

Effective Indigenous Involvement In The Living Murray - Introducing A New Methodology

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Background – Indigenous People in the Murray-Darling Basin

The Murray-Darling Basin, covering 1,061,469 square kilometres (14% of the country's total area) is the agricultural food bowl of Australia. For Indigenous Australians, it is an area with which they have special and timeless relationships. The Murray-Darling Basin has a population estimated to be just over 2 million people, based on 2006 census data. Out of that population, approximately 70,000 people are Indigenous, which represents 15% of the national Indigenous population.

As of June 2006, Indigenous Australians held communal rights and interests to land encompassing about 20% of Australia's total land mass, much of this gained through recent Land rights negotiations, Native Title and a number of other mechanisms. However, much of this land is remote and commercially marginal by mainstream market criteria, although it has high conservation value. It is estimated that Indigenous people have ownership or rights (known as the Indigenous estate) to less than 0.2% of the area of the Basin.

The history of European settlement of the Murray-Darling Basin and the emphasis on water use for agricultural production has resulted in over-allocation of water and the river system becoming seriously degraded. Consequently, the ability of Indigenous people to enjoy and exercise their strong relationship with land and water has been severely compromised. For Indigenous people, the Murray-Darling Basin is a place where virtually all of the water is allocated and the land is owned or controlled by others.

Indigenous Community Engagement

Recognition of the state of the river system has led to an extensive effort to restore 'environmental flows' to the river through a cooperative approach by the Commission and its partner governments. In focussing on the creation of a 'separate' flow for the health of the river, governments have in recent years understood the requirement to take into account the needs of a multitude of resource users, and considerable effort has been directed towards involving the Basin's communities, including Indigenous communities, in the decision making process.

The use of land for economic purposes and a history of government policies, such as segregation and assimilation, has altered but not terminated Indigenous people's relationship with the land. Since the 1970s, the predominant avenue governments have followed to involve Indigenous people in natural resource management and decision making in the Murray-Darling Basin has been through the protection of cultural sites such as shell middens, burial grounds, and stone quarries. There is no doubt that for Indigenous people, looking after archaeology sites is an important part of looking after their traditional lands and their identities, whilst providing reference points for the larger picture of their long term and ancient relationship with the land. However, management of ancient sites alone does not readily translate to the cultural, social and economic aspirations of Indigenous people in the 21st Century.

Managing land requires reversing degradation and accepting the concept of 'peopled landscapes' as an integral and essential part of a healthy and sustainable environment. The knowledge, values and perspectives of local Indigenous people is now seen by a growing number of natural resource managers as vital to achieving a more comprehensive and holistic approach to land management, and integral to improving the health of the land, in large measure because approaches based on western science alone have so clearly failed.

To gain Indigenous input into natural resource management issues, governments within the Basin often hold community meetings or workshops, or invite Indigenous individuals to participate in management and advisory committees addressing natural resource management issues. Indigenous people's involvement in committees is often undertaken without adequate consideration for the Indigenous representative's cultural authority to speak for the specific areas being discussed. Most Indigenous people strictly abide by protocols for speaking for their traditional Country, which is often very localised and usually a subset of government's management areas, such as catchments or State boundaries. At the same time, the financial and technical capacity for Indigenous people to equitably and effectively contribute to such decision making is often not taken into account.

Both the 'committee engagement' and 'broader consultative' approaches which are currently the default approach for Indigenous consultation tends to result in high level abstracted environmental aspirations being expressed by Indigenous participants such as "requiring a healthy environment with clear waters, so that we can catch fish", or "the River Murray being like it was 50 years ago, when we could tell it was time to collect swan eggs from the lakes because the duck weed was coming down the River."

These Indigenous perspectives are usually accepted as admirable by mainstream land managers or bureaucrats running the meetings, but at the same time they are often regarded as being beyond the capacity of the resources available. The outcome of this approach to consultation is for Indigenous people to view the meetings as "never resulting in change", and the bureaucrats feeling that Indigenous aspirations are unrealistic.

Other mechanisms to involve Indigenous people in land management and ensure their connection to traditional lands in the Murray-Darling Basin include Joint Ownership of National Parks and the purchase of lands by the Indigenous Land Corporation which are then transferred to Indigenous legal entities for their use with the caveat that they cannot be sold. However, at current levels, the benefits of these arrangements accrue to only a small proportion of Indigenous people.

The Murray-Darling Basin Commission and the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations

The Murray-Darling Basin Commission has formed a collaborative partnership arrangement with the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN), a collective of ten Indigenous Nations (Traditional Owner groups) primarily located along the corridor of the River Murray and lower Darling River. Over the last three years together they have developed the Indigenous Partnerships Project which focuses on establishing a new basis for engaging Indigenous people in The Living Murray in a way which ensures their social, spiritual, cultural, environmental and economic interests are included in planning and management of the icon sites. The Indigenous Partnerships Project takes a principle-based approach aimed at achieving consistent and grounded involvement of Indigenous people in The Living Murray's decision making and planning processes.

With the aim of improving Indigenous engagement in natural resource management, the Indigenous Partnerships Project funds the employment of a small number of Indigenous

Facilitators and supports an equal number of Indigenous advisory groups at each icon site. However, with this program, the emphasis is on pursuing an approach that elucidates Indigenous people's *contemporary* relationship with the land as a basis for their input into the environmental management planning process of The Living Murray.

Use and Occupancy mapping

The key to the innovative approach of the Indigenous Partnerships Project has been the introduction of the social science methodology of Use and Occupancy mapping.

Use and Occupancy mapping is essentially a survey technique based on mapping an individual's relationship with the land. This methodology was developed in Canada in the early 1970's and has evolved as a fundamental part of their First Nation land claim processes and negotiations over natural resource utilisation. As in Canada, many Indigenous activities in Australia leave no visible evidence, however they are etched in the memories of those who use their Country in search of physical and spiritual sustenance. Use and Occupancy mapping is a methodology that can document, in a scientifically robust way, those aspects of an individual's experience that can be shown on a map.

'Use' refers to activities involving the harvest of traditional resources, such as hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering of medicine plants and edible plants. 'Occupancy' refers to the area for which a particular Traditional Owner group regards as its own by virtue of continuing habitation, place naming, traditional knowledge of stories, spiritual places and burial grounds.

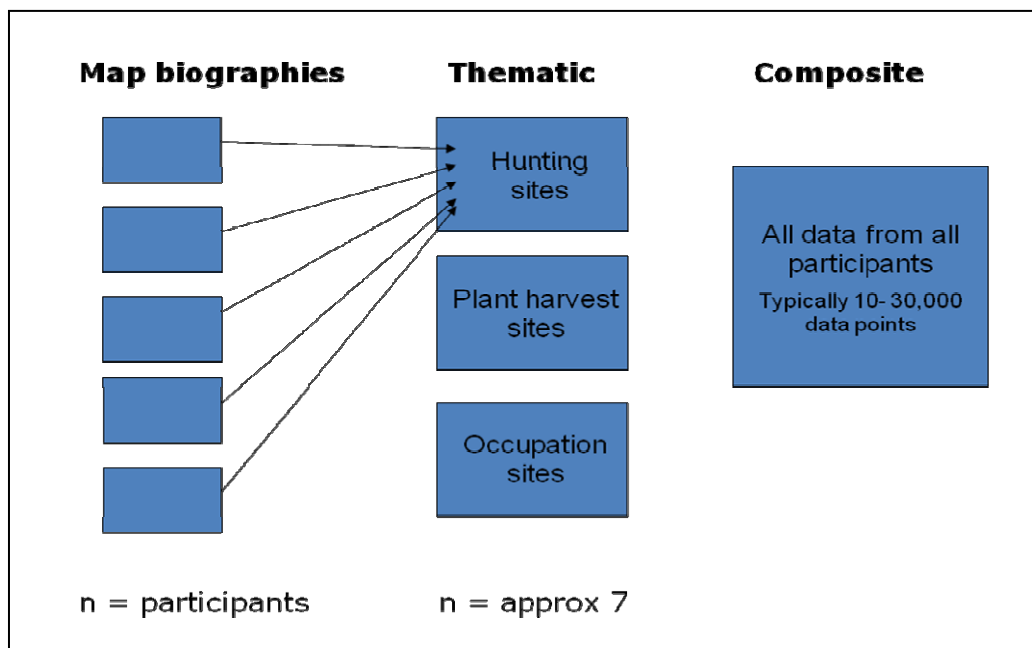


Figure 1: Schematic of Use and Occupancy mapping process

In developing a Use and Occupancy mapping project, a number of activities are identified which the community and the research designer believe will be representative of their contemporary relationship with the land and serve the purposes for which the maps are intended, in this case, for natural resource management negotiations. These activities are mapped as features with approximately 60 separate features being used in a mapping project. When each individual map biography is digitised, the features can be collated into groups or themes which are used to spatially show the collective use of the land by the community.

The focus of Use and Occupancy mapping is on the individual's life experience on their traditional Country rather than an approach that considers archaeology or historical sites.

Indigenous input comes from Traditional Owner groups, statutory Indigenous organisations and the broader Indigenous community. Landscape maps can then be produced through adding other information layers, such as; physical features, vegetation, soils, tenure information, land use etc.

Since one of the primary functions of the icon site Environmental Management Plans is to identify water requirements for ecological and cultural outcomes for incorporation into The Living Murray's Environmental Watering Plan, it is particularly important that the information gathered through the Indigenous Partnerships Project is recorded spatially and in a manner that relates to contour (flooding) levels.

Therefore, these Use and Occupancy maps will be used to help identify and record the contemporary spiritual, cultural, environmental, social and economic interests of Indigenous people for each icon site. Use and Occupancy mapping is intended to be used as a tool by Indigenous communities to help them describe their contemporary relationship with their Country and form the basis of their dialogue with natural resource managers. For example, a community that has mapped features such as fishing, kangaroo hunting, turtle egg collecting, spiritual sites, burial sites, gathering of weaving plants, and camping could use the maps of these different activities in discussions with natural resource managers regarding activities and areas to be protected and / or enhanced as outcomes of planning and management processes.

Informed Consent

One of the underpinning principles of the Indigenous Partnerships Project has been to involve Indigenous people effectively, through a process of 'informed consent'. This means that the Indigenous people involved must have an adequate knowledge and understanding of The Living Murray Initiative to ensure they are aware of the consequences and outcomes which may result from their contribution and any consent given with regards to their cultural knowledge, values and perspectives. With respect to Use and Occupancy mapping, the informed consent process is manifested through a careful program of introducing this methodology. The approach taken has been to sponsor one of Canada's leading experts in Use and Occupancy mapping, Mr Terry Tobias, to visit Australia and explain the methodology to MLDRIN delegates and other Indigenous community representatives. Opportunities were also provided for five influential Indigenous community leaders to visit Canada and meet with First Nation representatives that have undertaken Use and Occupancy mapping projects and have successfully used them in natural resource management negotiations.

This process has led to a level of support within MLDRIN that provided the impetus and interest for a pilot Use and Occupancy mapping project to be undertaken within the Murray-Darling Basin.

Yorta Yorta Nation Pilot Project

Following pre-tests of the methodology, Australia's first set of Use and Occupancy maps were produced in March 2008. With the support of the Yorta Yorta leadership, interviews were conducted in Echuca, Shepparton and Melbourne by an experienced Canadian team and the Manager of the Indigenous Partnerships Project. Utilising the Canadian team was the preferred way forward as it eliminated potential errors that would have occurred if a freshly trained and inexperienced Australian team had undertaken the research design, interviewing and mapping.

As could be expected, Yorta Yorta leaders had to deal with a general mistrust of government processes, scepticism regarding the ownership of the process and outcomes and therefore a reluctance to engage in the project. A key component of overcoming this was to emphasise to the Yorta Yorta people that Use and Occupancy mapping was a tool for their purposes, either at

the negotiating table or within their own communities. In addition, it was emphasised that all of the maps and associated intellectual property would belong to each of the respondents, legally, ethically and morally. The role of government (that is, MDBC) was limited to facilitation through the provision of funds, and a commitment to Indigenous people gaining meaningful and respectful engagement in the management of the Murray-Darling Basin's natural resources

A total of 66 members of the Yorta Yorta nation completed map biographies for the 667 square kilometres of the Barmah-Millewa Forests. They were asked to map sites for 72 different categories, ranging from places where they had successfully hunted for kangaroo, fished for Murray Cod, and collected turtle eggs, to locations where they had camped overnight or repatriated ancestors' remains. This resulted in over 6,000 features being mapped. Without doubt, the respondents enjoyed their time working on their map biographies. Some individuals commented that they had been waiting for years for an opportunity to record the land, its animals and the places that were important in their lives.

This participation and data production was sufficient to reveal a tangible, impressive snapshot of the Yorta Yorta nation's contemporaneous connection to their country.

The map biographies produced from the Yorta Yorta nation's pilot mapping project are currently being digitised by Ecotrust Canada in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. The Yorta Yorta leadership felt more comfortable having their data handled by a distant non-government organisation with much experience in producing these types of maps.

A very pleasing element of the Use and Occupancy mapping pilot project was that participation clearly created a common experience which has helped reinforce the notion of shared values and beliefs among the Yorta Yorta community about land and water. This strengthened the sense of community within the Yorta Yorta nation.

The Next Steps

The Yorta Yorta nation intends using their thematic maps for a range of purposes, primarily to help them explain to natural resource managers how they use their Country and how management actions can provide for and enhance these on-going activities. It is this use that the MDBC hopes will create a dialogue at a practical level that will assist icon site managers to better understand the ways in which land and water is important to Indigenous people.

With the first steps now behind them, MLDRIN and the MDBC are now organising formal training in Use and Occupancy mapping for the MDBC Indigenous Facilitators and selected Indigenous community nominees at each icon site. Efforts will be made to ensure that the standards set by the Yorta Yorta nation's pilot project are upheld as other nations move forward with mapping of their own respective Country.

Two years have elapsed since the concept of Use and Occupancy mapping was first proposed as part of the Indigenous Partnerships Project. During this time, there have been strong indicators that Use and Occupancy mapping has the potential to become an integral part of Indigenous community engagement in sustainable land and water management.

Acknowledgements

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