

Rivers, the veins of our Country

Six case studies of First Nations involvement in managing water for the environment in the Murray-Darling Basin 2021-22

On Country learning experience in the Barmah-Millewa Forest

Indigenous students get involved in the monitoring of endangered turtle species

Authors: Luke Egan, Karen Wilson, Keisha Egan, Tracy Hamilton, Deidre Hamilton, Coby Smith, Kobi Baxter and Ty Ross.

As part of The Living Murray (TLM) program, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) conduct monitoring programs within the Barmah-Millewa Forest, a Ramsar listed and TLM icon site. The Indigenous Partnership Program (IPP) (a component of TLM) engages with First Nations people on the ecological monitoring and other programs, aiming to share knowledge and promote First Nations people's aspirations.

The Nations involved in the monitoring program at Millewa Forest (Murray Valley National Park) were Yorta Yorta, Perrepa Perrepa - Barapa Barapa, Wamba Wamba - Wemba Wemba and Bangarang. Other organisations involved were Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre, Deniliquin High School, Arthur Rylah Institute (ARI), Murray Local Land Services, Cummeragunja Local Aboriginal Land Council and Bangarang Aboriginal Cooperation.

First Nations communities were involved in a turtle monitoring and tracking project delivered in 2022. There are 3 species monitored in the Barmah-Millewa Forest including the broad-shelled, Murray River, and common long-necked turtles. This work is significant as the broad-shelled turtle is listed as endangered and the Murray River turtle is critically endangered in Victoria. The 3 turtle species have cultural significance to the local First Nations community. The turtles are a totem for local First Nations people and some species are a food source.



*Turtles are not only a totem species, they are also training partners for First Nation youth and western science.
Photo credit: Vince Bucello, Midstate Video Productions*



*Uncle Colin Walker,
Yorta Yorta elder,
Millewa Forest NSW.
Photo credit: Vince
Bucello, Midstate
Video Productions*



Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre, NPWS, Murray Local Land Services and The Sarina Russo Group have partnered with the Deniliquin High School to provide a School Based Aboriginal Traineeship (SBAT) program.

The pilot SBAT program will see an initial cohort of three Year 11 Deniliquin High School students of Aboriginal background learn to manage, protect, and sustain valuable environmental and cultural assets. The program aims to retain local Aboriginal students in the education system while providing them with the opportunity to gain experience and learn about their culture, connect with Country and obtain a TAFE qualification outside of mainstream education avenues. A further goal is to provide role models and mentors for younger Aboriginal children whose families may aspire for them to continue their education and engage with culture and Country.

Luke Egan, Project Coordinator at Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre said, "Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre are proud to host the trainees, it's important for trainees to get this opportunity so in the future they

can get the opportunity to get a job in National Parks, look after their Country, protect their sites and set an example for the younger generation that are coming up."

The turtle monitoring and tracking program in the Barmah-Millewa Forest is essential for monitoring environmental outcomes, however it has also provided meaningful opportunities for the trainees to have hands-on environmental and cultural learning opportunities. Senior Elder, Uncle Colin Walker stated, "The traineeship is very important to the young ones now they are learning, it's important to get them out in the forest, it's a very important program I am a very proud Senior Elder to see this happening." Coby Smith a Deniliquin High School trainee added "We learned how the turtles are tagged and tracked."

The program is a notable example of how social outcomes are achieved by building strong relationships, collaborative approaches and an understanding and respect for the culture and heritage of the First Nations people and Country.





Where do science and culture connect best? On Country! Isaac Wilson learned the technical knowledge from Louise Durkin and Greg Clarke to complement his cultural learning.
Photo credit: Vince Bucello, Midstate Video Productions

Aboriginal staff from a partner agency, Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre, facilitated a cross-Nation partnership where a Yorta Yorta Senior Elder provided approval for Perrepa Perrepa - Barapa Barapa, and Wamba Wamba - Wemba Wemba youth to be involved in the on Country learning experience.

Uncle Colin Walker said “We all have connection with each other, we all have same blood, I have connections to your Country, and we want to bring all youth out to learn on Country, its important. We just have to remember to ask for permission before, that’s respect.”

First Nations people and trainees conducted the research with ARI, while also learning to respect Country. The hands-on learning experience incorporated a meaningful engagement opportunity for everyone involved.

Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre office manager Deidre Hamilton said “It was a great day, the boys seemed really interested and asked a lot of questions. It was the first time I’d seen cameras on turtles experiencing scientific research.”

The research was conducted at Blackgate Lagoon. The opportunity connected participants to how water for the environment is important for ecological and cultural health.

The turtles which are a totem species benefited from the water.

To view the video created for this turtle monitoring project, click this link.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUB3P-HQljg

