

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





Acknowledgement of the First Nations of the Murray–Darling Basin

The Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) acknowledges and offers respect to the Traditional Owners, and their Nations, of the Murray–Darling Basin, who have a deep cultural, social, environmental, spiritual and economic connection to their lands and waters.

The MDBA understands the need for recognition of Traditional Owner knowledge and cultural values in natural resource management associated with the Basin. The approach of Traditional Owners to caring for the natural landscape, including water, can be expressed in the words of Darren Perry (former Chair of the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations):

‘The environment that Aboriginal people know as Country has not been allowed to have a voice in contemporary Australia. Aboriginal First Nations have been listening to Country for many thousands of years and can speak for Country so that others can know what Country needs. Through the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations and the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations the voice of Country can be heard by all.’

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Accessing this report online

An online version of this report and further information about the Murray–Darling Basin are available at www.mdba.gov.au.

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Cover image: Regular Attendees of the Down the Track environmental program setting the small fyke nets with Dr Adam Kerezsy off Robinson Crusoe Island (Lake Cargelligo), March 2020. Image: Mal Carnegie, Lake Cowal Foundation and DPE–EES

Artwork and graphic elements; Lakkari Pitt (Lakkari Art) - Lakkari Pitt is a proud Gamilaroi Ularoi/Yuwaalaraay yinarr from Walgett, New South Wales. Lakkari’s art is a contemporary take on the knowledge that her Elders and significant people in her life have passed down throughout generations. Lakkari’s art explores the movement, essence and stories of Country.

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The following case studies provided by First Nations people and environmental water holders demonstrate a range of engagement undertaken with First Nations people and some of the benefits and outcomes achieved through involvement in the planning and delivery of water for the environment.

Importantly, several of these case studies have been written by First Nations people, providing an opportunity to share their stories.

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3. A vision for a healthier Barwon-Darling
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Introduction

This report is a collection of short stories that show the deep connection First Nations people and communities have to water. These stories (or case studies) provide examples of how First Nations people are working throughout the Murray-Darling Basin to achieve shared cultural and environmental benefits through the delivery of water for the environment. Collaboration efforts between First Nations people and State and Commonwealth agencies have led to many of the positive outcomes described in these stories as well as identifying areas needing improvement.

We acknowledge and thank everyone who worked on water for the environment projects and shared their stories, including First Nations people from across the Murray-Darling Basin, the Murray Lower Darling River Indigenous Nations, the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations and staff from government agencies.

We recognise that there is much to learn – especially from First Nations people who have shaped, managed and cared for land and waterways for millennia. Each watering provides us with understandings about what works and what doesn't. These learnings are part of ongoing efforts to improve water management to benefit our communities and environment.

The importance of healthy waterways

First Nations peoples' connection to water is an important part of their story, cultural knowledge and traditions. Through tradition, lore and custom, First Nations peoples have inherent rights, responsibilities, interests and expertise in managing land and water sustainably. Caring for Country and water is fundamentally linked to the maintenance of good health and wellbeing of people. The stories told in this report reflect how these intricate relationships are beginning to be incorporated into water for the environment management across the Murray-Darling Basin.

The stories focus on some of the most significant cultural and environmental outcomes from collaborations with First Nations peoples in the planning, delivery and monitoring of water for the environment, including:

- connection and reconnection to Country and Community
- continuation and connection to cultural practices
- identification, documentation and protection of important sites and their cultural uses and values
- use of both cultural science and western science to manage water
- fostering two-way learning between First Nations people and agency staff through mutual respect, connections and relationships
- intergenerational learning, and
- provision of learning, training and employment opportunities.

The twelve stories from 2020–21 outlined in this report are set against a challenging background of rolling disruptions due to Covid-19. Throughout 2020 and 2021, Covid-19 brought unique challenges to face-to-face collaboration and engagement activities across the Basin. Although imperfect, connection and relationships were maintained through virtual forums and virtual communication platforms. First Nations people and government agencies greatly look forward to meeting and working on Country again soon.



Leading up to 2020, dry conditions dominated much of the landscape. Communities, our rivers, wetlands, billabongs and our rural landscape were under immense pressure. Welcome rain in early 2020 saw an easing of conditions across much of the Basin, but it will take time to recover, especially from the extreme drought conditions across the northern Basin. Careful use of water for the environment during drought and when flows restart has an important role to play in helping to protect and recover the health of Country and communities. The stories presented here highlight what can be achieved by working well together to achieve a shared goal or vision for healthy and vibrant Country and Culture as well as highlighting those areas to improve. The stories are ordered from the northern Basin to the southern Basin to reflect the starting places of rivers and their journey of connection (see page 2).

What is water for the environment?

Though water for the environment can mean any water in a river or wetland that benefits the environment, when we talk about 'water for the environment' (or 'environmental water') we are referring to water that is set aside in storages such as reservoirs and dams which is managed for plants, animals and river health.

Many rivers have been modified as the Basin population has grown, and water has been provided to support towns, industry and food production. Instead of water flowing naturally through the landscape, water is now captured in dams and weirs, and then delivered via pipes and channels – as much as 50% of natural flows are removed from the river in some locations. These changes have interrupted many of the natural river and wetland processes needed by native plants and animals to survive, feed and breed. Water for the environment is water that is used to put back some of the missing or altered flows to improve the health of rivers, wetlands and floodplains.

How do environmental flows differ from cultural flows?

Environmental flows are water entitlements held by government agencies to improve river health. Healthy rivers benefit all river users and are vital to our economy as well as underpinning community and cultural health and wellbeing. Incorporating First Nations peoples' ecological knowledge and cultural values into water for the environment management will improve river

health which sustains Country and partly assists First Nations people to continue their connection and negotiate for their Country's water needs. It is recognised that ecological values may not always align with cultural values, although at times they may overlap or be complementary. It is therefore important for planners to 'test' the assumption that environmental flows can meet cultural objectives.

Cultural flows (or cultural water) are a key self-determination aspiration of First Nations people and are water entitlements legally and beneficially owned by First Nations people to improve the spiritual, cultural, environmental, social and economic conditions of those First Nations people. Establishment of cultural flows are currently out of scope for environmental water managers to directly influence, although environmental water managers embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards equity and a stronger voice for First Nations people.

Across all jurisdictions there are current examples of First Nations people influencing or participating in all stages of environmental water management, which would not have been the case ten or even five years ago. Areas of relative strength are First Nations involvement in annual environmental water planning and emerging areas of focus include increasing involvement in on-Country water delivery and monitoring. Environmental water managers recognise that First Nations' sovereignty has never been ceded, and that many of the current collaborations and partnerships have been established through government mechanisms that are not designed with First Nations in mind. Environmental water managers are still young in walking this journey together with First Nations peoples. There is much room to grow and much more remains to be done.



You can find out more about water for the environment and how it is managed here:
mdba.gov.au/issues-murray-darling-basin/water-for-environment
vewh.vic.gov.au/water-for-the-environment/what-is-water-for-the-environment
environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/water/water-for-the-environment
environment.sa.gov.au/topics/river-murray/improving-river-health/environmental-water

Young Veins for future thriving waterways

Most activities occurred on Kamilaroi Country

Sharing stories of fishing trips, learning about Aboriginal tool-making, visiting cultural artifacts, walking in wetlands and seeing waterbugs and fish in various parts of the northern Murray-Darling Basin were just some of the inspirational activities NSW high school students enjoyed in 2020-21.

Commonwealth Environmental Water Office (CEWO) Local Engagement Officers Jane Humphries and Jason Wilson combined with other stakeholders to visit schools, co-ordinate excursions to rivers and wetlands and build knowledge around First Nations connection to land and water.

Committing to the schools' program, Jane and Jason agreed that young people are the future managers and decision makers in caring for Australia's environment.

"An added bonus is that we can talk to students about the various career opportunities available such as rangers, environmental water managers, environmental monitoring and research, education and engagement work for natural resources management," Jane said.

At Pilliga School, Jane and Jason teamed up with Regional Engagement Officer Annabelle Guest from the Murray-Darling Basin Authority to talk with Pilliga and Gwabegar students about waterways and how they are important to different people for different reasons. Students shared their own experiences of connection to rivers, including tales of the Yellow Belly and Murray cod they have caught.

As a proud Gomeroi/Kamilaroi man, Jason showed tools and instruments made and used by First Nations people including fish-spears, traps and axes. The students also welcomed the opportunity to try out their boomerang throwing skills with Jason.

On another excursion, Jane and Jason took students and teachers from Collarenebri Central School students to the Barwon River and the Gwydir Wetlands systems. Joined by David Preston from New South Wales Department of Planning, Industries and Environment and community leaders, the group visited the incredible Collymungle Carved Trees and the Collymungle Lagoon where burial grounds and important ceremonial sites are located.

Staff and students heard stories of the historical and recent vandalism of these precious cultural artifacts and discussed the need to protect our cultural heritage. As they travelled across the landscape, students witnessed the transition from the dry woodlands on the higher floodplain country to the verdant wetlands on the floodplain. Impressed by the impact water can have on birdlife on the floodplain, students reflected on how water for the environment can benefit river plants and animals and help protect areas of cultural significance for the Gomeroi/Kamilaroi people.

Lightning Ridge Central School students identifying water critters, June 2021
Credit: CEWO

In September Jane and Jason continued the school program spending a day with students from Lightning Ridge Central School on Dharriwaa country at Narran Lakes.

"This was a great day where I could take the students along the Lakes track and point out the plants and animals important to our people. Clear Lake is absolutely stunning and the CEWO has significantly contributed to inflows there," Jason said.

"It's so rewarding to see students engaged in this – listening and asking questions. You really can see them soaking all the information in and we hope taking it home to tell their family members," he said.

Other schools involved included Walgett Community College, Fairfax Public School and Aboriginal students from the north west region of New South Wales who were selected to participate in the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) STEM Camp.

CEWO staff Jason Wilson and Catherine Atkinson speaking to students at Lightning Ridge Central School June 2021. Credit: CEWO



Lightning Ridge Central School students at Clear Lake in Narran Lakes Nature Reserve (NLNR) in September 2020
Credit: CEWO



Replenishing Dharriwaa

Yuwaalaraay Country

Outstanding environmental, cultural and social outcomes have all combined to raise the spirits of collaborative partners at the Ramsar site of Narran Lakes following water for the environment flows in 2020 and 2021.

Narran Lakes, which is known as Dharriwaa to the Yuwaalaraay/ Euahlayi people, has been an important meeting place to Aboriginal groups for thousands of years. The site is internationally recognised because of its cultural and ecological importance.

Jason Wilson, chair of Narran Lakes Nature Reserve Joint Management Committee, who is also a Local Engagement Officer for the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office (CEWO), said Narran Lakes inundated with water for the environment for the second year in a row replenishing critical nesting habitat that can support up 200,000 waterbirds in the expansive wetlands.

“The bird life is incredible when water inundates the Narran Lakes complex. There are birds that come from far away and the general local birds as well – it is a time of feasting when these beautiful birds come. Now we monitor, now we are learning and teaching our youth to harvest and now we feel a great sense of pride when we see these birds continuing to share our Dreaming Stories and meet at Narran Lakes as it was created for,” he said.

Interim Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder Hilton Taylor visited the Narran Lake Nature Reserve in late March 2021 as the floodwater arrived.

“These flows are critical to the recovery of the internationally significant Narran Lakes, following seven years of drought. Commonwealth water for the environment is starting to make a difference to restoring this precious ecosystem,” he said.

Tanya Morgan, who is a Youalaroi Traditional Owner from Narran Lakes Country, said the water that has come to Narran Lakes has been life giving.

“From being so dry and seeing the vegetation come back to life makes our soul sing, that’s why we feast, dance and have ceremony, we feel so connected to Dharriwaa Gooni-Ma, Mother earth Narran Lakes our Meeting Place,” she said.

During his CEWO engagement work Jason Wilson has observed that some vegetation is recovering well, while other areas are still showing signs of stress following seven years of drought.



Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder Hilton Taylor with CEWO Local Engagement Officer and Narran Lakes Joint Management Committee Chair, Jason Wilson, at Dharriwaa in March 2021 as floodwaters arrived
Credit: CEWO

The replenishing flows over the past two years have supported more than 47 waterbird species, including migratory species such as the white-winged black tern, the first sighting in northern inland New South Wales over the last decade. Threatened species including brolgas, black-necked stork, blue-billed duck and freckled duck have also been observed.

The University of New South Wales is collaborating with the CEWO and other Commonwealth and state government agencies to monitor breeding of ibis and other colonial-nesting waterbirds in the region. The CSIRO is also working with the CEWO to track waterbird movement in the northern Murray-Darling Basin, including when birds visit the Narran Lakes.

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority will continue to identify the Narran Lakes as a priority for environmental watering to help vegetation recover, increase the chance of waterbirds breeding and bring benefits for other animals around the lakes that are of cultural importance.



CEWO Local Engagement Officer Jason Wilson explaining the cultural significance of Dharriwaa to stakeholders.
Credit: CEWO



Black-necked Stork.
Credit: CEWO

A vision for a healthier Barwon-Darling

Northern Basin Nations

Participating Northern Basin Aboriginal Nation delegates: Euahlayi, Murrawarri, Ngemba, Ngiyampaa and Wayilwan.

First Nations’ input is a vital and valuable component of environmental water planning and envisioning a healthier Barwon-Darling. Building on the 2019-20 First Nations Environmental Water Guidance (FNEWG) project work, Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) approached NSW Department of Planning and environment: Energy, Environment and Science (DPE EES) and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office (CEWO) about hosting a two-day pilot workshop (the pilot).

The focus of the pilot was to develop First Nations water for the environment objectives and guidance to inform how Environmental water could be managed and protected in the Barwon-Darling for the 2021-2022 water year. Water for the environment is managed in the Barwon-Darling between Mungindi and Menindee.

During the workshop First Nations delegates further developed their priorities and objectives to guide water use in the Barwon-Darling.

These included connectivity, water quality, significant sites, iconic species and culturally important plants and trees. First Nations delegates also provided planning insights as to when and how water should be delivered to maximise healthy Country outcomes.

DPE EES and the CEWO are now working with NBAN First Nations delegates to characterise each of the identified sites. Site characterisation involves understanding how water can or can't be delivered to the site, factors include flow rates, duration, and timing. Following the site characterisation an on-Country workshop is being planned to develop possible watering plans. The common goal is to understand what can be done to improve the health of Country in the Barwon-Darling.

DPE EES and the CEWO are also looking to partner with other First Nations in decision making associated with water for the environment. Based on the success of the pilot and if First Nations feel it is appropriate there may be opportunities to adapt a similar style of workshop in other catchments.



Front – Raymond Thompson (Wayilwan delegate), Grace Gordon (Ngemba delegate), Rafe Pfitzner Milika (NBAN), Sonia Yeung (NBAN), Matt Miles (DPE EES) Michael Wrathall (CEWO)
Back – Josephine Wilson (DPE EES), Peter Harris (Ngiyampaa delegate), Barry Williams (Ngiyampaa delegate), Feli McHughes (Ngemba delegate), Jason Ford (NBAN), Michael Eckford (Euahlayi delegate), Debbie Love (DPE EES) (Left to right)
Credit: Jodie Sontag, reprinted with the permission of The Western Herald at Bourke





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

Down the Track

Lower Galari/Lachlan

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 (<https://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,



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.

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 Kerezsy 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 Kerezsy (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 Kerezsy 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 Cowal Foundation and DPE EES

Traditional Owners take the lead in healing wetland habitats

Taungurung

Hundreds of lagoons, backwaters and anabranches line the mid-Goulburn (Waring) River between Lake Eildon and Lake Nagambie. Sitting off the main river channel, these sites are important ecologically as they provide a safe home for a range of native plants and animals, and are also culturally significant to Taungurung people.

A joint project in 2021 between the Taungurung Land and Waters Council (TLaWC) and Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority (CMA), provided an exciting opportunity for Taungurung to partner with government and ecologists to develop a plan to improve the health of these sites. This considered the role of water for the environment, as well as a range of complementary works to enhance the sites and achieve both cultural and environmental outcomes.

Baan Ganalina (Guardians of Water), the Taungurung water knowledge group, have guided and taken a central role in the project from the very start.

With so many sites to choose from, the project focused on six locations. These were chosen following a detailed prioritisation process guided by the results of an Aboriginal Waterway Assessment, carried out by Baan Ganalina members in 2017. This enabled the group to return to some of these sites several years after their original assessment and see how they had changed. Importantly, the project also provided a unique opportunity for Taungurung to visit a new site for the first time – an off-channel lagoon system on private land.

Corrie Leatham, a Taungurung knowledge holder and member of Baan Ganalina, emphasized the importance of collaboration in finding the best outcomes for Country.



“McLarty's Lagoon is a pristine environment that has been carefully managed by its fourth generation farming family – a wonderful example of a landowner who obviously loves his country. Building sustainable relationships between government authorities, private landholders and TLaWC is a critical component of the work Baan Ganalina is involved with – a collective plan that reflects the aspirations of all the community and focuses on the environmental impacts and cultural significance of the Waring.”

**Taungurung Traditional Owner
Corrie Leatham, a member
of Baan Ganalina**

McLarty's Lagoon
Credit: Pam Beattie, GBCMA

Baan Ganalina members joined the landholder and staff from the TLaWC and Goulburn Broken CMA in the field, assessing the sites for their biocultural values, threats and current health. The research also included scientists from the Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research, who assessed the suitability of the area for future releases of threatened fish, that may then breed and re-colonise the habitats.

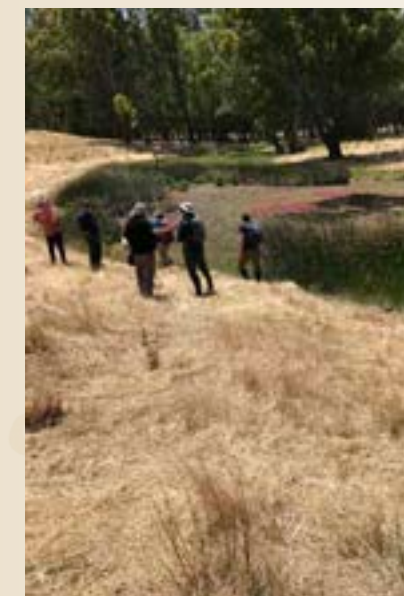
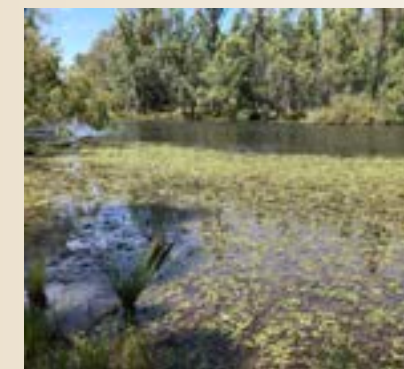
The field assessment allowed sharing of knowledge amongst participants and strengthened the collective understanding of each site. This information informed the development of site objectives focusing on culture, ecology and hydrology side by side. Working with other stakeholders in the project team, Taungurung guided the development of management actions and highlighted the works they intend to take the lead on in coming years.

Pam Beattie from Goulburn Broken CMA placed a high degree of importance on Taungurung jointly managing the project.

“This project is a great example of Traditional Owners taking a lead role, right from the beginning, in guiding the management of sites that are both environmentally and culturally important. By combining Taungurung’s knowledge and understanding with emerging ecological evidence, we now have a collective plan for where to focus our future management efforts”, she said.

“The Goulburn Broken CMA is looking forward to continue supporting Taungurung people to take a lead role in restoring the mid Goulburn River’s off-channel habitats”.

Images below; Taungurung Traditional Owners and scientists assess the private wetlands
Credit: Pam Beattie, GBCMA



Horseshoe Lagoon

Taungurung Traditional Owners

Taungurung Land and Water Council (TLaWC) is leading the way at Horseshoe Lagoon demonstrating how cultural values, environmental objectives and on-Country knowledge sharing are critical to long term water management, Healing Country and meaningful collaboration.

Culturally significant to Taungurung Traditional Owners, Horseshoe Lagoon near Seymour, Victoria continues to show promising response to environmental flow deliveries with birds, frogs and turtles returning to the site.

Taungurung Land and Water Council's Water Management Officer said it is not just about the ecological outcomes – Taungurung community is proud of what it has achieved so far.

“Our community has been involved since the beginning and pays close attention to what happens to the site. Healing Country is not merely ecological restoration of habitats, it is having the right people taking care of Country.”

Taungurung Land and Water Council has been working closely with Goulburn Broken CMA, Parks Victoria, community partners and the Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH) to bring water back to the lagoon.

“Ultimately, we would like to manage the site ourselves, this includes owning the water we deliver every year. That would be a big step for us, transforming environmental water into cultural water. Most of the natural resource management works undertaken are the result of constant coordination between TLaWC, Parks Victoria and Goulbourn Broken CMA. This work is the first step for Taungurung towards sole management for significant sites like this, reserves and parks.”

In 2017, TLaWC undertook an Aboriginal Waterway Assessment at the site which provided key information to the Environmental Water Management Plan in 2019.

Whether through on-Country visits or remote input under COVID-19 restrictions, TLaWC have been an integral part of the team in developing proposed watering activities at the lagoon. Taungurung have influenced the development of the seasonal watering proposal submitted to the VEW, collaborating with Goulburn Broken CMA to develop recommendations for water use at the site.

Taungurung Land and Water Council has identified and advised on cultural values and

uses and how they align with the environmental watering plan at the site. The Baan Ganalina (Guardians of Water) Taungurung water knowledge group has identified key objectives for the site through their cultural Natural Resource Management strategy, including: Healing Country and Healing Knowledge.

In 2019 Taungurung women held a Welcome to Country at the site, marking and celebrating the return of water through environmental flows. A follow up water delivery in 2020 helped to build on the environmental outcomes and heal Country.

Watering activities at Horseshoe Lagoon provide an opportunity to heal Knowledge through developing TLaWC capacity and confidence in water management. In 2021, TLaWC will be responsible for managing the pumping and delivery of the next environmental flow to the site.

“We work in collaboration and with the support of our partners. We have taken on more and more responsibilities with time and the support of our partners is essential. Goulburn Broken CMA, Parks Victoria and the VEW have shown true support for this purpose,” said TLaWC's Water Management Officer.

“This year we are delivering the water to this site, we want to include more wetlands in the future and continue Healing Country. It is great to see how we came from coordination to co-management; having our Natural Resource Management crews, Project Officers and Taungurung Rangers working all together to achieve bigger things.”





The Narrows

Yorta Yorta

Image 1 © Yorta Yorta Nation, Yorta Yorta Country supplied by Streamology Pty Ltd. Dhungala (the waters named the Murray) flows between the Moira Lake (NSW) on your left and the Barmah Lake (Vic) on your right, 02 February 2021, obtained from drone footage.

The Yorta Yorta Council of Elders (YYCOE) are elected by the Family Groups and sits within the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation (YYNAC) governance structure. The YYCOE instructed YYNAC at a Council of Elder meeting on 16 November 2019 under The Living Murray (TLM) Program to investigate and research the Barmah Choke and the erosion that has been occurring to the banks of Dhungala (the waters named the Murray).

The YYCOE were unsure what governments and media refer to as the 'Barmah Choke'. Initially YYNAC responded with what you call the 'Narrows' is called the Barmah Choke, and that it is a regulated system of water flow for environmental and commercial purposes. Yorta Yorta People never see the Narrows as a restricted part of Country.

The YYCOE were aware of some regulated flows; however, they were unsure where this water came from, what are the impacts to Yorta Yorta culture, and they had some knowledge of erosion as they have seen how the banks have changed in their lifetime. The YYCOE set a series of tasks to be undertaken with the following research question: **'What is the impact of flow regulation on Yorta Yorta knowledge, stories, people and sites including middens, mounds, scarred trees etc?'**

The YYCOE required YYNAC to obtain drone footage to capture videography of the Moira system. To Yorta Yorta People both the Moira Lake, Barmah Lake and Dhungala is one system called Moira.

Image 1 is drone footage capturing the Moira system as instructed by the YYCOE this includes videography of the banks of Dhungala on both the Victorian and New South Wales sides of the Narrows (see Image 2). A description of the problems from Picnic Point to the exit point of the Narrows (see Image 2) at Barmah Lake and Moira Lake will be presented to the YYCOE.

YYNAC engaged Streamology Pty Ltd (Streamology) to achieve this task of capturing Country and to provide a report of their findings. The YYCOE further sought YYNAC to record and predict potential loss of culture by erosion and water impacts, this was by walking, feeling, and seeing Country. Healthy soils are a major source of nutrients for plants, so it is important the soils can still absorb water and recharge vital areas of Country.

To achieve this task, YYNAC engaged Murrang Earth Sciences Pty Ltd (Murrang) who assisted with the collection of soil and water samples at key locations in the Narrows. Murrang provided a soil analysis report which found mass



Image 2. Map of the southern part of the Narrows from Picnic Point downstream to the exit point of The Narrows, 2021.

"Understanding Country is to live, walk, feel, taste and see Country".

Sonia Cooper, Yorta Yorta TLM Facilitator, 2021

failure events of Dhungala's banks as did the Streamology findings, including sliding, and slumping in large blocks.

The research found that surprisingly enough the soil was still able to absorb water and they were not hydrophobic. Toxicity findings from Murrang found that five heavy metals were present in the water, they were Arsenic, Chromium, Copper, Lead and Zinc, research is continuing in this space.

The original banks of the Dhungala continue to experience various forms of erosion including physical and chemical erosion. This is of major concern to the Yorta Yorta People because all types of erosion and physical impacts will accelerate the potential and moving energies held within water. These types of physical and chemical impacts have exposed Yorta Yorta ancestors in the Edwards River system initiating repatriation. As the water travels through Country pressure within the Dhungala will change depending on the area in which it flows, and this is evident on the banks. The YYCOE would like to understand the extent of the impacts recorded in maps. YYNAC inspected the state of Country and reported back to YYCOE on the conditions of the Narrows.

"A show of respect for other Nations downstream of us is to ensure that the water we send through is healthy water. It's important for us to be a part of the water system today, as we need to ensure that healthy water continues to flow in and through our Country to the next. We've been locked out of decision making for too long and now we have an opportunity to have a voice in what happens in the watering space and maintain caring for Country".

Aunty Greta Morgan, Council of Elders

YYCOE want to know how species are faring. Are they struggling? Are we losing plants? Is the water causing erosion? Is there enough water for our cultural plants and the environment? The questions did not end there and what information they are seeking.

The state of the Yorta Yorta cultural environment is important to the Yorta Yorta People from a holistic view including the Narrows. The Narrows like many cultural sites within Yorta Yorta Country hold cultural significance of creation knowledge, spiritual connections, and cultural meanings. The purpose of the videography was to capture the Narrows for the first time in real time and tell the YYCOE what's happening.

Margooya Lagoon Cultural Flows and test flow event

Tati Tati

In 2020–21 Tati Tati First Nations, in partnership with the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN) and Tati Tati Kaiejin, developed the first-ever Cultural Flows Management Plan (CFMP) for Margooya Lagoon in Victoria.

The plan outlines Tati Tati values, foundational needs, short and long-term outcomes, and nation aspirations for mob and Country. It also details a pathway for First Nations’ cultural water uses and management for the Lagoon, with recommendations and next steps for Tati Tati water rights and allocations. For Tati Tati, Cultural Flows is a lifelong concept, and as such, the CFMP for Margooya Lagoon is an ongoing and live document that will grow and adapt as the people and Country it concerns grow and change.

Through the continuation and attainment of Cultural Flows, Tati Tati aspire to achieve sovereign control of water management to uphold responsibilities of caring for Country and culture.

“We need to be responsible for the entire process (of watering events). From site selection and water management all the way through to the project monitoring.

This way, we can care for Country using traditional practices so that our cultural and ecological knowledge is not lost.”

Tati Tati Elder. Cultural Flows workshop, Robinvale 2021

Cultural Flows are water entitlements that are legally and beneficially owned by Indigenous Nations of a sufficient and adequate quantity and quality to improve the spiritual, cultural, environmental, social and economic conditions of those Indigenous Nations. – Echuca Declaration, MLDRIN



Test Flow

In November 2020, a 15ML environmental water allocation was committed and delivered on Tati Tati Country to a floodplain creek at the Murray River side of the Margooya Lagoon wetland. The creek was previously one of three main outlets that connected to and fed the Lagoon; however, this no longer occurs due to strict river regulations of recent decades. The watering event was a way to simulate the original inundation of the creek and help revive the biodiversity of the surrounding area.

A diesel pump was installed to pump water over ten days at a rate of 1.5ML per day over the raised riverbanks, nearby dirt road, and into what is now the beginning of the creek bed. A monitoring and evaluation report (MER), created by the Tati Tati Aboriginal Water Officers, was used over five weeks to survey and record the outcomes of the watering event. Now referred



to as the “test flow”, key indicators were included in the MER determined by Tati Tati based on nation values, goals, and outcomes to monitor changes and conditions of the event accurately.

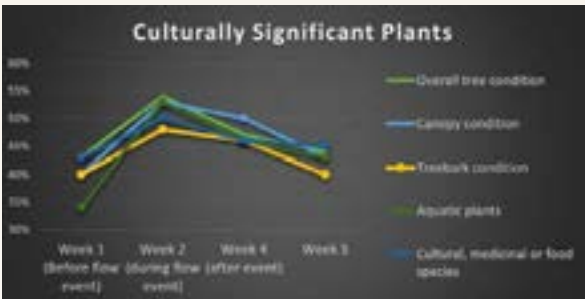
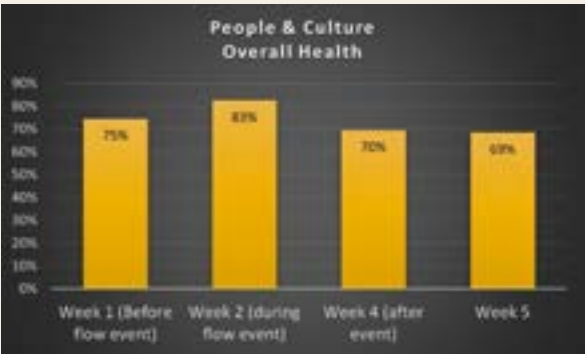
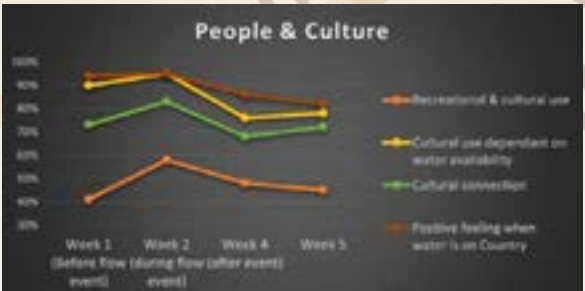
The results and learnings from the Test Flow have helped Tati Tati progress knowledge of current water management systems and highlight significant barriers that need to be addressed.

Results

Results from the MER demonstrate increases in the overall health and abundance of culturally significant plants and animals, reflecting what was evident on the ground of the increased abundance of birds, insects, and amphibians during the 10 day period that the water was flowing.

However, of great concern was the overall decrease in values of people and culture. Three of the four themes assessed in this section of the MER (recreational and cultural use; cultural uses dependant on water availability; and cultural connection) all saw lower average scores when monitoring continued three weeks after the flow event. The initial results these are compared against were when minimal or no flows were at that part of the Country.

The results were symbolic of the sense of powerlessness Tati Tati expressed throughout the water delivery event; from being unaware during the planning and proposal stages; to having no say in the location chosen for the event. Tati Tati also attributes the resulting black water event to the 15ML committed not being enough for the site, and no consideration, time, or planning provided for creek clearing or cultural burns to take place prior to the water delivery.



The Concerning issue

First Nations excluded from decision-making processes

The 2020 Test Flow came about after discussions between Tati Tati and a Mallee CMA representative at Tati Tati’s March 2020 Cultural Flows workshop. Following these discussions, a proposal from the Mallee CMA was put forward to, and approved by, the Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH), with no knowledge or consultation with Tati Tati Traditional Owners.

While the project was still a positive way to promote cultural practices and improve environmental outcomes, there were critical aspects of the project that the Traditional Owners were not involved in. These include, and are not limited to, decisions surrounding:

- The volume of the water allocation
- The location of the water delivery event,
- How water was to be delivered (i.e., the use of the pump),
- And the reporting and promotion of the watering event prior to Traditional Owners being informed of it.

Tati Tati feel it is important to state here that they were only enquiring about the process of environmental watering and were not giving any organisation permission to act on their behalf.

In doing so, **Tati Tati were explicitly left out of the watering event’s proposal, planning, and approval stages**, an essential and underlying foundation of Cultural Flows.

Tati Tati’s relationship with the VEWH is building

“The quality of the water now in that creek is useless to Country, to the animals and plants, and to us.”

“This is doing things the wrong way.”

“If water can’t be delivered the natural way, the cultural way, is it worth doing it at all?”

Tati Tati members during test flow event, Margooya Lagoon 2020

with commitments from them to come to the table and support Nation goals of caring for waterways. However Tati Tati still feel there is room for growth for other government organisations efforts and commitments to be genuine and consistent throughout all steps of watering events and projects on Tati Tati Country – for the benefit to all.

For more information on Margooya Lagoon, Cultural Flows, or how Tati Tati are advocating for First Nations access and rights to water, visit:

www.margooyalagoon.org.au

and

www.kaiejin.org.au



“These are fundamental components of water delivery that must have Traditional Owner involvement.”

Tati Tati member during test flow event, Margooya Lagoon 2020



Environmental water managers across the Murray-Darling Basin acknowledge that there is still much more work to be done to improve environmental water planning and management protocols to ensure they are more culturally informed given existing processes were not originally designed with First Nations involvement. The Victorian Environmental Water Holder and Mallee CMA reviewed and strengthened requirements around seeking and documenting consent during the environmental water planning process following feedback from Tati Tati representatives.

There are continuing opportunities for environmental water managers to partner with Traditional Owners to develop more culturally informed environmental watering practices, support Traditional Owners’ obligations in caring for Country, and provide opportunities to test ideas and processes that can assist Traditional Owners in determining what they might want or not want from cultural flows.



Reflections on water and Culture

Hattah Lakes Icon Site – Victoria

For northwest Victoria's Traditional Owner groups, the freshwater lakes and wetlands of the Hattah Lakes were focal points for trade and cultural exchanges.

The lakes would have provided an abundant and reliable source of food and water, and a central meeting place for Traditional Owners. The Hattah Lakes contains significant archaeological sites that hold cultural significance.

The local Aboriginal community still maintains strong connections to the land and its traditional resources such as native species used for food and medicine.

Nurturing the connection to culture

In spring 2019, as the rest of the Hattah lakes dried out, water for the environment was delivered to Lake Kramen and provided refuge for birds and fauna and wider environmental benefit.

Mallee CMA hosted a field trip with local Elders and Traditional Owners in April 2021, with the aim of assessing the cultural health of the different lakes within the system and build a shared understanding of their cultural views about the condition and importance of the lakes.

At the time of the visit, Lake Kramen was thriving, with surrounding understory vegetation

appearing healthy and an abundance of waterbirds. The initial reaction by the Traditional Owners and Elders to Lake Kramen, in a dry landscape, was sheer delight at the water, bird and animal life.

Archeologist Mark Grist gathered the group around a scarred tree and explained how scarred trees occurred, their cultural significance and the meaning of other cultural artifacts present at the sites.

The group discussions allowed the Traditional Owners and Elders to also offer cultural knowledge in relation to scarred trees and other cultural artefacts and practices. A questionnaire to create discussion points and prompt reflection brought responses about the strong cultural experience of seeing the water and the overall benefits to the surrounding environment, bird and animal life.

The second day of the event involved a field trip to the dry Lakes Bitterang and Woterap.

The overall reaction to the two lakes was around the observations of how

arid the area was and the need for water to improve the environment, animal and bird life. Traditional Owners and Elders commented about the large number of young trees and also big gum trees at both of the lakes.



Hearing the Elders' voices

Elders offered their thoughts and reflections of the day and the surroundings:

Aunty Janine Wilson

"It's beautiful. Makes me feel good, healthy. Strong in culture!"

"Seeing bird life and animals – connection back to country."

"Keep water here, keep birds here, let generations see the water and land like it used to be."

"Good to see birds, kangaroo, emus. More native food sources to teach next generation traditional tucker."

"We're here to look over the area and check out the system to see how its holding up. Those departments that are in control of the water and what's happening with the water, we sit down with them, so it's adding in the Aboriginal Elders' voices into the discussion. It's getting our younger ones interested in these discussions while we are still here. It's part of who they are and their way into the future."

Aunty Rose Kirby

"When the lakes are full and the land is in flood, it's beautiful. To me it's a new growth of life, not only for the birds but also the trees. It's a spiritual calling to me to look after this land. I am glad someone is listening to us, at least that gives us a voice."

The Culture and Water video received very positive feedback from Traditional Owners, Community Elders and stakeholders.

Traditional Owners and Elders would like to see the younger generation and the wider community on Country to learn about environmental water events and also about Aboriginal culture. More regular field trips with Traditional Owners were seen as the best way to learn and witness firsthand how environmental watering benefits Country and culture.

Some activities Traditional Owners and Elders would like to see were Cultural burning and camping and cultural training "for all kids and stakeholders".

Traditional Owners and Elders enjoyed being on Country and having the opportunity to be heard on ways to improve the environment. They expressed the wish for regular opportunities like this and to have larger and wider community groups able to engage with the experience.



The watering in May 2021 was the first delivery of water since November 2017. It has provided aquatic habitat, refuge for birds and environmental benefit to the lakes. The next planned watering event is in Spring 2021. It is planned to invite Traditional Owners and Elders to view the Lakes now that they have water.

Environmental Watering Forum

First Nations of the Southern Connected Basin

On Latji Latji Country in April 2021, First Nations People from along the length of the Murray gathered in Mildura, to discuss ways to support cultural values alongside environmental outcomes in environmental water delivery.

The 2-day forum (the Forum) was organised with the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, The Living Murray's Indigenous Partnership Program, the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and state environmental water managers. It brought together over 40 Traditional Owners from 12 Nations, from many parts of the southern Murray-Darling Basin to share information about the health of Country and discuss preferred outcomes from the management of water for the environment.

Over the course of the two days everyone present engaged in many challenging discussions. First Nations participants expressed their fatigue and frustration after years of providing advice to governments that goes unheeded.

During a field trip to Merbein Lagoon, with Latji Latji Nation and First People's of the Millewa-Mallee representatives, participants emphasized the importance of not just providing water to a site, but providing the water 'the right way'. That is, using natural flow pathways and not just pumping water to sites using the easiest or cheapest pathways. As Tati Tati and Latji Latji Elder Brendan Kennedy explained, "It's wrong water. It's like putting water up the rear end rather than going in through the mouth. Yes its adding water but it's not done right."

The Forum included Women's and Men's sessions to allow for open discussions on culturally sensitive topics. Empowered through this process, the women's group recorded a profound and potent statement that shares how the women connect to water and tells the importance of healthy waterways on their cultural business, obligations and aspirations.

Ngaywang Elder Aunty Christine Abdulla said: "It's Time! For Our Voices to be heard, and, acted upon!!

For all First Peoples of their respective language groups and Nations within the Southern Basin to have their Traditional Knowledges respected, and, included in the decision making of Government decisions surrounding water allocations.

I'm hoping our Women's' Business Statement will help us gain a voice, so we are heard and respected. For recognition of all the women before us, their hard work and tirelessly sharing our Traditional Knowledges, hoping one day we will be heard! It's Time!!"

In addition to the Women's Statement, an overarching statement was produced by all First Nations present at the forum. The 'Mildura Statement 2021' provides guidance to water holders around four key themes:

- Respect water, Country and Lore
- Address our concerns
- Recognise that our rivers are at risk
- Help us protect and grow the things that are important to us

This 'Mildura Statement' provides a powerful contribution to planning for water delivery in the Southern Connected Basin, and was included in its entirety in the planning documents published by environmental water holders.

The forum concluded with those present acknowledging that to create a long-term meaningful process of engagement with First Nations, a shift away from the standard government model of 'meeting in a room, sitting around tables, talking through PowerPoint presentations' was needed. The advice from First Nations was that the next gathering should be on Country, where young people can come along and be part of the discussion too. Its only when out on Country can we have meaningful conversations about connections to rivers and waterways, and how we might align cultural and environmental watering objectives.

Covid travel restrictions have prevented an on Country gathering to date, however we hope this will be possible in Autumn 2022 so we may and continue to build meaningful relationships and partnerships between First Nations and environmental water managers across the southern Basin.



The Mildura Statement can be found at awe.gov.au/water/cewo/working-with-first-nations/first-nations-input-to-planning



Aboriginal Waterways Assessments

First Peoples of the River Murray and Mallee Region

Aboriginal Waterways Assessments (AWA) continue to be undertaken in the South Australian Riverland to strengthen the partnership between the First Peoples of the River Murray and Mallee Region with the SA Department for Environment and Water and the Murraylands and Riverland Landscapes Board.

AWA's are used by First Peoples of the River Murray and Mallee (FPRMM) to assess the cultural values of wetlands and

other important sites within the Riverland to support environmental water and wetland management planning.

During 2020-21 and complying with coronavirus restrictions, 24 AWA's were undertaken by the First Peoples Working Group (FPWG) which included 8 assessments at 7 wetland sites on the Chowilla Floodplain Icon site with Lake Limbra being assessed twice, before and after e-water delivery.



Lake Limbra AWA site revisit – E-water being delivered via pumps to Lake Limbra. Tuesday 4th May 2021



Lake Limbra AWA site revisit Tuesday 4th May 2021

Future Aboriginal Waterways Assessments

AWA site revisits are scheduled for Lake Littra on Monday 15th November 2021 and Coppermine Lagoon on Tuesday 30th November 2021.

As technology is advancing, the FPRMM AWA form has recently been digitalised and incorporated into the River Murray and Mallee Aboriginal Corporation (RMMAC) cultural heritage data base – fulcrum app. Ten AWAs have so far been entered into the RMMAC cultural heritage data base, which automatically adds up the percentages for each of the components of the AWA, waterway health, cultural access and use and cultural values.

The FPWG have been undertaking groundwater workshops with the Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Corporation (NAC) and are currently in the process of utilising the AWA process on sites such as soaks and rock holes within the mallee area

Cultural Heritage Site Protection

The RMMAC cultural heritage data base – fulcrum application can also be used for reporting and recording cultural heritage sites of significance that are discovered during AWAs and to assist with ongoing cultural heritage site protection.

AWAs undertaken at Monoman Island Depression, Punkah Creek Floodrunner, Gumflat, Werta Wert Wetland and Coppermine Waterhole identified several culturally significant features at both watered and dry wetlands.

The AWA's at these additional sites have also identified areas where cultural heritage surveys and site protection works are urgently required.

Plant ID Project

The AWA teams recognised early in the assessment process the need for some resources to help identify plants at the AWA sites, particularly where plants are responding to the delivery of water for the environment. This led to a new project being initiated with the First Peoples Working Group to develop a plant ID and cultural uses field guide.

Spokesperson for the First Peoples – River Murray and Mallee Aboriginal Corporation (RMMAC), Sheryl Johnson said undertaking the AWA's mean they are better placed to negotiate for their Country's water needs, interests and cultural values across the Murray-Darling Basin system.

"The AWA process creates many opportunities for two-way knowledge sharing. First Peoples can better understand water planning and management and DEW staff get to learn from the Indigenous community about their cultural values and interests in a healthy River system," Sheryl said.

Acknowledgements

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The MDBA, SA Water, and the DEW ecologists for recording and monitoring all flora and fauna species on the Chowilla Floodplain.

RMMAC specialist Archaeologist Craig Westell for his ongoing research and expertise with all cultural heritage site protection issues.

Thanks also to Troy Mallie of e-solutions for assisting the FPRMM with the development of the RMMAC cultural heritage data base and training FPRMM how to utilise the fulcrum app.



Werta Wetland AWA – Monday 8th February 2021

Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Corporation Yarning Circles Project

Ngarrindjeri Ruwe

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 Yarlwar-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 <https://youtu.be/tK4TdPIIFDo>

Rick Hartman Yarlwar-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), Kaltumarri (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.

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



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

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: <https://youtu.be/tK4TdPIIFDo>

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