

BAAKA HERALD

— 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 over-extraction, 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 commitment to the Murray-Darling basin plan.

The panel has called

for an immediate effort 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.

“The Murray Darling Basin Plan was well designed by Labor, but its

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 during 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 days over 40C, and deoxygenated water below. When the temperature



Two dead murray cod float on the surface of the Darling River near Menindee. (Source: Dean Lewins/EPA)

dropped during a cool 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 floodplain harvesting, 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 its tributary catchments, maximum dry periods between low flow events

have doubled and are 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 and downstream connectivity were maintained.

The panel was particularly 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 implementation of the NSW floodplain harvesting policy would potentially legitimise growth in diversions. They said the take of groundwater was also likely to be contributing 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 Northern Basin review should be repealed.

The Australian Conservation Foundation

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 senator 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 Commission – too much water is being taken for irrigation and not enough is being allowed to flow

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 1-2 °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.

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 limit adjustment mechanism (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 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

main lakes.

“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 concerning, 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.”

View this publication and other exhibition resources online at

ngaratya.com.au



Hidden costs of almond production

CASE STUDY

ZENA CUMPTSON

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 2019-20, these were sold to more than 50 countries, with the almond industry yielding \$772.6 million.

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 the water needs of almonds and the role of this crop in the multiple pressures on

inland water and the environment in Australia more widely.

In Australia, almonds use triple the 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.

The underlying need for a reliable supply of water sees almond crops planted along river systems that are facing increasing pressure from prolonged dry periods. Almond crops have grown by 50% in the Murray-Darling Basin since 2016, despite their substantial water requirements in a geographical area with severe and catastrophic water security issues.

Almonds deplete biodiversity because they are grown as monocultures, with industrial farms stripping the ground around the trees bare to treat for insects and fungi. Also concerning is that the pesticides used to ensure high yields are particularly lethal to bees, and almond cultivation requires more hives for pollination than any other crop.

First Nations people campaign for more say in Murray-Darling Basin water management

DAVID CLAUGHTON

SIMON WALLACE

MAHNAZ ANGRUY

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 'em 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

involved in our culture and the river system, to care for country.

"Emu in the hole" Ms Blore's father worked in river management on the Menindee Lakes for three decades.

She grew up there and eventually shared her cultural knowledge with her own children – including how to cook emu.

"They dug the hole out, then you put the wood in there, get all the coals, get it hot," Ms Blore said.

"Some people put stones in there to keep it warm, and then you place gum leaves over it.

"Pluck the emu, gut it, cut the neck and the head stays out.

"Then they'd cover it

with the gum leaves, coals in the top, cover it with sand and a bit of tin to keep it in."

Having water in the Baaka River was important to her, she said, "because the wildlife disappears when it is dry."

She is worried that the water from Menindee Lakes will be released to supply South Australia, which is what happened in 2016.

"At the moment, our lakes are full and they're starting to take the water now," Ms Blore said.

"We're wondering how long it's going to take before they dry it up again."

Less than 1 per cent of the water in the Murray-Darling Basin is owned by Aboriginal people.

Excerpt only. Read the full article online.

NSW viticulturist accused of stealing 13,000 megalitres of water from the Darling River

FLEUR CONNICK

THEGUARDIAN.COM

Regulator alleges '5,200 Olympic swimming pools' worth of water was illegally pumped from the river over four years

A vineyard operator has been accused of illegally pumping "5,200 Olympic swimming pools" worth of water from the Darling River in south western New South Wales over a four-year period.

On Monday, the Natural Resources Access Regulator (NRAR) said it had begun a "significant" prosecution in the NSW Land and Environment Court against the Lower Murray vineyard operator.

The NRAR will allege the former owner of a vineyard, near Wentworth, bypassed water

meters and pumped up to 13,000 megalitres of water beyond their water licence allocation.

"The water was allegedly taken illegally from the Darling River between 2011 and 2015 – shortly after the millennium drought – when the Murray-Darling Basin and the majority of southern NSW cropping zones were still 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 have a way of taking attention away from the overall reality of finite water resources," she said.

In the three months from July

"When people irrigate unlawfully, they're not just risking 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 vineyard 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 allocation between April 2016 and March 2019.

In the three months from July

to September 2022, the NRAR conducted 1,033 property inspections 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?"

I went up to Pooncarie yesterday 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 320 days.

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 heart and gave up, it was all so sad.

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The Lower Darling River is in so much trouble that a 270-kilometre 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 Menindee Lakes.

The new pipeline is needed because the Menindee-to-Broken Hill pipeline, which has been used for the last 65 years, can no longer access a reliable source of water from the Darling. Despite a dramatic fall in the population of Broken Hill since the 1970s, there is no longer enough water flowing down the Lower Darling River into the Menindee storage because of the increased water use upstream.

That's what they call the Menindee Lakes now – storage, not lakes. There is a push to "decommission" the lakes – in other words, to dry them out – which will cause further devastation to the Lower Darling.

The argument is that there is too much evaporation from the lakes, which are shallow, and that's wasteful. The new on-farm dams that have been built upstream in northern NSW and southern Queensland by cotton growers in the home country of the former and current water ministers, Barnaby Joyce and David Littleproud, are much, much bigger and deeper, so evaporation is not such a problem. It's much more efficient.

This argument about reducing evaporation losses apparently does not apply to flood plain diversion

over private farms. Masquerading as an environmental mitigation works, funded by the taxpayer, farm levees have been constructed to create vast on-farm water storages, in some cases the size of Sydney Harbour.

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Cry me a river: Mismanagement and corruption have left the Darling River dry

OPINION

HELEN VIVIAN

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

"Where is the water? The Darling River has 22 tributaries. We have a buyback program for environmental flow. We spend billions. Where's the water?"

This post on Facebook by Mildura chef Stefano de Pieri got me thinking.

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states. Then there is the ad hoc manner in which many of these are applied. Whilst water is rigorously metered throughout Victoria, nearly 75 per cent of farms in the headwaters of the Darling are unmetered, so an honesty system effectively applies.

In 2012 the NSW government increased water entitlements and allowed upstream users to draw water from the river even during low flow periods. The Barwon-Darling water-sharing 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 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 government 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 Barnaby Joyce – was at more than twice the market price for water.

That's \$12 million of taxpayer funds to one station, Tandou. Webster Limited has owned Tandou since 2015. The company also owns several large cotton properties upstream at Bourke and Moree.

Webster, a Tasmanian company, is also one of Australia's biggest water traders. Its shareholders include Australian Food and Fibre, which is controlled by the Robinson family, a major donor to the National Party.

The outcome from this \$12 million investment of taxpayer funds is that Webster will decommission the irrigated horticultural enterprise at Tandou and return the property to dry-land farming. They will take all the promised jobs and economic activity with them to their northern NSW holdings, where they get to intercept the water before it enters the Darling River.

This is the real kicker – the \$12 million water "buyback" will do nothing to benefit the river or water users downstream.

We now know that this was not

an isolated case. Last month, Fairfax's Peter Hannam revealed details of a \$17 million purchase in March 2017, at twice the market price for water, from the Tulla Pastoral Company, owned by Geoff Dundson, 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 commensurate 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 permanently "decommissioned".

The Australian reported that Joyce said letting the lakes dry out would save precious water for irrigators in the cotton communities of St George and Dirranbandi, in 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 cotton producers like Chinese-owned Cubbie Station, the biggest user of water in Australia".

Some will say it's the drought causing problems in the lower Darling. But there have also been floods and generous flows throughout this period. In June 2016, approximately 60,000 megalitres of water per day was measured flowing down the Macintyre River at Boggabilla, in the Darling River catchment on the border of NSW and Queensland.

The Macintyre forms the northern boundary of Joyce's New England electorate. By December 2016, the Menindee Lakes were at 89 per cent capacity just four months later they were down to 45 per cent, presumably a good deal of this water flowing to Tandou Station, a few kilometres south of the lakes.

Very little if any of the water from the floods in early 2017 reached the Menindee Lakes. It was allocated and distributed to upstream irrigators. The recent frequent drying of the Darling River is a man-made situation. Fifty-six years passed between the "no-flow

events" of 1945 and 2001. Now they are an almost annual occurrence and the length of time during which the river ceases to flow has doubled.

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, Melbourne 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 corporate farming operations 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 interests 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 capacity 365 days a year.

The Lower Darling is the area between Broken Hill, Menindee and Wentworth. It is characterised by dryland grazing which occupies 91.5 per cent of the area while "native landscapes" comprise 1.9 per cent. Irrigated horticulture accounts for less than 0.1 per cent of land use in the Lower Darling, according to a NSW Department of Primary Industries study of 2012.

Having recently driven through this devastated landscape, it is hard to imagine the potential for ecotourism pointed to in the RM Consult-

ing Group's report. But then again, I am from Tasmania where wilderness is wilderness and rivers have 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 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.

‘Unfathomable’: millions of dead fish blanket river near Menindee in latest mass kill



Staggering amount of dead fish found at Menindee. (Source: Graeme McCrabb)

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 bream, but also Murray cod, golden perch, silver perch and carp – blanketed across the river's surface.

It is the latest in a series of large-scale fish deaths that have prompted questions about the management of water levels in the Murray-Darling Basin. Menindee residents who spoke with Guardian Australia on Friday said the latest fish kill appeared larger than previous mass deaths.

About a million fish died during a sustained drought in the same area in 2019 after a rapid drop in temperature led to an algal bloom de-oxygenating the river.

Resident Graeme McCrabb said the scale of the mass kill on Friday was “unfathomable”.

“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 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 along the Menindee main weir through to weir 32, adjacent to the Menindee township.

A department spokesperson said the deaths were due to low oxygen levels in the water as flood waters receded.

“Significant volumes of fish including carp and bony herring, nutrients and organic matter from the floodplain are being concentrated back into the river channel. The current hot weather in the region is also exacerbating hypoxia, as warmer water holds less oxygen than



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 RUSSELL
ABC RURAL

Later savings under Stage Two split among irrigators and the Commonwealth, bringing the total water savings to 420GL.

Stage One was funded by the Victorian Government and Melbourne water retailers, while Stage Two was funded by the Commonwealth.

Recently, Acting Water Minister Richard Wynne announced that an additional 2GL of water had been saved from the projects, and that it would be allocated to irrigators, bringing their total to 77GL.

Murray Darling Lower Rivers Indigenous Nations (MDLRIN) wrote to Mr Wynne late last week, expressing “deep frustration” with the announcement, in a letter seen by the ABC.

The letter called on the Minister to “immediately commit funding to acquire water entitlements for traditional owners and First Nations in northern Victoria.”

Tati Tati man Brendan Kennedy described the lack of consultation with traditional owners in northern Victoria about how the 2GL would be allocated, and being denied access to it, as “unjustifiable.”

“I’m feeling very disappointed, it’s a kick in the guts for traditional owners, particularly in Victoria, because we thought we were starting to build a relationship with the government around water,” Mr Kennedy said.

Indigenous water rights not adequately recognised

AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
NATIVE TITLE REPORT

Water is vital to life, essential to agriculture and a valuable energy source which may be utilised in the mitigation of climate change impacts. Water is extremely valuable globally to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and is used for many different purposes. Water is also important to both for different reasons.

For example, non-Indigenous Australians consider water as a spiritual, natural resource and a commodity that is not only essential to livelihood, but has significant

Australia has an ugly legacy of denying water rights to Aboriginal people, not much has changed

LANA D HARTWIG
NATALIE OSBORNE
SUE JACKSON
THECONVERSATION.COM

Water management in the Murray-Darling Basin has radically changed over the past 30 years. But none of the changes have addressed a glaring injustice: Aboriginal people’s share of water rights is minute, and in New South Wales it is diminishing.

In the 1990s, governments tried to restore the health of rivers in the basin by limiting how much water could be extracted. They also separated land and water titles to enable farmers to trade water.

This allowed the recovery of water for the environment and led to the world’s biggest water market, now worth billions of dollars.

We wanted to understand how these limited water rights 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 distribution.

What we found were key moments when governments denied Aboriginal people water rights and, by extension, the benefits that now flow from water access. This includes the ability to use water for an agricultural enterprise, or to temporarily trade water as many other entitlement holders do. We describe these moments as waves of dispossession.

The first wave of dispossession

Under colonial water law, rights to use water, for example for farming, were granted to whoever owned the land where rivers flowed. This link between water use and land-holding remained in place until the end of the 20th century.

As a result, Aboriginal people, whose traditional ownership of land (native title) was only recognised by the Australian High Court in 1992, were largely denied legal rights to water.

The second wave

During the last quarter of the 20th century, governments introduced land restitution measures, work with government departments, this decision felt like a step backwards.

“This is extremely disappointing,” he said.

“We’ve got the treaty process happening in Victoria, and we have a self-determination strategy with the Government for Traditional Owners, so this is a total contrast to that, a backflip, and we expect to be treated a lot better than this.

“This really brings into question how committed the Victorian Government is with regard to traditional owners and water.”

economic contemporary value. However, Indigenous groups in many of these ecologically rich and often remote environments Indigenous peoples regard the inland waters, rivers, wetlands, sea, islands, reefs, sandbars and sea grass beds as an inseparable part of their estates. As well as underpinning social and economic well-being, Indigenous people’s relationship with waters, lands and its resources is crucial to cultural vitality and resilience.

Australia, and in particular the Indigenous estate, includes some of the most biodiverse terrestrial and aquatic environments, including many

intact and nationally important wetlands, riparian zones, forests, reefs, rivers and waterways. Australia also has some of the most diverse, unique and spectacular marine life in the world.

Historically Indigenous peoples have been excluded from water management in Australia. The lack of engagement is compounded by the fact that Indigenous peoples have low levels of awareness of water institutions, technical information and regulation.

This has resulted in little to no involvement by Indigenous people in state, territory and national consultation processes, and the development of water policy. This means that Indigenous peoples are not well positioned to negotiate enforceable water rights or purchase highly priced water licences.

As identified in the previous chapters on climate change, the focus of law and policy has become highly influenced by the domestic and international economy. As a result, Indigenous rights to water, and the importance of water to the maintenance of Indigenous society, have not been given any priority in the fight for water resources.

Excerpt from Chapter 6: Indigenous Peoples and Water

For a little over 200 years, Country in Australia has been predominantly managed without empowering or reflecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ cultural practices, voices or aspirations.

To meaningfully engage First Nations communities’ ways of knowing and interacting with Country, they need to cease being “informants”, “actors” and “consultants” which, at best, marginally inform ecological and agricultural imperatives.

The machine of colonisation continues to restrict our involvement in decision-making processes at every level. There are very few areas in Australia where Traditional Owners have succeeded in not only gaining back large land holdings, but also enjoy any real power to significantly maintain and nurture Country.

Our mobs are extremely diverse, as are our land management practices. But some overarching beliefs sit at the core of our culture, and are important to understand.

First Peoples have a relationship with Country that is loving, reciprocal and engaged. This “kincentric” relationship includes custodianship obligations – often lacking within non-Indigenous views of Country. Instead of being seen as kin – something to be cared for, listened to, deeply respected and nurtured – Country is seen by many non-Indigenous people as a resource to be exploited and controlled.

Our custodianship of Country, our Law and our vast ecological knowledge are all attached to a place. For each area in

ded in our communities, and always have been. **Aboriginal knowledges aren’t lost**

When it comes to Aboriginal agricultural and land management practices there is still so much to uncover, adopt and reinvigorate. And there are still many who do not believe in our expertise in this area.

Too many ignorantly perceive our knowledges as lost, or call for elders to hand over their knowledges as a matter of urgency, unaware that our communities still practice intricate systems of sharing knowledge across generations.

The belief that our knowledges are lost harks back to early “scientific” theories which emerged around the time of colonisation, when we were considered an inferior race which would soon die out.

Our knowledges are not lost. We are very much still here, still a living culture. But many of our practices and systems need more resources to reinvigorate them.

The extraordinary lifetime work of ethnobiologist Dr Beth Gott to reawaken Aboriginal

caused by the gross mismanagement of this precious river by those in power – a destruction wrought through greed. Rights to land, with no rights to water, is a poignant example of our continued disempowerment in managing and caring for our lands in line

Australia’s First Peoples have honed and employed holistic land management practices for thousands of generations. These practices are embedded in all aspects of our culture. They are so effective, so perfectly suited to this harshest of continents, that we are the oldest living culture in the world today.

A reintroduction of traditional land management is essential if we want to address the ecological crisis we now face. **Not just ‘consultants’**

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To address the ecological crisis, Aboriginal peoples must be restored as custodians of Country

ZENA CUMPSTON
THECONVERSATION.COM

In the wake of devastating bushfires across the country, and with the prospect of losing a billion animals and some entire species, transformational change is required in the way we interact with this land.

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plant knowledge is a brilliant example of this reinvigoration.

Dr Gott took a truly collaborative, respectful and empowering approach to working with Aboriginal communities. This enabled a safe space for Elders and communities to share and create a



It’s not enough for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be ‘consulted’ about their lands. (Ringbarked II, image courtesy of Nici Cumpston and Michael Reid Gallery)

with cultural obligations. Our many thousands of generations of careful observations (science) and effective management and custodianship, must see us empowered to lead decision-making. Our community leaders must not only be given a seat at the table, they should set the menu too.

Different mob, different knowledge

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tion and healing for all communities. The recent horrifying and unprecedented bushfires traumatised and distressed all Australians. The loss of life, both people and animals, and the devastation wrought on Country triggered many calls for Aboriginal management systems to be more meaningfully incorporated.

Empowering and resourcing First Nations peoples’ ecological knowledge would help address the effects of climate change on the land, through practices of care and custodianship. But it must not perpetuate well-established systems of exploitation. It must happen in true partnership.

Enacting healing

Finally, making Indigenous cultural practices central to Australia’s ecological 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 challenging still-embedded narratives which deny our diversity, our agency and most damaging, our sovereignty.

Truth-telling could not only bring long overdue public recognition of atrocities suffered and their continuing legacies, but could also finally dispense with the lie of peaceful settlement. The psychosis of denial impoverishes us all.

A process to enact a healing would begin a path to enlightened acceptance of our systems of management, opening up new possibilities for coming together to heal and enact vital reparations for both people and Country. Empower us and our active custodianship of Country and you empower yourselves.

As long as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities continue to be disenfranchised with our sovereignty denied, as long as we are excluded from leadership roles in meeting the challenges of climate change, we all stand to lose so much more than we can imagine.

As explored by Uncle Bruce Pascoe in Dark Emu, Australian crops are the most nutrient-rich and sustainable crops that can be grown here, requiring little water and no fertilisers. First Nations communities domesticated these crops over thousands of generations, and hold the best knowledge of how to grow them.

Cultural fire management practices are integral to our agricultural practices and are medicine for Country. Their continued reinvigoration will undoubtedly prove an important aspect in land management, protec-

tremendous flows of water that we’re seeing that start life in western Queensland and start life in the Snowy Mountains,” Mr Page said.

“They’ve been able to rule that out in several of the places where we’ve had really localised fish kill events,” he said.

Mr Page said the deaths were likely linked to factors arising from heavy rain and flooding in-terstate.

“These are fish that would prefer to live in a warmer environment and, all of a sudden, they’re being impacted by these

“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 on 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.”

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.”
— Ron Perry, Mildura

“I get very, very upset when I see the river now. It makes you 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 is 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 yabbing anymore. There’s no more water sports. I’ve never seen anything so devastating in all my life. I’ve lived here for 50 years and it’s just tragic. ...”
— Reena Lombardo, Menindee

“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 reffin 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-crash, 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 Perry, 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 Rivers) and you’d see this amazing creamy milk white water swirling into the grey-green. This is the clear stuff swirling into the Murray. It was a defined confluence that was kind of cool. It was living off its own accord and off its own pulp 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 was about 8 years old – the water was up to my waist at the time. I could see my toes in the bottom of the water and yabbies 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 the river or boil the billy or whatever you wanted to do. It was absolutely beautiful water.”
— Ray Johnston, Broken Hill.

“For me, we’re at a situation where a very unique, wonderfully amazing, supportive river that’s been very fruitful for anybody living along it, from the Indigenous owners has really, in less than 20 years, been made into for an open channel with total disregard for anyone downstream.”
— Jason Modica, Mildura

“It hurts very much to look at the river as it 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 till 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 you know, about 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 local water] when I go to Wilcannia. I just use bottled water all the time. It’s wrong that you can’t drink the water. ... It’s sad to go home and see the dead animals ...”
— Clair Bates, Wentworth

“Grandfather, his name’s Charlie Edwams. 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 since his late 70s. The boat ramp down in Bourke, we could never touch the bottom there. You’d never touch it. Now you can just walk straight across it. And it’s heartbreaking. It’s real. It’s draining the community spiritually and culturally, you know.”
— 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

Barka: The Forgotten River exhibition opens at Australian Museum, showcasing the need for all Australians to protect it

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 foot-print 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



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

first piece being a portrait she painted of Mr Bates when her car broke down in Wilcannia.

"Uncle Badger then invited 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 the exhibition, including sculptures depicting native river water birds carved from river red gum that grows along the Darling.

Meanwhile, Ms Muller's contributions include a range of portraits and audio files depicting locals in Wilcannia talking about their love of the river and their observations of its declining health over time.

"The museum has been absolutely incredible to work with, even though the exhibition has been touring for four years, it's kind of a re-imagined version," she said.

Future not guaranteed
A range of people from Wilcannia, including those depicted in the work, have been flown out by the museum to attend the exhibition's opening this week.

Today's opening will also feature performances from Barkandji musicians Barkaa and Leroy Johnson, a mussel carving demonstration with David Doyle, jewellery making with Barbara Quayle, and a wood carving demonstration from Anthony Hayward.

The showing at the Australian Museum is expected to last around five months, and Mr Bates said it may be the exhibition's last.

"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 is going to be the best one, 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]."

Rare Wangarru wallaby colony grows in leaps and bounds after rains in Far West NSW

JONATHAN 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 conservation 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."

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 root cause of declining numbers, with predation and habitat damage from feral cats, foxes and goats.

He said the colony of Wangarru held 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 the Mutawintji Land Council are planning 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.



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)

Young Aboriginal artists choose to stay on country to further careers

AIMEE VOLKOFKY
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.

The 'Fresh Bark' artists are a collective of emerging Indigenous 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 art.

"Broken Hill is sort of

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 country was not only essential to his own practice, but also to keeping culture alive.

"It's extremely important for me to stay home. These practices need to be here on country and they need to continue on country," he said.

Twenty-year-old Mar-



Ngiyampaa artist Anthony Mulundji Hayward makes artefacts using techniques that are thousands of years old. (Source: Blake Griffiths)

cus Kennedy is a Barkindji, Wiradjuri, Yolngu artist from Menindee and Broken Hill.

While his more modern style is not as obviously connected to the landscape as others, he said staying in his local community was important.

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

"There are still people here that need help, that need a voice."

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

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. 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.

Public programs of- 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 choosing to stay in a regional area, but we have tried to bridge those gaps in formal training or art-world 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

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

"Professionals are actually coming here, bringing resources, but also learning about this environment and about the practices of the people in this environment.

"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.

Mr Kennedy said connecting with other local artists had helped him expand his networks.

"[We] all get other

What's it really worth?

DAVE DOYLE
BORNE OF THE BAAKA

The price of a community
The price of a fish
The price of a River
Our country's gone to shit

Should we knock down the
Bridge
Or Sydney's many a Church
Kill off Parliament House
Like they did our Yellow
Belly Perch

Close all the industry
No work to attend
It's just like being confined
to a mission again

This purpose made drought
To end the very history
Of inland Australia
The reasons no mystery

The assimilation policy
Did it ever really end
Is it truly climate change
Or are they at it again

Can our townships be refused
Can we stand against hostility
Can we withstand this barrage
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?
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?

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 Shanaha 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)