

Rivers, the veins of our Country

Six case studies of First Nations involvement in managing water for the environment in the Murray-Darling Basin
2022-23

Collaborating to share cultural connections at Hattah Lakes

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PRECIOUS traditional knowledge about the plants of Hattah Lakes has been collected in a booklet to help First Nations people ensure their voice is heard in the land and water management decisions for this iconic Australian landscape.

From using Lemon Myrtle leaves to flavour fish to the decline of Yam Daisies in the sandhills, the “Plants of cultural significance” booklet respectfully records ecological knowledge generously shared by Elders during visits to the freshwater lakes.

It's the first book of its kind for the Hattah Lakes system and can be used to help inform intervention monitoring, seasonal watering proposals and longer-term watering plans.

Hattah Lakes

The Hattah Lakes system has been shown to form part of a highly sensitive region for Aboriginal cultural values and contains considerable evidence of past Aboriginal occupation. More than 1,000 archaeological sites at the Hattah Lakes have been registered with Aboriginal Victoria. These include burial sites, scarred trees, shell middens, artefact scatters, hearths and other topological sites. The freshwater lakes and wetlands were focal points for trade and cultural exchanges amongst the region's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal community.

The Hattah Lakes lies within the border of several Traditional Owner groups. Historically, the lakes would have provided an abundant and reliable source of food and water for Aboriginal people and provided a central meeting or gathering place for surrounding groups. The local Aboriginal community continues to maintain strong connections to the land and its traditional resources, such as native plants used for food and medicine.

Passing on Traditional knowledge to heal Country

During on-Country events, Elders and Aboriginal community members talked about the many ways plants were used in the past. They talked about how plants and yams were used and eaten, how some plants were used for medicine, and their desire to see Hattah return to being a “paradise” for plants. There was an overall agreeance between Elders that Aboriginal heritage and cultural information was an important addition to ecological justifications for water for the environment, and for investment in this landscape.

Further discussions about the importance of plants led to yarning about the need to pass on traditional knowledge to younger generations, preferably while on Country. Mallee CMA staff and Elders continued to discuss this, agreeing to work together to develop a booklet recording the cultural values of plants of significance.



Project participants on the field trip (left to right) Wayne Pryor (Mallee CMA), Aunty Veronica Harradine, Aunty Margaret Hannah, Elise Hull (Mallee CMA), Aunty Rose Kirby and David Wood (Mallee CMA). Credit: Mallee CMA



Native liquorice. Credit: Mallee CMA

A core group of Elders were keen to see the booklet developed and took part in an on-Country visit to Hattah Lakes, accompanied by Mallee CMA staff members and an ecologist. The group travelled to several sites where environmental water is delivered. Conversations flowed about how different plants may have been used in the past (e.g. moira grass for weaving; eating the small pods of nardoo) and how watering can ensure these sorts of plants can grow for extended periods. There was also discussion about the difficulty of including traditional names for plants as there are several mobs and languages connected to Hattah Lakes.

The group documented photos and comments on the different native plants and their Traditional uses. This information was compiled in a booklet, printed June 2022. The booklet has received great feedback from Traditional Owners, Elders and the wider community – demand was so high a second print run has been ordered!

If you would like a copy of the booklet, please contact Wayne Pryor at Wayne.Pryor@malleecma.com.au



*Lake Kramen.
Credit: Mallee CMA*

