


Working together for Dharriwaa

Joint management at Narran Lakes, NSW



Dharriwaa
(Photo: Brendan Odee Welsh, 2020)

For over seven years, the Narran Lakes and surrounding river system remained dry. The Lakes, known as *Dharriwaa* by the Yuwaalaraay/Euahlayi people, is a significant meeting place for Aboriginal peoples and a source of food and medicine. The origin story of Dharriwaa highlights its immense cultural significance and demonstrates the importance of the area, especially for waterbirds.

In fact, Dharriwaa is one of the most important waterbird nesting sites in Australia. During wet times, there have been more than 50,000 nests and some of the largest recorded gatherings of waterbirds, around 200,000, have been recorded there. The site is an important stop for many migratory waterbirds that visit Australia annually over spring to summer, with parts of Dharriwaa listed as internationally important wetlands.

However, due to the recent prolonged drought, important plants which the birds use to nest and live in have been dying.

In early 2020, after welcome rainfall in the region, the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office (CEWO) worked with Queensland and NSW governments and a local landholder to ensure more water flowed into the Narran Lakes.

As a result of this collaboration, around 90 GL of water filled the Narran Lakes between February and April 2020, the most water to reach the special site since 2012. Water also flowed throughout the Lower Balonne, through multiple rivers, across floodplains and all the way down to the Menindee Lakes – in what has been the largest Commonwealth watering event in the northern Basin in the ten-year history of the CEWO.

Staff from CEWO worked with NSW and Queensland government agencies, the University of New England and Traditional Owners from the Narran Lakes Joint Management Committee to monitor the wildlife and plant recovery since water reached Dharriwaa. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority also keenly monitored the event using satellites.

The fieldwork enabled knowledge exchange between researchers, water managers, and Traditional Owners. Traditional knowledge and cultural insights into the plants, animals and artefacts encountered during the surveys was generously shared amongst the monitoring team during days out on Country. Joint Management Committee member, Rhonda Ashby commented that “*cultural and scientific knowledge can be embedded through respectful relationships and*



The JMC survey team
(CEWO, 2020)



Crocodile outline made at Narran
Lakes (UNE 2018)

partnerships. It's vitally important for Narran Co-management and researchers positively working in collaboration and understanding each other roles for better outcomes for all".

Over 30 waterbird species have been recorded since the flows, including the freckled duck, blue-billed duck and black necked stork, which are all listed as threatened species. Critically, all key waterbird nesting areas have had a drink, including 4,500 hectares of the Ramsar site, within the Narran Lake Nature Reserve.

Traditional Owner, Brendan Odee Welsh summed the event up saying "Our Yuwaalaraay country has been galingin (thirsty) for the longest time. It's always special to be out at Dharriwaa (Narran Lakes) but even more so after these water events".

Jody Swirepik, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, visited Dharriwaa to see water fill the lakes. "It will take more flows like this before Narran Lakes is able to bounce back to pre-drought health, but these flows have been a great start to help to bring life back to Dharriwaa".

The origin of Dharriwaa

Back in the creation time, Byamee went hunting with his two wives. His wives went one way, and he the other.

Byamee was supposed to meet his wives back at Coorigel spring. However, whilst bathing in the sweet and clear water Byamee's wives were seized and swallowed by two *kurreahs* (crocodile like creatures). The *kurreahs* then dived into an underground watercourse, which led to the Narran River – drying all watercourses along the way.

When Byamee reached the spring and realised what had happened he started in pursuit of the *kurreahs*. The track Byamee followed is still marked by the morilla ridges, which stretch down the Narran, pointing in towards the deep holes.

Finally, Byamee came to the end of the Narran and the *kurreahs* who had eaten his wives. Byamee speared and killed the *kurreahs* to release his wives who promptly came back to life.

Byamee then said: "where there was dry land and stones in the past, in the future there will be water and water-fowl, from henceforth; when the Narran runs it will run into this hole, and by the spreading of its waters will a big lake be made." (Parker, K 1897, sacred-texts.com).



Some of the monitoring
team (CEWO)