

Looking after the rivers – a view from nearly 50 000 years of experience

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Introduction

Many people who come to visit this country, the Lake Eyre Basin and its rivers, for more than one day gain a connection to it. Multiply this feeling of connection over 50 to 100 years and talk to families who have settled in the Channel Country and you appreciate their love of this country and its waters. Now I challenge you to imagine almost 50 000 years of connection and cultural obligation to a land (Tobler *et al.* 2017) and tell me that's not significant. Connecting with this country makes you feel responsibility for it and its waters.

Many of us care deeply about this country and its rivers. It feels good to have a responsibility and an obligation that's bigger than you. I belong to the Mithaka people. Our mob are the Kurrithala Tjimpa (Black Hawk) and our country is bordered by Cooper Creek (east) and the Diamantina River to the west. Kirrenderri is what we call this country, but now it's called the Channel Country. Mithaka people feel it's not only our right but it's also our responsibility to look after the country and its rivers. Wahlduru is our name for the three rivers, the Cooper, Diamantina and the Georgina Rivers, which may be different to the names given to them by other Aboriginal mobs in this region. My mob has been connected continuously to country and its waters for tens of thousands of years. I believe that I have approval to speak on behalf of these waters and this country. I have a responsibility, a right and an obligation to do this. I grew up on the Cooper; that's where I learnt to swim, near the bridge on the Cooper near Windorah (Fig. 8.1). Most of our Christmases and all of our school break-ups were on the river. We drink the water out of the Cooper.

These rivers and this country sustained thousands of peoples over tens of thousands of years. They provided food and water for us, as well as food and water for our food – the mussels (Fig. 8.2), fish and birds. And they are also the sites of our birthing places and our resting places. These are strategically scattered across the country, not far from water. Along these waterways, you will find the foundation of our stories: Mowana (budgerigar), Multhuri (pelican), Magwiri (stork), Miljoori (spoonbill), Munkerran (white ibis) and many more. They represent our families, the names for our clans and language groups, all of which inform us of our place in this country.

All along these iconic rivers, you will find the foundations of our stories; they either start or end at the significant waterholes. The stories connect us all the time and help us to remember the ways that we are supposed to be. These same stories informed a people for thousands of years. They continue to form the bases for our governing laws and our



Fig. 8.1. Cooper Creek waterholes near the bridge at Windorah where we used to swim and I grew up (photo, R. T. Kingsford).



Fig. 8.2. Aboriginal people are connected to the rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin, reflected in our history everywhere, including this enormous midden of mussel shells near Coongie Lake on the Cooper (photo, R. T. Kingsford).

relationships, and they connect country and water to the people and maintain our way of being. These stories include the wood duck, the pelican and the famous two-boys story.

The rivers were also our trading routes where we met, shared with, and learnt from neighbours. The rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin give us our swimming holes, our fishing holes and our camping places, and they provide a haven for us to go when we need to reflect and reconnect. These waters are the basis for the strong relationships between land, plant, animal and humans over thousands of years.

My journey so far – looking after the rivers

Of course, throughout my childhood I was intimately connected with the rivers, through my experiences and the stories of my family. Most recently, I became engaged with the governance of the Lake Eyre Basin rivers, through my membership of the Lake Eyre Basin Community Advisory Committee (2009–12) (see Chapter 7). I then spent nearly two years (2010–13) on the Queensland Government’s Wild Rivers Advisory Panel, negotiating an agreement to protect these rivers under Wild Rivers legislation (see Chapters 17, 20 and 21). I worked with passionate and committed people from all walks of life, including government officers, pastoralists, environmentalists and scientists, who are still with us on this journey. It was a privilege to work with them to develop long-term, sustainable and equitable protection for this country and its rivers. All relevant stakeholders on the committee agreed and in good



Fig. 8.3. About 70 Aboriginal people attended the Aboriginal Forum in Tibooburra in 2011, where we discussed the future of the rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin, identifying some powerful initiatives to pursue (Tables 8.1 and 8.2, photo, M. Turner).

Table 8.1. Themes and relevant resolutions from the 4th Lake Eyre Basin Aboriginal Forum, held in Tibooburra on 13–15 September 2011.

Themes	Resolutions
Science and management	Allow transfer of information across the Basin
	Share outcomes and learnings
	Increase the communication of progress and outcomes
	Lists of project work to be published, distributed and updated
Extractive industries and groundwater (esp. coal seam gas)	Fully funded Lake Eyre Basin Rivers Assessment (LEBRA), including groundwater
	Consultation and participation of communities, including Traditional Owners (selected by Lake Eyre Basin Traditional Owners)
	Reliable, updated information system with public access
	High level of recognition of risks associated with extractive industry
Traditional ecological knowledge	Share and teach traditional ecological knowledge using new technology and on-country, on-ground activities
	Respecting and honouring through consultation and networking
	Lake Eyre Basin or national policy on traditional ecological knowledge and water research
National Centre for Aboriginal Water Research	Link science to traditional ecological knowledge
	Integrate into national policy agenda to ensure policy outcomes for all
	Consider groundwater and surface water as a connected resource
	Provide credible evidence to support/raise profile of cultural knowledge to inform/guide national and state and territory policy
	Aboriginal water allocations – to provide water for cultural, social, economic purposes determined by Aboriginal people
Cultural water and land management plan, Lake Eyre Basin Authority – sustaining the effort	Co-management of Lake Eyre Basin (e.g. through a unified management authority for the Basin); support current Lake Eyre Basin as a Ministerial Forum initiative
	Dual leadership/management by Aboriginal people and community – including a power of veto over unwanted development
	Tied to an action plan which is outcome-oriented and brings solutions to problems

faith signed a formal agreement to protect the rivers under the Bligh Labor Government’s Wild Rivers legislation. The agreement would result in protected areas and protect these rivers and their community, including the economic, cultural and environmental values.

Aboriginal engagement focused in 2011 at an Aboriginal forum in Tibooburra when ~70 Aboriginal people from across the Lake Eyre Basin met to discuss the future of the rivers (Fig. 8.3). Over three days, we agreed on some powerful directions for the management of the Lake Eyre Basin and its rivers (tables 8.1 and 8.2). We identified key themes, resolutions and activities (Table 8.1). For science and management, we needed to see the transfer and sharing of information and to be informed about what projects were underway and how we could be involved.

In relation to extractive industries, we believed that the Lake Eyre Basin Rivers Assessment was critical and that the development of extractive industries should be done in

Table 8.2. The Tibooburra Resolution, consisting of an eight-point declaration from the 4th Lake Eyre Basin Aboriginal Forum, held in Tibooburra on 13–15th September 2011 on protection of rivers in the Lake Eyre Basin by Wild Rivers legislation in Queensland.

Resolutions
1. Declare the Cooper Creek, Georgina and Diamantina Rivers as Wild River Areas under the <i>Wild Rivers Act</i> .
2. Commit resources for Traditional Owner rangers in the three river basins under its policy to deliver 100 Indigenous Wild River rangers; starting with five rangers (including ranger coordinators) for each of the three river basins – 15 Indigenous rangers in total.
3. Support and resource an Aboriginal organisation which reflects their governance structure to oversee the Wild Rivers Rangers program within the Cooper Creek, Georgina and Diamantina Rivers for the Aboriginal Traditional Owners of these water systems.
4. Incorporate water allocations under each Wild River declaration for Aboriginal water allocation for Traditional Owners to decide its use.
5. Maintain the Aboriginal heritage and cultural landscapes of the three Wild River areas, by supporting management in accordance with the Aboriginal traditions and customs for the areas (joint management).
6. Exclude coal seam gas and shale gas projects, along with other mining and resource extraction, from the High Preservation Areas and Special Floodplain Management Areas; and regulate coal seam gas and shale gas activities in the Preservation Areas.
7. Ensure sustainable pastoral activity in the Wild River areas by committing land protection officers to monitor and restrict overstocking.
8. Call on the South Australian/New South Wales/Northern Territory governments to support the protection of the Lake Eyre Basin region with a commitment to a Wild River-type legislation.

collaboration with Traditional Owners. There was also a strong emphasis on the importance of traditional knowledge and its role in informing decision-making, as well as linking into a National Centre for Aboriginal Water Research. For management, we wanted to see co-management arrangements, including the establishment of a Lake Eyre Basin Authority focused on solutions to problems (Table 8.1). We also developed an eight-point declaration, related to Queensland Wild Rivers legislation, known as the Tibooburra Resolution (Table 8.2). This was provided to all political parties in Queensland, emphasising our commitment to protect Cooper Creek, the Georgina River and the Diamantina River, as wild rivers.

The Liberal National Party Government in Queensland (2012–15), at the time, led by Premier Campbell Newman, was no longer committed to Wild Rivers and chose to ignore us. The Liberal National Party made three contradictory election promises: retain, renew and then revoke the declaration of Wild Rivers. They ‘shifted the goal posts’. The Liberal National Party Government instead established a new advisory process, forming the Western Rivers Advisory Panel (see Chapter 20), ignoring the fact that the Wild Rivers legislation consultations had finished and all parties had agreed. The new advisory process opened it all up again, allowing potentially vested interests to change the original agreement. I was not invited to be on the new committee. The new committee had virtually the same interests although notable absences of representation of South Australian or environmental interests. This committee was given quite different political riding instructions. They were told to allow irrigation and to ‘ditch’ the Wild Rivers legislation and its declarations for the Channel Country rivers and come up with something new. It was a complete waste of time and money, and served only one purpose – revocation of the Wild Rivers legislation by the Liberal National Party.

It also devalued the work of dedicated people who fought to protect these rivers. Most disappointing, the government abused its powers, choosing to ignore and disengage with people who thought differently about sustainability. It pandered to a small vocal pro-development lobby and adopted an ideological approach to the development of the rivers, favouring the march of exploration and development of gas resources. Nobody talked to me about what I thought and in fact I was actively disengaged by the Liberal National Party on this issue, perhaps because of my publicly vocal opposition to development at the expense of the rivers. I am angry, frustrated and cynical with people in positions of power, particularly politicians for abusing their power to drive their own agendas. They are supposed to be governing for people like me as well.

The results of this advisory process came in, with predictable results and consequences. Sadly, the recommendations, while protecting the rivers to some extent, allowed development of existing sleeper licences (water) for small-scale irrigation and did not completely protect these rivers (Western Rivers Advisory Panel 2013) in the same way that the Wild Rivers legislation did (see Chapters 20 and 22). It opened up potential for development of the floodplains by oil and gas interests which may affect floodplain flows (see Chapter 22). The Newman Government ignored due process, the community and expert advice. We must continue the fight to protect these three rivers from the creeping insidious irrigation development that has killed off the rivers of the south in the Murray–Darling Basin, the dollar driven coal seam gas (CSG) operators and the government/mining alliance who abuse their power in order to push their own agendas. It could be said that some governments (at all levels) utilise mining (for infrastructure) to avoid their responsibilities to regional communities.

Of most concern is the ‘watering down’ of protection measures for floodplains and major tributaries that were in the Wild River declarations (see Chapter 21). These allow for developments of critical areas, including the potential establishment of oil and gas exploration platforms and infrastructure which could affect the flow patterns of the Channel Country (see Chapter 19).

In 2013, the Minister for Natural Resources in Queensland, the Honourable Andrew Cripps, advocated that small-scale irrigation could bring jobs to local communities in western Queensland (<http://www.abc.net.au/site-archive/rural/qld/content/2013/02/s3685477.htm>). It doesn’t matter how big or small the irrigation is – it takes away water used by the river downstream and on floodplains. With small-scale irrigation, there are licences that can be bought, sold and traded, potentially driving up development as in the Condamine–Balonne (see Chapters 14, 15 and 21). The relaxation of protection measures opens up the potential for mining to impact on these rivers and their floodplains. I’m not against mining or progress. Yet I am against development at the expense of country and its waters. Such decisions by governments are dangerous and irresponsible to our country and its waters – one that we have been responsibly managing for a long time.

Let’s please learn from the past. Look around the world. Look in our own backyard at the Murray–Darling Basin. We have had to spend billions of dollars trying to sort that system out because it was over allocated for irrigation. We (Lake Eyre Basin Traditional Owners) are all frustrated because we worry about the future of these rivers, the future of

this region. Strangely enough, the very reason driving the economic sustainability decisions could very well destroy this region. What I, and many others, believe is that this region needs the water flows, as well as their pristine qualities, to remain as they are to ensure economic sustainability. The removal of the Liberal National Party from power in January 2015 provided us with a new opportunity to reclaim sustainability for these rivers and revisit the public policies that gave them protection, particularly the Wild Rivers legislation. In recent years, the political arguments about Wild Rivers legislation have been dominated by the views of Aboriginal leaders in northern Queensland. If Aboriginal representatives in northern Queensland desire something different to us, then we support their vision, as I would hope they would support ours. These two regions are vastly different in all aspects: culturally, economically, environmentally and socially. We Aboriginal representatives of the Channel Country have a different view. We believe that the Wild Rivers declaration for the Lake Eyre Basin rivers protected these rivers for future generations, reflecting our people's custodianship for tens of thousands of years. As well, it enables us and others to engage in development activities in this region while significantly reducing the chances of the destruction of these important waterways.

Culturally the waters of the Lake Eyre Basin are highly significant to all our 'mobs' across the region and downstream. The Diéri, Wonkamurra, Wangkumarra and the Boothamurra mobs down towards Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre are worried about what Queensland can do to the rivers that flow down to the lake or 'Mowana', as Mithaka call it. The Diéri call it Kati Thanda, a name officially recognised in 2013. Mowana is the budgerigar. Our people have known forever that when Mowana were many, the water reached Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre, and the season would be good and food plentiful.

Conclusion

In the recent period of Liberal National Party Government in Queensland, policies and management were focused on mining, leading towards potentially destroying this magnificent natural system. New government regimes will take power and there will always be a constant turnover of governments with new agendas, but they all need to recognise that the people of the Lake Eyre Basin want to protect our rivers for future generations. These rivers are more than just a resource for making money. They are significant to this country as its birds, animals, its people and their stories and dreams depend on the rivers. And it doesn't matter what colour you are. Just the thought of someone wanting to destroy this unique, iconic river system, which is really significant to this region, this state, the country and the world, is crazy. I can't understand it. We Lake Eyre Traditional Owners want developers to back away from this country and our waters, if they are contemplating anything that threatens these magnificent cultural and environmental values. We do not want irrigation or gas that will destroy our country and its waters. As long as these rivers are okay, we're okay.

Finally, let's get more sophisticated. We can create jobs through the protection of these rivers, not through the destruction of them, and we can build a sustainable future for ourselves and our environment, one that Aboriginal people have maintained for tens of thousands of years. It's been our obligation for millennia to look after these waters and not to

harm them. Governments may have taken away our rights and responsibilities for other things, but they are not taking this responsibility from me. I grew up on Cooper Creek and I know its future depends on the free-flowing water that comes down. We have a collective obligation to keep the Lake Eyre Basin rivers safe.

Reference

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