

Oxford Australia Word of the Month

October 2007

irukandji /i-ruh-kan-jee/ *n.* box jellyfish of tropical Australian waters. [Aboriginal tribal name from near Cairns]

Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary, Sixth Edition

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irukandji

The story behind the Word of the Month

On 17 January 2007 the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* newspaper reported:

If you reckon covering the leopard skin bikini with a stinger suit is about as mad an idea as donning a full-body condom then think again... A marine expert has warned swimmers in Australia's tropical north they should wear stinger suits to protect against jellyfish stings just as they wear sunscreen to avoid getting burnt. Lisa-ann Gershwin, Surf Life Saving Australia's marine stinger adviser, yesterday said anyone swimming where deadly **irukandji** and box jellyfish lurked should wear the suits to avoid their potentially deadly sting.

The word **irukandji** is used to describe the box jellyfish *Carukia barnesi* of tropical Australian waters. It has a potentially fatal sting. Although the word in this sense was first recorded in 1953, it is only in the last two decades that it has been widely used. It appears very commonly in the compound **irukandji syndrome**—a combination of muscle cramps, vomiting, lower back pain, etc., caused by the sting of an **irukandji**:

Medical and tourism authorities yesterday called for urgent research into a mysterious but deadly jellyfish which has killed its first known victim. British tourist Richard Graham Jordan, 58, died on Thursday after being stung by an **irukandji** jellyfish while swimming off Hamilton Island in Queensland's Whitsundays. A Hamilton Island spokeswoman said the extremely painful sting aggravated the man's pre-existing heart condition and blood pressure, leading to a cerebral haemorrhage... **Irukandji syndrome** brings on intense aches all over the body, cramps, nausea, vomiting, fever and increased blood pressure. *Gold Coast Bulletin* 2 February 2002

So where does this strange-looking word come from? It is in fact an Aboriginal word, although it was not an

Aboriginal word for a jellyfish. In 1940 the anthropologist Norman Tindale published the results of a field survey of the distribution of Australian Aboriginal tribes in the *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia*. Among the Queensland tribes he lists **irukandji** as the name of a people who lived on a narrow coastal strip from Cairns to Port Douglas. It was this name that was arbitrarily applied to the jellyfish.

Australian English has taken many faunal names from Aboriginal languages, and in most cases these were the names for the animal in a particular area. For example, from the language of the Sydney area we took bettong, dingo, koala, pademelon, potoroo, wallaroo, wombat, boobook (owl), and currawong. From the Nyungar language of the Perth area we took dalgite (WA name for the bilby), dunnart (WA pouched mouse), noolbenger (the honey-possum), and quokka.

However, there was a recent arbitrary application of a name to a marsupial in the 1970s. In a book on the Tiwi people of Bathurst and Melville Islands (1969) there is a description of some 'tiny mythological beings that are hairy, have short feet, and only come out at night to hunt for food all of which is eaten raw', and an analogy was drawn between these and a newly-discovered tiny marsupial of dry inland Australia—resulting in the genus being called *Ningau*. The genus name has become the common name for these marsupials that have never been within cooee of Bathurst and Melville Island. In Tiwi the word means 'short ghost'.

Such arbitrary use of an Aboriginal word is unusual, but **irukandji** and **ningau** are fascinating examples of the processes of word formation in Australian English.

metrosexual
weapon
of mass
destruction
karrack
glycaemic
burka
index
barbecue stopper
senior moment
Sudoku
hornbag
dishlicker
witlof
cyberstalking
Naltrexone
pear-shaped
Bioterrorism
yakitori