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Basin  
Authority

# Review of the 2012 ‘A Yarn on the River’

Basin Condition Monitoring Program –  
Project 4.1

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### Acknowledgement of the Traditional Owners of the Murray–Darling Basin

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout the Murray–Darling Basin and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We offer our respects to the people, the cultures and the Elders past, present and emerging.

Aboriginal people should be aware that this publication may contain images, names or quotations of deceased persons.

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# Summary

*Project 4.1 Pathways to the Basin Plan Review* of the Basin Condition Monitoring Program (BCMP) builds on the 2012 *A Yarn on the River*. It is a multi-year engagement process with First Nations groups within the Murray–Darling Basin, to facilitate First Nations voices informing the 2025 Basin Plan Evaluation and 2026 Basin Plan Review.<sup>1</sup>

*A Yarn on the River* was the 2012 First Nations engagement process on the draft Basin Plan, to facilitate understanding of and submissions on the draft Basin Plan. The yarning prompted a conversation about the person's relationship with the river systems, and their life experience of the rivers and surrounding environments in their own terms. These submissions are stored in the Aboriginal Submissions Database (ASD).

The Commonwealth-funded BCMP will estimate the impacts of water reform by building a knowledge base and adding evidence to support effective government decisions made as part of the 2026 Basin Plan Review.

The BCMP cultural theme projects are dedicated to increasing the engagement, involvement and attention given to First Nations people, issues and values when monitoring and reporting on the Murray–Darling Basin condition – consistent with observations from the [Independent assessment of social and economic conditions in the Murray–Darling Basin](#) (Sefton et al 2020).

One of the first tasks for Project 4.1 is to review the ASD to see what was said, what has changed, and what needs to be put back on the table for the Basin Plan Review. A review of the access and use agreements for the ASD identified that these agreements had expired. Given the time required to renegotiate, the MDBA and Murray Lower Darling River Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN) agreed for this report to instead identify and collate content from documents where the authors had permission (under the then active agreements) to access the ASD and use the submissions.

Through this review of the 2012 *A Yarn on the River*, 7 reports have been identified which directly use and discuss information from the ASD, while another 6 reports or legislation refer to the ASD but don't contain any content drawn from the actual submissions. This review collates 'what was heard' as documented by the seven reports. The statements are grouped into 12 common themes.

The next step will be to review and report on progress made on First Nations priorities, values, and issues raised during and since the 2012 draft Basin Plan consultation.

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<sup>1</sup> BCMP Project 4.1 is titled *A Yarn on the River 2* in the published [program plan](#). The Project title was changed due to subsequent feedback from MLDRIN and to clarify the intent of this project.

# Background

## A Yarn on the River

*A Yarn on the River* was the First Nations engagement process on the draft Basin Plan, with 32 Murray–Darling Basin communities visited between February to April 2012. Prior to in-community engagement, a booklet titled '[A yarn on the river: Getting Aboriginal voices into the Basin Plan](#)' (MDBA 2011) was sent out. It was created to help First Nations people to understand the draft Basin Plan by highlighting “the parts of the Basin Plan most relevant to Aboriginal people” and outlined the submissions process. The booklet also includes a short summary of the views expressed in a number of reports as well as Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) and MLDRIN workshops and gatherings.

During the in-community engagement, participants had the draft Basin Plan explained and the yarning began with the opening question “How is the river important to you?.” This question was to enable a conversation about the person’s relationship with the river systems and recall their life experience of the rivers and surrounding environments in their own terms (Goff 2012).

Their responses were recorded word for word. Submissions were also received from ‘corporate’ First Nations groups. In total, approximately 450 submissions were received from individuals and corporate bodies resulting in a collection of very diverse, unique statements from Aboriginal people living in the Basin from all walks of life. It includes:

- social histories
- cultural knowledge
- cultural Flows
- spiritual reflections
- observations of the environmental state of the Basin
- socioeconomic information
- governance and leadership reflections
- accounts of impacts by non-First Nations cultures (MDBA 2016a).

## Aboriginal Submissions Database

Due to the richness of the narratives, NBAN, MLDRIN and the MDBA agreed to hold them in a collection for further use. The collection, referred to as the Aboriginal Submissions Database (ASD), is in an NVivo program which allows users to organise and analyse non-numerical or unstructured data. However, before any reuse of the submissions the Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) issues needed to be understood and agreed.

In 2013 an engagement process called *Completing the Circuit* was undertaken to carry out a process of Free, Prior and Informed Consent or Refusal to reuse the submissions (MDBA 2016a). The agreed terms for reuse were:

- For the purposes of natural resource planning and management in the Murray–Darling Basin where such activity benefits Aboriginal peoples and their Country.
- To inform Cultural Flows research, planning, monitoring, and evaluation.

- To inform policy and policy-related activities that explicitly benefit Aboriginal peoples and their Country in the Murray–Darling Basin as agreed by Aboriginal peoples whose Countries are affected by such activities.
- To inform baseline and long-term monitoring and evaluation of natural resource management in the Basin and its impacts on Aboriginal social, cultural, and spiritual values and uses of water in the Murray–Darling Basin.

In 2016 the MDBA, MLDRIN and NBAN signed a Shared Management Agreement (SMA) for the ASD, with the purpose to protect the ASD so that its ongoing use and maintenance is manageable, and the cultural and intellectual property of the submission makers is respected (MDBA 2016a). The individual consent forms and SMA expired on 30 June 2018, meaning all future access to and uses of the individual submissions must be renegotiated with individual submissions makers or their authorised representatives, and access to the ASD must be renegotiated with the relevant parties. As such, although copies of the ASD are held by the MDBA, MLDRIN and NBAN they are not being accessed.

## Basin Condition Monitoring Program

The [Murray–Darling Communities Investment Package](#) provides Commonwealth funding for 11 actions, including the Basin Condition Monitoring Program, the object of which is to:

*...report on social, economic, and environmental conditions in the Basin - the drivers, and dynamics of change. It will estimate the impacts of water reform, and build a knowledge base to support policy decisions, increase stakeholder trust, and inform effective decision making by water agencies and other organisations. It will add evidence to support government decisions made as part of the legislated 2026 Basin Plan review (DAWE 2020).*

The MDBA has designed a [Basin Condition Monitoring Program](#) (BCMP) with extensive consultation with the community, through the [Regional Community Forums](#), and the Basin governments. The BCMP consists of a suite of 15 projects under five themes – Economic, Social, Environmental, Cultural and Hydrology. The data collected by the Program will support ongoing Basin Plan implementation and inform the Murray–Darling Basin Outlook, 2025 Basin Plan Evaluation and 2026 Basin Plan Review.

Projects in the Cultural theme are dedicated to increasing the engagement, involvement and attention given to First Nations people, issues and values when monitoring and reporting on the Murray–Darling Basin condition. This is consistent with the Sefton Report observation that

*... data and information on the social and economic conditions of First Nations communities are often non-existent or incomplete, with many community members being missed in major surveys (including the census) (Sefton et al 2020).*

The initial design of these cultural projects has been in collaboration with First Nations groups, including representatives from MLDRIN and NBAN, the Indigenous Authority member, and the Basin Community Committee Indigenous sub-group.

## Project 4.1 Pathways to the Basin Plan Review

The Basin Condition Monitoring Program Project 4.1 builds on the 2012 *A Yarn on the River*. It is a multi-year engagement a listening process with all First Nations groups within the Basin to generate information for the 2025 Basin Plan Evaluation and suggest changes for the 2026 Basin Plan Review.

The first set of tasks for this project are to:

1. Review and, potentially, re-establish intellectual property agreements (i.e. access and use) for the First Nations 2012 draft Basin Plan submissions, as they were collected and agreed to be reused for very specific purposes.
2. Review the ASD to see what was said, what has changed, and what needs to be put back on the table for the Basin Plan Review.<sup>2</sup>

## Review of the 2012 *A Yarn on the River*

A review of the consent forms and SMA, along with legal advice, revealed that access to and use of individual submissions and the ASD was no longer permitted. Given the time required to renegotiate with individuals or their representatives, and other relevant parties, an interim approach was proposed to and accepted by MLDRIN in September 2022 to instead review and collate contents from reports where the authors were able to access the ASD under the active agreements.

In the meantime, the MDBA is committed to continue working with MLDRIN to identify submission owners from the 2012 *Yarn on the River* and ensure individuals or their families have a copy of the submission. Renegotiating the consent forms to access and reuse the 2012 submissions is under consideration by the MDBA.

## Documents referencing the ASD

### Reference and discuss ASD content

There are 7 reports which have directly used and discussed information from the ASD – 5 are available publicly and 2 the classification is unknown (held by MDBA).

1. Goff, SG (2012), [Yarns Woven: a socio-economic perspective of the draft Basin Plan Aboriginal submissions](#), Report 1. The river is our blood – more precious than gold: Aboriginal socio-economic issues relating to the management of water in the Murray–Darling Basin, CultureShift Pty Ltd. Commissioned by The Murray–Darling Basin Authority.
2. MDBA (2012), [Proposed Basin Plan consultation report](#), A report prepared under s. 43(11) of the *Water Act 2007* (Cwlth), Murray–Darling Basin Authority.
3. MDBA (2016b), [Our water, our life: An Aboriginal study in the Northern Basin](#), Murray–Darling Basin Authority.

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<sup>2</sup> As per the [Basin Condition Monitoring Program Plan](#).

4. MDBA (2015a), [Aboriginal Waterways Assessment program](#), Murray–Darling Basin Authority.
5. Fernando, J (unpublished, 2017), *Aboriginal peoples' use and occupancy of the northern Murray–Darling Basin waterways*, prepared for the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN).
6. Goff, S (unpublished, 2013), *Yarns Woven Report (2a): Counting the Threads. A companion reader for the Caring for Country Database (Draft 1)*. Prepared for the Murray–Darling Basin Authority by CultureShift Pty Ltd.
7. MDBA (2016d), [Murray–Darling Basin Authority Submission to the Select Committee on the Murray–Darling Basin Plan](#), Murray–Darling Basin Authority.

The reports take a mainstream approach to categorisation of topics, including:

- Social and economic issues – employment, income, housing, education, physical health, social health, emotional health, and cultural health.
- Socio-economic and cultural circumstances of First Nation people by Nation and/or Basin Region.
- Indigenous values and uses of water by specific locations (e.g. specific river reaches, Basin assets, Basin Regions) and by Nation.
- Condition, and changes in condition, of water-dependent ecosystems by location (e.g. specific river reaches, Basin assets, Basin Regions) and the impact of these changes on Indigenous health and wellbeing.
- How and why do First Nation people use the land.

The reports which provide the most comprehensive insight of topics raised in the 2012 submissions are: *Yarns Woven* (Goff 2012); *Our water, our life* (MDBA 2016b); and *Aboriginal peoples' use and occupancy of the northern Murray–Darling Basin waterways* (Fernando 2017). Goff (2012) and MDBA (2016b) discuss the submissions through a mainstream non-First Nations social and economic lens, while Fernando (2017) focusses on submissions within the northern Basin.

## 1. Yarns woven: A socio-economic perspective of the draft Basin Plan Aboriginal submissions

*This report identifies socio-economic issues in the submissions received by the MDBA from individuals and organisations that identify with Aboriginal cultures and that are located in the Murray Darling Basin. Its purpose is to satisfy the MDBA's reporting requirements, and to give Aboriginal and non-indigenous water managers and decision-makers a much-needed understanding of the relationship that River People hold with the Basin's water systems in socio-economic terms (Goff 2012).*

A cross-cultural conceptual framework was developed and applied to the original information/data to identify social and economic issues. These issues were grouped into 8 generic themes – employment, income, housing, education, physical health, social health, emotional health, and cultural health. The issues were further grouped into three scenarios – current (2012), future worsening (negative) and future rehabilitating (positive) states. The report contains many direct quotes from the submissions (only submission numbers are referenced, not names).



## 2. Proposed Basin Plan Consultation Report

*This report includes a summary of issues raised in submissions, MDBA response to those issues, and any changes made to the proposed Basin Plan...It covers issues relating to proposed Basin Plan chapters and schedules, issues relating to broader proposed Basin Plan content, and issues relating to broader water reform (MDBA 2012).*

This report covers **all** submissions (nearly 12,000) received in the 20-week consultation period on the proposed Basin Plan. Content relating to First Nations values, uses and other matters has been included in this literature review of the ASD.

## 3. Our water, our life: An Aboriginal study of the northern Basin

*As part of the Northern Basin Review, an inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural partnership between the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) was formed to manage a new study. The goal was to find out about the importance of environmental water to Aboriginal Nations in the north of the Basin. The research produced a culturally competent survey instrument, as well as a comprehensive and valid research result (MDBA 2016b).*

A new ‘survey tool’ was developed and validated using the ASD, information derived from a literature review and participant review of the survey. The project produced a set of culturally sensitive indicators for investigating the importance of water, to be used in future social and economic surveys of First Nations people in the northern Basin.

## 4. Aboriginal Waterways Assessment Program

*The Aboriginal Waterways Assessment (AWA) project tested and adapted a Ma-ori-originated water assessment tool to suit Traditional Owners’ needs and preferences in the Murray–Darling Basin...The purpose of the project was to develop a tool that consistently measures and prioritises river and wetland health so that Traditional Owners can more effectively participate in water planning and management in the Basin (MDBA 2015a).*

Development of the tool was supported by a literature review which included the ASD, although there is minimal reference to it within the report.

## 5. Aboriginal peoples use and occupancy of the northern Murray–Darling Basin waterways

The report analyses the ASD to provide limited additional qualitative data on traditional and modern-day occupation and use of land and waterways for NBANs Use and Occupancy Mapping project. Two questions were developed to direct the research:

- How do Aboriginal people use the land?

- Why do Aboriginal people use the land?

The document includes a few direct quotes from the ASD and summarises references to hunting and fishing, medicine plants, changes in water quality, tourism (ecotourism), Aboriginal assets and economic involvement, and connection to country.

## 6. Yarns Woven Report (2a): Counting the threads

Prepared for the Murray–Darling Basin Authority by CultureShift. The report describes how you use the ASD (referred to as the Caring for Country Database) through NVivo, including indicative searches which gives some detail on social and economic circumstances by Nation and by Basin region. It also contains a table showing the different ways the submissions were tagged – including how many individual submissions reference those topics, and how many times that topic was mentioned.

## 7. Select Committee on the Murray–Darling Basin Plan

To better understand the nature and extent of First Nation peoples' interest in environmental watering and long held views about irrigation, a review of the ASD and a 2016 socio-economic survey (see Document 9 (MDBA 2016c) below) of water interests were undertaken.

## Reference the ASD but don't contain content from the submissions

Several reports reference the ASD but don't include any content or discussion of the actual submissions.

8. MDBA (2016a), The Aboriginal Submissions Database: Companion Reader for Recognised Users, Murray–Darling Basin Authority.
9. MDBA (2016c), [A survey of Aboriginal water interests in the Murray–Darling Basin – A summary report](#), Murray–Darling Basin Authority.
10. NSW Floodplain management plans
11. Productivity Commission (PC) (2017), [National Water Reform Transcript of Proceedings at Canberra on Monday 16 October](#), Productivity Commission.
12. Goff, S. (2020), [Visionary evaluation: Approaching Aboriginal ontological equity in water management evaluation](#), Evaluation and Program Planning, Volume 79, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2019.101776>
13. Water Resource Plan guidance

## 8. Aboriginal submissions database: A companion reader for recognised users

This report was prepared by the MDBA in 2016 and is “a guide for recognised users of the ASD to enable culturally and intellectually respectful access and use of the ASD for the benefit of Aboriginal peoples in the Murray–Darling Basin”. The companion reader covers:

- the Shared Management Agreement (SMA)
- the history of the Aboriginal Submissions Database (ASD)
- accessing and navigating the ASD
- maintaining the terms of the SMA
- maintaining the Register of Recognised Users

The report contains very little information on the contents of the ASD however it does discuss intellectual and cultural property issues and access. It includes copies of the shared management agreement, copyright acknowledgment & disclaimer, and consent or refusal to reuse draft Basin Plan submissions forms and supporting information sheet from the Completing the Circuit project.

## 9. A survey of Aboriginal water interests

This report summarises the results of a socio-economic survey of Aboriginal water-related interests in the Murray–Darling Basin completed by 280 individuals who made submissions through the Yarn on the River process. The survey was conducted in 2012 and 2013, exploring three areas of inquiry:

- demographic characteristics of the First Nations people that were part of the consultation for the proposed Basin Plan
- participant views about their socio-economic conditions at that time
- participant knowledge of water management in the Basin.

## 10. NSW Floodplain management plans

NSW Floodplain management plans developed under the *Water Management Act 2000 (NSW)* must identify Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural assets (including cultural values) which are dependent on flooding or are vulnerable to the effects of erosion (NSW DPIE 2020a).<sup>3</sup> Cultural values are identified through a variety of means – consultation, reviewing previous studies, context-setting, and reviewing databases including the ASD. The floodplain management plans do not specify the cultural values – rather, the cultural values are used to develop cultural criteria which determine the nature and location of floodplain management zones (NSW DPIE 2020b).

## 11. Productivity Commission National Water Reform transcript of proceedings at Canberra

Makes general reference to the existence of the ASD.

## 12. Visionary evaluation: Approaching Aboriginal ontological equity in water management evaluation

Makes general reference to the ASD in a paper which presents the practices for the 2017 Traditional Owner evaluation of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan implementation.

## 13. Water Resource Plan guidance

The Basin Plan Chapter 10 Part 14 sets out the requirements in relation to Indigenous values and uses that a Water Resource Plan (WRP) must comply with to be accredited or adopted. Under s 10.52 of the Basin Plan, a WRP must:

1. Identify the objectives and outcomes desired by Aboriginal people that relate to the management and used of water resources in a WRP area

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<sup>3</sup> Cultural assets include non-material cultural heritage such as Aboriginal cultural practices connected with flooding.

2. Obtain information about desired Aboriginal objectives and outcomes through appropriate consultation with relevant Aboriginal organisations
3. Provide a fair-minded representation of information and knowledge gained through the consultation process (MDBA 2017).

The Water Resource Plans Part 14 guidelines (MDBA 2017) recommend that:

*To demonstrate how regard was had to these Aboriginal values and uses in identifying the objectives and outcomes for section 10.52(1), systematic measures of values and uses such as ... Aboriginal Submissions Database information may be used in conjunction with the consultation process.*

In addition, the MDBA may compare the consideration of Aboriginal values and uses in WRPs with the information contained in the Aboriginal submissions database, to provide confidence that Basin States have undertaken engagement Traditional Owners consistent with the MDBA Position Statement (MDBA 2015b).

## What was heard?

*... the ASD shows that there are three core values identified in the narratives: balance, cultural strengths, and respect for Aboriginal peoples ...*

*Seventy-two per cent of ... submissions discuss the problems of non-Aboriginal interventions into the Basin's natural systems and their environmental, social, spiritual, cultural, and economic consequences. Participants discuss water trading, water infrastructure, tourism and recreation, the Basin Plan, national parks, mining, land clearing, mining, irrigation, environmentalism, colonisation, buybacks, and agriculture – principally cotton. For some, the Plan's intention of retaining or returning water to the environment provokes a hope to restore natural flows; for others, the regulated rivers will never see their natural flows again, but a better balance to serve biodiversity, culture, water quality and social amenities in particular, is hoped for (MDBA 2016b).*

Following is a collation of 'what was heard' through *A Yarn on River*, as detailed in the seven documents which reference and discuss the ASD content. The collation also includes some values and interests from reports, workshops, and gatherings in the decade prior to the Basin Plan (MDBA 2011), although these are minimal and were echoed in the 2012 submission on the draft Basin Plan. The statements are grouped by common themes, however it is recognised that there are strong linkages between many. Consequently, some statements relate to a number of themes but have been categorised based on what is interpreted as the main point. In no order of priority, the themes are:

1. legislation
2. sovereignty, ownership, self-determination
3. engagement and representation
4. water market
5. water management
6. cultural flows

7. natural resource management
8. water quality
9. river access
10. traditional practices and learning – knowledge, education, food / medicinal sources
11. wellbeing – connection, social and emotional
12. economic.

## 1. Legislation

- a. The Basin Plan needs to be consistent and comply with international conventions such as the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) (Goff 2012).
- b. There is a lack of management objectives and outcomes regarding the protection of First Nations people uses and values in the Basin, including in relation to implementation and transitional arrangements (MDBA 2012).
- c. Concern that the draft Basin Plan contained no specific water resource plan objectives or outcomes for Aboriginal values and uses (MDBA 2012).
- d. The Basin Plan needs to include a requirement that water resource plans include a reference to federal and state heritage legislation in water resource plans to ensure protection of Aboriginal heritage sites (MDBA 2012).
- e. Cultural flows need to be secured in legislation, i.e. better and more strongly explained and expressed in all chapters of the Basin Plan and amendment of the *Water Act 2007 (Cth)* (Goff 2012; MDBA 2012).
- f. First Nations approaches to Caring for Country need to be recognised and worked with in an equitable and integrated manner in the Basin Plan (Goff 2012).
- g. With regard to means of protecting Aboriginal uses of waterways, references to Aboriginal lore are made throughout the ASD, including teaching. Heritage protection, cultural licenses, water licenses and controls such as indigenous habitat protection are identified (Fernando 2017).

## 2. Sovereignty, ownership, self-determination

- a. Need to recognise the customary sovereign rights of First Nations peoples (MDBA 2011, 2012). This recognition would include sovereignty, dominion, and ultimate title over water within the Murray–Darling Basin. Full First Nations management of all environmental water was proposed (MDBA 2012).
- b. First Nations peoples have an irrefutable relationship with their Country and never ceded ownership of Country, with evidence of ownership under customary law of unique Country, landscapes, and waterscapes, through Ancestors and Descendent Clans and despite ongoing dispossession (MDBA 2015a, 2016b).
- c. Possible existence of native title rights to water is not accounted for in the draft Basin Plan (MDBA 2012).
- d. Interest in First Nations land assets (such as recognised ownership of water and country) being given a monetary value, affording licensing and royalties (Fernando 2017).
- e. Some hope to move away from crisis management and towards increasing levels of Aboriginal self-determination and power in matters of cultural significance (Goff 2012).

- f. Belief in Ceremony and the presence of Ancestral spirits, (who foresaw and are now guiding the course of the Murray–Darling Basin system to bring forward shared Caring for Country, and recognition of Speaking for Country), as a legitimate source of authority that the Traditional/Ancestral Owners enact (Goff 2012).

### 3. Engagement and representation

- a. The current MDBA approach to consultation with First Nation people is not sufficiently comprehensive and concern was expressed regarding the basis of consultation with Traditional Owners in the Basin through MLDRIN and NBAN (MDBA 2012).
- b. Insufficient First Nations representation on MDBA water management committees and a First Nations role in all decisions related to water management was requested (MDBA 2012).
- c. The mainstream needing to be educated about how to listen to, respect and participate with First Nations people and their ways of knowing and living – held in many submissions as being crucial to governance, and to sustaining a viable socio-ecological system (Goff 2012).<sup>4</sup>
- d. Seek further recognition and resourcing for the two First Nations representative organisations in the Basin – MLDRIN and NBAN, who [at the time] comprise nearly all the Basin Nations (MDBA 2011).

### 4. Water market

- a. First Nations people want participation and parity in the water market – opportunities to participate in the water economy and water management have been limited (Goff 2012; MDBA 2016d). This would be achieved by allocation of First Nations water and the establishment of a First Nations water holder to manage this water (MDBA 2012).
- b. First Nations owning and managing a percentage of water as cultural flows will bring additional water and socioeconomic benefits to local communities adding to the notion of practical reconciliation (MDBA 2016b).
- c. Participation in farming and owning water through licensing was seen as increasing the possibility of having a voice at the decision-making level for land use and the allocation of water licenses (Fernando 2017).
- d. Trading of water entitlements with regard to NSW cultural water licences was discriminatory because the NSW cultural water licences were non-tradable whereas other classes of licences could generally be traded or transferred (MDBA 2012).

### 5. Water management

- a. ‘Please give water back to Country’ is a recurring message along with repeated voices of alarm regarding the loss of natural flows and the impacts of over extraction. More than 20% of the submissions in the ASD discuss the issue of flows (MDBA 2016b).
- b. A viable balance between environmental, social and economic needs in the context of climate change is necessary – current management regimes were not seen to be delivering to the expense of both the environment and First Nations people (culture and wellbeing) throughout

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<sup>4</sup> Socio-ecological system means the cultural, spiritual, economic and social connection with landscape that First Nations people hold central to their identity and to their understanding of a healthy life (Goff 2012).

- the Basin (MDBA 2016b). In particular, this was often attributed to over-allocation of water licences, floodplain harvesting, mismanagement and waste such as over extraction by the irrigation industry, and water management technologies such as pumping (Goff 2013; MDBA 2012, 2016d).
- c. The current balance of water for the environment and water for irrigation is bad for Country, although acknowledged by some that it is food for the broader economy. More water for the environment and less for irrigation would be good for Country (providing First Nations environmental, cultural, social and economic benefits), and some thought this would be good for the economy too (MDBA 2016c, 2016d).
  - d. The quality and flow of water that reaches the mouth of the Basin system is unable to keep waterways alive, and large quantities of water are going to agricultural production. The Coorong is dying and introduced water infrastructure to improve the quality of the water is not trusted (Goff 2013).
  - e. Clarification sought on the intent to restore environments subject to past and ongoing destruction, such as degradation of wetlands and infrastructure interfering with natural flows (MDBA 2012).
  - f. For some, the Basin Plan's intention of retaining or returning water to the environment provokes a hope to restore natural flows (resolving problems such as siltation); for others, a better balance to serve biodiversity, culture, water quality and social amenities in particular, is hoped for (Goff 2013; MDBA 2016b).
  - g. The loss of landscape such as the loss of creeks, springs, waterholes, and beaches as a result of the regulated water system (Goff 2012).
  - h. Storing water in natural reserves such as lagoons is a way of managing drought and supporting biodiversity through difficult times (Fernando 2017).
  - i. Inter-jurisdictional and State/Commonwealth problems with water management continue to make water quality and quantity issues unresolved. There is strong cultural knowledge to reduce these problems and environmental flows are seen to also produce strong ecological results (Goff 2013).

## 6. Cultural flows

- a. Specific cultural-flows entitlement/allocation to be managed by First Nations people (MDBA 2012).
- b. Cultural water is used for restoring natural ecosystems, cultural, spiritual, and human health outcomes (Goff 2013). Cultural flows are a means for healing and building a healthy future – restoring water quality, water quantity and species rehabilitation, which in turn establish the desired balances between traditional and contemporary First Nations people's life in the Basin (Goff 2012).
- c. Cultural flows need to be aligned with First Nations values for natural resource governance, management, implementation, and outcomes (Goff 2012). They need to provide enough water for First Nations people to conduct their ceremonial business when its seasonally appropriate (MDBA 2011).
- d. Assurance is needed that cultural flows are seen as the way in which Caring for Country is recognised and shared in effective governance partnerships with the mainstream, such as an agreement with all water holders that cultural flows can and should produce environmental,



economic and social benefits for First Nations communities in the Basin in order to secure different aspects of cultural health (Goff 2012).

- e. Understanding how environmental and cultural flows work together is unknown, however where they are delivered needs to be directed, including places of cultural significance (Goff 2013).
- f. Cultural flows are not seen to be for economic gain – rather to fund economic activities for the benefit of the environment, social health of First Nations people (including employment opportunities), and the broader non-indigenous population (Goff 2012).

## 7. Natural resource management

- a. Repeatedly throughout the Aboriginal Submissions Database the statement is made that Aboriginal knowledge is distinctive from non-Aboriginal knowledge, by being holistic and intergenerational, and that science cannot separate water from land, or land from people if it is to have value to the future wellbeing of communities (MDBA 2016b).
- b. Incorporate First Nations science, values, worldviews, and approaches to Caring for Country in the management and implementation of natural resource management strategies and integrate water with land management (Goff 2012).
- c. Combining cultural knowledge, traditional values, and intellectual property about a preferred way of using water-dependent resources ensures Traditional Owners are included in decisions with authorities regarding cultural flows and managing natural resources (Goff 2013; MDBA 2016b).
- d. Participation in natural resource management opportunities contributes to keeping water quality and quantity heading towards being drinkable for future generations (Goff 2013).
- e. While there are increased opportunities for First Nations people to participate and be included in natural resource management governance and deliveries, they are still finding it hard to be heard and struggle with the capacity to participate with so many competing pressures (Goff 2012). First Nations people want meaningful, active involvement in natural resource management and the operation of the rivers.
- f. Use of country that could be understood to be in line with Caring for Country made up the bulk of thinking about future commercial uses of land. Ideas included:
  - establishing and maintaining natural reserves
  - providing labor for feral animal management and eradication programs (e.g. water lettuce, carp)
  - the use of feral plant and animal material for fertiliser production
  - developing and maintaining wildlife corridors
  - sand mining to reduce siltation of rivers
  - riparian zone rehabilitation and management
  - removing rubbish from waterways to improve public safety for their use (Fernando 2017).

## 8. Water quality

- a. Poor water flow and quality, such as black water events causing mass deaths of fish and yabbies, is restricting access to important food sources (Goff 2013; Fernando 2017). Flooding



causes problems with pollutants in the river and when water levels are low there is carp infestation, and catfish and cod are almost non-existent (Goff 2013).

- b. First Nations people are concerned about the decline in water quality, introduced species and the impact of chemicals and fertilisers on the health of the river (MDBA 2011).
- c. First Nations people desire to have a river system that is increasingly protected from pollution and affords the spiritual connection of clean drinking water and reignites a healthy, direct relationship (Goff 2012).

## 9. River access

- a. Restricted physical access to rivers and their systems, negatively impacts on physical and intangible properties, and creates its own experience of re-lived, inter-generational trauma for individuals (Goff 2012).
- b. Loss of / lack of / blocked regulated access to river frontage and wetlands is a major issue preventing First Nations people from food sources, fishing, hunting, burning, gathering wood, harvesting natural resources, and undertaking other cultural activities – to care for each other, Care for Country and sustain their health (Goff 2012, 2013; MDBA 2012; Fernando 2017).
- c. For some, traditional access to and use of waterways, knowledge of food sources and how to use waterways to travel across country is still in use (Goff 2013).
- d. There should be proper resourcing to allow men, women, Elders, and young people to have access to their important places (MDBA 2011).
- e. Generations still refer to histories of mission life and still teach how to live off the river by fishing for example (Goff 2013).
- f. Desire for relocating people back to being near a river system and rekindling the cultural and social strength of families in their homes through such relocations (Goff 2012).

## 10. Traditional practices and learning

- a. A healthy restored river system reignites or strengthens memory, story, language, cultural practices, health, and social life (past and present) (Goff 2012).
- b. The current damage that the regulated system does to sacred sites continues, disappearing a people's history, cultural experiences, and practices in the process; and the associated impacts on future generations (Goff 2012).
- c. Loss of the Basin River systems is seen as the end of Basin First Nations learning practices, which bind generations to each other and the river systems. Without access to sites, clean water and viable species of flora and fauna, there is neither the setting nor the purpose for Indigenous learning to continue. This loss results in a loss of First Nations sciences regarding natural resource management, which further drives the degradation of the river system and the First Nations peoples (Goff 2012).
- d. Love of river is still strong, between generations and includes some families teaching their children traditional practices on river sites (several comments about attempts to continue the traditions despite the difficulties) (Goff 2013).
- e. Families still teach traditional stories across generations on the river, and still teach about animal life. First Nations land ownership provide opportunities for Elders to gather, practice

crafts and tell stories, and sustain spiritual connection, medicine plants and healing (Goff 2013).

- f. There is significantly increased exposure to mainstream assumptions, ways of life and values when the river system (which preserves Indigenous ways of life) is lost (Goff 2012).

### 10.1. Knowledge

- a. The loss of knowledge about Caring for Country is seen to threaten the identity of a whole people (Goff 2012).
- b. Recognition of and respect for First Nations people's knowledge and ongoing cultural practices by the mainstream (Goff 2012; MDBA 2011).
- c. Cultural teaching is important – helping people to relate to each other with that shared sense of everyone belonging to the country (Fernando 2017).
- d. A continuous relationship with Country including degrees of knowledge and memory of how the Basin was before it was impacted by development, industry, regulation, and climate change (MDBA 2016b).
- e. A desire for Sovereign Nations to have their own learning centres, including a capacity for Aboriginal-owned research to drive the recognition and development of contemporary Aboriginal knowledge (Goff 2012).

### 10.2. Education

- a. The river provides education (Goff 2013).
- b. Desire to see ongoing education of the young, provided by parents, grandparents, brothers, and sisters in traditional and adapted ways. This continues where access to sites is possible, and where there is still a willingness by Elders, parents, and young people to provide learning to children (Goff 2012).
- c. Desire to participate in mainstream educational activities at school and tertiary levels which provide learning cultural practices from First Nations educators working off texts and incorporating site visits where possible. However, lack of access to sites can interrupt this, and losing traditional (oral) forms and relationships of education puts mainstream learning at odds with cultural practices (Goff 2012).
- d. Participation in mainstream education is balanced with a strong infrastructure to support Aboriginal learning practices and educational purposes to improve its value (Goff 2012).
- e. Involving young people in programs on Country is an important use of Country. These programs are related to cultural education, scientific education, recreation, skill development for employment and rehabilitation services (Fernando 2017).

### 10.3. Food / medicinal sources

- a. Witnessing the degradation of the Basin and related loss of traditional food sources and medicines, which also threatens traditional learning relationships and practices (Goff 2012).
- b. Fishing is the most discussed traditional use of rivers and waterholes and is important as a cultural practice and for food sources. Species discussed include: yellow belly (Golden perch *Macquaria ambigua*); cod (Murray cod *Maccullochella peelii*); silver fish (Silver perch *Bidyanus bidyanus*); blue bream; catfish (Freshwater catfish *Tandanus tandanus*); red fin (Redfin perch

- Perca fluviatilis*); forky fish/bony bream (Bony herring *Nematalosa erebi*); and carp (European carp *Cyprinus carpio*). Mussels and crawfish are also used (MDBA 2012; Fernando 2017).
- c. Hunting is another aspect of using country for traditional economic means, and the species reflect both indigenous and introduced: wild pig, emu, kangaroo, goanna, porcupine, wild or bush turkey, duck, rabbits and goats. Bird eggs including emu eggs are also collected (Fernando 2017).
  - d. Medicine plants are mentioned but without a lot of detail. Harvested plants include quondong, quinine, naipan, wild lemon, wild oranges, wild cherry, and snotty gobbie. There is mention of using bark of trees for making plates and canoes (Fernando 2017).
  - e. Fishing and farming practices that do not respect First Nations lore/law that requires limits to use, sharing what is taken, and taking care of country when uses are made (Fernando 2017). Concerns of continuing loss of traditional hunting, fishing, and harvesting practices (Goff 2012).
  - f. Reestablishment of customary food-gathering practices on a healthy river system, in tandem with an active daily life, and access to western life as determined by each person – noting that re-education of some First Nations people regarding their own history and use of principles such as ‘take no more than you need’, will be needed where they have lost contact with their own culture (Goff 2012).

## 11. Wellbeing

- a. The well-being of First Nations people has been eroded in line with environmental degradation while gaining nothing through the diversion of water for consumptive purposes (MDBA 2012).
- b. Joy of seeing a river system that is responding to restored natural flows and that is more resilient to climate change (Goff 2012).

### 11.1. Connection

- a. First Nations peoples cultural, social, environmental, spiritual, and economic connection to the lands and water of the Basin needs to be recognised (MDBA 2011).
- b. Many submissions discuss the practices of keeping the connections strong. First Nations families in particular, have a deep connection to the rivers. It increases people’s sense of self-worth and their connections to peers and Nations. Connection is maintained through:
  - family teaching, passing on of knowledge from generation to generation
  - teaching about Elders, knowing where they were born and buried on the rivers, knowing their pathways through life
  - Elders telling stories about Aboriginal lore including matters of safety, where there are sacred places not to be visited, and places on the river to tell creation stories such as what animal created the Nation’s area
  - cutting of reeds as the basis of a spiritual practice, allowing Elders to gather together, share stories and teach
  - wakes and other ceremonies performed on the riverbanks if the person had a strong connection to the rivers

- teaching the young people how and when to fish and crawbob, how to swim, and in doing so bonding with family and across the generations (Fernando 2017).
- c. Valuing the waterways for their connection to life and nature underpin the sacred relationship First Nations people hold with the waterways, which they see as their home. Water is precious to everyone, and this common human value is a spiritual value in itself. Because the rivers are created from the rain that nature provides for life, this is also sacred in itself. The appreciation of nature as a life force, and beautiful river landscapes includes experience of this vital life connection (Fernando 2017).
- d. The river is like a mother, family member, providing health like life blood (Goff 2013).
- e. The rivers provide a sense of peace and healing for individual people who return to them to sit quietly, listen to the birds or to fish and swim, reconnecting with Ancestors and history, as a way of addressing sadness (Goff 2012, 2013).
- f. Water is valued for drinking directly from the waterways when they are clean, seen as foundational to health, spiritual connection, and survival (“water is life”) (Goff 2012; Fernando 2017).
- g. The health of the river is seen as a reflection of the health of the people (Goff 2013). Spiritual wellbeing is directly connected to the river’s health. When the river is healthy First Nations people are spiritually happy, more content in the knowledge that the rivers are flowing, the fish are breeding and plentiful, and that the fish, birds, and land around the river are healthy (Fernando 2017).
- h. If the river is healthy, it gives First Nations people a stronger sense of belonging – that they are connected to the land (Fernando 2017).
- i. The entire First Nations community is connected to each other through the river system because they have that knowledge from generation to generation. People may come from different communities, but the river literally connects every community (Fernando 2017).
- j. The river systems can still serve as interconnecting highways bringing large groups of people together from different communities, affirming individual and shared happiness, and emotional strength (Goff 2012).

## 11.2. Social and emotional

- a. Loss of identity and resilience that a healthy river system affords, contributing to a loss of social and emotional health (Goff 2012).
- b. Collective grief, anger, despair and confusion arising from observing (in many instances, over decades) the degradation, regulation and mechanisation of the Basin and its many water-related features (Goff 2012).
- c. The integration of river health with social health where the daily health of a river system is mirrored in its people and the quality of their inter-relationships. When the river systems are poorly, this state of the environment is seen to generate crime, family violence, self-harm and despair; when the river systems are healthy, they are seen to create general happiness, social amenity and cultural, social and physical activity and health (Goff 2012)
- d. Past life on missions and forced relocations away from rivers into towns, and the preference to be located near the rivers in First Nations communities that are connected to Country, are raised in the submissions (Goff 2012).

- e. The inability to heal from colonisation in relationship with mainstream institutions, communities and individual people who are yet to fully realise their responsibilities in this matter (Goff 2012).
- f. Strengthening of desired ways of living and subsequent re-establishment of intergenerational responsibility (Goff 2012).
- g. The loss of sacred sites, scar trees and whole landscapes which carry history, personal and language-group identity (Goff 2012).
- h. Identification with rivers continues, however this has reduced as a consequence of urbanisation and assimilation policies. People still want to be near the river (Goff 2013).
- i. Loss of inter-generational teaching between fathers and children, less social time spent on rivers (Goff 2013).
- j. The ability of a people to act with shared values that distinguish and govern their cultural health is being threatened when the source of those values, the river system, is disappearing (Goff 2012).

## 12. Economic

- a. The centrality of money as a value system for mainstream culture remains a core problem to First Nations people whose primary asset, the river system, has not yet been given a monetary value that reflects their values (Goff 2012).
- b. Financial compensation for environmental losses – for some this point included compensation and/or royalties from water flowing through or over sovereign territory (Goff 2012).
- c. Changes to water allocations would impact negatively on First Nations communities in terms of job losses and other economic change. First Nations people would not leave areas due to water cuts but would suffer from demographic changes and social impacts (MDBA 2012).
- d. Without a healthy river system there would be a loss of communities and industries, loss of social and economic infrastructure to provide employment, and the inability to return to subsistence-level living in mission-type settlements with a healthy culture of traditional hunting, fish and harvesting (Goff 2012).
- e. The possibility that a fairer share of owning and benefitting from water business will also increase respect for Aboriginal people and strengthen their voices in how the Basin is managed (MDBA 2016b).
- f. The commercialisation of water holds the potential of affording economic autonomy and self-determination to First Nations, but transgresses some perspectives of cultural authenticity which see water as spiritual, and as a human and environmental right and which should never be given a commercial value (Goff 2012).
- g. Social and economic relationships have always and continue to be dependent on the rivers and their natural environments (Goff 2013).
- h. Camping, fishing, bush walking, bird watching, canoeing, artworks including sculpting and photography as elements of tourism, and owning and managing caravan parks near rivers made up aspects of this industry that interest First Nations people. Tourism depends on healthy waterways, as commentators clearly stated that when the waterways have low flows and unhealthy water people are not drawn to them for their rest and recreation. When the waterways are healthy, money comes into the communities, and local peoples' money stays in the communities (Fernando 2017).

- i. There is possibility that returning water to the environment will bring cultural strengths (such as rehabilitating totemic species), which in turn will drive socioeconomic developments for First Nations peoples – the example of farming river red gums is frequently referred to (MDBA 2016b).
- j. Having a greater presence in farming in the Basin was also of interest, including traditional stock farming, the production of food such as fruit, vegetables, and stock foods such as sorghum. Additionally, participation in carbon farming, irrigation and cotton farming were also discussed. Creating businesses from bush tucker and being employed in monitoring water harvesting were additional ideas about First Nations peoples' commercial uses of country associated with the waterways (Fernando 2017).
- k. Ongoing real economic value of hunting, fishing, and harvesting food from the Basin as an income supplement, as well as for physical, social, and cultural health and wellbeing (Goff 2012).

## Next steps

The next step will be to review and report on progress made on First Nations priorities, values, and issues raised during and since the 2012 draft Basin Plan consultation.

The MDBA is also in the draft stage of developing a First Nations engagement approach for the Basin Plan Review. This collation of 'what was heard' in 2012 about the draft Basin Plan, and the subsequent review on progress made since then, will help inform the Basin Plan Review engagement.

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