

Rivers, the veins of our Country

Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Corporation Yarning Circles Project

Ngarrindjeri Ruwe

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

The Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Corporation (NAC) undertook a Yarning Circles Project during 2021 which aimed to understand and document Ngarrindjeri cultural values and priorities; and

to assist in decision-making for the planning and delivery of water for the environment to Ngarrindjeri Ruwe (Country). This was achieved by holding a series of six 'Yarning Circles' on Ruwe with members of the Ngarrindjeri community along with support from project staff from the Department for Environment and Water (DEW).

The Yarning Circles provided a safe space for Ngarrindjeri community members to share their stories and important cultural values, while also helping to build relationships between the Ngarrindjeri community, NAC and DEW.

Departmental staff also shared information on Commonwealth and State planning processes for the planning and delivery of water for the environment; to enhance the knowledge and understanding among members of the Ngarrindjeri community. The Yarning Circles were held in Tailem Bend, Raukkan, Goolwa, Murray Bridge, Meningie, and Wellington.

The Yarning Circles focused on the following specific objectives:

To document (where appropriate) Ngarrindjeri cultural values in relation to Ruwe.

For Ngarrindjeri to have a greater understanding in Commonwealth / State planning processes for the delivery of water for the environment.

For Departmental staff to gain an understanding and appreciation of Ngarrindjeri cultural values.

For Ngarrindjeri cultural values to influence decision-making in the prioritisation of water for the environment being delivered to Ruwe.



At each of the Yarning Circles, Ngarrindjeri community members were invited to participate and share their stories and cultural knowledge of Yarlular-Ruwe focusing on water. Participants consisted of Ngarrindjeri community members, ranging from elders to younger generations, so that knowledge transfer could occur as part of the project. All six Yarning Circles were filmed to record anecdotal evidence which can be used for additional projects and for Ngarrindjeri descendants to have access into the future.

A short 10 minute film was produced to capture the key elements of the project. It can be found on the DEW YouTube site www.youtube.be/tK4TdPIIFDo

Rick Hartman Yarlular-Ruwe Project Coordinator for the NAC facilitated each Yarning Circle with support from DEW staff. Occasional prompting questions were asked to generate discussion, however community members led the topics of discussion through sharing stories that were important to them both individually, as a family or within their community. There were various stories, memories and important values shared, and whilst each Yarning Circle was unique, some key themes were identified across all the Yarning Circles.

Pondi (Murray Cod)

Pondi and the absence of this spiritual fish in our waterways was a strong topic of discussion. Pondi is a key component of the Ngarrindjeri creation story with Ngurunderi chasing Pondi from the junction where the Darling and River

Murray meet. Back then this area was only a small stream and Pondi had nowhere to go, so he went ploughing and crashing through Ruwe creating the River Murray. Ngarrindjeri are still able to pass on stories about Pondi to generations but given that this spiritually important fish is now absent from the Lower Murray, Ngarrindjeri are unable to take future generations to catch and view this fish for themselves.

Importance of Ngartji's (totem/friend)

Elders shared stories of being able to catch and collect an abundance of native species including Pomeri (catfish), Pondi (Murray cod), Kaltuwari (crawfish/yabbie), Pila:ki (callop/golden perch), Kanmeri (Coorong mullet), Mamikalt (flounder) Kuti (cockle/pipi), Lokeri (freshwater mussel), Wa:nyi (duck), Kungari Nga:tadi (black swan eggs) and Kuntau-raipuri (water rat). Family groups would spend many a day on the water's edge fishing, collecting and hunting traditional foods while sharing traditional stories about Thukeri (Bony Bream) and the Mulyawongk (water creature). We were taught from children how all things are connected and must be cared for equally. The protection of Ngartji's (totemic species) was highlighted as being very important to Ngarrindjeri culture, and throughout the Yarning Circles participants mentioned not being able to prioritise one Ngartji over another unless they are threatened, vulnerable, or endangered. Stories were shared of how abundant native food resources were in the past, compared to how reduced or absent they are today.



Vicki Hartman (left) and Rick Hartman (right) standing on the banks of Murrundi (River Murray) near the Riverglades Wetland.
Credit: Miriam Yip



Yarning Circle at Taillem Bend on the banks of Murrundi (River Murray)
Credit: Miriam Yip

Changes to water quality and clarity

Stories were shared of when our water was good enough to drink, clear enough to see the river and lake beds and to watch the fish swimming past, or to catch ducks by swimming under water and grabbing their feet. Ngarrindjeri were denied the opportunity to participate in the management of our Yarluwar-Ruwe following European settlement; which resulted in structures built, wetlands drained, waterways polluted and country fenced off – separating our community from Ruwe.

Opportunity to practice culture

There is now limited access to Ruwe due to the establishment of private property boundaries which exclude Ngarrindjeri from important sites including wetlands. This results in a lack of opportunity to participate in cultural activities and to access our traditional plants and animals. Ngarrindjeri require adequate flows to our wetlands and rivers to enable a healthy country and so that our community can spend more time with their families passing on traditional practices and culture. The younger generations are telling their elders they do not want to just hear the stories of cultural practices but actually live them and be able to show and teach their own children Ngarrindjeri culture, rather than just tell the stories.

Looking after Yarluwar-Ruwe

There needs to be an investment into the continued healing of our Yarluwar-Ruwe with Ngarrindjeri management principles incorporated and adopted to ensure a healthier system into the

future. The Yarning Circles provided testimony to how people are connected and our desire to be on Yarluwar-Ruwe practicing culture and meeting with stakeholders to discuss how to heal our Yarluwar-Ruwe. Ngarrindjeri cultural practices are taught to us from our elders and in accordance with our traditional law, including how to care for our lands and waters to make them healthy again. We are taught to only take what you need and if we look after the lands and waters, it will look after you. We are obligated to manage our Yarluwar-Ruwe and therefore we aspire to participate in water management activities and how water for the environment is used and delivered to Ngarrindjeri Ruwe.

Participant feedback from the Yarning Circles was very positive with community members embracing the opportunity to share their stories. Vicki Hartman commented “Sitting on the banks of the river, connecting to country and family, yarning and triggering our memories of what the land and river looked like in our day. Brothers, grandchildren, and my great grandson all there participating in our journey from the past. Yarns about the river, the land, food, hunting and how the environment was our food source for our survival.”

The Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Corporation now has the challenge to build on the success of the 2021 Yarning Circles Project. Providing opportunities for our Ngarrindjeri community to explore country, to gather, to yarn and participate in cultural activities is very important for our present and future generations.

A video of the Ngarrindjeri Yarning Circles can be found at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tK4TdPIIFDo