

Caring for our sacred waterways – learning from our past

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Introduction

I am one of the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu people from the headwaters of the Lake Eyre Basin catchment, at the top of the catchment of the Georgina River. My father was an Alyawarr man. He was born under a sacred tree at Lake Nash (Alpurrurulam) on the Georgina River (Fig. 9.1). My mother's mother's tribal name was Marrarru, the name of a Dreaming that passes through the country where she was born, on Barkly Station. This is also the name of a tree on the Georgina River near Camooweal. The Indjalandji-Dhidhanu people are the Traditional Owners of our country; our custom holds our law for that country. And part of our law and my ancestral line is rain-making. My grandmother's brother and my great-grandfather before him were both rain-makers. They used to meet with the Alyawarr men,



Fig. 9.1. The Georgina River catchment flows south of Mt Isa to join Eyre Creek and eventually the Diamantina River, south of the town of Birdsville and along the way supplies incredible floodplains and lakes. The Georgina River has many culturally significant sites for Traditional Owners, up and down the river and its floodplains.

from the Sandover region, near Ampilatwatja and Amaroo, and also with Waanyi and Kalkadoon men, for ceremonies. Their ceremonies were held all up and down our river. Some were near Urandangie, downstream from Boundary Gully. One corroboree travelled with our people from Camooweal, down the Georgina River, across onto the Hamilton River and finally onto the Diamantina River. A few elders still carry on the ceremonies today. These ceremonies are designed to maintain alliances and religious customs.

Our people first met the Europeans in the early 1860s. This was graphically described by John Sutherland, the first European settler through our country, who brought 8000 sheep to the Georgina at Lake Mary in 1864 (Sutherland 1913). He was aiming to graze them on what is now Rocklands Station. After droving, over the dry country, he arrived at Lake Mary. The sheep smelt water and charged at the river where our mob was camped, with their campfires. This European and his sheep scattered my people. Big droughts followed, through to 1869, and there was inevitable conflict over access to water between my people and the settlers (Dugalunji Aboriginal Corporation 2015). Our stories tragically reflect this troubled history. My mother's grandmother lived through the struggles, telling her story to my mother, who was a little girl. Her family and tribe were attacked and bayoneted by troopers at Louie Creek at Lawn Hill (Roberts 2005, pp. 233–234). Many died but my great-grandmother managed to flee. Conflict erupted everywhere. My people retaliated to save their precious drinking water, by spearing cattle that were dying and polluting all the waterholes. This is a history inevitably tied to water in this dry country. It is not surprising that our people care so much about our precious water resources (see Chapter 8).

The rivers

The rivers were the trade routes between tribes living in the Lake Eyre Basin and elsewhere. The Georgina River was one of the biggest trade routes in Australia as Aboriginal people moved shells from the Gulf and Arnhem Land all the way into South Australia. The stimulant, pituri, was also a highly sought after commodity, derived from the leaves of the corkwood tree (*Duboisia hopwoodii*). Around Carlo Station near Boulia, the most potent pituri produced from the plants grew in the sand hills. It was mixed with the best ashes along the Georgina River to make a highly valuable commodity which was fought over and traded for ochre and chisel blades, up and down the river.

The Georgina River has enormous cultural significance with sites ranging up to 10 km on either side of the river and all along it. It provides ecosystem services in the form of our bush foods, such as freshwater fish, mussels and plants such as water lilies (*Nymphaea georginae*) and nardoo (*Marsilea drumondii*) (Dugalunji Aboriginal Corporation 2012). We Traditional Owners remain concerned about modern demands on these rivers, particularly from pastoralism, tourism, feral animals, weeds, erosion and sedimentation. Tourists are increasingly coming to this country, seeking out this wild and magnificent place (Schmiechen 2004), but they need to be managed. They also need to appreciate the system's cultural and environmental values. Ignorant, careless and thoughtless tourists can damage the river banks and vegetation and pollute the rivers with litter and waste. For example, the fascination with campfires can mean culturally significant trees, with scars made by our people, are cut down.

Invasive species are an ongoing problem. Recently, red claw crayfish (*Cherax quadricarinatus*) invaded the Georgina River (see Chapter 3), muddying the waters and proliferating after the 2009 floods. We run an Indigenous ranger program, involving rangers who tackle weeds and feral animals throughout the Lake Eyre Basin. The impact of livestock on our waterholes also represents a continuing problem. Feral pigs and cattle can degrade vegetation and the banks of waterholes and pollute them with their waste. By working with local pastoralists, we have had some success in restricting access by cattle to the river beds near Camooweal.

Our underground rivers

Few people in the Lake Eyre Basin or the rest of Australia know of the amazing underground rivers in the Georgina River catchment, including Nowranie Creek. Camooweal Caves National Park (Wiliyan-ngurru) has an extensive network of caves (Fig. 9.2), connected by sinkholes, formed when water over millennia has dissolved the dolomite deposited by ancient seas ~550 million years ago. Our stories tell us the caves were created by a giant ridge-tailed goanna (*Varanus acanthurus*) that used to live there – the ancestor of the resident monitor lizards. The caves fill with water during the wet season, creating one of the bigger underground river systems in the world, stretching for 36 km and 150 m deep. There are ~180 sinkholes, from Alpururulam (Lake Nash) in the south, right up to where the Gregory and Georgina Rivers meet in the north. Special animals have adapted to this cave life. For



Fig. 9.2. The underwater tunnels inside Great Nowranie Cave, in the Camooweal Caves National Park, in the Georgina River catchment, a sacred place for Traditional Owners, where sustainability is vulnerable following revocation of Wild Rivers legislation in Queensland (photo, Liz Rogers).

our people, the sinkhole complexes are sacred sites. These cave systems catch, hold and filter the underground water that we all rely on in the Barkly Tablelands. The revocation of the Georgina River/Diamantina River Wild River declaration (see Chapters 20 and 21) has made these systems particularly vulnerable to the increasing interest in petroleum and gas exploration (see Chapter 19).

Our history and engagement

Our people are documenting the cultural and environmental values of these magnificent surface and underground river systems. This includes capturing how they change with dry and wet seasons. We are training the next generation of Aboriginal people, providing them with the skills and qualifications to work in construction, mining, and land and water management. The mining industry employs many Indigenous people, providing an opportunity to educate our people about country as well as a source of employment. We provide basic skills training, but also focus on imparting cultural knowledge and an understanding of the importance of Aboriginal religion, culture, and traditional methods of land and water management. Our Indigenous land and sea rangers are increasingly deployed in our national parks.

Conclusion

There is a sad and long history of conflict, often over water, between our people and European settlers. We don't want to fight again over water; these wonderful rivers below and above the ground are irreplaceable. We need to work together and look after them. We need to listen to Traditional Owners of the country and their knowledge of how the rivers work and their deep cultural significance. It is incumbent upon us to find ways to protect the cultural and environmental health of the rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin, now and into the future.

References

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