

# Rivers, the veins of our Country

Nine case studies of First Nations involvement in managing water for the environment in the Murray-Darling Basin 2022-23

## Water is Life Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap

A new approach to water management policy

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Water is Life is a nation-leading publication that places government's policy position and Traditional Owner voices side-by-side. Launched by Victoria's Minister for Water in September 2022, Water is Life outlines pathways to increase Traditional Owner roles, responsibilities and resourcing in water management in Victoria.

Water is Life is an outcome of eight years of collaboration with Traditional Owners across Victoria through the state's Aboriginal Water Program and sets the trajectory for Traditional Owner involvement in water policy and management in Victoria for decades to come.



*Minister Shing at the smoking ceremony on Gunditjmara Country at the launch of Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap, 28 September 2022.  
Photo credit: DEECA*

Water is Life builds on the findings from complementary and preliminary work conducted within Victoria's Aboriginal Water Program, including Cultural Water for Cultural Economies and Traditional Owner-led pilot projects exploring opportunities for water-based enterprises (2019-2021). From early 2021, collaboration and engagement with Traditional Owner partners focused intensively on the development of Water is Life until its publication in September 2022. The final publication includes 2 sections: the Victorian Government's policy, which was co-authored by a team of 3 authors including 2 Traditional Owners from Victoria; and 27 Traditional Owner Nation statements. Water is Life now forms a key pillar of Victoria's Aboriginal Water Program.

Water is Life is an important historical record that formally acknowledges past injustices and outlines a meaningful pathway forward, reaffirming the government's commitment to "advancing, recognising and protecting First Nations' and Traditional Owners' access and rights to land and water in Victoria" (Minister for Water's foreword to Water is Life). The design, delivery and final content of Water is Life also highlights the Victorian Government's commitment to increasing Traditional Owner self-determination in water management.

Throughout the project's delivery, the Aboriginal Water Unit and its project partners, the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations and Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, embedded the principles of free, prior and informed consent and self-determination. Traditional Owners determined how they participated and with whom they would partner (for example, directly with the Aboriginal Water Unit, or through the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations and/or Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations). This approach significantly increased

the overall number of Traditional Owner groups participating in a policy development process, and specifically those choosing to partner directly with the Aboriginal Water Unit.

The collaborative approach to this policy's development was grounded in an extensive program of engagement that included a total of 61 workshops with Traditional Owners across Victoria at different scales. Each Traditional Owner group was supported to run their own Nation-level workshops, and the project team convened regional and statewide forums to bring Traditional Owners together from across Victoria. Additionally, a deliberately iterative and adaptive approach further strengthened this approach and these relationships through agile project management that enabled the inclusion of emerging Traditional Owner guidance throughout the engagement process. This guidance was reflected in the development of the government's commitments and in the final content published in Water is Life.

The final publication of Water is Life includes 27 Traditional Owner Nation Statements which sit alongside the government's policy commitments. Each Nation statement outlines Traditional Owner aspirations for the future of water and waterway management on Country, and details Traditional Owner needs, expectations and goals. Subsequently, the twelve targeted actions outlined in Water is Life are designed to strengthen and enhance Traditional Owner roles in decision-making and access to water over the short-, medium- and long-term. The development of Water is Life is testament to the work done by Traditional Owners to date and the government's commitment to increase Traditional Owner decision-making, self-determination and access to water in Victoria.