app is a great example of how traditional owners are driving their own development on their own land, working side-by-side with the NLC.

“The Malak Malak mob are leading the way in community development – creating a language app is a huge achievement. Keeping language alive is vital for the younger generation,” Ms Scrymgour said.

The app is organized into 22 lesson categories, such as family, animals and useful words. It contains around 200 illustrations and phrases, for example, What’s your name?/Wari ni eyiny? and region specific words, for example, Banyan tree/puenyu.

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