

# Water Community and Country

Victoria's Aboriginal Water Program



Progress Snapshot  
September 2020

**'Aboriginal communities are at the heart of Water for Victoria and have the experience and knowledge to make key decisions about water holdings and the health of our waterways.'**

Minister for Water Lisa Neville

*Water for Victoria*, launched by the Minister for Water in 2016, recognises the values that water has for Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians and the importance of self-determination.

The Victorian Government is committed to enabling self-determination for Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians. For the first time, Aboriginal values of water have been recognised in law and in water planning and management frameworks across Victoria.

*Water for Victoria* includes six key actions on recognising and managing for Aboriginal values and aspirations for water and progressing self-determination.

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) **Aboriginal Water Unit** is responsible for delivering the **Aboriginal Water Program** (AWP) and meeting the commitments outlined in *Water for Victoria*:

**Action 6.1:** to recognise Aboriginal values and objectives of water

**Action 6.2:** to include Aboriginal values and traditional ecological knowledge in water planning

**Action 6.3:** to support Aboriginal access to water for economic development

**Action 6.4:** build capacity to increase Aboriginal participation in water management

**Action 10.8:** to increase Aboriginal inclusion in the water sector

**Action 10.9:** to support economic development through Aboriginal participation

**Acknowledgement**

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it. We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of cultural and traditional practices.

We are committed to genuinely partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the broader protection of Country and its waterways in the 21st century and beyond.

NOTE: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that this document may contain quotes and images of Aboriginal people who have passed.



COVER: Aboriginal water totems representing the four corners of Victoria, by Taungurung artist, Mick Harding  
 LEFT: Mirring - Country, artist Thomas Day, a Gunditjmara, Yorta Yorta and Wemba Wemba man. DELWP  
 RIGHT: Barapa Barapa Elder, Esther Kirby, by Craig Moodie

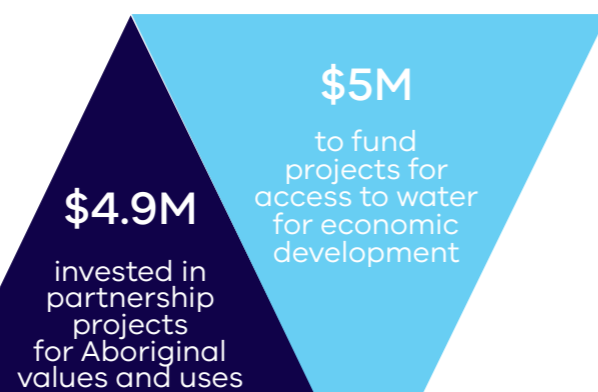
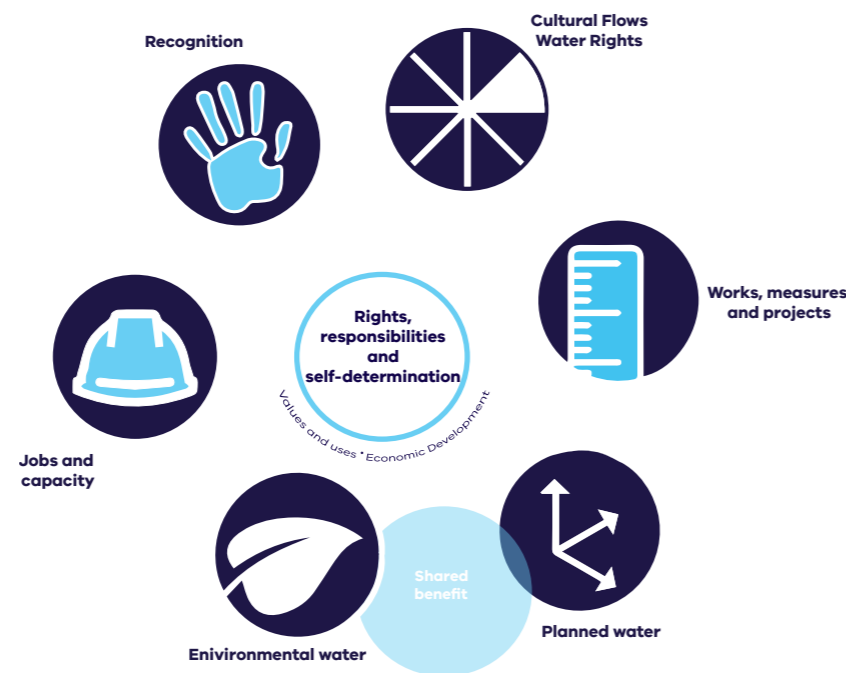
## Progressing self-determination through Victoria's Aboriginal Water Program

Traditional Owners have managed land and water sustainably over thousands of generations but Aboriginal approaches to water have not influenced Victorian water policy. We are changing this.

The Aboriginal Water Program is a partnership between the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) and Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians to manage our waterways and catchments across the state. Importantly, it is reconnecting communities to water for cultural, economic, customary and spiritual purposes.

The Aboriginal Water Unit is responsible for implementing the Aboriginal Water Program and meeting the commitments outlined in *Water for Victoria*. We are delivering the program and co-designing initiatives in collaboration with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians.

Together, we are working to secure a future where Traditional Owners' water aspirations are embedded in water planning and management to deliver cultural, spiritual, social, environmental and economic benefits.



RIGHT: Veronica (Ronnie) Harradine, Latji Latji Traditional Owner, at Bidjee Lagoon, February 2020, by Mallee CMA



*'It is our human right – the rights of the Indigenous people of Australia. To be involved in water, have the right of access to water, and be participating players in the decisions made regarding water.'*

Brendan Kennedy  
Tati Tati Wadi Wadi nations  
July 2017

Action 6.1  
Action 6.2

## Aboriginal Water Officers are integrating cultural values in water planning and management

One of our first priorities was to fund Traditional Owners to take an active role in the management of the state's water resources.

23

full-time positions have been funded for Aboriginal Water Officer roles

100%

of our CMAs are partnering with Aboriginal Water Officers to deliver projects on the ground

7

Aboriginal Water Officers' Network meetings held to date with four on Country

Aboriginal Water Officers (AWOs) play a significant role in promoting informed discussion to support Aboriginal values and uses through Victoria's existing water resource planning and management processes.

AWOs have delivered Aboriginal Water Program projects in partnership with Traditional Owner corporations, Aboriginal communities, catchment management authorities (CMAs) and water agencies.

Since the Aboriginal Water Program began in 2016, the Victorian Government has funded 23 full-time Aboriginal Water Officer positions to actively support Aboriginal communities to increase their participation in water planning and management.

The AWO positions provide a dedicated water expert on Country to support Traditional Owners to self-determine how they wish to partner with the water sector.

AWOs work on local projects and programs to contribute to environmental outcomes and economic benefits for local Aboriginal communities. Their projects and research support the Victorian Government to better understand and incorporate traditional ecological knowledge into water resource planning and management for the health of our shared waterways.

The Aboriginal Water Unit, in partnership with the AWOs, established the Aboriginal Water Officer Network as a forum to share knowledge and practices. It is administered by the AWOs to provide support for each other and strengthen capability to participate in the water industry.

AWOs work to build strong and collaborative relationships to contribute to environmental outcomes and economic benefits for local communities. They are a vital way we are working with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians to incorporate Traditional Owner knowledge of Country into water policy.

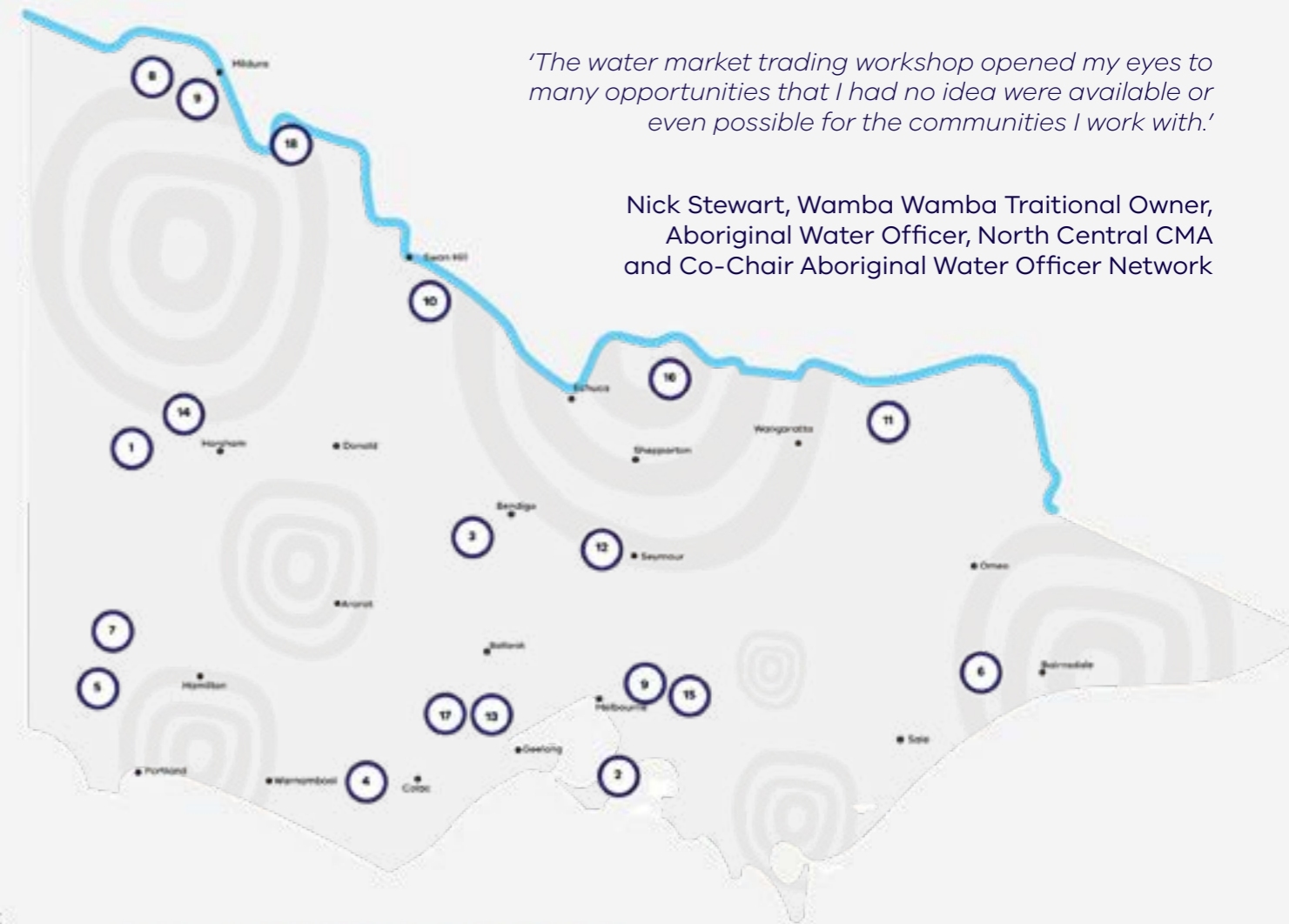
*'I've had great support along the way from my Wimmera CMA colleagues and I'm excited about the next steps in my career. It's great to see Aboriginal Water Officer roles like mine across the state now.'*

Ben Muir, Wotjobaluk and Jardwadjali Traditional Owner, Aboriginal Water Officer, Wimmera CMA and Co-Chair Aboriginal Water Officer Network

LOWER RIGHT: Aboriginal Water Officers' Network meeting on Taungurung Country in February 2019, by DELWP

*'The water market trading workshop opened my eyes to many opportunities that I had no idea were available or even possible for the communities I work with.'*

Nick Stewart, Wamba Wamba Traditional Owner, Aboriginal Water Officer, North Central CMA and Co-Chair Aboriginal Water Officer Network



### Victorian Aboriginal Water Officers Organisations funded for Aboriginal Water Officer roles

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| 1 Borengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation | 7 Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation | 13 Wathaurung Aboriginal Corporation trading as Wadawurrung        |
| 2 Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation       | 8 Mallee Catchment Management Authority                     | 14 Wimmera Catchment Management Authority                          |
| 3 Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation       | 9 Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations            | 15 Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation |
| 4 Eastern Marr Aboriginal Corporation                | 10 North Central Catchment Management Authority             | 16 Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation                       |
| 5 Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority     | 11 North East Catchment Management Authority                | 17 Corangamite Catchment Management Authority                      |
| 6 Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation | 12 Taungurung Land and Waters Council                       | 18 Tati Tati Wadi Wadi nations hosted by HLDRIN                    |

June 2020



Action 6.1

# Our work to recognise Aboriginal water values and uses

We have invested in research on-Country and partnered with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians on local projects to progress Aboriginal water values, uses and cultural heritage.

Over the past four years we have invested in projects led by Traditional Owners to better define and document Aboriginal values, uses, and aspirations of Victoria's waterways and catchments. These projects explore cultural mapping, seasonal watering plans, water management plans, and research of cultural and environmental flows.

To achieve their aims, several projects undertook Aboriginal Waterways Assessments (AWAs), an effective and culturally safe tool for Traditional Owners to document water-related values on Country, and influence waterway management.

The AWA findings, together with other outcomes of the values and uses projects, have identified improvements that could be made to waterways in Victoria.

The eight values and uses projects have been led by Traditional Owners in partnership with CMAs and DELWP:

- ▶ **Come Along and We Will Re-water The Billabong**  
Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Bunurong Barnth**  
Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Wanyarram Dhelk**  
Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Glenelg River Cultural Flows**  
Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation and Glenelg Hopkins CMA
- ▶ **GLaWAC Water Cultural Mapping**  
Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Taungurung Restoring Water, Restoring Country**  
Taungurung Clans Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Building Capacity and Shared Benefits for Traditional Owners**  
Corangamite Catchment Management Authority in partnership with Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Barapa Barapa Wemba Wemba Water for Country**  
Barapa Barapa and Wemba Wemba nations and North Central CMA

TOP LEFT: Aerial of Wallpalla Lagoon, by Mallee CMA

TOP RIGHT: Djandak team members at Koomba Street's new project healing storm water before it flows into the Bendigo Creek. by Mallee CMA

LOWER LEFT: Tammy Gilson, Wadawurrung Traditional Owner, with her Buniya Binak, by Kristen Lees, Corangamite CMA

LOWER CENTRE: Stuart Harradine, Wotjobaluk Traditional Owner, Aboriginal Water Officer in December 2018, by Wimmera CMA

LOWER RIGHT: Visit by Minister for Water, Lisa Neville, to the site of the first storm water ponds implemented by Wanyarram Dhelk project on Bendigo Creek in May 2017, by Dja Dja Wurrung

Over **30** AWAs guided Traditional Owners' input into Seasonal Watering Plans by CMAs

*'Water is number one. Without it trees, birdlife species and vegetation suffer greatly.'*

Participant, Dja Dja Wurrung AWA Tang Tang Swamp, 2018



**▶ Building Capacity for Traditional Owners**  
Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation

Recognition of Wadawurrung values in waterway management was celebrated at a special event and Welcome on the banks of the Moorabool River (Wadawurrung name *Moorobull Yaluk*) in 2019. It welcomed the release of 500 megalitres of water for the environment into the Moorabool River, embracing cultural values and eel fishing.

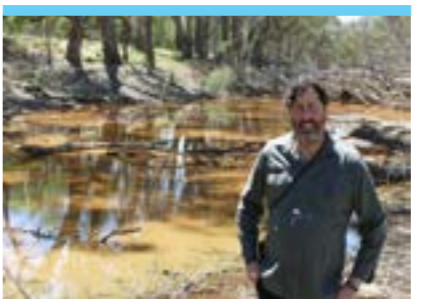
The release of the water supported the traditional method of fishing using Buniya Binak (woven eel trap) placed between river rocks.



**▶ Come Along and We Will Re-water the Billabong**  
Barengi Gadjin Land Council

The first-ever watering of The Ranch Billabong in December 2018 highlighted the use of water for the environment for shared benefits. Bringing water back to Country benefited the ecosystem and its people. Importantly, it will preserve a site on the Barengi Gadjin (Wimmera River) that is culturally significant to the Wotjobaluk people.

The project re-establishes a natural flooding regime to the billabong system to restore native plant and animal habitats.



**▶ Wanyarram Dhelk**  
Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation

Wanyarram Dhelk is a cultural expression encapsulating what Bendigo Creek once was, a series of waterholes that provided food and fibre resources as well as recreational opportunities for Djaara. The project has provided an important step in the healing process required for Bendigo Creek that has been left in poor condition since the gold-rush period. Wanyarram Dhelk has provided an example for the whole community on the potential to 'Re-imagine Bendigo Creek' and embrace its possibilities as a valued resource.



## Our work to support Aboriginal access to water for economic development

In partnership with Traditional Owners we are working to explore and develop opportunities for Aboriginal enterprises through access to water.



The Aboriginal access to water for economic development program has been co-designed between Traditional Owners, the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, MLDRIN, and the Aboriginal Water Unit and has been delivered in three stages.

### Stage One

The first stage was the Accessing Water project led by the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN). A series of workshops assisted Traditional Owners to explore questions around water rights, the water market and trading. The outcomes of these workshops will contribute to innovative policy to recognise Aboriginal water rights. Traditional Owners and representatives from CMAs, Victorian water corporations and DELWP staff attended these workshops across the state.

### Stage Two

The second stage funded 11 pilot projects to explore opportunities for Traditional Owners to access water for economic development and to inform planning for future investment. The pilot projects have been co-designed between Traditional Owners, the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, MLDRIN, and the Aboriginal Water Unit.

These projects tested the feasibility of aquaculture, bush foods, native plants, water-based education and cultural tourism across Victoria.

TOP LEFT: Economic development project, by DELWP

TOP RIGHT: Budj Bim Rangers and GHCMA project team, by Glenelg Hopkins CMA

LOWER LEFT: Native Raspberry (*Rubus parvifolius*)

LOWER CENTRE: Short-finned Eel (*kooyang*), by Arthur-Rylah Institute

LOWER RIGHT: Gunaikurnai project team, by GLaWAC

### Stage Three

The third stage of the Aboriginal Water Program will be informed by the findings and results from the first two stages. The Aboriginal Access to Water Roadmap will be co-designed with Traditional Owners to identify access to water for economic development and water for social, cultural and spiritual outcomes.

#### Pilot projects

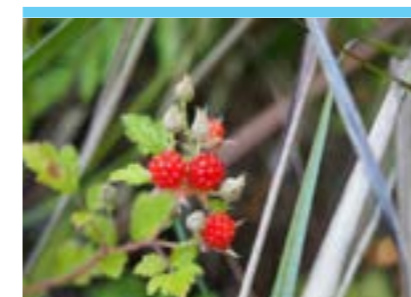
- ▶ **Aboriginal Farming**  
Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Bunurong Aquaponics**  
Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Healing Water Aquaculture**  
Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Eeling and Bushfoods**  
Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Native Fish Aquaculture**  
First People of the Millewa-Mallee Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Water-based Cultural Tourism**  
Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Killara Kooyang Water**  
Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Water for Bushfoods Horticulture** Taungurung Clans Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Water and Culture Education**  
Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation
- ▶ **Water for Economic Development**  
Barapa Barapa and Wemba Wemba nations
- ▶ **Cultural Flows on the Murray**  
Tati Tati and Wadi Wadi nations



**Water for Bushfoods**  
Taungurung Clans  
Aboriginal Corporation

Taungurung have access to water via a water use licence and are one of the first Traditional Owner corporations to have a water right of this kind. The project investigated the socio-economic benefits of Traditional Owners owning and making decisions around water – a first for Victoria.

This project provides an opportunity to explore the best use of the licence in establishing a bushfoods horticulture business and plant nursery on the King River.



**Killara Kooyang Water**  
Gunditj Mirring  
Traditional Owners  
Aboriginal Corporation

This eel (kooyang) aquaculture project will inform the long-term and sustainable water needs for this business at the Lake Condah Mission site. The project will harvest eels for the local community.

The kooyang farm is completely 'off-grid' and uses a reticulating aquaculture system. This project has been in partnership with Wannon Water and Deakin University and aims to re-establish traditional kooyang farming and restore its integral role for Country.



**Water-based Cultural Tourism**  
Gunaikurnai Land  
and Water Aboriginal  
Corporation

The Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation investigated the feasibility of a water-based cultural tourism enterprise to operate across the rivers and lakes of their Country.

The project investigated options for developing and teaching water-based cultural activities to bring community members back on Country.





# What's next?

Together we have made significant steps forward, but we know we still have much more to do in the water sector to enable self-determination for Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians.

The Victorian Government and Aboriginal Victorians are working to advance Treaty or Treaties following the passing of the *Advancing the Treaty Process with Aboriginal Act 2018*. This is an opportunity to formally recognise and celebrate the unique status, rights, cultures and histories of Aboriginal Victorians. It will benefit all Victorians by promoting reconciliation, fostering shared pride in Aboriginal cultures and helping to heal the wounds of the past.

DELWP's Aboriginal Water Program is supporting to inform water management policy and decision making.  
(Action 6.1 and Action 6.2)

Together we are supporting Aboriginal access to water for economic development.  
(Action 6.3 and Action 10.9)

We have increased Aboriginal inclusion and participation in Victoria's water sector.  
(Action 6.4 and Action 10.8)

The challenge we face is not easy, but it can and must be done. Future planning for the Aboriginal Water Program will be driven by working together to enable true self-determination for Aboriginal people, thereby creating a better future for all Victorians.

We are already planning to move into the next stage of the Aboriginal Water Program so that we can:

- ▶ implement an economic development roadmap to deliver water for Aboriginal values.
- ▶ address access to water for Traditional Owners for economic development and other self-determined uses.
- ▶ strengthen the capacity and skills of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians to promote and share Aboriginal values and knowledge with the water sector and further integrate this knowledge into water management processes.
- ▶ expand opportunities for representation of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians in water agency planning and decision-making.
- ▶ increase Aboriginal employment and procurement in the water sector.
- ▶ invest in environmental restoration to address and enhance Aboriginal cultural values and complement water ownership outcomes.

We are looking forward to the challenge.

*'Our connection to the river is not only through the past, it's about desire for a great future for our community.'*

Wergaia Elder Ron Marks, Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation

TOP RIGHT: Talk Water on Country at Bidgee Lagoon, by Mallee CMA

LOWER RIGHT: Beside the Murray River, by Murray Lower-Darling River Indigenous Nations



## Aboriginal Access to Water Roadmap

Our next step is to work with Traditional Owner corporations and Aboriginal Victorians to further develop the Aboriginal Access to Water Roadmap (the Roadmap). The Roadmap will be developed through a co-designed process with Traditional Owners and will be based on the outcomes of various pilot projects occurring around the state.

It will guide our next steps for investment and policy reform. The Roadmap intends to contribute to self-determination by identifying opportunities for Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians to access water.

Throughout the process of shaping the Roadmap through three years of program delivery, Traditional Owners have advocated for a holistic approach for access to water, not only for economic development but also for cultural, spiritual and social purposes. To support this, we have expanded the scope of the Roadmap.

The Roadmap will provide equitable and sustainable outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians through their engagement in water management, and readiness for Victoria's nation-leading treaty process. This process will address the exclusion of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians from water policy, design and management, and enable self-determination.

*Cultural flows are a way of translating Indigenous people's water rights, needs and aspirations into the language of modern water management. First Nations have the right to own and manage water on our Country to support self-determination.*

MLDRIN Echuca Declaration, 2007





***'Respect for the role of water in Aboriginal cultural heritage is a great example of Water for Victoria and our self-determination agenda in action.'***

**Minister for Water, the Hon. Lisa Neville**

***'One waterway might cut across multiple traditional owner groups, or it might cut across multiple catchment management authorities. So it's not just thinking about your little patch – it's about working with organisations to think about the broader landscape.'***

**Rueben Berg, Gunditjmara man and first Aboriginal Victorian Water Commissioner**

For further information visit

[water.vic.gov.au](http://water.vic.gov.au)

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DISCLAIMER: All images have been taken before COVID-19 restrictions were in force.

