**Strengthening connections with water for the environment** The First Nations Environmental Water Guidance Project

Lachlan River (Photo: Commonwealth Environmental Water Office)

Over 2019–20, the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) and the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN) partnered with the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office (CEWO) to share information, collaborate and integrate information about watering priorities directly into Basin annual environmental watering priorities. This work was undertaken through the First Nations Environmental Water Guidance (FNEWG) project.

The FNEWG project funded NBAN and MLDRIN to collate information about where and how water for the environment should be delivered to support tangible outcomes and benefits for First Nations. These tangible benefits include:

- improved fish populations to support fishing and healthy diets
- improved health and abundance of reeds and other culturally significant plants used for purposes such as weaving, tool making and medicine
- flows timed to coincide with important animal breeding or cultural activities
- improved health, wellbeing and cultural resilience for First Nations people.

In the FNEWG project, 32 Nations from the northern and southern Basin identified important waterways and significant species, as well as the timing of flows needed across the Basin to support them. Connecting rivers and their floodplains was identified as vital, along with ensuring enough good quality water flows through each Nations' Country, to those downstream.

As a result of the work undertaken through the FNEWG project, First Nations people's values and water management objectives have been represented at a Basin-scale and included in federal government planning for water for the environment for the first time.

"The 2020–21 watering year will, for the first time in history, see First Nations' environmental watering objectives acknowledged and incorporated into environmental water management at a federal level. This is a significant step forward," said Fred Hooper, Chair of NBAN.

## Involving First Nations at the northern Basin scale

NBAN worked with 16 First Nations to collect more than 10,000 environmental watering objectives at 111 sites across the northern Basin. The First Nations environmental outcomes gathered through this process highlight the wealth of knowledge First Nations people hold in relation to the northern Basin and across common themes, indicator species and significant sites.

NBAN worked with northern Basin First Nations to identify cultural indicator species. These are species that are endemic to river stretches and if they were seen to be flourishing would provide an indication to First Nations people that the rivers were healthy. When these indicator species thrive, First Nations people know that Country is healthy, and they experience improved spiritual, cultural, environmental and social conditions as a result. Critically, some of the flow indicator species listed by First Nations have not been seen in these river reaches for years.

The Basin-wide environmental watering strategy focuses on achieving improvements for flows, native vegetation, waterbirds and native fish, as indicators of a healthy river system. Nations stressed the importance of considering outcomes beyond fish, waterbirds and vegetation, wanting to see outcomes for important terrestrial and totemic species.

Improved flows to connect along rivers and the quality of flows were a clear theme from all Nations involved. Nations identified key sites of cultural importance, including Narran Lakes and the Macquarie Marshes which they would like to see supported using water for the environment. They highlighted the importance of ensuring rivers are connected to nearby wetlands and anabranches to provide opportunities for First Nations people to connect with Country. They said special attention should be given to providing opportunities to Nations to fulfil their cultural obligation to ensure that neighbouring Nations downstream have enough water.

"First Nations value and use these species today, in the same way we have for thousands of years. Water in the rivers means water for these species," (NBAN, 2020).

"This is the first time we have been invited to sit [as neighbouring Nations] and talk about connectivity. Up until now, our Nations have just been [individual] dots on a map," said NBAN Deputy Chairperson and Guwamu woman, Cheryl Buchanan.

## Involving First Nations at the southern Basin scale

MLDRIN worked with 16 Nations from across the southern Murray–Darling Basin to collect information about their priorities for environmental water management in 2020–21. Nation delegates, Elders, community members and water advisory committees responded to a questionnaire produced by MLDRIN, with detailed views about where and how water should be provided to protect and enhance important places, significant species and other cultural values.

Information gathered through this process was then analysed to identify shared priorities and areas of common concern. It is critical to note that, for First Nations in the southern Basin, all waterways, communities and plant and animal species exist as an interconnected whole.

While it is impossible to assign greater importance to one waterway or species, it is possible to identify common concerns and shared objectives. Key culturally significant species identified by multiple Nations included: Murray cod, golden perch (yellowbelly), catfish, black swans, pelicans, duck species, old man weed and other medicinal plants, river red gums, black box, cumbungi and lignum. Critically, Nations stressed the importance of considering outcomes beyond fish, waterbirds and vegetation. Nations also wanted to see improved outcomes for aquatic fauna such as turtles, yabbies, mussels, frogs, platypus and rakali (water rat) as well as terrestrial fauna such as kangaroos and emus.

## "The Nations' input highlights shared concern for all major rivers across the Basin and how environmental water can be used so that life returns to our culturally significant places," said Rene Woods, Chair of MLDRIN.

Participating Nations also identified key waterways and areas of Country that were in need of watering. Multiple Nations submitted priorities relating to the Murrumbidgee, Baaka (Darling River), Lachlan, Campaspe, Murray and Edwards-Wakool systems, but notably, participants said they shared common concern for all major rivers across the region. This is because declining river health and low flows in one part of the Basin can affect communities and cultural outcomes across the system.

Improving the timing, volume and quality of environmental flows in all major rivers, informed by First Nation's science and traditional knowledge, was identified by multiple Nations as a key to sustaining stories, values and connection to Country. Nations wanted to see water for the environment used to connect wetlands, billabongs and floodplains, so that life returns to these culturally significant places.

Feedback provided by First Nations also highlighted the shared opportunities and barriers for greater involvement in the management of water for the environment across the southern Basin.

"It is essential that water holders continue, and strengthen, direct engagement with First Nations to empower our participation in environmental water planning and delivery," (MLDRIN, 2020).

## **Building on FNEWG**

This project provided an important opportunity to strengthen involvement of First Nations to empower their participation in water for the environment planning and delivery.

It is crucial that water holders and agencies continue to create these opportunities to centre First Nations people, science and traditional knowledge in the management of water for the environment. The common goal of improving and sustaining the health of our waterways can be better achieved through collaboration and co-management.