



Aboriginal Partnerships Action Plan


Building partnerships with Traditional Owners

AUGUST 2017



Australian Government





The Murray-Darling Basin Authority pays respect to the Traditional Owners and their Nations of the Murray-Darling Basin. We acknowledge their deep cultural, social, environmental, spiritual and economic connection to their lands and waters.

The guidance and support received from the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations and our many Traditional Owner friends and colleagues is very much valued and appreciated.

Reviewed and approved by the Authority at meeting 110 on 6 June 2017.



River Country Spirit Ceremony (photo by Ali Sanderson)



Assessing the cultural health of the Barwon River (photo by Jackie Luethi)

OUR WORK WITH ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) created this Action Plan to guide how we enable and apply Aboriginal input to managing water and improving the condition of Country in the Murray-Darling Basin.

We want Traditional Owners in the Basin to be involved in MDBA research, planning and management through equitable, inclusive and respectful partnerships. An essential measure of the success of such partnerships is their role in improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal people throughout the Basin. Effective partnerships will help break down barriers, and promote cross-cultural collaborations in science and social settings. They will also help us respond to the requirements of the Basin Plan to consider social, economic and environmental challenges.

These partnerships will benefit Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, improve management of the Murray-Darling Basin's natural resources and help meet the Australian Government's obligations under the *Water Act 2007* and *Basin Plan 2012*.

The Aboriginal Partnerships Action Plan 2017 builds on long-term programs where the MDBA (and previously the Murray-Darling Basin Commission) and partner governments have had meaningful engagement with Aboriginal people to improve the environmental and cultural heritage management of the River Murray system. This includes the Lake Victoria program which has engaged with the Barkandji and Maraura people on cultural heritage protection and environmental issues since the mid-1990s.

Lake Victoria is a site of significant cultural heritage and is managed according to an Aboriginal heritage impact permit. The Lake Victoria program now employs up to five Aboriginal people. Over the past 14 years, there has also been significant involvement of other Aboriginal communities in the planning, development and implementation of projects through The Living Murray program and initiatives such as Use-and-Occupancy Mapping.



Chair of NBAN Fred Hooper (Murrwarri Nation) with Neil Ward (MDBA)
(photo by Charmain McDonald)

WHAT WE ARE AIMING TO DO

The MDBA Aboriginal Partnerships team will use best practice cross-cultural engagement principles to guide our approach to implementing, evaluating and reviewing the Basin Plan. Our aim is to enable equitable Traditional Owner involvement and input through 5 objectives (refer to Figure 1). The Aboriginal Partnerships Action Plan will help deliver on the Basin Plan's statutory provisions which require Aboriginal interests to be considered in ongoing water research, planning, management, and monitoring and evaluation activities. Our approach also contributes to the 'Closing the Gap' objectives.

EMPOWERING ABORIGINAL VOICES

We recognise the importance of independent, culturally authoritative and strategic input from Aboriginal people to help achieve our objectives.

To assist with this we have a partnership agreement with the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations and the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations. They are the two peak Traditional Owner-based organisations in the Basin with a primary focus on natural resource management. This makes them invaluable partners in delivering better environmental, cultural and social outcomes.

The Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations was formed in 1998 and the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations was formed in 2010. They are independent, self-determining and collectively comprised of delegates from 47 member Nations.

Both organisations are guided by their own constitutions and aim to develop greater recognition and respect for Aboriginal knowledge and values in managing land and water. For the benefit of Aboriginal people they

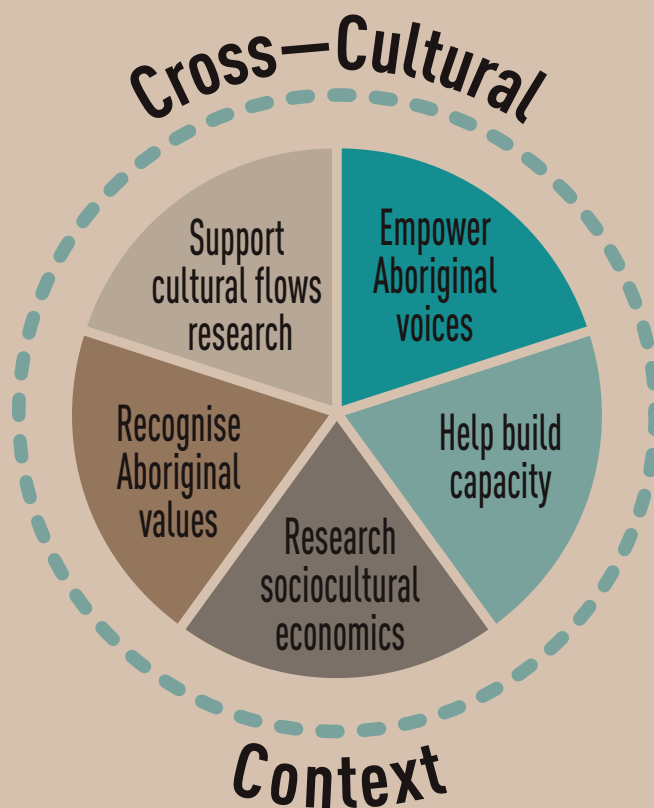


Figure 1 MDBA Aboriginal Partnership objectives

also promote the views and perspectives of Traditional Owners on water research, policy and management.

Ongoing support for these groups is essential to the implementation of the Basin Plan, building on years of investment in promoting awareness of Aboriginal water knowledge and enhancing already robust working relationships.

RECOGNISE AND HELP BUILD CAPACITY OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN WATER PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

Involving Aboriginal communities in water planning and management is relatively new for both water planners and Aboriginal people. Up until recently, efforts have largely focused on the protection of cultural heritage.

Investment is needed on all sides to bring together traditional and contemporary Aboriginal perspectives, interests, scholarship and management approaches into water governance and government policy structures.

Collaborative and inclusive approaches will benefit Aboriginal people and Country.

We will continue to support the development of processes and tools to assist Aboriginal people to engage in water research, planning and management. This includes developing projects that employ Aboriginal staff locally and which promote professional development and respectful, mutually beneficial knowledge sharing. Our successes include Use-and-Occupancy Mapping, the Aboriginal Waterways Assessment and developing the sociocultural research methodology. These processes and tools will help ensure Aboriginal knowledge, values and perspectives are included in water research, planning and management decisions.

RECOGNISING ABORIGINAL VALUES AND INTERESTS

We work with the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations and the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations to help raise public awareness about Aboriginal interests and concerns relating to water. We put effort into collecting and sharing Aboriginal information across the Basin using appropriate methods based on the principle of free, prior and informed consent.

The 2012 publication *'A yarn on the river'* was an important part of this journey. The 2015 report *'Aboriginal Waterways Assessment program'* has been used widely around the Basin. MDBA staff also regularly present at community forums, conferences and universities.

We will develop resources such as *'Yarns Woven'* to complement and build greater understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal water related objectives and outcomes. These resources will support Commonwealth agencies' and Basin states' engagement with Aboriginal people. They will also help enhance Aboriginal people's involvement in operational watering decisions and water planning.

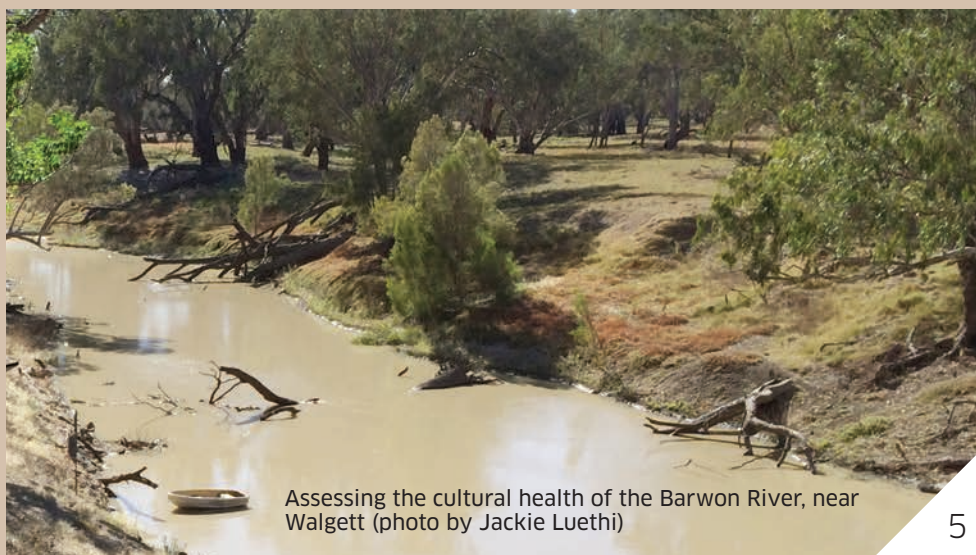
We are urging others to use any opportunities for improving the management of water resources across the Basin to:

- ensure Aboriginal knowledge, values and perspectives are included in water research, planning and management
- recognise and respond to Aboriginal interests
- include Traditional Owners as partners in all stages of water research, planning and management.

We will continue to undertake and support research to help understand and explain water requirements for delivering Aboriginal objectives and outcomes.

SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH

Basin Plan implementation requires regular monitoring and evaluation of the impacts and benefits to people in the Basin. We work with our partners to measure the outcomes for Aboriginal people and identify ways in which future Basin Plan implementation can be improved.



Assessing the cultural health of the Barwon River, near Walgett (photo by Jackie Luethi)

Much of this research is new and includes developing methodologies consistent with this Action Plan and the objectives of the Basin Plan. We need to identify and collect relevant information in order to measure Basin Plan outcomes for Aboriginal people. This field of work must be developed with the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations and the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations to ensure it is culturally sensitive, authoritative and meaningful. The interpretation of the research results will also be undertaken in partnership with the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations and the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations to ensure cultural integrity of the results.

This approach will produce socially robust and empowering data to inform future implementation of the Basin Plan and to highlight the effects of the Basin Plan on Aboriginal people.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH IN CULTURAL FLOWS

We have no statutory power to provide cultural flows for Aboriginal people or create water entitlements for any other stakeholders.

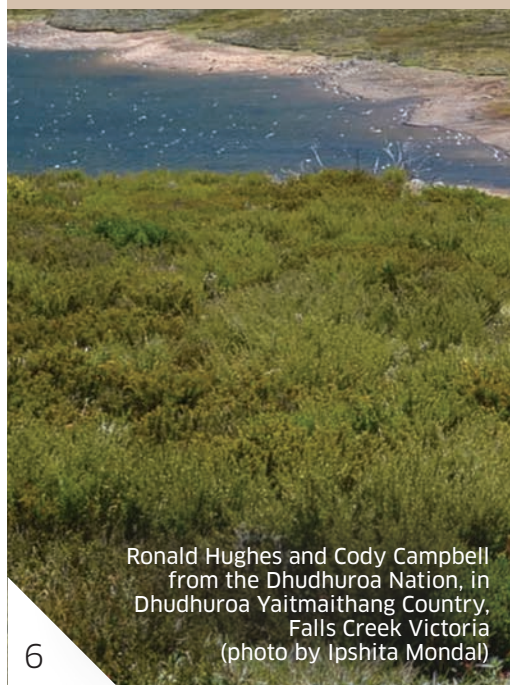
Nevertheless, we recognise and respect the desire of Aboriginal people to own water or have 'cultural flows' and so have supported

the National Cultural Flows Research Project, which is managed by the National Cultural Flows Planning and Research Committee. Cultural flows research is generating scientifically-based evidence for Aboriginal people to use in their efforts to achieve cultural flows.

We support the belief of Aboriginal people that cultural flows will improve the condition of Country, and in doing so, help to improve their wellbeing. There are a number of ways for Aboriginal people to work towards achieving cultural flows. These include developing partnerships with environmental water holders and managers, purchasing water entitlements from the water market and working with the Basin states to develop cultural flow arrangements.

The benefits of cultural flows to Aboriginal people include:

- improved self-esteem and empowerment as a result of being water owners and able to care for Country
- improved health and wellbeing through being able to see and connect with Country in a healthy state as a result of their work
- increased resources available for use by Aboriginal people.



Ronald Hughes and Cody Campbell
from the Dhudhuroa Nation, in
Dhudhuroa Yaitmaithang Country,
Falls Creek Victoria
(photo by Ipshita Mondal)



OUR ROLE



Figure 2 Sections of the Basin Plan particularly relevant to Aboriginal people

Established by the *Water Act 2007*, the MDBA has a Basin-wide strategic water planning focus. We work with other Australian Government agencies, Basin state governments, local governments, Aboriginal groups and communities, regional bodies, industry groups, landholders, environmental organisations, scientists, research organisations and the broader Australian community.

Our major focus is to implement the Basin Plan, which was made law in November 2012. Our work aims to achieve a balance between environmental, economic and social considerations. The Basin Plan contains statutory provisions which require Aboriginal interests to

be considered in water planning, management and monitoring activities (refer to Figure 2).

The development of the Basin Plan benefited from active participation and advice from Traditional Owners. It contains provisions for Aboriginal people to be involved in and advise on water resource planning and development of environmental watering priorities.

Implementation of the Basin Plan provides opportunities for Aboriginal perspectives to be heard, for Aboriginal values to become more widely understood and respected, and for Traditional Owners to be valued participants in water planning processes.



Figure 3 MDBA research programs and tools

The Basin Plan requires state jurisdictions to identify Aboriginal water objectives and outcomes, consider the views of Aboriginal people with respect to cultural flows and for the MDBA to consider Traditional Owner advice when assessing state water plans. The Basin Plan also requires the MDBA to have regard to Aboriginal values and uses when developing environmental watering plans and priorities. The MDBA recognises international obligations in relation to Aboriginal natural resource management and the requirements of the National Water Initiative.

The MDBA will use and promote a number of research tools to support and achieve these requirements. These include Use-and-Occupancy Mapping, the Aboriginal Waterways Assessment, the National Cultural Flows Research Project, Strengthening Connections Plan, the Aboriginal Weather Watchers Project and the Aboriginal Submissions Database (refer to Figure 3). These research programs will build the skills and knowledge of everyone involved in water planning and will help highlight where more work could address information or knowledge deficiencies.

Aboriginal people can use these tools and programs to assist them in being actively and effectively involved in water planning and management discussions. We are working with state water agencies to encourage incorporation of these programs into their engagement processes when implementing the Basin Plan. We will continue to collaborate with Aboriginal people and state water agencies to ensure that these tools are relevant and useful in water planning and management when implementing the Basin Plan. The need to develop more tools and approaches may also emerge from our growing experience with Basin Plan implementation.

A review of this Aboriginal Partnerships Action Plan will be undertaken before December 2021.



OUR PRINCIPLES



The MDBA takes a principle-based approach to its responsibilities to make sure that Aboriginal people are involved in natural resource management decision making. These principles were originally developed in consultation with the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations in planning and implementing The Living Murray program. They were then reviewed, amended and endorsed at a joint gathering of the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations and the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations in 2011.

This approach reflects our commitment to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Convention on Biological Diversity's *Akwé: Kon* guidelines, and is focused on achieving inclusive, meaningful and effective outcomes for Aboriginal people within the Murray-Darling Basin.

The MDBA's principles to engage Aboriginal people in the Basin are:

1. Recognition that the authority and responsibility to speak for and about Country and Aboriginal culture rests with Traditional Owners.
2. Effective involvement of Traditional Owners and, where appropriate, other Aboriginal people, through free, prior and informed consent, ensuring:
 - that Aboriginal people have knowledge and understanding of relevant government programs
 - awareness of the potential consequences and outcomes
 - cultural knowledge, values and perspectives underpin decision making.
3. Helping improve Aboriginal people's capacity to be effectively involved in natural resource management.
4. Recognising that natural resource management programs have a role in delivering cultural, social, economic and environmental outcomes that are equitable and appropriate to all Aboriginal people.
5. Ensuring that partnerships between Aboriginal people and the MDBA are based on respect and the capacity to participate with integrity and authority, that responsibility is shared, and accountability clearly defined.
6. Ensuring intellectual property remains with Aboriginal people.

BROADER CONTEXT

The United Nations

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. As an international instrument, the declaration provides a blueprint for indigenous peoples and governments around the world, based on the principles of self-determination and participation, to respect the rights and roles of indigenous peoples within society.

The declaration sets out the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of indigenous peoples all over the world

(Mick Gooda, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2015).

It is important to note that the declaration provisions are not Australian law but provide a guide for considering Aboriginal issues as they relate to the statutory responsibilities of the MDBA.

The independent review of the *Water Act 2007* recommended using the Convention on Biological Diversity's *Akwé: Kon* guidelines as a basis for regarding Aboriginal values and uses when developing state water resource plans. Accordingly, the MDBA has prepared a document titled 'Part 14 Guidelines' to assist state water planners to address the requirements of Basin Plan Chapter 10 Part 14 when developing water resource plans. The Part 14 Guidelines were developed in collaboration with Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations and Basin state governments.

Akwé: Kon is a Mohawk term meaning 'everything in creation'. The *Akwé: Kon* provides a collaborative framework to ensure indigenous

and local communities have full involvement in cultural, environmental and social impact assessments where proposed developments may impact sacred sites, lands and waters. Most importantly it provides advice on how to take into account traditional knowledge, innovations and practices as part of the impact-assessment processes and promoting the use of appropriate technologies.

Council of Australian Governments

The water planning sub-group under the Council of Australian Governments has worked with all Australian states and territories to guide Aboriginal engagement in water planning. These guidelines are intended to help improve and build upon existing engagement processes to ensure inclusive approaches to water planning that support genuine consideration of Aboriginal social, spiritual and customary objectives.

Aboriginal health and 'Closing the Gap'

The MDBA recognises and appreciates that the condition of Country is fundamentally linked to culture and cultural obligations, which has strong and profound impacts on Aboriginal wellbeing. Environmental degradation of rivers, wetlands and aquifers has had detrimental effects on the lifestyles of Aboriginal people and their spiritual connection to Country. There is potential to reduce the pressures on health and help with 'Closing the Gap' if opportunities to connect with the land are enhanced and the condition of Country is improved.

18.2% of the Aboriginal population of Australia live in the Murray-Darling Basin. Nationally

Aboriginal people manage or own 33% of the land (Aboriginal Estate). In the Basin, Aboriginal people own less than 1% of the land and water. Aboriginal people have a life expectancy about 10 years less than non-Aboriginal people. Figure 4 includes a selection of nationally based statistics collated by the Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet .

The MDBA can make a meaningful contribution to the Australian Government's 'Closing the Gap' program through implementing the Basin Plan and helping Aboriginal people achieve their aspirations for managing water, the sacred lifeblood of Country, within the Murray-Darling Basin. This in turn supports improvements to health, social and cultural inclusion, as well as contributing to higher education opportunities and aspirations.



12x

25-34 year old Aboriginal people are 12 times more likely to die from heart disease



2.3x

Aboriginal infant mortality rate is 2.3 times higher than non-Aboriginal infants



30%

Aboriginal children are 30% more likely to suffer from anaemia and malnutrition due to iron deficiencies



30%

Aboriginal adults suffer from type-2 diabetes

Figure 4 Nationally based statistics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet)¹

¹ Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet (2016) Summary of Australian Indigenous health 2015. Retrieved 24 March 2017 from www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/health-facts/summary.

Published by the Murray–Darling Basin Authority

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MDBA publication no.: 31/17

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Cover image: Aboriginal Elders and MDBA staff doing an Aboriginal Waterways Assessment below Lock 10 on the River Murray (photo by Neil Ward)

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