
**WATER FOR WELLBEING: OPTIMISING WATER QUALITY AND IMPROVING
THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS**

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ABSTRACT

The importance of the health of the Murray Darling Basin is addressed by the Senate Select Committee on the Multi-Jurisdictional Management and Execution of the Murray Darling Basin Plan. The author's response to the inquiry, overviewed in this short paper, puts forward an argument and recommendations for the need to incorporate traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) knowledge into the Plan, to improve water quality of the Murray and the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians. All recommended actions centre genuine partnership between the Australian Government, State and Territory Governments and Indigenous Australians and Indigenous organisations, as set out in the New National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Key Words: Closing the gap; health and wellbeing; Indigenous Australians; Murray Darling Basin; water quality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Increasing water quality and the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians

The Murray Darling Basin Plan (the Plan) was created to address the significant ecological degradation being caused by water consumption and management at the time, and the effects of the millennium drought. While there is a great deal of variability and some uncertainty in the modelling for precipitation patterns over the whole Basin, several trends have emerged as a result of increasing temperatures, including a decline in rainfall and lower water levels in the Southern Basin (Murray Darling Basin Authority [MDBA], 2019). It is expected that the intensity of extreme rainfall and the frequency and duration of drought will increase (MDBA, 2019). Changes to the hydrology of the Basin system will increase the pressures and risks for Indigenous Traditional Owners' rights to water, and, as the MDBA notes (2019, p.10), will likely mean that the management, sharing and delivery of the Basin water resources will become significantly more complex and contested.

As the Senate Select Committee on the Multi-Jurisdictional Management and Execution of the Murray Darling Basin Plan has identified, there are significant barriers to Indigenous Australians accessing water, including inconsistencies in compliance with trading rules, and accurate pricing information (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). Opportunities for Traditional Owner engagement in the water market and development of strategies to enable their participation must be identified in partnership between Federal and relevant State Governments Indigenous community representatives and organisations. There are certainly opportunities for shared and co-benefits in environmental watering, but the current provisions within the MBDP are fairly weak and there is no clear direction on how states should consult with Traditional Owners.

Indigenous Australians connection to land and water

For Indigenous Australians, water is sacred and a fundamental element of spiritual, cultural, social, economic and ecological wellbeing. Indigenous Australians have obligations, rights, and responsibilities to water that stem from their own traditional systems of governance. These rights are recognised under a range of Commonwealth, State and Territory laws, including Native Title Act 1993, Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006 and various State Traditional Owner Settlement Acts. Furthermore, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) states Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources, and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard.

The ongoing impact of colonisation and contemporary racism

The legacy and ongoing impact of colonisation, including the persistence of racism, discrepancies in life outcomes and the lack of participation of Indigenous Australians in the development of policies that affect them (Heaton 2019), further compounds the impacts of climate change and human activity contributing to the deterioration of the Basin. Many Indigenous Australians who ordinarily rely on water provided by the Basin, and the flora and fauna it sustains, face particularly difficult challenges pertaining to environmental health and food costs. Consideration of Traditional Owner rights and the principle of self-determination requires a clear acknowledgement of the history of dispossession of Indigenous Australians from land and water through the violence of colonisation (Marshall, 2017; Heaton, 2019). Marshall (2017) identifies that dispossession was further compounded when water was separated from land ownership through entitlement rights under Australia's water reforms in the 2004 National Water Initiative. Providing opportunities for Traditional Owners to participate in the water market is just one way to begin to address continued dispossession and exclusion of Indigenous Australians from the water sector.

Responding to the impacts of climate change

The impacts of climate change, including extreme drought, extreme wet, flooding and bushfires, have the potential to reduce water quality and availability, and further exclude Traditional Owners and other local Indigenous Australian residents from accessing sufficient quality water from the Basin. These risks need to be managed effectively as they have a significant impact on Indigenous Australians' ability to access and use water. Indigenous community groups have expressed concern that loss of access to water, and water that is not of an adequate quantity and quality, contributes to loss of culture and connection to Country (Victorian Government Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning [DELWP], 2019). Strengthening connection to Country and ensuring the transmission of knowledge to younger generations require healthy water that is managed by Traditional Owners and other local Indigenous Australians in culturally appropriate ways.

Climate change has placed water quality and supply at high risk, with current drinkable water levels diminishing and often critical. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal for water identifies that safe drinking water is a major determinant of health for many Indigenous communities. Poor water quality and quantity results in excessive sugary drink consumption, which exacerbates poor health outcomes for Indigenous Australians. The impact of climate change

on the Basin also discourages the regeneration of flora and fauna, which would otherwise contribute to a nutritious, balanced diet, or bush tucker, with the lack of these foods further impacting health as well as social and emotional wellbeing.

The long-term effects of changes to the Murray Darling Basin continue to have a detrimental impact on river ecosystems and on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) people who are Traditional Custodians of the Basin (Hartwig, Jackson & Osborne, 2018). The Plan is an important tool for responding to increasing concerns about ongoing ecological destruction occurring in the Murray Darling Basin (Weir, 2011). While a number of provisions within the Plan seek to improve and increase collaboration by government giving Indigenous Australians with greater control throughout its implementation, it has become evident these requirements provide only a limited scope for realising the full rights and aspirations of Indigenous Australians when it comes to accessing, managing and owning of bodies of water. Full, genuine partnership and shared decision-making between Indigenous Australians and all levels of government is imperative.

To best respond to the impact of climate change on the Murray Darling Basin, and to improve access to as well as management and ownership of water for Indigenous Australians, the cultural and traditional access to and uses of waterways must be consistently implemented. Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge must be integrated into water planning, management and decision making within the context of the impact of climate change on the Basin. This can and must include empowering local Indigenous Australians, particularly Traditional Owners, to spearhead climate change research and the development and implementation of climate change mitigation and adaptation policies and Water Resource Plans. A significant component of this research and implementation of policies and Plans must comprise monitoring and evaluating risks to water quantity and quality, with regard given to how the mitigation and management of these risks will impact the interests, rights and wellbeing of local Indigenous Australians. These actions must be adequately funded and take place in partnership between Australian and Basin State Governments and Indigenous community representatives and organisations, as per the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Coalition of Peaks, 2020).

The imperative value of Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge

There are numerous examples from across the nation that demonstrate the importance of the respectful integration of Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge and Western (European) knowledge in natural resource management for achieving positive environmental and sustainability outcomes (Bohensky, Butler, and Davies, 2013). It is essential to embed this traditional ecological knowledge in the monitoring of aquatic ecosystems to achieve the Plan's goal of restoring the Murray Darling Basin to full vitality (Weir, 2011). Genuine and ongoing partnerships that respectfully integrate Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge should be central to environmental water decision making and management.

While there are numerous ad hoc and once-off examples of successful partnerships with Indigenous community representatives and organisations and the Federal and State Governments in the delivery of environmental water, there is no clear Basin-wide strategy to ensure that participation and decision-making of Indigenous community representatives and organisations is consistent. Genuine, consistent and ongoing partnership between Australian and Basin State

Governments and Indigenous community representatives and organisations is imperative, and must be embedded in the Plan. Measures to mitigate the risks from climate change must be designed and implemented in partnership with Indigenous community representatives and organisations, and these community representatives and organisations must be central in the five-yearly evaluations and the Plan, the first review to occur in 2026.

There is a significant need for greater numbers of Environmental Health Workers (EHWs), including Indigenous EHWs who may draw upon Indigenous traditional knowledge to assist with identifying problems and solutions in terms of the Basin's water quantity and quality, and its impact of surrounding fauna, flora and Indigenous people and communities. The creation of Indigenous EHW jobs would bolster employment and income outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

2. CONCLUSION

Embedding genuine and ongoing partnership between Australian and State Governments and Indigenous community representatives and organisations in the Plan, in alignment with the new National Partnership Agreement in Closing the Gap, will ensure the optimisation of water quality and quantity in the Murray Darling Basin and health and wellbeing for Indigenous Australians. To see real, lasting and needed change, it is imperative that through such genuine and ongoing partnership we see:

1. issues pertaining to access, management, and ownership of water along the Murray Darling Basin for Indigenous Australians be improved;
2. Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge be integrated into water planning, management and decision making within the context of the impact of climate change on the Murray Darling Basin;
3. local Indigenous Australians, particularly Traditional Owners, lead:
 - a. research and policy development into climate change mitigation and adaptation practices and processes; and
 - b. the development, implementation and evaluation of the Plan and other water resource plans;
4. allocate additional and ongoing funding to build capacity and resourcing to enable local Indigenous Australians and organisations, including Traditional Owner groups, to:
 - fully participate in and lead the development and implementation of the Plan and other Water Resource Plans; and
 - have management and ownership of water to allow them to fulfil their spiritual, cultural, environmental and economic needs;
5. water quantity and quality be monitored with specific regard to mitigating risks to the interests and rights of local Indigenous Australians, particularly Traditional Owners; and
6. identify opportunities for the participation of Indigenous Australians in the water market and develop strategies for its enablement.

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About the author

Dr Adam Paul Heaton was awarded a PhD in education in 2014 at Charles Darwin University. The focus of his PhD was in Aboriginal Studies, with a focus on tackling racism. Adam developed the anti-prejudice teaching-learning framework, Reconciliation Education. He has worked at numerous NGOs and Australian Government departments in Aboriginal Affairs, and has published ten peer-reviewed research papers and over forty submissions into Australian Government inquiries, advocating for better outcomes for Indigenous Australians.