

A special publication for the ngaratya touring exhibition

'The Darling will die': Scientists say mass fish kill due to over-extraction and drought

ANNE DAVIES THEGUARDIAN.COM

A scientific panel investigating the causes of three mass fish deaths at the Menindee lakes has pointed the finger squarely at those managing the Murray-Darling river system, saying the lack of flows was caused by a combination of drought and overextraction, leading to the environmental disaster.

Up to one million native fish, including hundreds of thousands of small bony bream, Murray cod, up to 20 years old, and silver perch were killed in the three events. While there had been other fish kills during droughts, these were on an unprecedented scale, the report found.

"The conditions leading to this event are an interaction between a severe (but not unprecedented) drought and, more significantly, excess upstream diversion of water for irrigation," the panel of scientists convened by the Academy of Science said. "Prior releases of water from Menindee Lakes contributed to lack of local reserves."

Unless urgent steps are taken to restore flows in the Darling, Prof Craig Moritz, who chaired the panel, warned: "The Darling will die."

"No one expects the river to run every year but they have cut the water so hard, the river is dying," he said.

The report will again focus attention on the massive expansion of irrigated cotton farming in northern New South Wales, and the state's

over the next six months to restore flows, combined with a Menindee Lakes restoration plan focused on restoring its ecology, not saving water, as NSW hopes to do with its Menindee Lakes water saving plan.

It says there must be meaningful consultation with the Indigenous people who have native title along the river, as well as with local communities, to tap into local knowledge.

It is also calling on the federal government to immediately reverse last year's decision to cut the environmental water recovery target for the northern basin by 70 gigalitres, a move the panel warns will further degrade the river.

But Moritz acknowledged there were limited options to prevent more fish deaths in the short term. Without "truckloads of rain", there was almost no environmental water in storage upstream and letting small amounts of the bad-quality water go could make it worse.

The report, under the auspices of the Australian Academy of Science, was commissioned by the opposition leader, Bill Shorten, and released on Monday morning.

"I promised Australians I would get them answers on how this ecological disaster took place, and that's what this report does, Shorten said.

"There is simply not enough environmental water held in the Darling River to meet critical environmental needs in times of drought," he said.

for an immediate effort | implementation has been mismanaged by the Liberals. That's hurting the river, hurting farmers and hurting the environment," he said.

Labor is now supporting the removal of a 1,500GL cap on water buybacks, which will clear the way for more purchases of water from farmers. But he did not say whether Labor would support a reversal of the 70GL cut to environmental water recovery in the Northern Basin – something it has supported to date. The scientists made a

point of saying they had consulted with the government's rival panel, headed by Prof Robert Vertessy, and shared data and conclusions,

which suggests it too will make similar findings when it is released in a few days.

The Murray Darling Basin Authority said it would study the report.

"The key academy finding, that flows in the northern rivers needs to be improved, is exactly what the Basin Plan sets out to achieve. As noted in the AAS report, this is especially challenging dur-

ing drought," it said. It did not address the recommendation that the 70GL cut should be reversed.

The academy scientists agreed with the NSW Department of Primary Industries finding that the immediate cause of the fish deaths was stratification of the water column in the weir near Menindee, which led to blue

green algae outbreaks in the warm surface water during a run of very hot

change, the algae died and the water column mixed, depleting the river of oxygen and causing the mass fish deaths. After the initial fish kill just before Christmas, the dead fish and algae on the bottom may have added to the

problem. But the academy report goes much further in analysing what has happened to long-term flows in the Darling. "Increasing diversions are related to pumping of environmental water, increased harvesting, floodplain policy changes in NSW in relation to the Barwon-Darling Water Sharing Plan and access to low flows and theft," the report says.

"As a result of water resource development in the Barwon-Darling and

sometimes 10 times longer, severely stressing ecosystems." The panel based its

conclusions on the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's own scientific work on flows from 2018. It also cited a report to

the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office which identified that low flows have reduced by 70% across most sections of the Barwon-Darling since 1990.

Decisions by the NSW government to drain the lakes meant there was no local reserves of water available.

The scientists said regular, low flows in the Darling were important in ensuring that native fish and invertebrate populations survived during dry periods, and upstream

larly critical of NSW and its 2012 water sharing plan. "The NSW Barwon-

Darling Water Sharing Plan, and changes to it in 2012, contributed directly to the decline of low flows, independent of rainfall, and hence to the recent fish kills," it said. The scientists also warned that the imple-

mentation of the NSW floodplain harvesting policy would potentially legitimise growth in diversions. They said the take of groundwater was also likely to be contribut-

ing to the problem. NSW said it was studying the report but immediately rejected two recommendations: that the cap on buybacks should be lifted as well as the assertion that the

called for immediate action on the academy's recommendation.

"The Australian Academy of Science has sounded a warning that the management and implementation of water recovery across the Murray-Darling Basin is deeply flawed, finding that excess diversion of water for irrigation was a root cause of this summer's mass fish kills. "More than a million

dead fish floating in our rivers is a clear sign something must change. Centre Alliance sen-

ator Rex Patrick also called for action.

"The findings of the academy's expert panel are absolutely clear, and absolutely consistent with the findings of the Murray-Darling Basin Royal Northern Basin review Commission - too much

down the Darling River." The scientists were also asked to comment on whether climate change was contributing to the problems of the river system.

"The Murray-Darling Basin has increased in temperature by ~1 °C since 1910 and there is high confidence that the Northern Basin will continue to warm, towards a further I-2 °C increase over the coming one to three decades. These large changes cannot be explained without anthropogenic

emissions.' But so far there was no detectable long-term change in observed annual precipitation.

"While climate change linked to increasing emissions has contributed to hotter conditions, it is unlikely that the observed reductions in flows is attributable to climate change alone," they said.



dropped during a cool have doubled and are The panel was particu-

commitment to the Murray-Darling basin plan.

The panel has called

"The Murray Darling days over 40C, and deoxy-Basin Plan was well degenated water below. When the temperature signed by Labor, but its

its tributary catchments, maximum dry periods between low flow events

and downstream connectivity were maintained.

should be repealed. The Australian Conservation Foundation

water is being taken for irrigation and not enough is being allowed to flow

New NSW plan for Murray-Darling saves almost no water

ANNE DAVIES

THEGUARDIAN.COM

The state government's previous proposal was slammed by experts as lacking scientific evidence. There are concerns the next iteration is no better

The New South Wales government's main proposal to deliver on its promises under the Murray-Darling Basin plan is expected to be a project for the Menindee Lakes involving a visitor centre, but almost no additional water for the environment.

The Murray-Darling Basin plan aims to address the historic over-extraction of water by agriculture and return water to the environment. Most of this has been done by buying back entitlements to extract water from farmers, but the final part of the plan involves projects to use water more efficiently, leading to environmental benefits.

Water ministers will meet in late February to review the last stage of the plan. The federal water minister, Tanya Plibersek, is likely to be con-

fronted with a proposal from NSW, known as the better Baaka project, that includes fish ladders, improvements to weirs, a plan to keep more water in Lake Cawndilla and a visitor centre.

But the project will deliver almost no water for the environment. The plan includes a strategic buyback of just 15GL, and no other quantified water savings.

NSW had claimed its earlier proposal, known as the Menindee Lakes project, would save up to 106GL of water towards the target of 605GL under the sustainable diversion adjustment mechanism limit (SDLAM). This mechanism had been agreed by all states as an alternative to buybacks, with states arguing there were smarter ways to achieve water savings than simply withdrawing it from agriculture.

NSW, with support from upstream irrigators, had argued that reducing the size of the Menindee Lakes, making them deeper and operating them differently could save 106GL lost to evaporation.

But a scathing report by Prof

Richard Kingsford, director of the | main lakes. Centre for Ecosystem Science at the University of New South Wales, and others has cast doubt on the science behind the 106GL estimate.

The paper in the international scientific journal Ecology and Society and its accompanying report found the project lacked rigorous evidence and community consultation. Kingsford said the study showed the project had been misguided and poorly framed from the start.

"We identified project failures, particularly lack of transparent explanation of how this water could be 'saved', and inadequate consultation with local communities, including traditional owners," Kingsford said.

It also found that flows into the lakes from upstream had diminished significantly over the last century, leading to a 68% decline in waterbird numbers.

One of the main problems with the original NSW proposal was it would have destroyed a highly significant sacred site of the Barkindji people at the junction of the two

"This is another good example of governments looking for a simple engineering solution to a complex problem," Kingsford said.

Robbing Peter to pay Paul

"Basically, governments were in such a hurry to find an engineering solution to water savings for the basin plan, they just rolled out the Menindee Lakes project, which had been on the NSW water agency's books for more than 20 years. It is a classic case of robbing Peter, the Menindee Lakes environment, to pay Paul, the environment in the rest of the basin."

Zoe Ford, a UNSW PhD candidate who led the research, said there was "little rigorous evidence or modelling made publicly available to explain how water savings would be achieved by the project, which has a significant financial cost to taxpayers of \$151.8m".

"More concerningly, these proposed water savings made up a substantial proportion - up to 25% - of the additional 450GL of water to be recovered for the environment through efficiency measures," Ford said.

The researchers found that in the NSW government modelling for the Menindee Lakes primary planning document, only one source (4%) was peer reviewed. A large proportion (41%) of relevant, freely available, independent and peer-reviewed information was not used.

"It makes a mockery of using the best available scientific evidence for making decisions on water under the Murray-Darling Basin plan," Kingsford said.

"The first plan was flawed," he added. "We don't want the second plan to go the same way. At the moment there is no clarity about what it involves."

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority said it was not responsible for reviewing NSW claims of water savings. Its initial role was "only to determine the volume of the adjust-

ment of the projects that Basin governments notified, assuming they were implemented as notified".

Graeme McCrabb, a Menindee local and water activist, said residents had been kept in the dark about what the latest plan was and there had been little consultation with the traditional owners or the town. which relies on tourism.

"NSW [water] minister Kevin Anderson has been asleep. There has been no consultation on the better Baaka."

Anderson told Guardian Australia the NSW government considers community consultation to be crucial when it comes to decisions about the Murray-Darling Basin.

"Ministerial council agreed in 2021 that NSW would work to rescope the Menindee Lakes water savings project, which is now part of the Better Baaka program," he said.

"It's aimed at improving water security, while delivering economic, cultural, and environmental benefits for regional NSW."



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Hidden costs of almond production **NSW** viticulturist accused of stealing 13,000 inland water and the environment in **CASE STUDY** ustralia more widely. In Australia, almonds use triple the megalitres of water from the Darling River

ZENA CUMPSTON

STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

In 2021, 123,000 tonnes (t) of almonds are projected to be harvested in Australia. Almonds now represent Australia's most valuable horticultural crop, and Australia is the world's second largest supplier.

For each tonne of almonds sold in Australia. 2.6t are exported: in 2010-20, these were sold to more than 50 countries, with the almond industry yielding \$772.6 mil-

In 2000, Australia had approximately 3,546 hectares (ha) of almond tree plantations. By 2019, the rapid expansion of this industry had increased almond-growing land to 53,014 ha – a 900% rise in less than 20 years

The fact that much of this expansion has occurred in a short time, particularly within the highly compromised Murray-Darling Basin, invites questions about | are particularly lethal to bees, and althe water needs of almonds and the role | mond cultivation requires more hives for | former owner of a vineyard, near | away from the overall reality of fi- | March 2019. of this crop in the multiple pressures on pollination than any other crop.

Australia more widely

amount of water required to produce wheat or feed grain; they need at least 8.5-10 megalitres of water per hectare during a growing season that stretches from October to April.

supply of water sees almond crops was illegally pumped from the planted along river systems that are fa- river over four years cing increasing pressure from prolonged dry periods. Almond crops have grown accused of illegally pumping by 50% in the Murray-Darling Basin | "5,200 Olympic swimming pools" | ern NSW cropping zones were since 2016, despite their substantial water worth of water from the Darling requirements in a geographical area with River in south western New South severe and catastrophic water security | Wales over a four-year period.

cause they are grown as monocultures, (NRAR) said it had begun a "sigwith industrial farms stripping the nificant" prosecution in the NSW ground around the trees bare to treat for Land and Environment Court insects and fungi. Also concerning is that | against the Lower Murray vinethe pesticides used to ensure high yields | yard operator.

water

wondering

in

FLEUR CONNICK THEGUARDIAN.COM

Regulator alleges '5,200 Olympic The underlying need for a reliable swimming pools' worth of water A vineyard operator has been

On Monday, the Natural Re-Almonds deplete biodiversity be- sources Access Regulator

meters and pumped up to 13,000 megalitres of water beyond their | fully, they're not just risking | conducted 1,013 property inspec-

water licence allocation. The water was allegedly taken illegally from the Darling River between 2011 and 2015 - shortly after the millennium drought the Murray-Darling when Basin and the majority of southstill severely affected by dry conditions

The director of investigations and enforcement at the NRAR Lisa Stockley, said the allegations were extremely serious, even though conditions in the area had since moved from severe drought to flooding in some locations.

"Periods of abundant rainfall The NRAR will allege the have a way of taking attention | tion between April 2016 and Wentworth, bypassed water nite water resources," she said.

"When people irrigate unlaw- | to September 2022, the NRAR heavy penalties. Illegal water take can also cause significant harm to the environment and their own community."

5,200 Olympic swimming pools worth of water

It's not the first time a Wentworth vinevard owner has been prosecuted for water theft.

In 2019, in an unrelated case, an owner pleaded guilty to eight charges of taking water from a watercourse without an alloca-

In the three months from July monitoring activities," she said.

First Nations people campaign for | Management plan must consider First Nations, climate more say in Murray-Darling Basin water management

DAVID CLAUGHTON SIMON WALLACE MAHNAZ ANGURY ABC NSW COUNTRY HOUR

Cheryl Blore grew up on the Baaka River — or the Darling, as most of us know it.

"We'd go swimming, feel for mussels in the sand with our feet to get them out," she said. "That's where our

Mum taught us how to cook Johnny cakes and put 'emu in the hole.''

Now she works as a river ranger, one of a number of positions created to involve more Indigenous people in river management. "It's just a dream," Ms

Blore said. "I always wanted to be

nvolved in our culture | with the gum leaves, coals and the river system, to in the top, cover it with care for country 'Emu in the hole'

sand and a bit of tin to keep it in." Ms Blore's father Having worked in river manage-

ment on the Menindee "because the wildlife dis-Lakes for three decades. appears when it is dry". She grew up there and eventually shared her cultural knowledge with her own children — including supply South Australia, how to cook emu.

"They dug the hole out, then you put the 2016. wood in there, get all the lakes are full and they're coals, get it hot," Ms Blore

"Some people put now," Ms Blore said. stones in there to keep it "We're warm, and then you place gum leaves over it. "Pluck the emu, gut it, again.' but the neck and the head

"Then they'd cover it full article online. KATH SULLIVAN

ABC NATIONAL RURAL REPORTER

Australia must rethink how Indigenous knowledge and climate change are incorporated into the management of the country's largest the Baaka River was im- river network, the new boss of the Murrayportant to her, she said, Darling Basin Authority says.

In a speech to the National Rural Press Club in Canberra today, MDBA chief execut- ment She is worried that the vive Andrew McConville will appeal for First water from Menindee Nations people to be included in water man-Lakes will be released to agement in a "real and meaningful way".

"All of us need to work harder to provide which is what happened in a place for First Nations people in water man- onment, farming and communities. agement decision-making," Mr McCon-"At the moment, our ville will say.

"We need to rethink how we incorporate starting to take the water Indigenous knowledge into the way we manage water in the Basin

"We need to do this in a respectful and culhow long it's going to take turally appropriate way ... this, I see, is the before they dry it up great unfinished business of water management in the Murray-Darling Basin."

Less than I per cent of the water in the **Excerpt only. Read the** Murray-Darling Basin is owned by Aboriginal

In 2018, the Coalition government commit- | cing his role in late June. ted \$40 million to help Indigenous Australians "to economically participate in water and en- | throw it out," he will tell the press club. sure that they get not only economic but also cultural outcomes".

The funding is yet to be delivered.

Mr McConville, a former oil and gas industry lobbyist, was appointed to head up the dwindled. MDBA in the dying days of the final parlia-

His first speech to the National Rural Press Club marks a decade since the Murray-Darling Basin Plan was legislated, setting out how water is to be shared between the envir-

With less than two years before major water-saving deadlines must be reconciled, Mr McConville is expected to highlight, in his speech, the challenges that climate change CSIRO modelling that shows inflows could fall by 30 per cent by 2050.

"That's 30 per cent less water in our rivers," he will say.

In an excerpt from his address, released ahead of the event, Mr McConville will say he than 120 water bird species, 50 native fish spevisited 36 Basin communities since commen- | cies and 16 protected wetlands.

"Hand on heart, literally no-one has said The plan has had plenty of detractors, arguing it either does not do enough to help the

environment or it has devastated communities, where irrigation-agriculture has Since the Basin Plan was legislated in 2012

there have been 2,100 gigalitres of water reallocated to the environment At a Senate Estimates hearing earlier this

month, federal officials confirmed 634 gigalitres are still to be recovered for the environment from across the Basin, in order to meet the legislated targets

It includes 49 gigalitres toward what is known as the Bridging the Gap target, 424 gigalitres toward an additional 450 gigalitres target presents for river management, referring to from efficiency projects and 161 gigalitres against a 605 gigalitres target to be recovered from state-managed projects.

> The Murray-Darling Basin produces \$22 billion of food and fibre, generates \$11 billion of tourism each year, while supporting more

Aboriginal people have spent centuries building in the Darling River, now there are plans to demolish these important structures

MICHAEL WESTAWAY BADGER BATES SUE JACKSON **THECONVERSATION.COM**

Apart from managing the land, Indigenous people | ship pilots, graziers and | fish traps, so many weirs | government's response to have also managed water- | other settlers who trav- | were built on outcropping | the crisis now presents a ways, including the Murray River and the Darling/ Baaka River, for thousands of years.

Like many Indigenous peoples of Australia, the Barkandii people of the Baaka manipulated tems of their country.

managed, grown and rocks. stored by the Barkandji.

These structures, and the famous paddle the cultural practices that steamer trade that contin- decades an increasing Indigenous community's over the rocks at different travel up and down the fresh spring water attracts sustain them, are still sig- | ued into the 1940s. Rocks | amount of water has been | strong opposition. nificant to the Barkandji | in the river often stopped | removed for large-scale irrisk from government even sank. commitments to irriga-

Reconstructing the Baaka's Aboriginal past To study the struc- dynamite. This blasted than 2,000km long. lied on archaeological methods. Barkandii knowledge and oral history, and written accounts from early settlers and explorers.

We found most of the wooden or earthen fish traps on the Baaka's floodplains have not endured and aren't archaeologic-

ted rock.

along the L200km chan-

stays out.

nel. elled along the Baaka rock. between Wentworth and Bourke.

traps were paddle steamers

Darling junction to traps, which are still used ables new dams and new Now, our research on Brewarrina on the Barwon today. stone, wood and earthen River. It was piloted by They are made in weir at Wilcannia, which fish traps and fish weirs | Captain William Randell, | steps going up the weir | has been used by Indigenon the Baaka and its flood- | and was unable to pass | wall, helping fish climb | ous people as a series of | plains reveals how these over the fish traps due to the wall like a modern fish fish traps for at least 60 aquatic resources were a lack of draught over the ladder.

This voyage initiated

and remnant stone traps - | river to secure water sup- | without water in the river,

These structures were ous people did when history and significance. encountered by explorers, | choosing sites for stone

hold the weir wall in ter The first paddle Indigenous workers who needs to reduce the steamer travelled in 1861 | carted and placed the | amount of water allocated and enhanced the river up the Baaka from rocks at the weir later to irrigation. and floodplain ecosys- Wentworth at the Murray- made them into stone fish

tures in the Baaka we re- rock can still be seen at The mass fish kills at stretched like a wall be managed. The first through. They also - providing fish reserves, ment's proposed infrasome outcrops, including | Menindee in 2018–2019 | across the river and held | thing is the river needs its | provide a rocky habitat | fish nurseries and rich and | structure will not only enareas that have the re- showed the devastating water back (before being "low and medium flows" that effectively forms diverse habitats for danger the remnants of mains of fish traps or are effects of removing so blasted to allow paddle protected. known to have once had | many of the small to me- | steamers to pass). them. Indigenous people dium flows that kept the But our field survey ginal people have held ce- yabbies and river snails. | aquatic plants and animals | impact the river's ecology.

areas, often using the blas-

which were once common plies. Settlers sought the the Barkandji could not same river features to use their fish traps or pass build weirs that Indigen- along knowledge of their

The New South Wales new threat to the fragile These weirs tended to fish traps. In 2019 the govhave loose boulders on ernment passed legisla-The first threat to the | the downstream side to | tion to fast-track new wainfrastructure. place. At Wilcannia, the despite strong evidence it

> The legislation en-(higher) weirs. The old vears, will be partly de-**Taking too much water** molished and will no for irrigation | longer function as a fish During the last two trap. This is despite the

The legislation also alpeople - but they've been | these vessels from navig- | rigation from the Baaka | lows for the "re-establish- | helping sustain the eco- | traps assist with this. severely affected by col- ating at low water levels, and its northern tributar- ment of natural rock weirs system. onisation, and remain at and they occasionally ies. By 2019, excessive wa- on the Darling River How should the river benefits from water flow- the necessity of regularly of the Baaka. Yet Indigenter extraction had virtu- between Bourke and its This prompted gov- ally dried the Baaka and junction with the Murray ernment-resourced teams Barwon rivers from River". This suggests all original people along the increase flow turbulence, They previously en- about how its water to force a passage through Wentworth to Col- the rock outcrops in the Baaka offer valuable in- reduce silting, improve hanced these water bodies moves long before scientby blasting the rocks with | larenebri - a route more | Darling Baaka were ori- | sight into how this pre- | water quality and are | by using temporary | ists did. ginally weirs that cious body of water could "keyed" to let small fish wooden and earthen weirs The NSW govern-

built new traps in these ecosystem functioning. coupled with historical remonies (and to some ex-This extended dry material indicates most tent still do) to mark mass also often found in associ- life when floods came people's experience and river resulted in the near rock outcrops were ori- migrations of fish such as ation with shallow aquifer down after dry periods. knowledge are taken seri-During the 20th cen- extinction of many spe- ginally uneven, with golden perch and silver springs, with one recor- They held water to replen- ously, the Baaka and its tury, a series of low-level cies, including river openings and numerous bream that travel up- ded trap built around a ish the shallow aquifers precious resources may be ally visible. There are, weirs were built at the snails, mussels, catfish loose rocks. This allowed stream to spawn. These spring. This is evidence of that create springs and depleted beyond the point



The Wilcannia weir stone fish traps are still used by young Barkandji people. (Source: Sarah Martin)

fish traps to work and at the Wilcannia weir, fish during drought.

be managed?

however, some existing small towns along the and silver bream. Also, water to flow through and fish have to be able to fish management; the soaks in the river.

river heights, enabling the river unimpeded. As seen fish and acts as a refuge so far largely ignored the

There are also several people also understand sustainable management ing over and through fish | filling floodplain lakes, | ous people living along Fish traps set by Ab- | trap stone walls. The walls | swamps and billabongs. | the Baaka have known "multi-storey apartments" | aquatic life.

culturally significant fish Historically, Abori- for invertebrates such as These structures kept trap structures, but also

Local Indigenous knowledge to facilitate the

OPINION

water?"

me thinking.

520 days.

HELEN VIVIAN

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

buyback program for environmental

flow. We spend billions. Where's the

This post on Facebook by

I went up to Pooncarie vesterday

to try to come to grips with the state

of the Darling River. The Darling

River has had 15 "cease to flow"

events since 2001, the longest being

Prior to 2001, the last time the

river was dry was about 1945, after

the big drought during World War

II. Curiously, the previous big

drought was during World War I.

Like the old river just ran out of

There must be millions of pages

of reports written on the Murray-

Darling Basin, mostly by people sit-

Because there is no escaping the

state of this once magnificent river.

It's like a giant neon emergency sig-

nal flashing across the four most

populous states in the country. De-

pleted, despoiled, often poisonous

and since 2001 frequently dry, the

mismanagement

Darling River is an emblem of poor

greed and anti-democratic activity.

pipeline is being built to supply

Murray River water to Broken Hill,

which used to supplement its water

supply from the Darling River via

The new pipeline is needed be-

cause the Menindee-to-Broken Hill

pipeline, which has been used for

the last 65 years, can no longer ac-

cess a reliable source of water from

the Darling. Despite a dramatic fall

in the population of Broken Hill

enough water flowing down the

Lower Darling River into the Men-

indee storage because of the in-

That's what they call the Men-

indee Lakes now - storage, not

lakes. There is a push to "decom-

mission" the lakes - in other words.

to dry them out - which will cause

further devastation to the Lower

much evaporation from the lakes.

creased water use upstream.

Darling

efficient.

government.

the Menindee Lakes.

Have they ever seen the Darling?

ting in desks in capital cities.

heart and gave up, it was all so sad.

Mildura chef Stefano de Pieri got

Cry me a river: Mismanagement and corruption

tions and 298 investigations, with six active prosecutions in court. Quarterly reporting data from that period revealed illegal water

take and water meter breaches remain the most common offence dealt with by the NRAR, making up 48% of all offences. When the NRAR decide what to investigate, Stockley said they consider two main questions:

"Does the evidence show there is a high risk that water rules are being broken? How much harm will be caused by that rule breaking? "Since irrigated agriculture often includes the largest water users within a particular region, the regulator has made this a pri-

change, says new Murray-Darling Basin Authority boss

ority area for compliance and

Water managers have potential for Indigenous have left the Darling River dry levees on private farms. Masquerad- | states. Then there is the ad hoc | an isolated case. Last month, Fair- | events" of 1945 and 2001. Now they | ing Group's report. But then again, I ing as environmental mitigation manner in which many of these are fax's Peter Hannam revealed details are an almost annual occurrence am from Tasmania where wilderworks, funded by the taxpayer, farm | applied. Whilst water is rigorously | of a \$17 million purchase in March | and the length of time during which | ness is wilderness and rivers have levees have been constructed to create vast on-farm water storages, in 75 per cent of farms in the headwa-"Where is the water? The Darling some cases the size of Sydney Har-

River has 22 tributaries. We have a bour Major crimes police raided the plies Norman farm at Goondiwindi last year after allegations of fraud relating to misuse of \$25 million of taxpayer funds provided for water saving programs

And this week it was announced that WaterNSW would prosecute five people for water theft, after the NSW Ombudsman pointed out that contrary to statistics WaterNSW provided to the government - no penalty enforcement notices for water theft had been issued between July 2016 and November 2017.

The Wentworth-Broken Hill pipeline has happened very fast for a government project. The NSW government approved the \$467 million project in late 2016. The contract was awarded and announced in October 2017, in the same month that the business case for the pipeline was published (Broken Hill Long-Term Water Supply Solution). Detailed design and planning was carried out after the awarding of the contract (according to WaterNSW) and apparently completed within two months, as work commenced in January 2018

The pipes have already been delivered - a large quantity can be seen lining the chosen route on the western side of the Silver City Highway The lower Darling River is in so much trouble that a 270-kilometre outside Wentworth.

> It's good to know that Australian steel manufacturers can produce 28,000 tonnes of steel and deliver a significant proportion of the 270 kilometres of rolled steel pipes, approximately 80 centimetres in diameter, in just two months.

According to the WaterNSW website: "The pipeline will be completed and ready for water by 37.4 megalitres during peak daily since the 1970s, there is no longer demand.'

To give you an idea how much water that is, 37.4 megalitres per day is 433 litres per second, or 1.5 million litres per hour pumped out of the Murray

The Wentworth-Broken Hill pipeline will fix things for Broken Darling for its water supply. It will also ensure secure water supply for two new mines. Perilva Mines and The argument is that there is too Hawsons Iron Project.

Finally, we can mark a new which are shallow, and that's waste- | achievement in our technological | that Webster will decommission the | the Menindee Lakes were at 89 per | between Broken Hill, Menindee and | not know some of the locations ful. The new on-farm dams that progress calendars. It's not quite up irrigated horticultural enterprise at cent capacity. Just four months later Wentworth. It is characterised by ferred to by the invited audience. have been built upstream in north- there with going to the moon, but Tandou and return the property to they were down to 45 per cent, pre- dryland grazing which occupies 91.5 He is the minister. It's his back ern NSW and southern Queensland | we have made water flow uphill and | dry-land farming. They will take all | sumably a good deal of this water | per cent of the area while "native | yard. There is real-time satellite by cotton growers in the home into the deepest pockets, just as the promised jobs and economic flowing to Tandou Station, a few landscapes" comprise 1.9 per cent. tracking of water flows that shows country of the former and current some predicted when water was activity with them to their northern kilometres south of the lakes. water ministers, Barnaby Joyce and | first commodified and "decoupled" | NSW holdings, where they get to in- | Very little if any of the water | less than o.I per cent of land use in David Littleproud, are much, much from the land.

bigger and deeper, so evaporation is It is hard to untangle water is- the Darling River. not such a problem. It's much more sues as upstream users square off This is the real kicker - the \$112 allocated and distributed to up- dustries study of 2012. against those downstream. There | million water "buyback" will do | stream irrigators. The recent fre-This argument about reducing are dozens of different types of wa- nothing to benefit the river or water quent drying of the Darling River is this devastated landscape, it is hard evaporation losses apparently does | ter titles, and a litany of government | users downstream. not apply to flood plain diversion regulations which vary between We now know that this was not years passed between the "no-flow ism pointed to in the RM Consult- University.

ters of the Darling are unmetered, so an honesty system effectively ap-

In 2012 the NSW government inreased water entitlements and allowed upstream users to draw water from the river even during low flow periods. The Barwon-Darling watersharing plan has been contentious from the day it was introduced and serious allegations were raised last month about the conduct of the then minister for primary industries, Katrina Hodgkinson, for unilaterally altering the plan after it was finalised by her department. In July 2017 the ABC Four

Corners program "Pumped" revealed astounding malpractice and alleged corruption, which is currently being investigated by the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC). Some of these allegedly corrupt transactions hide behind a veil of incompetence. Hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars have been spent on water "buybacks", where the government has paid twice the going rate for water which effectively does not exist, except during heavy rainfall and peak water conditions.

The first of these was the purchase of \$34 million of supplementary water rights, described locally as "empty buckets of water", sold to the federal government during the manently "decommissioned". Millennium drought in 2008 by Tandou Station, 100 kilometres south-east of Broken Hill and just south of the Menindee Lakes. A further water sale to the federal gov- St George and Dirranbandi, in ernment was made last year by the same station. \$78 million for their entire 21,900-megalitre water right and for business readjustment.

As was reported last month, that deal - personally negotiated by ton producers like Chinese-owned December 2018. It will supply up to Barnaby Joyce - was at more than Cubbie Station, the biggest user of twice the market price for water.

That's \$112 million of taxpayer funds to one station, Tandou. Webster Limited has owned Tandou since 2015. The company also owns | floods and generous flows throughseveral large cotton properties upstream at Bourke and Moree.

Webster, a Tasmanian company, is also one of Australia's biggest wa- ing down the Macintyre River at Hill, which can no longer rely on the ter traders. Its shareholders include Boggabilla, in the Darling River Australian Food and Fibre, which is controlled by the Robinson family, a major donor to the National Party.

lion investment of taxpayer funds is | land electorate. By December 2016,

metered throughout Victoria, nearly 2017, at twice the market price for the river ceases to flow has doubled. water, from the Tulla Pastoral Company, owned by Geoff Dunsdon, in the Warrego River in southern Queensland. This was also empty buckets of water - or "goanna water" as they call it further north.

> This transfer of water and wealth to a very small number of corporate farming operations comes at great cost to the river and cannot be justified *economically, let alone* environmentally or

socially.

According to the November 2017 Matthews Report, commissioned by the NSW government in the wake of the explosive allegations aired by Four Corners, most of the effective water controls and regulation do not apply, or are not complied with, in the Upper Darling Basin

Joyce confirmed in an interview with The Australian that the deal with Webster meant that some of the five lakes making up the Menindee storage system would be per-

The Australian reported that Joyce said letting the lakes dry out would save precious water for irrigators in the cotton communities of southern Queensland, and Bourke, Wee Waa and Moree in northern NSW. This was "a much better alternative than having to withdraw water entitlements from large cotwater in Australia".

Some will say it's the drought causing problems in the lower Darling. But there have also been out this period. In June 2016, approximately 60,000 megalitres of water per day was measured flowcatchment on the border of NSW and Queensland.

The Macintvre forms the north-The outcome from this \$112 mil- | ern boundary of Joyce's New Eng- | pacity 365 days a year.

tercept the water before it enters from the floods in early 2017 the Lower Darling, according to a rolling out. The Darling has no tears reached the Menindee Lakes. It was | NSW Department of Primary In- | left to cry.

Alarm bells rang from the very start of the water reforms and an ABC News report, "Water Wars", summed up the problem succinctly: "In 2008-9 ... whilst urban water users faced severe restrictions and the vast majority of the Basin was enduring the peak of the worst drought in living memory, the cultivation of cotton and rice consumed 981 gigalitres of water. This figure equates to the combined water consumption of Sydney, Meloourne and Adelaide (990 gigalitres) over the same period, to produce a crop with a combined value of less than \$650 million, in a year when the gross value of national agricultural production was in excess of \$46 billion."

This transfer of water and wealth to a very small number of comes at great cost to the river and cannot be justified economically, let alone environmentally or socially.

The Wentworth-Broken Hill pipeline is a vital element in what increasingly looks like a plan to sacrifice the Lower Darling to the inerests of the cotton industry upstream

Broken Hill is the only populous area in the region that relied on the river. It was a problem that needed to be solved, given the NSW government's statutory responsibility to maintain water supply to the township. But Broken Hill's gain will certainly be a loss to those on the Lower Darling and further downstream

The RM Consulting Group's report on the pipeline, prepared for WaterNSW in July 2017 and finalised in November 2017, states that the pipeline is designed to supply 100 per cent of Broken Hill's water requirements. Why 100 per cent? Broken Hill does have some water resources of its own or it wouldn't be there

The current average cost of water to consumers along the pipeline is \$740 per megalitre, based on usage charges to consumers along the pipeline as set out in the report. So the value of the 37.4 megalitres of daily water the pipeline will supply is \$26.928 per day, or about \$10 million a year. That's \$467 million spent to supply \$10 million of water per year, assuming the pipe flows at ca-

Irrigated horticulture accounts for exactly where the water is going.

Having recently driven through a man-made situation. Fifty-six to imagine the potential for ecotour- Visual Culture from Monash

Public hearings see citizens speaking in support of the Baaka

MANAV SATIJA AUSTRALIAN EARTH LAWS ALLIANCE

Blog from Citizens' Inquiry into the Health of the Darling River and Menindee Lakes - 27 March, 2019

Wentworth, Broken Hill and Menindee. I was only able eyes. to participate as a panel member in these first four hearings, and subsequent hearings in other affected communities continue in my absence, however my brief pression on me.

ings of grief – and at times – anger. Although the cumu- hadn't died in a good way. lative decision-making of governments, industrial agriregion go far beyond economics.

of a rich timeless connection and love for their river. the river in his role as a steward.

Many people spoke, both implicitly and explicitly, of a | The victims of this ecological travesty are wide- | using water such as that bought by the trucks for all deep symbiosis connecting them with this river ecosys- spread. Yet after the last week of hearings I am also sur- their other needs). tem. This is about more than just the theft of livelihoods prisingly hopeful. The pain in the eyes and words of the or the dispossession of water "resources". The destruc- | locals coexists alongside immeasurable strength, detion of the river is itself mirrored in the erosion of dig-termination and resilience. I just returned home after a whirlwind series of pub-

immersion in the Citizens' Inquiry has left a lasting im- was a traditional weaver and artist whose totem animal

culturalists and water managers which has led to the of her pain of not being able to teach her own children could hear her. degradation of this delicate river ecosystem has been | how to fish the river as her father had taught her. The

The courage of an 8-year-old girl from Menindee passion to the river itself. lic hearings of the Citizen's Inquiry into the Health of | Their distress has a deeply personal ring to it... as if a | (who was quick to assert that she was almost 9) particwas the emu. Their feathers adorned her art, however | future the most. She will have to live by, or ultimately | way of relating to the river. Since returning to Sydney I have had lingering feel- | she could not use the feathers of these emu as they | leave, the river long after all else have passed on. Her selflessness was particularly arresting. If only those be enriched by looking to, and walking alongside the Another First Nations woman in Broken Hill spoke continuing their destructive exploitation of the waters First Nations custodians of this area. Uncle Badger

heavily weighted towards economic considerations, the | depth of her pain of witnessing in real time, a rupture in | the region who has organised for truckloads of water to | the symbiosis between the river and its traditional cusimpacts on human and non-human communities of this the chain of cultural lineage and heritage which has be delivered to Menindee every few weeks to sustain todians, the Barkandji. connected her and her mob to this land seems un- the local community. (The drinking water in Menindee The ancientness of this river seems to speak to the | fathomable to me. My heart felt torn as I heard the writ- | ran dry 4 months ago and the local community is now | nition in law and governance systems of this type of eninfinite in the hearts of the people who live by it. Every- | ten words of a First Nations man being read out by a | almost completely reliant on donated water. The water | during relationship between landscape and custodian one here, irrespective of their cultural heritage, speaks | friend. He apologised to the river for failing to protect | coming out of their taps smells and is all but completely | may instil a much-needed sense of our responsibilities toxic. Locals are currently drinking bottled water and to the ecosystems which support us.

Perhaps the starting point for us all to move forward is to honour the resilience and compassion modelled by these young concerned citizens, by extending this com-

Time and time again we heard people speak of their the Darling River and Menindee Lakes in Mildura, loved family member is deteriorating in front of their ularly touched me. She shared a poem she had written deep knowing that the river would bounce back if, as with her nan's assistance in which she asked for solu- one person told us in Broken Hill, we only 'give her a A First Nations elder in Wentworth spoke of stop- tions which would make the people happy again. Of all chance'. We heard a range of solutions offered by ping by the side of the road to pick up carcasses of dead | that spoke she perhaps has the greatest entitlement to | people about how to restore the river – ranging from emus who had died from drinking poisoned water. She | immediate action as the consequences of this short- | immediate actions designed to minimise further damsighted mismanagement and exploitation will affect her age to longer-term objectives to establish a different

This new paradigm of relationship could certainly

Bates spoke in Wentworth of his fight to have the tradi-We also met Riley, a young teenager from outside tional name of the Barkariver restored in recognition of There is little doubt in my mind that explicit recog-

been saved by direct community action, in the days when it was possible to congregate to protest such schemes without fearing imprisonment as a terrorist

Recently, Bob Brown challenged the new Tasmanian anti-congregation laws when he was arrested at a logging protest in October 2017. The Victorian, NSW, Queensland, South Australian and federal governments joined Tasmania in fighting Brown's challenge to the laws.

The High Court found that "the laws were at odds with the implied right, in the Australian constitution. to the freedom of political communication". The Tasmanian government was ordered to pay costs in the case

People do have the right to protest destruction of their environment and no one should be afraid to corporate farming operations stand up when the future of Australia's most iconic rivers is at stake Several of those involved in organising recent demonstrations against the pipeline in Wentworth expressed fear of the harsh penalties applied by the anti-congregation laws and said they could not afford legal representation should they be arrested.

This is not just about one river, though that would be enough. It's about the whole Murray-Darling Basin, the ecology, people and creatures who depend upon the Basin, the communities and cities downstream, the fisheries which spawn in the Darling and populate the rivers downstream. Above all it is about the state of our nation.

Alleged corruption and collusion with cotton growers in the northern Basin has already claimed the scalp of the deputy directorgeneral of water at the NSW De-

partment of Industry, Gavin Hanlon, and increasingly there are concerns that it may extend to ministerial levels. When corruption reaches these sorts of levels, the functioning of our democracy is at risk.

After more than \$8 billion has been spent, the capacity of our governments and authorities to deliver anything of value to their citizens is in question. If we are prepared to sacrifice the Darling River, what future can we contemplate for Australia

The Federal Minister for Water, David Littleproud, met with concerned lower Darling residents in The Lower Darling is the area Mildura on Thursday. He said he did

The obfuscations just keep on

Helen Vivian is a writer and curator with an MA in Environmental Studies from the University of Tasmania and an MA in

Uncle Badger Bates expresses fight for sacred river through art

JENNETTA QUINN-BATES NITV NEWS

The exhibit reflects the decadesto save the sacred river and is completely constructed of materials | time before it dries up again. from Wilcannia.

In the middle of the floor is a trail of sand. While it's adorned with clay

footprints, feathers, rocks twigs and | gence and gross maladministration meaning.

Uncle Badger Bates watches river. over it, he brought the sand here from Wilcannia. It's a confronting representation of the battle his people have fought for decades.

"We tried to make the riverbed. pact. What you see on the floor is what vou can see out there when they take water," he said.

The artwork is the centerpiece of a powerful new exhibition on display at the Maitland Art Gallery. Titled 'Barka. The Forgotten River'. it tells the story of the Barkindji people's long-term, ongoing fight to protect the sacred waterway. While the river is currently

flowing, the Barkindji people say it | traveled to the outback "by acci- | was about 3 months old and the old- | by small speakers so you can hear

will never be the same following | dent".

years of over-extraction of the wa-

There are concerns for the fu-

A Royal Commission into the

Uncle Badger has been on the

then I am just a black trouble-

Badger linked up with Sydney-

based artist Justine Muller, who first

"With my artwork, I can put a

maker." he said.

speak for itself."

committed unlawful actions, negli-

"The mechanic that fixed my car gave me a dog and said I shouldn't be in the outback by myself, long battle of the Barkindii people ture of all people who live along the and then that car broke down a river, and that it's only a matter of second time in Wilcannia," she told NITV News.

"I ended making really good Murray Darling Basin plan in 2019 friends with Uncle Badger who befound Commonwealth officials came a mentor for me."

Ms Muller spoke to residents of the town and got a sense of their pieces of glass - it has so much more with multibillion-dollar deals they story. She then contemplated how made to "recover" water for the best it could be told.

"I was very aware of the fact that I was an outsider coming in and I frontlines fighting to protect the was invited to be on that country. river for decades and he hopes this | So, with that in mind I was really form of expression can have an im- | like, how do I use my privilege and my position to incorporate the "I can go and row with the govvoices of these people that should ernment anytime but if I do that, be heard but weren't getting heard," she said

"With consultation, I decided to est person was in their 90s." collect footprints from every single everyone and let the exhibition I went to almost every house print, wood and steel sculpture and nia. and Uncle Badger and I collected painting. To create the exhibition, Uncle | buckets of clay directly from the dry riverbed.

"The youngest person we got



Other works in the exhibit incor-

There's also a multi-media installation that involves still images

of people that are accompanied

their stories point across and make it kind to person that I could in Wilcannia, so porate ceramics, leadlight, lino all the materials are from Wilcan- son asking other people to help us

> Most importantly, all the pieces reflect Uncle Badger's love for his | and we all say we need a future for people and his dedication to healing our kids. It does not matter who you the Barka. "I am standing here today, not as water."

a black person from the Darling It took three years to make and Barka. I am standing here as a perwith this fight." he said. "If people don't help us, the kids,

Barkandji Elder gives his powerful testimony to the Murray Darling Basin Royal Commission

the Wilcannia hospital near Bourke, and the on the Barka (Darling | Ngatji lives in it still. River).

I was brought mostly by my grand- of the river after the Ngatji mother Granny Annie went thru with the water. Moysey. She was recorded The Ngatji looks after us speaking Barkandji and and we have to look after talking about Barkandji it, it is our traditional job culture and country by lin- | to look after the Ngatji and guist Dr Luise Hercus in | the river and the other surthe late 1960's and early face and sub-surface wa-1970's. Granny was born ters of the Barka and its on the river at Toorale Sta- floodplains. The Barka tion between Louth and gives us healthy food and Bourke, and belonged to medicine, it gives us wood the northern Kurnu dialect to make our artefacts, group of Barkandii. I was reeds to weave, it is where the last baby she reared up we go as families to swim, and she took me travelling | boat, camp, picnic, fish, go through Barkandji country | yabbying, and prepare and and neighboring people's | cook our traditional food. country. I grew up in Wil- | It is where we relax and cannia, Louth, Bourke, and enjoy our homeland. visited relations in Cobar | talk and remember and grandmother never lived on a mission, and stayed water. If we catch some much, I feel life is right. away from authorities. She | fish we light a little fire by | The young kids in Wil- | are disappearing. took me and travelled the river and cook the fish cannia use the town weir generation.

either side in 2015. I am on walk along the river and cannia. tional Parks and Wildlife (this might be under water for 21 years, and since my so you can't see it). and practice that involves ex- where to put your cod line creeks and lakes, the and no flows. hibitions, artist in residen- in. We have many stories plants and the animals. cies, workshops and pub- like this. The river is our The river was always fresh lic art works.

Cultural Values places.

Our Barka means I walk along the river slightly milky colour from everything to us, it is our and climb down to cut a the clay, settling to a mother. It is who we are. boomerang out of a bent clearer colour after We take our name from it, red gum or black box tree freshes settle down. We Barkandji means people root, then sit on the riverb- used to catch fish with a

Thirri also shaped the memory, we walk along it enough to drink and we What the Barka or and remember our history could always get a feed of **Darling River Means to** and our ancestors by look- fish, or yabbies, duck or Barkandji People - Our ing at the marks and turtle or something. Our

I was born 5/10/1947 in out of his waterbag up country, I can hear my old feel the slight breeze made by them moving around. It up channel, bends and islands is what makes me who I am. Without water in our river the trees will die and

> At night on the river I listen to *the fish jumping* up and I am

happy. there will be no more roots to cut out and make

happy. Or I hear the sound coming down. From this I

to be like river water should be a

There were birds everyswans, cormorants, ibis, would come in for a drink at dusk or hang in the cool of the river red gums, like parrots, finches and cockatoos. There were lots of

So many of our plants and animals have gone or are just disappearing.

called Badger (a nick- when Kuluwarra let the thing like this I am looking would use spears we fish. Now for every 10 carp fella's silly story. name from childhood). Ngatji (Rainbow Serpent) after my river and my made. Our fish are beauti- we catch we might get one Low Flows or No flows ful to eat, we used to get decent native fish. Black people talking to me, I can cod, perch, black bream, bream and catfish are ways had water flowing, catfish and bony bream. nearly extinct in the river we had big and medium We used to get buckets now, this has happened and buckets of yabbies. only recently because flows that kept it all going. there is no water. So many Very rarely it would stop where along the river, wa- of our plants and animals flowing but if it stopped ter birds like pelicans, have gone or are just dis- the big waterholes were appearing. These are a still good. It would only cranes, herons, and ducks. part of us, it is just the stop flowing for a while. Often we would see a kite | same as losing a family | Since 2012 we have seen hawk swooping down to | member, or worse because | the river completely dry catch a fish. There were once they are gone that is up for miles and miles, and also lots of birds that the end of our cultural life. this just keeps happening **River Springs and**

Aquifers

we could always drink the | could pump out our small river water, but if the river | flows so we are left with water rats and river goan- was really low we used to nothing most of the time. nas and water dragons, dig holes along the bank The MDBA have studies boomerangs. At night on now we only see the odd and get fresh clean water that show how important the river I listen to the fish | old goanna. The water had | from soaks or springs. The | the small flows are to the jumping up and I am | lots of insects such as wa- | big water holes also linked At Easter this year we | the next rise, this was their | Plan. around with me to stop the and some johnny cakes as a fish trap, when the wa- were looking for some refuge. Now at Wilcannia Water Quality ate (PBC), Barkandji were language. It is where we Brewarrina they are right gone, and the few left are Shire pumps water from a the water is unfit to drink, seem to take what we say about it. Darling National Park and a coolamon or a canoe, birds and animals and the animals depend on them ted. We know this because than not. year. I was an Aboriginal stony bank in the river buka, they will not live. imals that depend on the both on top of and below. We never heard of "black way. retirement in 2005 I divide then you know that the lived beside the river in know that many of our us that we will end up with my time between sitting deep bend up or down tents, humpies and tin other smaller shellfish no water at all, because the tees, teaching young where the cod will be ting to know every bend in snail that we used for bait and floodplain in the wet, people about Barkandji hanging out cause they eat the river, and everything is now officially extinct and then it seeps back out culture, and my artwork the mussels. So you know about the river, billabongs, due to bad water quality into to river in the dry. This is how our river works, it is all connected. But with no floods, no floodplain water, and

The Barka nearly alfloods and many small now. The changes they made in 2012 meant that When \overline{I} was younger | the irrigators upstream river, but they are ignoring Broken Hill, Menindee

on Boards and commit- from the shell midden is huts, and moved a lot, get- have also gone, the river aquifer fills from the river They call us Traditional Owners but they don't accept we have any rights to manage the Barka or stop them ruining it for us all.

manage the Barka or stop them ruining it for us all. **MDBA and NSW Dol**

consultation with Barkandji People When the MDBA and ginal people around the

They hold separate colour coded meetings for the whitefellas and blackfellas.

for regulators between kilometres from our land The water from the When they gave an ex-Lake Menindee and Lake and river. They don't unfloodplains, lakes and biltra 70 GL allowance for irme on MLDRIN last year Cawndilla that we hadn't | derstand how important it | labongs refill our shallow rigators taken out of the Northern Basin in May seen before and asked us is to us to have **our** river aquifers, which as I said and bush medicine but we flows report that we before are linked to the need just a little bit of wa- worked so hard doing. basin, rarely they come to | for comment. All the loca- | with fresh water in it, and | this year, the media from tions have burials, mid- our lakes, billabongs and river and are a necessary David Littleproud and When you look at this ter to get the plants started ter boatmen, and lots of | in to these springs, so if | their own scientists. See | and Wilcannia. It is usu- | dens. scarred trees. arte- | floodplains as well. part of the river system MDBA was all about the to do that. We have a farm cultural flows project it come from Wilcannia, we Barkandji are not in the flow will be salty and on stations between Wil- When we go fishing we go of the swans flying north wrigglers, that you don't the river stopped running Appendix 4 chart that ally the same old thing. facts and ovens that will Just one example of and are our emergency extra 200 jobs around just near the town and it only has two study areas, which is not in MLDRIN list that needs to be con- nasty at first because all cannia and Bourke, and as a family and we sit and to meet the fresh water supplies for towns the increase in no They give us hardly any be destroyed, and they how they don't understand water supplies for towns Moree, Walgett etc. But has a small water license, one at a swamp on the Cul- area. I asked if I could sulted, it only lists the the bad water upstream is of water plants in the river holes still stayed full of flows (when the river has notice or any agenda, they wanted feedback on the our cultural values. Ku- and properties. If the what we can't work out is but there is no water to goa River and one on the transfer to NBAN because groups to the north of us. pushed down. But people and Murrin Bridge. My pass stories on about our know when the fresh wa- and mainly in the billa- clean water because water why can't we have jobs pump. It has all been Murrumbidgee. Nothing that is more my county. In effect this map says we can't work out how come ancestors and our land and ter is coming and how bongs, the fish and other seeped into them from the 1970's but mainly through charts and want us to give it but when I went home I Barkandji people, they are the river can't cope with too? At Menindee was lots pumped out up past from the Barka or Darling NBAN said no because Barkandji are not the tra- it is still salty, even getting things eat these, but they springs. This is where the the millennium drought them feedback on things couldn't sleep because I our relations, they tell us dry times. Many plants of vineyards, fruit trees because I our relations, they tell us dry times. cod stayed and waited for and since the 2012 Basin without being able to was thinking what will things and they dance for and animals breed and equivalent and vegetable farms until ployment has huge social the Murray, the two MLDRIN so they couldn't Barka, even though we against the usual recent think about it and under- they say we said, who us. We don't kill them or grow in the lakes and billa- about 10 years ago, as well effects on the people of biggest rivers. MDBA say be on NBAN as well, al- have a determined Native stand it. They hold separ- knows, we never get any eat them because they are bongs, not the river chan- as Tandou which grew cot- Wilcannia, people turn to the NBAN and MLDRIN though they were earlier Title claim over most of it. causing the salt levels, the welfare stealing me and and we sit and eat there on ter is a the right level they empty mussel shells along for the last few years even they think of ton. This employed our grog and drugs because are independent but that is on, two of the founders of the surface water map long term lack of water in putting me in a home to the river. We don't use shape the rocks into pools the river at Wilcannia to our big waterholes have with water quality like we for the whitefellas and minutes or anything. What and they cry if one is floodplain water as people, all my nephews they are so depressed hav- a joke, they get funded by NBAN were Barkandji does list us, over the river and shallow "wasted". They want to used to work in the vine- ing no work and seeing the the MDBA. become one of the stolen | plates or knives and forks, | to trap the fish, this way of | use for art work. There | been drying up, and there | do now. Over the last few | blackfellas. We never get | I do know they will be des- | killed. we just use our fingers and catching fish has been used to huge numbers of is nowhere for the cod to years they have put warn- any feedback, or minutes, troying more of our sites and not On the 1 August this brother-in-law Willy Riley groups. I am a director of the maybe a bit of bark as a handed down through the big mussels along the go. When the river gets ing signs up all around the so they could be reporting including burials of our one our Barkandji families. indee Lakes are operated and all my nieces and even able to go fishing or year it was splashed all and cousin William Cultural Flows and into the river, I was told Barkandji Native Title plate. It is where we teach generations. Stone river, but we realised that low and the blue green al- river near Wilcannia and anything, we wouldn't ancestors and we are When I was very young as part of the "water sav- cousins used to pick, sort swimming. Our elders are over the papers and inter- Charles Bates, both passed Environmental Flows this years ago by Boama Prescribed Body Corpor- | our children and speak our | fishtraps are not just at | our mussels are nearly all | gae sets in, the Wilcannia | elsewhere telling people | know. And they never | powerless to do anything | living on the river on a sta- | ings" agreement for more | and pack the fruit. On top | passing away and young | net about the MDBA study | away now. Barkandji is a | Barkandji is a | Barkandji people at | the engineer who was in tion called Winbar water to be given to irrig- of that there was employ- people committing suicide that recorded 26,000 sites huge language group made Wilcannia, Menindee and charge of the Salt Intergiven native title to most do our artwork, take pho- along the Barka too, there small, round, and the shell bore near one of these big unfit for stock to drink, into account. Like we have been asking ception Scheme near one of these big unfit for stock to drink, between Wilcannia and ators, but they are so sad. of the Barka or Darling tos, make videos, make is a good one in the river is thin and blistered like waterholes. We know that and not to swim, or take been telling them for years yes they consult but it is Bourke, us kids were al- ing their own official sci- ness for the Menindee Louth. River and wide areas songs and dances. We about 10 km below Wil- they have been poisoned. they are pumping from the fish or yabbies. They don't especially since 2012 that fake consultation, they lowed to go and watch the entific evidence. They community. Now that is all the small groups can't even get anyone to This "Northern Con-Our people depended on shallow aquifer that refills even bother to pull them our river is dying for lack only do it to tick a box and brolgas dance. But we had want to only fill the lakes gone because there is no Project and lack of didn't cover any of the around Brewarrina etc. are give us any answers. nectivity Event" was the the Joint Management see where our ancestors do und the big waterholes, we down now because they of water, so what do they do as little consultation as to behave just like we were when there is a big flood, secure water supply and Inclusion of Barkandji Barka or Barkandji Coun- all individually represented by a subject of on-going media Committees of Paroo- cooked mussels or cut out beautiful, the water, the for bait, and all the other know they are all connec- are in force more often do? Change the basin plan beautiful, the water, the back of Barkandii country was try, and the MDBA say ted on NBAN, even though us, no explanation even and patting on the back of so they can take out an ex- what they like no matter quietly up and sit down they can't stop that any- empty yet again because originally not included in they won't be doing any- they belong to the one lan- given. The Toorale Na- the NSW DoI and MDBA. and watch and not talk. We way) and then they want they pushed all the water the MDBA Cultural Flows more. I am sorry, correct guage group. So as it tional Park Joint Manage- David Littleproud put out Toorale National Park, and and we connect with them huge river red gums are for food. I was so sad I did of the stories handed When I was younger tra 70GL for the irrigators what we say. I am on the Mutawintji and use this to interpret famous for their beauty, an art work called Fragile down to use about the we did not have blue green upstream. So whatever You can see from the thought of the Brolgas ex- to release the water using out. Maybe 200 jobs have project until I said last me if I'm wrong but it stands MLDRIN says it ment Committee has been all of these media releases National Park Board of and understand our land- which gives us pride and River, which was about 30 Ngatji or rainbow serpent, algae the river like we do consultation they did with Menindee, and year at a MDBA meeting looks like a stitch up for only goes up to Menindee, and asking for about what a good job they Management, I have been | scape. For example, a shell | happiness. Without these | happiness. Without on MLDRIN for about a midden means there is a things my people will be ished and etched with an- and they be ished and etched with an- and they be ished and etched with an- and they be ished and etched with an- be ished ginal people are not rated showed us their dances. Barka 3 times as fast as it why are Menindee people Barka or Darling River? others to make us all fight, of the Barkandji people Earlier this year the said it was too salty to Sites Officer for NSW Na- where the mussels live What the river used mussels for food, such as the ground. These shallow water events", this hap- For example in early as stakeholders that can But now there are seldom can now, and even want on the ground. These shallow water events are not barka water rat, goannas, cod, aquifers are how the pens when there is a big August 2018 NSW DoI "influence the decision any Brolgas in Barkandji people can been involved in politics even represented by any- pletely dried up with long this little bit of salty "shut When I was young we perch, and water birds. I Ngatji travel. It is clear to flood after many years of rang and said they wanted making process", unlike country because they need from the main weir at the etc.??? No-one can tell us talk about the cultural sig- since the 1970's. Divide one, especially my people stretches of the river with up" water down to get Fedlandholders, irrigators, water on the floodplains same time. This will erode that, but most Menindee nificance to the river to and conquer. and government depart- and swamps for food and our riverbanks and change people are either us". So they gave us a little ments, it is there in black shelter for their nests, and the river forever. But Barkandji or Ngiyampaa, bit of money and we did a I see this as and white. And the table these days the floodplains MDBA have new official and we feel that we are be- 2 week field project at also suggests they mainly don't get the water. To evidence that the Men- ing targeted. Menindee with local another way of just want to engage Abori- MDBA they think it is all indee Lakes are the main We show politicians Barkandji people and it ginal people in survey and OK if there is somewhere hatchery and nursery for and water people all the was all written up by Susie keeping us from monitoring of cultural ar- where the brolgas can live, perch in the MDB, this is dead fruit trees and dead Goff from MDBA and we chaeological sites that will but they don't understand our best fish to eat, the vines, dead vegie patches, were pleased. But then our being able to be wrecked in the con- how it breaks our heart if fish that has kept us all go- the tourist boats high and report got binned - they *influence this* pumping town water from no floods, they say it is to meet with the Barkandji struction of the new regulation they can't come and live ing for thousands of years, dry in the empty lakes and said they couldn't use it the aquifer when the river natural but before it prob- PBC in Broken Hill about lators etc. They don't get on Barkandji country like and the favourite fish for ask why but get no answer, because we said Barkandji cultural mapping is dry, we will end up with ably only happened every the changes they want to that the whole Menindee they used to. They just the tourists and anglers. In Wilcannia we would people belong to the Barka nothing to drink at all, and 100 years or so, but now do at the Menindee Lakes Lakes is a place of special don't get that at all. At But the way they now like to have some busi- and they didn't like that our fish, mussels, birds happens every flood and (this is one of the "water significance to us on many Toorale National Park want to fill the lakes and nesses that depend on wa- for some reason. and everything will be kills millions of fish. saving projects" that levels, and that it is part of near Bourke the Common- then empty them so fast ter in the river. One is I went to a MDBA MDBA bring people | done over the last few of | and then let traffic thru, | still waiting for someone gone, and our creator the We complain about the MDBA are using as an ex- our living culture, and that wealth water people will not allow time for the tourism. My people meeting in Dubbo where from Canada to do this years to try and get more and so on for two days. to give us an answer about Ngatii will leave us. We try water quality but the cuse for taking out extra we should be consulted wanted to stop the West- lakes to be a nursery for already run a successful they showed us the draft mapping and pay them water in the Barka I have Federal Labour decided to where our fresh cultural I remember the first and tell the water people MDBA and NSW DoI water for irrigators). We from the beginning about ern floodplain getting any fish. The Menindee tourism business at cultural flows publication when we have all the paid for myself, even plane block the passage of the water might be hiding.

are, what colour you are you drink

short notice on the

Thursday night at 7:30 pm

after the other directors

ment councils and Nato dual name the Darling River as Baaka," it said in

a statement. The river was named by explorer Charles Sturt in honour of NSW Governor Ralph Darling. The name Baaka has

become widely used by non-Indigenous people The Darling River has organisations and politibeen known as the Baaka | cians in recent years, especially after the river's poor health and fish kills at Menindee hit national headlines.

Many local Indigenous people blame mismanagement by state and federal authorities for the poor state of the river.

It has barely flowed for reach out to relevant two years, and in many stretches has dried up Councils, local govern- completely.

tional Parks seeking en- | Wilcannia artist Badger | name for the river would | ituality.

dorsement for a proposal Bates said formally recog- emphasise its importance "It will give the river said.

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Government realise that river. there are people dependent on it, and not just irrigators," he said.

He said the fact the name was regularly used | were granted native title | that." even outside a local Indigenous context suggested for dual-naming.

"I reckon the support'll be great," he said. "It's not just black

imals, if they could talk, those boundaries. they'd get up and say call it the Baaka, so you can the dual naming within say on the Geographical

"Everyone who lives

My name is William | belonging to the Barka, | ank and cut it out and | line, or net, or if the water | carp in the 1000water, but this is the | Lakes also used to be fam- | Mutawintii National Park | which stated that Mur- | knowledge here, we are | fares to get to Sydney to | extra 70 GL to be taken Brian Bates, usually | The Barka was created shape it. When I do some- was still and clear we couldn't believe such ugly they think it is just a black- They call us Traditional ectors meeting in Broken lakes and for the fish and only remaining place for lous as a water bird habitat which is a range of hills 150 rawarri were the custodi- the knowledge holders of present petitions to parlia- from environmental water Owners but they don't ac- Hill on the Tuesday and birds to be able to breed brolgas in our country. So and breeding area, and km from the river, but we ans of our water!!!!! Can our country, we have ar-

ginal, and we have more ent all of the Barkandji

consultation, they don't was unfit for human or onmental water.

cept we have any rights to Wednesday, so of course and exist in our country. we played up over the last was nominated as a Ram- can't do it at Wilcannia you believe that!!! It said chaeologists both Abori- Wentworth to Broken Hill given to the irrigators and they wanted to meet us at MBDA lack of

understanding of our cultural values

had left. There was only 2 only an information ses- to make money and to there they handed us maps | some areas looked after, of proposed new locations | areas 100's or a thousand

The other thing about was no agenda and it was values. The main thing is cultural values. sion. But when we got have the environment of

some floodwater will still MDBA consultation is that plain on Toorale for the not have time to breed and of us and our CEO, we they cannot understand or brolgas. But we only man- grow their young. So they Corp solicitors to email | When we talk about our | Parks fought long and hard | how to manage the envir-

then beforehand and ask cultural values they do not with us, we could not have onment, they are going to for an agenda and what understand. They only done it on our own be- destroy the fish, the birds they wanted to meet think in terms of economic cause they don't listen to and everything to save waabout. They replied there or white fellas scientific us or respect us and our ter for the cotton irrigators **MDBA** lack of

understanding or lack of care for **Environmental values**

IO years and we have nego- | sar wetland, but the same | now because most of the | they were the custodians | ginal and non-Aboriginal, | pipeline. We tiated an agreement that goes for the birds, the wa- time the river is dry, or has from the Culgoa right we have anthropologists MLDRIN to ask for extra ing us, it seemed like they ter will be let out so go to the Western flood- quickly that the birds will NSW DoI consult Abori- were the only ones invited don't want to understand aged to get this small con- are ignoring their own sci- fish or yabbies. We would they changed this wording they get people from Bourke unrepresented. anyway. We got the NT what we say anyway. cession because National entific evidence about like to do some other busi- a bit but still didn't put in Canada, and I see this as to the north.

(ABC News: Paige Cockburn)

MDBA lack of understanding or lack of care for our **Economic survival**

pools of toxic water with signs up everywhere and down to the Coorong. warning people not to go I played up with them at mapping experts than you people properly, not leave mental flow" was sent near the water, or catch the Dubbo meeting and can poke a stick at. But all of us from Menindee to from the upper storages ness such as bush tucker | anything from our cultural

for the 'Baaka' among people and government departments.

Most of the time the river is dry, or has pools of toxic water with signs up everywhere warning people not to go near the water, or catch fish or vabbies.

through Barkandji country

NSW Government considers adopting dual name **NEW SOUTH WALES**

DECLAN GOOCH ABC BROKEN HILL

The NSW Government is considering whether to formally adopt a traditional name for the Darling River, to exist side-by-side with the

European name it has held since 1820. by the Barkindji people

for thousands of years. The NSW Geographical Names Board said it was about to begin con-

sultation about whether to formally recognise Baaka as a dual name for the river.

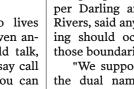
"[The Board] will Local Aboriginal Land

wishes. Badger Bates hopes dual naming of the Darling River would create more respect manage it properly."

Barkindji elder and | nising the Indigenous | to local culture and spir- | more respect, the Baaka | native title group pro- | native title over," Mr more respect," Mr Bates | posed a new culturally-fo- | Hooper said cused authority to oversee "It's going to make the the management of the Naming must respect

over a large portion of far

south of Menindee.



Aboriginal and non-Abori-

I feel like they are just

cultural boundaries: peak body The Barkindji people

west NSW in 2015, includ-

Northern Basin Aboripeople want to call it the ginal Nations (NBAN), Baaka — it should be re- | which represents Indigen- | tions or other traditional specting both cultures' ous groups along the up- owner groups along the per Darling and Barwon river, without consulta-Rivers, said any dual namalong the Baaka, even an- ing should occur within owner groups as well."

"We support certainly

Earlier this year, the boundaries that they have for a month.

"Certainly upstream

we would call for consultation with the Ngiyampaa people, the Ngemba people, and the Murrawarri people in regards to the naming of

He said NBAN would oppose any decision to exthere would be support | ing the river between an | tend the name Baaka beyarea north of Tilpa and ond the Barkindji region.

"It's not keeping with Fred Hooper from First Nations protocol and First Nations law to impose names on other na-

Members of the public will be able to have their the Barkindji native title Names Board's website



need State labour were supportmoney so they can repres- were listening to us.

Then an "environdown to the Darling River, If you look on the called the Northern Conanother way of keeping us | MDBA webpage and look | nectivity Event. I don't refrom being able to influ- for their maps that show | call this ever happening ence this cultural map- what traditional groups before, usually water we should be consulted over get is from natural rainfall Water Sharing Plans, there | events. It finally reached waiting for me and my are two maps, one for Wilcannia in June, a very couple of surviving cous- groundwater and one for small and very salty bit of ins to pass away, they don't surface water. The water that had a strange want to record what we groundwater map covers bright clear look about it. know from the days when | the Darling Alluvial Plains | It has been trickling down we lived all along the river from Bourke down to for two months now and it and off the river. They put Wentworth, the shallow is getting saltier, which has aquifers along our river, puzzled everyone (see Apwhen they know my lakes and floodplain, the pendix 3 of official figures grandmother comes from shallow aquifers that our from Wilcannia Times). the upper Darling and I Ngatji lives in. On this map Usually these days a small from Wilcannia, my itself, but with other aquifers lets the salty aquifer escape and seep

from Menindee up to Wil- no water at all, and the re- eral Labour to rollover and cannia and up to Bourke. maining pools had signs vote in May for taking out So much for MDBA up everyone saying water the 70GL from our envir-

even consider most of the stock to drink, and blue This little bit of salty Barkandji people still liv- green algae made it dan- water did nothing for our ing where they always gerous to swim in it or eat cultural values and not have lived, on the Barka. fish or yabbies. At Easter | much good for the envir-Wilcannia people are not the Wilcannia people and onment, there were no represented by NBAN or some others blockaded the young fish coming down, MLDRIN, we are lost. bridge on the highway for just some old survivors, MLDRIN paid for me to go two days, but only as dir- which were too fatty to to Canberra last year to ected by the police. So we eat. You can see the salt on talk about the Barka, but blocked the bridge and the riverbank when the every other thing I have marched across and back, water goes down. We are

'Unfathomable': millions of dead | Indigenous water rights not adequately recognised fish blanket river near Menindee in latest mass kill



ADAM MORTON THEGUARDIAN.COM

Authorities blame low oxygen levels made worse by receding flood waters as locals say latest event much more severe than previously

Millions of fish have died in another mass kill in the lower Darling-Baaka river near Menindee, in New South West's far west.

Photos supplied by Menindee residents show dead fish - mostly bony then experience significant mortalities, bream, but also Murray cod, golden or busts, when flows return to more norperch, silver perch and carp – blanketed mal levels." across the river's surface.

It is the latest in a series of largescale fish deaths that have prompted questions about the management of wa- deaths earlier this year. "This time there's ter levels in the Murray-Darling Basin. Menindee residents who spoke with Guardian Australia on Friday said the latest fish kill appeared larger than pre- urday. "Then it will be just dead rotting vious mass deaths.

About a million fish died during a sustained drought in the same area in 2019 after a rapid drop in temperature people around 100km south-east of led to an algal bloom de-oxygenating the | Broken Hill. Locals have previously acriver.

scale of the mass kill on Friday was "un- to be drained and not effectively manfathomable"

"It's horrendous here today," he said, speaking from the riverbank about 5km upstream of Menindee. "The river is just white. I'm looking at probably a kilo- Environmental Sciences, said an investmetre or a kilometre-and-a-half of fish and they're all dead. It's unfathomable."

The NSW Department of Primary Industries said on Friday there was a "developing large-scale fish death event" affecting millions of fish below the important to remember that fish kill Menindee main weir through to weir 32, events impact not only the large-body policies. This water injustice is holders do. We describe these adjacent to the Menindee township.

deaths were due to low oxygen levels in gudgeons that are essential to maintainthe water as flood waters receded.

"Significant volumes of fish including carp and bony herring, nutrients and said "we are living in the age of climate organic matter from the floodplain are change", with increasingly extreme being concentrated back into the river | floods and droughts being compounded channel. The current hot weather in the by poor government decisions. "No one region is also exacerbating hypoxia, as should think fish kills on this scale is natwarmer water holds less oxygen than ural," he said.

cold water and fish have higher oxygen needs at warmer temperatures," the spokesperson said "This event is ongoing as a heatwave

across western NSW continues to put further stress on a system that has experienced extreme conditions from widescale flooding."

The spokesperson said the bony bream population "typically booms and busts over time". "It booms in population numbers during flood times and can

Geoff Looney, a photographer from Menindee, said the latest mass kill was much more severe than the fish hardly a live fish out there," he said.

McCrabb said the fish would have washed through to Menindee by Satfish through the township and people won't be able to use the water," he said.

Menindee is a town of about 500 cused authorities of contributing to fish Resident Graeme McCrabb said the deaths by allowing the Menindee Lakes aging water quality. Officials have denied that they were responsible.

Associate Prof Joy Becker, from the University of Sydney's School of Life and igation should determine the cause of the mass death.

"Ultimately, fish kill events happen because the quality of the environment cannot sustain fish life," she said. "It is fish like the Murray cod and bony bream, A department spokesperson said the but also the small-body fish like the ing a healthy aquatic ecosystem."

The independent MP Justin Field

NSW portion of the Murray- | such as the NSW Aboriginal | at least 17.2% (2.0 gigalitres of wa-Darling Basin, Aboriginal people | Land Rights Act (1983), to re- | ter per year). No new entitlecollectively hold just 12.1 giga- dress or compensate Indigenous ments were acquired during this litres of water. This is a mere peoples for colonial acts of dis- decade. 0.2% of all available surface water

Water management in the Mur-(as of October 2018). ray-Darling Basin has radically By comparison, Aboriginal people make up 9.3% of this But none of the changes have adarea's population.

> The value of water held by Aboriginal organisations was A\$16.5 million in 2015-16 terms, equating to just 0.1% of the value of the Murray-Darling Basin's water market

> We wanted to understand affect Aboriginal people today, and the challenges, if any, they face in holding onto these entitlements. This required examining Australia's water history and its systems of water rights distri-

ments when governments denied | ity of the water rights of those Aboriginal people water rights and, by extension, the benefits that now flow from water access. kind, shows Aboriginal water en- | This includes the ability to use | claims of Aboriginal people who | Aboriginal people. water for an agricultural enter- see a clear connection between prise, or to temporarily trade wa- the past and the present in the policy, governments must work ter as many other entitlement moments as waves of disposses-

The first wave of dispossession

Under colonial water law, rights to use water, for example | own laws and customs. its holder a share of available wa- | for farming, were granted to whoever owned the land where rivers ernments allocate water against | flowed. This link between water | substantial interests in land and | management, returning more these entitlements periodic- use and land-holding remained in waters. The Native Title Act 1993 than a third of the continent to ally, depending on rainfall and | place until the end of the 20th | defined native title to include century

whose traditional ownership of cognise a commercial right to waposes such as irrigation, or sell it | land (native title) was only recog- | ter. nised by the Australian High Court in 1992, were largely denied

legal rights to water. The second wave

20th century, governments intro- | people in the NSW portion of the | and share more equitably in the

possession. We found water entitlements

were attached to some of the land | ant being forced permanent waparcels that were transferred to ter (and land) sales arising from Aboriginal ownership under the liquidation of Aboriginal enthese processes – but this was the terprises. exception.

Land restitution processes intentionally restricted what land Aboriginal people could claim. They were biased against properties with agricultural potential how these limited water rights | and, therefore, very few of the properties that were returned to Aboriginal ownership came with | ler in other parts of the Murraywater entitlements.

At this crucial juncture in tions beyond the Basin). Reland rights reform, federal and state governments entrenched the inequity of water rights dis-What we found were key mowho historically held entitlements. Governments have vet to water policy, and must urgently pay serious attention to the distribution of water entitle-

this

The native title framework has not helped the situation either. cess and stemming further loss of Native title is the recognition that water rights. Treaty negotiations Indigenous peoples have rights to may offer another avenue for waland and water according to their ter reform.

But it's difficult for those tralia has been coming to terms making a native title claim to get | with its colonial history of land rights to water for customary trol under a "land titling revolu-As a result, Aboriginal people, purposes and courts are yet to re- tion".

The third wave We also identified a third of land restitution is long over-

wave of dispossession, now un- due. Indigenous peoples must derway. From 2009 to 2018, the have the opportunity to care for During the last quarter of the water rights held by Aboriginal their land and waters holistically, duced land restitution measures. Murray-Darling Basin shrunk by benefits of water use.

SAVE OUR DARLING-BARKA

Commonwealth.

Traditional owners say missing out on rare opportunity to access water rights is a step backwards, 'we expect to be treated a lot better'

VICTORIA **CLINT JASPER** ABC RURAL

"New" water in the Murray-Darling Basin is rarely made available, so a recent Victorian govern- ter retailers, while Stage ate water to irrigators has been labelled a "kick in the guts" by traditional owners.

the \$2 billion Connections Project, which modern- jects, and that it would be able". tion District (GMID), and 77GL. gave the 225 gigalitres of vironmental Holder and Melbourne pressing "deep frustra- with the government said.

Later savings under | the ABC.

ment and Melbourne wa- northern Victoria". Tati Tati man Brendan

Recently, Acting Water traditional owners in the Connections Project, ernment announced 2GL cess water rights was this is a total contrast to 2GL would have represen-Minister Richard Wynne northern Victoria about 75GL each were to go to of unallocated surface wa- through state and federal that, a backflip, and we ex- ted a significant step announced that an addi- | how the 2GL would be al- | the environment, irrigat- | ter in Gippsland's | re-allocation of water. The water comes from tional 2GL of water had located, and being denied ors and Melbourne for a Mitchell River would be been saved from the pro- access to it, as "unjustifi- drought reserve" Dr given to the Gunaikurnai known this is the only opised northern Victoria's allocated to irrigators, "I'm feeling very dis-"There is no indication ginal Goulburn Murray Irriga- bringing their total to appointed, it's a kick in in any of the previous (GLaWAC), in a historic project] has been working ernment is with regard to aikurnai, it's helped them

ment, in a letter seen by Kennedy said.

being shared equally.

ment decision to alloc- Two was funded by the Kennedy described the committed to recovering Plan." lack of consultation with 225GL under Stage One of O'Donnell said.

the guts for traditional work of the project to sug- decision for the state and closely with traditional traditional owners and gain water ownership," he Murray Darling Lower | owners, particularly in | gest any additional sav- | Indigenous groups. water it saved back to ir- Rivers Indigenous Nations Victoria, because we ings would be handed to That allocation was ment of Water Environrigators, the Victorian En- (MDLRIN) wrote to Mr thought we were starting one of those parties, over made under the 2016 'Wa- ment, Land and Planning," Government has \$40 mil- it could be used for cul-Water | Wynne late last week, ex- to build a relationship | the others," Dr O'Donnell | ter for Victoria' plan, | Dr O'Donnell, an author | lion on the table to im- | tural flows, to water our

ment statement said: "We water, and more engage- years of consultation and divides a small amount of Basin."

University of Mel- | recognise the traditional | ment with First Nations | work with government | water among many groups Stage Two split among ir- The letter called on bourne early career re- owners' connection to wa- groups. rigators and the Common- the Minister to "immedi- searcher Dr Erin O'Don- ter. We will continue to The 'Cultural Water felt like a step backwards. Basin. wealth, bringing the total ately commit funding to nell said it was unclear work closely with Abori- for Cultural Communities' water savings to 429GL. acquire water entitle- why all of the additional ginal groups to ensure report was handed to Mr appointing," he said. Stage One was funded | ments for traditional own- | savings were allocated to | their voices are heard in | Wynne's office in March, by the Victorian Govern- | ers and First Nations in | a single group, rather than | relation to access to water | funded under the Water | process happening in Vic-

in Victoria as well as in for Victoria plan, that toria, and we have a self

Late last year, the gov- in northern Victoria to ac- Traditional Owners, so Land and Waters Abori- tion, [the Cultural Water into question how com-

which promised to im- of the report, said. water retailers in stage tion" with the announce- around water," Mr A Victorian govern- prove Aboriginal access to Mr Kennedy said, after ownership, that funding hasn't happened in the

departments, this decision in the Murray Darling

"We've got the treaty ity for traditional owners with the Government for Commonwealth. "The government has better than this.

owners and the Depart- water."

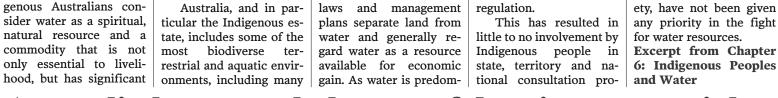
While the Federal "In northern Victoria, prove First Nations water | country, something that

And the existing cultural flows under the Murrav-Darling Basin Plan do release water for cultural purposes, but the water "The government the Murray Darling Basin stated the only opportunder determination strategy rights remain with the In northern Victoria.

pect to be treated a lot change for traditional owners in the Basin, ac-"This really brings cording to Mr Kennedy, "We've already seen

"This is extremely dis-

Corporation for Cultural Communities mitted the Victorian Gov- what it can do for the Gun-





the mitigation of climate change impacts. Water is extremely valuable globally to both Indigenous and both for different reas-For example, non-Indigenous Australians con-

LANA D HARTWIG

NATALIE OSBORNE

THECONVERSATION.COM

changed over the past 30 years.

dressed a glaring injustice: Abori-

ginal people's share of water

rights is minute, and in New

tried to restore the health of

rivers in the basin by limiting how

much water could be extracted.

They also separated land and wa-

ter titles to enable farmers to

This allowed the recovery of

water for the environment and

led to the world's biggest water

market, now worth billions of dol-

lars. For a range of reasons, Ab-

original people have largely been

shut out of this valuable water

Our research, the first of its

titlements in the Murray-Darling

Basin are declining, and further

losses are likely under current

an ongoing legacy of colonisa-

An unjust distribution

of water

A water use right, also called

licence or entitlement, grants

ter in a particular waterway. Gov-

water storage. Entitlement hold-

ers choose how to use this water.

Typically, they extract it for pur-

We mapped Aboriginal water

Across ten catchments in the

access and rights in NSW over

more than 200 years, including

the current scale of Aboriginal-

on the temporary market.

held water entitlements.

In the 1990s, governments

South Wales it is diminishing.

SUE IACKSON

trade water

market

tion

AUSTRALIAN HUMAN

RIGHTS COMMISSION

NATIVE TITLE REPORT

Water is vital to life, es-

sential to agriculture and

a valuable energy source

which may be utilised in

non-Indigenous peoples and is used for well-being, Indigenous ous and non-Indigenous lack of engagement is the domestic and internamany different purposes. people's relationship with perspectives of water and compounded by the fact tional economy. As a res-Water is also important to waters, lands and its re- its management differ that Indigenous peoples ult, Indigenous rights to ence.

rivers, wetlands, sea, is- world. arable part of their es- recognised by Australian ous peoples have been ex- mate change, the focus of tates. As well as underpin- law and policy. This is cluded from water man- law and policy has bening social and economic | largely because Indigen- | agement in Australia. The | come highly influenced by sources is crucial to cul- greatly. tural vitality and resili-

economic contemporary | intact and nationally im- | inantly considered only | cesses, and the developlands. reefs, sandbars and Indigenous rights in and usage. sea grass beds as an insep- water are not adequately

creates diffi-This

culties as non-Indigenous technical information and

value. However, Indigen- portant wetlands, riparian for its consumptive value, ment of water policy. This ous groups in many of zones, forests, reefs, rivers its use and regulation is means that Indigenous these ecologically rich and waterways. Australia limited and restricted by peoples are not well posiand often remote environ- also has some of the most governments to industries tioned to negotiate enments Indigenous peoples diverse, unique and spec- or individuals willing to forceable water rights or regard the inland waters, tacular marine life in the pay the highest price. This purchase highly priced affects Indigenous access

> Historically Indigenhave low levels of aware- water, and the importance ness of water institutions.

This has resulted in any priority in the fight

water licences.

only essential to liveli- restrial and aquatic envir- available for economic state, territory and na- 6: Indigenous Peoples hood, but has significant onments, including many gain. As water is predom- tional consultation pro- and Water Australia has an ugly legacy of denying water rights to Aboriginal people, not much has changed

ZENA CUMPSTON

is required in the way we

Peoples have honed and

employed holistic land

management practices for

thousand of generations.

bedded in all aspects of

our culture. They are so

effective, so perfectly

suited to this harshest of

A reintroduction of

traditional land manage-

want to address the ecolo-

Not just 'consultants'

tralia has been predomin-

antly managed without

empowering or reflecting

Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander peoples'

strict our involvement in

cesses at every level

There are very few areas

in Australia where Tradi-

tional Owners have suc-

back large land holdings.

Title determination.

washing up dead.

decision-making

Country

or aspirations.

gical crisis we now face.

world today.

First

interact with this land.

Australia's

As identified in the previous chapters on cliof water to the maintenance of Indigenous society, have not been given

The decline is attributable to several factors, the most signific-

With water rights held by Aboriginal people vulnerable to further decline, the options for Aboriginal communities to enjoy the wide-ranging benefits of water access may further diminish. We expect rates of Aboriginal water ownership to be even smal-Darling Basin (and in jurisdicsearch is underway to explore

Australia urgently needs a fair national water policy The Productivity Commis sion is now reviewing Australian address the injustices faced by

In developing a just water with First Nations towards the twin goals of redressing historical inequities in water ac-

Over recent decades, Aussome form of Indigenous con-

But a water titling revolution that reconnects water law and policy to the social justice agenda

THECONVERSATION.COM cious river by those in engaged, and empowered vigoration. In the wake of devastating power – a destruction to speak for that Country. bushfires across the counwrought through greed. try, and with the prospect Rights to land, with no Aboriginal of losing a billion animals rights to water, is a knowledges as something proach to working with The loss of life, both and some entire species, poignant example of our which can exist separately Aboriginal communities. people and animals, and transformational change

continued disempower- from the people who are This enabled a safe space the devastation wrought ment in managing and its custodians. Our vast for Elders and communitcaring for our lands in line | knowledges are embed- | ies to share and create a | many calls for Aboriginal

must be restored as custodians of Country

caused by the gross mis- | Australia, the mob belong- | plant knowledge is a bril- | tion and healing for all management of this pre- ing to that place must be liant example of this rein- communities.

> Dr Gott took a truly It's time to stop seeing | collaborative, respectful ecological and

fires traumatrised and empowering ap- distressed all Australians. on Country triggered management systems to be more meaningfully incorporated.

> Empowering and resourcing First Nations peoples' ecological knowedges would help address the effects of climate change on the land, through practices of care and custodianship. But it must not perpetuate wellestablished systems of exloitation. It must happen n true partnership.

The recent horrifying

and unprecedented bush-

Enacting healing Finally, making Indirenous cultural practices central to Australia's ecoogical management could be vital to the process of "truth-telling".

Truth-telling here means acknowledging the complexity and richness of our culture, acknowledging the science we have developed over many many millennia to care for Country, and ded narratives which deny our diversity, our agency and most damaging, our sovereignty.

Truth-telling could not only bring long overdue cities suffered and their continuing legacies, but could also finally dispense with the lie of peaceful of denial impoverishes us

A process to enact a healing would begin a path to enlightened acceptance of our systems of management, opening up both people and Coun-

As long as Aboriginal peoples and communities continue to be disenfran-

Community comments to the Citizens' Inquiry into the Health of the Barka / **Darling River and Menindee Lakes HOW THE RIVER**

USED TO BE

"We yabbied, we fished, we had many a picnic on the Darling River. You can't now. All you'll find is stagnant water." now. It's just a green mass of ... well, if there is water in the puddles it's just murky water."

— Sandra Gregg, Mildura

"I remember when the river was clear, when you could see fish and you could fish and eat what you caught. These days I don't drink anything unless its boiled, even the stuff that comes out of our taps.'

— Susan Nichols, Wentworth

"We'd run that fast down to the weir in Wilcannia. We'd jump in ... and we'd float right down under the bridge. We would swim under there and have a play around in the water there for an hour long and you could actually see through the water. we'd be drinking the water as we were swimming. We could see the fish floating around, you could see the bottom of the river. That's how clear it was back in those days. ... Many years later, as years went by, we could see how it got darker and darker and darker, muddier. ... It's | anymore. There's no more water sports. wrong that you can't drink that clean clear fresh water that we drank when we were kids."

— Clair Bates, Wentworth

'I can't remember when I couldn't swim in the river. It's just been a part of my life and we used to go down to the Deton Sandbar and swim there. ... My father used to fish using a homemade spinner, dragged behind a boat on the Murray and they used to row in those days and the waters were clear. I can remember rowing the boat while my father would encourage me to stay at a constant speed. Many a good-sized cod were caught this way. Freshwater crayfish were also harvested. ... There was always a line in the river for a perch or redfin when we were on the rivers camping. In the 1960s I can remember swimming in the Murray when it was still clear. This was pre-carp, 1962, you could see the snags and rock ledges 16 feet down to the bottom. ... I didn't think about it then. It was just a way of life. We don't go camping on the Darling now. All you'll find is stagnant water."

— Ron Perrv. Mildura

I have really fond memories of camping near Wilcannia in 1977 with the Italian side of my family. There was probably 40 of us in caravans and tents as the Darling River was coming out of flood and there was cod and perch and catfish. What was quite amazing was the size of the blue yabbies. I'm just reflecting on what it looks like now, which is green water in holes. It hasn't discharged into the Murray properly since they drained the lakes for a pipeline.'

— Jason Modica, Mildura

'I grew up for the better part of my life in Mildura and spent many years camping along the Darling at a friend's shack, just out the back of Wentworth. So I have some history of swimming, boating, fishing and mucking around in the clear waters of the Darling."

— Jane MacAllister, Mildura

"Growing up as a kid on and around the Darling River there was always water. You'd get a dry and it'd go very low but the river was never, never in the situation that it's in now.

— Graham Clarke, Wentworth

"When I was a kid you could go to the junction (of the Darling and the Murray | local water] when I go to Wilcannia. I Rivers) and you'd see this amazing creamy milky white water swirling into the grey-green. This is the clear stuff It's sad to go home and see the dead answirling into the Murray. It was a defined confluence that was kind of cool. It was living off its own accord and off its own pulse and that's gone."

— Jason Modica, Mildura

"I can remember back in the mid 50s when we used to go to the river every weekend. When the river was low, we went up there camping one weekend. And I can remember this vividly and I | touch it. Now you can just walk straight was about 8 years old – the water was up | across it. And it's heartbreaking. It's real. to my waist at the time. I could see my | It's draining the community spiritually toes in the bottom of the water and yab- and culturally, you know." bies crawling around the bottom of it. The water was so clear and clean at that time if you wanted a cup of tea ... you could drink it straight out of the river or boil the billy or whatever you wanted to do. It was absolutely beautiful water."

— Ray Johnston, Broken Hill.



To address the ecological crisis, Aboriginal peoples

about their lands. (Ringbarked II, image courtesy of Nici Cumpston and Michael Reid Gallerv)

cultural practices, voices Our many thousands To meaningfully engage First Nations communities' ways of knowobservations (science) and effective management ing and interacting with Country, they need to and custodianship, must see us empowered to lead cease being "informants" "actors" and "consultants" which, at best, marginally inform ecological and agricultural imperatives. The machine of colonthe menu too. isation continues to re-

Different mob. different knowledge

Our mobs are extremely diverse, as are our as lost, or call for elders to demic to Australia such as settlement. The psychosis land management practices. But some overarch- ledges as a matter of ur- and kangaroo grass will all. ing beliefs sit at the core gency, unaware that our perhaps again become ceeded in not only gaining of our culture, and are important to understand.

but also enjoy any real First Peoples have a power to significantly relationship with Country | erations. maintain and nurture that is loving, reciprocal An example of this can centric" relationship in- back to early "scientific" can be grown here, requir- enact vital reparations for be seen on my own cludes custodianship ob-Barkandji Country where ligations - often lacking around the time of colon- tilisers. First Nations try. Empower us and our in 2015, after 18 years of within non-Indigenous isation, when we were communities domestic- active custodianship of fighting, Barkandji people views of Country. Instead considered an inferior ated these crops over Country and you emwere recognised as the of being seen as kin - race which would soon thousands of generations, power vourselves. Traditional Owners of one something to be cared for, die out. of the largest areas ever | listened to, deeply respec- | Our knowledges are | ledge of how to grow | and Torres Strait Islander before granted in a Native ted and nurtured – Coun- not lost. We are very them. And yet, our Barka (the | Indigneous people as a re- | ing culture. But many of | ment practices are integ- | chised with our sover-Darling River), our source to be exploited and our practices and systems ral to our agricultural eignty denied, as long as Mother, is now dying. It is controlled.

poisonous and foul with Our custodianship of reinvigorate them.

with cultural obligations. ded in our communities, significant archive of their and always have been. of generations of careful Aboriginal knowledges of the medicinal, nutriaren't lost

original agricultural and south-eastern Australia. land management pracdecision-making. Our tices there is still so much community leaders must to uncover, adopt and re- rising, many of our food not only be given a seat at invigorate. And there are systems will fail. Introthe table, they should set still many who do not be- duced grain crops we rely public recognition of atrolieve in our expertise in this area.

Too many ignorantly perceive our knowledges hand over their know- native millet (panicum) communities still practice staple food sources. intricate systems of sharing knowledge across gen- Bruce Pascoe in Dark

and engaged. This "kin- knowledges are lost harks and sustainable crops that ing together to heal and theories which emerged

try is seen by many non- much still here, still a liv- Cultural fire manageneed more resources to practices and are medi- we are excluded from

unparalelled knowledge tional and cultural uses of challenging still-embed-When it comes to Ab- Indigenous plants in Agriculture and fire With temperatures

> heavily upon may not cope with the fluctuations predicted. Traditional crops en-

As explored by Uncle Emu, Australian crops are The belief that our the most nutrient-rich new possibilities for coming little water and no ferand hold the best know-

Dead fish wash up in their 'hundreds' along lower reaches of the River Murray, Lake Alexandrina

DANIEL KEANE **ABC RADIO ADELAIDE**

Environment authorities have Milang on Saturday. warned of the likelihood of more reaches of the River Murray in ness'," she said. the coming weeks amid fast flows, high water levels, and flooding upstream.

reports in South Australia of dead | the water there." fish washing up on the banks of the river from Walker Flat | Industries and Regions (PIRSA) and Mypolonga, near Mannum, to said pathology testing had ruled Milang on Lake Alexandrina out "any notifiable infectious dis- onment and, all of a sudden, and Goolwa Beach at the Murray ease". Mouth

Goolwa resident Jackie Volkman told ABC Radio Adelaide's Sonya Feldhoff that she first noticed large numbers of dead fish earlier this month. "There were hundreds of

them," she said. "Last week they started wash-

ing up downriver as well. "I know that the [Goolwa] barrage has been open because of the floodwaters coming down, so I'm guessing it was from that."

"I went for a little walk on the | ical contamination. fish deaths along the lower jetty and I thought, 'Oh, my good-

"All the rocks by the edge | where we've had really localised were covered with fish - [I] fish kill events," he said. walked out to the jetty and they

The Department of Primary | terstate.

"They've been able to rule

Mr Page said the deaths were

"These are fish that would prefer to live in a warmer envir- dead fish in the coming weeks. they're being impacted by these

Photographer Glenn Power recently snapped this photo at Mypolonga. (Facebook: Glenn Power)

Another listener, Joylene from | PIRSA principal biosecurity | tremendous flows of water that Strathalbyn, said she was shocked officer Brad Page said the Envir- we're seeing that start life in to see "hundreds" of dead fish at onment Protection Authority western Queensland and start life (EPA) had also tested for chem- in the Snowy Mountains," Mr Page said.

"Salt levels have gone up over that out in several of the places the past few months, they're about 30 to 50 per cent higher than they

were just a few months ago." While the event was nowhere There have been widespread were just floating everywhere in likely linked to factors arising near the scale of the types of mass from heavy rain and flooding in- | fish kills that have previously made headlines, Mr Page said river users would continue to notice

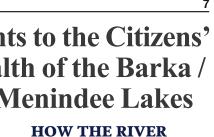
"While we've got these La Niña weather events, PIRSA's actually expecting more fish kills to happen, particularly in the next month while we've got these high flows continuing to flush salt and sediments," he said

"That salt load puts pressure n what's called their 'osmotic balance'.

"The sediment in the water makes it hard on their gills ... and what we call this is an environmental fish kill, so it's a natural event that's not caused by an infectious disease nor by contamination."

The devastation was place. For each area in reawaken Aboriginal land management, protec- we can imagine.

cine for Country. Their leadership roles in meetalgae, bone dry in many Country, our Law and our The extraordinary life- continued reinvigoration ing the challenges of cliareas, with millions of fish vast ecological know- time work of ethnobiolo- will undoubtedly prove an mate change, we all stand ledges are all attached to a gist Dr Beth Gott to important aspect in to lose so much more than



IS NOW

"We don't go camping on the Darling — Ron Perry, Mildura

'I get very, very upset when I see the river now. It makes your gut twist, you know. And it makes me ashamed of being a white Australian."

– Barbara Webster, Broken Hill

you can't swim in it. No you can't do much. I went down there yesterday and the smell was so bad. Yeah I saw these poor old mussels these big fellows all just sitting there dead, picked it up and somebody was in there but he was dead. No one eat him. It was a little bit sad." — Tia Whyman, Wilcannia

Driving from Menindee to Broken Hill s just dead animals on the road everywhere. Sheep are dying but the government is blaming it on evaporation and drought but that's not the truth. It's water mismanagement... We might be a tiny town, but we're all suffering you know. People don't even go fishing or yabbying I've never seen anything so devastating in all my life. I've lived here for 56 years and it's just tragic. ..."

— Reena Lombardo. Menindee

'I have never seen it so bad in my 72 years of life. I'm seeing a dead river.... Before it stopped you could always go down and play in the water, play on the sand. I wouldn't dare go down there [to the river] today."

— David William Clarke, Wilcannia

was out at Louth recently, having not been there for 26 years. The landscape itself is a moonscape. There is a very fine clay dust. Even if there is a hell of a lot of water over the next few months, it will not restore the damage that has been done. We are looking at climate change in action."

– Jane MacAllister, Mildura

'For me, we're at a situation where a very inique, wonderfully amazing, supportive river that's been very fruitful for anybody iving along it, from the Indigenous people through to the original station owners has really, in less than 20 years, been made into just an open channel with total disregard for anyone downstream." — Iason Modica, Mildura

t hurts very much to look at the river as t is now. My kids grew up there. They all grown up and got families of their own. And my mum and dad lived there all their life til they died. And my grandparents. Everything they taught us, they taught us on the riverbank and now that's not happening anymore. It's terrible. ... I get stressed vou know, abou how much the river means to me. I grew up on the river, it was like our mum and dad, you know. The river's like your mum. The river was our life, our blood. We learnt to swim in the river. Took all our young siblings, younger than us to swim there and fish. School holidays we used to go up river and sleep on the riverbank for weeks and weeks on school holidays. That's not happening anymore now. We used to go in horse and carts. My mum and dad never had cars. Was taught to catch your own fish when we was knee-high to a grasshopper - we'd go fishing, take home heaps of fish you know, to mum and dad."

— Leila Webster, Broken Hill,

"I won't even have a cup of tea [with the just use bottled water all the time. It's wrong that you can't drink the water.... imals ... all the skeletons ..." — Clair Bates, Wentworth

'Grandfather, his name's Charlie Edwards. They come around from Cunnamulla area. And he's lived in Bourke most of his life and he's never seen the river like that and he's late 70s. The boat ramp down in Bourke, we could never touch the bottom there. You'd never

— Will Middleton, Wilcannia

"What's a river people without a river? What's the community without life in it? It's just a bad reflection on the white fella'

— Greg Cleary, Wilcannia

What's it

BORNE OF THE BAAKA

DAVE DOYLE

really worth?

The price of a community

Our country's gone to shit

Should we knock down the

Or Sydney's many a Church

Kill off Parliament House

Like they did our Yellow

The price of a fish

Bridge

Belly Perch

No work to attend

to a mission again

Of inland Australia

To end the very history

The reasons no mystery

The assimilation policy

Is it truly climate change

Of their political artillery

Assimilation could not end

Our connection to culture

So they dried up the river

And wait for the vultures

Poison the ground water

That was their campaign

An algal bloom you say?

Can our townships be refused

Did it ever really end

Or are they at it again

The price of a River

Barka: The Forgotten River exhibition opens at Australian Museum, showcasing the need for all Australians to protect it Rare Wangarru wallaby colony grows in leaps and bounds after rains in Far West NSW

OLIVER BROWN BEN LOUGHRAN ABC BROKEN HILL

An art exhibition depicting the cultural connection between the Darling River and the Indigenous peoples who have lived on its banks for thousands of years opens at the Australian Museum in Sydney today.

Pieces featured in Barka: The Forgotten River will include a range of disciplines, from footprint impressions in river clay to oil paintings and multi-media installations.

The exhibition was first created about five years ago by Barkandji elder Badger Bates of Wilcannia and Sydney-based artist Justine Muller.

Mr Bates said the idea behind it was to showcase the importance of the Darling River to local Aboriginal communities and the need to protect it.

"We as Barkandji people take our name from the river, from the Barka ... without the Barka we got nothing," Mr Bates said.

"If they kill our river, they kill everything that lives in that river and everyone who lives on that river.

"[The exhibition is about] what's happening to the river but also to the environment and to the people living along the river."

Journey to the national stage

Co-creator Ms Muller described conceiving the exhibition as a very organic process, with the

The Forgotten River

An exhibit created in Wilcannia by Barkandji elder Badger Bates and artist Justine Muller has made its Australian Museum debut. (Source: Justine Muller)

Darling.

Meanwhile,

health over time.

sion." she said.

Wilcannia,

this week.

to work with, even though

the exhibition has been

touring for four years, it's

kind of a re-imagined ver-

Future not guaranteed

those depicted in the

work, have been flown out

by the museum to attend

the exhibition's opening

first piece being a portrait she painted of Mr Bates when her car broke down in Wilcannia. "Uncle Badger then in-

vited me to return to Barkandji country and to continue that collaboration to work with him," she said.

"I guess our work has a language that talks to each other ... we've grown up with very different backgrounds, but we have a common interest in protecting the Barka."

After taking around three years to compile it, Barka: The Forgotten River made its debut at the Broken Hill art gallery in 2018.

In the years since, it has toured to several other galleries across Australia, including ones in Adelaide, Canberra, Mildura,

and Maitland. To prepare for the national stage, Mr Bates

made some additions to Today's opening will the exhibition, including also feature performances from Barkandji musicians sculptures depicting nat-Barkaa and Leroy Johnson, ive river water birds carved from river red gum a mussel carving demonstration with David Doyle, that grows along the jewellery making with Barbara Quayle, and a Ms Muller's contributions inwood carving demonstraclude a range of portraits tion from Anthony Hayand audio files depicting

ward. locals in Wilcannia talking The showing at the about their love of the Australian Museum is exriver and their observapected to last around five months, and tions of its declining Mr Bates said it may be the exhibition's last. "The museum has been absolutely incredible

"We [might] have to pull it apart [because] we can't get any funding. We can't get any grants because it's considered too political," he said.

"[But] this exhibition A range of people from is going to be the best one, including it's got a lot of stuff in it.

"I hope people go and see it and think about the environment [rather than] the two artists [behind it]."

JONATHON POULSON ABC BROKEN HILL

A rare native wallaby population found only in the New South Wales Far West and outback South Australia has slowly begun to grow again after years of dwindling numbers.

The yellow-footed rock wallabies, or Wangarru, reside in Mutawintji National Park and Nature Reserve.

The only other colony is in the Flinders Ranges. The NSW Government's wildlife con-

servation program has been monitoring the nocturnal marsupials for 40 years in one of the state's longest running aerial survey studies.

The Saving Our Species Program's senior project officer, Sarah Bell, has been surveying the species for the last four years.

She said numbers were finally on an upwards trajectory after years of decline.

"Because we've had really poor years of rainfall, the population declined from around 150 animals down to below 60," Dr Bell said.

"But rain from March caused the ground cover to grow back and the wallabies have started breeding again, and this latest count in July we recorded 75 wallabies.

"We were getting quite concerned, because 60 in one population is such a small number of animals to represent a species distribution in NSW."



The yellow-footed rock wallaby is endangered in NSW and can only be found at Mutawintji National Park and Nature Reserve. (Source: Saving Our Species)

Dr Bell said it was remarkable how closely related the colony's populations were to rainfall.

"If you put the population count on top of rainfall data, it's really quite amazing how closely it corresponds," she said.

In his role as Mutawintji Park Manager, Barkindji man Leroy Johnson would set up food and water stations for the animals to ensure their survival, particularly in times of intense drought.

Pest control problems are another Close all the industry root cause of declining numbers, with predation and habitat damage from feral It's just like being confined cats, foxes and goats.

He said the colony of Wangarru held This purpose made drought immense cultural significance for the local Aboriginal community.

"Mutawintji Land Council has the rock wallaby in their logo, so our people take it very seriously to look after not only those animals, but the habitat they live in," Mr Johnson said.

"If the numbers are good then the land and the country is healthy too ... we take pride in the fact that they're there."

The Saving Our Species Program and Can we stand against hostility the Mutawintji Land Council are plan-Can we withstand this barrage ning on a translocation project for the species in a bid reintroduce them to other areas of the Far West — but only if the numbers continue to rise.

'That strategy would increase the number of sub-populations in NSW and provide a back-up population in case of future droughts, fire or disease," Dr Bell said.

> They're doing it again We are not blind We see through the lies You might wear a suit But it's only a disguise

Morton Boolka's sacred Leave it well alone It's a place of misery A history written in bone

You've take enough Surely its time to listen To look after our country It's our only mission

So what's it really worth? When will enough be enough? When we're all gone? When we're nothing but dust?

people to each other's

shows, then you get

yourselves some money,

get yourselves recognised,

Young Aboriginal artists choose to stay on country to further careers

AIMEE VOLKOFSKY ABC BROKEN HILL

Broken Hill has a reputation as a home for artists, with Pro Hart its most famous son. But what has been a predominantly white, male landscape is changing.

'Fresh Bark' The

an art Mecca. So if you're a young artist in Broken Hill, you're better off starting here than maybe anywhere else in Australia," he said. 'Leaving isn't always the answer'

From traditional artefact making to contemporary street art, the Fresh Bark artists' styles and practices vary but their passion for home is a common thread. Mr Hayward said making artefacts on councus Kennedy is a Bartry was not only essential to his own practice, but kindji, Wiradjuri, Yolngu also to keeping culture artist from Menindee and alive. Broken Hill. "It's extremely important for me to stay home. These practices need to be here on country and landscape as others, he said staying in his local they need to continue on country," he said. community was import-Twenty-year-old Marant.



ary styles in her work.

She said developing her practice in her home town gave her unique access to elders.

"I base my art around the river and patterns I see around country," she said.

"It's always good to learn from your elders. ficer at the Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery Blake Griffiths initiated the program, which he said set out to bring the art world to those artists who might not otherwise have access to it.

"Of course, there are different disadvantages in

Public programs ofartists] are not just getting shipped away to find out what everybody else is doing," he said.

"Professionals are acthen you get a voice out tually coming here, bringthere," he said. ing resources, but also learning about this environment and about the practices of the people in this environment.

Mr Griffiths said those artists who were choosing to stay and make work in and about their local community and culture were

artists are a collective of Indigenous emerging artists, making the choice to stay living on country to make art in far western New South Wales.

Where aspiring young artists often leave home to pursue opportunities in big cities, 27-year-old Ngiyampaa artist Anthony Mulundji Hayward, said he felt there were many advantages to staying home to make and sell his "Broken Hill is sort of Ngiyampaa artist Anthony Mulundji Hayward makes artefacts using techniques that are thousands of years old. (Source: Blake Griffiths)

> "I'm showing other people that leaving isn't always the answer," he said.

While his more mod-"There are still people ern style is not as obvihere that need help, that ously connected to the need a voice."

> Twenty-year-old Barkindji artist Jade Cicak uses a combination of traditional and contempor-

They're the ones who teach you the right things and then we can teach it to other people as we go.' Bringing the art world

to the artists For the past two years, young Indigenous artists based in the far west have taken part in 'Fresh Bark' workshops — learning from more senior Indigenous artists and art professionals, learning about

copyright law, and holding group exhibitions.

choosing to stay in a regional area, but we have tried to bridge those gaps in formal training or artworld training," he said.

"Rather than sending 20 people to Sydney on a research tour, maybe it's better to send one person

from Sydney to us.' Mr Griffiths said bringing art professionals out to a regional area was also beneficial to the art world.

"It's a more cross-cultural exchange; [the

"It's a true form of collaboration, rather than one person receiving and

one person giving." **Strength in numbers**

Mr Hayward said being in a collective had helped the whole group gain exposure.

"Doing a group exhibition really raises the level and exposure," he said.

"They've also got access to elders providing information about how and why work might be made, and to family for support."

Wilcannia witnesses historic floating of Aboriginal canoe along the Darling River

CULTURAL REVIVAL

CALLUM MARSHALL

ABC BROKEN HILL

The first traditionally made Indigenous canoe to appear on the Darling River in 80 years has taken to the water in Wilcannia.

The river red gum canoe was made by Barkindji elder Badger Bates with help from artists Anthony Hayward and David Doyle, Wilcannia Central School students and staff from the Art Gallery of NSW.

Community members gathered at Steamers Point on Thursday morning to watch as students attempted to row down the river on the canoe.

Mr Bates said now the canoe had been made, it was important to make more.

"I promise to everyone that

while there's life in my body, I will continue cutting Baaka (Barkindji name for the Darling River) canoes and teaching young people our culture," he said.

"It won't just be Barkindji people either or black people, it will be white people — I will hand it down to everyone.'

Mr Bates said he was pleased students took part but that more water was needed in the river to guarantee the canoe project's long-term success.

"We need water in the Baaka, or any river, to make the river red gum tress grow so we can cut the canoes.

"It's important for all of our survival that the Baaka must keep flowing."

Passing on knowledge to next generation Mununjali/Wiradjuri girl Sha-

naha Clayton helped make the canoe and took it out onto the river.

She said it was important to learn about a different culture and become involved in the project.

"It's not my culture but I grew up here," she said.

"I've learnt a lot of the language from growing up here, so it's good to know a bit of something I've never learnt before."

Barkindji/Wiradjuri girl Shaday Shaknight-Wade said it was good getting involved in the project and coming back home for it, as she lives in Queensland.

She thanked Mr Bates for providing the students the opportunity to work on the project and showing them traditional culture.

"It's good that he's still showing us new generation so we can then pass it on to the generation below us so we never lose our culture," she said.

"I'd like to do this myself. It would be really good showing other kids how to do it."



Shanaha Clayton helped make the canoe with Badger Bates and others. (ABC Broken Hill: Callum Marshall)

working to their biggest advantage. "Number one, they've

got a connection to the country that is a complex and a deep relationship, one that both inspires their work, but can only continue because they are choosing to live here," he said.

Mr Kennedy said connecting with other local artists had helped him expand his networks. "[We] all get other