

# Rivers, the veins of our Country

Twelve case studies of First Nations involvement in managing water for the environment in the Murray-Darling Basin 2020-2021

## Down the Track *Lower Galari/Lachlan*



Regular attendees of the Down the Track environmental program setting the small fyke nets with Dr Adam Kerezszy off Robinson Crusoe Island (Lake Cargelligo), March 2020. Credit: Mal Carnegie, Lake Cowal Foundation and DPE EES

**Lana Masterson is the CEO of Down the Track, her work and significant contribution to the Lake Cargelligo community has been acknowledged widely, receiving 2020 NSW Youth Service of the Year, 2021 NSW Local Hero Finalist – Australian Of The Year Awards, 2021 Winner of the Lachlan Shire Citizen of the Year Award and as a 2021 Australia Day Ambassador.**

### Tell us about the Down the Track Program

Down the Track is all about young people. We are located in Lake Cargelligo and provide opportunities to get young disadvantaged people back on track by supporting them to achieve their best potential. We mentor young people from all walks of life.

In 2016 the community identified a need to address the social issues and anti-social behaviour displayed by some young people. With no other options, 5-7 young people were being incarcerated per week. Funding was sourced to pilot a version of the successful BackTrack program ([www.backtrack.org.au](http://www.backtrack.org.au)) from Armidale. After the 6-month pilot, people saw some great results and that the pilot program had legs in the community. Funding for another 12 months was secured. Down the Track is now a standalone organisation with its own social enterprise.

We work with all young people from 10-20 years of age, which at the moment is predominantly Indigenous (98%). They have multiple and complex life challenges. Young people are generally referred to Down the Track. Referrals can come from schools, the police, community organisation, their family or they can self-nominate.

When they walk in, they feel supported. By acknowledging them and their unique position we are able to develop a program with them to suit their needs and aspirations. We don't work for them; we work with them. We focus on skills development through a series of red dust classrooms. Each red dust classroom focuses on life skills that could lead to employment 'down the track'. They include

agriculture (fencing, shearing, and cropping), construction and environmental management.

The staff work alongside the kids and together, they do the hard work while talking through and facing the hard issues.



Lana Masterson and the Down the Track keen to see what Dr Adam Kerezszy has got in small fyke nets in Booberoi Creek just downstream of where the kids love a quick swim, October 2020. Credit: Mal Carnegie, Lake Cowal Foundation and DPE EES

### **What is the connection between the environment and the program?**

The kids love getting on Country, they love camping, they love understanding more about their surrounds and they love being able to share the information and facts they have learnt with their friends and family. I often hear the kids saying to their brothers and sisters 'do you know that's a .... bird and they like to nest....' It has a direct knock on effect – engaging with the community beyond just the kids.

### **How has water for the environment supported the program?**

Doing the water for the environment monitoring exercises really ignited something in the kids – it's a new passion for the environment. The mentoring provided by Dr Joanne Lenehan (Senior Environmental Water Manager) and Dr Adam Kerezszy (Aquatic Ecologist) and their community networks – makes the kids want to do the work not just now but in the future. They see Jo and Adam's passion and it sparks an interest in occupations that are not traditionally found in Lake Cargelligo where industry and employment is heavily focused on agriculture. Kids that can't count, learn how to count by the end of the weekend by monitoring birds, counting and tracking their movements and then writing down the data.

### **What difference has the program made?**

We measure success differently. We break it down to the individual and their capabilities, we witness their growth and are invested in their progression step by step.

The opportunities provided in the red dust classroom come from the community. The program has connected the community and broken-down barriers and stereotypes. Some of these kids would never have the confidence to speak to the people who teach them the skills, let alone ask for a job. They were almost invisible.

Down the Track is providing kids with more opportunities and is helping to upskill the next generation. We are helping to address the skills shortage faced by our community.

In the last two years only one child has been sent to juvenile detention in Wagga Wagga.

### **What is the future vision for Down the Track and how can water for the environment support the vision?**

We want to grow sustainably and be able to employ more young people in our social enterprise. We want to invest in more employment opportunities and re-engage kids with the school system.

Another great thing would be to formalise our environmental program, connecting the lake and the river system to a pathway for employment opportunities in science and environmental management. We have partnered with the NSW water for the environment program to further develop our environmental work alongside their monitoring program. To date work has been based mainly on dedicated community volunteers, now with the additional partnership funding we can look forward to building on the skills the kids have gained so far.

Our ultimate goal is to have our own River Rangers program that could mentor kids on how to manage and monitor water for the environment in their own backyard and beyond.



Dr Adam Kerezszy and Dr Jo Lenehan (DPE EES) monitoring the fish community during environmental water delivery in Booberoi Creek with Down the Track's help, October 2020. Credit: Mal Carnegie, Lake Cowl Foundation and DPE EES