



The National Cultural Flows Research Project

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THE NATIONAL CULTURAL FLOWS Research Project is an innovative collaborative research project driven by the Aboriginal nations of the Murray-Darling basin. The project is developing a framework and solid evidence base for understanding Aboriginal values relating to water, and estimating water requirements. The long-term aim is to encourage the adoption of cultural flows into Australia's water management regimes, by supporting traditional owners to make their own cases for cultural flows allocations.

A formal definition of cultural flows was endorsed by the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN) in 2007, in what is called the Echuca Declaration. It defined cultural flows as 'water entitlements that are legally and beneficially owned by Indigenous Nations of a sufficient quantity and quality, to improve the spiritual, cultural, environmental and economic conditions of those Indigenous Nations.'¹

Rene Woods, a Nari Nari man from southwest New South Wales, is the chair of MLDRIN and represents that organisation on the project's Research Committee. He says that the research grew from the need to answer a single question; 'We were constantly being asked how much water we needed. Getting the project started took a lot of hard work and good key people within some of the agencies that pushed it internally.'

The project is the result of years of advocacy and relationship-building by both MLDRIN and the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN). Its Research Committee comprises representatives from MLDRIN, NBAN, the Northern Australia Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance, the National Native Title Council and various Commonwealth and basin state and territory government agencies, including the Murray-Darling Basin Authority.

The first component of the field research involved developing and

testing methodologies for identifying Aboriginal values relating to water. Interviews with Aboriginal people connected to the two case study sites – the Toogimbie Wetlands near Hay, NSW, and Gooraman Swamp near Weilmoringle, NSW – have found strong evidence for significant cultural, economic, health and wellbeing outcomes from water ownership.

In the next stage, hydraulic and hydrological modelling of the case study sites was used to develop methodologies for quantifying how much water, and what kinds of flows, are needed to sustain these positive outcomes. The findings have been used to create easy to understand tools that groups can use to determine the cultural flows they need to get their desired outcomes.

Environmental flows – ensuring there is enough water of sufficient quality and quantity, and at the right times and places, to sustain riverine ecosystems – are accepted as a



necessary part of water management in Australia. Cultural flows, however, only began attracting serious interest from basin governments more recently. Rene estimates that 'cultural flows is now where the environmental water discussion was twenty-five years ago.'

The key feature that separates cultural flows from environmental flows and other water allocations is that they are owned by Aboriginal nations for their own benefit. With this ownership comes greater agency for nations to manage their own country and resources as they see fit. Currently, there are no cultural flows allocations in the Murray-Darling basin; however, MLDRIN is working with southern basin state governments to have already existing environmental flows releases targeted at areas and at times that will support Aboriginal values.

Grant Rigney, a Ramindjeri Ngarrindjeri man from the Coorong Lower Lakes area of South Australia, also represents MLDRIN on the project Research Committee. He explained the kinds of opportunities adequate cultural flows allocations could provide:

You're talking so many different business activities if you choose to go down that path, plus watering of country in cultural flow events to get specific outcomes, and topping up of environmental watering events if nations decide it's needed. I believe a lot of nation groups would also be looking at mechanisms to ensure there's enough water for everyone's country.

While the focus of the project is on the Murray-Darling basin, the Research Committee expects the findings of the project will be useful to groups across the country. According to Grant,

One of the big windfalls, I think, for the cultural flows research is it will create a robust tool that can help nations with their water planning. It might support arguments around water and native title; it might help with engagement with other stakeholders. It can build their capacity to engage in this space, and the agency of their nation.

Rene believes that access to these tools will support further dialogue between Aboriginal nations and governments on the issues of cultural flows and water rights in general;

It backs up that argument that if there's not a certain flow in the river at this time of year it's restraining on our native title and our values across the landscape, and that's detrimental to our country. That tool's going to be beneficial to that discussion into the future as well.

The Research Committee aims to have the project research tools publicly available for use late this year or early next year. You can find out more about the project at www.culturalflows.com.au

1 Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, *Echuca Declaration*, Part I, Article 1, 2007, available at <<http://www.savanna.org.au/nailsma/publications/downloads/MLDRIN-NBAN-ECHUCA-DECLARATION-2009.pdf>>.