



# We are struggling if the GALRI BILA, THE LACHLAN RIVER, ISN'T FLOWING

BY PJ WILLIAMS, AIATSIS, TRADITIONAL OWNER, WIRADJURI (CONDOBOLIN KALARIE)

The Galri Bila (Lachlan River) is a part of our livelihoods and the cultural heart of my mob – the Kalarie people from the area of Condobolin. The Lachlan River is the fourth longest river in Australia and runs from the Great Dividing Range in central NSW to the traditional land of the Wiradjuri people, who are also known as the people of the *three rivers*<sup>1</sup> including *Wambuul* (Macquarie), *Galari* (Lachlan), *Marrambidya* (Murrumbidgee).

The Lachlan River<sup>2</sup> and its floodplains provide a wide range of aquatic habitats such as pools, backwaters and billabongs, instream woody habitat and aquatic plants. The lower Lachlan floodplain has nine nationally important wetlands, including Lake Brewster, the Booligal Wetlands, the Great Cumbung Swamp and the Gum Bend Lake. It features one of the largest stands of river red gums in NSW and is one of the most important waterbird-breeding areas.

Part of the Galri Bila system is the Oxley River, located in Condobolin where my family and people are connected. The Galri Bila runs through our veins and breathes life into our stories and culture.

My elders have passed down dreamtime and family stories to me about the Bunyip and other creatures that make up the river system. When I was growing up they taught me about the billabongs and how to find certain spots along the river by using landmarks, trees and the layout of country. They also taught me about all the native local fish, birds and plants that depend on Galri Bila. My family and my mob all depend on the Galri Bila, just as our ancestors did, as a resource for hunting and gathering food.

Galri Bila isn't just important to us because of natural resources, but because of its cultural significance. The river banks are shaded by tall red gums, many of which have Aboriginal scars and markings. The sacred and secret spots along the river system tell stories of the past.

One example is the old Willow Bend Mission which was established on the banks of the river and is the site of a cultural ground. Dancing on the banks of Galri Bila was a big thing for our family. I remember being a young man and having my first experience of cultural dancing with the elders on the mission. I remember being next to the river, the burning fire and the smell of charcoal and smoke. I was shown our cultural practices by the men and women who were dressed up in possum skin cloaks and ceremonial feathers.

But things are changing for the Galri Bila and it is hurting our mob and the native local wildlife. Climate change, like extreme drought, has changed the way we live and hunt for food. The animal and plant life is disappearing without the water flowing through our country. Without vegetation, birdlife and animals it is hard to live off the country and gather food. It is going to be harder for future generations of our mob.

Dancing ground by the weir.

Credit: Otis Williams, traditional owner, Wiradjuri (Condobolin Kalarie)



There are a number of fish species that rely on good constant water, the better known being the Murray cod, the golden and silver perch and catfish. Traditional bush food gathering relies on the water system being full at the right time of the year.

Our people have already been affected by drought and without the river, the surrounding community is struggling. Wetlands are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including changes in rainfall, temperature and the effect of extreme weather events.

We need to protect our country and one way we can do that is by working with local council and government to train them in Indigenous land management and by taking action on climate change.

Climate change can affect the ways of teaching cultural practices but even today my boys and I go on country to practice the ways of the past. Every year we meet up in May to have a men and boy's camp on the river, sharing our knowledge of the country and water system and showing how important the Lachlan River is to us.

My experience growing up on country, swimming and fishing, dancing with my elders on the banks of Galri Bila is key to who I am today. The river flows through my veins and I'll do what I can to protect it.



Otis Williams walking through the dried out creek bed of Galri Bila October 2019.  
Credit: Catholic Care Wilcannia-Forbes

- <sup>1</sup> E Strobel, *Welcome to the Three Rivers University Department of Rural Health*, 2020, viewed 13 March 2020, <<https://threerivers.csu.edu.au/home>>.
- <sup>2</sup> Murray Darling Basin Authority, *Lachlan*, 2015, viewed 13 March 2020, <<https://www.mdba.gov.au/discover-basin/catchments/lachlan>>.



Galri Bila after rain in February 2020 30 meters downstream from the above image.  
Credit: Otis Williams, traditional owner, Wiradjuri (Condobolin Kalarie)